

Naming Jesus: The interplay of Lived Experience, Culture, and Philosophical Language in Defining Who Jesus Is

As the disciples, drawing from the images and symbols of their own religious tradition, came to a deeper understanding of who Jesus was, the language they used to express their understanding evolved. So, too, as the early church, steeped in the Hellenistic philosophical tradition, wrestled with the nature and personhood of Jesus, the Church, found itself searching for philosophical language which accurately reflected and communicated its evolving experience and understanding of Jesus. The process has continued through the millennia, witnessing, in a “life imitates art” unfolding, an organically developing comprehension and expression that itself reflects the very stretching and overlapping that mark the ontological nature of the Jesus who is the subject of the study.

The Easter Christologies

Tied into the language and symbols of the Messianic Tradition, the Gospels and the early writings (especially Acts, the letters of Paul) reflect a blending of Jewish apocalyptic anthropology and New Christian eschatology. In Schillebeeckx's, reflection on the Q source, the Parousia and Maranatha Christologies suggest that the Messianic nature of Jesus will

be actualized only at the second (assumed to be immanent) coming. The Kingdom of God will be begun on Earth, but only brought to completion in the end times.

The Parousia expectations are not “New Testament longings” of “Old Testament” believers, but, rather, the reflections of Jews still steeped in the prophecies of the ancient Hebrew Scriptures which hold both a Messianic and Apocalyptic Tradition.

Rooted in the history and sociology of the Israelite Monarchy, the Messianic Tradition places the Kingdom of David (Jesus' family) as the family from which the here-to-fore beaten down Israelites will find their ultimate King. Prophets, from Nathan through Amos and Micah and Jeremiah, Habakkuk, Ezekiel, Malachi, Hosea and Isaiah, did remind the Israelites that there would be a day of peace and unity for them, if they held firm to their faith. The kingdom would be restored not just in political terms, but in religious as well, as recounted in the apocryphal Psalms of Solomon. This Messiah would bring to the people a New Covenant of peace, as extolled by Ezekiel and Isaiah—who adds to the image of peace, the concept of the suffering servant.

Add to this the Apocalyptic tradition, where eschatology became an important part of the Jewish experience after the return from Babylon. The “cataclysm of things to come” took both literary form (in the peaceful writing of Daniel prophesying a new order in the Universe) and

the form of actual violence in the uprising of the Maccabees against the Hellenizing repressions of Antiochus Epiphanes in the 2nd century BC. It was held that “the son of Man” would ultimately accomplish what the insurrections of the Maccabees and the prophecies of Daniel and Isaiah only foresaw: The institution of a New Kingdom for Israel. This Kingdom would not necessarily be of an earthly order—but, rather, a heavenly order where all is restored according to the Covenant.

In the New Order apocalyptic tradition, there was a hope among the Jewish people that the death-infused life which they experienced as a repressed and subjugated people would be revived and regenerated by the Messiah to come. Was it a physical regeneration of the dead that they awaited, or a figurative? In the divinity-infused world of the ancients, the distinction between the two is difficult to discern.

Reflecting more of the Greek influence, the Exaltation/Resurrection Christologies, hold that the Resurrection IS ALREADY the vindication of Life, and that salvation is presently accomplished through the God-presence of the resurrected Christ. The cycle in this model is Conception---Ministry---Exaltation, each step of which is seen as part of a Divine Necessity, an inherent expression of the nature of God. Such language was to become an important part of the coming conversation of “who is Jesus” in that it raises the idea of Jesus being “of” the Father, and begging the question “when did this ‘ofness’ begin?”

Son of God Christologies

These Christologies draw just as deeply from the well of Tradition. Although the actual title “Son of God” may not always be used, the allusion to the biblical Son is clear, and becomes a cornerstone for each of the Synoptics, and for John, in their presentation of Jesus. The Hebrew scriptural foundation of such language is varied: The Messiah as the Son of David to be adopted by God, the Just Man of Wisdom Tradition, angels and people of Israel collectively.

The most obvious “fan” of the Son of God language is Mark, whose opening and defining reference to “Jesus, the Son of God” and the other 29 appearances of the term that follow, is Mark. Though so early in his account we have Jesus’ Baptism by John, where Jesus is revealed as a definitely divine-connected figure. perhaps Mark’s most highly Christological moment is the Transfiguration, where (Mk. 9:7), the “beloved Son,” in the company of Moses and Elijah (the Law and the Prophets) is revealed to the apostles. Curiously, Mark has a gentile pagan Roman centurion utter the classically inclusive Marcan Christology at the site of the crucifixion: “Surely this man is the Son of God.” (Mk. 15:39). The notion of sonship in Mark is one of adoption, and is expressed through various epiphanies.

Matthew, writing to an audience of Jews as well as Gentiles—in fact, the community of his day (mid 80’s) was a delicate and fractious balance of the two populations) ---was interested in

showing Jesus as the fulfillment of the Hebrew scriptures. The structure of his Gospel parallels, with its five great discourses, the Pentateuch. Jesus is the fulfillment of Torah., the Messiah in the line of David.

Matthew’s Jesus refers to God as “My Father,” (16 times) and Jesus is frequently establishing a connection between access to the Father and knowledge of Jesus himself. He tells Peter, who confesses to Jesus as “Son of God,” that such knowledge is only revealed through the Father. From his very birth, virginal as it was, Jesus is of the Father, God, conceived of the Holy Spirit, but not hidden from the world.

In Luke, the disciples do not personally profess Jesus as Son of God, but, as they speak of Jesus in their ministry, they clearly indicate that Jesus is the Son. There appears in Luke a two-stage Spirit Christology—Christ is born of the Spirit (which follows him through his public ministry) and, at the culmination, through the spirit, Christ is exalted. In 9:20, Luke refers to Jesus as “the Christ of God,” and, in 41 other references in Luke and Acts Jesus is seen as the agent of God who, by his nature as part of God, does what is necessary as the fulfillment of God’s plan. These references also set up a conversation of timing: “When did Jesus become the Son of God? Was it at the entrance of the spirit at conception...or, possibly, was Christ already of God at the beginning of time?”

Wisdom Christologies

Drawing from the influence of Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiaste, Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon—Jesus is often portrayed as a teacher in the Wisdom Tradition. The Q source, with its wisdom sayings, and its influence of the writings of the Synoptics, provides a platform rich with the sense of Christ as the Wisdom Figure.

The post-exilic experience of the Hebrews shaped the Wisdom Tradition. How does a people explain the existence of a loving God who has promised to always be with them, yet who allows the kinds of disasters that typified the history of the Israelites? The Wisdom Tradition helped moved the Israelites beyond a mere literary soothing and into an existential calm where they were able to see a purpose in all that happens. Wisdom was personified, seen as a gift from God, present with God at the time of Creation, and offering a mission for the People of God. The mission would be the fulfillment of Torah, as exemplified in the book of Job. This Wisdom essence of God is in all things from all time, and through all time—a portend of the evangelist John’s Apocalyptic view and the Logos of his prologue to his Gospel account

Often referred to as the Gospels of Wisdom, the writings of Matthew and John are rife with references to Christ’s participation in the Wisdom of God. The Pauline writing, especially his 2 Philippians hymn, can be seen as a reference to Jesus as the Second Adam, or,

to Jesus as participating in the Wisdom of God from the start of all Creation

This sense of Christ as being a part of God, existing in the Plan of Salvation before the actual Incarnation sets the stage for the development of yet another Christology—the one most associated with John—the Christology of Preexistence.

Preexistence Christologies

It is important to remember that all the language around Jesus, the Christ, was not categorized in the scholarly, organized, ontological way that we, in this third millennium do. Terms like “Son of God” and “With the Father” had *many* meanings for the people of the time. Still, there were traditions of belief being developed, and common prayer, liturgy and ritual was beginning to crystallize and express belief and move the early Church to a sense of a higher Christology.

John’s Christology, with its references to Jesus as eternally, intimately and indistinguishably connected to God as the Logos, is seen as the highest Christology. For John, the Incarnation is not an historical event in the sense of “it happened on December 25, in the year 4 CE.” The Incarnation is timeless, as is God, God who is identified (as Christ self-identifies) as “I Am.” John draws a Jesus who is transcendent, while being very palpable, very human, and the hymns and liturgy of the early community reflect this combination of natures: Jesus is the timeless Word of God, made flesh and risen to God’s glory.

Paul, especially in his I Colossians hymn, reiterates the Wisdom themes of the Hebrew Scriptures and reveals a very early tradition of preexistence with language like “firstborn of all creation...the image of the invisible God...He is before all things...and in him all things hold together.”

The Challenge presented by Greek philosophy—The language of Christ from Capernaum to Chalcedon

The early church was soon to become in some ways a victim of its own success. As it spread, and quite rapidly, from the Semitic world into the Hellenistic arena of the Roman Empire, there was to develop an inherent conflict between the basic philosophical templates of the Jewish Tradition, and the Greek Philosophical Paradigm.

Essential to the Hebraic view of the world is the infusion of God, “the Living God,” into all Creation. Divinity is not an extrinsic element in the Universe, but, rather, an intrinsic, living, breathing (Ruah) force that generates life and acts in history. In contrast is the Hellenistic view, where the realm of the spirit is literally “above” the earth, distinct from it. In fact, in Socratic terms, the world of the flesh is an illusion, a mere reflection of the spiritual realm, and only death will allow the real experience of life as spirit. The body and the physical world were limitations to the experience of divinity, not

vehicles for its access. The spirit was impersonal, immutable, transcendent, and not interested in the world of change below. Nor did Romans and Greeks think in the Messianic Jewish terms. For them, there was no Wisdom Tradition, no Apocalyptic Tradition to shape their experience and language.

Out of this framework, many controversies developed as the now-broadly dispersed Christian communities began to assign concrete language and dogma to their beliefs. Two Greek philosophies proved to be particularly instrumental in stirring the conversation: Gnosticism and Docetism.

Illustrating well the Socratic notion of dualism, Gnosticism asserted that redemption was achieved by escaping the world’s entanglements, by liberating oneself from the prison of material existence. One did not come to the knowledge (*Gnosis*) of how to achieve this escape on one’s own, or through intuition. Rather, the secret was acquired through an initiation into the group of believers. Curiously enough this belief spawned two quite diverse courses of behavior: One, to deny any connection to the body, including marriage and sexuality, and the second, since it is only the world of spirit that “counts,” to advocate a “who cares?” amorality where what we do with our bodies is unimportant.

Docetism (from the Greek *Dokeo*—“to seem”) proposes that Jesus’ humanity was an illusion—It only seemed or appeared that Jesus had flesh.

Jesus was all spirit, and not embodied. Docertism proved to be the platform from which many controversies and heresies developed. The first centuries of the Church were rife with differing opinions of Jesus as divine/human. Ebionism and Arianism (challenging Christ's timeless divinity); Docetism and Appollinarianism (challenging Christ's full humanity); Nestorianism; (suggesting that Jesus was in essence two persons, Mary being the mother of the human Jesus, not the divine.) and Eutychianism and Monophysitism (proposing that Jesus was neither fully divine nor fully human.)

The search for a balance between the language of the polytheistic Greco-Roman world and the monotheistic Jewish tradition in the Church's response to the question of Jesus' combination of divine and human natures brought about two distinct approaches, centered in two separate ancient capitals: the Logo-Sarx model of Alexandria (Egypt), and the Logos-Anthropos theory of Antioch (Turkey).

Clement of Alexandria posited that the Logos of God "enters into" or becomes attached to human flesh in the person of Jesus, and that it is the Logos which is the center of Godhead. Christ "clothed himself with humanity," say Alexander, and his followers Origen, Justin, Cyril and Tertullian—leading to the possibility of denying Christ's full humanity. Lucian of Antioch and his school (including Nestorius) preached that

Jesus the Christ was an actual historical figure with two distinct natures. The Logos was created, existing not from all time, but with a distinct beginning, with a distinct nature of humanity. The resultant relationship of Father and Son was a sort of demigod, with Jesus participating in Godhead, but as an adjunct. The temporal Logos was created by God to serve as the mediator to the timeless God.

It took nearly three centuries for the Church to agree, at the Council of Nicaea in 325, on the Principle of the Hypostatic Union, the tenet which holds that Jesus expresses his essence as both 100% divine and 100% human.

The essence of that agreement was the distinguishing and defining of the terms *homoousios* (God and Jesus are consubstantial and *one* in being) and *homoiousios* (God and Jesus are of *like* being.) The council elected the term *homoousios*, codifying the doctrine, but in no way putting to rest the debate of the language used to express Jesus' divine and human natures. Of course, the most well known product of that council was the Nicene Creed, a mainstay of Catholic ritual prayer to this day.

Three later councils at Constantinople, Ephesus and Chalcedon further clarified the Creed of Nicaea.

At Constantinople I, (381CE), the Church validated the Nicene Creed, but made some important changes. By removing the phrase, "that is, of the substance of the Father..." and adding the reference to the entity of the Spirit as "the holy and life-giving one," it laid the groundwork for a more fully-drawn Trinitarian doctrine. In addition, the formula of: "We believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic faith---we profess one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look forward to a resurrection of the dead and the life of the age to come, Amen", cemented the theology in kerygmatic form.

In 431, at Ephesus I, the Emperor Theodosius called a council to settle the matter of whether Mary was Mother of (the divine) God, Theotokos, or Mother of the human) Jesus, Christokos. Cyril's interpretation of Mary as Mother of God (meaning Christ and God were consubstantial) prevailed, much to the disappointment of Nestorius and John of Antioch, who feared such a decree would support Appollinarian contention that Jesus was not fully human. Cyril excommunicated John, and John excommunicated Cyril.

As perhaps proof of the work of the Spirit, later that year, John of Antioch proposed to Cyril a compromise called the Symbol of Union, confessing Jesus as "perfect God and perfect man," speaking to the issues of two natures in

one person (prosopon,) and addressing Mary as Theotokos. Cyriil's response: a letter called "Laetentur Coeli," "Let the Heavens Rejoice!" The heavens may have rejoiced, but the controversy was not over...

At Chalcedon in 451, with the language of nature and personhood still in contention, Theodocius' successor Marcian called another council, and at last, agreement was reached on the language of expressing the faith. The council affirmed the Nicene focus on the divinity of Christ, while placing full emphasis on His humanity. Alexandrian views of God and Logos were reconciled with Antiochan concerns about the humanity of Jesus. Through the language of ONE person, with TWO natures. Chalcedon showed the Church as existing in the context of the "real world," using contemporary language and philosophy to express religious concepts. In an "Art meets life" moment, the church expressed the intersection of the divine and human by taking the very human tools of language and finding in them the seeds of the divine. Pretty cool, actually.

universal nature being the supreme reality, the world now had a new option: personhood, individuality and relationship as the measure of what is real and ideal. There exists, through God, not a barrier between the world of spirit and flesh, but an integrity. It sets the stage where, in a way not before fully embraced by human culture, it is neither the group (the nation/state) nor the Ideal (the abstract) but the unique individual person which is of the highest value. Here, the dignity of the human person is beginning to be seen as the fundamental principle of life.

AFTERTHOUGHTS

Not only did Greek philosophical language help the church understand itself—the experience of dialogue and intersection of culture and spirituality actually helped move human culture to a more clear understanding of itself. As an alternative to the Greek ideal of the impersonal