

Who was Jesus of Nazareth?

**7. Views of Jesus in the Early
Church Arising From
Reflections on His Life
Before He Began His Public
Ministry**

Christology

Meaning

“Christology:” the study of:

- who was Jesus? (“ontological” = nature of being – component)
- what role did he play in the God’s divine plan? (“functional” component)

Christology

Revelation

Christian religious understanding -- like any human understanding -- developed and grew.

325 AD: Council of Nicaea

451 AD: Council of Chalcedon

Jesus:

- fully God and fully Human
- equal to God the Father
- existed from all eternity

Earliest Views of Jesus in the Church

Were based on the **Second Coming** and the **Resurrection**

Likely from before the 50 AD.

Second Coming Christologies

- Jesus would return as “Messiah” (in the way expected by most first century Jews) in the Second Coming.

Resurrection Christologies.

- “Two-step Christology” of lowly service during his life, then exaltation to Messiah, Son of God in the Resurrection.

Gospel Writers' Views of Jesus

Apparent in Their Narratives of Jesus' Public Ministry

All four gospel writers agree that Jesus during his ministry was Messiah and Son of God (no two-step Christology)

Each gospel gives a different emphasis in the tension between Jesus as *fully human* vs. Jesus as *fully God*.

- Jesus' *servanthood and humanity*, in decreasing order of emphasis: Mark, Luke, Matthew, John
- Jesus' *divinity* the most important message in John

Gospel Writers' Views of Jesus

Apparent in Their Narratives of Jesus' Public Ministry

“No one Gospel would enable us to see the whole picture, and only when the four are kept in tension among themselves has the church come to appreciate who Jesus is.”

- Father Brown

Views of Jesus in the Early Church Arising From Reflections on His Life Before He Began His Public Ministry

1. Family-Circle or Boyhood Christology
2. Conception Christology
3. Pre-existence Christology

Common Thrust: to show that “the identity of Jesus” manifested during his public ministry was a continuation of an identity that he had earlier.

Family-Circle or Boyhood Christology

We know very little of Jesus' boyhood and young adulthood prior to his public ministry

- Luke's story of Jesus at age 12 left behind in the Jerusalem Temple (Luke 2:41-51)
- the extracanonical *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* relates incidents in Jesus' life from ages 5-12 (ending with the story of Jesus in the temple found in Luke)
- John's story of the miracle at Cana – may actually have been a pre-ministry story

Family-Circle or Boyhood Christology

Jesus at Age 12 in the Temple

- Mary speaks of “your father [Joseph] and I”
- Jesus (first time he speaks in Luke) says she and Joseph should have known he would be in his Father’s house (or about his Father’s business
 - affirms he already has the identity subsequently expressed by the voice of God at his baptism “My Beloved Son.”

Family-Circle or Boyhood Christology

Jesus at Age 12 in the Temple

This story in Luke probably once stood by itself – Mary and Joseph should already know Jesus is the Son of God from the Nativity stories – but in this story they do not seem to understand when Jesus talks about his true Father in heaven

Family-Circle or Boyhood Christology

Infancy Gospel of Thomas

Late second century extracanonical gospel
relating stories of Jesus' childhood ages
5-12

Probably stories from popular imagination
Jesus:

- does “convenience” miracles (water for Mom; lengthens wood plank for Dad)
- heals boy with wounded foot;
resuscitates dead child
- makes birds out of clay that fly away (a “certain Jew” objects that he is working with clay on the Sabbath)

Family-Circle or Boyhood Christology Infancy Gospel of Thomas

Shows a tradition in the popular imagination that Jesus' ability to do miracles during his ministry was a power he also had as a child and did not begin after God called him "My Beloved Son" at his baptism.

Family-Circle or Boyhood Christology Miracle at Cana

John presents the Miracle at Cana (John 2:1-11) as occurring after Jesus' baptism and gathering of disciples – but it may actually be a story from before his baptism because:

- it takes place at Cana (Galilean town near Nazareth) before he goes to Capernaum (the base for his public ministry). In the other gospels, Jesus in his public ministry does not work miracles near Nazareth (see Mark 6:5)

Family-Circle or Boyhood Christology Miracle at Cana

- his mother is a central figure; his brothers are present
- fits in with the genre of stories in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* where Jesus performs “convenience” miracles for his family (his mother seems to expect he can do something about the wine shortage)

Family-Circle or Boyhood Christology Miracle at Cana

John 2:4: Jesus: “My hour has not yet come.” (NRSV)

- we later find his “hour” refers to the work of his Father

John 2:11: “Jesus did this . . . and revealed his glory. . .” (NRSV)

- we later find the nature of this glory in John 17:5 “So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.” (NRSV)

Family-Circle or Boyhood Christology Summary

Jesus was God's Son, not only from when John baptized, but also in his boyhood and young adulthood before he began his public ministry

Conception Christology

Luke's and Matthew's infancy stories (the only infancy stories we have in the gospels) are very different; they were likely composed independently

Common points in each:

- **Jesus' *human* identity: Son of David**
(he was a descendant of David because his legal father Joseph, was of the House of David)
- **Jesus' *divine* identity: Son of God** (he was conceived of Mary through the Holy Spirit without a human father)

Conception Christology

Jesus' Divine Identity in Matthew's Infancy Story

Matthew tells us that at his conception,

Jesus is:

- one who will save people from their sins (1:21),
- **Emmanuel** (“God is with Us” 1:23)
- God’s Son (2:15).

Returns to the **Emmanuel** identity at the end of the gospel when Jesus says after his Resurrection: “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”
(Matthew 28:20, NRSV)

Conception Christology

Jesus' Divine Identity in Luke's Infancy Story

Luke identifies Jesus as God's Son at conception, echoing the "Holy Spirit / Power" language of the pre-Pauline Resurrection Christology (a "two step" Christology) of Romans 1:3-4:

Jesus was ". . .descended from David according to the flesh, and was declared to be *Son of God* with *power* according to the *Spirit of Holiness* by resurrection from the dead. . ." (NRSV)

Conception Christology

Jesus' Divine Identity in Luke's Infancy Story

Pre-Pauline Resurrection (“two-step”)

Christology:

- Jesus Son of David (“descended from David according to the flesh”); then:
- Jesus declared *Son of God* with *power* according to the *Holy Spirit* after his resurrection

Luke's Christology (Angel Gabriel to Mary Luke 1:34-35):

“The *Holy Spirit* will come upon you, and the *power* of the Most High will overshadow you, therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called the *Son of God*.”

(NRSV)

Conception Christology

Jesus' Divine Identity in Luke's Infancy Story

Pre-Pauline Resurrection Christology: the two identities of Jesus are sequential:

- **Son of David**; *then* (after the resurrection)
- **Son of God**

Luke's Conception Christology: the two identities of Jesus are simultaneously present from conception:

- **Son of David** (Luke 1:32-33, echoing Nathan talking to David in 2 Samuel 7:9-16)
- **Son of God**

Conception Christology Summary

In Matthew and Luke, Jesus has the divine identity **Son of God** from the moment of conception

Preexistence Christology

Existence of Jesus During the Time of
Moses and Abraham

Existence of Jesus Before or At Creation

Preexistence Christology

Existence of Jesus During the Time of Moses and Abraham

Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:1-4:

“ . . .our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ.” (NRSV)

Preexistence Christology

Existence of Jesus During the Time of Moses and Abraham

John 8:56-58:

(Jesus speaking to some Jews:) “ ‘Your ancestor Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad.’ Then the Jews said to him, ‘You are not yet fifty year old, and have you seen Abraham?’ Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.’ ” (NRSV)

Preexistence Christology

Existence of Jesus Before or At Creation

Incarnation: means the “Son of God” was a being that previously existed in the divine realm before taking on flesh.

Preexistence Christology

Existence of Jesus Before or At Creation (Colossians)

Colossians 1:15-20: (hymn that may have existed before Paul's letter):

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominations or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” (NRSV)

Preexistence Christology

Existence of Jesus Before or At Creation (Hebrews)

Christology in the Letter to the Hebrews:

- Heb. 4:14-15, 5:8: Christ “in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.” and “learned obedience through what he suffered.” (NRSV)
- Heb.10:5-10: describes thoughts of Christ entering the world and the body God has prepared for him

Preexistence Christology

Existence of Jesus Before or At Creation (Hebrews)

Christology in the Letter to the Hebrews:

- Heb. 1:2-3: Christ present at creation: “. . . a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.” (NRSV)

Preexistence Christology

Existence of Jesus Before or At Creation (John's Prologue)

Opening versus of the hymn of John's Prologue (John 1:1-2)

- All things created through the Son (the Word or Logos of God)
- Son existed in God's presence *before* creation

Not intended figuratively:

- John 17:5: "So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed." (NRSV)
- also see John 16:28, 3:13, 5:19, 8:26, 8:58

Preexistence Christology

Existence of Jesus Before or At Creation (Jesus & I AM in John)

The use of “I am” by Jesus in John. Greek

ego eimi has meanings / usages:

- 1. phrase of common speech meaning “It is I” or “I am the one”
- 2. sacred meaning in the Bible, Gnosticism and pagan Greek religious writings

Preexistence Christology

Existence of Jesus Before or At Creation (Jesus & I AM in John)

Use of “I am” in the Old Testament:

- 1. expressions of divine authority:
 - e.g. Exod. 6:7: “You shall know that *I am* YHWH”
- 2. expressions of the oneness of God:
 - I am YHWH and there is no other:
Second Isaiah, Hosea 13:4, Joel 2:27
 - “I YHWH” and ‘I He’ of the Hebrew translated into Greek in the Septuagint simply as “I am” (*egō eimi*)

Preexistence Christology

Existence of Jesus Before or At Creation (Jesus & I AM in John)

Use of “I am” in the Old Testament:

- 3. the divine name:

- e.g. Isa. 43:25: “I, I am He who blots out your transgressions. . .” (NRSV). In Greek Septuagint: *egō eimi egō eimi*. Could be read as “I am ‘I AM’ who blots out . . .”
- e.g. Isa. 52.6 “I am He who speaks:” In Greek Septuagint can be read as ‘I AM’ (*egō eimi*) speaks.

Preexistence Christology

Existence of Jesus Before or At Creation (Jesus & I AM in John)

John's Jesus speaks like YHWH in Second Isaiah. Compare:

- Isa. 43:10: Greek Septuagint: "that you may know and believe me and understand 'I AM' (*egō eimi*)"
- John 8:28: ". . . then you will know 'I AM' (*egō eimi*)"

The absolute (that is, use without a predicate) of "I am" (*egō eimi*) in John portrays Jesus as like YHWH of the Old Testament (God, existing before creation)

Preexistence Christology

Existence of Jesus Before or At Creation (Jesus & I AM in John)

John's absolute use of "I AM" may be an elaboration of an early tradition, hints of which can be found in the earlier Gospels (where it may be a play on the double meaning of *egō eimi*):

- e.g. Matt. 14:27; Mark 6:50: " 'I AM' (*egō eimi*); do not be afraid."
- e.g. Mark 13:6; Luke 21:8: "Many will come in my name, saying 'I AM' (*egō eimi*)"

Preexistence Christology

Existence of Jesus Before or At Creation (The Incarnation in John)

The Importance of the Incarnation in John:

- only John explicitly describes an Incarnation: the Son of God (the Word, Logos) takes on human flesh in the form of Jesus Christ.

God's Supreme Act of Love:

- *Other New Testament Thought*: the self-giving seen in the crucifixion
- *John*: the sending of the Son into the world as a light to the world (i.e. the Incarnation)

Preexistence Christology

Existence of Jesus Before or At Creation (The Incarnation in John)

Two Paradigms of Salvation:

- Western Idea: *Via the crucifixion*.
Jesus' suffering and death on the cross defeats sin and allows us, through God's grace, to share in eternal life
- Eastern Idea: *Via the Incarnation*. "God became human so that we might become divine." (Maximus the Confessor, father of Byzantine Theology)

Summary of New Testament View of Jesus

Parousia or Second Coming Christology
(Jesus will be Lord / Messiah) when he comes again.

- wrong only if it is taken to mean Jesus does not become Messiah until the parousia

Resurrection Christology (Jesus is Messiah, Lord, Son of God through / at the Resurrection)

- wrong only if it is taken to mean Jesus did not become Messiah, Son of God until the Resurrection

Summary of New Testament View of Jesus

Ministry Christology (Jesus was God's Beloved Son through his public ministry)
- wrong only if it is taken to mean Jesus did not become God's Beloved Son until his baptism by John the Baptist)

Boyhood – Family Circle Christology (Jesus was Son of God as a boy / young adult) and **Conception Christology** (Jesus was Son of God at conception)
- wrong only if it is taken to mean Son of God did not exist until conception

Pre-existence Christology (Son of God existed at / before Creation)

Later Challenges to Christology

New Testament Period: thinkers described their Christology in terms of Jewish theological language

Second to Fourth Century: thinkers trained in Greek Philosophy began to ask questions about Christology in the language of their own developed and nuanced philosophy:

- **Arius** in the 4th century asked: did the Son of God, who was present at and before creation, ever have a beginning? (NT thinkers had not considered this question)

Later Challenges to Christology

Arius suggested that the Son of God did indeed have a beginning before creation

Athanasius argued in reply that the New Testament had resisted all temporal limitations in the identity of Jesus, and he prevailed at the **Council of Nicaea**:

- begotten not made
- never was a time when he was not
- true God of true God
- coeternal with the Father

Later Challenges to Christology

Twenty-First Century: thinkers trained in Modern Philosophy ask questions about Christology in the language of their own developed and nuanced philosophy (questions that those trained in Greek Philosophy never considered)

“In our times Christians are going to have to reach answers to new dilemmas in fidelity to God’s revelation in Christ; they can be helped in that if they have seen some examples of how their ancestors in the faith had to struggle to emerge with the answers now taken for granted.”

- Father Raymond Brown

Reference and Source

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