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Forward to *The Son of God: Three Views of the Identity of Jesus*

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FOREWORD

THE STUDY OF NEW Testament Christology—the depiction(s) of Jesus articulated by the authors of the New Testament—has never ceased to be of interest. But if it may not be true to say that there has been *more* interest in the subject in recent years, the past several decades have at the very least witnessed a burst of *creativity* in the field, with significant new and interesting proposals being offered by a range of scholars. This work has been stimulated in turn by an increased amount of attention to ancient Jewish sources, sparked by the publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls and other ancient literature that was previously neglected or unknown. This has allowed scholars to get a sense as never before of the Jewish context within which Jesus and his earliest followers reflected on who he was.

The New Testament sources are full of affirmations of the sort that one also finds in non-Christian Jewish sources: “Jesus answered, ‘The first [commandment] is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one’” (Mark 12:29), “there is no God but one” (1 Cor 8:4), “there is one God” (1 Tim 2:5), “the only true God” (John 17:3), “You believe that there is one God. Good!” (Jas 2:19). And yet Christians have typically coupled such references to the one God with references to Christ as “one Lord,” “one Mediator,” “the one whom [the only true God] sent.” Much of the first few Christian centuries were spent trying to work out how these statements were best to be understood, and what their implications might be. The present day has seen not only an increasing awareness of the ancient Jewish context of the New Testament, but also the fact that views which were in the past dismissed as clear heresies were—whether one judges them to be right or wrong—sincere attempts to make sense of the range of New Testament evidence.

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So much has been written on New Testament Christology in recent years and decades, that it is simply impossible to summarize it all in a preface and do it justice. Fortunately, the pages of this book will survey and engage the key issues, highlighting key points of disagreement among scholars in the process. But it may nevertheless be worth listing here a few of the important points about which there is ongoing debate:

- Did the earliest Christians think of Jesus as a human being singled out and sent by God, or as a preexistent angelic or other celestial figure subordinate to God, or as the incarnation of one who was fully God?
- Did different early Christian authors have different views of Jesus, corresponding to those listed above?
- Was there a development in early Christology, from the view of Jesus as a special human being to the view of Jesus as a preexistent celestial figure, or was the latter view held from the very beginning?
- Did Christians, in formulating their view of Jesus, include him within the nature, or the identity, of the one God, or did they view him as distinct from the one God, however closely related to him?
- In viewing Jesus as they did, did the earliest Christians depart from Jewish monotheism as it existed in their time?

On the pages that follow, you will find most of these points engaged directly; and where any are not addressed explicitly, reading the scholarly literature that is cited will bring you into contact with discussions of the remaining issues. These are points about which there is ongoing vigorous disagreement among scholars, and this disagreement, however much it has progressed, mirrors debates which have been going on for nearly 2,000 years. And yet many Christians may not even be aware either of the diversity of views held among Christians, or of the scholarship that brings historical knowledge to bear on these questions.

There has been a delightful trend in recent years towards the production of multi-author volumes offering three (or in some cases four or even five) different views on a particular subject. In the present volume, three views of Jesus are presented. Each of these views is attested in very ancient Christian sources (often in the process of the one being denounced by a proponent of another view). Each view is one that significant numbers of scholars are convinced is reflected in at least some of the writings of the New Testament. The authors who have contributed to this volume each

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seeks not only to engage with this New Testament scholarship, but also to formulate a convincing portrait of Jesus on that basis.

Scholarship is a conversation, and the wider public often has only the vaguest sense of how central interaction between viewpoints is to the scholarly endeavor. On the one hand, every scholar seeks to break new ground, to come up with new ideas and interpretations. It is a requirement as part of our jobs, since we are expected to publish, and no scholarly periodical is likely to publish an article which simply says things that have been said before. On the other hand, the scholarly community evaluates our new proposals, looking at them with critical scrutiny. Only rarely do our new proposals overturn a prevailing consensus. And that is as it should be. Both these two poles are conversational in character. The individual scholar interacts with the scholarly community through the literature that has been published previously, trying to see just a little bit further standing on our shoulders. And then the scholarly community responds in turn with feedback and evaluation, and with acceptance or rebuttal.

I still recall a friend who was, like me at the time, both a Christian and a PhD student, saying that the process of trying to earn a doctorate pushes you towards heresy. The truth has supposedly already been established, and so new ideas can only represent departures from them. This viewpoint is not uncommon, and is a reason why ordinary people in churches often view scholars and scholarship with suspicion.

However, it ought to be clear in our internet age, if it was not clear well before that, that the notion of the “truth established once for all” has never reflected the reality. Churches use Bibles the contents of which differ. And churches which share the exact same Bible, and the exact same view of the Bible as without error, may disagree radically on what the Bible means. Christians have always been engaging in conversations which involved not only the Jewish Scriptures and the life and teaching of Jesus, but the world around them. Some have claimed to be doing otherwise, but the claims do not reflect the reality. Tertullian famously asked “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”—suggesting that there is a huge gulf between biblical religion and Greek philosophy. And yet it seems clear that Tertullian’s thinking—for instance, in applying the term “Trinity” (threeness) to God—was indebted to his background in Stoic philosophy. We cannot ignore the ancient context of the Biblical texts, nor can we ignore the context within which we interpret them. And when we do both those things, we come to

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see just how it is possible for people with the same shared Scriptures and the same shared Jesus to nonetheless have drawn different conclusions.

More than a century ago, an editorial in the periodical *The Biblical World* addressed this very point:

The duty of Christian thinkers in the present generation is to address themselves consciously and earnestly to the task never indeed abandoned, but long held in check by the doctrine of an authoritative canon of Scripture or an authoritative church, and to seek from all the sources at our disposal to frame for our day such a statement of truths in the realm of religion as will on the one hand satisfy in the fullest possible measure the data at our disposal and on the other hand meet as fully as possible the needs of our day In this process the true greatness of Jesus and the finality of his fundamental thought will not be lost, but only transferred from postulate to assured result of investigation. But no period and no experience, certainly not that of our own day, will be without its possible contribution, and our effort will be not to return to the position of any past age, even that of the dawn of Christianity, but with fullest loyalty to the achievements of the past to push on as far as possible toward the larger light and fuller truth.¹

The situation has not changed, but this dialogical nature of theology seems no more generally recognized among Christian laypeople than it was in the past. And that is unfortunate.

Most of the volumes that have been published offering multiple viewpoints on a topic have done so within the framework of a shared set of assumptions, typically that of conservative Evangelicalism. Some of the views included might seem radical within that context, but often they appear quite narrowly clustered when viewed from another perspective. Occasionally such volumes include, in the interest of “fairness” or perhaps of sensationalism, a viewpoint that is considered fringe not merely by Evangelicals but by all academics. The present volume is different from such other volumes in important ways. On the one hand, the contributors share a commitment to interpreting the Bible diligently and accurately, and allowing the evidence from the Bible to shape their views. On the other hand, the three christological viewpoints which the authors represent are only relatively rarely found within the same church setting. Trinitarianism, Arianism, and Socinianism are typically not found within the same denomination, much

1. “Truth ‘Once for All Delivered,’” *The Biblical World* 35.4 (April 1910) 221–22.

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less within the same church, and more often than not, adherents to one of the viewpoints will regard the other views as anathema.

And so the fact that the authors are *friends* across such divides is an important message of the book, one which should not be missed. The content of their discussions is important, but so too is the fact that people with a shared desire to follow Jesus and to be faithful to Scripture can understand who Jesus is in different ways. In the past, those with the authority to do so who held one of these viewpoints might have excommunicated or expelled the others. In some circles, that might still happen today. And yet if we think about the emperor Constantine, he brought Christians together at the Council of Nicaea to seek unity, and oversaw the condemnation of Arius—and yet he would later be baptized by a bishop who adhered to the same viewpoint as Arius. Christians who listened carefully to the various sides could find arguments from both to be compelling, and could find it difficult to choose between them.

Christianity has always been diverse, and has long been plagued by a tendency toward reciprocal condemnation and exclusion of others who have different opinions than our own, as we have proved time and again to be unable to apply the demand of Jesus that we love our enemies to those who are “enemies” only of our idea, but not necessarily of ourselves. The contributors exemplify something that scholars have long known, and which explains the approach to scholarship which I outlined towards the start of this preface. It is very easy for any one of us, no matter how great our expertise in a given area, to be wrong. If we are to get at the truth, our chances of achieving this are much greater if we seek it in community, a community that challenges us with a critical examination of our assumptions and claims, and presents us with alternative viewpoints which we in turn must evaluate. It is a delight to see three individuals with such different viewpoints committed to interacting with the best scholarship on New Testament Christology, and to engaging one another. I hope that readers will find themselves welcomed into the conversation, and that they in turn will not just learn about Christology, but about being Christians who disagree—sometimes adamantly and vociferously—yet without hating one another. For it seems to me that, if we figure out who Jesus is, and in the process ignore what he taught, we have missed the point. It is possible to be genuinely concerned—as the authors of this volume are—to mean the “right thing” when calling Jesus “Lord, Lord,” and yet to recognize that this

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Lord, however his nature is understood, has called those who follow him to live in a certain way.

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ON THE LABELS

CHARLES LEE IRONS ON THE "TRINITARIAN" LABEL

THE TRINITARIAN VIEW OF the identity of Jesus that I wish to defend is the historic position enshrined as church doctrine in the Nicene Creed. It is the position that Jesus is the divine Son of God. Jesus' identity as the Son of God implies his full ontological equality with the Father. Jesus did not become the Son; he always was the Son. There was never a time when the Father was without his Son. The Son, in his very person, not merely through his words, fully reveals the Father, which he could not do if he were a mere creature. Crucial to this understanding is a fundamental metaphysical presupposition that there are only two kinds of being: Creator and creature. Any existing being that has a beginning and a time when it did not exist is a creature. Any existing being that is described in Scripture as having created all things belongs on the Creator side of the Creator-creature distinction. Since the New Testament asserts that God created all things through the Son, the Son must be fully divine and not a creature. In addition to focusing on the Son's eternal preexistence, I also defend his full humanity. This yields a three-phase Christology: (1) eternal preexistence, (2) incarnation, and (3) exaltation. The eternally preexistent Son became man and was exalted to the right hand of God the Father in order to receive divine worship and to exercise divine sovereignty over all things, a worship and a sovereignty that are appropriate because of his ontological deity.