

New Testament Christologies

Christopher McMahon, PhD

The development of Christology in the New Testament—the attempt to articulate the religious significance of Jesus—involves the interplay of several factors: insight born of the resurrection experience, the memory tradition of Jesus' life and ministry, developments within apocalyptic Judaism, and tensions with the limits of Jewish monotheism. The results of this interplay yield profound yet somewhat uneven Christologies. We should be careful, therefore, about demanding full and clear doctrinal orthodoxy from the New Testament when such clarity was the product of subsequent generations. This does not mean that the New Testament offers us a Christology that is less than orthodox! All Christian interpretations of Jesus' religious significance rest on Scripture as the norm or guide for faith, but that faith has developed through time and circumstance to reach a state of formal clarity. . . .

The Growth of New Testament Christology: Titles, Roles, and Patterns

The Christology of the New Testament makes use of a variety of titles or roles that had been circulating within first-century Judaism to make sense of Jesus. First, let's clarify what is meant by "title," "role," and "pattern." Titles are like proper names; they are characters in the story of Israel and were used by early Christians to confess their faith in Jesus. Two obvious examples include "**Lord**" (e.g., Philippians 2:11), used as a circumlocution for the divine name (YHWH), and "**Messiah**" (Greek *christos*, "**Christ**"; e.g., Matthew 16:16). A role, on the other hand, is more of a job description. For example, the Letter to the Hebrews identifies Jesus as "a great high priest" (4:14). To call Jesus a great high priest is to describe a manner in which he functions or a role he performs, and was never used as a profession of faith in early Christian prayer or worship.

New Testament Christology situates these titles and roles into narrative, sequential, or chronological patterns, thereby privileging certain moments that point to the identity and meaning of Jesus. For example, the title "Lord" was often associated with the exaltation of Jesus (e.g., Philippians 2:11) and not commonly associated with his life and ministry. The reader should be aware, however, that the relationships between these titles, roles, and patterns are not always stable; titles and roles overlap, and christological patterns can employ a variety of titles. In what follows, some basic aspects of New Testament Christology will be discussed using titles, roles, and patterns. All of this is somewhat artificial and certainly not part of the thinking of the early church as it wrestled with language about Jesus, but it may prove helpful for gaining an understanding of the christological language used in the New Testament.

Jesus himself appears to be somewhat uncomfortable with self-description in the gospel tradition, since any such attempt might result in a misunderstanding of his ministry. If we can talk about a "Christology of Jesus" as the starting point for a discussion of New Testament Christology in general, then we must begin with Jesus' self-designation as **Son of Man**.

The Son of Man is a notoriously complex topic in New Testament Christology and historical Jesus research.¹ It is a self-designation, or self-description, often used by Jesus but not used by others to refer to Jesus (for a possible exception, see Acts 7:56). The enigmatic phrase "son of man" (*bar nasha* in Aramaic) can be understood in at least three senses: (1) the indefinite sense ("a human being" or "mortal," used thus throughout the Book of Ezekiel), (2) the generic sense ("a person in my position"), and (3) the eschatological sense (referring to a specific eschatological figure prominent in the literature of Jesus' time). It appears as though Jesus used the phrase in the eschatological sense and connected it to his role as



“Suffering Servant of YHWH,” an enigmatic figure who would manifest YHWH’s glory through suffering. The figure of the Son of Man is found in scripture in Daniel 7:13, but also in non-canonical books of Jesus’ time such as **1 Enoch**. The Son of Man was interpreted by some Jews of the first century as a key figure in the story of Israel, a figure who vindicates YHWH’s fidelity toward Israel and his judgment against the wicked. But the Son of Man, like Isaiah’s Suffering Servant, is probably best understood corporately as a figure representative of righteous Israelites as a group, not an individual. In fact, the application of this role to an individual is a unique feature of Jesus’ preaching and the preaching of the early church.

The Son of Man in both early Judaism and within early Christian writings is a figure who points to the future. When Jesus identifies himself with the Son of Man he often does so in regard to some future event, sometimes his suffering (as in Mark) but most often his coming vindication: “you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:62). This passage also signals the importance of Psalm 110:1 for New Testament Christology (“The LORD says to you, my lord: ‘Take your throne at my righthand, while I make your enemies your footstool’”). Through the resurrection Jesus has been exalted to God’s right hand, the place of intimacy, happiness, and power. In the future, he will come on the clouds as the vindicated Son of Man to execute judgment against the faithless and the unjust and to vindicate the righteous faithful. This orientation toward the future is an important pattern in New Testament Christology and often closely associated with the struggle to identify Jesus as the Messiah.

The title “Messiah” provides us with an appropriate point of transition from a “Christology of Jesus” to a Christology of the early church. It is apparent that Jesus himself had an ambivalent attitude toward the title Messiah, or “anointed one.” It was customary in the ancient Near East to anoint people as they assumed important new positions in the community (king, priest, and prophet). Anointing had a wide range of meanings, but usually it served as a marking of divine protection, health, and mission. The term “messiah” gradually became associated with the kings of Judah, though not exclusively. Following the Babylonian Exile (586 BCE–539 BCE) it began to be used in conjunction with Israel’s hope of future restoration and deliverance from oppression. While there was no uniform set of expectations concerning a messiah figure in first-century Judaism, his role generally included achievements like the inauguration of a new age, punishment of the wicked, general resurrection of the dead, defeat of Gentile (non-Jewish) oppressors, purification of the temple, and reestablishment of the Davidic monarchy. When viewed in this light, the applicability of the title Christ or Messiah to Jesus seems curious—Jesus did not envision himself as the one who would bring defeat to Israel’s political enemies or vindicate the violent nationalism that often characterized first-century Palestine. Yet Jesus did identify himself with messianic expectations through a variety of symbolic actions and provocative pronouncements. In light of such statements, the earliest Christians identified Jesus as Messiah, even though Jesus had not performed many of the actions (performed the role) that many Jews in the first century expected of the Messiah. The earliest Christians, however, oriented themselves toward a future when Jesus would be vindicated as Messiah and perform the basic functions expected of that role. This future event was called the *parousia*.

The Greek word *parousia* was often used to describe the visit of the emperor. One can imagine the joy—and horror—such a visitation might evoke in a particular town: those who were “good servants” of the empire might expect rewards and accolades, while those who were poor administrators would be fearful about the repercussions of such a visit. The word thus became an effective image for the apocalyptic expectations that played an important role in early Christianity; Jesus at his *parousia* would exercise his Lordship over all and execute judgment against evildoers. The expectation of the *parousia*, or second coming of Christ, effectively bridged the early Christian experience of Jesus as decisive for Israel’s future and the Jewish expectation of final judgment and resurrection. The *parousia* would finally and definitively inaugurate the kingdom that Jesus had proclaimed as breaking into the world in his day, and thus would bring about the defeat of evil and the resurrection of the dead, thereby vindicating Jesus’ role as Messiah.



This future vindication contrasts with the earthly ministry of Jesus in which he is depicted as a lowly servant. The christological pattern that shifts between these two stages—first lowly, then exalted—is often called “two-step Christology.”

Two-step Christology is thought to be the christological pattern characteristic of the early part of stage two, the decades immediately after the death and resurrection of Jesus. In the letters of Paul, where we find evidence of the earliest Christology, there seems to emerge a diversity of Christologies, while in the Gospels Jesus is depicted as Lord and Messiah at earlier and earlier points along a time line. Raymond Brown used the expression “christological moment” to refer to scenes taken from the life and ministry of Jesus that became the vehicle for the expression of a post-resurrectional Christology.² Jesus’ Lordship, recognized by his disciples in the resurrection, is transferred to various points in the life of Jesus. These points or moments tend to emerge earlier in the narrative of Jesus in the progressive development of the New Testament. For example, the earliest Gospel, Mark, uses the scene of Jesus’ baptism as an inaugural christological moment in the life of Jesus. But in Matthew and Luke, their birth or infancy narratives are the key early christological moments. This developmental pattern, however, should be read with caution; as we shall see in the case of some of the material from Paul’s letters, the pattern is far from neat.

One of the more problematic titles for beginning students of theology is “**Son of God**,” often used to signify important christological moments (e.g., Mark 15:39). Most modern Christians immediately think of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity (that God is three persons in one divine substance—Father, Son, and Spirit). But students should be cautious about reading late doctrinal developments back into the biblical texts, and since the doctrine of the Trinity is not defined until the fourth century CE, it ought not be read into the pages of the New Testament. On the other hand, having made a case for historical modesty about the development of Christian doctrine, we should not pretend that such a doctrine emerged out of a vacuum. Rather, these doctrinal developments have their roots in the witness of Scripture and the beliefs of the early church. We must be attentive to the way doctrinal development takes place: as a movement from experience, to question, to formal doctrinal statements. In the New Testament, we are at the point of experience and question; we have not yet arrived at formal doctrinal statements.

In the Old Testament the son of God is a role rather than a title. On occasion it designates angels, as in the case of Job 1:6 where even “[the] Satan” (Hebrew for “the adversary”) is described as a son of God. In the Old Testament the people of Israel collectively or individually are designated as son(s) of God. Since the king could be called God’s son some have thought that this title may have come to be associated with the coming messiah, but even the Qumran literature does not unambiguously support this view. The dominant view in the Old Testament is that a son of God was someone who had received a God-given task. As such, the title is applied to Jesus to signify his unique God-given task: redemption. In the Fourth Gospel, as in many early Christian writings, the uniqueness of Jesus’ task is emphasized when Jesus is called “the only begotten Son” (*monogenēs*). But it would be a mistake to conceive of the uniqueness of Jesus’ relationship with the Father simply in terms of mission or function. Rather, in the New Testament, the title of Jesus as Son reflects the special intimacy Jesus has with the Father and which, in his redemptive mission, he makes available to those who have faith: as we cry out to God we too call God *Abba* (Galatians 4:4–6). So while not Trinitarian per se the title Son of God expresses the fundamental intimacy between Jesus and his Father that would eventually provide the foundation for the doctrine of the Trinity.

The title, roles, and patterns that comprise New Testament Christology are only partially understood when abstracted from the literature of the New Testament.



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¹ For a good summary of the major points in the discussion of the “Son of Man,” see John R. Donahue, “Recent Studies on the Origin of ‘Son of Man’ in the Gospels,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 48 (1986): 484–98, and John Collins, “The Son of Man in First-Century Judaism,” *New Testament Studies* 38 (1992): 448–66.

² Raymond Brown, “Aspects of New Testament Thought,” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. R. Brown, J. Fitzmyer, and R. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 1357.

