Development in New Testament Christology

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‘Evolution’ or ‘Development’?
In 1977, two books on Christology were published independently in Britain. The first, a symposium entitled *The Myth of God Incarnate*, attracted a lot of publicity, perhaps more on account of the provocative nature of its title than for any major contribution to scholarly discussion. The second, less noticed at the time, has proved I believe to be of more long-term significance: *The Origin of Christology* by C.F.D. Moule.7

Moule’s primary aim was to call attention to, and to challenge, an assumption which underlies much recent christological discussion, and of which in fact *The Myth of God Incarnate* provides an obvious example. He characterizes this as a theory of *evolution*, as opposed to one of *development*, which Moule himself offers as an alternative. The terms chosen may not be the most helpful, particularly in circles where the word ‘evolution’ has emotive connotations in quite a different connection, but the point is crucial.

In Moule’s own words, the ‘evolutionary’ approach is ‘the tendency to explain the change from (say) invoking Jesus as a revered Master to the acclamation of him as a divine Lord by the theory that, when the Christian movement spread beyond Palestinian soil, it began to come under the influence of non-Semitic Saviour-cults and to assimilate some of their ideas’: the result was the rise of new christological categories from non-Christian mythology, which were alien to the original character and teaching of Jesus. Moule’s ‘developmental’ approach, by contrast, ‘is to explain all the various estimates of Jesus reflected in the NT as, in essence, only attempts to describe what was already there from the beginning.’8

This is, to my mind, one of the most important issues in current christological debate. Was the increasingly sophisticated christology of the NT authors (and still more of subsequent Christian discussion) due to the addition of new ideas which substantially changed the underlying understanding of Jesus, or was it simply working out more explicitly what was already there? In what sense can Jesus the Son of God, the second Person of the Trinity, be recognized to be the same person as the historical Jesus of Nazareth? Is there a discernible continuity between them, and if so, how is the development of the more theologically explicit language and thought to be explained?

That there was a development is clear enough. To take the most extreme case, the use of the word ‘God’ to describe Jesus is very rare in the NT, and occurs almost exclusively in what are generally agreed to be the later writings (with the one remarkable exception of Rom. 9:5).9 And in almost all these passages there is hot debate over either the original reading of the text or the syntactical analysis which allows the word *theos* to be construed as referring to Jesus (or, in some cases, on both points at once). The gospels (even the Gospel of John) do not portray Jesus as claiming in so many words that he was God, and in this they have historical verisimilitude on their side — the picture of the carpenter of Nazareth walking the hills of Galilee proclaiming ‘I am God’ is not substantially changed the underlying understanding of Jesus, or which was alien to the original character and teaching of Jesus. Moule’s ‘developmental’ approach, by contrast, ‘is to explain all the various estimates of Jesus reflected in the NT as, in essence, only attempts to describe what was already there from the beginning.’

This is, to my mind, one of the most important issues in current christological debate. Was the increasingly sophisticated christology of the NT authors (and still more of subsequent Christian discussion) due to the addition of new ideas which substantially changed the underlying understanding of Jesus, or was it simply working out more explicitly what was already there? In what sense can Jesus the Son of God, the second Person of the Trinity, be recognized to be the same person as the historical Jesus of Nazareth? Is there a discernible continuity between them, and if so, how is the development of the more theologically explicit language and thought to be explained?

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The terms used would, of course, vary depending on the cultural and linguistic background of the writer, and indeed the immediate semantic value of a term such as ‘Son of God’ would also differ from one reader to another. New ideas and experiences, in theology as anywhere else, have to be expressed in terms which have not previously been used in quite the same way, and which may carry different connotations depending on the reader’s background. In the process of exploring the significance of Jesus, many different categories were used, some of which proved to have more lasting value than others. At first, these were mainly Jewish categories, since it was among Jewish Christians that the process of development began. But as the Christian message began to be preached in a wider context, new terms came to be used. In the following centuries, Greek philosophical categories came to be adopted as the chief currency of christological debate, a process which culminated in the ‘orthodox’ christological formulations of the great councils, in which the language of the NT has been left far behind. But even in the NT itself it is possible to discern the beginning of this development, as for instance in John’s adoption for the first time of what became a central term in patristic debate, when he described Jesus as the Logos, a term which will be understood differently depending on whether you come to it from the background of OT thought about the ‘word of Yahweh’ or from a Greek philosophical school which sees logos as the governing principle of the universe.”

The question we need to ask is whether such terms and categories of thought, whether Jewish or pagan, are themselves the source of the christological ideas they are used to express, to the extent that the content of the Christology is determined by the linguistic and conceptual apparatus available, or whether they are rather, in Martin Hengel’s helpful analogy, to be seen as ‘building material’ available to the early Christians for the construction of a Christology which derived its content not from any existing model, but from the new events, experiences and teaching which had come to them in the life and ministry of Jesus.

A sample area: christological development in the gospels
In the necessarily brief compass of this paper I cannot discuss this question of ‘evolution v. development’ with regard to the whole of the NT. But we may appropriately focus on the gospels, for there we find both an ostensible portrait of the beginnings of Christianity in the ministry of Jesus, and also at the same time some indication of the subsequent development of thought about him, at least in the explicit reflections of the evangelists themselves, but also in what we can discern of the development of the traditions between the events recorded and the incorporation of them into the finished gospels.

In this connection it has been usual to deal separately with the synoptic gospels and with John, since it is generally recognized that the process of development has gone much further in the case of John, resulting in a more explicit presentation of Jesus as the Son of God who came from heaven and will return there. In more recent scholarship, however, this difference has been understood more as one of degree than of kind, in that all the evangelists, not just John, are seen to have their own christological tendencies...
which affect the way they present their material; there is a Marcan Jesus, a Matthean Jesus and a Lucan Jesus as well as a Johannine Jesus, and all these portraits in their differing ways reveal the features of the Son of God displayed in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. At the same time, there is an increasing tendency to recognize in John a more historically grounded tradition, to a large extent independent of that found in the synoptics, but none the less reliable for that. John may have carried out a more thorough and consistent process of christological interpretation in the way he has presented Jesus’ life and teaching, but he is not therefore to be dismissed as having lost touch with the historical reality of Jesus. The distinction between John and the synoptics tends therefore to be less sharply drawn than it used to be.

(a) The Messiahship of Jesus in the gospels

For the earliest Christian preachers, working in a primarily Jewish context, one of the key points to be established was that Jesus was the Messiah. Indeed, during his ministry we are told that this was a question regularly canvassed by those who encountered him. All the gospels, in differing degrees, focus on this question, and Matthew’s overriding concern with the theme of ‘fulfilment’ in Jesus clearly relates to this issue. How far, then, is it possible to discern a development in this area?

Discussion of Jesus’ Messiahship frequently begins with William Wrede’s theory of the ‘Messianic Secret.’ For Wrede, Mark’s presentation of Jesus as Messiah was not a development from Jesus’ own claim, but a falsification of it. The belief of the early Christian preachers, as a result of the resurrection, that Jesus had been the Messiah caused them, in Wrede’s view, both to attribute falsely to Jesus a claim to that effect and also to explain its absence from the tradition (as well as the embarrassing failure of the Jewish establishment to accept him as Messiah) by the theory that Jesus deliberately suppressed any public acknowledgment of this supposition of his own Messiahship. Even the apparently very basic concept of Jesus as the Messiah is then, on this theory, not the result of development of what was ‘already there’, but rather represents the ‘evolution’ of a new and alien category.

It would be possible (though not perhaps very convincing) to isolate the specific occurrences of the word Christos, and to set these aside as unhistorical elements in the tradition. But the issue of ‘Messiahship’ involves much more than the usage of the title itself. Some of the most central elements in the gospel narrative presuppose that a messianic claim was involved. The accounts of Jesus’ baptism and temptation focus on the distinctive role he was to fulfil as the one upon whom the Spirit came, and whose identity was declared in terms of Isaiah 42:1 and Psalm 2:7: ‘‘The feeding of the 5,000 takes place in an atmosphere of messianic expectation, and indeed it is hard to see how a ministry such as Jesus exercised could fail to evoke the sort of response indicated in John 6:14-15, where the people hail Jesus as ‘the prophet who is coming into the world’ and attempt to force him into the role of ‘King’. The return to Caesarea Philippi and the teaching about the coming suffering both of Jesus and his followers which is associated with it would make little sense without Peter’s use of the title Christos as the focus of Jesus’ subsequent ‘reinterpretation’. The involvement of the ‘messianic’ figures Elijah and Moses is fundamental to the account of the transfiguration (and that of Elijah at other points in the tradition as well). The entry into Jerusalem is viewed by all four gospels as a messianic demonstration, and it is hard to see what other meaning it could have had in earlier tradition. Jesus’ demonstration in the temple is also best seen as conveying a similar message. The trial of Jesus before the Sanhedrin reaches its climax in the question of his alleged claim to be the Messiah, if that is eliminated, or if Jesus refused to acknowledge the alleged claim, what was the basis of his conviction? The subsequent Roman trial clearly depends on a charge of seditious intention, focused on the title ‘King of the Jews’; it is agreed that it was on such a charge that Jesus was executed, and it is hard to see how Wrede’s non-messianic Jesus could have attracted that fate.

These are among the more prominent aspects of the story of Jesus which make little sense without at least an implicit messianic claim, and it would be a very bold critic who would attempt to discard all such stories as unhistorical at least in their essential outlines, and to argue that these are, of course, an element of the post-Easter preaching and cannot be discerned primarily through what he did. But insofar as the distinction can properly be drawn, ‘Son of God’ promises to be a more relevant title than ‘Christ’ for the ‘ontological’ questions on which today’s christological debate is focused.

In fact, the title Christos itself is not the main basis for asserting Jesus’ messianic consciousness. This is found rather in the subtle way in which the idea of the fulfilment of OT hope in Jesus’ coming and through his ministry is woven into the tradition at many levels. Incidents such as the sermon at Nazareth (Lk. 4:16-30) and the teaching of the Baptist (Mt. 11:4-5) depend on this idea, as does also the fundamental summary of Jesus’ preaching in Mark 1:15, etc. The centrality of the coming of the kingdom of God in Jesus’ preaching must raise the question of the status of the one who brings it. A similar force derives from the frequent mention of Jesus’ unique authority, particularly when that authority is seen in a sovereign declaration of the will of God which dispenses not only with the traditions of the scribes but also with the generally understood sense of the OT itself.

Many more such indications of a ‘messianic’ element in Jesus’ teaching and activity could be listed. Several of the sayings and incidents involved would be disputed by some scholars as historical records of what Jesus actually said and did, but the case is strong enough to survive a good deal of scepticism over individual items. The impression is very firmly embedded in the tradition of a Jesus who, whether he used or welcomed the title Christos or not, spoke and acted as the one in whom God’s eschatological purposes were coming to fulfilment (and that is what we mean by ‘the Messiah’, even if the term Christos itself may have carried more specific and less desirable connotations for Jesus and his contemporaries).

On such grounds it may reasonably be concluded that the use of messianic language for Jesus is a clear case of the sort of ‘development’ Moule is arguing for. The title Christos itself is far more evident in the post-Easter preaching of the church and in subsequent Christian writing than it seems likely to have been during Jesus’ ministry. It emerges, apparently, as a newly established theme in Christian preaching as a result of the resurrection (Acts 2:36), and the title about which Jesus’ own attitude seemed to have been at least ambivalent now becomes central to what his followers have to say about him. But this is not a matter of foisting onto Jesus after his death a role which he himself would have repudiated (as the ‘evolutionary’ approach would insist), but of expressing openly and unequivocally a perception which had gradually and particularly as a result of his proclamation of his mission but which it would have been premature (and politically undesirable) to express in such terms while he was still on earth.

Moule, having reached such a conclusion from his brief discussion of the title Christ, concludes drily: ‘This is an absurdly old-fashioned conclusion, but the question is whether it does not still fit the evidence.’ I believe that it does, and that it thus provides a paradigm case of how ‘development’ (in Moule’s sense of the word) operates in NT Christology.

(b) Jesus as the Son of God in the gospels

The preceding discussion may seem scarcely relevant to today’s christological debates. It is not Jesus’ Messiahship that is under discussion today, but the claim that he is to be understood as ‘more than human’, a claim often encapsulated in the title ‘Son of God’. Indeed, even in ancient christological discussion this was so, as the title ‘Christ’, while not explicitly put aside, became increasingly less central to the discussion. Moule’s thought moved more outside Jewish circles. It remained one of the given factors rather than a matter for debate.

It has become customary to distinguish between ‘functional’ and ‘ontological’ aspects of Christology. In terms of that distinction, the question of Jesus’ Messiahship is primarily a functional question, a matter of the role he had to fulfil, while the centre of interest soon became, and has remained, rather the ontological question of who he was. The two are of course inseparable: the role he could fulfil depends on who Jesus’ own attitude was to the way he was thought to have been or on how one could discern primarily through what he did. But insofar as the distinction can properly be drawn, ‘Son of God’ promises to be a more relevant title than ‘Christ’ for the ‘ontological’ questions on which today’s christological debate is focused.
It is possible, to be sure, that 'Son of God' could have carried more ontological implications than 'Messiah' for some of Jesus' contemporaries, if, as is increasingly being recognized, it was a title which might have been at least as closely associated with Messiah. It is certainly true that in both pagan and Jewish circles such phrases could be used of people who, either by office or by character, were felt to have a special relationship with a god or gods, without necessarily implying any doubt about their being themselves 'merely human'. But it is clear that the NT usage of the title implied more than that, and formed a crucial element in the church's ultimate confession of the divinity of Jesus.

Is it then possible to trace in the case of such language the same sort of development which we have seen in the use of messianic categories? Was there anything in the life and sayings of the historical Jesus which might appropriately give rise not only to the use of the title 'Son of God' but also to the implication of his being 'more than human'?

A central issue here must be the clear difference in perspective between the Gospel of John and the other canonical gospels with regard to the sort of language Jesus used about himself. The Johannine Jesus not only refers to himself as 'Son of God' or 'the Son' some 25 times, and to God as 'Father' some 120 times, but his teaching develops a consistent view of his unique relationship with God, Jesus, for the first gospel to be written, but that it isn't; nonetheless finds its appropriate culmination in such sayings as 'I and the Father are one' and 'he who has seen me has seen the Father'. While the other gospels have a few sayings of Jesus which reflect a similar self-understanding (and a greater number of places where others refer to Jesus as 'Son of God'), there can be no doubt that this has here been significantly highlighted. Most modern scholarship has concluded that the Gospel of John is not the place to look for information about the historical Jesus.

But here the concept of 'development' is again important. It is one thing to recognize that John presents a more 'developed' Christology, in the teaching ascribed to Jesus as well as in the evangelist's own assertions, but quite another to assume that therefore there was no historical basis for this Christology in the teaching of Jesus. We have already noted that Johannine scholarship in the last 30 years or so has swung rather markedly back towards a recognition that John had independent and valuable sources of information, and that therefore when he differs from the other gospels it may not necessarily be because he is reading back later beliefs into the story of Jesus. A few years ago, this trend reached its remarkable climax in the posthumous publication of J.A.T. Robinson's book, The Priority of John, which argues not necessarily that John's gospel is the first to be written, but that it is the 'closest to source', in that its presentation of Jesus reflects the most reliable information on what Jesus was really like, so that it should have 'procedural priority' in our reconstruction of the historical Jesus. Thus, instead of taking the synoptic portrait as our primary framework into which Johannine material must somehow be made to fit, we should work the other way round. Robinson's argument includes (though it does not entirely depend on) the conclusion that the author of the gospel was John, the son of Zebedee, so that his primary source of information is his own reminiscences as one of the very closest of Jesus' disciples throughout his ministry. In that case, Robinson argues, we have every reason to be confident that John 'got it right' — historically and 'theologically'.

It is hardly surprising that so unfashionable a view has as yet received little welcome in the scholarly world. Robinson's own earlier experience had warned him to expect this. But such a radical and innovative approach was accepted after a time in much of the American school, where the dogmatic conservatism but from a full and fresh reconsideration of the evidence, deserves to be taken seriously, however uncomfortable its wider implications for our conception of Christian origins. In that case, the Johannine Jesus may have a lot more to tell us about what Jesus of Nazareth actually said and believed about himself than is generally admitted.

But in any case, the relation between the synoptic Jesus and the Johannine is not one of total discontinuity. The assertion of a unique relationship in the statement that 'No-one knows the Son except the Father, and no-one knows the Father except the Son' (Mt. 11:27; Lk. 10:22), which is sometimes said to be too 'Johannine' to fit in a synoptic gospel, is not alone. The declaration of Jesus' special status as 'Son of God' is central to the synoptic accounts of his baptism, and the subsequent temptation as recorded by Matthew and Luke focuses on this newly declared relationship: 'If you are the Son of God...'. The repetition of the same declaration at the transfiguration would serve only to reinforce this conviction. It emerges most obviously in Jesus' use of the name 'Father' in addressing God (Mk. 14:36, using the Aramaic term bana', which may refer to a boy or to God's own Son, but has long been recognized as one of the distinctive features of Jesus' approach to God when contrasted with what we know of contemporary Jewish piety. It even comes to public expression in Jesus' choice of the figure of the owner's only son to represent his own role in the parable of the tenants in the vineyard (Mt. 21:12-14), a choice daring enough to provide a plausible basis for the High Priest's rejection of the divine inclusion of the 'Blessed' in his language relating to Jesus' alleged claims (Mk. 14:61). Even the assertion, potentially embarrassing for a high Christology, that there is something Jesus does not know (Mk. 13:32), is expressed in such a way as to locate himself as 'the Son' in a position in the ascending order between the angels and God.

All that is obvious on the surface. A belief that Jesus neither thought nor spoke of himself as the Son of God involves the rejection of more than the Johannine testimony. But to focus attention solely on the title 'Son of God' is perhaps to miss the strength of the case that all the gospels, not just John, present Jesus as conscious of a 'more than human' status.

We have noted already the impression of a unique authority which comes across in many aspects of Jesus' ministry: men leave everything and follow him, accepting his demand for total allegiance even at the expense of the closest family ties; he declares the will of God with a sovereign assurance, 'not like their scribes', frequently using his distinctive formula 'Amen, I say to you'; his power over illness and even over the forces of nature is displayed in a many remarkable miracles; and even the demons are unable to resist his authority. We are frequently told that people were 'amazed' at what they heard and saw, and asked, 'Who is this? None of this, of course, in itself requires us to believe that Jesus was anything more than a very remarkable man who was closely in touch with God. But there are times in the stories of Jesus' ministry when such a view begins to seem inadequate.

Sometimes, Jesus seems to assume the right to exercise what are specifically divine functions. His response to the theologically correct comment that only God can forgive sins is not to retract his claim to do so, but to prove it by a miracle (Mt. 9:5-8; Lk. 5:21-26; 7:50). He gives rest to those who accept his yoke, a gift offered in Jewish thought only by the divine wisdom (Mt. 11:28-30; cf. Ben Sir 51:23-27). His words, like those of God, have eternal validity (Mt. 13:31; cf. Is. 40:8). He will be the one who determines men's final destinies, and the basis for the decision will be their relationship with him (Mt. 7:21-23). He is the final judge, the king in an eternal kingdom (Mt. 25:31ff.). To accept or to reject him is to accept or reject God (Mt. 10:40; Lk. 10:16). Such language does not constitute a formal claim to be divine. Some of it may be seen as no more than a rather exaggerated expression of the consciousness of a prophetic commission. But it is at least suggestive of something more far-reaching in Jesus' self-consciousness.

This suggestion is strengthened when we notice some of the ways the OT is used in Jesus' recorded teaching. That he should refer to OT messianic hopes as fulfilled in his ministry is not so surprising in the light of what we have seen above. But sometimes he takes up passages which refer to God himself, not to a messianic figure, and uses these equally naturally as if they refer to himself. Thus his mission 'to seek and to save the lost' (Lk. 19:10) echoes Ezekiel's prophecy about God himself as the shepherd (Ezk. 34, esp. vv. 16, 22), while his defence of the children's praise of him is based on a psalm about how the Lord 'hears the voice of one who pleads' (Ps. 40:2; cf. Lk. 18:1-6). He is the stone on which men stumble, taking up an image for God's role in the parable of the tenants in the vineyard (Mk. 12:1-12), a role in the parable of the tenants in the vineyard (Mk. 11:27; Lk. 10:22), which is sometimes said to be too 'Johannine' to fit in a synoptic gospel, is not alone. The declaration of Jesus' special status as 'Son of God' is central to the synoptic accounts of his baptism, and the subsequent temptation as recorded by Matthew and Luke focuses on this newly declared relationship: 'If you are the Son of God...'. The repetition of the same
the original lexical value of the phrase 'a son of man', the relevant background for Jesus' distinctive self-designation as 'the Son of Man' is to be found in the vision of 'one like a son of man' in Daniel 7, a passage from which Jewish thought was already beginning to develop the expectation of a heavenly deliverer. In the view of some recent scholars, it is not going too far to claim that, far from conveying the opposite to 'Son of God', Jesus' choice of 'the Son of Man' is intended to convey something of the same connotations, a claim summed up in the title of Seykoim King's monograph, The "Son of Man" as the Son of God."

What we have been considering are indications, sometimes subtle and uncertain, but perhaps the more impressive for their very unobtrusiveness, that Jesus was conscious of a status which was 'more than human'. He did not call himself 'God' — how could he? He knew some other material is a genuine reflection of how Jesus spoke and thought, we have here the raw materials to enable us to discern a self-consciousness that forms a solid basis for the church's subsequent confession that Jesus was in a unique sense 'Son of God', a confession which in due course found its proper expression in the worship of Jesus as God.

We have often been warned of the danger of attempting a psychological analysis of Jesus. It is a necessary warning, but I do not believe that it prohibits us from taking notice of such hints in the accounts of Jesus as we have been considering. James Dunn both explained the reason for the omission in his book Theologie and the Son of God. If the first part of the book is devoted to 'The Religious Experience of Jesus', and within this section there is an important discussion of Jesus' awareness that he was the Son of God, it seems to me that he was God's son, Dunn argues, not just in the sense that any religious man might make such a claim, but with a distinctive intimation which makes it called uniquely, to the extent that other people's sonship is in some way dependent on his. To claim this as evidence of a metaphysical 'divine consciousness' is, Dunn believes, to outrun what we may responsibly conclude from the gospels, since he is not prepared to use the Gospel of John as a source for what the historical Jesus actually said and did. But even so, there is here, we may reasonably suggest, a firm foundation for the self-consciousness of the historical Jesus on which the later development of more explicitly metaphysical language could be built. If, with John Robinson, you are prepared to give more historical credence to the Gospel of John, that foundation is significantly strengthened.

The nature of christological development

We have considered only two sample areas of christological development, and those only in relation to the gospels. If we could have taken our study further through the rest of the NT, the importance of this concept of development would have become much more evident."

This study suggests that we are wrong to look in the accounts of the ministry of Jesus for the overt expression of metaphysical truths about the nature of his relationship with God in a way which might make it appropriate to speak of a "psychological attitude." Rather, the evidence of our first century (still less for statements of Chalcedonian orthodoxy!), and that the absence of such language is no cause for doctrinal embarrassment. However great Jesus' own awareness of his unique status, it is surely to be expected that the extent to which he might give it open expression must be governed by the likely understanding, or (rather misunderstanding) of such language on the part of those who heard him, whether friends or enemies. We have to reckon too with the fact that the accounts of what Jesus said and did have come down to us through his followers who themselves must have experienced a growth in their own awareness of the implications of what was said. No doubt the impact made on them by Jesus' striking and immediate, but there is no reason to imagine that their christological understanding was fully formed at the first encounter. Indeed, the gospels give us plenty of evidence that the progress was slow and painful for them, and that it was not until after the resurrection that the full truth of what they had heard and seen began to come home to them. Even then, it is no surprise that Peter's speech at the first Pentecost is far from the theological sophistication of the later writings of Paul. Such a gradual process of deepening understanding is what might reasonably be expected, and the NT does not dispel that expectation. This is not to suggest, of course, a rigid scheme whereby succeeding stages of christological understanding can be located at fixed points along an inexorable line of chronological development, so that the more 'primitive' is necessarily to be seen as earlier than the more 'sophisticated', in much the same way that OT scholars used to attempt to date the presumed sources of the Pentateuch by their supposed place along an evolutionary line from the vivid anthropomorphism of 'I' to the dry scholasticism of 'P'. Life is not as simple as that, and we do well to heed B.C. Butler's correct warning that 'The parish magazine is not necessarily of earlier date than the Summa Theologica of St. Thomas.' There is therefore no place for the dogmatism which will not allow Paul to express more 'developed' theological ideas simply because he was writing in the 50s, earlier than the generally agreed date for the writing of any of the gospels. But of the fact that the NT does include both mother and father 'sacrament of christology to which theologians have been led, it is no doubt, and it should be no surprise therefore that the sayings of Jesus in the gospels do not use the language of Hebrews 1:1-3 or of the Prologue of John.

The nature of the development is sometimes expressed in terms of the distinction mentioned earlier between functional and ontological aspects of Christology. At first, on this understanding, Christians thought of Jesus only, or at least primarily, in terms of what he had done, as the Messiah or the Saviour. It was only later that they began to realize that in order to fulfil these functions, Jesus must have experience of an ordinary man, and so ontological Christology came onto the scene. It may be questioned, indeed, how far a concept of Jesus as Saviour could ever have existed without at least a rudimentary realization that this was a role beyond the scope of a mere man. But the progression from functional to ontological interest is one which seems to correspond in some way to the way religious experience may be perceived to develop. The development will not stop there, of course, but one ontological question will lead to another, so that the development from the Christology of the NT to the patristic formulations of the doctrine of the Trinity was a necessary next step — you could not confess Jesus as the eternal Son of God without having to go further and ask what this confession did to your monothestic presuppositions.

It may be more appropriate, however, to formulate the nature of the development more in terms of the experience of the first Christians as this came to be expressed in their worship. Recent christological discussion, through concentrating mainly on the titles and explicit theological formulations found in the NT, may be in danger of missing the more fundamental evidence for a developing attitude to Jesus expressed in worship, which was itself the seedbed out of which the christological titles and formulations grew. Those who, at a very early date after the resurrection, were 'calling on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Cor. 1:2), a practice reflected in the early Aramaic prayer 'Maranatha' (1 Cor. 16:22), who, in what is probably a pre-Pauline hymn, had already come to revere him as the 'Lord' to whom is due the worship exclusively reserved for God (Psa. 41:11), express a need to clothe the figure of Christ with appropriately human attributes, a need that led to what may be termed a self-consciousness that forms a solid basis for the church's subsequent confession that Jesus was in a unique sense 'Son of God', a confession which many may not yet have come to form fully. Christology as finding its source in the worship of Jesus. In opposition to the currently fashionable search for models outside the Christian community which they gratuitously adopted in their desire to clothe the figure of Christ with appropriately human attributes, this view finds the origin of the high Christology of the NT within the Christian context, as the religious experience and worship of ordinary men and women (not necessarily speculative theologians) came to be focused on Jesus of Nazareth. Christology then arose out of the attempt to give appropriate expression to what they had already come to know to be true in their experience.

I have tried elsewhere to sketch out this approach to NT Christology as finding its source in the worship of Jesus. It seems to me to supply a necessary context for christological thought which is lacking when the titles are taken to be isolated theological statements. If it is true that worship preceded and gave rise to theology, rather than vice versa, the origin of that experience which is expressed in worship lies much further back than the supposed influence of non-Christian cults on Christian thought in the context of the Gentile mission. It goes back to the beginning of the church's distinct existence as the body of those who worship Jesus. And as means, as we have already seen, of 'development', that the high Christology to which NT writers eventually gave expression was in essence 'already there' in the beginning.
It was there in the impact that Jesus made on those who saw and heard him; it was there in the religious experience into which he led them, as they found in him a new relationship with God; it was there in the paradoxical compulsion to attribute divine honours in their worship to a man whom they had known before his death and resurrection as an itinerant preacher in Galilee. For Jesus' first followers were Jews, to whom the very thought of offering worship to a human being was abhorrent (cf. Acts 17:29). This is the sense in which the brief period between Jesus' resurrection and the writing of Paul's letters, the worship of Jesus had become the distinctive feature of this largely Jewish group, points to some influence more potent than a mere desire to imitate pagan myths. There was something 'already there' in the life and teaching of the historical Jesus which led them to take his remarkable step, with all the doctrinal problems it was bound to cause. It is, I believe, in this irresistible impact of Jesus himself that we must find the origin of Christology.


For the possibility that 'Son of God' was an accepted title for the Messiah, see e.g. Longenecker, The Christology of Early Jewish Christianity, pp. 93-99.

For non-Christian use of 'Son of God', see e.g. Hengel, The Son of God, pp. 21-56; more briefly, Dunn, Christology in the Making, pp. 13-22.


Robinson's equally ground-breaking study, Redating the New Testament (London: SCM, 1976), has been largely ignored by NT scholars. It may be that this work, which would involve too drastic an upheaval in the accepted framework of thought, Robinson wryly comments on his own experience in this connection: 'One must always beware of the tendency of the critical establishment to close ranks against anything that disturbs its foundational presuppositions.' (John 3:10).

It should be noted, however, that Robinson's high view of the reliability of John does not lead, as might be expected, to a high Christology, since he argues in his final chapter that not even this gospel may be properly interpreted as teaching the incarnation of a pre-existent being.

J. Jeremias, New Studies in the Parables of Jesus (ET. London: SCM, 1971), pp. 59-61, argues that the son and the father here are not specific 'titles' but merely convey a general statement about human relationships. Even if this were so, it is hard to see what other sense such a 'parable' might be intended to convey in this context than to claim a special relationship between Jesus and his Father - the same point would be made, but by analogy rather than by a direct statement.

The well-known argument by J. Jeremias, The Prayers of Jesus (ET. London: SCM, 1967), pp. 11-65, that Jesus' use of the term ἄνθρωπος as an address to God in prayer marks his awareness of a unique relationship, has been heavily contested (notably by G. Vermes, Jesus the Jew (London: Collins, 1963), pp. 210-7; and R.N. Longenecker, The Christology of Early Jewish Christianity (London: SCM, 1970), pp. 95-112. Metzger considers that the passage does not mean 'as God'. An even earlier example would be found in II Thess. 1:12, if the text were translated: 'our God and Lord Jesus Christ'; it is, however, possible even if less natural, to construe it as referring to two persons, 'our God and the Lord Jesus Christ', and the other expression is felt to be so remarkable in a very early letter of Paul that commentators regularly opt for a different rendering (or deny the Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians).


R. N. Longenecker, The Christology of Early Jewish Christianity (London: SCM, 1970), chapter II, considers a variety of 'distinctive imagery and motifs' (such as 'The Name', 'The Righteous One', 'The Shepherd and the Lamb', 'The Rejected Stone') which were explored in the earlier days of christological development, but tended to drop out of use, particularly in non-Jewish circles.

The background of the term Logos as a christological title has often been discussed. For a good recent survey, see J.D.G. Dunn, Christology in the Making (London: SCM, 1980), pp. 215-230.

It is a full list of such features in the parables (some of which are of more questionable relevance), see P.B. Payne, The Authenticity of the Parables of Jesus, in R.T. France and D. Wenhun (eds.), Gospel Perspectives II (Shelford: JSOT, 1981), pp. 338-341.

In view of the complexity of scholarly discussion on the title 'the Son of Man' in general, and the interpretation and use of 7:13 in particular, it is bold to risk so firm a statement! A recent full discussion of the subject, however, moves strongly in the direction of identifying the one 'like a son of man' in 7:13 as a transcendent, heavenly being who replaces the traditional concept of a human Messiah: C.C. Caragounis, The Son of Man: Vision and Interpretation in the Jesus Tradition (London: SCM, 1983).


pp. 11-40. Cf. more briefly, Dunn's Christology in the Making, pp. 22-23.

Moule's presentation of his case for a 'developmental' view of NT Christology is derived in fact mainly from outside the gospels, with special reference to the letters of Paul.


Cf. the remarkable statement of M. Hengel, The Son of God, p. 2, on the christological development in the 30s and 40s of the first century: '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 exact mode of Christ's manifestation began to take shape.'


Cf. some cautionary comments on the danger of restricting Christology to a study of titles, see L.E. Keck, NTS 32 (1986), pp. 368-370: "To reconstruct the history of titles as if this were the study of Christology is like trying to understand the windows of Chartres Cathedral by studying the history of coloured glass."