

Preface

IN 1988 I ENTERED the fraught world of modern theology and biblical studies a naïve Bible-believing Evangelical. I was confronted by a disturbing curriculum: Jesus' followers had been wrong about their Lord's return, Christ did not believe that he had to die for anyone's sins, the Gospels were largely created by the early church (and historically inaccurate), and belief in Jesus' deity only emerged late in the first century. None of the cardinal tenets of orthodox Christianity could be believed without question or serious modification.

But I had arrived at Oxford at a time when many of the assured results of modern critical scholarship were fair game. With N. T. (Tom) Wright, Ed Sanders, Christopher Rowland, John Ashton, Rowan Williams, Alister McGrath, and their ilk for teachers, my theology was molded in a melting pot of rigorous scholarship and wide-open creative possibilities. We were taught to think for ourselves and to question everything. And I was captivated by the light of a bright new future for biblical studies, for theology, and for the church.

This is a book about the issue at the heart of it all: Christology—the earliest beliefs about Christ and the ways his followers devoted their lives to him. I offer, over the course of four volumes, a “new paradigm” that describes and accounts for the origins of the belief in his deity. The foundations for the conceptual structure of the new paradigm were laid in the intellectual crucible that was Oxford in my undergraduate years. For the most part, the new paradigm is a synthesis of my teachers' seminal insights. Mix together Sanders on the centrality of the priesthood and the Temple in ancient Jewish life, with Wright's observations on Adam, Israel, the Messiah, and the overarching shape of the biblical story, and Rowland's groundbreaking discussion of Jewish apocalyptic; stir whilst listening to Kallistos Ware and Geoffrey Rowell lay out the basics of patristic Christian orthodoxy. Then add in a sprinkling of Margaret Barker (a muse to many of us, albeit from beyond the immediate confines of Oxford) on the cosmology and religious

experiences nurtured by Israel's Temple, and you have all the ingredients of the new paradigm (bar a few fresh observations of my own).

There are two ideas that constitute its heart. Firstly, I contend that in Israel's Scriptures (and for first-century Judaism) the one God has already revealed himself to be an incarnational and scandalously humanity-focused God. Secondly, I propose that, within the context of a fresh understanding of the shape of Jewish monotheism, a straightforward explanation of Christological origins is now available: the historical Jesus believed himself to be uniquely included—as one who served as Israel's royal and priestly Messiah and as a fully divine person—within the identity of the one God (as the “Son” of the “Father”). Jesus' own monotheism was this new, radically refashioned “Jesus monotheism.” These two theses offer a satisfactory account for the primary sources and historical data that no other currently available models can.

I arrive at these conclusions not through a reactionary return to pre-critical arguments and dogmas, but by revisiting some assumptions about biblical theology that predate the critical period; questionable assumptions that are deeply rooted in those strands of the Christian tradition where post-Enlightenment scholarship has flourished. Early on in my own studies I concluded that a third way between the critical dismantling of orthodoxy and a defensive conservative reaction was needed. In the heat of debate unspoken assumptions shared by both sides are often the real cause of the conflict. On the matter of Christological origins, it seems to me that both those of us for whom Christian “orthodoxy” has become a toxic brand and those of us at the forefront of the fight to defend it have, in various ways, missed the theological shape and force of the texts. So the route I lay out to the new paradigm will seem to many a surprising one. I offer what I hope is ultimately an attractive alternative to the models currently on offer. The new paradigm builds on recent insights and advances by many specialists in the field (whose contributions will, in particular, be the focus of this first volume). There are places where it at least has the virtue of greater historical simplicity than other models, and no doubt some will find it theologically appealing. However, *it is not a cheap account*; it has its intellectual and existential (personal, political, economic, and ecclesial) costs. I hope not to push and cajole readers to an old place long since abandoned, but to introduce readers to a new terrain. The journey there is neither quick—this is the first of four volumes—nor easy.

Initially I had hoped, on leaving a position as the principal of a small college in 2012, to write a short book that would set out in an accessible form the main parts of the view of Christological origins that I have long taught my students (and that I had begun to sketch in some shorter, discretely

focused publications since the publication of my doctoral thesis in 1997). That was to be a series of propositions, without meticulous argument, with but a brief introduction setting the scene. The project grew rapidly. The laying out of the propositions that comprise the new paradigm now takes up Volume 3, which covers the biblical and Jewish material, and Volume 4, which covers the New Testament material. A summary of the new paradigm is available on my www.academia.edu page and at www.JesusMonotheism.com. Volumes 1 and 2 prepare the ground for a full presentation of the new paradigm (in Volumes 3 and 4).

Volume 1 maps out the current state of scholarship as the context for the new paradigm. It has two main aims. On the one hand, it sets out the convincing arguments of Larry Hurtado and Richard Bauckham for an early high Christology. On the other hand, it explores the ways in which Hurtado and Bauckham (and the others in what I call the “emerging consensus”) are unable to account satisfactorily for some of the hard data of the primary sources. That data, especially some non-Christian Jewish material which the emerging consensus scholars have not treated adequately, points towards a new approach.

Volume 2 takes up the evidence of those Jewish texts (studied in Part 3 of Volume 1) and returns to the New Testament to consider the possibility that its divine Christology is built on pre-Christian precedents. A long chapter is dedicated to a focused case study—the hymn in Phil 2:6–11—and another to a survey of texts in the Synoptic Gospels where Jesus is presented with, or claims for himself, a divine identity. Volume 2 also offers some new insights into these early Christian texts, but it will attempt to show that, without a wholly new paradigm, some key components of New Testament Christology are really hard to explain.

For the new paradigm I am indebted not just to Oxford, but also to the many who have made the United Kingdom the powerhouse of Christology research that it has been for the last twenty-five years; above all to Larry Hurtado and Richard Bauckham. Between them, they have changed the field forever. In fundamental ways their work paints a picture from which we must all start. And, over the course of the last twenty years, their publications have both confirmed and challenged my thinking in equal measure. Along with N. T. Wright, they are dialogue partners throughout this book. Other colleagues, friends, and conversation partners have made vital contributions to the sharpening of my thinking: Eddie Adams, Colin Gunton, Karen Kilby, Loren Stuckenbruck, Robert Hayward, Mike Thate. Larry graciously read and commented on an earlier version of several chapters. Others have given me invaluable feedback throughout the writing process:

especially, Jim West, Joseph Longarino, Ed Gerber, Simon Gathercole, Gabrielle Thomas, and Chris Kugler.

Robin Parry, my editor at Wipf and Stock, invited me to write a book on Christology about fifteen years ago. He has been patient, and when, in the autumn of 2012, I said I had something for him, I had no idea it would take this long, nor the number of times I would ask him if he minded increasing the size and the number of volumes.

Finally, thanks goes to my colleagues and the students of Westminster Theological Centre; for taking up the baton so successfully as I stepped down at a critical juncture in the new college's life. In countless ways the new paradigm is indebted to my experience in spearheading the WTC experiment, but if I had not stepped down this book would never have happened.

Ash Wednesday, 2015

Camelot

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