The emergence of the doctrine of the incarnation

Review article

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There has been a spate of books on Christology in recent years and Dr. James D. G. Dunn has contributed a very significant addition in Christology in the Making.¹ He sees a shift of emphasis over the years. In the immediate post-World War II period people concentrated on a new quest of the historical Jesus or on an attempt to trace a continuity between what Jesus taught and what the early church taught. In more recent times the interest is in the origins of the doctrine of the incarnation and Dunn concerns himself with this problem. He agrees that many have taken up this topic but ‘none of them has been able to investigate the questions raised in sufficient detail’ (p. 5). He sets himself to do this. He is neither defending nor attacking the doctrine of the incarnation but looking for its origin. He is not facing

the question, ‘Is it true?’ but ‘Where did it come from?’

Dunn pursues his inquiry by looking carefully at the way the New Testament writers use some important concepts: Son of God, Son of man, the last Adam, Spirit or Angel, the Wisdom of God, and the Word of God. In each case he makes a careful examination both of the New Testament evidence and of the relevant background material. It goes without saying that this is done most carefully and with a full consideration of the relevant literature. The breadth of the reading behind the book is shown by the eighty-five pages of footnotes and the fifty pages of bibliography. It is impossible to read the result of all this research without being informed, and prodded into some hard thinking on one of the most important subjects for the Christian. This will surely become one of the standard works on the subject.

One of the difficulties we face as we study the incarnation is that we stand at the end of a long process of Christian life and thought. The great Christological controversies took place centuries ago and the church’s definitive statements have been with us all our lives. When we read the New Testament it is all too easy to do so with spectacles provided by the classic Christian formulations so that we read into the apostolic writings meanings that are not there. A principal value of this book is that Dunn puts us on our guard against such tendencies. He searches for the meaning for the early Christians of each of his chosen categories and warns us against going beyond that. His scholarly work keeps bringing us back to what the writers actually said and what the terms they used meant.

I must confess to some misgivings about Dunn’s emphasis on the development of the doctrine in the New Testament. That there is development no-one will deny. But Dunn seems to me to make it altogether too tidy, with first the early believers, later Paul and then John as the summit of the process towards the end of the century. I doubt whether he has given sufficient attention to the possibility that John’s Gospel is earlier (I find it hard to see it as later than AD 70). It is also important to notice that Paul has as developed a theology as any in the New Testament. Is there anywhere a more developed theology than that in Romans? But this must be dated in the fifties. It seems to me that development took place more quickly than Dunn allows and further that it was not development in a straight line. Development rarely is. One thinker makes great advances but the next in line is as likely to go back as to go forward. There are some quite advanced thoughts in the synoptics (e.g. Mt. 11:25-30) as well as in John. The picture is untidy, but life, even New Testament life, is like that. Genius is not the result of building painstakingly on the work of predecessors.

Dunn relies a good deal on finding ‘the most plausible context of thought’ (p. 125) for what the New Testament writers have written. No-one is going to quarrel with the attempt to find the context in which the New Testament writers did their work (though few of us manage to do this in the detailed manner of Dr Dunn). That is a necessary preliminary to any serious attempt to study an ancient document. But at times Dunn writes as though, once we have discovered this ‘most plausible context’, we have discovered what the New Testament writer meant. For example, he is able to demonstrate that there was a good deal of interest in Adam in Jewish writings and that Paul inherited a wide range of application of imagery featuring the first man. This must be accepted. But it is quite another thing to say that the sense of Paul’s words ‘is determined by their role within the Adam christology, by their function in describing Adam or more generally God’s purpose for man’ (p. 119; Dunn’s italics; he is referring to Phil. 2).

It is a fallacy to hold that the New Testament must be explicable in terms of its background. There is a radical novelty in Christianity and it is always possible that the New Testament writers mean something different from others even when they adapt common matter. John, for example, makes use of the Logos concept but we cannot find his meaning in his literary predecessors. No great writer, biblical or non-biblical, ancient or modern, is completely explicable in terms of the context in which he writes. A great writer invariably outstrips his contemporaries and brings new meaning to light. It may be possible to discover the sources of a creative writer. But that does not dispose of his creativity. He goes beyond his source.

Dunn points this out. Thus he says, ‘if the contemporary cosmologies of Hellenistic Judaism and Stoicism determined what words should be used in describing the cosmic significance of the Christ-event, the meaning of these words is determined by the Christ-event itself’ (p. 211). But, though he recognizes this, I doubt whether he is keeping it in mind when he says things like, ‘This language would almost certainly have been understood by Paul and his readers as ascribing to Christ the role in relation to the cosmos which pre-Christian Judaism ascribed to Wisdom’ (pp. 209-210). It is apparently ‘pre-Christian Judaism’ and not ‘the Christ-event’ that determines the apostle’s meaning.

Dunn often (and rightly) warns against ‘an illegitimate transfer of twentieth-century presuppositions to the first century’ (p. 195). The danger of such a
transfer is always present and probably none of us has always avoided the peril. Dunn confers a benefit on us when he warns us so vigorously against the process.

But it also illegitimate to transfer meaning from the background of the New Testament writers to the foreground. Because an idea, say pre-existence, does not occur in Paul's background, that does not mean that the language of pre-existence which he uses now and then may legitimately be understood only in the way the background writers would have meant had they used it. Once more I plead for a more thorough-going application of Dunn's own dictum that 'the meaning of these words is determined by the Christ-event itself'.

Dunn begins with an examination of the meaning of 'the Son of God'. He reminds us that heroes and kings were sometimes called gods in the ancient world and that the title was widely used of the Roman emperor. Such language was less common among Jewish writers, though even here we find occasional use of terms attributing deity to specific men, for example Moses (though this is done in such a way that it is clearly not meant to be taken literally). The question arises as to whether the New Testament writers, when they used such language of Jesus, meant any more than did their contemporaries. Dunn finds himself unable to say that they did. The way Jesus refers to God as 'Father' may involve a claim to a special place but he is not sure.

This is written compellingly. But I wonder whether sufficient weight is given to such a passage as Matthew 11:27. This Dunn sees as meaning that 'Jesus' sense of sonship was one of intimacy in the councils of God and of eschatological significance, unique in the degree and finality of the revelation and authority accorded to him (as compared with prophetic consciousness — Amos 3:7); but more than that we cannot say with any confidence' (p. 29; cf. also pp. 198-200). I realize that 'eschatological' is a blessed word in modern New Testament studies and that many scholars see it as relevant to this passage. But is it? Dunn's study is a very careful one. It is characterized by a refusal to go beyond what any passage actually says; we must not read things into sayings about Jesus as 'Son of God'. So I find myself asking, Where in this whole paragraph is there a reference to eschatology? I want to employ Dunn's principle that we do not go beyond the meaning of the words actually used. To say, 'No-one knows the Son except the Father' seems to me to say that in the present (whatever may happen eschatologically) the being of the Son is such that it is not known to people in general; it is known to God alone. Add to that that only the Son knows the Father and it is not easy for me at any rate to see anything less than a claim to sonship in the present in the fullest sense.

I find a similar difficulty in other places, for example in the discussion of Hebrews 1: 2: God, having spoken in earlier times through prophets 'at the end of these days spoke to us in the Son . . . through whom he made the worlds'. Is it being quite fair to the writer to deny that this means pre-existence and to reduce it to an 'ideal pre-existence, the existence of an idea in the mind of God, his divine intention for the last days' (p. 54; Dunn's italics)?

Dunn criticizes a good deal of traditional exegesis. He is firm that we must not go beyond what the New Testament writers actually say. Fair enough. But we can't have it both ways. If the orthodox are not to be allowed to read meanings into sayings about Jesus as God's Son, then the less orthodox must not read meanings into sayings about the Son's making of the worlds. There is nothing in the majestic opening of Hebrews that leads us to think that the writer is talking about the ideal rather than the actual, about God's intention for the last days rather than God's past action in Christ.

When he comes to the section on 'the Son of man' Dunn has a very lucid summary of the state of the action. He argues that we must understand the use of the term in the gospels to go back to Jesus himself (p. 86). He sees the expression as essentially eschatological in meaning and finds no reason for taking it to point to Jesus' pre-existence. I gladly pay my tribute to this chapter, but there are a couple of points which concern me.

First, is the expression invariably eschatological? It certainly is quite often (cf. the coming of the Son of man 'in his glory'). But it is also used of suffering and death in an important group of passages (e.g. Mk. 8: 31). This part of the evidence seems to show that as Jesus used the term it did not invariably have eschatological significance.

Secondly, there are passages which say, 'the Son of man came . . .' or the like (Lk. 7: 34; 19: 10; Mk. 10: 45), and passages in which Jesus says 'I came . . .' (Mt. 17: 17; 9: 13; 10:34-35; Lk. 12:49, 51, etc.). Dunn classes such passages with those that speak of God as sending people (on p. 89 he refers the 'I came' passages to pp. 39f., but there he is discussing God's 'sending' of his agents). But there is a significant difference between saying 'God sent his prophets' and 'I came to call sinners'. How could Jesus 'come' unless he existed before he 'came'? An expression like 'The Son of man came to seek and to save that which was lost' (Lk. 19: 10) seems to mean more than that Jesus was conscious of a divine mission.

There is much of interest in the discussion of 'the
Dr Dunn has certainly shown that many passages in the New Testament which are unthinkingly assumed to speak of incarnation do not in fact do so. Over and over he compels us to think again and to modify our interpretation of familiar passages. But he has not shown that the idea of Christ's pre-existence is absent from Paul's thought and as Paul is probably the first Christian writer this is very significant. His discussions of Philippians 2 and 2 Corinthians 8:9 are among the least convincing sections of his book.

In the chapter, 'Spirit or Angel?', Dr Dunn has no great difficulty in showing that Jesus is not identified with either in the New Testament writings. But there are some small points that call for comment. Thus to say that John 'seems to understand the coming of the Spirit as fulfilling the promise of Christ's return' (pp. 147f.) is perhaps too simple. It is true that many scholars understand the relevant passages in that way, but many do not. I do not understand why Dr Dunn does not discuss the other view. We might perhaps see another inadequacy in the passage which refers to 'some OT texts which speak of "the Lord" as being applied to Christ in the New Testament but cites only Romans 10:13 and Philippians 2:10f. (pp. 157f.). But there are several others (e.g. Mt. 3:3; Lk. 1:76; Acts 2:21; 1 Cor. 2:16; Heb. 1:10). The phenomenon is more widespread than one would gather from the discussion.

Further, we read, 'There is no evidence that any NT writer thought of Jesus as actually present in Israel's past' (p. 158; Dunn's italics). But Paul wrote, 'the Rock was Christ' (1 Cor. 10:4). It is true that later Dunn tells us that 'rock = Christ in Christian typology' (p. 184). But most exegesis agree that when Paul says that Christ 'was' the rock he means that Christ existed at the time of the rock. Thus Conzelmann says explicitly, 'The "was" of the typological statement, of the interpretation of the rock as being Christ, means real pre-existence, not merely symbolic significance' (ad loc.).

When he comes to the Wisdom literature Dunn shows that the concept of wisdom was used widely. In the Old Testament, however, it does not go beyond a vivid personification and certainly does not denote anything like a 'hypostasis'. When the New Testament writers use this concept they often do so in ways we find strange but which do not carry with them the ideas, such as pre-existence, that we would most naturally understand of the words they use. Dunn reminds us that it is not a matter of determining the meaning we would have if we used these words but the meaning first-century writers had. We must whole-heartedly agree. But this does not mean that when Paul writes, 'one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom all things and we through him' (1 Cor.
8:6) he means, 'Christ who because he is now Lord now shares in God's rule over creation and believers, and therefore his Lordship is the continuation and fullest expression of God's own creative power' (p. 182; Dunn's italics), that 'Christ is being identified here not with a pre-existent being but with the creative power and action of God' (ibid; Dunn's italics).

In an important 'creation' passage in Colossians 1:15ff. Dunn takes the words, 'in him were created all things' (v. 16), to mean 'Christ now reveals the character of the power behind the world' (p. 190; Dunn's italics). The passage says a little later, 'all things were created through him and to him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together'. Dunn finds this to mean, 'that the creation and Christ must be understood in relation to each other; now that Christ has been raised from the dead the power and purpose in creation cannot be fully understood except in terms of Christ' (pp. 193ff.; Dunn's italics). Even the depth of scholarship and the sincerity with which this is argued cannot make such an exegesis plausible. Traditional exegesis may require modification but it is asking too much that the plain meaning of words be modified in such a drastic fashion.

When he comes to deal with the Logos Dr Dunn has a valuable section on Philo. He goes on to argue that John's view of the Logos certainly includes the idea of pre-existence. He holds that in John 1:1-18 we have 'an explicit statement of incarnation, the first, and indeed only such statement in the NT' (p. 241). Many will wonder whether this can be justified. Further, Dunn does not seem to give sufficient attention to the possibility that John may be early. To agree that John's Logos Christology includes pre-existence does not mean that pre-existence comes into Christianity as a late doctrine. If John is early it does not. And if 'the Logos poem' is earlier than John (p. 241) it may be very early indeed. Further, it does seem that pre-existence is present in addition in some of the Pauline writings and these are among the earliest in the New Testament.

In his conclusion Dunn makes it quite clear that there is no real precedent for the Christian doctrine of the incarnation. His close examination of developments in Judaism and other religions has made it plain that the Christian view is a new one. It may be indebted to others for this or that aspect, but its essential idea is new. His view is that Jesus did not himself explicitly claim incarnation: 'We cannot claim that Jesus believed himself to be the incarnate Son of God'. But that is not the whole story. Dunn sees the incarnation as a fitting development of Jesus' teaching. He goes on, 'we can claim that the teaching to that effect as it came to expression in the later first-century Christian thought was, in the light of the whole Christ-event, an appropriate reflection on and elaboration of Jesus' own sense of sonship and eschatological mission' (p. 254; Dunn's italics). That is an important conclusion.

It is interesting that at this point Dunn allows the possibility that some texts in Paul 'could be readily interpreted' of pre-existence as well as of a cosmic role for Christ from the resurrection (p. 255). I welcome this, but I wonder whether Dunn has made sufficient allowance for the possibility in his earlier discussion. He goes on to speak of the complexity in the thought of Paul (p. 266) and it would seem that a fair exegesis of what Paul says includes the thought of Christ's pre-existence within that complexity.

It will be obvious that I find some aspects of Dr Dunn's study unacceptable. But it would be churlish to finish on any other note than one of appreciation. He has written a great book and put us all very much in his debt. He has broken new ground and made us all think. The repercussions of his argument will be with us for a long time. We must be grateful for the information and the stimulation this book brings us.