

Paul's Christology

Nearly every passage in Paul's writings discloses one aspect or other of his views about Christ, but his letters were not written for the purpose of offering a systematised discussion of christology. In each of his letters Paul is responding to specific situations arising in individual communities; his presentation of christological themes can therefore take forms and include emphases that are relevant to the circumstances of those whom he addresses. For example, Paul's extended discussion of his conviction that the risen Christ will return (I Thess. 4:13-5:11) arises from the concern voiced by members of the community at Thessalonica about the fate of those who had already died before the parousia. However, while due regard must be given to the context and concerns reflected in each letter, there is also an underlying consistency in Paul's expressions of his christological convictions. In order to examine these central convictions, some preliminary factors need to be taken into account.

First, what does appear remarkable is that Paul offers very few indications in his letters of the extent of his knowledge about Jesus of Nazareth. Limited references to the earthly life of Jesus include declarations about his birth of a woman under the Jewish law (Gal. 4:4) and about his descent from the line of David in what appears to be an already existing confessional formula: 'descended from David according to the flesh' (Rom. 1:3). In a few places Paul also includes reference to Jesus' words, perhaps quoting from oral tradition or a written collection of Jesus' teachings (cf. Rom. 12:14; 13:7-10). In I Cor. 7:10-11 he quotes Jesus' teaching on divorce, while in 11:23-25 he reports his tradition of Jesus' sayings over the bread and cup at the Last Supper (cf. Mk 14:22-24). Paul can also, at times, refer to Jesus' behaviour as an ethical example for believers (Rom. 15:3, 7-9), particularly in the well-known hymn in Philippians 2 where Paul sets up Jesus' life as an example of humility to be imitated by believers. The paucity of explicit statements about Jesus of Nazareth should not be interpreted as implying that Paul does not know much about Jesus or that he has no interest in the events of his life and ministry. The citation of existing formulaic traditions, together with allusions to the teaching of Jesus, suggests that Paul takes for granted that the recipients of his letters are already familiar with traditions about Jesus to the earlier preaching activity carried out in their midst by Paul himself or other early Christ-believing missionaries.

Secondly, the central events for Paul are the passion, death and resurrection of Christ, as demonstrated when he appeals to the tradition he has received and handed on to the Corinthians: 'that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures' (I Cor. 15:3-4). The salvific death and resurrection of Jesus are presented here as the core of the gospel message, as something Paul himself had experienced when the risen Christ 'last of all appeared also to me' (15:8). On the few occasions that Paul does make explicit reference to his own call or conversion, he emphasizes that this was due to a 'revelation' of the risen Lord (Gal. 1:12, 15-16). This christophanic experience clearly resulted in a decisive shift in Paul's understanding of the significance of Jesus; it was an event that led him to accept the claim of the first believers that the crucified Christ had been raised from the dead. It was also an experience that, according to several scholars, brought about many key aspects of Paul's christology.

Thirdly, the fact that Paul, like his predecessors, expresses his belief in Jesus as the crucified and risen Christ demonstrates that his christology did not occur in a vacuum. Certainly, on occasions he appears to take up and use earlier traditional statements about Jesus. This applies to Romans 1:3-4, which is characterized by its rhythmic structure and traces of language not characteristic of Paul. Similarly, Philippians 2:6-11 is introduced by the word 'who', indicating its separability from its present context. The fact that such traditions have been taken up by Paul suggests agreement between him and his tradition. There are no indications in his letters that his views about Christ were unique to him or indeed conflicted with those of other Jewish Christ-believers; his disagreements with the Jerusalem church centred on his mission to the Gentiles not on christology.

In addition to the evidence of Paul's use of earlier formulations, several attempts are made to establish continuity between Paul and his Jewish-Christian predecessors by delineating the nature of christological reflection during the decisive period between Jesus' death (about 30 CE) and the emergence of Paul's letters (from around 49-50 CE onwards). Attention is paid in particular to what many view as a historically reliable tradition in Acts 6:1 about the presence of 'Hebrews' and 'Hellenists' in the Jerusalem church. The term 'Hellenists' is interpreted as denoting Greek-speaking Jewish Christians from the Diaspora who

now resided in Jerusalem and had, from an early date, formed a community alongside Aramaic-speaking Jewish Christ-believers ('Hebrews'). Martin Hengel in particular proposes that these Jewish Christ-believers played a decisive role in the shaping of beliefs about Jesus, particularly the role played by Scripture in their early reflection on the titles and functions of the risen Christ, including his sonship (II Sam. 7:14; Ps. 2:7), his exaltation as Son of Man (Ps. 8) and his enthronement as Lord at the right hand of God (Ps. 110:1), all of which find echoes in the letters of Paul. If so, his writings are important not only as expressions of his own christological convictions but because they cast considerable light on the views of first-generation believers.

How, therefore, does one approach the task of examining Paul's christology, particularly if it permeates his letters from beginning to end? Until recently the study of New Testament christology was exclusively approached through analysis of the individual titles applied to Jesus, with particular attention given to their conceptual background and usage. The limitations of this procedure are, nevertheless, now being highlighted (see the influential article of Leander Keck), since it is an approach that tends to isolate christological titles from their context (particularly their *narrative* context in the Gospels) and can overlook other, equally significant, modes of christological expression. Nevertheless, while it is true that a study of titles used by an author like Paul cannot provide a comprehensive picture of his views about Jesus, key aspects of Paul's interpretation of the identity and role of Jesus, his christological rhetoric, are communicated through his presentation of Jesus as the 'Messiah (Christ)', 'Son of God' and 'Lord' .

2. Jesus as Messiah

No other New Testament author employs the term 'Christ' (*christos*, the Greek translation of the Hebrew term *mashiach*, 'Messiah' or 'Anointed One') as frequently as Paul. More than half of the NT occurrences of this term appears in his letters. Indeed, references to Jesus in Paul's letters usually take the form 'Jesus Christ' (23x), 'Christ Jesus' (48x), or simply 'Christ' and they are rarely clarified, suggesting that the term has become virtually synonymous with a proper or second name for Jesus. In other words, the term 'Christ', even when used on its own, always refers to Jesus. Thus in the case of what is widely viewed as a pre-Pauline formula in I Corinthians 15:3, 'Christ died for our sins', this designation (without the definite article) has virtually displaced the name Jesus itself.

What does this state of affairs signify with regard to Paul's presentation of Jesus' messianic status? It undoubtedly means that this status is now accepted as an incontrovertible fact. For example, the confessional formula 'descended from David' in Romans 1:3, the only such statement by Paul that Jesus' messianic status depends on his Davidic descent, is simply cited with no attempt to justify its claim. One factor that may account for Paul's lack of explanation of Jesus' messianic status is that *christos* as a title would have little meaning for Gentile audiences, because to them it was a word that simply meant 'anointed or smeared with oil'. However, since Paul does not find it necessary in his letters to justify the claim from early tradition that Jesus is Christ/Messiah, it can only mean that, for his audiences, presumably even for his Gentile readers, the identity of Jesus as 'Christ' is already recognized without further explanation as a firmly established designation for Jesus (that is, it is already a feature of the Christ-centred proclamation before Paul wrote his letters). He may even have expected his Gentile readers or hearers to have some acquaintance with the royal-messianic Jewish traditions connected with this designation.

Indeed, the titular usage with the definite article ('the Christ'), to describe Jesus as God's chosen or anointed agent in whom Jewish promises of eschatological salvation are fulfilled, seems to be preserved by Paul in some passages in which messianic connotations remain (II Cor. 5:10: 'For all of us must appear before the judgement seat of the Christ, so that each may receive recompense'). Another passage to which this applies is Romans 9:3-5, where Paul speaks of the privileges received by the Jews, emphasizing that 'the Christ/Messiah' (with the definite article) came from their midst: 'For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. They are Israelites....to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever'.

What is certain is that, while Paul can use this designation in a wide range of contexts, he relates it closely to Jesus' redemptive death and resurrection, his identity as the Christ who died on the cross and was raised from the dead (Rom. 5:6; I Cor. 5:7; 8:11; Gal. 3:13). In other words, what was earlier regarded as the root of the controversy between believers and non-Christian Jews (from a Jewish perspective, the paradox of a 'crucified Christ'; cf. I Cor. 1:23; 2:2), is taken up by

Paul in a radical appropriation of existing Jewish categories; Jesus' messianic significance is to be understood in terms of his death and resurrection rather than of earthly kingship and power. In this respect, Paul stands in continuity with the early Christian conviction (reflected in I Cor. 15:1-7) that Jesus had been raised from the dead in fulfilment of God's plan (according to the Scriptures), producing, at an early stage the distinctive notion that Jesus' death was a central part of his messianic status and activity.

3. Christ as the Son of God

Paul, perhaps surprisingly, only includes a cluster of references to Jesus' divine sonship; the title occurs only fifteen times in the undisputed Pauline letters, and these are concentrated in Romans and Galatians where Paul is most in dialogue with Jewish Scripture and tradition. It is however an important feature of his christology. There are those occasions where Paul speaks of Jesus as 'Son of God' (Rom. 1:4; 2 Cor. 1:19; Gal. 2:20) and as 'Son' (Rom. 8:3, 29; 1 Cor. 1:9; Gal. 4:4), even describing the content of the gospel as a revelation of God's Son (cf. Gal. 1:15-16).

These declarations are more likely to have been influenced by ancient Jewish traditions than pagan religious concepts (as though Paul is seeking to legitimate Jesus as the object of worship to pagan converts). The title 'Son (of God)' is absent, for example, from I Corinthians 8-10 where Paul contrasts Christ-worship with the pagan worship of many deities. Sonship terminology occurs frequently in the Scriptures and in wide-ranging contexts: to denote Israel collectively as the 'son' or 'firstborn' of God (Exod. 4:22; Hos. 11:1), angels (Gen. 6:2; Deut. 32:43 LXX; Job 1:6), the Davidic king (II Sam. 7:14; Ps. 2:7) and, in some Qumran texts, the Davidic Messiah (4QFlorilegium [4Q174] 1:10-13, which interprets II Sam. 7:10-14 with reference to a future royal Messiah). Assessing the Pauline evidence against this Jewish background also suggests that Paul did not necessarily employ the language of sonship primarily to connote Jesus' divinity. It is the contexts of his references to Jesus as God's 'Son' that supply the particular nuances to the term, and what Paul essentially communicates in these references is Jesus' unique status and his intimate relationship with God (making consistent use of the definite article), their unity of purpose and his obedience as Son (Rom. 1:9; II Cor. 1:19).

The actual context of Paul's sonship language is decisive in such cases as the kerygmatic formula cited as the core of the gospel in Romans 1:3-4: 'the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh, and was appointed (NRSV: declared [Greek: *horisthentos*]) to be Son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord'. The language and structure of this formulation suggest that this is a creedal summary already in circulation in the early Church. Paul, as a result, quotes this couplet at the beginning of his letter to the Romans, a Christian community that does not know him, in order to establish that they share a common faith. In this two-part declaration, Jesus' earthly status as 'Son of David' is juxtaposed with his installation as 'Son of God' in power by virtue of his resurrection. It has been widely debated whether the second part declares that divine sonship was first conferred upon Jesus at his resurrection, particularly in view of the contrast between its two halves and because there are other examples in the New Testament where Jesus' sonship is dependent on his resurrection (cf. Acts 13:33). Related to this is the question of whether Paul himself was responsible for modifying its ambiguous statement about Jesus' status as Son by adding the phrase 'in power'. Whether this was an original part of the formula or not, the summary in its present form envisages a divine sonship true of Jesus during his whole life, but one that was enhanced or 'declared' by his resurrection. In other words, the empowerment of Jesus as Son takes place at his resurrection ('in power'). This is the view favoured by most scholars rather than seeing in this text hints of an 'adoptionist Christology', namely that Jesus was made son in virtue of his resurrection.

Another declaration in Romans stresses that Jesus' sonship expresses his unique relationship with God. Jesus' salvific death is described in terms of God's direct involvement in his Son's redemptive work: he did not withhold his own Son 'but gave him up for all of us' (Rom. 8:32), with echoes of Abraham's offering of Isaac in Genesis 22:12, 16 (cf. Rom. 5:10; Gal. 2:20; 4:4-5). The aim of the giving up of his Son is to enable others to be conformed to the likeness of his Son and to share in the same status as 'sons of God'. Thus Paul, in both Romans and Galatians, stresses that this new status is patterned after Jesus as Son; God gives to the redeemed 'the Spirit of his Son' through whom they can now address God as 'Abba, Father' (Gal. 4:6-7; cf. Rom. 8:14-17, 29). The fundamental difference is that believers become sons through adoption (Rom. 8:15), whereas this does not apply in the case of Jesus who is the source and origin of the new humanity.

4. Christ as Lord

It is the title 'Lord' (*kyrios*) that receives most prominence in the Pauline writings: about 200x in such forms as 'the Lord', Lord Jesus Christ, Lord Jesus, in the Lord. The centrality of Jesus' lordship, relating to both the present and the future, is made clear by Paul in numerous passages. The decisive event is the resurrection, and to speak of the risen Christ as Lord is to define his relationship with all believers (all usages of the term are bound together by the notion of a superior status and of power and authority). Hence Paul stresses that the central confession of their faith is that 'Jesus is Lord' (Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 12:3), a confession accentuated particularly by Paul in two contexts: ethics and worship. He therefore designates Jesus as 'Lord' when he wishes to emphasize Jesus' authoritative status in questions of Christian behaviour. For example, in Romans 14:1-12 Paul urges tolerance among believers about the issues of food and special days, emphasizing that believers live and die to 'the Lord'. Paul strikingly uses 'Christ' to refer to Jesus' death and resurrection (verse 9), but 'Lord' to refer to the status he holds as a result of these events. In I Corinthians 6:13-7:40 Paul deals with a number of sexual matters, repeatedly referring to Jesus as 'Lord' to whom believers are responsible and from whom authoritative teaching comes (7:10-11; cf. 7:25).

The title *kyrios* is one frequently used by Paul in various creedal and liturgical expressions, including the confession of Jesus as Lord in the context of worship. Perhaps the most striking text of all is the christological hymn in Philippians 2:6-11, widely thought to be Paul's adaptation of an early hymn sung in Christian worship. The second half of the hymn speaks of God exalting Jesus to the heights and bestowing upon him the name above every name, *kyrios*, as implied by the concluding statement that every tongue should confess 'that Jesus Christ is Lord'. This hymn makes a dramatic move upwards after the description of the humbling of Jesus on the cross (v. 8). His exaltation to lordship, by means of resurrection, is God's response to the cross; it is his act of vindication following Jesus' obedient death. As a hymn that originated in the context of worship, it indicates that the ritual invocation of Jesus as 'Lord' was done in anticipation of the future acknowledgement of Jesus' lordship by the whole of creation.

What is the appropriate background to this title *kyrios*? It was certainly part of the religious vocabulary of the Graeco-Roman world to denote gods and Roman

emperors, but it seems unlikely that Paul derived his own understanding of Christ's lordship from the category of pagan cultic worship (as proposed by Wilhelm Bousset, and followed by, among others, Rudolf Bultmann). Attention can be drawn in particular to I Corinthians 8:5, where Paul displays awareness of the 'many lords' (*kyrioi*) honoured in Hellenistic pagan cults, but that this stands in stark contrast to his own conviction expressed in the next verse that Jesus alone is Lord. On the whole the appropriate background for Paul's use of the title 'Lord' is to be sought from a Jewish direction. Two important factors are to be considered:

i) There is evidence of the use of *mar* (Aramaic for 'lord') as a title for God among first-century Jews, now attested in the Qumran scrolls. The Targum on Job from Cave 11 uses 'the Lord' absolutely to refer to God (24:7), while the Genesis Apocryphon (1QapGen) at one point refers to God as 'the Lord': 'Blessed are you, O God, most High, my Lord, for all ages, For you are Lord and Master over all' (20:12-13). The key Pauline passage in this respect is I Corinthians 16:22, where Paul declares, 'Our Lord, come' using the Aramaic term *marana tha* with reference to Jesus. Since Paul preserves this Aramaic phrase in transliterated form (without explanation) in a text written in Greek, this liturgical formula originated in all likelihood among Aramaic-speaking Jewish Christ-believers in the Jerusalem church, where it served as an eschatological petition for the return of Jesus ('Our Lord, come'), probably recited within the liturgical context of the eucharistic meal (cf. I Cor. 11:26). Wilhelm Bousset sought to argue against a Jewish background for Paul's use of *kyrios* by stating that passages like I Corinthians 16:22 reflects the earlier Jewish Christian practice of invoking Jesus as the coming Lord, but that it is only in Gentile communities, in response to pagan cults, that Jesus is acclaimed as Lord. The distinction proposed by Bousset is tendentious to say the least; if Jesus was already invoked as Lord by early Christian communities before Paul, this can only mean that they also regarded (and acclaimed) him as Lord. It is thus conceivable that Aramaic-speaking Jewish Christians already applied the title *marē* to Jesus as a divine title, which was then translated as *kyrios* for or by Greek-speaking Jewish Christians.

ii) There is also evidence that the Greek equivalent of *mar* (*kyrios*) was used by Jews as a way of referring to God and, in particular, as a substitute for the divine name Yahweh. Although it has been argued that the use of the term *kyrios* for God is a Christian invention, in that it appears for the first time as a substitute for the

divine name 'Yahweh' in later Christian copies of the Septuagint, in pre-Christian copies Yahweh itself is either written out or transcribed into Greek letters (the use of ΠΙΠΙ as some kind of visual equivalent of the divine name YHWH). However, it is likely that *kyrios* would have been the term used when the LXX texts were read out, and much light has been thrown on this issue by Joseph Fitzmyer who has shown that there is evidence that *kyrios* was already widespread among Greek-speaking Jews as a designation for God (*Antiquities* 13:68; 20:90; Letter of Aristeas 155). This is an important issue for the study of Paul's christology, since he not only uses *kyrios* in several scriptural quotations to designate God (Rom. 4:8; 9:28, 29; 10:16; I Cor. 3:20; 10:26; II Cor. 3:16, 17), but in some cases it appears that Paul transfers the referent from Yahweh to Jesus, making him the *kyrios* in question. One such example is Romans 10:9-13, which begins with a confession of Jesus as Lord and is then followed by the words: 'the same one is Lord of all, rich to all who call upon him. For "everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Joel 2:32 LXX). See also I Corinthians 1:31 (Jer. 9:23-24); 10:26 (Ps. 24:1); II Corinthians 10:17 (Jer. 9:23-24). In other passages these references to Jesus as the *kyrios* of Scripture take the form of allusions or indirect references, as in Philippians 2:11 which applies Isaiah 45:23-25 (a passage that originally proclaimed universal submission to God) to express the universal acclamation of Jesus as *kyrios*. A similar phenomenon occurs in connection with the scriptural expression 'the day of the Lord', now appropriated by Paul to refer to the eschatological victory of Jesus (I Thess. 5:2; I Cor. 5:5). What are the implications of such cases of transference for understanding Paul's christology in relation to his commitment to belief in one God? This will be considered in the next set of Unit notes.

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