

# Critical Orthodoxy and the Christology of Luke-Acts or Were the Apostles Adoptionists?

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(This is a slightly edited version a blog post entitled [A Reply to the Questioning Christian.](#))



One of the causes for frustration in the current discussions in the mainline churches is that so often the debates are between an uncritical orthodoxy and an uncritical revisionism. Many of the orthodox seem under the impression that critical biblical scholarship is essentially unchristian, and always leads (or will inevitably lead) to heresy. Many revisionists endorse a kind of popularist uninformed version of biblical scholarship that amounts to little more than a philosophical prejudice that “miracles don’t happen” combined with a search for “gotcha” difficulties. In my opinion, both of these approaches

represent a kind of naïve epistemological fundamentalism that has its roots in the Enlightenment, specifically in the Cartesian methodology of doubt and a “foundationalist” or “methodist” rationalism. A single difficulty is thought to uproot the entire faith, so “conservatives” launch an all out attack against any recognition of genuine diversity or plurality or development in the Scriptures as attacks on Christian faith, while the revisionists regard such diversity, development, or pluralism, as definitive arguments against orthodoxy.

Both sides seem oblivious to the history of what I would call “critical orthodoxy.” There has been for at least a hundred and fifty years a careful and thoughtful application of historical and literary method to studying the Bible that has led not to doubt, but to confirmation of orthodox faith. For the New Testament, I think of the work of scholars like B.F. Westcott, Sir Edwin Hoskyns, Joachim Jeremias, Oscar Cullmann, C.F.D. Moule, and, more recently, Brevard Childs, N.T. Wright, Richard Hays, Larry Hirtado, Richard Bauckham, and Ben Witherington. While not a biblical scholar myself, but a systematic theologian, I have learned much from those who are.

The occasion for this reflection was an online discussion in which my interlocutor was insisting (as rather self-evident) that high christologies were a relatively late development in the history of the early church. The early Christians had been something like adoptionists, and it was only after several decades that Christians began speaking of Jesus as in any sense divine, certainly not God incarnate. My interlocutor’s chief evidence was the apostles’ speeches in the early chapters of the Book of Acts. His argument went something like this: “If we look at speeches in the Book of Acts, it is clear that the apostles originally regarded Jesus as a human being. He was a special human being, no doubt, and his resurrection was supposed to mean that he would soon return to be Israel’s liberator—this did not happen, by the way—but, the early

apostles certainly did not believe in the deity of Jesus. None of the early apostles (including Paul) would have said that 'Jesus is God.' And it was not until at least the Gospel of John toward the end of the first century that any Christians would have believed anything like this."

Numerous popular accounts of the New Testament assume something like this argument. Something like this claim was made repeatedly by (now retired) Bishop John Spong,<sup>1</sup> and Dan Brown's popular novel *The DaVinci Code* actually claims that the deity of Christ was invented by the emperor Constantine, some 300 years after Jesus lived.<sup>2</sup>

I offer the following as a reflection of "critical orthodoxy," a correction of the kind of "uncritical revisionism" that assumes that careful critical biblical scholarship undercuts historic Christian orthodoxy. In particular, I am going to look at contemporary critical scholarship on the christology in Luke-Acts, addressing particularly the question of whether the speeches in Acts indicate that either the early apostles or Luke held something like an adoptionist christology—that Jesus was not God incarnate, but a "good man" in whom perhaps God was in some way especially present.

Before beginning, it is necessary to remind ourselves that all readings of the development of New Testament christology are interpretations. We have only the canonical documents, and any reading of what lies behind the documents is largely speculation. We can look at what Paul writes in his letters. We can look at what Luke writes in his gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. From this we can extrapolate something like Paul's christology or Luke's christology. We cannot say with certainty what the christology was that preceded either Paul or Luke—although some scholarly speculations are more certain than others. We can be fairly confident, for example, that Paul is quoting an earlier christological hymn in Philippians 2, so the christology there is earlier than Paul.<sup>3</sup> What

scholars do is provide plausible reconstructions based on the evidence. There are at least four variations in such recent attempts at reconstruction of the development of the post-resurrection church's christology in current New Testament scholarship.

1) The first position could be called "evolutionary" in the sense that it is claimed that one kind of christology evolved into another kind over time. The earliest Christians did indeed endorse something like an adoptionist christology. Jesus was a man who received a new status because of the resurrection. It was only later (perhaps as late as John's gospel) that an incarnational christology came into being. (There may have been various stages in this development, with some scholars suggesting that Christians pushed the moment of adoption from the resurrection back to the baptism by John the Baptist, then to the conception by Mary, then finally to pre-existence.) This is largely the argument that James Dunn made in his *Christology in the Making*.<sup>4</sup> Raymond Brown also argued a position something like this in his *Introduction to New Testament Christology*<sup>5</sup> as did Wolfhart Pannenberg in *Jesus – God and Man*.<sup>6</sup> The problem with this position is that it conflicts with the evidence that the earliest christology in the New Testament—Paul's—is a high christology. Interestingly, Dunn seems to have backed down from this earlier position, and moved in a more conservative direction in his later *Theology of Paul the Apostle*.<sup>7</sup>

2) The second view would be called "developmental." This is the position argued for by C. F. D. Moule in his *The Origin of Christology*.<sup>8</sup> Moule claimed that the crucial question for understanding the origin of christology must be the relation between Jesus' own self-consciousness, the significance of the resurrection, and the continuity of the relation between the two in the post-resurrection church's own understanding of Jesus' identity. Moule argues that the evolutionary

understanding is mistaken—presupposing without argument or evidence that the (late) high christology of the New Testament is in fundamental discontinuity with the actual self-understanding of Jesus. Rather, claimed Moule, a developmental view is demanded by the evidence. That is, the church's christology is in direct continuity with the self-understanding that the earthly Jesus already had before the resurrection, and is a more explicit spelling out of what was at least implicitly there all along.<sup>9</sup>

Moule points to four titles applied to Jesus in the gospels that he believes go back to Jesus himself: Son of Man, Son of God, Messiah, Lord. Moule finds particularly significant the parallel between the Septuagint use of κύριος (“Lord”) to translate the Tetragrammaton (YHWH, the Hebrew name for God), and the very early consistent application of κύριος to Jesus—particularly the consistent transfer to Christ of Old Testament passages that refer to God in their original context (Phil. 2:10, Rom. 14:11, Heb. 1:10). In First Corinthians 8:6 and Colossians 1: 16 ff., Paul postulates a cosmic Lordship of Christ, identifying him with the Divine Wisdom of the Old Testament, and also as the Creator. There is a clear connection between this cosmic Lordship and the resurrection of Christ in such passages as Romans 14:9.<sup>10</sup>

Moule then points to Paul as exhibit A in his argument that the church's christology was a high christology from the beginning, a consistent development of the earlier christology held by Jesus himself. Moule focuses particularly on Paul's notion of corporate personality as exhibited in his “in Christ” language. For Paul, the risen Christ is more than an individual, but has a universal all-embracing presence. He is described in language that parallels the kind of language that Scripture applies to God.<sup>11</sup>

3) A third approach emphasizes the complex variety of christologies found in the New Testament. Jesus is talked

about in different ways at different times in different contexts, often by the same author. So there are Son of Man christologies (the synoptic gospels), exaltation christologies that focus on the resurrection, Adam-Christ christologies (Rom. 5, Phil. 2), cosmic Creator christologies that focus on the pre-existent Christ's role in creation (Col. 1-2), Suffering Servant christologies, incarnational christologies (John 1, Heb. 1), Scripture fulfillment christologies, κύριος christologies that focus on Jesus as Lord, Messianic christologies, wisdom christologies, second coming christologies. An older example of such an approach would be Oscar Cullmann's *The Christology of the New Testament*.<sup>12</sup> The sheer variety and overlap (both in the same and between different authors) makes it difficult to trace development.

4) A fourth approach would be the "canonical approach." This approach focuses on the final text of Scripture as the church has received it, and generally refuses to speculate about the pre-canonical history of the text. It is the final form of Scripture that is canonical and authoritative, not the attempted reconstructions of historical-critics, which are highly subjective, and often mutually contradictory. We have the writings of Paul, the gospels, the catholic epistles, and Revelation. We do not have any immediate access to either the earthly Jesus who lived in Galilee, or the development of Christian theology in the early church apart from the canonical texts. The late Brevard Childs of Yale Divinity School and Richard Hays of Duke Divinity School basically follow this approach.

How do these four approaches relate to the problem of the speeches in Acts and Luke's christology?

Before addressing this question, it is helpful to remind ourselves that the earliest writings of the New Testament are neither the gospels nor the Book of Acts, but the writings of Paul—and Paul's writings (together with John's Gospel) contain

the highest christologies in the New Testament. Uncritical readings of the New Testament (both conservative and revisionist) often do not appreciate the full implications of the fact that Paul's writings are the earliest New Testament documents we have, and that Paul's christology and soteriology precedes the synoptic gospels. The synoptics presume this early christology and soteriology throughout.

Was there a development from a very early christology that could be read as adoptionist? Perhaps. Scholars believe that in Romans 1:4, Paul cites an early Christian "creed" in which Jesus is "declared to be the Son of God" by his resurrection. But, if so, such a christology would have had to have been very early indeed, because it had already been superseded by a completely incarnational christology by the time that Paul was writing his letters, a matter of a mere two decades. Paul himself saw no tension between this creedal statement that points to Jesus' resurrection as declaring his Sonship, and Paul's own completely incarnational christology. In Philippians 2, Paul speaks of Christ pre-existing in the "form of God"; in his resurrection/ascension, Jesus receives the "name above every name—at his name "every knee will bow" and "every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" κύριος). The latter is a direct quotation from Isaiah 45:23. Paul is clearly applying to Christ a passage that in its original context applies to Yahweh—the God of the Old Testament.

Of course, it is correct that κύριος is a word that can be translated "master," and is sometimes applied in the New Testament (particularly in forms of address) to ordinary human beings. Context determines whether κύριος is being used simply as a form of address, or is rather an applying to Jesus of the divine name, that is, the Septuagint translation of YHWH. Although Jesus is often addressed as "Lord" in the gospels during his earthly ministry in a way that can be translated "Master," the majority of New Testament scholars (I am tempted to write "all," since I am unaware of any who suggest

otherwise) agree that *after* the resurrection the term is applied to Jesus in a manner equivalent to YHWH.

Thus biblical scholars often distinguish between a relative and an absolute use of κύριος as applied to Christ. It is the latter only that is relevant to this discussion. The citation of Isaiah 45:23 in Philippians 2 is a clear example of this. In another classic example that shows that the NT writers understood this distinction between a relative and an absolute use of κύριος, Paul in 1 Corinthians 8:5-6 distinguishes between “many gods” and “many lords,” yet insists that for Christians, “there is one God the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.” This is quite stunning, since Paul has here clearly “inserted” Jesus into the *Shema*: “Hear, O Israel, The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” (Deut. 6:4).

As Paul draws a direct parallel between the roles of God the Father and the Son in creation in the above passage, so, in Colossians 1, he develops a cosmic christology in which the pre-existent Christ exists not only (as in Philippians) in the “image [or form] of God,” but is also the agent through whom God (the Father) creates the world. Paul tells us in Colossians 2:9, “In [him] the fullness (πλήρωμα) of deity dwells bodily.”

So there is no question that the highest christology is found in the the earliest writings of the New Testament (Paul’s epistles) and it is a christology that applies to Christ the name and attributes of the God of the Old Testament.

How then do the speeches in Acts relate to all of this?

First, the book of Acts is written later than Paul’s epistles, and it is a witness primarily of Luke’s christology—a later christology than Paul’s. Apart from the autobiographical notations in the Pauline letters, Acts is the only historical

account we have of Paul's life and mission. Luke clearly regards Paul's ministry as authoritative and definitive. The narrative of Acts is about the spread of Christianity from an originally Jewish community to the Gentile world—and this culminates with Paul in captivity in Rome. The "we" sections in Acts indicate that the writer was either with Paul, or incorporated material of one of Paul's companions into his narrative. So the author of Acts (whom we call Luke) sees no conflict between his own theological views and those of Paul. And, as mentioned above, Paul's christology is one of the highest in the New Testament.

Second, it is important to remember that Acts is the second volume of a two-volume work. Though separated in the canon, Luke-Acts was, from the point of view of its author, a single two-part narrative. Assuming that the authors of New Testament writings were at least as intelligent as their contemporary readers, we have to assume that Luke saw no inconsistencies between the christology of his gospel, and what he wrote in Acts.

Third, since the rise of redaction criticism (a methodology that focuses on the authorial and editorial production of texts), New Testament scholars have recognized that the gospel writers are not merely cut-and-paste compilers, but authors in their own right. Through the arrangement of their material, and their own editorial interpolations, they have not only incorporated the theological bent of their sources, but have also contributed their own emphases. For example, Mark's gospel recognizes from the first verse that Jesus is the Son of God, yet throughout, Mark's emphasis is that Jesus' Sonship is hidden within his role as the Suffering Servant. What it means to follow Jesus is to take up one's cross, just as Jesus did. Luke's particular emphases include a geographical structuring; his gospel tells the story of a journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, while Acts tells the story of the journey of the gospel from Jerusalem, to Samaria, to the "ends

of the earth." In both Luke and Acts, Luke speaks of God's activity in terms of the presence of the Holy Spirit, an emphasis not found in the same way in the other gospels or in Paul. Luke also thinks more specifically in terms of a salvation-history. The time of the Acts of the apostles is the intermediate time between the time of Jesus as the center of God's activity in history, and the present time of the church. The christology in Luke-Acts is thus primary evidence for Luke's christology, and only secondarily evidence for the christology of the earliest church.

Fourth, the speeches in Acts have presented a special kind of problem for New Testament interpreters, who have to ask (and try to answer) the following kinds of questions:

1) To what extent are the speeches primarily historical reconstructions of actual sermons preached by Peter and others, based on Luke's sources? To what extent are they summaries of much longer materials, and, how has Luke's own theological perspective affected their arrangement and emphasis? (Each sermon in Luke's gospel can be read in only a minute or so; so they can hardly be word for word accounts of the sermons as actually preached.)

2) To what extent has Luke been influenced by the style of speeches contained in the histories of the ancient pagan writers who were his contemporaries, for example, Thucydides, who composed summary speeches to put in the mouths of historical figures at important events, that is, what they "might have said." (For a contemporary parallel, think of the kinds of dialogue that appears in modern docudramas, films based on actual historical events that must provide spoken dialogue for reconstructed scenes, films as diverse as war and political dramas (*Tora, Tora, Tora*; *Midway*; *Thirteen Days*), heroic adventures (*Braveheart*), biting political commentary (*W.*, *All the President's Men*), even reconstructions of the gospel or lives of saints, (*Jesus of Nazareth*, Mel Gibson's *The Passion*, Franco Zeffereilli's *Brother Son, Sister Moon*).

Such docudramas may vary in their historical faithfulness, but the creation of imagined dialogue does not in itself falsify the presentation of the story. In fact, a too faithful presentation of dialogue would make for a tedious recounting. Unlike *All the President's Men*, a film that faithfully reproduced every word of Richard Nixon's tapes would be a box office disaster.

3) To what extent are the speeches compositions that reflect Luke's own theology? That is, are they material for the christology of the earliest church or for the christology of Luke? Or, rather, is it even a legitimate question to attempt to reconstruct the historical events behind the canonical texts, since it is the final canonical text that is authoritative for the church, and all such reconstructions are hypothetical and subjective?

Not surprisingly, critical scholars (whether revisionist or orthodox) have embraced positions that have tended to emphasize some variation of these three positions or a combination thereof.

1) C. H. Dodd wrote the most important and influential book embracing the position that the speeches in Acts provide important historical evidence for the christology of the earliest church in his book *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments*.<sup>13</sup> Dodd argued in his book that the speeches in Acts are summaries of the earliest missionary preaching (κήρυγμα) of the church. This κήρυγμα was intended primarily for outsiders and needed to be distinguished clearly from the teaching (διδασχή) of the church, which consisted primarily of doctrinal and moral teaching, and was intended for insiders. The κήρυγμα consisted of a summary of certain historical events (the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, his exaltation to God's right hand, and his coming again in judgment); claims about the fulfillment of prophecy within an eschatological framework (the prophecies are fulfilled, and

the New Age has begun with the coming of Christ); claims about Jesus' identity (he is the Son of David, the risen Lord, the Messiah, the Son of God); a basic ecclesiology (the presence of the Spirit in the church is the sign of God's presence); a call for repentance.

Dodd argued that the content of the κήρυγμα can be reconstructed from materials in the Pauline and other epistles (Petrine and Johannine epistles, Hebrews), the speeches in Acts, and the synoptic gospels, which are basically expanded narratives of the original κήρυγμα.

At the same time that the speeches in Acts accurately summarize the content of the earliest apostolic preaching, it cannot be emphasized too strongly that the κήρυγμα does not represent the entire gospel. It is a minimal summary addressed to outsiders. The κήρυγμα does not contain such essential theological teaching as the doctrines of grace or justification, the full teaching of the church about the incarnation, a developed ecclesiology, or the sacramental theology of the church.<sup>14</sup>

2) C.F.D. Moule (already mentioned) wrote one of the most important (and frequently cited) essays about Luke's use of his sources.<sup>15</sup> Moule begins by acknowledging a point made frequently in recent New Testament studies, and one I acknowledged above, that the gospels are theological documents reflecting the faith of their writers and communities. One possible conclusion from this acknowledgment would be that the gospel writers were not interested in providing a faithful historical account of the pre-resurrection Jesus as he really was, but were rather presenting Jesus as the risen Lord of the later Christian church. In other words, they are nothing more than propaganda pieces.

Moule notes a significant difference in the christology of Luke's gospel and Acts. Both acknowledge Jesus as Lord

(κύριος). However, in the gospel, the human characters in the narrative do not refer to Jesus as κύριος except in the vocative (κύριε)—nothing more than a respectful form of address. (The single exceptions are angels and the narrator himself, who are “in the know.”) After the resurrection, and throughout Acts, this changes completely. From Luke 24:34 on, the disciples freely apply the term κύριος to Jesus in a way that they did not do before the resurrection. Moreover, they clearly understand this in an absolute sense. Jesus is not merely one Lord among many, but “Lord of all” (πάντων κύριος) (Acts 10:36). There is now a regular exchange between κύριος used of God, and κύριος used of Jesus. There is also the phenomenon of the frequent variations on the expression “call on the name of the Lord” (επικαλέσῃται τὸ ὄνομα κυρίου), which, in its first citation in Acts 2:21 is a quotation from Joel 2:32 referring to Yahweh, but which, through the rest of Acts (7:59, 9:13-14,21; 22:16) clearly equates the name of Jesus as the Lord who is being called on.

The key point is that Luke acknowledges a clear distinction between the recognition given to Jesus during his earthly ministry, and the full recognition that Jesus is κύριος after the resurrection. Moule traces similar differences in the way that characters in Luke-Acts apply titles like “prophet,” “Son of Man,” “Savior, and “Son” to Jesus, before and after the resurrection. The resurrection plays a crucial role, not in Jesus’ identity—both the angels and the gospel narrator acknowledge Jesus’ true identity from the very beginning (Luke 1:32)—but in his vindication. The risen Lord is identical with the earthly Jesus, but before the resurrection, his identity is hidden. Moule addresses specifically the question of two different christologies, an “adoptionist” christology (Acts 10:38) representing a primitive Palestinian christology, and a later well developed Hellenistic christology (“He is Lord of all,” 10:36). Given the significance of the resurrection, there simply is no reason to presume any incompatibility here. In the resurrection, this Jesus of Nazareth, who was “anointed

with the Holy Spirit,” and “who went about doing good” is recognized for who he was all along—“the Lord of all” (πάντων κύριος).

This also indicates that Luke is a careful historian. He does not credit the pre-resurrection disciples with a post-resurrection christology—though he (as narrator) is willing to do so.

3) Joseph Fitzmyer has a discussion of “Lucan christology” in his commentary on *The Gospel According to Luke (I-IX)*.<sup>16</sup> For Luke, there are four phases in Christ’s existence: virginal conception until baptism, baptism until ascension, ascension until παρουσία, the παρουσία itself. Fitzmyer notes correctly that Luke says nothing about Jesus’ pre-existence or incarnation. Fitzmyer discusses Luke’s use of κύριος in an absolute sense, noting (as did Moule) that he “retrojects” this title back into the time of Jesus’ ministry, including the first phases of his earthly existence. Fitzmyer notes: “In using κύριος of both Yahweh and Jesus in his writings Luke continues the sense of the title already being used in the early Christian community, which in some sense regarded Jesus as on a level with Yahweh.”<sup>17</sup> Fitzmyer says of the title “Son of God,” that in Luke, it “attributes a unique relationship with Yahweh, the God of Israel. . . . Luke does not intend that Jesus should be recognized as God’s son merely in the adoptive sense in which a king on God’s throne would be called his son . . . ” He says further, “Luke might even be suggesting that Jesus is God.”<sup>18</sup>

Fitzmyer states that “we shall never know” how the process of the revelation of Jesus’ divine sonship took place in the ministry of Jesus, and in the gospel tradition. What we can do is trace “various stages” or “phases of awareness” as the New Testament writers gradually recognized the implications of that revelation.<sup>19</sup>

4) In his *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*,<sup>20</sup> Ben Witherington suggests that in the speeches in Acts, Luke follows the custom of Thucydides and others of rendering speeches in their own words and style. While we cannot assume that Luke created the speeches, he did make his source material his own, in such a way that recovering his sources is “difficult if not impossible.”<sup>21</sup> If Luke followed the pattern of Thucydides, we can assume that he provided accurate and adequate summaries, especially if he was able to consult with those who heard the speeches first-hand. The similarity between the speeches in Acts may suggest the use of a basic κήρυγμα or *testimonia* (lists of Old Testament verses pointing to Christ) by various early Christian preachers. (Witherington here refers to Dodd’s *The Apostolic Preaching*.)<sup>22</sup>

Witherington notes that κύριος is the most frequently used christological title in Luke-Acts. The quotation from Psalm 110:1 in Acts 2:34 shows that Luke equally applied κύριος to both God and Jesus. Expressions like “Day of the Lord,” “angel of the Lord,” and so on, refer to God. Expressions like “Word of the Lord” refer to Jesus.<sup>23</sup>

The key to understanding Luke’s use of κύριος is the “narrative framework” in which he views christological matters. What Luke says about Jesus depends on which stage in Jesus’ career he has reached at that moment in the narrative. Witherington cites Moule’s article to indicate the significance of the resurrection for indicating whether Jesus is called κύριος by the narrator or by others.<sup>24</sup>

Witherington insists that it is a misreading to interpret Luke’s language in Acts 2:36 as adoptionist. Luke uses his language in a way that “suits his narrative.” “It was not that Jesus became someone different from who he was before, but that he entered a new stage in his career.” After the ascension, Jesus assumed a new role. He did not fully assume

the roles of Lord and Messiah until after the resurrection. According to Witherington, "The Lord Jesus is able to do what he does because he is who he is." The roles he assumes at various points in the narrative are the appropriate ones for him to assume at that time: "Luke's primary concern is with presenting a narrative christology that tells the story of Jesus from his birth until his present exaltation to heaven and his reign from there as Lord of all."<sup>25</sup>

5) H. Douglas Buckwalter writes of Jesus as "The Divine Saviour."<sup>26</sup> Buckwalter draws attention to the sheer diversity of christological images in Acts. Jesus is portrayed as God's instrument in salvation-history, as Saviour, as Lord, as Messiah, and so on.<sup>27</sup> Buckwalter believes that two common elements unite the various christological images: first, Luke describes Jesus' divine status; second, Luke points to the way the earthly and heavenly Jesus are instructional for discipleship.<sup>28</sup>

Buckwalter describes the way in which Luke draws parallels between the exalted Jesus and the Old Testament depiction of God.<sup>29</sup> The exalted Jesus pours out his Spirit on the church, and provides it guidance. As the Spirit's presence describes Yahweh's immanence in the Old Testament, so, in Acts, the Spirit's presence is equated with the immanence of the risen Jesus. As Yahweh gave visions and provided guidance to Israel in the Old Testament, so the exalted Jesus appears in visions in Acts and provides guidance to the church. As the Old Testament associates salvation with the name of the Lord (Joel 2:32), so Luke in Acts associates the name of the Lord with the exalted Jesus. Buckwalter notes: "With Luke's description of the work of the exalted Jesus in Acts, one cannot easily dismiss the impression that he intended his readers to view Jesus' heavenly ministry as similar to Yahweh's."<sup>30</sup>

Buckwalter concludes his essay by arguing that in Luke-Acts

Jesus models a new understanding of Lordship. The Lord is one who “waits on tables,” not one who seeks personal glory.<sup>31</sup> Buckwalter concludes: “it is arguable that Luke considered Jesus as Yahweh’s co-equal and co-regent.”<sup>32</sup> Yahweh is distinguished from everything else by the way he providentially brings about salvation according to his will. The exalted Jesus “appears on equal footing with God” by doing the same thing. However, Jesus is not only a deity who is all-knowing, and all-powerful, but the kind of deity who serves rather than is served. Jesus acts as does the Father, and does what the Father does.<sup>33</sup>

6) Brevard Childs presents a highly original discussion of the purpose of the sermons in Acts in both his *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction*<sup>34</sup> and *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: An Introduction*.<sup>35</sup> Childs criticizes current Acts scholarship for trying to find the decisive factor for interpretation in “some force *behind* the biblical text.” To the contrary, “The book of Acts sees itself in direct continuity with the Gospel of Luke.” The key to interpretation is to understand this continuity, which is related by a “conscious pattern of promise and fulfillment.”<sup>36</sup> The decisive new factors in Acts are, first, the presence of the Spirit, and, second, the “word of God” as the vehicle for the witness of the Spirit (Acts 4:4,29,31; 6:4,7; 8:14; 10:44; 11:1).<sup>37</sup> The “word” which is preached is “in the name” of Jesus (4:30, 10:43, 16:18). For Luke, the “name of Jesus” is the way in which he is present to the church after the resurrection. The “preached word” unleashes the power of the risen Christ. The Spirit is the bridge between the earthly Jesus of Luke’s gospel, and the ascended Lord of Acts.<sup>38</sup>

The preached sermons in Acts show “how the preached word functions as the means of actualizing the present significance of the gospel.” There is a consistent pattern: a) the sermon

summarizes the life of Jesus culminating in his death; b) these events occurred according to God's plan, not by chance; c) God raised Jesus from the dead and vindicated him; d) Christ is alive and reigning with God; d) the sermon closes with a call to repentance.<sup>39</sup>

Consistently, the sermons connect to the previously written gospel of Luke by portraying Christ as "belonging both to the past and the present." As in Luke, Jesus' life is portrayed as a series of historical events, in which he "went about doing good," (Acts 10:38), was crucified and killed (Acts 2:22), was raised and appointed Lord and Christ (2:36). On this basis, he is recognized as "judge of the living and the dead" (Acts 10:42). Luke portrays this salvation as being in continuity with the mighty acts of God in the Old Testament. The proofs from prophecy that appear in the sermons are consistent with the same way Jesus is portrayed in Luke's gospel.<sup>40</sup>

Although Childs does not state this explicitly (because he was not addressing this question), the crucial point for christology would be that the christology of the sermons in Acts is a short summary of the christology of Luke's gospel, and must be read as entirely consistent with it.

The above is not at all an exhaustive summary of contemporary critical scholarship on the book of Acts and Luke's christology, but I think it sufficient to address the question of whether the speeches in Acts indicate that the apostles after the resurrection endorsed an adoptionist christology, with incarnational christologies being only a much later development in the history of the church.

If the sermons in Acts represent accurate summaries of the apostolic preaching (κήρυγμα) of the church (as Dodd and those who follow him argue), then they represent at most some of the key themes in the public proclamation of the church. These are precisely the themes we would expect the apostles to emphasize

in a Jerusalem setting right after the crucifixion of Jesus: 1) A narrative summary of Jesus' ministry; 2) the crucifixion of Jesus by the Jewish religious leaders and the Romans—the chief scandal to both a Jewish and Gentile audience; 3) the vindication of Jesus' mission by his resurrection—the Jewish leaders and the Romans were wrong; 4) Jesus' exaltation as Lord (κύριος) and Messiah—God has declared Jesus in the right after all; 5) the presence of the Kingdom and Jesus' coming again in judgment—the eschatological setting in which this all makes sense; 6) the fulfillment of prophecy—Jesus' mission and message were not in contradiction to God's promises to Israel, but were rather its fulfillment; 7) a call to repentance.

Dodd argues persuasively, and in detail, that these same six points are found in early material (through creedal summaries and quotations) not only in the sermons in Acts, but throughout the epistles and other New Testament writings, and that they provide the narrative structure around which the gospels are written.

At the same time, the κήρυγμα does not provide a complete and comprehensive account of the early church's theology. It is κήρυγμα, not διδαχή. The apostolic preaching in Acts is at most a short summary of the central outline of what the early Christians preached—addressed to outsiders. It is not at all detailed discussion of everything the earliest church believed about Christ. The seven points do not provide a detailed discussion of christology, soteriology, pneumatology, grace, sacraments, or ecclesiology. Nor do they provide a detailed discussion of Christian moral teaching. However, this doctrinal and moral teaching (διδαχή

) is found elsewhere in the New Testament, and it is evident in the earliest writings.

To borrow an illustration from a more contemporary setting—I have recently been reading a book written by Stephen Neill, the prominent Anglican historian, bishop and missionary,

entitled *Out of Bondage: Christ and the Indian Villager*.<sup>41</sup> It was written while Neill was a young man, and describes his missionary experiences in India. In a chapter describing mission strategy among Hindus, Neill states that the missionaries learned that the heart of their preaching had to be their story of Jesus as described in the gospels. Rural village Hindus were particularly struck by stories of Jesus' exorcisms because spirit possession and exorcism are "real" experiences and common practices in Hindu village life. Village Hindus have a genuine fear of spirits, especially the ghosts of those who die violently—this is confirmed even in more recent accounts of Hinduism. What the missionary found unhelpful was preaching the high theology of the incarnation, and the doctrines of grace, and so on, because until the Hindus knew the story of Jesus, they had no context into which to put these doctrines. It was only after potential converts seriously became attracted to the person of Jesus in the gospel stories that they could then have a context for understanding more abstract Christian doctrine. I would suggest a similar context for the earliest Christian proclamation. Jesus' life, death and resurrection would have to be the central content of any preaching to initial converts. A fully explicated christology would come later.

So the apostolic preaching in Acts says little about christology, but insofar as the preaching in Acts touches on christology at all, it indicates a high christology. Jesus is κύριος and Messiah, and the coming judge. Parallel material elsewhere (for example, in Paul) and in other places in Luke-Acts indicates that κύριος and other titles (like Son of God) are understood in an absolute sense. The ascription of the title κύριος to Jesus means that the risen Jesus exercises the same functions as, and has the same dignity as the God of the Old Testament.

In addition, if we acknowledge (as all contemporary critical New Testament scholars do) that Luke-Acts is not only a

historical record, but an intentional theological construction—Luke does not simply do cut-and-paste with his sources; he is a genuine author—then the sermons in Acts have to be understood as Luke’s own summaries of the christology of not only Acts, but also his gospel. One cannot understand the christology of the sermons apart from the entire narrative structure of Luke-Acts, and Luke makes it clear that Jesus is Lord and Son of God from the beginning. The disciples and others do not recognize him as such, however, until the resurrection. Jesus does not become Lord and Son of God at the resurrection; what was hidden during his ministry now becomes publicly manifest.

A more plausible explanation than the one suggested by my original internet interlocutor—that an early adoptionist christology later altered into an incarnational one—notes the differences between epistemology (how we know things) and ontology (the realities we know). In the order in which we come to know things (*ordo cognoscendi*), knowledge comes first. However, at the level of ontological reality (*ordo essendi*), being is first. So, when an archaeologist uncovers the ruins of a previously unknown village, the discovery takes place at a certain point in time, for example, some morning in the summer of 2009. However, the village did not begin to exist at that time. It had already existed thousands of years previously, and had long been unoccupied. At the level of the order of knowledge (*ordo cognoscendi*), the resurrection of Jesus was the point at which Jesus’ divine status was first known. Thus, in the passage Paul cites in Romans 1:4, Jesus was “declared to be Son of God by his resurrection,” that is, came to be known as such at that time. However, at the level of ontology (*ordo essendi*), if Jesus was known to be Son of God at his resurrection, then he had to have been ontologically the Son of God all along. And the Synoptics (including Luke) presume that throughout. So even though Luke in Acts 2 and elsewhere has Peter declaring the significance of Jesus’ resurrection to his hearers to confirm to them

Jesus' identity as the one in whom the promises of Scripture had been fulfilled, Luke had already made it clear that Jesus had been God's Son (and κύριος) all along by virtue of his conception by the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35). Luke's gospel presumes throughout that Jesus was the Son of God (and κύριος) during his entire ministry. He did not become Son of God (or Lord) at his resurrection. Moreover, Luke's gospel depends on Mark, so Luke had to have been aware of Mark's own high christology.

A helpful illustration of this point was made as long ago as 1926 by Edwin C. Hoskyns.<sup>42</sup> Hoskyns suggests that the crucial critical question is that of the relation between the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth, and the Christ of St. Paul, St. John, and the later Christian church. Hoskyns compares the synoptic gospels with Paul and concludes that the synoptics presuppose a high christology throughout. The gospels consistently presume that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, but his christological identity is hidden in the suffering of the cross: "They do not involve the transformation of a human prophet into a supernatural Messiah, since the Marcan source itself implies a supernatural christology." The contrast is not, Hoskyns claimed, between the "Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, but between the Christ humiliated and the Christ returning in glory." The two-fold use of the title "Son of Man" illustrates this; before the resurrection, the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head (Mark 9: 58); after the resurrection, the Son of Man sits at the right hand of God, and returns in glory (Mark 14: 62). It is the resurrection that ties the two together, and makes for continuity.

Luke is making the same point in Acts, and in his account the apostles' sermons are summaries of this. It is not that Jesus was an ordinary human being, who received a celestial promotion after the resurrection; rather, from the beginning Jesus was the Lord (κύριος), the Son of God—and Luke lets his reader know this from the beginning of his gospel. However,

Jesus' Lordship and Deity were hidden in humility until the resurrection—he is the Lord who waits at tables. It is only after his resurrection, that Jesus is exalted to the right hand and his identity as “Lord of all” (πάντων κύριος) is finally recognized and proclaimed by his followers.

[1](#) In a passage typical of many that would appear in the next two decades, Spong denied that the apostle Paul would have believed that Jesus was God; nor was Paul a trinitarian. According to Spong, Paul's christology was adoptionist: “For Paul, Jesus the Christ was a special human life through whom God had uniquely acted and in whom God was uniquely present.” John Shelby Spong, *Rescuing the Bible From Fundamentalism: A Bishop Rethinks the Meaning of Scripture* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), 123.

[2](#) Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Random House, 2003), 253.

[3](#) This fairly “assured result” of critical method has been questioned by Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 41.

[4](#) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2nd. Edition, 2003).

[5](#) (Mahweh, NJ: Paulist Press, 1994).

[6](#) (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967; 2nd ed, 1983).

[7](#) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006).

[8](#) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

[9](#) Moule, *Origin, 1-10*.

[10](#) Moule, *Origin, 11-46*.

[11](#) Moule, *Origin*, 47-96.

[12](#) (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1959; rev. ed, 1963); Also note Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*, and Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), who emphasize the early Christian practice of devotion to Christ in worship.

[13](#) (New York: Harper & Bros., 1962).

[14](#) For the above, see Dodd, 7-35.

[15](#) "The Christology of Acts," *Studies in Luke-Acts*, ed. Leander E. Keck and J. Louis Martin (Fortress, 1966), 159-185.

[16](#) (New York: Anchor Doubleday, 1979), 192-218.

[17](#) Fitzmyer, 203.

[18](#) Fitzmyer, 207, 208.

[19](#) Fitzmyer, 208.

[20](#) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998).

[21](#) Witherington, 117.

[22](#) Witherington, 119.

[23](#) Witherington, 147-148.

[24](#) Witherington, 148-149.

[25](#) Witherington, 149, 152.

[26](#) I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson, eds. *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 107-123.

[27](#) Buckwalter, 108.

- [28](#) Buckwalter, 112.
- [29](#) Buckwalter, 115-120.
- [30](#) Buckwalter, 118.
- [31](#) Buckwalter, 120.
- [32](#) Buckwalter, 123.
- [33](#) Buckwalter, 123.
- [34](#) (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).
- [35](#) (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).
- [36](#) Childs, *New Testament as Canon*, 220.
- [37](#) Childs, *New Testament as Canon*, 222.
- [38](#) Childs, *New Testament as Canon*, 220-222.
- [39](#) Childs, *New Testament as Canon*, 222.
- [40](#) Childs, *New Testament as Canon*, 222-223.
- [41](#) (London: Edinburgh House, 1930).
- [42](#) "The Christ of the Synoptic Gospels," *Essays Catholic and Critical*, E. G. Selwyn, ed. (London: SPCK, 1926), 151-178.