

UNIT 5: JESUS CHRIST IN THE SCRIPTURES

The primary accounts we have of the life of Jesus Christ are, of course, the Gospels. In addition to the four canonical Gospels, we have a large number of other accounts of Jesus' life and sayings (the Gospel of Thomas, for example, which was discovered in 1945 at Nag Hammadi in Egypt). Why were the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life written? The common answer to this standard question in undergraduate examinations in New Testament Studies is that the Gospels were written in order to transmit authoritative accounts of Jesus' life. While Paul and the other writers of the New Testament letters generally believed that Jesus would return within their lifetime, it gradually became clear that the time of the second coming was to remain a mystery. A question therefore arose: as the disciples and eyewitnesses of Jesus' life began to die, where would one look for authoritative accounts of the identity of Jesus? The rapidly circulating oral accounts of Jesus' life soon became distilled into written accounts which could be held in common amongst an ever growing and culturally diverse body of Christ-followers. So authority slowly comes to be vested in certain texts (although there was to be no 'Bible' as we know it until the end of the third century, and the number and variety of texts in circulation is very large), and the authority of the disciples is handed on through the ordination of 'overseers' (what we now call Bishops), presbyters and deacons.

But what do the Gospels *themselves* say? Towards the end of his Gospel, presumably last of the four canonical Gospels to be written, the evangelist John states the following: 'Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah [or the Christ], the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.' (20.30-31). John is explicitly referring to Jesus under a Jewish title, the Messiah, the Christ (the Greek rendering of this term), or 'the anointed one'. It was by looking to their ancient theological and scriptural categories that the writers of the New Testament texts attempted to make sense of the identity of Jesus. The Messiah, they believed, had come, and this drew them to read again the ancient prophecies and the heritage of the Kingdom of David extending back over a thousand years. For John, Jesus Christ was the fulfilment of the Hebrew scriptures, but even more shockingly he was also the beginning and the fulfilment of creation: Christ is the Messiah, but he is also the incarnate Logos 'by whom all things were made'.

This suggests that, in order to understand the identity of Jesus as the Christ or Messiah, one must look to the Old Testament as well as the New. In the Old Testament, the 'anointed ones' were prophets, priests and kings. In particular, kings were regarded and especially chosen and appointed by God for a specific

purpose. Often that purpose was the leadership and renewal of Israel. It is therefore not surprising that Jesus comes to be understood as the Messiah, and therefore under the typologies of prophet, priest and king. Strikingly, Jesus does not use the term 'Messiah' in reference to himself. In fact, New Testament scholars have come to label this 'the messianic secret' in reference to those numerous occasions when, after a profession of faith in Jesus the Messiah, Jesus forbids his followers to tell anyone. The term 'Messiah' was politically highly charged in the first century and continues to be so today.

There are three further terms of Hebrew provenance which are applied to Christ: 'Son of God', 'Son of Man' and 'Lord'. We might think that 'Son of God' applies to Jesus' divinity while 'Son of Man' applies to his humanity, but matters are, needless to say, rather more complicated. In the Old Testament, the term 'son of God' refers to one who belongs to God. In the New Testament, the term 'Son of God' is primarily (but certainly not exclusively) used by Paul with reference to Christ, and he clearly wishes to point to Jesus' unique and distinctive relation to God. Remember that Paul uses different terms with reference to Jesus' status as Son of God (*huios*) and our status as adopted sons, or children, of God (*huioi/teknoi*).

By contrast, the term 'Son of Man' is only used in the Gospels (and on one occasion in Acts 7), and then only by Jesus in reference to himself. There is a clear reference back to Daniel 7.13-14:

As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being [son of man] coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed. (NRSV)

In the Synoptic Gospels the title 'Son of Man' refers to Christ's authority, suffering and resurrection and the second coming (see, for example, Mark 2.10, Mark 8.31, 38). Meanwhile, John's gospel refers to the Son of Man being 'lifted up' which seems to refer both to Christ's crucifixion and his exaltation. This clearly reminds us of Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness.

The term 'Lord' is used in reference to God in the Old Testament, so its use as a name for Jesus is exceptionally striking in the New Testament (see Romans 10, for example). One of the most striking uses of *kyrios* is found in the confession of Thomas after the resurrection: my Lord and my God. In fact, the New Testament never makes the bald statement that 'Jesus is God'. Thomas's confession is the clearest ascription of divinity to Jesus, along with the prologue to John's Gospel.

The Gospels themselves present us with a varied picture of the person and identity of Jesus. Please note that this is **NOT** to suggest that the accounts are therefore mutually contradictory and that it is the job of the theologian to 'square the circle' and bring all the accounts of Jesus into a neat line of uniformity. If this were the task of the theologian, it would indeed be a very dull task. Rather, we have *four* accounts of the life of Jesus for a reason: each introduces us to a different aspect of Christ. Together they weave a complete tapestry, *but they are not therefore saying the same single thing four times over*. For example, the Christ of Mark's Gospel resonates very strongly with the theme of the suffering servant in Isaiah. Matthew ties Jesus much more closely to the genealogy of Israel while Luke emphasises the suffering of Christ in the passion narrative and the friendship of Jesus with the poor. Each gospel writer orders his material slightly differently, and for a reason.

Meanwhile, the Gospel of John appears to present the most distinctive Christology. Here, Jesus appears to be in command of each and every situation, anticipating and guiding events rather than being subject to the vicissitudes of the world. This led the twentieth century German New Testament scholar Ernst Käsemann (1906-1998) (a student of Rudolf Bultmann) to describe the Christ of John's Gospel as Docetic. Docetism (from the Greek *dokeō*, 'I seem') is the Christian heresy which claims that Christ's incarnation – and therefore his bodily appearance – is merely a cloak which veils the divine second person of the Trinity. In other words, human identity and flesh are not *really* assumed by God; they are merely an appearance (hence Christ only 'seems' human). For Käsemann, Christ is 'God striding the earth'. While the 'control' shown by Christ in the Johannine passion narrative gives a very different picture of Christ to the suffering servant of Mark or Luke, nevertheless Käsemann's view has been widely dismissed.