

CHRISTOLOGY
AND THE
NEW TESTAMENT

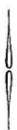
Jesus and His Earliest Followers

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND



INTRODUCTION

It is no exaggeration to say that the person of Jesus is absolutely central to Christianity. Christian belief has always made the person of Jesus of crucial significance, and it is indeed arguable that it is precisely this focus on Jesus which distinguishes Christianity from other religions. In many ways Christianity shares much of its doctrine of God with Judaism; and it shares a great deal of its ethical teaching with many of its religious neighbours, past and present. Yet a Christianity without Jesus would be impossible to conceive: it would almost be a contradiction in terms.

Yet what exactly is or was the crucial significance ascribed to Jesus by Christians? Who was Jesus? That question can of course be answered at many different levels, and different people will inevitably answer it in different ways. The very fact that Jesus has become the focus of a major world religion – Christianity – means that an answer to the question 'Who was Jesus?' may well be affected by one's own religious beliefs. A Christian may well wish to answer the question rather differently from a non-Christian.

For the most part, no attempt will be made here to provide any answer to the question from the point of view of contemporary theology, Christian or otherwise. Rather, the aim will be to answer the more historical question 'Who did other people think Jesus was?', as well as raising the further question 'Who did Jesus himself think he was?' We shall be concerned with what other peoples' views were in the past. How those views might affect the views which contemporary Christians (or non-Christians) believe they *should* hold about Jesus is really a further problem which will not be considered here. (The slightly

narrower question of how Jesus' own views about himself might or should affect other peoples' views about him will be considered very briefly in the final section of this book.)

Jesus lived 2000 years ago and between his own time and ours a lot of water has flown under a lot of bridges. Many people down the ages have had their say in making claims about who Jesus was. In particular, Christians have grappled with the question continuously. The focus of this book will, however, be the earliest period of Christian history: who did Jesus' earliest followers think he was? 'Early' is of course a relative word and can mean very different things to different people. I shall be taking it as covering approximately the first seventy years or so of the Christian church, that is the period of roughly the first century. And the prime – indeed probably only – evidence for discovering what Christians in this period thought about Jesus is to be found in the collection of texts which we call the 'New Testament'. The focus of this book will therefore be 'The Christology of the New Testament'.¹

Such a statement of aims may, however, need an odd rider or two. By focusing on the New Testament I have no wish to make any claim about the normative nature for Christians about any 'New Testament Christology' which may emerge from an exercise such as this. My purpose is simply to try to discover what early Christians thought about Jesus, and/or what Jesus might have thought about himself. The fact that most (if not all) of the evidence comes from a set of documents which were subsequently claimed by the Christian church as a 'canonical' body of sacred 'scripture' can, at least in one sense, be discounted. The process by which the texts now in what we call 'the New Testament' were separated from other early Christian literature and given the status of 'scripture' alongside Jewish scripture was a long and complex one. Certainly it was not completed until at least the fourth century.² It seems highly unlikely that any of the New Testament authors themselves thought that they were writing a text which was to be part of Holy Scripture for a worldwide Christian church! The very idea of a specifically Christian 'supplement' being added to the Jewish Bible had simply not arisen in the first century. So, too, the nature of the 'authority' ascribed to the documents of the New Testament will inevitably vary even amongst Christians: certainly the precise manner in which any 'authority' of scripture is, or should be, related to other potential 'authorities' within the Christian church (for example the church's subsequent tradition, the pronouncements of contemporary

authority figures in the church, the use of reason) is not one about which there is any unanimity amongst Christians today.³

Yet whatever view one takes about the nature of scriptural authority, one cannot deny that an exercise in seeking to establish what the New Testament may be saying on the question of Christology (or on anything else for that matter) must have *some* relevance for contemporary discussions. Any religious movement, in seeking to articulate its own contemporary views, will inevitably seek to be in dialogue with its own tradition and to find points of continuity with its past. Such dialogue may be critical at times; but a religious movement cannot cut itself off from its past history completely. Otherwise it will lose its very self-identity and its claim to be *this* movement and not another one. Thus contemporary Christian theologising will always involve a dialogue with earlier Christian tradition if it wishes to claim the name 'Christian'.⁴ Complete novelty, with no claim to find any point of positive contact with the past, is simply not a viable option within any religious movement, Christian or otherwise.

In this context, the earliest tradition, especially the New Testament tradition, will always occupy a place of supreme importance, whatever one's views about scriptural authority. For the very fact that it is the earliest, and the fact that it was subsequently canonised, means that it forms the fountainhead and start of all subsequent tradition in the Christian church. Later theologising thus involves, explicitly or implicitly, an appeal back to the earliest form of the tradition.⁵ A constant return to the earliest tradition can therefore be of vital significance, in part to see the roots of later developments, in part also perhaps to exercise a check and control on later developments which can be seen at times to have appealed to the past in ways which we would no longer find tenable today. I would not necessarily claim to have the expertise to make that kind of comparison; the remarks here are simply to highlight the significance which New Testament Christology will always have in relation, say, to the Christologies of later Christian writers and thinkers.

So far I have spoken of 'early' Christianity/Christology (interpreting 'early' as approximately first century) and 'New Testament' Christianity/Christology as virtually synonymous. Clearly such an implied equation also needs something of a rider or qualification. In one way, of course, early Christianity and New Testament Christianity are not synonymous. It is quite clear that there are many aspects of early Christianity which

are not represented, or represented only very weakly, in the New Testament. For example, we know next to nothing of the rise of early Egyptian Christianity, or of the beginnings of Roman Christianity. At the same time, I would defend here the claim (implied above) that our *primum*, if not our only, evidence for Christianity in this period is provided by the documents of the New Testament. There will always be debates about whether one or two New Testament texts can really count as 'early' in this context (for example 2 Peter may well be relatively late, from the second century), and some non-canonical Christian texts, such as the letter known as 1 *Clement*, probably date from the end of the first century.⁶ More controversial here may be the decision implied in the limitation to the New Testament to exclude from consideration some other texts which did not make it into the New Testament canon, but which we now have available. Some have argued, for example, that some non-canonical texts such as the *Gospel of Thomas* (now available from the Nag Hammadi library) or the *Gospel of Peter* may be just as, if not more, valuable as sources for early Christianity and/or Jesus as the canonical texts in the New Testament.⁷ There is not enough time or space to debate the matter here. I can only state my own view, which is that I remain to be persuaded that any of these non-canonical texts can provide us with reliable information about 'early' Christianity or Jesus. Rather, they are more likely to be products of a rather later period of Christian history (that is second century or later).⁸ As such they are invaluable resources for throwing light on many aspects of the history of Christianity about which we are otherwise very ignorant. But it is probably on a *later* period that they throw light, and not on the early period being considered here. For the first century, we are probably driven back to the documents of the New Testament itself as our primary evidence.

If then we are asking about the views of the early Christians about Jesus and/or Jesus' views about himself, we must be fully aware of the fact that the evidence available to us is in the form of texts which come to us from the first century. If then we are to be fair to the evidence, and to do justice to it, we must be aware of the fact that we are reading *ancient* texts. We must therefore be continuously aware of the dangers of anachronism, of reading back later ideas and later uses of language into earlier texts.

At a very general level we have to be aware of the fact that uses of

language can change over both space and time. A word or a phrase may mean very different things in different contexts. Above all languages change over the course of time. We are all no doubt aware of this if we ever stop to think about it (though we rarely do!). Thus, for example, the adjective 'gay' in English thirty or forty years ago meant simply 'happy, cheerful', etc. Today it has largely lost that meaning and now carries clear overtones of being homosexual.⁹

The same general phenomenon applies in relation to christological language. The description of Jesus as 'Son of God' became in subsequent (that is post-New Testament) Christianity the phrase by which Christians expressed their belief that Jesus was in some sense a fully divine being, 'one in being with the Father', with 'Son' serving to distinguish Jesus from the 'Father' as two of the three 'persons' in a single undivided divine Trinity. New Testament texts also not infrequently refer to Jesus as 'Son of God'. But we cannot assume necessarily that the same thing is meant when different people use the same words. Arguably, some of the New Testament texts are using the phrase 'Son of God' to express something very different from what is being claimed by later Christians at, say, the Council of Chalcedon in the fifth century, seeking to produce a 'definition' of who Jesus was/is. Thus, if we are to do justice to the nature of the New Testament evidence as first-century documents, we must be continually wary of reading them through spectacles tinted (or tainted?) by later Christian terminology. This is of course true for all reading of historical texts; but in relation to Christian texts, and more specifically in relation to Christology, the danger is all the more acute. For the overlap in language is certainly not coincidental. Undoubtedly, some later Christian terminology was quite explicitly borrowed from the New Testament. The language of Jesus' divine sonship was in part adopted precisely because that language was present in the formative tradition of the Christian church, that is the New Testament. But equally, it is now clear that, in the process of adopting the terminology, the ideas expressed were being changed and adapted as the same words were taken up and used in different circumstances and contexts. Thus a return to the New Testament can perhaps at times offer a *critical* reflection on the nature of the subsequent tradition which was ostensibly based upon it.

So far I have used the term 'the New Testament' or 'early Christianity' almost as if they were monolithic entities. That too clearly needs an important rider attached to it.

We are now more than ever aware of the enormous variety within the collection of texts we call 'the New Testament', and of the variety within primitive Christianity.¹⁰ Older reconstructions of the development of Christian thinking or theology had perhaps worked with a rather monolithic model of an original, pristine and unified tradition of 'orthodoxy', only branching out into ('heretical'?) offshoots rather later, perhaps in the second century. We are now much more conscious of the tremendous variety that characterises the earliest period in Christian history to which we have access. If one wants an illustration of this, one only has to read some of Paul's letters to realise that many of Paul's communities were clearly divided – at times quite deeply – about important matters of Christian belief and conduct. Nor indeed is this surprising; Christianity started as a movement within Judaism (and indeed, arguably, stayed one throughout much if not all of the New Testament period).¹¹ Yet it claimed a number of novel features, and various Christians asserted the right to criticise and reject important elements within the religious system of its parent body (notably, for example, the necessity for new male members of the movement to undergo circumcision). In this process the whole question of authority, of who could say what and why, was inevitably controversial and different people had different ideas. The process of narrowing down the limits of what was acceptable, and indeed what was normative, within Christianity was long and at times painful. Thus the New Testament lets us see many different viewpoints, at times coming into conflict with each other at various levels. The conflict element is not always so evident in relation to the question of Christology, though one wonders if Paul's passing reference to some people in Corinth who were apparently 'preach[ing] another Jesus' (2 Cor. 11: 4) is not a reference to 'Christology' in some way: these people may have had such a different view of Jesus from that of Paul himself that Paul refers to their position as preaching 'another' Jesus.¹²

But even if explicit disagreement is not so evident in the pages of the New Testament over the question of Christology, it is quite clear that there is great variety. Different writers use different categories to express their beliefs about who Jesus is. Paul focuses on Jesus as in some sense 'Son of God' who is also 'Lord' and 'Christ'/'Messiah'. In the synoptic Gospels, Jesus rarely refers to himself as God's 'Son', though this is ubiquitous in the Fourth Gospel. Jesus as 'Lord' is relatively rare in all four Gospels. The author of the letter to the Hebrews develops an

involved and detailed argument to show that Jesus is to be seen as a priestly figure, though a priest quite unlike the Levitical priests of contemporary Judaism: Jesus is a priest after the order of Melchizedek'. There is thus great variety within the pages of the New Testament and it is impossible to tie the New Testament down to a single monolithic view about who Jesus was. So too we may note that, even within the output of a single writer, we may get different views emerging. Hebrews, for example, focuses on Jesus as a priestly figure for much of the 'letter', but elsewhere Jesus is presented as one who is greater than the angels (cf. Heb. 1), a super-Moses figure (Heb. 3), even at one point addressed as 'God' (Heb. 1: 8 citing Ps. 45: 6), but also as a human being exactly like other human beings, being the forerunner leading the way for men and women to imitate and follow (Heb. 2: 10, 17–18, 12: 2). Thus we should be wary of being able to pin down any one writer to a single 'Christology'. At best we will produce a synthesis of a range of views sitting side by side, at times not altogether happily or consistently.

At the end of a very long period of Christians' grappling with the question of Christology, the Council of Chalcedon in 451 produced a 'definition' of who Jesus was.¹³ This, among other things, affirmed the claims of the Nicene creed that Jesus was/is 'God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father'. It also stated that Jesus was/is 'the same perfect in Godhead, the same perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man, of one substance with the Father as touching the Godhead, the same of one substance with us as touching the manhood...'¹⁴

In fact it is universally recognised that this was no definition of exactly what or who Jesus was. It was simply a setting up of a number of parameters, or boundary conditions, within which it was decided that all future Christian discussion about Jesus should remain. Thus the twin claims of the full divinity and the full humanity of Jesus in the Chalcedonian Definition are effectively simply asserting that any denial of Jesus' divinity, and any denial of his humanity, are unacceptable. How one can pin things down more precisely is left open. So too (at perhaps a slightly 'lower' level) with the New Testament. The New Testament writers may want to say several things about Jesus. But we may in the end have to leave everything they say a little untidy if only because it may not be possible to synthesise everything said into a neat package. In any case, none of the New Testament writers ever offers a

sustained treatise on the question of Christology. Thus we have to read off the christological beliefs of a writer at times slightly more indirectly from things that are sometimes said in passing.

We should also note here that the New Testament presents us with a great variety in relation to the *kinds* of texts which it contains. The New Testament texts form a very heterogeneous mixture in terms of their genre. Some of the texts have the form of a 'letter'. Some of these are clearly genuine letters, sent to individuals or groups of individuals, and dealing with very specific problems which have arisen. Most, if not all, of Paul's genuine letters fall into this category. Some have the form of a letter but seem to be rather more general treatises, not so clearly related to a specific situation.¹⁵ Further, as noted earlier, the 'specific situation' does not always focus on anything directly christological, at least explicitly, and so one has to deduce the writer's Christology more indirectly.

More problems are raised in this respect by the narrative texts of the New Testament, that is the texts which purport to give historical accounts of things that have happened in the past. In the New Testament, these are the four Gospels and Acts. How far the narratives give us a reliable account of the history they are purporting to tell is a very complex question; nor is it one that can be answered with a single simple answer covering all the texts concerned: we might decide that the Gospel of Mark is more reliable as history than the Gospel of John, or indeed within one book that one part of Acts is more reliable than another part.

We have now also become aware that all these narrative texts, especially the Gospels, may represent the end-point of quite a long and complex development in the history of the tradition. Thus stories about Jesus probably circulated for some time in Christian circles before being assembled into their present form within a wider narrative by the evangelists (or possibly by a prior source).¹⁶ So too it is seems clear that the evangelists may have had access to other sources which are now lost. Thus it is widely believed that Matthew and Luke had access to a source, usually called Q.¹⁷ Thus we have a number of narratives, and also stages in the development of the tradition between the historical events described and the narratives, some of which may be visible to us.

Now with all narratives, it is possible, and entirely legitimate, to approach such texts in a number of different ways. We can use such texts to try to discover information about the events or people being

described. Thus we could use a Gospel to try to tell us something about Jesus. But equally we could use the text to find out something about the person who actually wrote it.¹⁸ Thus the Gospel of Mark, for example, may tell us as much, if not more, about its author 'Mark' as it does about Jesus. The way in which Mark tells the story, the nuances he gives to the narrative, the choice of the material he includes, his arrangement of the material into an ordered whole, etc., may all tell us quite a lot about Mark himself. This is supremely the case with the Fourth Gospel. The many differences between John's Gospel and the other three (so-called synoptic) Gospels make it all but impossible to accept that all four are reliable accounts of Jesus' ministry.¹⁹ The portrait and story of Jesus is so different at so many levels that it is really impossible to reconcile them. In terms of historical reliability, scholars have normally opted for the synoptic picture (at least in general terms) as most likely to give us access to the figure of the historical Jesus himself. But this means that the picture in the Fourth Gospel is likely to tell us more about John and his concerns than about Jesus.

In relation to a topic such as Christology, this general state of affairs can make the Gospel accounts quite complex as texts to evaluate. How far do the Gospels show us the views of Jesus and how far do they show us the views of the evangelists? There is of course no single simple answer. Each Gospel has to be treated on its own merits, as does each part of each Gospel. But even if we want to try to discover the theology, or Christology, of the Gospel writers, there is the further complication that none of the evangelists ever addresses his readers directly. Certainly none of them writes a treatise on Christology. What they do is tell stories, making characters in the story say various things at various points, as well as having their characters do various things, *some* of which are (occasionally) 'interpreted' either by the narrator or by another character in the story.²⁰ It can then become a matter of some delicacy to determine how far what is said by some characters in the story directly reflects the viewpoint of the author of the narrative. In the case of John's Gospel it is perhaps easier since it seems highly likely that what John has Jesus say expresses John's own ideas well. With an author like Luke, life can be much more difficult. Luke is much more of a self-conscious historian, aware of the temporal distance between the past he is describing and his own day. Thus it is not always quite so clear that what characters in the story are made to say reflects Luke's own views. Thus, in relation to Christology, we may be able to

see what some characters in the story think about Jesus and it may well be that Luke generally portrays such characters in a positive way; but whether such ideas in the story reflect Luke's own may be harder to determine.²¹

All this is simply to say that, in relation to the Gospels, the nature of the evidence for determining the Christology of the writers, or of characters in the history being recounted (supremely Jesus himself), may be rather indirect. In any case we shall have to reckon with texts that give us a narrative Christology, rather than a neatly ordered treatise with a logically developed argument and clearly set out bulleted points and subdivisions of the material!

Given then the rather indirect nature of the evidence in the New Testament for determining christological beliefs, how should one proceed? What is, or should be, the main focus of attention?

In some older discussions, the focus of attention has often been on the titles used of Jesus by other writers or speakers (or indeed by Jesus himself). At several points, certain key terms or phrases are explicitly or implicitly applied to Jesus. Among these are 'Son of God', 'Lord', 'Messiah', and 'Son of Man'. It is indeed one of these terms that gives us the name of the general topic as 'Christ'-ology: the Greek word *christos* being the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *mashiach* = 'Messiah'. Many older discussions of Christology focused on these titles as used by Jesus himself and other early Christians to determine both what they meant and if/how they might be adapted when they were applied to Jesus.²²

Such an approach has come under fire in recent years, not least because this kind of investigation is in danger of ignoring quite a lot of potentially important christological material in the New Testament which does not explicitly use any of the standard christological titles.²³ Some New Testament texts say or imply things about Jesus which may have great significance without ever using one of a predetermined list of key terms. Thus the claim of the risen Jesus in Matthew 28: 17 that 'All authority on heaven and earth has been given to me' is potentially extremely significant christologically, although no title is explicitly used. (The language may echo Dan. 7: 13 and imply that Jesus is being seen as 'Son of Man', but this is at best implicit.) The phrase 'the Spirit of Jesus' used by Luke in Acts 16: 7 has been regarded by many as highly significant, possibly suggesting that the relation of Jesus to the Spirit is the same as that of God to the Spirit.²⁴ Yet once again no title

is used, and Jesus is referred to only by his personal name. The christological use of the Old Testament, or the use of hymns about Jesus (for example Phil. 2: 6–11) may also have great significance in this context, even though no title is explicitly used. Within the Pauline (and other) letters, we may note the way in which Jesus is almost casually included alongside God in the opening greetings, for example 'Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Cor. 1: 3); this too is extremely striking (and largely unparalleled in other Jewish letters), quite apart from the epithets 'Lord' and 'Christ' which are attached to Jesus here. So too Paul's 'inclusive' language, whereby he speaks of Christians being 'in Christ' in some real, almost geographical, sense is potentially far more important than the term 'Christ' itself which is used in the phrase 'in Christ'.²⁵ So too the fact that Christians appear to have engaged in what might be termed 'worship' of Jesus has been seen by some as one of the most christologically important and influential facets of early Christian activity.²⁶ All of this shows that we cannot simply confine ourselves to a study of a few christological key terms such as 'Son of God' or 'Lord' in seeking to delineate New Testament Christology.

This protest against an over-concentration on christological titles has been well made by several scholars in recent debates. At the same time, one should not let the pendulum swing too far in the opposite direction. Thus we cannot ignore the use of key christological terms or 'titles' completely. In any case, many of these key terms or titles became important in subsequent Christian history when they were adapted and used as key descriptions of who Jesus was. Further, many of these terms are used in the New Testament in christologically significant ways. Hence they do constitute an important part of the evidence for the Christology of the New Testament. Thus, whilst remaining mindful of the criticisms that have rightly been brought against too 'titled-centred' an approach to the study of New Testament Christology, we cannot ignore christological 'titles' completely. In what follows, therefore, we shall not be ignoring some of the titles used of Jesus in the New Testament, as well as considering some of the other evidence which is relevant in seeking to discover what the earliest Christians thought about Jesus. However, before we start to examine the evidence of the New Testament itself, we must spend some time considering the background against which key terms or titles are ascribed to Jesus by New Testament writers.

THE BACKGROUND OF CHRISTOLOGICAL TERMS

An understanding of the background, the thought world, and the state of the language used, is essential for understanding any communication. At the crudest level, we need to know the language used. If we come across the word 'chat', we need to know at the very least if this is part of a text in English or French: does the word refer to a friendly conversation (English) or to a four-legged feline creature (French 'chat' = English 'cat')? Even within one language, we have already seen that words and phrases can change their meaning over the course of time, and hence we need to know the appropriate background against which to interpret what is said or written.

We should also note that language may change significantly across space as well as time. Thus the same words or phrases may mean different things in different geographical and/or social contexts. This is especially the case in relation to first century Christianity which started life and developed within a highly pluriform social and religious context. Thus early Christianity started from (and largely remained) within Judaism but also spread and developed in the wider non-Jewish Greco-Roman world.

In studying 'the' background of key New Testament words, we should not, however, assume that all New Testament language has exactly the same meaning as when the same language is used in other contemporary texts. In relation to christological language, it is undoubtedly the case that some of the crucial vocabulary did change its meaning somewhat when it was taken up and applied to the person of Jesus. For example, any language about Jesus as a 'king' must have sounded more than a little strange to many in the first century, since Jesus as a 'royal' figure was, to say the least, somewhat unlike other royal figures of the time. Thus the use of royal terminology applied to Jesus involved a certain novelty in the use of such language.

Precisely because of this, it is vital to know what meanings, or ranges of meaning, were current at the time of the writing of the New Testament for key christological words or phrases. Insofar as there is continuity between the New Testament and other contemporary writings, such knowledge will enable us to understand just what the New Testament is saying (as well as what it is not saying!); and insofar as the New Testament stretches and changes language in applying it to Jesus, such knowledge may enable us to see more precisely just where and how the changes are occurring.

Introduction and Background

In assessing the background of New Testament christological language, there can be little doubt that, in general terms, the background in Judaism is of supreme importance. Early Christianity started as a movement within Judaism and, for much of the time covered by the New Testament writings, stayed within a Jewish matrix. Eventually the tensions between Christianity and Judaism became too great and the two movements diverged to become two separate 'religions'.²⁷ Yet it is uncertain if such terminology has ever been appropriate, at least from the Christian side. Christianity has never cut itself off from its Jewish roots.²⁸ Christian scripture has always included Jewish scripture as an integral part (even if it has added a 'New Testament' to the Jewish Bible which is now called by some Christians the 'Old Testament'). Certainly in the New Testament period, Christianity is clearly seen as growing out of, but remaining part of, Judaism. There are of course fierce polemics reflected at times in the New Testament documents, evidently reflecting competing claims to be the 'true' form of Judaism. Yet such polemic is not confined to debates involving Christians: the Dead Sea Scrolls now let us see very similar debates going on at about the same time as that of the start of the Christian movement between other competing groups within Judaism.

But quite apart from any polemic, it is striking how much early Christian writers assume many key aspects of Judaism as given. These are never disputed or argued for: it is simply assumed that Christians will acknowledge them without question. Thus, for example, Jewish monotheism is assumed as almost self-evident: there is one and only one God and this is never questioned, nor does the matter ever arise as a contentious issue. So too in general terms the belief in God as the Creator of the world is assumed as self-evident for Christians. All this is perhaps more surprising in relation to some of Paul's communities living in religiously pluriform cities of the Roman Empire where some kind of polytheistic belief would presumably have been regarded as the norm. Yet it is precisely in Paul's letters, writing to the church in the highly pluriform city of Corinth, that we find statements like *all our fathers were under the cloud*, and *all passed through the sea* (1 Cor. 10: 1), referring to *Jewish* ancestors and apparently assuming as read that these can be referred to as the (Gentile!) Corinthians' ancestors as well. Similarly, it is a standard observation in relation to New Testament ethics that much of the ethical teaching of the New Testament is not that distinctive and can be paralleled in Jewish (as well as non-Jewish) texts.²⁹

We should perhaps also note at this point that, whatever is said about Jesus in the New Testament, only rarely is any awareness indicated that christological claims might threaten Jewish monotheism in any way.³⁰ Whatever is said about Jesus, virtually no one seems to think that this in any way compromises, or affects, the fundamental belief in the uniqueness and sovereignty of God. The one exception might be the Fourth Gospel where it seems that, at least for the Jewish opponents who appear in the story, Jesus' claims about himself are regarded as blasphemous (cf. John 10:30-9). But John at least thinks that such accusations can be answered and that even Jesus' claim to be 'one with God' (John 10:30) is fully in line with the (monotheistic) teaching of Judaism. We must therefore constantly bear in mind that the use of what may appear at first (and second!) sight as very exalted language being applied to Jesus was rarely if ever felt to threaten the fundamental Jewish belief of monotheism. Worries on that score, seeking to reconcile claims made about Jesus with beliefs about God, were much more a feature of the time after the New Testament period.

As well as an unquestioned monotheistic belief, early Christianity also adopted, apparently without ever questioning, what were essentially Jewish ideas about history: God was the God of past history, above all of the history of the Jewish people. Thus, as we have already seen, Christian history was identified with Jewish history: the history of the Jewish people was taken over and appropriated as the history of the Christian movement.³¹

Yet Christianity also adopted another aspect of Jewish beliefs about history, an aspect which was very important in the context of christological claims. This concerned Jewish beliefs about *eschatology*, looking not so much to the past as to the future.

With the overarching belief in God as the God of history, Jews believed above all that God was the God of Israel. Within the course of history, God had chosen the Jewish people, creating a special relationship with them through the making of the covenant, and establishing them as a nation state with the promise to maintain and protect them. The fortunes of the Jewish nation reached their height at the time of the Davidic monarchy, when the nation of Israel enjoyed political autonomy and considerable material prosperity. However, the political disasters of subsequent years, including the military defeats of the nation by the Assyrians in 721 BCE and the Babylonians in 587 BCE, led to an extended period in Israel's history when the nation was no

longer under its own control. It was in this situation of domination by successive foreign powers that hopes grew for God to be faithful to his promises to the nation: he would therefore at some stage intervene in history to put right all the wrongs of the present and restore the nation to its position of independence when it could once again be free of foreign domination. One thus got the rise of *eschatological* hope.

The precise nature of this hope varied considerably. In particular, there was variation in the extent to which the new conditions hoped for would be established in a line of continuity with those of the present order, or whether the new age would involve a complete break with the present. For some the new age would be continuous with the present, involving a restoration of the fortunes of the nation. For others, the new age would involve a radical break and an end of the present world order: there would be judgement on everything and everyone in the present, and then there would be a totally new world order quite different from the present.³²

In addition (and of crucial importance for the present purposes), there was variety in the way Jews thought this new age would be established. For some, God would act entirely alone to achieve his ends (cf. *Sib. Or.* 4:40-9, 181-2).³³ However, in other strands of Jewish eschatological thought, ideas developed whereby God would be accompanied by, and assisted by, another figure acting alongside him to inaugurate the new age. The identity and nature of this figure could and did vary considerably. Thus, in some Jewish texts, we find the belief that one of the great figures of the past would act as God's intermediary at the end of the present world order. For example, some Jews evidently thought that God would be assisted by the patriarch Enoch (*Jub.* 10:17; *2 Enoch* 64:5), others that Elijah would return (cf. *Mal.* 3:1; *Sir.* 48:10), others that a prophet like Moses would come (apparently based on *Deut.* 18:15, this seems to have been important for Samaritan expectations; also cf. 4QTest), others that Enoch and Elijah together would appear (cf. *4 Ezra* 6:26). In yet other texts God would be assisted by an angelic figure (*Ass. Mos.* 10:1-2).³⁴

In some (but by no means all) strands of Jewish thought the expected intermediary figure could be termed 'messianic', or a 'Messiah'. Thus as part of broader eschatological hopes, Judaism developed specifically *messianic* ideas, and some of this language was evidently applied to Jesus by early Christians. In seeking to understand what might have

been meant by Christian claims about the messiahship of Jesus, we need therefore to have some idea of what messiahship might have meant in Judaism at the time of Jesus.

Messiah

First, it must be emphasised that ideas about messiahship *only* make sense against a background of Jewish categories and beliefs. The term Messiah is really meaningless outside a Jewish context. Yet within a Jewish matrix, some caution is needed.

The term 'messianic' strictly means simply an 'anointed' figure. A 'messiah' figure, a *mashiah*, is thus simply someone who has been anointed. Now in Judaism, anointing was associated with a variety of different people, supremely with three groups: kings, priests and prophets. Thus kings were anointed as part of their inauguration and installation into office (cf. 1 Sam. 10: 1; 1 Ki. 1: 39), as were priests (cf. Exod. 29: 3; 40: 13; Lev. 16: 32); so too prophets were thought of at times as anointed figures (1 Ki. 19: 16; Ps. 105: 15).

However, the use of anointing seems to have become significant in the eschatological hopes of some Jews. Thus the 'intermediary' figure (or figures – see below) who was thought of as possibly assisting God at the time of his eschatological intervention on behalf of Israel was evidently conceived of by some in 'messianic' terms, that is as an anointed figure. The precise significance of such language is not always clear since a 'messianic' figure could be a royal figure, a priestly figure, or a prophetic figure.

It is sometimes argued that messianic language must be primarily associated with a royal figure.³⁵ There is certainly some evidence for this in Jewish texts from around the time of the start of the Christian movement: the seventeenth *Psalim of Solomon* (c. middle of the first century BCE) describes the coming of a new Davidic ruler who will be called 'The Lord Messiah' (*Ps. Sol.* 17: 32).³⁶ In older discussions it was often assumed that Jewish messianic expectations were ubiquitous and uniform: Jews everywhere were looking for a royal Messiah figure to come and inaugurate the new age.³⁷ It is now recognised that the situation was probably far more complex and Judaism itself far more variegated.³⁸ The older handbooks tended to produce a rather artificial synthesis on the basis of statements culled from texts spanning a wide range both geographically and temporally. It seems very likely that

'messianic' expectations were in a state of considerable flux and development at the time of the start of the Christian movement.³⁹

Nevertheless, it does seem clear that expectations of a royal Messiah figure, a new Davidic ruler, were current at the time of Jesus, or at least for some Jews.⁴⁰ The roots for such a hope lie in the Old Testament itself where the classic text is to be found in Nathan's oracle to David in 2 Samuel 7. Here the promise is made that the Davidic line will not die out and that God will establish a successor on the Davidic throne who will be to him as his son (2 Sam. 7: 14). Although no doubt originally intended as a prophecy about Solomon, the hope evidently remained alive after the monarchy ceased that God would one day restore the monarchy with the appointment of an ideal king in the form of a new Davidic ruler. The hope for a new Davidic ruler is evident in oracles attributed to some of the pre-exilic prophets: for example the prophecy of Isaiah 9: 1–6 of the child born who will sit on the throne of David (v. 6), or the prophecy of Isaiah 11: 1–5 that 'a shoot shall come out of the stump of Jesse' who shall be the ideal ruler, or the promise to 'raise up the booth of David that is fallen' (Amos 9: 11). The precise dating of these oracles is disputed, and several may in fact be post-exilic. Certainly in the period around the time of the exile, the hope is still clearly alive when Jeremiah looks forward to the time when God 'will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely and execute justice and righteousness in the land' (Jer. 23: 5–6, cf. 33: 14–26). So too Ezekiel looks forward to the come of a new Davidic ruler (Ezek. 33: 23–4; 37: 24–5). In the later period it seems that hopes for a Davidic ruler were revived with the activity of Zerubbabel and the rebuilding of the temple (cf. Hag. 2: 22–3; Zech. 3: 8; 4: 6–10; 6: 11–12).

For the period after the time of the biblical writings, there is the evidence of *Ps. Sol.* 17, as we have seen. In addition, the Qumran scrolls have shown us that such an expectation was alive in some circles at least, at a period roughly contemporaneous with the start of the Christian movement. Thus a number of texts evidently echo the language used in several of the biblical prophecies about a coming Davidic king. For example, 4QFlor (= 4Q174) contains an interpretation of 2 Sam. 7: 10–14 in which the prediction of a new ruler is evidently applied to a coming eschatological figure. So too a peshar text on Isaiah (4QpIsa^a = 4Q161) reinterprets the prophecy of Isaiah 11 in terms of an eschatological future Davidic ruler.