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# THE UNIQUENESS OF JESUS AND THE ABSOLUTENESS OF CHRIST

By

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I am grateful for having this opportunity to participate in this *Festschrift* in honour of Archbishop Methodios of Thyateira and Great Britain whom I have known for several years and with whom I have collaborated on various scholarly projects both in Africa and in Europe. May God grant Him many more years of fruitful service to the Church and the world.

The Incarnation has become a major topic of theological discussion, particularly in theological circles in England, and has led to a disruption of faith and order, with serious consequences for the future of ecumenical relations in the world-wide Church. This is because a confusion has occurred between the language and function of Biblical criticism on the one hand and of doctrine on the other<sup>1</sup>. One result of this is undoubtedly the threat to church order from within over the question of the ordination of women to the priesthood at least for some Churches. With regard to this issue the doctrine of the Incarnation is an essential guide if true order is to be maintained.

The issue is more important than a mere domestic *impasse* - which is not the subject - matter of this essay - and it concerns the necessity for a restatement of the doctrine of the Incarnation in terms which take into account serious developments in Biblical criticism. A genuine Christology must be reasserted on the basis of the Bible and of Church Tradition, in the past the two bases of the true Anglican witness and indeed of a lot of Protestant witness as well.

I am concerned in this essay to relate together, on the basis of historical criticism of the Gospels, what can be said historically about Jesus and what can be asserted of him by faith as the Christ, so that the two sets of

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1) The publication of *The Myth of God Incarnate* (ed. J. Hick), London 1977, is a clear example. Dennis Nineham has recently asked for an attempt in England to relate Biblical Studies with doctrinal theology ("R. H. Lightfoot and the Gospels", *Theology* LXXXVIII 1985 pp. 95f). One can only agree with this demand.

statements can be seen to form a single entity we can properly call Jesus Christ and go on to believe in as the Son of God, with all that the doctrine of the Incarnation says of him. This will take us several steps further than what I said in my essay on "Jesus Christ" in *Theology* in 1965<sup>2</sup> about the inseparability and distinction between history and faith with regard to Jesus Christ in the Gospels as a basis for continued belief in the Incarnation, without necessarily having to use metaphysical categories of thought. There is in fact a basis in the Gospels for what these metaphysical categories of thought assert, though, as I said in that article, since the eighteenth century this has been wrongly rent in two. The centrality of Christology in the Gospel of Mark has been a theme of my other and later essays on that Gospel<sup>3</sup> and these have also centred on the issue of the status of history with regard to faith in Jesus as the Christ, or Messiah. This essay is an application of these studies to the question of Christology itself.

Biblical criticism has often led to a distinction being made between Jesus and Christ in such a way that either a single entity, the historical Jesus, is set over against many interpretations of Christ, or many different pictures of Jesus are set over against a single figure of faith, Christ. One or the other has appeared as a variable and the other made into a fixed entity

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2) LXVIII 1965, pp. 558-563.

3) In particular "St. Mark's Attitude to the Relationship between History and the Gospel". *Studia Biblica* 1978, II *Papers on the Gospels*. ed. E.A. Livingstone. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, Supplement Series 2. Sheffield 1980, pp. 115-127. This approach has been disputed by E. Best, with regard to my earlier article - "The Use of Miracles in the Markan Gospel". *Miracles. Cambridge Studies in their Philosophy and History*. ed. C.F.D. Moule. London 1965, pp. 151-162, E. Best "the Miracles in Mark". *Review and Expositor* LXXV 1978, pp. 539-554, see particularly n. 5 p. 554. I cannot separate discipleship from Christology. Mark's interest in Christology is, of course, in the context of discipleship in the Church of his day.

however conceived. The background for the collapse of attempts at the former approach is well documented in Albert Schweitzer's study of the quest of the historical Jesus<sup>4</sup>, and since then the latter has gained ground, partly on the basis of the earlier impetus of the work of Martin Kahler<sup>5</sup>, from Bultmann's use of Wrede<sup>6</sup>, but it is the former which seems to be gaining some ground today as part of a flight from dogma to what is seen as simple historical experience. Mr. Don Cupitt has made a peculiar plea for this approach by perversely modifying the old liberal enterprise for what he calls that of the modernists and accepting some variety in the picture of Jesus<sup>7</sup>. The "messianic secret" in Mark is, he says, Mark's symbol for Jesus' elusiveness, regarded by Mr. Cupitt as a virtue in itself.

The "messianic secret" in Mark should, however, not be regarded as preserving historical elusiveness over against later doctrinal fixation, but as a way of preserving a uniqueness of Jesus which allows Mark to assert his absoluteness of Christ over against many false Christs and false prophets in history. This positive doctrinal purpose is what comes out in the much debated question why Jesus appears to accept the title of Christ at his trial by saying "I am" (Mk. 14:62) - which is such a difficulty to all completely negative explanations of the secret. This acceptance of the title on the part of Jesus does give way to a future reference to the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven, but this only shows that for Mark Jesus is both beginning (*arche*) and conclusion (*telos*) of the Gospel, in history and at the end, although only faith can acknowledge this<sup>8</sup>. The assertion before non-believers does not dispel the secret

in history but rather it intensifies it as well as preserves it. It is after all not a historical secret for Mark but one concerned with the whole question of the relation between history and faith<sup>9</sup>. By the theme of secrecy, Mark does not point us to some suprahistorical reality, nor defy orthodox rigidity with historical elusiveness, but assert that the historical context of faith in Jesus remains constant till the end.

The truth of Jesus being Son of God is not, however, a historical fact (historical in the modern sense), but is set, as an absolute truth, in relation to Jesus' historically unique witness to God. This is clear in all places where the title Son of God appears - in the occurrence of the voice from heaven, in the cries of the exorcised demons, in the words of the centurion at the cross (whether viewed as confession or not), and even in the High-priest's question, which for him could only be answered in the affirmative as an act of blasphemy. Mark's opening verse probably does make that clear - if we accept the longer reading - as required St. John (aware of Mark's work)<sup>10</sup> to present Jesus as the *arche* of the Gospel as an of necessity eternal fact rather than simply as part of historical context of the Gospel story. But St. John had also, as a result, to assert the mystery of the Incarnation, the Word made flesh, the Gospel in history, though still subject to faith or unbelief<sup>11</sup>.

Don Cupitt's way of wishing for some amorphous historical Jesus as an answer to our quest is rendered illegitimate since the messianic secret in Mark protects the historical Jesus from any purely historical quest and asserts that he cannot be categorised in any purely historical way. He is unique among men by being beyond any historical categories and in fact absolutises them beyond their original meaning by having them ascribed to him. That is why none of the Christological titles are used on their own, or in accordance with previous understandings of their meaning, but are used to reinterpret each other in order to interpret Jesus. They *can* be used in this way for the utterly unique person, Jesus of Nazareth, though not as any contemporary human being could have used them. This is true even of the centurion at the cross, who by the context must be understood as uttering more than he knew. Thus, whatever earlier more "primitive" Christologies

9) My article in *Studia Biblica* n. 3 above, has a full discussion of the messianic secret in Mark.

10) See my article, "The Relation between John and Mark". *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*. 23, 1985, pp. 99-115.

11) Cf. Jn. 12. 37ff, which is John's way of making clear the significance of the parables as explained in Mk. 4. 11f.

4) Originally *Von Reimarus zu Wrede, Eine Geschichte der Leben Jesu - Forschung*. Tübingen 1906 (Eng. tr. *The Quest of the historical Jesus. A critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*. London 1910.

5) *Des sogenannte historische Jesus und der geschichtliche biblische Christus*. Leipzig 1892 (Eng. tr. *The so-called historical Jesus and the historic Biblical Christ*. Philadelphia 1964).

6) Bultmann's epoch-making statement of this approach was in his essay "Neues Testament und Mythologie" 1941 (eng. tr. *Kerygma and Myth I* London 1953, pp. 1-44). See also "Das Verhältnis der urchristlichen Christusbotschaft zum historischen Jesus". *Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberg Akademie der wissenschaften, philosophisch - historische Klasse*. Heidelberg 1960 pp. 5-27.

7) "One Jesus, Many Christs?" *Christ, Faith and History. Cambridge Studies in Christology*. ed. S.W. Sykes and J.P. Clayton. Cambridge 1972, pp. 131-144, especially pp. 143f..

8) Cf. my article, "The Beginning of the Gospel. A Study of St. Mark's Gospel with regard to its first verse". *New Testament Christianity for Africa and the World*. Essays in Honour of Harry Sawyer. ed. M.E. Glasswell and E.W. Fashole Luke. London 1974, pp. 36-43.

lie behind the account, Mark, in his picture of Jesus' baptism as Son of God, was himself also pointing beyond all the categories of his own time to the formulations of the Church through the ages, because, by cancelling out earlier approaches, his theme of the messianic secret does open the way to more perfect affirmations, though not by way of an historical apology - in these respects Wrede was right!

Jesus remains, of course, historical and this historicity is essential both to his uniqueness as well as to those absolute categories created by him. His historicity and the absoluteness of those categories hang together, and nowhere more so than in the crucifixion. It is clearly that event, together with the conviction of the resurrection, which comprised for Mark the essential basis for the whole story as Gospel and thus allowed for the creation of the *genre* Gospel. It is that event too which negates the purely historical understanding of the Christological titles and in its outcome also absolutizes them as titles for Jesus alone. History and faith are at this point either held together or rendered meaningless. One cannot be retained in isolation from the other, yet each retains its own integrity without changing its identity as history or faith. Put in Christological terms we have here the Chalcedonian definition and this guarantees genuine Christianity in both its horizontal and vertical aspects, historical experience and supernatural faith.

Matthew and Luke, standing half-way between Mark and John, tried to encapsulate the vertical in the horizontal and historicise the Gospel. Thus Matthew asserts the *fact* of Jesus' messiahship in history in relation to Israel, even though Israel rejected it, and Luke sees the historical life of Jesus together with his death and resurrection as part of a necessary process leading to the Christian Church, even though this was not understood even by the disciples at the time. But both evangelists felt the necessity of a vertical background to the story if it was to make sense, and this, despite different surrounding circumstances, was provided for both by the virgin-birth. This historical way of asserting the Incarnation is as historically impossible and indescribable as the resurrection at the end of the story. They are comparable pointers to the absolute dimension of faith by asserting the historical uniqueness of Jesus, but only faith can reach the conclusion demanded, the divine Sonship of Jesus, as an eternal truth. John asserts the latter directly and draws out the full implications for the history itself without destroying the historical aspect as the Gnostics eventually did. For this

he did not need the story of the virgin-birth, though it is not the only story John does not use whilst presupposing it<sup>12</sup>.

In all four canonical Gospels the absoluteness<sup>13</sup> of Christ is inseparable from the uniqueness of Jesus. A Gospel must after all present the Gospel in historical form with a complete unity between revelation and concealment noted by Bultmann<sup>14</sup> is the way this unity of subject is most tellingly achieved, without either aspect being absorbed by the other.

I will close with some reflections on the implications of this for the universality of Christ, since this corollary is so vital for the African situation. It is the Fourth Gospel, with its doctrine of the Logos, which shows how this relates to the particularity of Jesus. The Incarnation is also shown to be the cornerstone, holding all else together. The picture presented by the Fourth Gospel can be explained with reference to the Igbo concept of the *Chi*, which, as a universal concept, is related to the Creator, *Chi-ne-ke* (cf. also *Chi-ukwu*, the Great *Chi*), but which is given to each man individually<sup>15</sup>. However, if the universal *Chi* is found in a single human life, as in the picture of the Word made flesh, we do see a situation whereby something universal and belonging to all men is achieved through an individual man, although that universal was not available before even though it existed before. The particular revelation of God to the Jews is seen as being fulfilled in Jesus, but also universalised through a new historical entity, the Church, as the community of those who received him. This community stands over against the created world of men and 'his own' in historical Israel<sup>16</sup>. This new entity implies a new creation, as well as a new and fuller

12) I do not agree with Bonhoeffer's lectures on Christology (in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 3, Munich 1960, published separately as *Wer ist und wer war Jesus Christus? Seine Geschichte und sein Geheimnis*. Hamburg 1962, p. 111, Eng. tr. *Christology* London 1971, p. 109) that the virgin birth is a less satisfactory picture than what we have in John, it is a different way of presenting the idea of the perfected human nature of the incarnate One.

13) The use of this word results from the fact that this essay was originally prepared for a Symposium with that title. It refers to the divine and eternal dimension of the person, Jesus Christ.

14) *Theologie des neuen Testaments*. Tübingen 1953, p. 394 (Eng. tr. *Theology of the New Testament*. vol. II. London 1955, pp. 47f.).

15) cf. E.C.O. Ilogu *Christianity and Ibo Culture*. Leiden 1974, p. 34.

16) Jn. 1. 10-12. Cf. R.E. Brown *The Gospel according to John*. Vol. I, London 1966, pp. 10, 29. Schackenburg's view that "his own" is mankind in general (*Gospel according to St. John*. vol. I, New York and London 1968, p. 260) does not substantially affect the argument here.

revelation, which, from within the old creation and revelation, takes over the historical particularities of the old to incorporate them in a new universal. The absoluteness of Christ envisaged here rests upon something prior and antecedent and original (i.e. his previous relation to mankind and to Israel, and indeed the created world), but is also seen as something ultimate, to be achieved finally, and to which we are pressing forward, i.e. a new sonship of God<sup>17</sup>. Thus this is not a Gnostic conception, but remains an eschatological one which demanded of necessity the historical particularity of the flesh for its ultimate realisation. Yet this individual particularity was in Christ also totally unique, because in him alone the universal and eternal *Chi* (or Logos) resided.

The implications of this are that, although we all have our distinctive backgrounds in this world, by which we are linked to the old creation and the creative and eternal Logos of God, yet this background is only the penultimate aspect of our life, a qualification for application rather than membership of the new community. The ultimate takes us beyond, though by way of the penultimate<sup>18</sup>, and is reached through the incarnate Logos who has himself participated in the penultimate and through it proclaims the ultimate as present and available to us all. The absoluteness of Christ is, therefore, to be understood in terms of a universality which is saving by being an ultimacy made possible through the uniqueness of the historical Jesus. The eschatological aspect is not absent in the Fourth Gospel, but the fact of Jesus being the *telos* as well as the *arche* is expressed, not in apocalyptic terms, but in terms of history and faith. What is not gloriously contributed by the Fourth Gospel is the fact that Christ's very universality demands that he is both the *arche* and the *telos*, absolute and ultimate, and that this truth is inseparable from his uniqueness within history as an individual man, who, by his own presence amongst us, connects our own penultimates to his own ultimacy as belonging to us all<sup>19</sup>.

17) cf. Schnackenburg pp. 261f.

18) I borrow this language of the penultimate and the ultimate from Appendix I Section (a) Faith and Order (Canterbury 1969) of the WCC document 10 (revised) of the Addis Ababa conference of January 1971 in the section on "The Church and Mankind".

19) I may add, because of the issue I touched on at the beginning, that Christ could only do this as man, as well as a Jew, because, in Biblical terms, a woman would not have the universal meaning required. This is not a merely semantic fact, but a matter of historical revelation in the Bible. The priesthood expresses the continued im-

This absoluteness of Christ, mediated through the uniqueness of Jesus and tending to the ultimacy of Jesus Christ, for all and in all, necessitates the unity of his people, as the proper children of God, with him and each other, whilst taking account of their prior diversity and distinctive particularities. These particularities are now to be seen as penultimates which give way to a single ultimate which is expressed by Christ and realised in us through the Spirit proceeding from the one Father of Christ.

To return to my starting-point, I have tried to demonstrate how the uniqueness of Jesus and the absoluteness of Christ are inseparable and to draw out some of the implications of this. I believe that all aspects of orthodox doctrine stem from this insight and that it is the only proper way to read the Gospels, even with our critical eyes open, because they make no sense in any other way. The development from Mark to John is also seen as inevitable and fully explicable as a drawing out of this truth. I have also shown that the corollary of the universality of the one, Jesus Christ, demands the insight of his pre-existence<sup>20</sup>, just as well as it preserves the hope of the final realisation of all this at the end<sup>21</sup>, because the Incarnation asserts both in terms of the particular encapsulating and indicating the universal as both origin and goal of human life. In him "one meets the one man, Jesus Christ, who is fully God"<sup>22</sup>.

But we have added here that this is clearly seen to be so, because, as "the one man", he fulfils all men's expectations by transcending them in their diversity and separateness, and uniquely incorporates them in an ultimate truth, ultimate because it is also the original

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portance of this in terms of being a man, whereas the importance of being a Jew has ceased. The Church must continue to represent the universality of Christ historically in order for his ultimacy, in which all differences disappear, to become true. I have said more about this issue in "Some Issues of Church and Society in the light of Paul's Eschatology". *Paul and Paulinism*. Essays in Honour of C.K. Barrett, ed. M.D. Hooker and S.G. Wilson, London 1982, pp. 310-319.

20) cf. C.F.D. Moule (*The Origin of Christology*. Cambridge 1977) who, in the course of discussing the question of how preexistence came to be attributed to Christ, practically gives this answer when he says (p. 139): "If this Jesus of history turns out, in subsequent Christian experience, to be eternal and more than individual but still personally identical with the one who was known as Jesus, how are we to deny him personal preexistence comparable to this?"

21) This is as true of the Christology of the Epistle to the Hebrews as of John.

22) "Man hat es mit dem einen Menschen Jesus Christus zu tun, der ganz Gott ist", Bonhoeffer p. 110, Eng. tr. p. 108.

unifying truth behind the fragmented diversities of human history in this fallen, yet created world. Thus absoluteness and uniqueness, which in the abstract

must be seen as opposites (i.e. what harmonises and what distinguishes) are to be seen as one in a single person who is both human and divine<sup>23</sup>.

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23) Having written this essay my attention was drawn by Dr. George Dragas to the third chapter (Christology and History) of J. Daniélou's *The Lord of History*, London 1985, which concurs with most of my views and could be read with profit.