



OXFORD

# Christology

*A Biblical, Historical,  
and Systematic Study of Jesus*

SECOND EDITION

Gerald O'Collins, SJ

# Christology



# Christology

---

A Biblical, Historical, and  
Systematic Study of Jesus

SECOND EDITION

Gerald O'Collins S.J.

**OXFORD**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

# OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.  
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,  
and education by publishing worldwide in

Oxford New York

Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi  
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi  
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in

Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece  
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore  
South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press  
in the UK and in certain other countries

Published in the United States  
by Oxford University Press Inc., New York

© Gerald O'Collins 1995, 2009

The moral rights of the author have been asserted  
Database right Oxford University Press (maker)

First published 1995  
Second edition 2009

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,  
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,  
without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press,  
or as expressly permitted by law, or under terms agreed with the appropriate  
reprographics rights organization. Enquiries concerning reproduction  
outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department,  
Oxford University Press, at the address above

You must not circulate this book in any other binding or cover  
and you must impose the same condition on any acquirer

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
Data available

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data  
Library of Congress Control Number: 2009926738

Typeset by SPI Publisher Services, Pondicherry, India  
Printed in Great Britain  
on acid-free paper by  
Clays Ltd., St Ives plc

ISBN 978-0-19-955787-5

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

*For Charles and Thérèse*



# Preface to the Second Edition

After first publishing this book in 1995, in subsequent reprintings I was able to correct a few errata, add a biblical index, and update the bibliography. For the present task of thoroughly revising the whole text, I need to take account of the numerous biblical, historical, and systematic studies of Jesus that have appeared in recent years. Many valuable, as well as some questionable, books and articles have appeared in all three areas. But, what should I bring into focus as the most significant contributions to Christology coming from the closing years of the twentieth century and the opening years of the twenty-first century? Let me single out two groups of contributions.

First, publications in the biblical area have continued to supply further indispensable resources for the task of theologians. I think here of major commentaries: on Mark (Joel Marcus (2000) and Francis Moloney (2002)); on Matthew (Ulrich Luz (2002 for the final section in German and 2005 in English) and John Nolland (2005)); on John (Andrew Lincoln (2005)). Systematic Christology can draw from a landmark volume on the formation of the Gospels by Richard Bauckham (2006) and by fine studies on the theology of Paul by James Dunn (1998) and Gordon Fee (2007). Further commentaries can enhance theological reflection on Christ—for instance, Anthony Thiselton on 1 Corinthians (2000) and Craig Koester on Hebrews (2001).

Long and valuable works on the ministry of Jesus have been published by N. T. Wright (*Jesus and the Victory of God*, 1996) and John Meier. After the first volume of *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* appeared in 1991 and the second in 1994, Meier added a third volume in 2001. An *annus mirabilis* occurred in 2003, with the appearance of James Dunn's *Jesus Remembered*, N. T. Wright's *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, and Larry Hurtado's *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*.

Second, within the discipline of Christology itself, Jacques Dupuis' *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (1997) has helped to focus a vast debate about the role of Christ and his humanity for

the salvation of all human beings. The *Festschrift* that Daniel Kendall and I co-edited for Dupuis' eightieth birthday (*In Many and Diverse Ways*, 2003) provides an extensive bibliography and comment on the approach of Dupuis. Along with those writers in India with whom he engaged in dialogue, many scholars in other parts of the world have struggled to understand, even partially, how the divine grace is mediated to all those who do not belong to the visible Christian community—for instance, David Burrell, Francis X. Clooney, Gavin D'Costa, Bishop Kenneth Cragg, Claude Geffré, Paul Griffiths, Peter Phan, and Christian Troll.

To be sure, in the late nineties and early years of the present century, Christology has been well served by some systematic studies (e.g., the work of Oliver Crisp, Robert Jensen, and Jon Sobrino) and by valuable studies in patristics (e.g., the work of Lewis Ayres, Sarah Coakley, Brian Daley, Andrew Louth, and Richard Price) and in medieval thought and practice (e.g., the work of Caroline Walker Bynum, Richard Cross, and Marilyn McCord Adams). Such philosophers as Ingolf Dalferth, Stephen Davis, C. S. Evans, Brian Leftow, Alvin Plantinga, Eleonore Stump, Peter van Inwagen, and Richard Swinburne have continued to prove lively dialogue partners for those in systematic Christology. Some documents emerging from ecumenical dialogues, like the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* signed by the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church in 1999, contribute important guidelines for pondering the salvation brought by Christ.

But, all in all, I consider that in recent years Christology has received its richest input from elsewhere: from (1) a broad range of biblical scholars (see above) and from (2) those writers mentioned above (and others) who have wrestled seriously with the question of Christ's saving work being mediated through the Holy Spirit to the whole of humanity.

In the chapters that follow, I will (where necessary) update, enlarge, and modify what I wrote in the first edition of *Christology*. The most extensive changes will come in Chapters 3, 4, 10, 11, 13, and 14, as well as in the bibliography. As regards the translation of the Bible, I will in general continue to follow the New Revised Standard Version, but for some passages I will (silently) change or even correct it.

In revising this book, I want to thank those who wrote reviews of the original edition; where necessary, I have changed my text in the

light of their comments. They include the following: D. Carroll in *The Furrow* (May 1996), 317–18; D. Flanagan in *Doctrine and Life*, 46 (1996), 187–8; C. Hefling in *Anglican Theological Review*, 79 (1997), 73–6; J. L. Heft in *Theological Studies*, 57 (1996), 547–9; R. P. Imbelli in *Commonweal* (26 Jan. 1996), 25–7; D. M. Kelly in *First Things* (Feb. 1996), 72; J. P. Kenny in *The Australasian Catholic Record*, 73 (1996), 120–1; J. Massa in *Crisis* (Dec. 1996), 44; J. McIntyre in *The Expository Times*, 107 (1995–6), 88 (and in his *The Shape of Christology* (2nd edn, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998) 283–305); R. Moloney in *Milltown Studies* (1996), 132–5; G. T. Montague in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 59 (1997), 168–9; G. Newlands in *Journal of Theological Studies*, 47 (1996), 782–4; C. C. Newman in *Choice* (Jan. 1996), 8–9; J. Parr in *Theology*, 99 (1996), 304–5; P. O’Connell in *New Oxford Review* (Sept. 1997), 31–2; P. Perkins in *America* (23 Mar. 1996), 26; and J. E. Thiel in *Religious Studies Review*, 23 (1997), 46–7.

My thanks go also to many people who in recent years have followed my courses or attended lectures by me in Auckland, Ballarat, Belfast, Birmingham, Bologna, Boston, Cambridge, Harrogate, Leuven, London, Milwaukee, Melbourne, Notre Dame (Indiana), Oxford, Perth (Australia), Portland (Oregon), Rome, Salerno, San Francisco, St Louis, Sydney, Tulsa, Washington, DC, and elsewhere in the world. Innumerable questions and comments have enriched my thinking about what faith in Christ involves intellectually, as well as for Christian life and worship. I continue to be most grateful to all at Oxford University Press and, in particular, to Tom Perridge, who suggested that I tackle a thorough revision of this book. Finally, my thanks go to colleagues at St Mary’s University College, Twickenham, and to the Jesuits who have supported my life in our small community at 9 Edge Hill, Wimbledon.

GO’C

St Mary’s University College, Twickenham  
June 2008.

# Preface to the First Edition

In his *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions* (London, 1990), Jürgen Moltmann points to one of the major ‘constraints’ in undertaking such a project: ‘No contemporary christology is ever completely new. Every christology is part of a grateful and critical dialogue with the christologies of [our] predecessors and contemporaries, setting its own tiny accents in this great dialogue about the messianic secret of Jesus Christ’ (p. 38). In other words, to write a satisfactory Christology, you must tell a story that is at least partly familiar and cannot promise to be constantly and startlingly original.

Before presenting my own contribution in the later chapters of this book, I must first engage in some ‘grateful and critical dialogue’ with my predecessors in the biblical period, the patristic era, and the subsequent history of Christology. Such a critical dialogue necessarily involves being selective. The material from the Bible, the Fathers, and later church history is complex and often controversial. Exegetes, patristic scholars, historians of doctrine, and philosophers will always want to hear more. But, this work introduces the biblical, historical, and philosophical contributions with the aim of setting my ‘own tiny accents’ in a systematic Christology which finds its primary interpretative key in the resurrection of the crucified Jesus and his presence, and not with the aim of writing a complete history of Christology. Like Moltmann and others, I am convinced that one cannot write a systematic Christology without paying attention to and drawing to some extent on what has gone before. Yet, writing up the complete history of christological developments would be a quite different and much longer project.

Any ‘grateful and critical dialogue’ with my contemporaries in Christology also calls for selectivity. In particular, for the second half of this book, a full critical attention to all the major alternative positions would mean switching projects. My purpose is to write a systematic Christology, not to do something thoroughly worthwhile but quite different—namely, survey and appraise leading contributions to

twentieth-century Christology. In any case the many articles and books in which I have presented and evaluated the christological views of Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, Walter Kasper, Hans Küng, James Mackey, Willi Marxsen, Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Karl Rahner, John Robinson, Edward Schillebeeckx, Jon Sobrino, and others have at least established one conclusion: I have not ignored alternative positions. (See e.g. *Interpreting Jesus* (1983); *Interpreting the Resurrection* (1988); *Jesus Risen* (1987); *Jesus Today* (1986); *What are they Saying about Jesus?* (1983); *What are they Saying about the Resurrection?* (1978); ‘Newman’s Seven Notes’, in I. Ker and A. G. Hill (eds), *Newman after a Hundred Years* (1990), 135–48. (To this I could add more recent publications in which I discuss current views in Christology—for instance, ‘Images of Jesus and Modern Theology’, in S. E. Porter, et al. (eds), *Images of Christ, Ancient and Modern* (1997), 128–43, and ‘The Incarnation: The Critical Issues’, in S. T. Davis, D. Kendall, and G. O’Collins (eds), *The Incarnation* (2002), 1–27.)

Although the dialogue with my predecessors and contemporaries must be selective, on substantive issues this book will direct readers to some relevant works and/or major entries in large dictionaries and encyclopedias. Through these references interested readers will easily find further bibliographical information. For some important points, full or fairly full biblical and other references will be provided. But, in general, an effort has been made to avoid the massive footnoting and/or intertextual references which bring some scholarly books almost to a standstill.

Taking over a phrase from the pioneering work of William Wrede, Moltmann writes of ‘the messianic secret of Jesus Christ’. Here I would talk rather of ‘the messianic mystery of Jesus Christ’. A secret can be fully revealed once and for all; a religious mystery invites a lifetime of reflection in which there cannot really be definitive statements and truly final conclusions. Both by themselves and in dialogue with others, workers in Christology, as much or even more than other theological scholars, find themselves in the ‘yes—but’ situation. Every significant affirmation will always call for further qualifications, explorations, and additions. The messianic mystery of Christ, precisely as mystery, means that we can never expect to argue everything out in complete and final detail. At the same time, this ‘yes—but’ situation may never be an excuse for blatantly inadequate or simply inaccurate claims.

I am most grateful to Hilva Martorana for typing much of this book. My special thanks go also to Henry Chadwick, Frank Coady, Monica Ellison, Ernest Fiedler, William Kelly, Catherine LaCugna, Richard McBrien, James Mackey, William Thompson, Bishop [now Archbishop] Rowan Williams, and a number of Jesuit colleagues (Brendan Byrne, Jacques Dupuis, Kevin Flannery, Andrew Hamilton, Daniel Kendall, Louis Ladaria, J. Michael McDermott, John O'Donnell, Jared Wicks, and John Hickey Wright) for their comments, criticisms, and encouragement. Audiences of students and teachers in Australia, England, Ireland, Italy, Scotland, and the USA helped to sharpen some of the points. I wish to thank very warmly the McCarthy Family Foundation and, specifically, Eugene and Maureen McCarthy for their generous support during my initial work on this book. Lastly, I am particularly grateful to Hilary O'Shea for her help in seeing this book through to publication.

References to verses of the Bible follow the tradition adopted by the NRSV.

GO'C

Gregorian University, Rome  
June 1994

# Contents

<i>Abbreviations</i>	xvi
<b>1 Some Major Challenges</b>	<b>1</b>
History	2
Philosophy	4
Language	11
Content, Emphases, and Context	14
<b>2 The Jewish Matrix</b>	<b>21</b>
Five Titles	24
Two Closing Comments	42
<b>3 The Human History</b>	<b>44</b>
Some Preliminaries	44
Proclaimer of the Kingdom	54
Personal Authority	59
Son of Man	62
Self-Identity	66
Faced with Death	67
Conclusion	80
<b>4 The Resurrection</b>	<b>82</b>
The Claim	83
First Ground for the Claim: The Appearances	90
The Appearances Challenged	93
A Secondary Sign	100
Other Factors	101
The Resurrection as Revealing	103
Resurrection as Redemptive	110
God's Activity	112
<b>5 The Son of God</b>	<b>119</b>
Dating the Title	121
The Title's Meaning	130
Naming the Son of God	138

<b>6 Lord, Saviour, God, and Spirit</b>	<b>141</b>
Lord	141
Further Appropriations	145
Saviour and God	148
Spirit	151
Trinity	155
<b>7 To the First Council of Constantinople</b>	<b>158</b>
Four Queries	159
Ambiguities and Intimations	169
Divinity and Humanity	174
<b>8 Ephesus, Chalcedon, and Beyond</b>	<b>188</b>
The Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon	190
After Chalcedon	197
Into the Middle Ages	202
<b>9 Medieval and Modern Christology</b>	<b>206</b>
Thomas Aquinas	208
To the Reformation	212
The Background for Today	217
<b>10 Divine and Human</b>	<b>229</b>
Divinity	230
Humanity	234
Divine and Human	238
One Divine Person	242
Personal Pre-existence	248
Further Issues	255
<b>11 Faith, Holiness, and Virginal Conception</b>	<b>262</b>
The Faith of Jesus	262
The Sinlessness of Christ	280
The Grace of Christ	284
The Virginal Conception	286
<b>12 Redeemer</b>	<b>297</b>
The Human Need	298
Christ's Saving Work	300
Saved by Love	306

<b>13 Universal Redeemer</b>	<b>315</b>
The Redeemer of All	316
Grounds for a Universal Claim	321
The Salvation of the Non-evangelized	326
A Coda	328
<b>14 The Possibilities of Presence</b>	<b>334</b>
Chapters 2–13 on Christ’s Presence	334
A Philosophy of Presence	337
The Revealing and Saving Presence of Christ	343
Three Further Advantages	352
Conclusion	357
<i>Bibliography</i>	359
<i>Index of Names</i>	363
<i>Biblical Index</i>	375

# Abbreviations

- ABD D. N. Freedman (ed.), *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols (New York: Doubleday, 1992)
- DzH H. Denzinger and P. Hünermann (eds), *Enchiridion Symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum* (37th edn, Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1991)
- ND J. Neuner and J. Dupuis (eds), *The Christian Faith* (7th edn, Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2001)
- NJBC R. E. Brown, J. A. Fitzmyer, and R. E. Murphy (eds), *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1989)
- NRSV New Revised Standard Version
- par(r). and parallel(s) in other Gospel(s)
- TDNT G. Kittel and G. Friedrich (eds), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1964–76)
- Th. Inv.* K. Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, 23 vols (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961–92)
- TRE G. Krause and G. Müller (eds), *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, 36 vols (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1977–2004)

# 1

## Some Major Challenges

God brought forth the Word . . . as a root brings forth a shoot, a spring the river and the sun its beam.

(Tertullian, *Adversus Praxean*)

You preach to me God, born and dying, two thousand years ago, at the other end of the world, in some small town I know not where; and you tell me that all who have not believed in this mystery are damned.

(Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile*)

In the light of Christian faith, practice, and worship, that branch of theology called Christology reflects systematically on the person, being, and activity of Jesus of Nazareth (c.5 BC–c.AD 30). In seeking to clarify the essential truths about him, it investigates his person and being (who and what he was/is) and work (what he did/does). Was/is he both human and divine? If so, how is that possible and not a blatant contradiction in terms? Surely we cannot attribute to one and the same subject the attributes of being simultaneously finite (as a human being) and infinite (as Son of God)? Then, should we envisage his revealing and redeeming ‘work’ as having an impact not only on all men and women of all times and places, but also on the whole created cosmos? In any case, can we describe or even minimally explain that salvific ‘work’?

In facing and tackling these and other such questions, historical, philosophical, and linguistic considerations play a crucial role. They can be distinguished, if not finally separated.

## History

How do we know who Jesus was/is and what he did/does? Not only for those who believe in him, but also for those who do not give him their personal allegiance, clearly the first answer must be: we know him and know about him from human history and human experience of him.

The quest for a historical knowledge of Jesus will make us examine, at the very least, his background in the story of Israel, his earthly career, his influence on the origins of Christianity, and the subsequent development of christological thinking and teaching. Those who have attempted to write the history of anyone or, even more, their own history will recognize just how difficult it proves to express fully through a text any human life. To transcribe adequately the story of Jesus is an impossible dream. As John's Gospel observed, 'there are also many other things which Jesus did. If they were all to be recorded in detail, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written' (John 21: 25).

Nevertheless, we need to come up with some historical account of Jesus. Unless it is going to remain outrageously inadequate, any such account must attend not only to the events of his life and death to which we have access, but also to his antecedents in the history of Israel and to the response he evoked, both in the short term and in the long term, through his death, resurrection, and sending of the Holy Spirit. Hence, in pursuing the reality and meaning of Jesus' person, being, and work, we will examine some themes from Jewish history, from the origins of Christianity, and from the development of reflection and teaching about him.

As regards the 'things which Jesus did', let me note that he left no letters or other personal documents. The only time he was remembered as writing anything came when he 'wrote with his finger on the ground' (John 8: 6–8). Jesus did not bequeath to his followers any written instructions, and he lived in almost complete obscurity except for the brief period of his public ministry. According to the testimony provided by the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), that ministry could have lasted as little as a year or eighteen

months. John implies a period of at least two to three years. Even for the brief span of that ministry, much of the chronological sequence of events (except for the baptism of Jesus at the start and the passion at the end) is, by and large, irretrievably lost. The fact that, explicitly and for the most part, Jesus did not proclaim himself but the kingdom of God, as well as the fact that he left behind no personal papers, makes access to his interior life difficult. In any case, the Gospels rarely mention his motives or deal with his states of mind. These sources make it hard (but not impossible) to penetrate his interior life. But, they do allow us to reconstruct much of the message, activity, claims, and impact of Jesus in the final years of his life, as well as glimpsing every now and then his feelings and intentions.

Such non-Christian sources as the Roman writers Tacitus, Suetonius, and Pliny the Younger, the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (whose testimony suffers from later interpolations), and, later, the Cynic philosopher Lucian of Samosata and the Babylonian Talmud yield a little data about Jesus: he was put to death by crucifixion under the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate during the reign of the Emperor Tiberius; some Jewish leaders in Jerusalem were involved in the execution; his followers called him 'Christ' and regarded him as the divine founder of a new way of life.<sup>1</sup>

The letters of Paul of Tarsus, which were written between AD 50 and 64 (or 67) and hence before the four Gospels, provide some details: Jesus was born a Jew (Gal. 3: 16; Rom. 9: 5), a descendant of King David (Rom. 1: 3); he exercised a ministry to the people of Israel (Rom. 15: 8); he forbade divorce (1 Cor. 7: 10–11); he celebrated a 'last' supper 'on the night he was betrayed' (1 Cor. 11: 23–5); he died by crucifixion (Gal. 2: 20; 3: 1; 1 Cor. 1: 23; Phil. 2: 8); as risen from the dead, he appeared to Cephas (= Peter), 'the twelve', over 500 followers, James (a Christian leader in Jerusalem), and Paul himself (1 Cor. 15: 3–8; see 9: 1 and Gal. 1: 12, 16).

Other books of the New Testament occasionally allude to the story of Jesus. These fleeting references mainly concern his suffering and death (e.g., 1 Pet. 2: 24; Heb. 6: 6; 13: 12). For our knowledge of Jesus' life and work we are almost totally dependent on the Gospels.

<sup>1</sup> For details, see C. K. Barrett, *The New Testament Background: Selected Documents* (rev. edn, London: SPCK, 1987), 14–16, 277–9; J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, 3 vols (New York: Doubleday, 1991–2001), i. 56–111; J. Stevenson and W. H. Friend, *A New Eusebius* (London: SPCK, 1987), 1–3, 18–20, 128–30.

As regards what I have called ‘the response he evoked’, the history of Jesus includes not only the emergence of a new community with its scriptures but also all the different items that go to make up the whole Christian tradition: creeds and other official doctrines; liturgical worship in its great diversity; millions of lives which have taken their inspiration from Jesus (and, in particular, the lives of those who teach us by their shining, saintly example); preaching and theological reflection on Jesus (right down to modern scholarly works and documents produced by the World Council of Churches, the International Theological Commission, and official dialogues between Christian churches); private prayer and personal experience of Jesus; the art, literature, plays, and films that have come into existence around him. Let us acknowledge also the response he has evoked in Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and other non-Christians. Those who have volunteered an answer to the question ‘who do you say that I am?’ (Mark 8: 29) have included not only disciples committed to Jesus but also members of a wider public. Even though they did not or do not surrender fully to his spell, they too have wanted to say something about his reality and meaning for the world.

## Philosophy

Putting down this list of historical and experiential sources, in an attempt to summarize where we might look for answers to our questions about Jesus’ ‘being’ and ‘doing’ (including the responses he has evoked from the first century to the twenty-first), raises a whole range of questions of a more or less philosophical nature. What is the status of experiential knowledge? Can it supply any reliable information or evidence about Jesus? Where personal testimonies differ, whose experience counts? The whole Christian tradition about Jesus (and, for that matter, non-Christian traditions about him) can be seen as recording and interpreting various collective and individual experiences of Jesus. But, why privilege and emphasize certain voices and witnesses in that tradition over and above others? Why find normative and reliable guides in mainstream credal and liturgical texts, as well as in the conciliar teaching of Nicaea I (325),

Constantinople I (381), Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon (451), over and above what Arius (c.250–c.336), Apollinarius (c.310–c.390), Nestorius (d. c.451), and Eutyches (c.378–454) actually taught or were alleged to have taught?

Elsewhere I have explained what I hold about experience and its evidential status.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, I have suggested some guidelines for finding the (reliable and normative) Tradition (upper case) within the mass of traditions (lower case), as well as joining Hans-Georg Gadamer and others in recognizing traditional data as an indispensable help for interpreting the biblical texts.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, present experience and past (Christian) tradition can never justify refusing to return to the Gospels themselves. What do we know about Jesus from these sources? What level of certainty do we have in our historical knowledge of Jesus? How much do we need to know about him to support our Christian faith and theology (including Christology)? Or, in other words, as believers and theologians what is the nature of our dependence on the historical knowledge of Jesus conveyed primarily through the Gospels?

Some answers here have taken extreme forms. Although of course they could not face these issues in a modern sense, from the second to the fourth centuries the authors of the apocryphal, non-canonical gospels responded in a maximalist fashion: they often embroidered and supplemented, as well as revising, what the canonical Gospels tell us of Jesus' birth, life, teaching, death, and resurrection. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century 'lives' of Jesus, not to mention sermons and meditations on the Gospels, have encouraged a similar tendency to 'know' far too much about the dating and details of Jesus' career, as well as about his motivation, feelings, and whole interior life. Classic films about Jesus like Franco Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth* have also catered to the desire to 'know' too much about the history of Jesus. Those who in such ways 'enlarge' our available historical knowledge

<sup>2</sup> See G. O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993), 108–19, 168–69; W. P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); E. T. Charry, 'Experience', in J. Webster, K. Tanner, and I. Torrance (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 413–31; and C. F. Davis, *The Evidential Value of Religious Experience* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> See O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology* (Eugene, Oreg.: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 208–24, 249–59.

of Jesus can finish up partially depending (in their faith and theology) on what they themselves have produced.

At the other extreme from the maximalists are such writers as Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–81), Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55), and Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976), who have given minimalist answers to the historical questions about Jesus. Let us examine them in a counter-chronological order.

As a historian Bultmann was by no means a thoroughgoing sceptic. In *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (German original 1921), *Jesus and the Word* (German original 1926), and *Theology of the New Testament* (German original 1948 and 1953),<sup>4</sup> he accepted quite a range of conclusions about the actual life of Jesus. It was as believer and theologian that Bultmann showed himself a radical reductionist, claiming that we neither can nor should found our Christian faith and theology on any supposedly ‘objective’ basis in history—apart from one objectively historical event, the crucifixion. We need do no more than affirm the *dass*, the mere fact that Jesus existed and was crucified, without enquiring about the *was*, what Jesus was in his own history. Bultmann argued that he was supported by Paul and John, who both present us with the essential ‘kerygma’ without entering into the historical detail that we find in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Apropos of Paul, Bultmann wrote:

Paul proclaims the incarnate, crucified and risen Lord; that is, his kerygma requires only the ‘that’ of the life of Jesus and the fact of his crucifixion. He does not hold before his hearer’s eyes a portrait of Jesus the human person, apart from the cross (Gal. 3: 1), and the cross is not regarded from a biographical standpoint but as saving event. The obedience and self-emptying of Christ of which he speaks (Phil. 2: 6–9; Rom. 15: 3; 2 Cor. 8: 9) are attitudes of the pre-existent and not of the historical Jesus... the decisive thing is simply the ‘that’.<sup>5</sup>

But, what would a simple ‘that’ mean apart from the ‘what’? Jesus would be reduced to mere cipher. Why should we find the saving

<sup>4</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. J. Marsh (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963); id., *Jesus and the Word*, trans. L. P. Smith and E. H. Lantero (New York: Scribner, 1958); id., *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. K. Grobel, 2 vols (London: SCM Press, 1956–8). See also id., ‘The Primitive Christian Kerygma and the Historical Jesus’, in C. Braaten and R. Harrisville (eds), *The Historical Jesus and the Kerygmatic Christ* (New York: Abingdon, 1964), 15–42.

<sup>5</sup> Id., ‘The Primitive Christian Kerygma’, 20.

event in the crucifixion of someone about whom we refuse as believers and theologians to ‘know’ anything further? If no historical detail of Jesus’ story matters other than his sheer existence and crucifixion, why should we not look for the saving event in one of the thousands of others who died at the hands of the Romans by this sadistic form of execution?

As regards Paul, we have seen above how such details about Jesus as his Jewishness and his ministry to Israel do matter to the apostle. Paul’s kerygmatic message goes beyond the mere crucifixion of Jesus to include his last supper (1 Cor. 11: 23–5), his burial, and his appearances to Cephas and the twelve (1 Cor. 15: 3–5). As regards its concern to say something about Jesus’ human story, John’s Gospel is considerably more interested in historical detail than Bultmann would like to admit. Where the Synoptic Gospels seemingly present the ministry as lasting for about a year and including only one (final) journey to Jerusalem, John corrects that impression by reporting that Jesus was active during three Passover feasts, attending two of them in Jerusalem (John 2: 13; 6: 4; 11: 55), and making four journeys there (John 2: 13; 5: 1; 7: 10; 12: 12). Such a prolonged exposure to the Jerusalem public explains more plausibly the hostility towards Jesus shown by the authorities in the capital—something that belongs to John’s presentation of Jesus’ final destiny. This is just one example among many of how the ‘what’ matters to John, and not merely the sheer ‘that’ of Jesus’ crucifixion.

After the criticisms mounted by Ernst Käsemann and others, Bultmann’s veto against detail from Jesus’ human history being relevant for proclamation, faith, and theology has been widely ignored. The wonder is that this veto on historical knowledge was taken so seriously by so many and for so long.<sup>6</sup>

Kierkegaard’s classic reduction of the historical knowledge required for faith was phrased as follows: ‘if the contemporary generation had left nothing behind them but these words: “We have believed that in such and such a year God has appeared among us in the humble figure of a servant, that he lived and taught in our

<sup>6</sup> See J. S. Kselman and B. D. Witherup, ‘Modern New Testament Criticism’, *NJBC*, 1137–42. For the dependence of Christian faith on history and historical knowledge, see O’Collins, *Easter Faith* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2003), 25–50.

community, and finally died,” it would be more than enough.<sup>7</sup> Here the incarnation (‘God has appeared among us’) and its hidden character (‘in the humble figure of a servant’) bulk large. The crucifixion, not to mention the miracles of Jesus, his resurrection, and the sending of the Holy Spirit, is passed over in silence. So too are any details about Jesus’ teaching; it is simply stated that he ‘taught in our community’. Kierkegaard’s reductionism differs from Bultmann’s in that it is phrased hypothetically and theoretically (‘if’). In fact, the contemporary generation (the eyewitnesses and their associates) has left us through the evangelists much more than what Kierkegaard proposes. Here, as elsewhere, it seems more profitable to reflect on what we have actually received rather than on what we might possibly have received under different circumstances. In brief, let us begin from matters of fact, rather than from matters of principle and possible alternate scenarios.

Lessing’s critique of the role (or rather non-role) of historical knowledge took a general, two-pronged form: ‘If no historical truth can be demonstrated, then nothing can be demonstrated by means of historical truths . . . Accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason.’<sup>8</sup> Against this, one can very well argue that, although they cannot be demonstrated by mathematical calculations, repeated scientific experiments, or philosophical logic, historical truths can certainly be established beyond any reasonable doubt. Mathematical calculations cannot demonstrate the existence and career of Alexander the Great in the fourth century BC. But, the converging historical evidence would make it absurd to deny that he lived to change the political and cultural face of the Middle East. We cannot ‘run the film backwards’ to regain contact with the past by literally reconstructing and repeating the assassination of Julius Caesar in the first century BC or the crucifixion of Jesus almost a hundred years later. Such historical events cannot be re-enacted in the way we can endlessly repeat scientific experiments in a laboratory. But, once

<sup>7</sup> S. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. D. F. Swenson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1936), 87. Just as in the case of Bultmann, I do not intend to develop fully Kierkegaard’s position. In the case of both writers, I use them only to illustrate a minimalist tendency, while granting that there is much more to their thought than what is indicated here.

<sup>8</sup> G. E. Lessing, *Theological Writings*, selected and trans. H. Chadwick (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1967), 53.

again only the lunatic fringe would cast doubt on these two violent deaths. A priori logic cannot demonstrate the existence of St Augustine of Hippo (354–430). But, to deny his existence and massive impact on subsequent European thought and culture would be to exclude yourself from normal academic discussion about the history of Western ideas. The available data let us know a great deal that went on in the past, including the distant past, even if—from the nature of the case—we cannot (and, in fact, should not try to) demonstrate our conclusions along the lines appropriate to mathematics, the natural sciences, and philosophy. There are very many historically certain truths from which we can argue and draw conclusions.

The main thrust of Lessing's case comes, however, in his second assertion: 'accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason.' Even if we know with certainty many historical truths, they always remain contingent or accidental. These historical events, the truth of which we have learned and established, neither had to be at all nor had to be precisely the way they were. In principle, things could have gone differently in the life and career of Alexander the Great, Augustine, Jesus, and Julius Caesar. As such, historical truths do not have the status of necessary, universal truths of reason, nor can they work to demonstrate such truths of reason.

But, is that so tragic? In terms of this study in Christology, is it a fatal admission to grant that our knowledge of Jesus' career does not rise 'above' the level of contingent truths? Strictly speaking, he could have done, said, and suffered different things. Only someone like Lessing who was/is bewitched by the pursuit of necessary, universal truths of reason would deplore this (historical) situation. In the strictest sense of the word, 'necessary truths of reason' are tautologies, mathematical truths, and other a priori deductions that are in principle true always and everywhere without needing the support of any empirical evidence. But, how many people would base their lives on such truths? Historical experience and contingent truths have a power to shape and change human existence in a way never enjoyed by Lessing's timeless, universal truths of reason. In particular, 'accidental' truths from the story of Jesus and his most heroic followers have played a crucial role for millions of Christians. They have looked at the life of Jesus and the lives of his more saintly disciples and found themselves awed, moved, and changed. Both within Christianity and beyond, the concreteness of history repeatedly proves far more persuasive than any necessary truths of reason.

In the end, however, Lessing's classic assertion could be usefully modified and applied in this book. For Christology we need both the data and truths of history and the help and truths of philosophical reason. Apropos of our empirical knowledge of the world, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) observed: 'thoughts without content [= empirical content] are empty; intuitions [= experiences?] without concepts are blind.'<sup>9</sup> This remark might be adapted to read: 'metaphysical thoughts without empirical historical content are empty; historical experiences without philosophical concepts are blind.' Or perhaps it is better not to risk doing violence to the views of either Lessing or Kant and simply to point out that Christology requires both some *historically* credible information and some *philosophical* structure. From the second century, Christology has rightly drawn on metaphysical reflection, as well as historical experience.

We have just seen how philosophical considerations necessarily turn up when Christology raises (1) questions of hermeneutics (the role of tradition in interpretation) and questions of epistemology, both (2) the evidential status of experience and (3) the dependence of Christian faith upon historical knowledge. Yet, the contribution of philosophy (as a distinct discipline) to theology in general and to Christology in particular has gone beyond these three areas.

Where historical claims are tested primarily by the way they correspond or fail to correspond to the available evidence, philosophical clarification comes by testing the coherence of some belief in the light of our most general principles (e.g., those which concern the nature of human and divine existence). Is it, for example, logically consistent for someone to be simultaneously fully human and fully divine? If we cannot positively justify this conceptually, can we at least show that it is not manifestly impossible? Or is this simply as impossible and blatantly inconsistent as calling someone a married bachelor? To reach a reasoned position here one needs to clarify the notions of humanity and divinity. What counts as being, in the strict sense of the word, human and/or divine? What do a human nature and a divine nature mean and entail? How could one person be at the same time fully human and truly divine? What does personhood mean?

This last paragraph illustrates the role of philosophy in clarifying concepts and testing possibilities. It is not philosophy's task to say

<sup>9</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. P. Guyer and A. W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 193–4.

whether some possibility (e.g., a person who is simultaneously fully human and truly divine) has been actualized in history. Philosophy comes into play in producing concepts that have a certain clarity, examining whether some claims are coherent, and judging whether some claims are incoherent to the point of impossibility.

My examples above come from questions about the person and being of Christ. Philosophy has its role also in clarifying concepts and testing coherent possibilities that concern Christ's redemptive 'doing'. How could and does redemption work? What are the appropriate terms to use here and what could they mean? Victory? Liberation? Sacrifice? Expiation? Transforming love? What does it mean to speak of Christ's representation? How could one person represent the whole human race and prove the cause of eternal salvation for all men and women everywhere?

## Language

Traditionally, the redemptive 'doing' of Christ has been expressed largely through such biblical terms as victory, expiation, and love, which have been more or (often) less satisfactorily explicated. Much biblical language about Christ's doing and being has been strongly symbolic: he is the bread of life, the Good Shepherd, the light of the world, the vine, the Suffering Servant, the head of the body, or the last Adam. At times the symbolism can be subtler and less obtrusive as when he is called Lord, Mediator, Messiah, Redeemer, Saviour, Son of God, Son of man, or Word. The primary, biblical language of Christology is analogical (pointing to similarities and correspondences), metaphorical (using language in an extended, non-literal way), and symbolic (pointing to something perceptible that represents and embodies something else). The post-biblical language has often been less conspicuously symbolic (e.g., one divine person in two natures, *the* symbol of the Father, the second person of the Trinity, or the Pantocrator), but not always so (e.g., the Sacred Heart).

To recall such terms and titles is to suggest the difficult question of the function, limits, and interpretation of religious language. How far can human language (and, for that matter, human thinking) go in

expressing Christ, God, and other-worldly realities? In religious worship, practice, and reflection, language gets used in non-literal, extended, or special ways. We may speak metaphorically, applying such common terms as bread, light, lamb, shepherd, and priest to Christ. He is the bread of life, the light of the world, and the lamb of God. He is both like and unlike the bread, light, lambs, shepherds, and priests of our human experience. His own symbolic language about a lost coin, a lost sheep, and a lost son (Luke 15: 3–32) ‘represents’ and perceptibly expresses truths about the invisible God and the divine designs in our regard. As the Book of Exodus tells the story, the crossing of the Red Sea and the making of the Sinai covenant, the roles of Pharaoh and Moses, and the water and manna in the desert work, respectively, as actions, persons, and things that symbolize God’s saving purposes. Putting together various particular symbols, the whole Exodus narrative functions as a symbolic story, in which basic truths about God and our existence vis-à-vis God get imaginatively expressed. We are guided towards the ultimate realities not only by abstract concepts but also, and even more, by symbolic language.<sup>10</sup>

In Christology, as in other branches of theology, we explore the meaning and test the *truth* of various religious claims in which history, philosophy, language, or discipleship and worship may be, respectively, more to the fore. That can make a significant difference. In the area of religious claims of a *historical* nature, truth will be often a matter of correspondence to the available data. When the claims are of a rather *philosophical* nature, coherence may be the primary test. In the case of linguistic claims, the truth quality of the language used will be judged by its *disclosive*, illuminating success. For committed disciples, truth is *practical* and something to be done faithfully; for worshippers, God is *the Truth* to be praised and adored. Thus, truth comes across, respectively, as corresponding, cohering, disclosing, or to be practised and adored.

In this context one should also note how the critical appropriation of tradition and its wisdom also leads to knowing and interpreting truth. Chapters 9 and 14, in particular, will have more to say on this

<sup>10</sup> On religious language, see W. P. Alston, *Divine Nature and Human Language: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989); J. M. Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985); and O’Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, 24–5, 29–30, 98–107.

issue, to which, as we recognized above, Gadamer has contributed much.<sup>11</sup>

Talk about truth should not, however, be allowed to encourage a facile optimism in Christology or in the rest of theology. To what extent can history, philosophy, language, and tradition really show us how things are with Christ, God, and the divine–human relationship? We should never claim to know or say too much. Of course, there remains the task of clarifying and making sense of things. But, at our peril we forget that in Christology, as in other branches of theology, we are dealing with mystery, the mystery of the ineffable God and, for that matter, the corresponding mystery of the human condition. In particular, we should never forget the indirect, analogical, metaphorical, and symbolic character of our biblical, liturgical, and theological language about God. As developed in Eastern Christianity, apophatic (‘negative’) theology reminds us of the inadequacy of all attempts to approach the divine mystery. Any affirmation about God has to be qualified with a corresponding negation and with the recognition that God infinitely surpasses our human categories. The Western tradition of ‘negative’ theology insists that we can say more what God is not than what God really is. As the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) pointed out, any similarity between the Creator and creatures is characterized by an even greater dissimilarity (see DzH 806; ND 320). There exists an infinite difference between saying ‘God is’ and ‘creatures are.’<sup>12</sup>

Add too the fact that Christians do not hold that mere language can ever be rich enough to express everything about Jesus Christ, or at least everything that they wish to express about who he is and what he has done. Their primary tradition of understanding and interpreting him consists in various styles of life, commitment towards those in need, the symbolic gestures of public worship, music, painting, sculpture, architecture, and other non-verbal forms of communication. Technical, christological language has its undoubted point and purpose. But, Christian faith has more to express about Jesus as

<sup>11</sup> See H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall (London: Sheed & Ward, 1989).

<sup>12</sup> On the role of ‘negative theology’ in Islam and Judaism, as well as in Christianity, see M. Idel and B. McGinn (eds), *Mystical Union in Judaism, Christianity and Islam: An Ecumenical Dialogue* (New York: Continuum, 1996); see also M. A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

Son of God and Saviour of the world than can be contained in words, even in the most carefully chiselled theological language.<sup>13</sup>

## Content, Emphases, and Context

Thus far this introductory chapter has been limited to more formal considerations about (1) the respective roles and interplay of history, philosophy, language, and tradition in elaborating Christology and (2) the need to remember the element of mystery and the limits of language. What of the content of this book, its emphases, major themes, and context?

The next chapter will examine some aspects of the Jewish matrix of Jesus' life, and some themes in the Old Testament Scriptures that fed into New Testament thinking about him. Then we will focus on significant points in the history of Jesus (Chapter 3), before moving to his resurrection (Chapter 4) and the Christ preached by Paul and early Christianity (Chapters 5 and 6).

During the first centuries of the Church's existence, various heresies and then conciliar responses to these heresies served to develop some clarity about the being of Christ. By the end of the first century, two opposite false tendencies had already emerged to mark out for all time the possible extreme positions. On the one hand, the Ebionites, an umbrella name for various groups of Jewish Christians, considered Jesus to be no more than the human son of Mary and Joseph, a mere man on whom the Spirit descended at baptism. This was to assimilate Christ so much to us that he too would need redemption and could not truly function as 'the Saviour of the world' (John 4: 42). On the other hand, the early heresy of Docetism held that the Son of God merely appeared to be a human being. Christ's corporeal reality was considered heavenly or else a body only in appearance, with someone else, such as Simon of Cyrene, suffering in his place. The Docetic heresy, to the extent that it separated Christ from the human race,

<sup>13</sup> Here one might distinguish the 'showing' of tradition (in all its visual, verbal, and musical forms) from the 'telling' of theology. The former enjoys a primacy over the second-order language of theological clarification. See O'Collins, *Jesus Our Redeemer: A Christian Approach to Salvation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 2–3.

made him irrelevant for our salvation. The Johannine literature insisted against Docetist tendencies that Christ had truly ‘come in the flesh’ (1 John 4: 1–3; 2 John 7) and against any Ebionite tendencies that he was truly divine Lord (John 1: 1; 20: 28).

Chapters 7 and 8 will pick up the trail of the ‘dogmatic’ Christ (or Christ of Christian doctrine) from the end of the first century through to the ninth century and the end of the iconoclastic movement. Those centuries saw the development of the classic, orthodox language about the being of Christ, his one person existing in two natures. Chapter 9 will recall some important christological themes that emerged after the patristic age. Chapters 10 and 11 will build on the biblical and historical material provided in the previous chapters to respond systematically to key questions about Christ’s humanity, divinity, personhood, pre-existence, virginal conception, sinlessness, knowledge, and faith.

Chapter 12 will switch to the ‘doing’ of Christ. What has he done for our salvation? How did/does he save us? What does he save us from and for? Reflection on his redeeming work inevitably raises the issue of the universal scope of his mediation (Chapter 13). Is Christ *the* revealer and redeemer for the whole human race? If so, can we relate him to the various mediators and ways of salvation proposed by non-Christian religions? The concluding chapter will use the theme of presence to draw together what has been expounded about the being, person, and doing of Christ.

To help readers tune into my text from the start, it seems good to come clean about some emphases and distinctions. The centrality of the paschal mystery will run like a leitmotif through this book. Beyond question, there are other options. ‘Earlier’ christological mysteries (the creation, the history of Israel, the incarnation, or the life of Jesus culminating in his death on the cross) could serve to organize one’s reflections. So too could the ‘later’ mysteries (the Church guided by Christ’s Spirit until his future coming in glory). Nevertheless, *historical* and *liturgical* considerations have persuaded me to make the resurrection of the crucified Jesus (with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit) the central focus. Historically, it was faith in and the proclamation of the paschal mystery that set the Christian movement going and eventually led to the parting of the ways between the Church and the Synagogue. Second, from the outset the public worship of Christians has maintained the conviction that

believers share sacramentally both in the dying and rising of Christ and in the correlative gift of the Holy Spirit (e.g., Rom. 6: 3–11; 1 Cor. 6: 11; 11: 23–6; 2 Cor. 1: 22). If ‘the law of prayer establishes the law of belief’ (DzH 246), the law of christological belief should follow the law of liturgical prayer in centring everything on the paschal mystery. *Dei Verbum*, the 1965 Constitution on Divine Revelation from the Second Vatican Council (1962–5), followed the lead of the previously promulgated Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (1963) by acknowledging the resurrection of the crucified Jesus (with the gift of the Spirit) as the crowning-point of the divine self-revelation (*Dei Verbum*, 4). Given the way God’s ‘economy’ of revelation is closely integrated with the history of salvation (ibid. 2), the paschal mystery is simultaneously the climax of God’s salvific and revelatory self-communication in Christ. Hence, the resurrection of the crucified Jesus should be the primary interpretative key for Christology.

Like some other theologians, I have long harboured the dream of one day producing a Christology whose standard and clarity no one could question. Such an unquestionable standard is an impossible dream, above all because Jesus will never find a theologian worthy of him. My clarity can, nevertheless, be helped along by a few distinctions.

The fact of having announced that this book will take shape from Jesus’ background and history is tantamount to declaring for a Christology ‘from below’—that is to say, a Christology that develops from an examination of Christ’s human history, especially as prepared in the Old Testament and presented by the Synoptic Gospels (those of Matthew, Mark, and Luke). This Christology has sometimes been called Antiochene, because the school of Antioch, shaped by the martyred St Lucian of Antioch (d. 312), emphasized the full humanity of Christ as does the modern Christology ‘from below’. The challenge for this style of Christology is suggested by a further name for it, ‘ascending’. How could a human life be and be shown to be that of the Son of God? How could humanity be united with divinity in Christ?

Any Christology ‘from below’ implies its counterpart, a Christology ‘from above’, the kind of Christology developed from the theme of the pre-existent Logos or Son of God who descends into our world (John 1: 14). This ‘descending’ Christology is sometimes called Alexandrian, because the style of theology that began in Alexandria as a catechetical school towards the end of the second century AD focused on the eternal Word being made flesh and the divine nature of the

incarnate Christ. The serious challenge for this Christology ‘from above’ can be expressed by the question: how could the eternal Word of God take on a genuinely and fully human way of acting?

As will emerge in the course of this book, Christologies ‘from below’ and ‘from above’ complement each other. Although the Synoptic Gospels suggest an approach ‘from below’, they do not lack such divine elements ‘from above’ as the kingdom of God breaking into the world. Although John may begin by focusing on the Word who comes ‘from above’, that Gospel by no means lacks human elements ‘from below’—not least in its realistic account of Jesus’ death. In Christology, we need both approaches—‘from above’ and ‘from below’—just as the whole Church has been enduringly enriched by the schools of both Alexandria and Antioch.

Talk of a ‘Christology’ from below or above refers to our knowledge and interpretation (‘logos’)—the way we move epistemologically from Christ’s humanity to his divinity or vice versa. As such, this talk does not refer directly to Christ’s order of being—to what happened ontologically when the Word ‘descended’ by ‘being made flesh’, or when Christ’s humanity ‘ascended’ towards God by being assumed into a hypostatic union with the Word of God. Yet, what happened in the order of being has to be presented, of course, to justify what theologians claim to know and want to say.

Another point to be underlined is that Christologies ‘from above’ and ‘from below’ do not by any means necessarily coincide with ‘high’ and ‘low’ Christologies. As its name suggests, a genuine Christology ‘from above’ begins from the divinity of Christ but it will go on to do justice to his humanity. Vice versa, a true Christology ‘from below’ begins from the humanity of Christ but it will go on to do justice to his divinity.

As such, a ‘high’ Christology acknowledges the divinity of Christ, but the term itself does not indicate what or how much is done to incorporate into a total picture the full humanity of Christ. An early member of the Alexandrian school, Clement of Alexandria (c.150–c.215), developed a high Christology of the pre-existent and incarnate Logos, but could say things that cast doubt on Christ’s genuine humanity. In his *Stromateis* he claimed that Jesus merely went through the motions of eating and drinking. He had no need to take physical nourishment (6. 9). A high Christology may at times reveal such Docetic tendencies, which fail to do justice to Christ being fully and genuinely human.

As the term gets used, a ‘low’ Christology emphasizes one-sidedly the human life of Christ and excludes anything like an appropriate recognition of his divinity. Historically, low Christologies have taken the form of holding that the power of God came upon the man Jesus and adopted him at his baptism or at his resurrection. Often this means misinterpreting the story of Jesus’ baptism, the use of Psalm 2: 7 in Acts 13: 33, or Paul’s traditional language about Jesus being ‘designated’ Son of God (Rom. 1: 4). We will return to these points in Chapter 5.

Whether or not we care to use the distinction high/low Christology, this distinction should not be confused with explicit/implicit Christology. As we shall see, the Synoptic Gospels leave us largely with an implicit Christology—quite different from the explicit statements about Jesus’ being and doing we come across repeatedly in John’s Gospel. Nevertheless, as we shall also see, the implications of what we find in the Synoptics take us beyond any mere ‘low’ Christology. To speak of an ‘implicit’ claim refers to the way in which the claim is expressed, and says nothing whatsoever about the ‘lofty’ or ‘lowly’ status of the claim. Exalted claims can also be expressed implicitly.

A further caution. A high or low Christology should not be immediately attributed to those who note the distinction between ‘high’ titles for Jesus (e.g., Logos and Son of God) and ‘low’ titles (e.g., Son of David and Messiah). The former titles point to the eternal, divine side of things, the latter to the historical, human side. Merely attending to the ‘high’ or ‘low’ character of many New Testament titles (well over 100) for Jesus in no way automatically puts one in the camp of either high or low Christology.

Moreover, the ‘low’ titles, while they indicate the earthly functions and at times the humiliation of Jesus, do not in any way exclude all reference to divine transcendence. When Acts calls Jesus ‘Servant’, it thinks of him as ‘Servant of God’ (Acts 3: 13, 26; 4: 27, 30). Right in the Old Testament itself ‘Son of David’ also enjoys its divine reference: by being enthroned on Zion where *God dwells* and by officiating in the Temple where God likewise dwells, the Davidic priest-king visibly presents God. In short, the ‘low’ titles, as well as the ‘high’ titles, are all related to God. One should also add that some of the ‘high’ titles are not merely high. ‘Son of God’, for instance, while often pointing to the divine, eternal side of Jesus, is not in any way incompatible with talk about his earthly humiliation and death (e.g., Rom. 8: 32).

Finally, my impulse is to dismiss a further distinction, but reference to it may help the cause of clarity: ontological versus (merely) functional Christologies. An ontological Christology is concerned with who and what Jesus is in himself, whereas a functional Christology focuses on his saving work for us and thus largely coincides with soteriology, or Christ's redemptive activity for human beings and their world. Indisputably, christological thinking in the New Testament is somewhat more functional than ontological, while the early centuries of Christianity took a more ontological approach that culminated in Chalcedon's teaching about Christ's one person in two natures. Nevertheless, in Christology it would be as mistaken to ignore all the implicit (and sometimes explicit) ontological affirmations in the New Testament as to deny the strong soteriological interests of the Fathers of the Church and the early councils.

As regards a functional Christology, Philip Melancthon (1497–1560) classically stated this option: 'to know Christ means to know his benefits, and not . . . to reflect upon his natures and the modes of his incarnation.'<sup>14</sup> In various ways Bultmann, Paul Tillich (1886–1965), and others have developed a functional, soteriological approach to Christology. Yet, it is doubtful that any of them can propose a purely functional Christology, one which attends only to Christ's saving activity on our behalf and refuses to raise, explicitly or implicitly, any ontological questions whatsoever about who and what he is in himself. According to a classical axiom, 'action follows being' (*agere sequitur esse*). To reflect on the activity of Christ, while denying or at least refraining from all knowledge of his being, would be to attempt the impossible. In general, recent Western theology has tried to end any divorce between soteriology and Christology, between systematic reflection on Christ's doing and such reflection on his being.

Lastly, there is the question of context. Clearly, right from its opening pages, this book has situated itself primarily in an academic context. In the light of the Scriptures and later Christian documents, as well as other texts of a historical, philosophical, or liturgical nature,

<sup>14</sup> P. Melancthon, *Loci communes theologici*, trans. L. J. Satre and W. Pauck, in W. Pauck (ed.), *Melancthon and Bucer*, Library of Christian Classics, 19 (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster Press, 1969), 21–2. To identify Melancthon as a pure functionalist seems dubious. J. Macquarrie associates him with Martin Luther in producing a Christology 'based on soteriology rather than on metaphysics' (*Jesus Christ in Modern Thought* (London: SCM Press, 1990), 171; see also 296, 332).

it will try to understand and interpret the truth about Jesus' being and doing. Christologies have been valuably developed, however, in two further contexts: a practical and a liturgical one. A Christology can take as its favoured context the worldwide situation of massive injustice, hunger, and deprivation. Such a Christology with and for the poor makes the search for justice and liberation focus its exploration of who Jesus is and what he does. A third possibility is to develop Christology in a context of liturgical worship. Here the primary focus is not on the quest for meaning and truth (first context) nor on the search for justice (second context) but rather on the celebration of the infinite divine beauty through public prayer.

The academic context will inevitably bulk large in this book. But, I will try to keep in mind the practical and liturgical concerns that have fed other styles of Christologies. Searching for truth need not mean ignoring the cause of justice and the celebration of beauty. It is questionable whether academic dialogue alone gives a privileged access to truth in theology and similar disciplines. It is certainly false to say that such dialogue provides the *only* access to truth in theology.

Enough has been said to indicate how this book will take shape. Let me now turn to the Jewish roots for the New Testament's presentation of Jesus Christ.

# 2

## The Jewish Matrix

The only-begotten Word, who is always present with the human race, united and mingled with his handiwork . . . is Jesus Christ our Lord.

(Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*)

To succumb to a typically Christian temptation and dismiss the Old Testament Scriptures as ‘merely’ recording a historical phase in God’s pedagogy would be to risk losing, among other things, much of what the New Testament meant and means in presenting Jesus. To put this positively, the Old Testament is essential for grasping both the matrix of Jesus’ life and what the New Testament witnesses have to say about him. As a Christian I use the terminology of Old Testament and New Testament. Here ‘old’ is understood as good and does not imply any ‘supersessionism’, or the view that the New Testament has rendered obsolete, replaced, and so ‘superseded’ the Old Testament.

Hans Hübner has rightly insisted on the way in which the first Christians fashioned their proclamation and interpretation of Jesus largely by putting together two elements: on the one hand, their experience of events in which Jesus was the central protagonist and, on the other hand, the ready-made images and concepts they found to be relevant and illuminating in their inherited Scriptures.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See H. Hübner, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 3 vols (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990–5), vol. i. For an integral Christology based on the Old and New Testaments, see J. A. Fitzmyer, *Scripture and Christology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986).

To articulate their convictions about the identity of Jesus and his role in fulfilling the divine purposes, they depended upon the ideas, beliefs, and expectations of Judaism which we primarily come across in the Old Testament, including the so-called ‘Apocrypha’—books written in Greek and Hebrew mostly after 200 BC included in the Septuagint (ancient Greek version of the Scriptures)—printed in Roman Catholic bibles, but at times still omitted from other bibles.<sup>2</sup>

In the last paragraph I spoke of the Old Testament as the major source providing the first Christians with their theological language and concepts. But, the images and language they used are also illuminated secondarily by other sources from the world around them—for example, the non-canonical Jewish pseudepigrapha (non-canonical works that pre-date Christianity, like the Book of Enoch), the writings from Qumran, the Letter of Aristeas, fragments from Hellenistic-Jewish authors, the works of Philo (c.25 BC–AD 40) and Josephus (c.AD 37–post-100), and the oral rabbinic traditions which were recorded in the Palestinian and the Babylonian Talmud of the fourth and fifth centuries AD, respectively, and some of which may go back to the time of Jesus or even earlier. Middle Eastern writings, Graeco-Roman thought, and non-canonical literature from Hellenistic Judaism can at times throw light on New Testament ideas. But, the major sources from which the first Christians and authors drew their theological notions are clearly the Old Testament Scriptures. To descend to the obvious, this is mirrored by the fact that well over 90 per cent of the clear quotations and vaguer allusions in the New Testament come from the Old Testament books of pre-Christian Judaism. Relatively few come from such pseudepigrapha as Enoch and other non-biblical sources.

Those who wish to appreciate what the New Testament meant about Jesus need to examine the inherited Scriptures which the first Christians quarried for language to press into christological service. Their sacred texts, known now as the books of the Old Testament,

<sup>2</sup> *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) gives full details of the difference between the biblical canons recognized by Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Jews, and Protestants (pp. xxi–xxiii, xxv–xxvi). See also J. H. Charlesworth, ‘Apocrypha: Old Testament Apocrypha’, *ABD*, i. 292–4; J. A. Sanders, ‘Canon’, *ibid.* 837–52.

were indispensable for interpreting their experience of Jesus. A Christology that ignores or plays down the Old Testament can only be radically deficient. Something essential will be missing from our account of Jesus, if we ignore his Jewish roots and those of his first followers. The Old Testament Scriptures continue to play their crucial role in interpreting any contemporary faith in and experience of Jesus.

Before examining Old Testament images and concepts that fed into the New Testament interpretation of Jesus' being and doing, it seems important to recall three points. First, affected by the destruction of the Davidic dynasty, the Babylonian exile, later foreign domination, and other watersheds, the use and meaning of Old Testament religious themes often remained fluid and not very sharply defined. Over the centuries, in response to new circumstances, key themes could be interpreted, reinterpreted, emphasized, and marginalized. Hence, one cannot speak, for example, of clear-cut messianic 'titles' (titles for some anointed and promised deliverer) emerging and simply holding their ground in the Old Testament. Second, when roughly etched Old Testament images and designations were applied to Jesus, they could be radically changed in the process. We will see this at once in the case of 'Christ', a central Christian designation for Jesus which fairly quickly became simply his second name.

Third, interpreting his person and work through Old Testament themes began with Jesus himself. We will see more of this in the next chapter. Here one example should suffice: that of relating Jesus to the person of King David and messianic hopes linked to the name of David. In Mark's Gospel Jesus invokes David to justify the conduct of his own disciples (2: 23–8). A blind beggar twice calls Jesus 'Son of David' (Mark 10: 46–52). On the occasion of a spectacular entry into Jerusalem, Jesus is associated with David by the crowd (Mark 11: 10). When teaching in the Temple, Jesus argues, on the basis of Psalm 110: 1, that the Messiah, even if descended from David, is superior to him (Mark 12: 35–7). Unless one wishes to argue that all this Davidic material derives from the Christian, pre-gospel tradition or even from the evangelist himself, one should agree that the interpretation of Jesus' person and work by aligning him with David began historically in the very ministry of Jesus himself.

## Five Titles

To illustrate the essential contribution of the Old Testament to the New Testament christological message, let me sample a number of descriptive titles or designations for Jesus: as Christ, High Priest, Last Adam, Wisdom, and Word.

### Christ

The oldest Christian document shows us Paul repeatedly calling Jesus ‘Christ’ in a way that suggests that within twenty years of Jesus’ death and resurrection this comprehensive title for Jesus’ identity and powers was simply taken for granted by Paul and his readers, had almost lost its original significance, and was more or less his second (personal) name (1 Thess. 1: 1, 3; 5: 23, 28).<sup>3</sup> In a notable pre-Pauline formulation, which also goes back to the earliest years of Christianity, ‘Christ’ seems already to have lost much of its titular significance (or messianic expectations) and to be functioning largely as an alternative name for Jesus (1 Cor. 15: 3). In his letters Paul uses ‘Christ’ 270 times but never considers it necessary to argue explicitly that Jesus is ‘the Christ’ whom Israel expected.

The title goes back to the Septuagintal ‘Christos’ and its Greek rendering of the Hebrew *mashiah* or ‘anointed one’. By a ritual act of anointing, Old Testament kings (and monarchs in ancient and other cultures) were installed: for example, Saul (1 Sam. 10: 1), David (2 Sam. 2: 4; 5: 3), and Solomon (1 Kgs. 1: 34, 39). Hence, a king would be called ‘the Lord’s anointed’ (1 Sam. 16: 6; 24: 6; 2 Sam. 1: 14, 16; Ps. 2: 2) or simply ‘the anointed one’. The practice of anointing kings at their investiture was extended to the service for the ordination of the Aaronic priesthood. As in the case of the king, the high priest’s head was anointed with oil (Exod. 29: 1–9; Lev. 4: 3, 5, 16; 6: 22; 16: 32). Prophets

<sup>3</sup> Many scholars agree with this observation, but not N. T. Wright, who argues that in Paul’s letters ‘Christ’ is not simply a proper name but can retain its Jewish significance as ‘Messiah’ (*The Climax of the Covenant* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991), 41–55). See also J. H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Messiah* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992); M. de Jonge, ‘Christ’, *ABD*, i. 914–21; id., ‘Messiah’, *ABD*, iv. 777–88; J. A. Fitzmyer, *The One Who is to Come* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2007).