Here is a document which addresses the people of God on the boundary of a huge cultural challenge. They were moving from the relatively mono-cultural wilderness life into the strange new culture of Canaan, with its technological achievement, its decadent but attractive religion, its pluralism and idolatry, its social and economic oppression. How, in relation to such powerful cultural challenge, would they fare? Would they preserve their love and loyalty to the one true living God and witness to his truth, integrity, justice and compassion, for the sake of the nations (cf. 4:5-8)? Would they remain committed to the uniqueness of Yahweh in the context of religious pluralism (cf. 4:32-40)? That was their mission. That mission remains for the people of God in every culture, including the late 20th century neo-paganism of the west. The relevance of Deuteronomy to the cross-cultural mission of the church is a theme you will not find in many commentaries. Until the next one!

The origins of the worship of Christ

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Introduction

The great German scholar Johannes Weiss called the worship of Christ 'the most significant step of all in the history of the origins of Christianity'. The American scholar David Aune has written, 'Perhaps the single most important historical development within the early church was the rise of the cultic worship of the exalted Jesus within the primitive Palestinian church.' In this essay I wish to discuss the origins of this fascinating feature of early Christianity. I begin with a quotation from 1 Corinthians 8:5-6, from a letter of the apostle Paul written c. AD 52-55, scarcely 20 years after the death of Jesus.

Although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth – as indeed there are many 'gods' and many 'lords' – yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

In these words we find succinctly expressed the distinctive 'binitarian pattern' of early Christian devotion, in which Christ is reverenced along with God within a firm monotheistic commitment to the one God of the Bible. I would like to comment on a few important matters about early devotion to Christ reflected in this passage. After these comments, I shall then offer some observations on the historical factors that contributed to this binitarian pattern of devotion.

Early devotion to Christ

(i) Scriptural background

First, the wording Paul uses here appears to be a deliberate adaptation of the ancient Jewish expression of faith in the one God of the Bible, the Shema (constructed fromDt. 6:4-9; 11:13-21; Nu. 15:37-41), whose initial words can be rendered 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord.' Over against the readiness characteristic of all other forms of ancient religion to worship the many deities of the ancient world, the Jewish stance may be called an 'exclusive monotheism': the one God of the Bible is to be worshipped exclusively. This is the firm faith within which Saul of Tarsus was formed, and it is the commitment within which he continued to live as a Christian apostle. Here Paul rejects the other deities of the Greco-Roman world as 'so-called gods', and insists that there is only one true God.

But for Paul and for other Jewish Christians of the first few decades of the Christian movement, their monotheistic commitment to the one God of the Bible accommodated a second figure as worthy of devotion, namely the resurrected and exalted Jesus. That is, within the firm monotheism of these early Christians there was a definitive duality, of God the Father and Christ. There was a binitarian 'shape' to their monotheistic faith and devotion. In this passage, without hesitation, Paul immediately follows his exclusivist expression of monotheistic faith ('one God, the Father, from whom are all things') with an equally firm reference to the 'one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things'. It appears that Paul actually adapts the wording of the Shema to make room for both the one 'God' and Jesus as the one 'Lord'. This means that this passage exhibits a most exalted reverence for Christ, reverence expressed in terms normally applied only to God.

This is shown in the application to Christ of the titles and language used to refer to God in the OT. In this passage, Christ is the one 'Lord' (κύριος), using the title by which God is designated in Deuteronomy 6. In many other passages as well, Paul and other early Christian writers apply to Christ the language and functions associated with God in the OT. That is, the early Christians seem to use the most exalted language and concepts available to them in their religious tradition by which to refer to Christ.

Over the 400 years following Paul, the early church struggled to develop doctrines adequate to express and to justify this binitarian monotheism. The Nicene Creed of AD 325 and the Chalcedonian Creed of AD 451 are the classic formulations. But well before these developments – indeed, driving these developments – was the binitarian pattern of early Christian devotion and worship reflected in 1 Corinthians 8:5-6. In other words, it is not an exaggeration to say that the 400 years of doctrinal controversy which followed Paul were essentially an attempt to form doctrine adequate to the pattern of religious life which had taken shape within the first 20 years of the Christian movement.

(ii) Early and undisputed

Secondly, we should also note that here as everywhere in Paul's undisputed letters (written between approximately AD 50 and 60), this inclusion of Christ in Christian devotional life is taken for granted as the established pattern. Controversies between Paul and other Christians are reflected in his letters, but there is no hint of a controversy over this matter. He has disagreements with other Jewish Christians over the divine plan of salvation for Gentiles, and does not hesitate to indicate that his own views are controversial. Consequently, the lack of any evidence of disagreement over the status of Christ is a most eloquent silence that suggests that the evidence of Christian devotion in the Pauline letters can be taken as representative of at least many circles of Christians beyond Paul's own churches.

Indeed, there are strong confirmations that the devotional pattern involving both God and Christ goes back to the earliest 'layers' of the Christian movement. One of the most striking
pieces of evidence for this is the little Aramaic phrase in 1 Corinthians 16:22, marana tha, 'Our Lord, Come!'. This phrase is probably an invocation of the risen Christ by the gathered Aramaic-speaking Christian community, an invocation uttered as part of the worship gathering, a corporate prayer to the risen Christ. The fact that Paul uses the phrase in his letter to Greek-speaking converts and without translating it suggests that the phrase was already a piece of sacred Christian tradition, a liturgical formula carried over into Greek-speaking churches and preserved because it derived from the earliest circles of Jewish Christians.

In addition, there are other passages in Paul's letters commonly identified by scholars as pieces of Christian faith and practice from years earlier than the letters in which they appear. These include confessional forms such as 'Jesus is Lord' (1 Cor. 12:3; Rom. 10:9), and perhaps hymns such as the much-discussed passage in Philippians 2:6-11. It is also commonly thought that Paul's letter openings and closings, which feature both Greek and Old Testament elements, take up the language of early Christian liturgy that had become well established by the time of his letters.

In my book One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism (1986), I have described six major patterns of the devotional life of the early Christians which show that this binurian pattern was firmly embedded within the first decades of the Christian movement. These six phenomena are (1) early Christian hymns concerning Christ and probably sung to Christ, (2) prayer to Christ, (3) liturgical use of the 'name' of Christ, such as 'calling upon the name' of Christ (Grekically, corporate invocation/prayer of Christ in liturgical setting) and baptizing 'in/into the name' of Jesus, (4) the understanding of the Christian common meal as 'the Lord's supper', which identifies this marker of Christian fellowship as belonging to Christ, (5) 'confessing' Jesus, another ritual probably set within the Christian community gathered for worship, and (6) prophecy in the name of Jesus and inspired by the 'Spirit of Christ'. Taken together, these things amount to clear evidence of a conscious and significant inclusion of Christ into the devotional life of early Christianity. They show a pattern of devotion in which Christ, with God, receives the sort of prominence and cultic actions that in monotheistic religion are normally reserved for God alone.

I wish to underscore the fact that 1 Corinthians 8:5-6 reflects the actual incorporation of Christ as an object of devotion in the worship life of early Christianity. In the context of this passage, the contrast is between reverence for idols on the one hand and, on the other hand, proper reverence for the one true God and the Lord Jesus. Scholars have tended to focus on the doctrinal concepts of the early Christians. Perhaps it is to be expected that scholars, who spend their days developing ideas, would approach early Christianity primarily asking about its ideas and doctrines. Also, of course, the historical investigation of the NT emerged during the Reformation as Protestants contended with Rome as south one another over right doctrine. Consequently, scholars went looking first and foremost for doctrines and regarded the NT mainly as a record of early doctrinal developments.

The NT certainly reflects early Christian doctrinal developments, but it is also very much a record of the larger religious life of early Christianity. We must recognize that behind the NT lies, not primarily doctrinal discussions, but the mission, community formation and worship of the churches. In the context of ancient Jewish scruples about worship, I suggest that the incorporation of Christ with God into the devotional life of the churches amounted to a momentous development. This development in the worship pattern of early Christianity is in fact a much more significant development than any of the christological doctrines, such as pre-existence and incarnation, with which scholars have usually been so very preoccupied. As I have argued in One God, One Lord, the ancient Jewish religious tradition made scruples about the legitimate object of worship the key dividing line between right piety and blasphemy. The acceptance of Christ with God as worthy of cultic veneration within the early years of Christianity and among Jews sensitive to the scruples of their ancestral religion can only be regarded as a most striking phenomenon. It deserves far more attention than it has been given in critical scholarship.

(iii) Not pagan divination

Thridly, this treatment of Christ as worthy of divine honours cannot correctly be understood as a divinization of Christ after the pattern of pagan heroes and demi-gods. The people among whom Christ was first given cultic devotion were Jews loyal to their ancestral traditions, not pagans or syncretic Jews who had assimilated to paganism. Although the doctrinal reflection on Christ continued and developed over several centuries, the essential steps in the pattern of Christ as divine were taken while Christianity was still almost entirely made up of Jews and dominated by Jewish theological categories.

This is shown, for example, in the larger context of 1 Corinthians 8-10, where Paul instructs his converts to avoid the worship of idols, reflecting the attitudes and the language characteristic of ancient Jewish monotheistic disdain for pagan religions. The early Christian readiness to worship Jesus cannot be seen as a late development: it begins within the first two decades of the church. It cannot be explained as the result of Gentile influences: it begins during the period when the church is essentially a new movement within the Jewish tradition. The worship of Jesus does not reflect a readiness to accommodate additional deities: the Christians among whom Jesus was first revered continue to show the disdain for pagan gods that characterized Jewish monotheism of the Greco-Roman era.

I wish to emphasize also that this inclusion of Christ as object of cultic/liturgical devotion was not intended or understood in any way as diminishing or threatening the sovereignty of the one God. Paul's language here suggests that for him the reverence of Christ is an extension of reverence for the one God. This is confirmed, for example, in the NT passages of 1 Corinthians 10:42-11, which emphasizes that it is God who has 'highly exalted' Jesus and given Jesus 'the name above every name'. The same passage predicts a universal acclamation of Jesus as 'Lord' (kurios), likening Jesus' acclamation to the acclamation of God's universal sovereignty by using the wording from Isaiah 45:23 (another example of the use of OT language and passages concerning God to refer to Christ). My point here, however, is that this universal acclamation of Christ is also 'to the glory of God the Father' (2:11). There is absolutely no intention to reverence Christ at the expense of God the Father. Reverence for Christ is seen as reverence for God the Father.

Likewise, in 1 Corinthians 15:20-28 Christ is portrayed as the risen Son to whom everything is to be made subject, including death. But note that it is God who puts all things 'in subjection under him' (15:27), making Christ's rule an extension of God's sovereignty. And the outcome of Christ's victory over all things is that Christ will deliver the kingdom to God (15:24), manifesting his subjecthood to the Father, so that God may be magnified above all (15:27).

This too shows plainly that the religious viewpoint of the early Christians was not contrary to but part of the pagan religious environment with its readiness to recognize many deities. The veneration of Christ as divine in earliest Christianity remained firmly within the tradition of Jewish monotheistic concern for the universal sovereignty and uniqueness of the one God of Israel. The incorporation of Christ with God produced an apparently unusual form of monotheism, but was never intended to violate the monotheistic commitment of the biblical tradition.

Historical factors that shaped devotion to Jesus

If we have correctly sketched the binurian devotional pattern of early Christianity reflected in 1 Corinthians 8:5-6, and if it reflects a development as important as I have asserted, then what could have caused this development? Unfortunately for modern historical enquiry, the early Christians did not spend a lot of time analysing the historical factors that led them to worship Christ, and they have left us no records of discussion about this matter. Therefore, we have to use what early Christian evidence we have and try to make inferences. In what follows, I offer my own reflections, which have been stimulated and informed very much by the work of many other scholars, to whom I am greatly indebted. I suggest that there were four major historical factors involved in shaping the binurian pat-
tern of early Christian devotion, which involved the worship of Christ alongside God the Father.¹⁰

(i) The ministry of Jesus
First, we have to grant the importance of the ministry of Jesus. There are sharp differences among scholars about the precise features of Jesus’ ministry and message, and it would take much more time than is available here to develop a very specific picture of Jesus’ ministry.¹¹ I suggest, however, that we must grant that Jesus had a very high impact on his followers during his earthly ministry. He summoned his closest followers to fellowship with him in his mission, and his own validity was the central question for both his followers and his opponents. His execution on charges against Roman order (probably as ‘king of the Jews’), and his probable rejection by the priestly authorities as a false teacher or blasphemer (perhaps against the temple), further combined to make the question of Jesus’ person the central one for his followers, even after his death. The choice was either to agree with his opponents and regard him as a failure, and perhaps even as a dangerous man (a false prophet and/or rebel), or to find in him the decisive figure around whom to gather before God.¹²

In other words, Jesus’ own earthly ministry and its immediate outcome produced a profound crisis in the lives of his followers. The apparently bold, even audacious, way he presented himself as decisive spokesman and representative of the divine kingdom made it difficult to take him as one teacher among others. The priestly and governmental rejection of him in the strongest possible measure available (crucifixion!) made the choice rather stark: either they were right and Jesus should be rejected, or they were wrong and Jesus was in fact God’s decisive representative, with a validity far higher than those who condemned him. This crisis in the religious lives of Jesus’ followers must be taken as one of the historical factors that contributed to him being at the centre of their religious life so soon after his earthly ministry.¹³

(ii) Jewish tradition: God’s principal agent
Secondly, ancient Jewish religious tradition provided the earliest Christians with precedents and a basic category for accommodating Jesus in a heavenly position next to God. I have discussed this at some length in One God, One Lord, and can only summarize that material here very briefly.¹⁴

In a variety of ancient Jewish texts we have references to this or that figure who is pictured as what we might call the divine vizier, God’s chief agent. In some cases this figure is one of the heroes of the OT, such as Moses. Another such figure less well-known today is Enoch, around whom developed a very great deal of interest and speculation across at least some ancient Jewish circles. Such OT heroes are pictured as sitting on God’s throne and exercising God’s sovereignty on God’s behalf as his appointed representatives.

In some texts we have a divine attribute such as Wisdom or the divine Word (Logos) personified and described as God’s chosen representative, even as God’s companion in the creation of the world (see, e.g., Prov. 8:22ff.; Wisdom of Solomon 9–10). There continues to be a debate among scholars as to whether the personalization of these divine attributes was essentially a form of colourful religious language or represented a belief that Wisdom or the divine Word really existed as distinct beings.¹⁵ I tend to think that the language is highly rhetorical, but that is not the issue before us in this essay. My point here is that these references to divine attributes picture them in the role of God’s principal agent, almost as God’s partner in the exercise of his sovereignty over the rest of creation.

There are also important cases where a principal angel is portrayed in this position.¹⁶ Indeed, I think that the idea of having such a principal agent or vizier probably originated in connection with speculations about God’s angels, and was then appropriated in speculations about revered OT heroes and divine attributes. In any case, principal angels are certainly portrayed as God’s chief agent, his vizier, second only to God in comparison with all other beings. In Daniel 12:1 we have a reference to ‘Michael, the great prince’ who will arise to lead the redemption of the elect in the last days. Even more striking, however, are references to principal angels such as Yahweh in the ancient Jewish writing called The Apocalypse of Abraham (1:22–5:9). Here, Yahweh is appointed by God as the angel in whom the divine name dwells, as is indicated by his name, which is a compound of YHWH and El, two names of the God of the Bible. The details vary from text to text, but this sort of principal angel who acts as God’s chief agent is described as exercising divine powers and attributes. When such a being is described visually, these visions use the common language of ancient ‘theophanic’ accounts, such as Daniel 7, where God is pictured and manifests his glory. In some cases, the appearance of such a principal angel to a human being causes the human to become confused by the angel with God until corrected, so much is the principal angel like God.¹⁷

As texts such as 1 Enoch show (esp. chs. 37–71), various motifs could be combined, from royal traditions about the Davidic king and messianic expectations, speculations about OT heroes such as Enoch, and principal angel speculations. My main point here is that, though the names and particular features vary across the many Jewish texts, we seem to have a recurring idea in them all that God can be thought of as having a specially chosen agent who is far above all other beings, even God. That is, there seems to have been a widespread notion that pictured God as like a great emperor exercising sovereignty over all creation, with a massive and glorious retinue of heavenly beings to serve him. Also, as appropriate for a great emperor, God has a particular figure who holds the position of vizier, chief or prime ministerial agent of the divine sovereignty. The fact that a variety of identities were given to this figure, e.g., OT heroes, personified attributes, principal angels, shows that the basic idea of such a principal agent was widespread. It also shows that the principal agent position or category was a popular way of exalting this or that figure next to God within the fundamentally monotheistic orientation of ancient Jewish religion.

These traditions about God’s principal agent allowed considerable scope for the exaltation of the figure put in this position. The principal agent or heavenly vizier is essentially the highest position imaginable without threatening the position of God or moving into a notion of multiple gods. I suggest that, when the earliest Christians became convinced through encounters with the resurrected Jesus that he was in fact really sent from God and had been chosen by God, the principal agent traditions provided them with a category for placing Jesus next to God in the divine plan. We have to allow for a powerful (and perhaps complex) interaction back and forth between their experiences of the risen/exalted Jesus and the Jewish monotheistic traditions I have been trying to adapt to this purpose. The resurrection experiences convinced the earliest Christians that Jesus was totally vindicated by God against all those who had condemned him (see e.g. Acts 2:26). Also, as the one man singled out for eschatological glorification, Jesus was especially chosen by God to be the leader of the eschatological resurrection (e.g. 1 Thes. 1:10; 1 Cor. 15:20). But, I suggest, these experiences were interpreted with the aid of categories provided to the earliest Christians in their Jewish monotheistic religious tradition, though these categories were also adapted in the process. Among the traditions that were much used in the period of the origins of Christianity, there was the idea that God has a principal agent, exalted far above all others, second only to God in rank.

This category of principal agent seems to lie behind nearly all the christological terms and expressions used in the NT. Space permits me only a few illustrations. The text we considered at the beginning, 1 Corinthians 8:5–6, is a good example. All things come from God and are for God, but come through Christ. Christ is here the principal agent of creation and redemption. Likewise, in 1 Corinthians 6:19–20, Christ is the divinely designated leader through whom comes resurrection (15:22), and the one appointed by God to manifest the divine rule over all opposing forces (15:24–26). Christ rules by divine appointment, as God’s chosen agent, and demonstrates his position as agent to God ultimately by subjecting himself to God (15:28). Even the most exotic christological expressions in the NT, such as John 1, Hebrews 1, Colossians 1, or in the book of Revelation, all seem

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to be appropriations of the principal agent category we have identified.²⁶

In the Christian adaptation of Jewish divine-agent traditions and categories, however, there were momentous and apparently unparallelled developments. For one thing, it was an astonishing move to identify a recently executed contemporary as holding this position. I know of no analogy of an authentically Jewish group identifying its leader or founder as the heavenly vizier of God. The Qumran sect referred to its ‘Righteous Teacher’ with great respect (commonly thought to be a designation of the founder or some major figure in the history of the group], but this does not compare with what the early Christians made of the risen Jesus. The other examples of divine vizier in the Jewish tradition are either angels, divine attributes or heroic figures of the distant (and more glorious) past, such as Moses.

The principal agent traditions provide us with some of the religious background and may help us to understand what the earliest Christians were trying to say about Jesus. But these traditions do not explain why the early Christians said these things about Jesus. It would have been quite possible for them to have portrayed Jesus as the vindicated prophet of the last days, or even as the vindicated Messiah who is to return as God’s chosen king over the elect. But something seems to have driven the earliest Christians to put the risen Jesus in the highest category afforded to them by their ancestral tradition, seeing him as God’s heavenly vizier, second only to God both on earth and in heaven.

Moreover, nothing in the principal agent traditions prepares us for the worship of God’s principal agent.² There is no evidence of cultus devoted to any of the other principal agent figures in Jewish tradition. There are no sacrifices to Moses, Michael, or Enoch in the Jerusalem temple of the first century. There are no prayers or hymns to such figures that seem to have been actually used in Jewish worship gatherings, no indication that in Jewish gatherings such figures were the objects of religious devotion. The Qumran sect speculated about the worship offered by angels in heaven but did not worship angels. They had special common meals, but did not identify it with any principal agent of God. Nor were the initiation rites of any known Jewish group identified with the name of such a figure.

In the apocalyptic texts which show such interest in God’s heavenly seat, the prayers and worship are always directed to God alone. In fact, in several texts where a principal angel appears to a human being who initially confuses the angel with God, the angel corrects the human’s confusion and refuses the attempts of the human being to offer him worship.²⁷ That is, in the very writings which show the strongest interest in God’s principal agent and describe such a figure in glorious terms, there is a clear recognition that it is not appropriate to offer worship to this figure.

In short, though the principal agent traditions are important in the basic conceptual categories as appropriated by early Christians in accommodating Jesus as God’s uniquely chosen agent, these traditions do not suffice to explain all that happened. The early Christian development went beyond any analogy in the Jewish principal agent traditions, in identifying a recent contemporary as God’s heavenly vizier, and in taking the momentous step of offering worship to this figure. We have to look at other factors that might have contributed to these unparalleled developments.

(ii) Experience of the glorified Jesus

A third historical factor, particularly important for the rise of the worship of Jesus, was the powerful effect of religious experiences in the earliest Christian circles. I have in mind the Easter experiences, subsequent visions of the glorified Christ and prophetic revelations and oracles in the apocalyptic writings. As the case with all the material in the gospels, the stories of the disciples’ encounters with the risen Jesus have all been shaped by the process of being retold and adapted by the individual evangelists. This makes it difficult to reconstruct the actual experiences of the disciples in any detail, though I think it most likely that real experiences do lie beyond these traditions.²⁸

Paul claims his own powerful experiences of the risen Jesus in 1 Corinthians 9:1 and 2 Corinthians 12:1. He describes his change from persecutor to advocate of the Christian faith as caused by a ‘revelation’ of God’s Son (Gal. 1:15-16).²⁹ Acts 7:55-56 attributes to the dying Stephen a vision of the glorified Christ ‘at the right hand of God’, and in Revelation 5 we have another, more detailed description of a Christian visionary’s ascension to heaven, where he sees the glorified Christ receiving heavenly reverence with God. In short, the religious life of the earliest Christian communities was marked by many such powerful experiences of ‘revelation’.

In 1 Corinthians 14:26, Paul includes several such charismatic experiences as regular features of the Christian worship gathering. It seems likely that the worship gathering may well have been a characteristic setting for times when the glory of Christ was made known experimentally.³⁰

I suggest that the only way we can account for devoutly monotheistic Jews taking the unparalleled step of offering worship to God’s principal agent is to posit that they must have felt required by God to do this. They must have come to believe that it was not only permitted to offer devotion to Jesus, it was required of them. It may well be that they came to this conviction as a result of visions of Christ receiving reverence in heaven (as, e.g., in Rev. 5), and then patterned their own worship after the heavenly vision. It may well have been that information given to them in revelatory oracles from God, endorsing Jesus as the divine agent and requiring the elect to obey God by reverencing Jesus. Certainly the history of religions seems to furnish analogous cases of major modifications of religious traditions arising from the powerful religious experiences of individuals and groups.³¹

Conclusions

In this discussion I have been able only to sketch the nature of early Christian devotion to Christ and the possible historical factors that prompted it. The attempt will continue to understand better how the earliest Christians interpreted Jesus’ significance and the factors that influenced them to reshape their monistic traditions and categories in order to accommodate devotion to Christ. A vigorous dialogue (and sometimes heated disagreement!) characterizes the current discussion of the matter, and my own suggestions will not all be persuasive to everyone else engaged in the subject. In any case, I hope that I have helped readers to see how important this topic is in the development of early Christianity, and that some among research students will join in the investigation of why Jesus may have become such an important figure in the Christian redifinition of monotheistic devotion to accommodate the worship of Christ.

For a more extensive discussion of these matters, see my book One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism (Philadelphia: Fortress Press/London: SCM, 1988). Of course, the classical Christian doctrine is a trinitarian understanding of God. But the earliest developments in what became the doctrine of the Trinity had to do with incorporating Christ along with God the 'Father', both in doctrine and in the devotional life of early Christianity. The Spirit has never become an object of devotion in the way that God the Father and Christ were and are for Christians.


English translations of these and other creeds are in H. Bettonson, Documents of the Christian Church (London: Oxford University Press, 1963). Good survival is the doctrine throughout developments in the New Testament, e.g., what Paul, Christians view


One God, One Lord, pp. 100–114.

It is still the case that the study of early Christian worship is left mainly to the means of literary study and turns us to focus on formal features of worship and attempt to trace origins of later liturgical practices, while neglecting the all-important question of the content and objects of early Christian worship as historically significant in the context of ancient Jewish monotheistic scruples. For a helpful introduction to historical investigation of liturgical developments, see now Paul Bradshaw, The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship (London: SPCK, 1992).

Whatever may one think of particular positions advocated by the old religiousgeschichtliche Schule and scholars of similar orientation (e.g. Bousset, Weiss, Wrede, Deissmann), it seems to me that they can be applauded for this emphasis on the role of the early church.

See also my essay, 'What Do We Mean by 'First-Century Jewish Monotheism?' in the first work referred to in n. 5 above.

Other scholars who have pointed to the historical significance of early Christian worship of Christ include R. Bauckham, 'The Worship of Jesus in Apostolic Times: The Evidence for Tertullian's Apologetic Christus Victor' in A Thousand Thousands God: Essays in Honour of Walter R. W. Carson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1986), pp. 69–81; G.W. Eicken, 'The Worship of Jesus: A Neglected Factor in Historical Debate?', in Christ the Lord: Studies in Christology Presented to Donald Guthrie (see n. 9 above), pp. 17–36. For responses to my emphasis on this matter, see, e.g., Paul A. Rainbow, 'Jewish Monotheism as the Matrix for New Testament Christology', New Testament Studies 37 (1991), pp. 546–48; G.H. Dunn, The Partings of the Ways between Christianity and Judaism and their Significance for the Character of Christianity (London: SCM/Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991), ch. 10, esp. pp. 203–206. See my comments on Rainbow later in this essay. I do not find persuasive Dunn's attempt to play down the evidence of early Christian devotion of Christ in the New Testament setting, and no one in the Protestant community who would convey no evidence that Jewish authorities found Christian reverence for Christ objectionable fails to take account of three things: (1) 1 Cor. 12:13 may in fact be such evidence, perhaps alluding to Jewish pressure to curtail Christ (see W. Horbury, 'The Benediction of the Minim and Early Jewish-Christian Controversy', JTS 33 (1982), pp. 19–61; (2) Paul's letters are intra-Christian communications and the issues that arise are not entirely intra-church questions, so a paucity of information about Jewish attitudes toward Christian worship is not surprising, and is not by any means indicative of the absence of hostility toward Christian worship practices; (3) the gospel accounts of Jesus trial and condemnation for blasphemy may well have been shaped by early Jewish/Macchabean experiences charged with blasphemy by synagogue councils, and may thus be indirect evidence of Jewish opposition to Christian reverence of Christ.

David B. Capes, Old Testament Yahweh Texts in Paul's Christology (WUNT 2/47; Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck), 1992), is a recent study of this phenomenon, but his discussion is flawed at some points by simplistic categories. See my review forthcoming in JBL. On Paul's use of kuros as a christological title, see my article 'Lord', forthcoming in The Dictionary of Paul and His Letters, eds. G.F. Hawthorne and R.P. Martin (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

Indeed, the classical dogma of the Trinity was essentially intended to teach the divinity of Christ while professing a monotheistic stance in which there is only one God, and in which reverence for Christ (and the Spirit) is seen as glorifying, not diminishing, the one God. But concepts of divine 'subordination' practiced by the early Christians were probably stronger than the NT. Within the NT, the way of referring to Christ's divinity is more in terms of his status, glory, attributes and titles, which all amount to an ornithic rhetoric of divinity.

Of course, the classical Christian understanding of the Trinity grants the same divine 'natures' to Christ and the Spirit as to God the Father. But the functional subordination of Christ and the Spirit to God the Father expressed in these NT passages is also retained in classical trinitarian dogma as well.

Students should recognize that an attempt to analyse the historical process involved in the emergence of devotion to Christ is not necessarily in conflict with a view of the process as divinely directed and as conveying, authoritative revelation. A committed Christian could be just as capable as anyone else of engaging in vigorous historical enquiry, and might have special motivation for wanting to understand in historical terms the process by which the truths he or she holds dear came to expression.

Personally, I find Dunn's discussion of Jesus' ministry and its connections with post-Easter Christian developments largely persuasive in The Partings of the Ways, chs. 3, 6 and 9. Among recent studies of Jesus' ministry, we may single out E.P. Sanders, Jesus and Judaism (London: SCM/Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), as particularly influential, though some of his positions have received telling criticism.


See chs. 1–4 for references to primary texts and scholarly literature. See the above-mentioned works of H. Rowdon, A Thousand Thousands God: Exegesis and the Naming of Angels in Ancient Judaism (TSAJ 36; Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck), 1993), esp. pp. 89–91.

On Jewish angel speculation, see ibid. and Michael Mach, Entwicklungsgeschichte des jüdischen Engelglaubens in vorchristlicher Zeit (TSAJ 34; Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck), 1988).


On this phenomenon, see esp. R. Bauckham, 'The Worship of Jesus' (see n. 6 above).

My argument has been taken up by E.E. Ellis (in a review of One God, One Lord) as promoting an 'Arian' christology, a suggestion I regard as bizarre on account of its anachronism, its use of dogmatic categories to evaluate historic enquiry, and the failure involved in recognizing that I emphasize the innovative adaptation of divine agent traditions in the NT as summarized in the following paragraphs, an adaptation that involved the worship of the divine agent in the acts and terms normally reserved for God alone. This cultic development was in fact later the major factor that militated against Arian christology being accepted, as Arius could not justify the worship of Christ and attribute it to God alone.

This is a major point, for which I have argued in One God, One Lord in discussing the references to divine agent figures in the Jewish sources. See also my discussion in What Do We Mean by 'First-Century Jewish Monotheism?' (n. 5 above).


J.D.G. Dunn, Jesus and the Spirit (London: SCM/Philadelphia: Westminister Press, 1975), is a good discussion of religious experience in early Christianity. On early Jewish participant, see e.g., O.C. MacCann, Prophetic Inbreathing in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), though Aune focuses more on the form than the contents of prophetic speech.

The narratives have been so shaped. This does not necessarily mean that the origins behind the narratives were created in the process.

See my essay 'Convert, Apostle or Prophet to the Nations? The 'Conversion' of Paul in Recent Scholarship', forthcoming in Studies in Religion / Sciences religieuses, for a review of recent issues and literature on Paul's conversion.

See One God, One Lord, esp. pp. 161–168, for references to scholarly studies of earliest Christian worship.

Paul Rainbow's view (Jewish Monotheism as the Matrix for New Testament Christology, pp. 86–87) that religious experiences can only reflect previously formed religious beliefs seems to me simplistic. To be sure, his view connects for example experiences of the Holy Spirit (ad popem), activities of God (apparitions that appear to be novel), introducing innovation, invention, 'revelation' in religion, experiences that seem to require (and help generate) revised or new understandings of things. On innovation, see, e.g., H.G. Barnett, Innovation: The Basis of Cultural Change (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1953).

See my comments about early Jewish opposition to Christ devotion in n. 14 above.