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Confronting Current Christological Controversy

Charles A. Gieschen

For most of us, the term *christological controversy* conjures up a lengthy list of challenges concerning the person and work of Christ that arose in the first centuries of Christianity. We think of teachings that were branded as heretical by church bishops and councils, such as Docetism, Ebionism, Monarchianism, Gnosticism, Sabellianism, Arianism, Apollinarianism, Nestorianism, Eutychianism, Monophysitism, and Monothelitism.¹ We are certain that these were the big christological controversies but are equally confident that they were resolved by the church councils that took place between the fourth and eighth centuries, especially those at Nicea in AD 325 and Chalcedon in AD 451. We view these challenges from a rather distant and triumphant post-Easter perspective: "The strife is o'er, the battle done."²

Despite the seriousness of these early heresies and the clarity of confession that arose from the crucible of conflict, they neither marked the end to christological controversies, nor even the climax. The past two centuries, in fact, have witnessed christological controversies that rival and surpass those early ones.³ What is the basis for this bold assertion? Many of those early controversies concerned the true humanity of Jesus, especially the relationship of the humanity to his divinity, but *not* a denial of his divinity.⁴ The current situation is much worse: the divinity of Christ as true God is incessantly questioned or denied. Therefore, although Jesus'

¹ For a discussion of these controversies, see Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in the Christian Tradition: Volume 1, From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451)*, 2nd ed., trans. John Bowden (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975), and also the short summary in David P. Scaer, *Christology*, Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics VI (Fort Wayne: International Foundation for Lutheran Confessional Research, 1989), 10-20.

² These are the opening words of the Easter hymn "The Strife is O'er, the Battle Done."

³ For example, see the essays in *Crisis in Christology: Essays in Quest of Resolution*, ed. William R. Farmer (Livonia: Dove Booksellers, 1995).

⁴ Larry Hurtado notes that it was especially "proto-orthodox" Christians that regarded Jesus' humanity as crucial for his redemptive work; *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 150.

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historical existence as a human is acknowledged by most scholars, serious discussion about the two natures of Christ has ceased among those who deny his divinity. This study, therefore, will argue that the church can defend the divinity of the Son by showing, through rigorous historical research, that the formative period for the identification of Jesus within the mystery of the one God was the two decades that followed his death and resurrection as evidenced in the worship of Jesus by Jews. Furthermore, this study will set forth four often underappreciated theological categories that should be used in defending the divine identity of the Son.

I. The Current Controversy Concerning Jesus' Divinity

Let us begin with a very terse overview of the past two centuries of christological controversy in order to set the stage for where the church finds herself at the start of the twenty-first century. Although there were several post-Enlightenment scholars who were products of the rise of rationalism and the scientific method that sowed the seeds which blossomed into modern christological controversies, it is perhaps best to begin with David Friedrich Strauss. In his 1835 book *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, Strauss approached the Gospels from the perspective that they should be read as religious texts and not as historical texts.⁵ The point of his attack was the miracle stories, especially the resurrection of Jesus. He characterized the miracle accounts in the Gospels as mythic presentations that symbolized the truth that Jesus is the Messiah. He is the first to make the distinction between the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history. In his view, Christ's deification took place within the early church long after the death of Jesus. Although this early book was optimistic for the viability of Christianity after his attack on the historical foundation of Jesus, he offered this pessimistic assessment a few decades later:

The founder [of Christianity] is at the same time the most prominent object of worship; the system based upon him loses its support as soon as he is shown to be lacking in the qualities appropriate to an object of religious worship. This, indeed, has long been apparent; for an object of religious adoration must be a Divinity, and thinking men have long since ceased to regard the founder of Christianity as such.⁶

⁵ David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, trans. George Eliot (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972).

⁶ David Friedrich Strauss, *The Old and the New Faith*, trans. G. A. Wells, 2 vols. (Anherst: Prometheus Books, 1997), I. 54.

This historical skepticism, which ceased to regard Jesus as divine, characterized those who followed Strauss during the latter half of the nineteenth century. After they scraped the Christ of faith off the pages of the four Gospels, the image that remained was Jesus as an ethical teacher.

The accurateness of this research on Jesus was challenged by Albert Schweitzer at the beginning of the twentieth century in *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*:

The Jesus who came forward publicly as the Messiah, who reached the ethic of the Kingdom of God, who founded the Kingdom of Heaven upon earth, and died to give His work its final consecration, never had any existence. He is a figure designed by rationalism, endowed with life by liberalism, and clothed by modern theology in an historical garb.⁷

Although Schweitzer debunked the simplistic portrait of Jesus painted by his predecessors and pointed instead to understanding Jesus as an apocalyptic visionary who was tragically martyred, he was even more skeptical than others about what could be known of Jesus. The complete dissembling of the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith, however, climaxed two decades later with Rudolf Bultmann. After applying his criteria of authenticity to Gospel traditions, he stated: "We can, strictly speaking, know nothing of the personality of Jesus. But this does not really matter, for it is not the historical Jesus that concerns us, but the kerygmatic Christ."⁸

Bultmann went on to become the dominant voice in twentieth-century scholarship on the Gospels. He had been influenced by the work of Wilhelm Bousset, whose name is synonymous with the well-known *religionsgeschichtliche Schule* (the History-of-Religions School).⁹ Bousset had sought to use his vast knowledge of comparative religions to explain how Jesus came to be confessed as divine. He understood this confession as a late first-century development that resulted from the contact of Jesus' followers with the imperial cult, mystery religions, and Oriental religion outside of Palestine. Although Bousset died at a relatively early age,

⁷ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, trans. J. W. Montgomery (New York: MacMillan, 1970 [German original 1906]), 398.

⁸ Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* (Berlin: Deutscherbibelothek, 1926), 147.

⁹ See Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos: A History of the Belief in Christ from the Beginnings of Christianity to Irenaeus*, trans. J. Steely, 5th ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970). The first German edition was published in 1913.

Bultmann endorsed Bousset's flawed developmental model and extended its life through much of the twentieth century.¹⁰

The closing decades of the twentieth century have witnessed a renewed interest in the relationship between the historical Jesus and the depictions of him in the Gospels, but this interest is still characterized by historical skepticism. The now infamous Jesus Seminar consisted of a group of scholars who voted on the historical probability of individual sayings and actions of Jesus from individual Gospels, including the Gospel of Thomas.¹¹ Several of these scholars have produced monographs, but none has captivated as much popular attention as John Dominic Crossan's *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Peasant*.¹² He prides himself on his methodological rigor which leads him to conclude that Jesus was a poor, illiterate, peasant leader who led a social movement against the established religious and political powers of his day. Similar recent studies depict Jesus as a cynic teacher or an apocalyptic prophet, usually far short of one who is the divine Son, although serious voices have been raised against such portraits.¹³

Two major paradigm shifts have occurred in the study of Jesus over the past two centuries. First, a very conscious and sharp separation of the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith has occurred in scholarship. The conclusion has been drawn that the Gospels teach us much about the Christ of faith but very little about the Jesus of history. This historical skepticism is seen in the movement from historical approaches to various literary approaches over the last half of the twentieth century.¹⁴ Recent commentaries on the Gospels are no longer dominated by source criticism,

¹⁰ For Bultmann's endorsement of Bousset's flawed approach, see *The Theology of the New Testament*, 2 vols., trans. Kenneth Grobel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951 and 1955), I: 52.

¹¹ Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and The Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say? The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: MacMillan, 1993). For a helpful critique, see Jeffrey Gibbs, "The Search for the Idiosyncratic Jesus: A Critique of the Jesus Seminar's *The Five Gospels*," *Concordia Journal* 20 (1994): 368-384.

¹² John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991).

¹³ For example, see Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996).

¹⁴ Especially prominent among literary approaches to the Gospels over the past few decades is narrative criticism. This shift to the use of narrative criticism was seen first in the study of the Gospel of John; R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

form criticism, or redaction criticism. While some celebrate this change, with it has also come a growing lack of engagement with the history of Jesus as interpreters increasingly focus exclusively on the literary artistry of the narrative. The historical research that has survived tends to focus on the social context of the evangelists and their communities, not Jesus. David Scaer warns us that we must not ignore the history of Jesus himself: "For those who have no firm confidence in the historicity of Jesus, a true Christology is impossible."¹⁵ Second, the evolutionary or developmental model for understanding Jesus Christ has become firmly entrenched among New Testament scholars and theologians.¹⁶ This model presents Christology as gradually developing from understanding Jesus as a prophet in AD 30 to asserting that he is a divine being who is one with God in a few New Testament documents of the late first century (for example, the Gospel of John) and finally to confessing him to be "of one substance with the Father, very God of very God" at Nicea in the fourth century.¹⁷ This is a modern form of Adoptionism.

II. The Search for Historical Evidence of Jesus' Divine Identity

There have been three basic responses from within the church to these controversies. One response has been to follow the consensus. Even as Christmas and Easter articles in *Newsweek* and *Time*, TV network specials, and fiction like *The Da Vinci Code* have all popularized the conclusion that the divinity of Jesus was a creation of the later church, some within Christianity deny his incarnation and physical resurrection. Another response has been to ignore these controversies as scholarly rubbish that does not merit Christian response. More than a few have chosen this path: Let the academy discredit its Jesus and the church adore her Lord. The third response has been to challenge these controversies by refuting assertions claiming to be historically trustworthy. Since many Christians will be mesmerized by sensational scholarship, Christian scholars must respond. Even as we confess the Nicene Creed, we must defend the divine identity of Jesus through careful and credible historical research in the Scriptures that are the living foundation for this confession.

¹⁵ Scaer, *Christology*, 16.

¹⁶ I am using these terms as synonyms. Some scholars distinguish between the use of these two terms; for example, see C. F. D. Moule, *The Origin of Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 2-3.

¹⁷ For example, see Maurice Casey, *From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God: The Origins and Development of New Testament Christology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991).

Historical research has identified the earliest extant evidence for identification of Jesus with the one God of Israel. This was not a development that occurred over the first few centuries or even over the course of the first century. The evidence points us to the earthly ministry of Jesus and the two decades that followed, namely between AD 30 and 50. Despite the divergent dating of New Testament documents by scholars, we can be certain that the first ones were written no later than the early 50s. They contain evidence that Jesus was worshipped, which is very significant evidence for his divine identification. Such worship, moreover, must predate the documents themselves. In light of this, consider this provocative assertion by Martin Hengel, the highly respected New Testament scholar who taught many years at Tübingen:

... one is tempted to say that more happened in this period of less than two decades than in the whole of the next seven centuries, up to the time when the doctrine of the early church was completed. Indeed, one might even ask whether the formation of doctrine in the early church was essentially more than a consistent development and completion of what has already been unfolded in the primal event of the first two decades, but in the language and thought-forms of Greek, which was its necessary setting.¹⁸

Hengel's statement stands against the sea of scholarship that has eroded the understanding and confession of Jesus' divine identity. Historians must deal with the evidence that Jesus was worshipped as Lord by Jews already in the earliest years of Christianity, and not only by Gentiles in the final decade of the first century.

III. The Worship of Jesus

The most important evidence for Jesus' divine identity is the worship of him by Jews prior to the first New Testament writings. The First Commandment testifies that worship of any being other than YHWH is idolatry (Exodus 20:3-6). For first-century Jews to worship Jesus and to reflect this veneration in their writing, they would first need to believe that the fleshly Jesus is within the mystery of YHWH, otherwise they would be practicing blatant idolatry. Although the New Testament documents undoubtedly nurtured future worship of Jesus, these documents did not

¹⁸ Martin Hengel, *The Son of God: The Origin of Christology and the History of Jewish-Hellenistic Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 2, his emphasis; see also his "Christology and New Testament Chronology," *Between Jesus and Paul*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1983), 30-47.

create or commence such worship; they reflect, rather, the worship of Jesus that existed *prior* to their composition.

Larry Hurtado has defended this thesis in his *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*.¹⁹ In this volume he demonstrates that devotion to Jesus arose in the first decade or two after Jesus' death and resurrection, was intense, and was widespread among monotheistic Jews.²⁰ Hurtado resists the historical sources in order to show that Jesus' position in prayers, hymns, confession, baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the Gospels, all understand "the reverence given to Jesus as an extension of the worship of God."²¹ After reviewing the evidence for the multiple ways devotion was shown to Jesus in the early decades of Christianity, he then offers these conclusions:

Moreover, devotion to Jesus as divine erupted suddenly and quickly, not gradually and late, among first-century circles of followers. More specifically, the origins lie in Jewish circles of the earliest years. Only a certain wishful thinking continues to attribute the reverence of Jesus as divine decisively to the influence of pagan religion and the influx of Gentile converts, characterizing it as developing late and incrementally. Furthermore, devotion to Jesus as the "Lord," to whom cultic reverence and total obedience were the appropriate response, was widespread, not confined or attributable to particular circles, such as "Hellenists" or Gentile Christians of a supposed Syrian "Christ cult."²²

The Gospels contain some testimony that Jesus was even worshipped during his earthly ministry. For example, Matthew records the posture of worship (προσκυνέω) towards Jesus being taken by different individuals on different occasions: the visit of the Magi (Matthew 2:11), those who seek a miracle (Matthew 8:2, 9:18, 15:25), the mother of the Zebedee brothers (Matthew 20:20), the women at tomb after the resurrection (Matthew 28:9), and the disciples after the resurrection (Matthew 28:17). The significance of προσκυνέω as implying actual veneration is made clear by its use in the temptation narrative where Satan requests that Jesus take such a posture before him (Matthew 4:9). Even if such evidence is dismissed by critical

¹⁹ It should be noted that Hurtado prefers the nomenclature of *devotion* over *worship* because it is broader and more inclusive of the type of evidence he discusses.

²⁰ See further the reviews of Hurtado's book by James Voelz and David Scaer that follow this article.

²¹ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 151.

²² Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 650.

historians as reflecting later Christian practice, these texts remain solid evidence that Jesus was indeed being worshipped by Jews prior to the composition of Matthew. Like most literary traditions, these presuppose actual practice.

IV. Underappreciated Categories for the Divine Identity of Jesus

Based upon the evidence of the worship of Jesus by Jews, which was both very early and extensive, this question arises: What were the theological categories that allowed for the identification of Jesus within the mystery of the one God of Israel, YHWH, which must have taken place prior to, or in conjunction with, the actual worship of Jesus? There are two categories that have been traditionally used as support for Jesus' divine identity. First, Jesus did divine deeds during his earthly ministry (for example, miracles), the foremost being his own resurrection from the dead.²³ It is difficult to overstate the role that Jesus' resurrection played in confirming his divine identity. It must be realized, however, that the primary deed of Jesus upon which New Testament writers focus much attention is his death. The significance of the death of Jesus for his divine identity is expressed well by Richard Bauckham:

The profoundest points of New Testament Christology occur when the inclusion of the exalted Christ in the divine identity entails the inclusion of the crucified Christ in the divine identity, and when the Christological pattern of humiliation and exaltation is recognized as revelatory of God, indeed as the definitive revelation of who God is.²⁴

Moreover, New Testament documents evince that many of the other deeds of Jesus were understood primarily in relationship to YHWH's past deeds in the history of Israel; the same God is understood and presented to be acting in both. Second, the divine titles which are given to Jesus are a category frequently used as support for the identification of Jesus within the mystery of YHWH.²⁵ Here κύριος ("Lord") and θεοῦ υἱός ("Son of

²³ For example, see especially N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God Volume 3 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2003).

²⁴ Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 46. My use of the "divine identity" nomenclature is influenced by Bauckham.

²⁵ For an important discussion of Jesus' titles, see Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, rev. ed., trans. Shirley C. Guthrie and Charles A. M. Hall (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963).

God") usually receive pride of place. Less frequent are discussions about the significance of Jesus possessing the divine name (transliterated "YHWH") or Jesus' use of ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ("the Son of man") as testimony to his divinity and preexistence (and not his humanity as an offspring of humans).

Within these two broad divisions are theological categories that are marginalized in discussions of the divine identity of Jesus. Four such underappreciated categories that were important among first-century Jewish Christians are: Jesus' Death as Universal Atonement; The Son's Preincarnate Existence; Jesus' Possession of the divine name; and Jesus' Self-Identification as the Son of Man. Each of these will now be examined for important historical evidence that testifies to the divine identity of Jesus as YHWH.

Jesus' Death as Universal Atonement

The passion narratives dominate the presentation of Jesus in the four Gospels. Even skeptical historians have difficulty denying the crucifixion of Jesus. A natural question arises: If the church was out to transform the human Jesus into the divine Christ as critics allege, why would they focus doggedly on the crucifixion as central to understanding him? It is noteworthy that historical research often attacks the reliability of miracle accounts in the Gospels. If miracles are so important to the identity of Jesus, why do the Gospels depict Jesus discouraging those who are healed from speaking about them (for example, Mark 1:44)? The Gospels, instead, focus on the necessity of Jesus' death and resurrection as his definitive work: "From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised" (Matthew 16:21).²⁶

The message of a crucified God was scandalous to Jews and foolishness to the Hellenistic world, yet it took center stage in the preaching of the apostles (1 Corinthians 1:18-25). For Paul this message was the creed of first generation Christians: "For I handed over to you as of first importance

²⁶ See also Matthew 17:22-23, 20:17-19, as well as parallels in Luke (9:22; 9:44; 18:31-33) and Mark (8:31; 9:12; 10:33-34). John records Jesus pointing to his own death in a different manner, using language such as the destroying of his temple (2:19), the coming of his hour (2:4; 7:30; 8:20; 12:23; 13:1; 17:1), the lifting up of the Son of man (3:14; 8:28; 12:32-34), the glorification of the Son of man (7:39; 12:23; 13:31), the giving of his flesh (6:51), and the laying down of his entire being (10:11, 15, 18).

what I also received, that Christ died on behalf of our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3–4). Nils Dahl has made this important observation about Jesus' death:

The end of Jesus' life stands at the heart of the gospel; this historical Jesus, like the kerygmatic Christ, is the crucified Messiah. There is no gap between the historical Jesus and the preaching of the church; rather, there exists a close and inseparable connection.²⁷

The connection is the death of Jesus. This tradition which Paul received contains the phrase ὅτι Χριστὸς ἀπέθανεν ὑπὲρ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν ("that Christ died on behalf of our sins"). This pre-Pauline formula reflects an early and nevertheless complex understanding of Christ's death as substitutionary atonement. Rather than understanding the death of Jesus as having to do primarily with Christ's humanity, it is apparent that many early Christians viewed Jesus' death as the ultimate revelation of his divinity. While it was certainly noble martyrdom, it was primarily understood and proclaimed as universal atonement.²⁸

The interpretation of Jesus' death as universal atonement is visible in synoptic Gospel texts that use the language or imagery of both Passover (Exodus 12 and 24) and the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16).²⁹ The theme of atonement is presented already in Matthew's baptismal narrative with Jesus' words to John the Baptist: "It is necessary for us to fulfill all righteousness" (3:15).³⁰ This statement is probably a reflection of Isaiah 53:11, "By his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous; and he shall bear their iniquities."³¹ This theme is made explicit when Matthew explains Jesus' healings in terms of atonement with a quotation that calls to mind all of Isaiah 53: "This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah, 'He took our infirmities and bore our diseases'" (Matthew 8:17 quoting Isaiah 53:4). Both Matthew and

²⁷ Nils Alstrup Dahl, *Jesus the Christ: The Historical Origins of Christological Doctrine*, ed. Donald H. Juel (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 44.

²⁸ Peter J. Scaer traces the theme of a noble death in Luke's passion narrative; *The Lukan Passion and the Praiseworthy Death* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005).

²⁹ See John Kleinig, *Leviticus*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2004).

³⁰ David P. Scaer, *Discourses in Matthew: Jesus Teaches the Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2004), 245–263.

³¹ Pilate's wife even refers to Jesus as the "righteous man" in Matthew's passion narrative (27:19).

Mark include important testimony of Jesus himself to his atoning work: "The Son of man came not to be served, but to serve and give his entire being as a ransom [δοῦναι τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ λύτρον] in the place of many [ἀντὶ πολλῶν; that is, the masses of humanity]" (Matthew 20:28; see also Mark 10:45). Luke lacks this explicit statement, yet he uses Exodus-Passover imagery in his interpretation of Jesus' death as the eschatological release from captivity. This is signaled already in Jesus' programmatic sermon in Nazareth (note the use of ἀφεοῖν and ἀφέσει in Luke 4:18–19), and reinforced in his transfiguration account (note the use of τὴν ἔξοδον αὐτοῦ in Luke 9:31). Luke, however, introduces atonement already in the *Benedictus*: "he made payment for his people [ἐποίησεν λύτρωσιν τῷ λαῷ αὐτοῦ]" (Luke 1:68). Atonement language characterizes the words Jesus spoke in the Passover context of the Last Supper in each of the synoptic Gospels, especially in Matthew: "This is my blood of the covenant poured out for many [that is, the masses of humanity] for the forgiveness of sins" (26:28; see also Mark 14:24 and Luke 22:20).³² It appears that Isaiah 53:12 (MT) may be part of the background for the pouring imagery used here: "because he [the servant] poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sins of many."

John's Gospel combines his depiction of Jesus as the Passover Lamb with atonement imagery and language. John the Baptist announces him to be "the Lamb of God who takes away [ὁ αἴρων] the sin of the world" (John 1:29, 36). The universal—even cosmic—scope of Jesus' death is emphasized several times (John 2:16; 4:45). Jesus is then crucified on the Day of Preparation when all the lambs are slaughtered for the Passover Feast (John 19:14). John's quotation of Exodus 12:46 at the close of his passion narrative identifies Jesus as the eschatological Passover sacrifice (John 19:36). Jesus understands his death as substitutionary atonement: "I am the noble shepherd. The noble shepherd lays down his entire self [τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ] on behalf [ὑπὲρ] of the sheep" (John 10:11). Substitutionary atonement is also clearly presented in the irony of Caiaphas's statement: "It is better for us that one man die on behalf of the people [ἵνα εἷς ἄνθρωπος ἀποθάνῃ ὑπὲρ τοῦ λαοῦ]" (John 11: 50, 52). John's first epistle is

³² Exodus 24:8 is the background and source for "the blood of the covenant" language. This understanding of Jesus' death is driven home by Matthew's focus on blood in the narrative of Jesus' trial and death: Pilate washes his hands of "this man's blood" (27:24); the people say "his blood be upon us and on our children" (27:25); Judas confesses: "I have betrayed innocent blood" (27:4); and the "Field of Blood" is purchased (27:8).

even more explicit with universal atonement language: "We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous one. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins [αὐτὸς ἱλασμός ἐστιν περὶ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν], and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world [καὶ περὶ ὅλου τοῦ κόσμου]" (1 John 2:1-2).

The writers of the New Testament Epistles also focus on this theme. Paul calls Christ our "Mercy Seat sacrifice [ἱλαστήριον]" (Rom 3:25), but in another place writes "for Christ our Passover [τὸ πάσχα ἡμῶν] has been sacrificed" (1 Corinthians 5:7b). 1 Peter also combines the unblemished lamb of Passover with the sacrifice and sin-bearing goats of atonement: "Knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ" (1 Peter 1:18-19); and "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we die to sin and live to righteousness" (1 Peter 2:24-25). The depiction of Christ as the Passover Lamb whose blood gives atonement purity is front and center in the book of Revelation. There the Lamb who has been "slaughtered" now stands (Rev 5:6; 13:8) and "has loosed us from our sins by his blood" (Revelation 1:5). With his blood he "purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Revelation 5:9). They who have washed their robes and made them "white in the blood of the Lamb" (Revelation 7:14) have conquered "by the blood of the Lamb" (Revelation 12:11). Finally, there is the classic evidence of understanding Jesus' death as universal atonement in Hebrews. Two examples will suffice. "[Christ] has appeared, once for all, at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Hebrews 9:26). "When Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God" (Hebrews 10:12).³³

This stark evidence demonstrates that Jesus' crucifixion on Passover was being interpreted in light of the Day of Atonement already during the first three decades of Christianity. This interpretation took place for some early

³³ Alongside this understanding of Jesus' death as atonement is a profound interpretation of this event as his enthronement. When the theme of enthronement surfaces in the New Testament, many think it synonymous with Jesus' exaltation following resurrection; see Martin Hengel, "Sit at My Right Hand!: The Enthronement of Christ at God's Right Hand and Psalm 110," *Studies in Early Christology* (London: T&T Clark, 1995), 119-225. What is striking is that several New Testament texts interpret Jesus' death as a kingly enthronement (see also the discussion of the Son of man below).

Christians through the atonement language of the servant song in Isaiah 53.³⁴ Consider this brief portion of the song:

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:4–6)

More examples of the influence of Isaiah 53 upon the interpretation of Jesus' death as atonement can be added to those mentioned above. First, the influence of Isaiah 53 is clearly visible in Paul's succinct summary of Christ's work in Romans 4:25, "He was handed over [παρεδόθη] on account of our trespasses, and raised for our justification." The παρεδόθη of Romans reflects its usage in the Greek text of Isaiah 53:6 and 53:12 (twice). "Raised for our justification" is probably echoing Isaiah 53:11: "After the anguish of his life he shall see light; the righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous." This verse from Isaiah is also echoed in Romans 5:15–19. Second, one can point to the influence of Isaiah 53 on the mysterious interpretation of Jesus' death in 2 Corinthians 5 that climaxes in verse 21: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we become the righteousness of God." Third, Isaiah 53 and 45 are also the quarry from which the great Philippians hymn was cut.³⁵ If Paul is incorporating an already extant hymn, as some scholars hold, then the use of Isaiah in interpreting Jesus' death was already well-established. Fourth, the Septuagint text of Isaiah 52:13 with its use of ὑψωθήσεται and δοξαθήσεται shows that this servant song is the source of the interpretation of Jesus' death throughout the Gospel of John where these verbs are on the lips of Jesus (John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32–34; 7:39; 11:4; 12:23; 13:31).³⁶ John's use

³⁴ For further discussion of this, see Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher eds., *Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, trans. Dean P. Bailey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004). The huge and early influence of Isaiah upon early Christian exegesis is being increasingly acknowledged by scholars; for example see Steve Moyise and Maarten J. J. Menken eds., *Isaiah in the New Testament* (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2005), and more broadly J.F.A. Sawyer, *The Fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the History of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

³⁵ Ralph P. Martin, *Carmen Christi: Philippians ii.5–11 in Recent Interpretation and in the Setting of Early Christian Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 211–213 and 255–257.

³⁶ Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified*, 63–68.

of ὁ ἀμνός ("the lamb") is probably dependent on the use of this noun in the Septuagint of Isaiah 53:7 (John 1:29, 36). Finally, Otfried Hofius even argues Isaiah 53 is the referent of κατὰ τὰς γραφάς ("according to the Scriptures") in the pre-Pauline creedal formula quoted above (1 Corinthians 15:3–5).³⁷

How early then do we have such an interpretation of Jesus' death as the universal divine atoning action of God? The Gospels point us to Jesus viewing himself as the Isaianic servant who gives his life on behalf of others: "Instead, whoever wants to be welcomed as great among you must be your servant and whoever wants to be first must be servant of all. For even the Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and give his entire self as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:43b–45; see also Matthew 20:28). While acknowledging that the early church interpreted Jesus' death as universal atonement before it was expressed in NT writings, we can go one step further back and attribute this basic understanding to Jesus himself. Peter Stuhlmacher connects the dots for us in this manner:

The earthly Jesus himself understood his witness and his approaching death in the light of the tradition already given to him in Isaiah about the vicariously suffering Servant of God. He understood the suffering laid upon him as an event in which God's will was fulfilled.³⁸

This profound interpretation of Jesus' death appears to have played an early and significant role in confessing and worshipping Jesus as Lord. These texts testify that early Jewish Christians understood that the human Jesus was not exalted to the status of YHWH following his resurrection, but showed forth that he is YHWH specifically in the total giving of self for the world at his crucifixion. The weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper was one other early and important impetus for this interpretation of Jesus' death. The recounting of a passion narrative set the stage for the Eucharist in early celebrations "that proclaimed his death until he comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26) and the words "this is my blood of the covenant" were being spoken decades before they were included in the Gospel accounts (1 Corinthians 11:23).

³⁷ "The Fourth Servant Song in the New Testament Letters," *Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, ed. Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher, trans. Dean P. Bailey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 177.

³⁸ "Isaiah 53 in the Gospels and Acts," *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, ed. Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher, trans. Dean P. Bailey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 153

The Son's Preincarnate Existence

The second christological category that merits further attention is the evidence of the Son's existence prior to the incarnation. Sometimes this category is simply labeled "The Preexistence of Christ," focusing narrowly on textual testimony to the Son's existence prior to creation as well as his participation in creation (for example, John 1:1-4; Colossians 1:15-20).³⁹ Although this evidence is important, also very crucial for discussion of the divine identity of the Son is evidence that he existed within the mystery of YHWH during the history of the patriarchs and Israel that is prior to the conception of Jesus. Because scholars have generally agreed that early Jewish Christians had a monotheistic understanding of YHWH, their challenge, as Richard Bauckham has stated, was to identify Jesus within this one God: "[God's] identity in Jesus must be consistent with God's identity in the Hebrew scriptures."⁴⁰ This is certainly correct, yet it may be helpful to conceptualize the situation in a different manner. Once Jesus is confessed to be Lord (YHWH), he became definitive for understanding YHWH in the Old Testament scriptures as well. The question then became *not* "How does one fit Jesus in with the God of the Hebrew scriptures?" but "How does one fit God (our Father) in with our Lord (the Son) who is active and speaking in the Hebrew scriptures?"⁴¹

The theological foundation in the Old Testament for the understanding that the Son is central to the identity of YHWH is the tension between the theophanies of YHWH and the testimony that one cannot see YHWH and live (Exodus 33:20).⁴² A legitimate question arises: If one cannot see YHWH and live, and yet people are seeing YHWH and not dying, then who is the visible image of YHWH that is being seen? The Old Testament texts provide some assistance to our understanding of this phenomenon by often using a distinct title for the form of YHWH that people see: he is

³⁹ For a broader, helpful discussion, see Douglas McCready, *He Came Down From Heaven: The Preexistence of Christ and the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005).

⁴⁰ Bauckham, *God Crucified*, 47. On the monotheism of early Christians, see the essays in Loren T. Stuckenbruck and Wendy E.S. North eds., *Early Jewish and Christian Monotheism*, JSNTSup 263 (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2004).

⁴¹ This question reflects the common Pauline language that identifies the Father as God and Jesus as Lord (for example, Romans 1:7).

⁴² I previously discussed this in "The Real Presence of the Son Before Christ: Revisiting an Old Approach to Old Testament Christology," *CTQ* 68 (2004): 105-126 (esp. 115), and *Angelomorphic Christology: Antecedents and Early Evidence*, AGJU 42 (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 51-123.

labeled variously as the Angel of YHWH, the Name of YHWH, the Glory of YHWH, or the Word of YHWH. There is some distinction between this visible form of YHWH and YHWH's unveiled presence, even though this form of YHWH is certainly not separate from YHWH. Careful study of these theophanies leads to the conclusion that it is best to understand each as a hypostasis of YHWH, namely an aspect of YHWH that is depicted with independent personhood.⁴³ These theophanic traditions testify both to the immanence and transcendence of YHWH as well as the complexity of the oneness of the God of Israel. Given this understanding of the mystery of YHWH that exists in the Old Testament, what kind of testimony do we find in early Christianity to the Son's existence as YHWH before the conception of Jesus?

Not only do we find testimony in the New Testament to the Son's existence prior to creation, but we also find evidence that the theophanic traditions were being interpreted christologically.⁴⁴ Some examples from the Gospel of John will suffice to support this assertion. A christological interpretation of theophanic traditions is very evident in the Prologue of the Gospel of John: "No one has ever seen God at any time, the only begotten Son⁴⁵ from the position alongside the Father, made him known" (John 1:18). God is seen repeatedly, but it is "the only begotten Son" who is actually seen and has revealed the mystery of YHWH, not only after the incarnation, but also before it. This statement by John appears to be founded upon the teaching of Jesus found later in this Gospel: "Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; this one has seen the Father" (John 6:46). In light of this, John records that Jesus himself acknowledged that as the Son he interacted with Abraham (John 8:56-59). He describes Jesus' bringing the disciples' boat safely to harbor with words that identify the Son with the divine act of delivering Israel across the Reed

⁴³ For a defense of using this hypostasis nomenclature, see Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology*, 36-45. Many critical scholars view these labels as attempts to spiritualize earlier beliefs about YHWH's appearances; see, Walther Eichrodt, *The Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. J. A. Baker (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967) II.23-45.

⁴⁴ For a further discussion of this topic, see Gieschen, "The Real Presence of the Son Before Christ" and especially Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology*.

⁴⁵ There is a text-critical question here. My preference is for reading υἱός ("Son") rather than the more difficult θεός ("God"), but neither variant changes the understanding that the "only begotten" is the Son.

Sea (John 6:21; Psalm 106:30 LXX).⁴⁶ John makes it clear that the same YHWH who promised that he himself would come one day as "shepherd" to his people (Ezekiel 34:11-16) has come in Jesus who says, "I am the noble shepherd who lays down my entire being on behalf of the sheep" (John 10:11-18). He even states that Isaiah saw the Son in his call vision (John 12:41).

A prominent example in John of the identification of Jesus as YHWH who spoke in the Old Testament is the absolute ἐγώ εἰμι ("I am") sayings of Jesus.⁴⁷ Even though these sayings are often overshadowed by the study of the seven predicate nominative ἐγώ εἰμι sayings and the seven signs, they are actually a more significant testimony to Jesus' divine identity because of their relationship to the self-discourse statements of YHWH in the Old Testament.⁴⁸ There are seven absolute sayings:

Jesus said to her [the Samaritan woman], "ἐγώ εἰμι the one who is speaking to you." (4:16)

But he said to them [the disciples in the boat], "ἐγώ εἰμι do not be afraid." (6:20)

"You [the Jews] will die in yours sins unless you believe that ἐγώ εἰμι." (8:24)

"When you have lifted up the Son of man, then you will realize that ἐγώ εἰμι, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me." (8:28)

"Amen, amen, I tell you, before Abraham was, ἐγώ εἰμι" (8:58)

⁴⁶ For an even more striking example of identifying Jesus as YHWH in this incident, see the use of Job 9:8 LXX in Mark 6:48; see further Richard B. Hays, "Can the Gospels Teach Us How to Read the Old Testament?", *Pro Ecclesia* 11 (2002): 402-418.

⁴⁷ Similar absolute forms of ἐγώ εἰμι in the synoptic Gospels that draw on the Old Testament self-disclosure formula are found in Mark 6:50 and 14:62 as well as Luke 22:70 and 24:39 (compare, Mark 13:6 and Luke 21:8; see also Matthew 28:20).

⁴⁸ Richard Bauckham, "Monotheism and Christology in the Gospel of John," *Contours in the Christology of the New Testament*, ed. Richard Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 148-166; see also David Mark Ball, "I Am" in John's Gospel: Literary Function, Background and Theological Implications (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996). Because of the obvious relationship between the absolute and predicate nominate ἐγώ εἰμι sayings in John, it is probable that the latter at least alludes to Jesus as YHWH and possessor of the Divine Name (6:35, 41, 48; 8:12, cf. 9:5; 10:7, 9; 10:11, 14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1).

"I tell you this now [Judas's betrayal], before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you believe that ἐγώ εἰμι." (13:19)

"Whom are you looking for?" They answered, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus replied, "ἐγώ εἰμι" Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. When Jesus said to them, "ἐγώ εἰμι" they stepped back and fell to the ground. Again he asked them, "Whom are you looking for?" And they said, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus answered, "I told you ἐγώ εἰμι. So if you are looking for me, let these men go." (18:5-6, 8)

Much of the past research asserting that the background for these absolute Johannine sayings is to be found in Old Testament divine disclosure statements, especially as found in the Septuagint text of Isaiah 40-52, has been confirmed by the impressive work of Catrin Williams.⁴⁹ Williams, however, cautiously steers clear of the relationship between the Septuagint translation of these disclosure statements and its translation of the explanation of the divine name in Exodus 3.14: אֲנִי הוּא ("I am who I am") is rendered ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν ("I am the one who is"). This relationship has been demonstrated by previous scholarship.⁵⁰ If these absolute ἐγώ εἰμι sayings were not closely related to the divine name, why does one cause the Jews who heard it to reach for stones (8:59) and another cause his arresting party to fall to the ground (18:6)? Even though this formula in John should not be understood simplistically as the divine name that Jesus has been given (17:6), nevertheless these absolute sayings are very closely related to it and function as a way of indicating that Jesus is the possessor of the divine name, as will be discussed below. The message these absolute sayings convey is bold: Jesus' seven self-declarations are a complete revelation of YHWH who discloses his identity

⁴⁹ Catrin H. Williams, *I am He: The Interpretation of 'Anî Hû' in Jewish and Early Christian Literature*, WUNT II.113 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 255-303. There are nine divine disclosure statements in the MT and seven in the LXX: אֲנִי הוּא (Deuteronomy 32:39) אֲנִי הוּא (Isaiah 41:4; 43:10, 13; 46:4; 48:12; 52:6) אֲנִי הוּא (Isaiah 43:25; 51:12) and ἐγώ εἰμι (Deuteronomy 32:39; Isaiah 41:4; 43:10; 45:18) ἐγώ εἰμι (Isaiah 43:25; 46:4; 51:12). Bauckham notes that John has seven absolute ἐγώ εἰμι sayings, but in the last occurrence in Gethsemane it is spoken three times (for a total of nine).

⁵⁰ For example, Sean M. McDonough, *YHWH at Patmos: Rev. 1:4 in its Hellenistic and Early Jewish Setting*, WUNT II.107 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 171-176.

with the same phrase the same number of times in the Old Testament. Jesus is thereby fully identified with YHWH.⁵¹

This understanding of the Son as YHWH who is visible and speaks in the Old Testament is summarized succinctly with these words of Jesus in John:

"You search the Scriptures . . . ; it is they that bear witness to me . . . Do not think that I shall accuse you to the Father; it is Moses who accuses you, on whom you set your hope. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?" (John 5:39, 45–47)⁵²

Does this mean that since the Father is unseen, he was somehow unknown to patriarchs and prophets? No, because what Jesus said to Philip also applies to his preincarnate existence: "The one who has seen me, has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

Jesus' Possession of the Divine Name

The primary area where interpreters have long acknowledged some relationship between Jesus and the divine name, YHWH, is in explanations of the frequent title κύριος ("Lord") that is ascribed to Christ in the New Testament.⁵³ One typical basis for asserting a relationship between these two is the pre-Christian practice by translators of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek of rendering יהוה with κύριος.⁵⁴ Although there have been some skeptics, the early confession κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστός ("Jesus Christ is Lord") can be seen to reflect Jewish identification of Jesus with YHWH.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Bauckham, "Monotheism and Christology in the Gospel of John."

⁵² For a similar christological reading of the Old Testament, see Luke 24:25 and 2:44–447.

⁵³ For example, Christopher M. Tuckett, *Christology and the New Testament: Jesus and His Earliest Followers* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 19–22.

⁵⁴ Albert Pietersma, "Kyrios or Tetragram: A Renewed Quest for the Original Septuagint," *De Septuaginta: Studies in Honour of John William Wevers on his sixth-fifth birthday*, ed. Albert Pietersma and Claude Cox (Mississauga, Ontario: Benben Publications, 1984), 85–101; see also McDonough, *YHWH at Patmos*, 60–61.

⁵⁵ This is widely understood as the foundational confession or creed of the early Christians; esp. Romans 10:9, Philippians 2:11 and 1 Corinthians 12:3 (cf. John 20:28). Wilhelm Bousset argued in the early twentieth century that this title and confession was adapted by Christians like Paul outside of Palestine under influence from Hellenistic understandings of κύριος and κυρίως; see his *Kyrios Christos*. Although many challenged Bousset over the years, his theory held considerable sway until the important study by Joseph Fitzmyer, "The Semitic Background of the New Testament Kyrios-Title", *The*

Discussion of the divine name in early Christology usually fades fast after one reads beyond the important κύριος title because scholars argue that interest quickly shifted to the personal name Jesus.⁵⁶ Pre-Christian texts from the Old Testament and late Second Temple Jewish literature, however, testify to interest in the figure who possesses the divine name or Tetragrammaton.⁵⁷ Because the early Christian evidence has been presented in detail elsewhere, the discussion that follows will be limited to the Gospel of John in order to illustrate the importance of the divine name as a theological category used to express Jesus' divine identity.⁵⁸

The Gospel of John unambiguously asserts that Jesus shares the name of the Father: "I have come in my Father's name [ἐγὼ ἐλήλυθα ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι τοῦ πατρὸς μου], and you do not receive me; if another comes in his own name, him you will receive" (5:43). "I have come in my Father's name" has been interpreted as asserting that Jesus has come by and with the authority of the Father. Although there is certainly a relationship between the word *name* and authority, this statement signifies a more intimate connection: Jesus has come as the one who possesses and shows forth the divine name. This Gospel depicts Jesus demonstrating what his true name is by what he says and especially by what he does: "The works that I do in my Father's name, they bear witness to me" (10:25b; see also 14:10–11).

John depicts Jesus as the embodiment of the divine name of the Father, to the extent that Jesus even prays, "Father, glorify your name [πάτερ, δόξασόν σου τὸ ὄνομα]" (12:28). This is not simply a pious prayer that God's name be honored through Jesus' sacrifice; it is the identification of Jesus as the one who possesses the divine name. This indicates that he can simply be identified as the Name, much like the visible manifestations of YHWH in Deuteronomy and Jeremiah. This personal identification of the divine

Semitic Background of the New Testament (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1997), 115–142. This is a revised and expanded version of "Der semitische Hintergrund des neutestamentlichen Kyriostitels," *Jesus Christus in Historie und Theologie: Neutestamentliche Festschrift für Hans Conzelmann zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. G. Strecker (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1975), 267–298.

⁵⁶This is the understanding of Hurtado; *Lord Jesus Christ*, 381–392.

⁵⁷Charles A. Gieschen, "The Divine Name in Ante-Nicene Christology," *Vigiliae Christianae* 57 (2003): 121–127.

⁵⁸The evidence is presented in Gieschen, "The Divine Name in Ante-Nicene Christology," 115–157. The discussion of John that follows is a slightly revised form of material from this article. A significant text not discussed below is the use of Psalm 110 in the synoptic Gospels in order to testify to the pre-existence of the Son as David's Lord with the LORD (Matthew 22:41–46; Mark 12:35–37; Luke 20:41–44).

name as Jesus is supported by the parallel announcement that comes shortly before this prayer: "The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified" (12:23). The "Son of man", therefore, is also known as "your [the Father's] name."⁵⁹ That "your name" could be understood in this way by the intended readers of this Gospel is apparent from the use of τὸ ὄνομα as a title—indeed the only title—of Jesus in 3 John: "For they departed on behalf of the name [ὑπὲρ γὰρ τοῦ ὀνόματος ἐξῆλθον] and have accepted nothing from the heathen" (v. 7).

The Gospel of John most clearly presents Jesus as the possessor of the divine name in the prayer of Jesus at the close of the farewell discourse (John 17):

I revealed your name to those you gave me from the world. (17:6a)

Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, in order that they be one, as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. (17:11b)

I made your name known to them and will continue to make it known. (17:26)

Several conclusions can be drawn from these petitions. First, the repeated use of the personal pronoun makes it evident that the name discussed here is the divine name of the Father, to whom this prayer is directed.⁶⁰ Second, the divine name was given to the Son (17:11b). Based upon the testimony in this prayer that the Son received the Father's glory before the foundation of the world (17:24), the giving of the divine name is also understood to have taken place before creation.⁶¹ Third, Jesus has made the

⁵⁹ The relationship between this divine name tradition and the prominent Son of man sayings in John can be understood in light of traditions like those in 1 *Enoch* 37–71 discussed above. It is apparent that this Gospel challenges some of the Jewish understandings of the Son of man figure in its portrait of Jesus; see Bauckham, *God Crucified*, 63–79.

⁶⁰ Most commentators argue that here "name" denotes the "revealed character and nature of God" rather than the divine name; see Williams, *I am He*, 280 n. 85. Gilles Quispel argues that these verses refer to the Divine Name that was hidden, but has been revealed by Jesus; see "John and Jewish Christianity," *John and Qumran*, ed. J.H. Charlesworth (London: Chapman, 1972), 148–155.

⁶¹ This conclusion is also based upon the identification of the preexistent Word as the divine name in both the prologue and the farewell prayer; see discussion below and Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology*, 271–280.

divine name, which is normally a hidden mystery in this world, known to his disciples. Fourth, the divine name that was revealed to the disciples by Jesus has protecting power (17:11b). This power is especially reassuring to the disciples because earlier in the farewell discourse Jesus gives some emphasis to how much they will suffer "on account of my name" (15:21), a theme that is also found in Acts (5:41; 9:16; 15:26; 21:13).

This power of the divine name for the one who believes in the true identity of Jesus (that he is YHWH) is a subject that is explained several times earlier in the farewell discourse (14:12-13; 15:16; 16:23-24; 16:26). Here is but one representative example:

Amen, amen, I say to you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. Whatever you ask in my name [ἐν τῷ ὀνόματί μου], I will do it, that the Father be glorified in the Son; if you ask anything in my name [ἐν τῷ ὀνόματί μου], I will do it. (14:12-13)

This certainly does not refer to using the personal name Jesus as some kind of theurgic formula, but asking in the confession that Jesus' true name is YHWH, a word of power.

Testimony to the vital importance of knowing the name possessed by the Son is frequent in John. Already in the prologue, this bold assertion is made:

But to all who received him, who believe in his name [τοῖς πιστεύουσιν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ], he gives power to become children of God. (1:12)

It is noteworthy that the focus is not only believing in Jesus, but specifically believing in his name (that is, his true identity as YHWH in the flesh). In light of Jesus having the divine name of the Father as discussed above, "believe in his name" here should be understood as trusting that Jesus possesses the divine name and, thus, he is identified as being within the mystery of YHWH. This idea is also expressed in the reaction of the disciples to Jesus' sign at Cana: "Many believed in his name" (2:23). Knowing the true name of Christ is the source of life according to the thematic conclusion of the Gospel: "in order that, because you believe, you have life in his name" (20:31). Conversely, the lack of belief that Jesus possesses the divine name brings eschatological judgment: "he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (3:18).

The prominence of the divine name in Johannine Christology is further accentuated by seeing its relationship with λόγος ("Word") theology in this Gospel. The λόγος Christology of the prologue is widely recognized (1:1, 14), but its source is often sought solely in wisdom tradition rather than in angelomorphic traditions where the theophanic figure who possesses the divine name is called "the Word" or "the Word of God".⁶² In light of the prominent focus of the prologue on the Word's involvement in creation (1:3) as well as Jewish evidence linking creation to the divine name, there is a firm foundation for the conclusion that the divine name is central to John's understanding of ὁ λόγος.

It is also important to note that the λόγος tradition is found in John beyond the prologue, even though it often fails to be noticed. It is natural to expect this Gospel, with its dominant prologue on "the Word," to continue this theme in some way in the body of the narrative. Although one does not find further examples of ὁ λόγος after the prologue, λόγος is found in the singular form modified by a personal pronoun in chapters 5, 8, and 17.⁶³ For example, Jesus states in the polemical dialogue of chapter 5: "Neither his voice have you ever heard, nor his image have you ever seen, and his word you do not have abiding in you [καὶ τὸν λόγον αὐτοῦ οὐκ ἔχετε ἐν ὑμῖν μένοντα]" (5:37b-38a). Based upon the reciprocal relationship between the terms *word* and *name* in the prologue, and the prominence of name theology elsewhere in John as discussed above, including in this immediate context (5:43), the referent of "his word" in 5:38 should be interpreted to be "his name" rather than "his communication or teaching." The sense of the sentence is this: These Jews have obviously never heard the voice of YHWH nor seen the image of YHWH nor had the name of YHWH in them, otherwise they would not be rejecting Jesus (in whom one hears YHWH, sees YHWH, and has the divine name revealed). The technical understanding of λόγος here as "name" is confirmed in part by the observation that the immediate context (5:47) uses a plural form of ῥῆμα — not λόγος — to refer to words in the sense of teachings: "But if you do

⁶² For a corrective, see Jarl E. Fossum, "In the Beginning was the Name: Onomanology as the Key to Johannine Christology", *The Image of the Invisible God: Essays on the Influence of Jewish Mysticism on Early Christology*, NTOA 30 (Universitätsverlag Freiburg Schwiez and Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Göttingen, 1995), 109-133.

⁶³ Even though this theory has much merit, John 14:23-24 does not fit neatly into the puzzle because it shifts between λόγος (singular), λόγοι (plural), and λόγος (singular). Even here, however, keeping "my word [name]" could be understood as the key to the keeping "my words [teachings]".

not believe his [Moses's] writings, how will you believe my words [πῶς τοῖς ἐμοῖς ῥήμασιν πιστεύετε]?"

This technical usage of λόγος is especially dense in the polemical dialogue of John 8:

If you abide in my word [Ἐὰν ὑμεῖς μένητε ἐν τῷ λόγῳ τῷ ἐμῷ], you are truly my disciples and you will know the truth, and the truth will free you. (8:31)

I know that you are seed of Abraham, yet you are seeking to kill me, because my word finds no place in you [ὅτι ὁ λόγος ὁ ἐμὸς οὐ χωρεῖ ἐν ὑμῖν]. (8:37)

Why do you not understand my speech [διὰ τί τὴν λαλίαν τὴν ἐμὴν οὐ γινώσκετε]? Because you are not able to hear my word [ὅτι οὐ δύνασθε ἀκούειν τὸν λόγον τὸν ἐμόν]. (8:43)

Amen, Amen, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word [ἐάν τις τὸν ἐμὸν λόγον τηρήσῃ], he will surely not see death unto the ages. (8:51)

But I know him [that is, God/the Father] and I keep his word [καὶ τὸν λόγον αὐτοῦ τηρῶ]. (8:55)

The identity of Jesus is a central question throughout John, including this chapter. As demonstrated earlier, it is belief "in his name" that brings life. The sayings here about "my word", therefore, can be better understood if their referent is interpreted as Jesus' name rather than his teaching. For example, this approach enables one to make sense of John 8:43. "Why do you not understand my speech? Because you are not able to hear my word" (that is, "If you confessed my word, my name, to be the divine name, you would receive and understand my speech as the speaking of YHWH"). Understanding 8:31 in the sense of "abide in my name" fits better with the organic and personal union described later with the same verb "Abide in me, and I in you" (15:4). Furthermore, "keeps my word" in 8:51 fits better with the soteriology of the rest of the Gospel if understood in the sense of "confesses my name", rather than in the sense of "obeys my teaching".

This reciprocal relationship between the terms *word* and *name* in John is woven tightly together in the prayer of John 17 at the close of the farewell discourse, a prayer that returns the reader to the central themes of the prologue:

I revealed your name [Ἐφανερώσά σου τὸ ὄνομα] to those you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word [καὶ τὸν λόγον σου τετήρηκα]. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words [τὰ ῥήματα] that you gave to me I have given to them.⁶⁴ (17:6–8)

I have given them your word [τὸν λόγον σου], and the world hated them. (17:14)

Sanctify them in the truth; your Word is truth [ὁ λόγος ὁ σὸς ἀλήθειά ἐστιν]. (17:17)

This evidence from John is meant to confirm the important role of Jesus' possession of the divine name in his divine identity. These texts clearly reflect that long before the Nicene Creed confessed the Son to be of "one substance with the Father," first-century Jews were confessing the full identification of the Son with the Father on the basis of the divine name they share.

Jesus' Self-Identification as the Son of Man

Much about Christ's divine identity has been discussed to this point with little reference to the many titles of Jesus that typically dominate discussions of Christology. Although critical scholars tend to see many of the titles of Jesus as the reading of later confessions back into the earthly ministry of Jesus, "the Son of man" (ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου) is one title that makes it through the sieve of their criteria of authenticity.⁶⁵ This title is found primarily on the lips of Jesus in the Gospels (except John 12:34), and is frequent in all four Gospels.⁶⁶ It is clear the Son of man is not a confessional title of the later church since it is not the content of the major confessions in the Gospels, but is Jesus' public self-designation used during his earthly ministry as he established the kingdom or reign of

⁶⁴ That the reader is to understand "word" here in the sense of "name" is alluded to by the careful switch from the singular τὸν λόγον (17:6) to the plural τὰ ῥήματα (17:7) in consecutive sentences.

⁶⁵ For a good summary of the philological issues, see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "The New Testament Title 'Son of Man,'" *A Wandering Aramean: Collected Aramaic Essays*, SBLMS 25 (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979), 143–160. For discussion of the history of scholarship on the subject, see Delbert Burkett, *The Son of Man Debate: A History and Evaluation*, SNTSMS 107 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁶⁶ It is found 30 times in Matthew, 14 in Mark, 25 in Luke, and 12 in John; see Douglas R. A. Hare, *The Son of Man Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

God.⁶⁷ Scholars have found it difficult to understand the meaning of this self-designation, largely because of attempts to escape the huge shadow cast by the use of a similar phrase in Daniel 7:13 (MT אִנְשׁ בֶּרֶךְ LXX: υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου). This title has not been used extensively by Christians after the New Testament, except mistakenly as a designation for the human nature of Jesus.⁶⁸ This understanding of the title is still promulgated in some hymns.⁶⁹

Absolutely crucial to understanding the significance of this title as revelatory of Jesus' divine identity is seeing the influence of Daniel 7:13 on the later use of this title among first-century Jews, including Jesus.⁷⁰ It must be remembered that Daniel 7:13 was not a marginal text in first-century Judaism and Christianity. Both its relationship to the depiction of YHWH as the enthroned likeness of "the man" in Ezekiel 1:26–28 as well as its significant influence upon later apocalyptic texts like 1 Enoch 37–71, the book of Revelation (1:13; 14:14), and 4 Ezra 13 testify to its importance.⁷¹ Grouping the Son of man sayings into three neat categories can be helpful for study purposes (for example, Earthly Son of man sayings, Suffering Son of man sayings, and Eschatological Son of man sayings), but rigid categorization can distract from understanding how these sayings function together within each Gospel. Just as it is obvious that Daniel 7:13 played an important role in understanding several of the eschatological Son of man sayings in the Gospels (for example, Matthew

⁶⁷ See Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew*, Proclamation Commentaries, Second Edition (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 33–65.

⁶⁸ See the discussion in Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, 188–192.

⁶⁹ See the understanding that the referent of "Son of man" is Christ's human nature (in apposition to "Son of God" which refers to Christ's divine nature) as expressed in the hymns "Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted" (stanza 4) and "Beautiful Savior" (stanza 4).

⁷⁰ Contrary to the assessment of Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 290–306.

⁷¹ 1 Enoch 37–71 is especially important testimony concerning how the Son of man of Daniel 7 was being interpreted among first-century Jews as a preexistent person within the mystery of YHWH who would bring deliverance on the last day; see James C. VanderKam, "Righteous One, Messiah, Chosen One, and Son of Man in 1 Enoch 37–71", *The Messiah: Developments in Early Judaism and Christianity*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 169–191. For the close identification of the Son of man with the Ancient of Days in these chapters, see Charles A. Gieschen, "The Name of the Son of Man in 1 Enoch," *Enoch and the Messiah Son of Man: Revisiting the Book of Parables*, ed. Gabriele Boccaccini (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming in 2006).

25:31), it is also simplistic to argue that Daniel 7:13 plays no role in the origin and interpretation of the earthly and suffering Son of man sayings.

What was puzzling for Jesus' followers was not that he speaks of himself as the Son of man, but specifically how he speaks of himself as the Son of man. The Son of man is not only seen enthroned in heaven at the end of time, but—most importantly—on earth upon the cross in time (for example, Matthew 24:64; John 12:23, 32–34). Interpreters are so familiar with the depiction of Christ enthroned that some fail to see the profound theological significance of enthronement as identifying Jesus within the mystery of YHWH.⁷² The so-called earthly and suffering Son of man sayings show how Jesus redefines some Jewish Son of man expectations in light of humiliation (Psalm 8) and suffering (the servant songs of Isaiah). Oscar Cullmann reflected upon this redefinition process decades ago and explained it in this manner:

One may ask why Jesus preferred the title Son of Man to that of the ebed Yahweh rather than the reverse. This becomes quite understandable when we consider that the Son of Man idea is more comprehensive. It both refers to Jesus' future work, and at the same time, with regard to his work as the incarnate one, visualizes his humanity as such. It was therefore more appropriate to subordinate the ebed Yahweh concept to that of the Son of Man. Jesus did this in such a way that the vocation of the ebed becomes, so to speak, the main content of the Son of Man's earthly work. As soon as the Son of Man concept was applied to the earthly life of Jesus, the two central Christological titles, Son of Man and Suffering Servant of God, have to come into contact.

Both the 'Suffering Servant' and the 'Son of Man' already existed in Second Temple Judaism. But Jesus' combination of precisely these two titles was something completely new. 'Son of Man' represents the highest conceivable declaration of exaltation in Judaism; ebed Yahweh is the expression of the deepest humiliation. . . . This is the unheard-of new act of Jesus, that he united these two apparently contradictory

⁷² See Richard Bauckham, "The Throne of God and the Worship of Jesus," *The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism: Papers from the St. Andrews Conference of the Worship of Jesus*, edited by Carey C. Newman, James R. Davila, and Gladys S. Lewis, JSJSup 63 (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 43–69.

tasks in his self-consciousness, and that he expressed that union in his life and teaching.⁷³

Much like the parables (Matthew 13:10-17), the Son of man sayings reveal Jesus' true identity to those who believe in him, but are at the same time confusing to those who reject him (that is: How can this man be the preexistent, end-time Son of man promised by Daniel?). As Jack Kingsbury asserts, to those who do not receive him for who he actually is, he will remain an enigmatic son of man (that is, "a human offspring") who will be vindicated at the end and shown to be the Son of God (Matthew 26:63-64).⁷⁴

Jesus, therefore, does not dismiss Jewish Son of man expectations based upon Daniel 7 in many of his sayings, but he reshapes and redefines these expectations by pointing to his crucifixion as that place where the Son of man will be revealed and the cosmic reign foretold in Daniel 7 begins (Matthew 26:64), a reign that will be consummated on the Last Day (Matthew 25:31). The Gospels present a radical interpretation of Daniel 7 by Jesus, not only in the so-called earthly and suffering Son of man sayings, but especially in presenting the crucifixion as the commencement of the Son of man's eschatological enthronement and reign. This makes all of the Son of man sayings important historical evidence testifying to Jesus' divine identity.

V. Conclusion: Controversy Clarifies Confession

Let us return to the two central paradigm shifts that are at the root of current denials of the divinity of Jesus. First, we have seen that models positing a linear development in Christology from early simple confessions (Jesus is a prophet) to later exalted ones (Jesus is God) are flawed and need to be discarded. The confession of Jesus as one who is within the mystery of the one God of Israel took place early and is necessarily prior to the worship of Jesus among Jews, which in turn existed in advance of the earliest documents of the New Testament. This is not to be simplistic and assert that the divine identity of Jesus was completely articulated before the ascension. The first two decades, indeed, were formative, and the expression of the identity of Jesus as the incarnate Lord continued in the decades and centuries beyond AD 50. It was not, however, an evolutionary development from the human Jesus to the

⁷³ Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, 160-161.

⁷⁴ Kingsbury, *Matthew*, 61-65.

divine Christ over the course of decades, much less centuries. In light of evidence like that presented above, Richard Bauckham draws this perceptive conclusion:

. . . we can see that the New Testament writers are already, in a deliberate and sophisticated way, expressing a fully divine Christology by including Jesus in the unique identity of God as defined by Second Temple Judaism. Once we recognize the theological categories with which they are working, it is clear that there is nothing embryonic or tentative about this. In its own terms, it is an adequate expression of a fully divine Christology. It is, as I have called it, a Christology of divine identity. The developmental model, according to which the New Testament sets a christological direction only completed in the fourth century, is therefore seriously flawed.⁷⁵

Second, the early identification of Jesus within the mystery of the one God of Israel and the subsequent worship of Jesus point us to the necessity of not neatly dividing the Christ of faith from the Jesus of history, but grounding the former in the latter. As was argued above, it is especially the centrality of the death of Jesus by crucifixion in early Christian proclamation that points us to an organic relationship between these two as one reality. Hoskyns and Davey expressed it this way in the midst of the historical skepticism of the past century:

For any historical reconstruction which leaves an unbridgeable gulf between the faith of the primitive church and the historical Jesus must be both inadequate and uncritical: inadequate, because it leaves the origin of the church unexplained; and uncritical, because a critical sifting of the evidence of the New Testament points towards the life and death of Jesus as the ground of primitive Christian faith, and points in no other direction.⁷⁶

If we have learned anything from the history of the early church, it is that controversy did not weaken the church, but clarified her confession of the one Triune God. The important question that Jesus asked his disciples at Caesarea Philippi was not "Who do men say that I am?" but "Who do

⁷⁵ Bauckham, *God Crucified*, 77-78.

⁷⁶ E. Hoskyns and N. Davey, *The Riddle of the New Testament* (London: Faber and Faber, 1958), 170.

you say that I am?" (Matthew 16:15). Current controversy, precisely because it drives us to sift the historical evidence anew, can serve to strengthen the clarity of our confession in order that we declare with conviction, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God" (Matthew 16:15), and even "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28).