

## *Christological Ambiguities in the Gospel of Matthew*

**D. A. Carson**

[p.97]

Recent study of the Christology embraced by the Gospel of Matthew has usually run along several complementary lines. First, in the age of redaction criticism and the dominance of the two-source hypothesis, careful attention has been given to comparisons (not to say contrasts) between Matthew on the one hand, and Mark and Q on the other.<sup>1</sup> Second, several scholars have focused attention on the meaning and function of particular titles, such as 'Lord',<sup>2</sup> 'Son of God',<sup>3</sup> 'Son of David'<sup>4</sup> and others. Third, others have directed their study to particular passages rich in Christological language and symbolism, and based broad conclusions on their findings. One thinks, for instance, of Michel's seminal study on Matthew 28:16-20,<sup>5</sup> and of the many works that have sprung from it; or, more recently, of Nolan's book on Matthew 1f., which develops a Christology shaped by the Davidic covenant.<sup>6</sup>

[p.98]

With few exceptions, however, these studies assume that because the Evangelist is writing from the perspective of faith, and decades after the events (most scholars believe the Gospel of Matthew was written about AD 85; Gundry, not later than AD 63; and others, from theological positions as polarized as those of William Hendriksen and John A. T. Robinson, place the book at various dates before AD 70), he must reflect a theology contemporaneous with his own *Sitz im Leben*. Inevitably, it is presupposed that the Gospel of Matthew is studded with Christological anachronisms.

The purpose of this paper is to call these assumptions into question, and to suggest replacing them with a subtler construction which more fairly reflects the evidence. If this were a book instead of a short article, it would be necessary to embark upon several rather negative discussions. For instance, it would be necessary to begin with the observation that Matthew chose to write a Gospel about Jesus, and to see where that would take us. Was Matthew himself unaware of his putative anachronisms? If so, then must we assume he was

---

<sup>1</sup> One may think, for instance, of the seminal essay by G. M. Styler, 'Stages in Christology in the Synoptic Gospels', *NTS* 10, 1963-64, pp. 398-409; or of the recent commentary by Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Eerdmans, 1981).

<sup>2</sup> On 'Lord', see Gunther Bornkamm, 'Die Sturmstillung im Mattheusevangelium', *Wort und Dienst* I, 1948, pp.49-54, available in English in G. Bornkamm, G. Barth and H. J. Held, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (SCM, 1963), pp. 52-57 [hereafter *TIM*]; and many others after him.

<sup>3</sup> On 'Son of God', see especially Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew. Structure, Christology, Kingdom* (Fortress, 1975), and the telling critique by David Hill, 'Son and Servant: An essay on Matthean Christology', *JSNT* 6, 1980, pp. 2-16.

<sup>4</sup> On 'Son of David', cf. Dennis C. Duling, 'The Therapeutic Son of David: An Element in Matthew's Christological Apologetic', *NTS* 24, 1978, pp. 392-410; and for greater background, Christoph Burger, *Jesus als Davidssohn* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970).

<sup>5</sup> O. Michel, 'Der Abschluss des Mattheusevangeliums', *Evangelische Theologie* 10, 1950-51, pp. 16-26.

<sup>6</sup> Brian M. Nolan, *The Royal Son of God: The Christology of Matthew 1—2 in the Setting of the Gospel* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979).

anachronistic only sometimes? And exactly how may we distinguish genuine anachronisms, material that is not anachronistic yet not historical, and material that is historical and therefore not anachronistic? On the other hand, if Matthew was aware of his alleged anachronisms, then we must adjust our understanding of what a 'Gospel' is; and we would have to ask whether Matthew intended to be *consistently* anachronistic, reflecting his own times, or selectively so; and if the latter, we would need to know how (or if!) he expected his readers to tell the difference. These questions would take us into complex considerations of literary genre, which cannot be probed here.<sup>7</sup>

Behind them lies another nest of questions concerning the power of redaction criticism. How valid is it to conclude that, because some snippet is redactional and not traditional, it is for that reason not historical? Or, for that matter, how valid is it to assume that because something is judged traditional, it must therefore be historical? How influential on our redaction criticism is the bevy of fairly speculative 'historical' *Sitze im Leben* which are reconstructed almost exclusively on the grounds of form and redaction criticism? What do we know, after all, of Matthew's community (did he have a community?) except by reconstructions that are no more than deductions based on debatable judgments about why he wrote?

Some of these questions I have explored elsewhere, and shall refrain from repeating myself here.<sup>8</sup> I am far from suggesting that redaction criticism is not

[p.99]

a valuable literary tool, when its severe limitations are carefully borne in mind. Equally, I am not suggesting that Matthew attempts to describe the events in Jesus' day with reportorial disinterest. Matthew's Christology is far more subtle than that. Rather, while revealing his own Christological commitments, both by the flow of his argument and by occasional asides and other remarks which he does not put back into the time of Jesus, Matthew carefully avoids outright Christological anachronisms but holds that the frequently ambiguous Christological confessions and claims which transpired in Jesus' day unerringly pointed forward to the full understanding held by the church in the post-resurrection period.

To justify this thesis, I must show three things: first, that at least occasionally Matthew unambiguously reveals his own Christological commitments; second, that the many Christological texts often assumed to be anachronistic are nothing of the kind; and third, that the Evangelist himself intends to show that the confessions and claims which transpired in Jesus' day can only be rightly understood if they are seen to point forward to the full-orbed Christology of his own day. To demonstrate these three comprehensively for each Christological title used by Matthew would require a very thick book. Within the confines of this article I must limit myself to priming the pump: I shall select five of the most prominent Christological terms in the Gospel of Matthew, and sketch out a line of argument which seems to me quite compelling, even if it could be considerably expanded.

---

<sup>7</sup> I have reviewed the most recent commentary which makes substantial appeal to considerations of literary genre—that of Gundry (see n.1, *supra*)—in *Trinity Journal* 3, 1982.

<sup>8</sup> 'Redaction Criticism: On the Use and Abuse of a Literary Tool', in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Zondervan, 1982).

Before embarking on this survey, however, it is worth pausing to remark that the third point which must be shown—that the Evangelist himself intends to show that the Christological confessions and claims which transpired in Jesus' day can only be rightly understood if they are seen to point forward to the full-orbed Christology of his own day—bears an intrinsic probability, if we may judge by the Evangelist's treatment of other themes. In a manner somewhat analogous to the Epistle to the Hebrews, which understands laws, institutions and past redemptive events to have a major *prophetic* function in pointing the way to their fulfilment and culmination in Jesus, so Matthew holds that certain major redemptive appointments in the Old Testament (e.g., the exodus, the exile), and certain prophecies surrounding Old Testament figures (especially David), are not only significant in their own right but enjoy a prophetic function fulfilled in Jesus Messiah. The very structure of the Old Testament revelation, he holds, finds its true culmination in Jesus and the events of his ministry, passion and resurrection.<sup>9</sup> Just as those past events and

[p.100]

words of a bygone period of salvation history find their fulfilment in the ministry of Jesus, so, it may be argued, do the events and words during Jesus' ministry point forward to a maturer understanding achieved by Jesus' disciples only after the resurrection and Pentecost. Again, Matthew quite clearly sees Jesus' ministry in Gentile Galilee, the healing of the (Gentile) centurion's servant and of the (Gentile) Canaanite woman, and the repeated hardness of the Jewish leaders (4:12-17; 8:1-4, 5-13; 15:21-28; 11:20-24; 23:1-39), as unambiguous pointers to world-wide, inter-racial mission, a new extension of the locus of the people of God (24:14; 28:15-20). An Evangelist with such deep sensitivities to the organic connections in redemptive history might almost be *expected* to detect similar connections in the Christological arena.

## Christ

We may begin with 'Christ', the rough Greek equivalent to 'Messiah' or 'Anointed One'. In the Old Testament, the term refers to various people who have been 'anointed' to some special function: priests (Lv. 4:3; 6:22), kings (1 Sa. 16:13; 24:10; 2 Sa. 19:21; La. 4:20), the patriarchs ('anointed' metaphorically; cf. Ps. 105:15), and even the pagan king Cyrus (Is. 45:1). As early as Hannah's prayer, 'messiah' is parallel with 'king': 'the LORD will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed' (1 Sa. 2:10). With the rising number of Old Testament prophecies regarding King David's line (e.g. 2 Sa. 7:12-16; cf. Pss. 2:2; 105:15; Is. 45:1; Dn. 9:25f.), 'Messiah' or 'Christ' became one of the favourite designations of a figure who would represent the people of God and bring in the promised eschatological reign.

The Palestine of Jesus' day was ripe with diverse messianic expectations. Some Jews expected two different 'messiahs'. But the link, in Matthew's first verse (1:1), between 'Jesus Christ' and 'the Son of David', makes it fairly clear just what Matthew is claiming. The Evangelist writes from the perspective of faith: the Jesus about whom he writes is the Messiah.

---

<sup>9</sup> I have dealt with these themes at some length, especially Matthew's use of the Old Testament, in my forthcoming commentary on Matthew (Zondervan).

Syntactically, the absence of the article enables us to go further. It is well known that, on the whole, the Epistles use anarthrous *Christos*, reflecting a time when 'Christ' had become almost a proper name (though we may doubt that it ever lost its titular force completely, even in Paul),<sup>10</sup> whereas the Gospels prefer *ho Christos*, suggesting the earlier period, during Jesus' ministry, when 'Christ' was still purely titular, 'the Messiah'.<sup>11</sup> There are other,

[p.101]

syntactical forces which bear on the question of whether or not the word is articular; but the fundamental distinction between the articular and the anarthrous forms can scarcely be disputed, even if it may be questioned in particular instances. Of the approximately seventeen occurrences (there is an important variant reading at 16:21) of *Christos* in Matthew, all are titular except those in 1:1; probably 1:16; certainly 1:18; and possibly the variant at 16:21. In these instances, including the variant, the Evangelist is unambiguously writing from the confessional stance of his own mature reflection, using the form of the name/title common in the church when he writes. But wherever he describes the events of Jesus' ministry, during which 'Christ' was never a name in any real sense, he uses a titular form (which he also uses in 1:17, part of his own editorial aside, probably because he is there drawing attention not to the *person* of 'Messiah' but to the *time* of 'the Messiah'; cf. 2:4; 11:2; 16:16, 20; 22:42; 23:10; 24:5, 23; 26:63, 68; 27:17, 22). In short, Matthew ably distinguishes between his own linguistic practice and Christological understanding, and that enjoyed by the disciples during the days of Jesus' ministry.

We may go further. The ways these titular usages function in Matthew suggest not only that people during Jesus' ministry never used *Christos* as a personal name (with some residual titular force), but also that no-one during Jesus' ministry understood *Christos* or *ho Christos* in the full, Christian sense presupposed by Matthew. Matthew 2:4 finds the Magi asking where the Christ was to be born. Unlike the leaders of Jerusalem, they, at least, wanted to pay him homage; but there is no hint that they understood him to be a *suffering* 'anointed one', as Matthew did. To Peter, the Father supernaturally reveals Jesus' identity as 'the Christ' (16:16, 20); but he, too, has no category for a suffering and dying Christ (16:21-23). None of the disciples is prepared for Good Friday and Easter. At that distinctly *Christian* level, the level at which the Evangelist operates, no-one but Jesus himself understands in advance just what it means to be 'the Christ'.<sup>12</sup> Elsewhere in Matthew, Jesus can refer to 'the Christ', in a titular sense, and focus in on some other aspect of Christological implication (22:42; 23:10). He can warn against false Christs (24:5, 23). When challenged directly by the high priest as to whether or not he is the

---

<sup>10</sup> See especially N. T. Wright, 'The Messiah and the People of God: A Study in Pauline Theology with Particular Reference to the Argument of the Epistle to the Romans' (D. Phil. thesis, Oxford University, 1980), pp. 9-55, 247ff.

<sup>11</sup> So, for instance, A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Broadman, 1934), pp. 760f., 795.

<sup>12</sup> I am here breaking a trend, developed by Gerhard Barth and popularized in *TIM*, pp. 105ff. He argues that the disciples in Matthew, unlike those pictured in Mark, are characterized by deep understanding which distinguishes them from outsiders. This analysis is mistaken: cf. my commentary (as in n.9, *supra*), and especially Andrew H. Trotter, 'Understanding and Stumbling: A Study of the Disciples' Understanding of Jesus and His Teaching in the Gospel of Matthew' (Ph.D. thesis, Cambridge University, 1982).

[p.102]

Christ, Jesus gives an answer 'affirmative in content but reluctant or circumlocutory in formulation'<sup>13</sup> (26:63f.). From the perspective of the high priest, Jesus has spoken blasphemy; from the Evangelist's perspective, however, the high priest's conclusion is not only in error as to Jesus' messianic identity, but, in a deeply ironic way, it is one step in bringing the Christ to the cross and the ransom-death (20:28) which, as any Christian (like Matthew) could clearly see some time after the event, was the Christ's prime purpose in coming. In exactly the same way, the taunting tormentors (26:68) speak better than they know. Even Pilate does (27:17, 22).

The only other passage in Matthew where [*ho*] *Christos* is used is 11:2, where, we are told, John 'heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ' and sent disciples to question him. At first glance, the passage is rather surprising: Matthew does not normally intrude into his narrative explicit reference to his own Christological convictions. With the exception of the first chapter, he normally prefers to reveal these convictions only by the flow of his narrative. But having established his confessional stance in 1:1, 18, it is scarcely anachronistic for him to let that stance peep through again.

Indeed, there may be an important reason for doing so. Matthew here reminds his readers just who it is the Baptist is doubting. John may doubt; but from Matthew's perspective the time for doubting has passed. The Baptist's doubt, in his own time, was understandable. He had preached of one who was to come with both blessing and judgment (3:11f.);<sup>14</sup> but the only reports he was receiving were of blessing, not judgment. And meanwhile, the forerunner of this putative Messiah was languishing month after month in Machaerus. Within this context, Jesus' response is masterful. He points to the evidence of miracles in his ministry, but in the language of Isaiah 35:5f.; 61:1, with possible further allusions to Isaiah 26:19; 29:18f. Isaiah 61:1 is an explicit messianic passage; Isaiah 35:5f., though it has no messianic figure, describes the return of God's people to Zion with accompanying blessings (*e.g.* restoration of sight). Jesus claims that these messianic visions are being fulfilled in the miracles he is performing; and his preaching the good news to the poor (*cf.* also Mt. 5:3) is as explicit a claim to fulfil the messianic promises of Isaiah 61:1ff. as is Luke 4:17-21. The powers of darkness were being undermined; the kingdom

[p.103]

was advancing (Mt. 11:12; 12:28). But intriguingly, all four of the passages from Isaiah also contain references to judgment, somewhere in the immediate context. We read, 'Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense {better: 'retribution', as in NIV] of God' (Is. 35:4). What Isaiah foresaw was not only the proclamation of 'liberty to the captives' but 'the day of vengeance of our God' (Is. 61:1f.).

---

<sup>13</sup> David R. Catchpole, 'The Answer of Jesus to Caiaphas (Matt. xxvi.64)', *NTS* 17, 1970-71, p.226.

<sup>14</sup> *Cf.* James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (SCM, 1975), pp. 55-60. Dunn's discussion is important. He is interested in asking when the question of Mt. 11:3 would arise. 'The most obvious answer is, *as soon as the note of imminence characteristic of John's preaching was supplanted or at least supplemented by the note of fulfilment characteristic of Jesus' preaching*' (p.59; emphasis his).

Thus, Jesus is allusively responding to the Baptist's deepest concerns. The blessings promised for the end have broken out and prove it is here, even though the judgments are delayed. 'And blessed is he who takes no offence at me' (Mt. 11:6), *i.e.* who does not fall away on account of Jesus. The beatitude in this form assumes the interlocutor has begun well and now must avoid stumbling. It is therefore an implicit challenge to John to re-examine his presuppositions about what the Messiah should be and do in the light of Jesus' fulfilment of Scripture, and to bring his understanding and trust into line with him. But by the time Matthew writes, the problem is largely resolved. It has become clear to Matthew, as to all Christians, *though not transparently so to the Baptist because of his place in salvation history*, that Jesus is truly the Messiah, as attested not only by his miracles but by his death and resurrection; and that the promises of retribution and vengeance, at least those not poured out in the bitter cup which Jesus himself drank (26:27, 39),<sup>15</sup> will find their fulfilment when Messiah returns at the end of the age (13:40-43; 24:36-51; 25:1-46). All of this Matthew clearly understands when he uses 'the Christ' in 11:2.

Detailed comparisons between Matthew and Mark in their respective uses of [*ho*] *Christos* would be interesting, but would take us too far afield, and entangle us in the intricacies of the so-called 'messianic secret' debate. I would be prepared to argue that Mark, too, can distinguish between his own confessional stance regarding 'Christ', and the perceptions of people during the period of Jesus' ministry. Matthew, however, carries through the distinction more systematically and subtly.

### **Son of David**

There are three recent studies of Matthew's use of this title. Kingsbury is primarily interested in arguing that 'Son of David' is less significant title for Matthew than many scholars have assumed, and certainly less important than 'Son of God'.<sup>16</sup> Nolan focuses primarily on Matthew 1 - 2, but rightly argues

[p.104]

that Davidic motifs stretch beyond the title itself and gather strength from almost every chapter in the Gospel; but in the end he associates too many Matthean themes with a Davidic Christology and loses control.<sup>17</sup> Duling shows how Matthew frequently associates 'Son of David' with Jesus' *healing ministry*, and attempts to link this with a peculiar Matthean *Sitz im Leben*, in which the Evangelist is opposing certain Jewish conceptions of 'Son of David';<sup>18</sup> but his Jewish sources are not particularly compelling.

If we are careful not to assume that everyone who takes 'Son of David' on his lips is being presented by Matthew as someone who holds a full-blown 'Son of David Christology', we shall be open to a more nuanced interpretation of the evidence. Matthew certainly holds that

---

<sup>15</sup> On which see especially C. E. B. Cranfield, 'The Cup Metaphor in Mark xiv.36 and Parallels', *ExpT* 59, 1947-48, pp. 137f.

<sup>16</sup> Jack Dean Kingsbury, 'The Title "Son of David" in Matthew's Gospel', *JBL* 95, 1976, pp.591-602.

<sup>17</sup> B. M. Nolan, as in n.6, *supra*.

<sup>18</sup> *Cf.* n.4, *supra*.

Jesus is the 'Son of David' and stands in the royal succession (1:1, 6, 17 [*bis*], 20).<sup>19</sup> These verses find no parallel in Mark. For Matthew, the title is not only equivalent to saying that Jesus is the promised Christ (1:1), but that he fulfils the promises God made to David (2 Sa. 7:12-16) and reiterated through the prophets (*e.g.* Is. 9:6f.). For at least some Jews in Jesus' day, 'Son of David' was an accepted messianic title (*cf.* Psalms of Solomon 17:21), and became an important theme in early Christianity, one that was frequently tied up with Christianity's Scriptures (*cf.* Lk. 1:32, 39; Jn. 7:42; Acts 13:23; Rom. 1:3; Rev. 22:16). Matthew opens his Gospel in ways that show he stands in this Christian train.

Matthew's remaining uses of 'Son of David', however, are more subtle; and none is demonstrably anachronistic, while collectively they point toward a fully Christian understanding of the term. The mention of David in Matthew 12:3 (paralleled in Mk. 2:25), in the context of debate with the Pharisees, may presuppose a 'Son of David' Christology in Jesus' mind; but the exegetical factors which bear on the question are too complex to be weighed here. More interesting are the frequent uses of 'Son of David' on the lips of those seeking healing or exorcism ('Have mercy on us, Son of David': Mt. 9:27; 15:22; 20:30f.), heightened by the wondering question of the crowds after one such miracle: 'Can this be the Son of David?' (12:23) The same theme is not unknown in Mark (*cf.* 10:47f.), but is much stronger in Matthew. Hill rightly remarks, 'The use of the Davidic title is less extraordinary in address to Jesus than some think: in Palestine, in the time of Jesus, there was an intense Messianic expectation.'<sup>20</sup> Small wonder: the messianic age was to be a time

[p.105]

when 'the eyes of the blind [would be] opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped', when 'the lame man [would] leap like a hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy' (Is. 35:5)—a point which, as we have seen, Jesus can make in the context of the title *ho Christos*, when he is answering the Baptist's doubts (Mt. 11:46).

It appears, therefore, that 'the Christ' and 'the Son of David' overlap considerably in their significance. If 'Son of David' bears distinctive emphasis, it conjures up the image of a king and his kingdom. That is why the same pericope which harbours the question, 'Can this be the Son of David?' (12:23), also records Jesus' conclusion, after the same exorcism: 'But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the *kingdom of God* has come upon you' (12:28). The anointed one ('the Christ') is the anointed king ('the Son of David'); and if he is exercising his kingly authority to fulfil messianic expectation, then the messianic kingdom ('the kingdom of God') must have dawned.

So, at least, reasoned those who were most in need of Jesus' help. The Pharisees had other interpretations of Jesus' miracles (*e.g.* 12:24). Small wonder the needy were among the first to glimpse Jesus' identity: they had most to gain by their hope. They constituted the complementary side of an important truth: Jesus came to those in need of a physician (9:12f.).

Something similar transpires in Matthew 21:9, 15. There, 'Son of David' is not connected with healing or exorcism; but this title is certainly messianic, and portrays the crowd (21:9)

---

<sup>19</sup> On the significance of the genealogy, see the extended discussion in my commentary (as in n.9).

<sup>20</sup> David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Marshall, Morgan and, Scott, 1972), p.180.

and then the children (21:15—influenced by the crowd, and less inhibited, even in the temple precincts), as those who recognized Jesus' identity at the time of his triumphal entry. Interestingly, Luke's account (19:38) omits reference to the 'Son of David', but rightly understands its significance: 'Blessed is *the King who comes in the name of the Lord!*' Some scholars reject the authenticity of this event, even though it appears in all four Gospels, or suggest that 'Son of David' could not have been a messianic description, on the grounds that a messianic acclamation on the lips of the people would have forced the authorities to intervene. Perhaps, it is argued, the phrase 'Hosanna to the Son of David' is nothing more than a formula of greeting addressed to pilgrims on their way to the temple. These suggestions are far-fetched. As all the Gospels report the event, the cries were messianic. How else shall we explain the fact that the authorities *do* raise objections (21:16)? But the authorities had enough sense not to antagonize the crowds whose hope and expectation were at fever pitch (*cf.* 26:4f, 16). Equally significant is the fact that Jesus is prepared to accept the praise of the children, and defend it (21:16; see further below).

None of this is historically implausible, and many fine points could be addressed in favour of the story's essential authenticity. On the other hand, this

[p.106]

should not be taken to mean that the crowd, the children or the opposing Jewish leaders saw in 'Son of David' everything that Matthew saw. This is made clear by Matthew 22:41-46 (*cf.* also Mk. 12:35-37; Lk. 20:41-44). All agree that the Jewish leaders accepted the identification of 'the Christ' with 'the Son of David'.<sup>21</sup> The problem is posed by Jesus' question as to how the Messiah can be the Son of David. Psalm 110 opens with the words, 'The LORD said unto my Lord'; this psalm, acknowledged to be Davidic in authorship and messianic in reference, therefore presents the Messiah in a position superior to that of David. How can David's son also be his lord? Matthew records: 'And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did any one dare to ask him any more questions' (22:46). In other words, in Matthew's assessment, Jesus' contemporaries were stuck. Their categories for 'Messiah' and 'Son of David' could not accommodate the scriptural data. A 'Son of David' who would restore something of the grandeur of David's kingdom, eliminate the Roman overlords, and introduce 'messianic' blessings, they could understand; and exuberant crowds might joyfully and hopefully proclaim Jesus to be just such a Messiah. But no-one during Jesus' ministry could integrate into this pattern the notion that this Messiah was also David's *lord*.

Where the Jewish authorities were silenced, modern scholars have chosen to speak and offer diverse interpretations of this pericope. Some hold that the passage denies the identification of Messiah with Son of David;<sup>22</sup> but Matthew 1:1 shows that was not Matthew's view, and Matthew 21:16 suggests it was not Jesus' view. Others argue for a two-stage Christology developing in the church: 'Son of David' applies to the span of Jesus' human life, 'Christ' to the risen Lord.<sup>23</sup> Nothing in the text supports this view: it is the imposition of a scheme

---

<sup>21</sup> *Cf.* G. F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era 2* (Harvard University Press, 1930), pp. 328f.; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Essays on the Semitic Background of the New Testament* (Geoffrey Chapman, 1971), pp. 113-126; Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (IVP, 1981), pp.253-256.

<sup>22</sup> They follow in the wake of W. Wrede, *The Messianic Secret* (ET James Clarke, 1971), p.46.

<sup>23</sup> So F. Hahn, *The Titles of Jesus in Christology* (ET Lutterworth, 1969), pp. 247f.



developed elsewhere. Still others think the passage is concerned to deny all political expectations of messiahship without denying Davidic descent.<sup>24</sup> But although political considerations are prominent elsewhere (e.g. Jn. 6:15), and are presupposed at several points in Matthew's Gospel, the central issue in this pericope is not political but theological and exegetical.

The point is that, although none of Jesus' contemporaries grasped the answer to the conundrum raised by Jesus, Matthew knows what the answer is. Writing after the resurrection and Pentecost, after the period of relative

[p.107]

uncertainty and of traditional Christological categories too narrow to accommodate the evidence, Matthew perceives that Jesus legally stood in the royal line and was in truth David's son (hence the genealogy in Mt. 1, and the frequent references to Davidic fulfilment motifs); yet Jesus was also in fact the Son of God, virgin born, superior to David, the risen Lord, the one through whom all of God's sovereignty is now mediated (28:18-20). From Matthew's perspective, it was easy enough to see how Jesus could be David's lord, while yet being his son.

It follows that there is only one way Matthew could have interpreted the pericope. The enigma Jesus proposes is an invitation, indeed a challenge, to re-think their current Christological presuppositions by measuring them against Scripture. The affirmations of the crowds at the triumphal entry, the children in the temple courts, the blind who desired sight, might all cry out that Jesus is the 'Son of David'; and the Jewish leaders might with equal enthusiasm deny it. As for Jesus, he not only tacitly accepts that he is the Son of David (as in 21:16), but suggests that the Scriptures picture a Son of David who is also David's Lord—and that therefore the conceptions of both supportive crowd and opposing Pharisee are too narrow. The most the acclamations do is affirm part of the truth, and thereby point to the full truth of the matter not fully understood until the period after Jesus' resurrection and exaltation.

Once again, therefore, we have discovered Matthew's capacity for distinguishing between the Christological understanding of Jesus' contemporaries, and his own. Doubtless he wants his readers to see the full significance of 'Christ' and 'Son of David', even as he does; but he does not compromise the authenticity of his account to achieve this end. Rather, he shows how the imperfect understanding and faith of those who at least were right in their identification of Jesus, pointed to the full truth which Jesus alone grasped during the period of his ministry, but which the church came in time to embrace.

## **Lord**

There are so many occurrences of this title in Matthew that even a hasty examination of each passage is not possible in this essay.

To simplify matters a little, the modern trend can be sketched in somewhat as follows. In his essay on the stilling of the storm, Bornkamm<sup>25</sup> noted that in Matthew (8:23-27; cf. Mk. 4:35-

---

<sup>24</sup> O. Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (ET SCM, Z 1963), pp. 131f.

<sup>25</sup> *TIM*, p.55.

41; Lk. 8:22-25) the disciples cry, 'Save, Lord, we are perishing.' Instead of *Kyrie*, Mark has *Didaskale* and Luke has *epstata*. Bornkamm argues that, unlike Mark and Luke, Matthew has designated

[p.108]

Jesus 'not only ... with a human title of respect, but with a divine predicate of majesty. This is obviously the meaning of *kyrie*'.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, Matthew uses *kyrios* comparatively more often than do the other Synoptists. In a later essay,<sup>27</sup> Bornkamm carried the argument farther, pointing out that in Matthew Pharisees and strangers can refer to Jesus in such terms as *didaskalos*, but the disciples, with the exception of Judas Iscariot, do not: they refer to him as *kyrios*, and this, for Matthew, is a predicate of divine majesty. Stanton remarks, 'Most scholars have accepted this view.'<sup>28</sup> The inevitable implication, of course, is that the Evangelist was anachronistically reading back a view of Jesus not actually found until the time of his own *Sitz im Leben*. Gundry<sup>29</sup> has honed this view yet farther, and argues that the Evangelist was constantly creating scenes or embroidering scenes to present Jesus' full deity and the response of adoring worship. For instance, when the Magi see Jesus and his mother they *pesontes prosekynēsan autō*, which, according to Gundry, means they fell down and worshipped Jesus in the fullest sense, recognizing his deity and kingship. (Gundry, of course, does not think of this as either great insight by the Magi nor blundering anachronism by the Evangelist, since he holds that the story of the Magi has no historical referent, but only theological purpose.)<sup>30</sup>

At first glance, the evidence appears persuasive; but once again, a subtler interpretation more fairly reflects the evidence. Bornkamm neglects to mention that, although in the Gospel of Matthew Jesus' disciples do not address him as *didaskalos*, yet Jesus refers to *himself* in that term, *in the context of discussing his relationship with his followers* (10:25f.; 23:18; 26:18). Some of the 'strangers' who thus address Jesus are, after all, inquirers (8:19; 19:16). Although it is true that Jesus' opponents can address him as *didaskalos* while trying to trip him up (12:38; 22:16, 24, 36), they can also address the disciples and refer to Jesus as 'your teacher' (9:11; 17:24). I have now given all of Matthew's references to *didaskalos*; and they seem a narrow base to support the weight of the thesis that for Matthew this term is inferior.

Of course, the thesis rests in part on the observation that Matthew is rather fond of *kyrios*, and sometimes prefers it even when the Synoptic parallels preserve something else. But it does not necessarily follow that Matthew is

[p.109]

ascribing full deity to Jesus every time he applies *kyrios* to him. Bornkamm does not reckon adequately with the range of Matthean usage. The word often turns up in the parables, where,

---

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> First published as 'Enderwartung und Kirche im Matthäusevangelium', in *The Background of the New Testament and its Eschatology*, ed. W. D. Davies and D. Daube (Cambridge, 1956), p.41; ET in *TIM*, pp. 15ff.

<sup>28</sup> Graham N. Stanton, 'The Origin and Purpose of Matthew's Gospel: Matthean Scholarship from 1945 to 1980', *Aufstieg and Niedergang der Römischen Welt* (Walter de Gruyter, 1982), forthcoming.

<sup>29</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew* (as in n. 1, *supra*), pp. 31f.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. n.7, *supra*, for further discussion of Gundry's approach.

even if the *kyrios* represents Jesus, it first and foremost refers to a human individual in the parabolic story itself (13:27; 18:25ff; 20:8; 21:30, 40; 25:11ff.; cf. 10:24f.). One of these examples pictures a son addressing his father as *kyrios* (21:30). More impressive yet, Pilate is addressed as *kyrios* by the chief priests and Pharisees (27:63). It follows that *kyrios* is not a technical term for Matthew, and cannot be assumed to bear the weight of deity. It may carry only its common force of respect to a superior. Matthew's demonstrable proclivity for it may spring from personal usage rather than profound, theological motivation. In two or three instances, as we shall see, *kyrios* as used in Matthew certainly hints at something more than mere respect; but when this occurs, the context calls for such a conclusion. But as far as the stilling of the storm is concerned, it is hard to see why we should think that *kyrios* predicated 'divine majesty' of Jesus, instead of serving as yet another example of the reportorial freedom exhibited by all the Evangelists. After all, the pericope ends with the following question by the astonished disciples: 'What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?' (8:27). The question is singularly out of place if by *kyrios* they have already predicated 'divine majesty' of Jesus. Similarly, it is very doubtful if *proskyneō* by itself or in connection with *piptō* suggests anything more than obeisance, homage: note the usage in 18:26; 20:20.

This is not to say that Matthew entertains no notion of Jesus' deity. Quite the contrary: there is bountiful evidence that the idea is important to him. But he handles the theme with the kind of restraint which makes Jesus' claims all the more plausible. In a number of places, an Old Testament text which refers to Yahweh is applied to Jesus without any sense of impropriety (e.g. 3:3; 11:9-11). The same thing occurs in connection with broader themes: for instance, in Matthew 5:11f. the disciples of Jesus are likened to the Old Testament prophets of God, so far as suffering for righteousness is concerned. In this parallel, Jesus is not likened to prophets (as are the disciples), but to God. Again, in Matthew 7:15-23, Jesus ascribes to himself the ultimate judicial function which belongs to God alone. More broadly, Philip B. Payne has demonstrated at some length how often, in Jesus' parables, images which in the Old Testament are applied exclusively to God now quite clearly stand for Jesus (sower, director of the harvest, rock, shepherd, bridegroom, father, king, vineyard owner, etc.).<sup>31</sup> Moreover, in Jesus' quotation of Psalm 110 (in

[p.110]

Mt. 22:41-46), already discussed, the remark of Guthrie seems appropriate: 'If Jesus acknowledged himself to be Messiah, and admitted in the course of the dialogue that the psalmist addresses the Messiah as Lord, it is tantamount to recognizing the title as applicable to himself.'<sup>32</sup> Again, in Jesus' defence of the children's 'Hosannas!', he cites Psalm 8: 'Have you never read, "Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast brought perfect praise"?' (21:16). This response is a masterpiece. It not only provides a biblical basis for letting the children go on with their exuberant praise, thus stifling, for the moment, the objections of the authorities; but, at the same time, it also encourages thoughtful persons to reflect, especially after the resurrection, that Jesus is saying more than first meets the eye. The children's 'Hosannas', after all, were not being directed to God, but to the Son of David, the Messiah. Jesus is therefore not only acknowledging he is the Son of David, but he is daring to justify the praise of the children by applying to himself a passage of the Scripture referring

---

<sup>31</sup> Philip B. Payne, 'Jesus' Implicit Claim to Deity in His Parables', *Trinity Journal* 2, 1981, pp. 3-23.

<sup>32</sup> Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, p.293.

exclusively to God.<sup>33</sup> The same sort of assessment must be made when Jesus forgives sin, a prerogative of God alone (9:1-8).

Now there is no doubt that the post-resurrection church came in time to apply *kyrios* to Jesus in the same way in which the LXX used *kyrios* as a reference to God. But from the evidence I have just outlined, it appears premature either to minimize the Christological implications of Jesus' historical self-disclosure, or to exaggerate the amount of creative tinkering Matthew allegedly performed on the tradition in order to make the *recognition* of Jesus' deity retroactive, as it were, to the period of Jesus' ministry. Rather, Matthew records all kinds of subtle claims regarding Jesus' deity, made by Jesus himself; and he records all kinds of acts of homage or obeisance, each pointing forward to the full understanding which came to the disciples only *after* the resurrection. That no-one really enjoyed such understanding *before* the passion is obvious: otherwise there would have been no passion. Certainly Matthew rather favours *kyrios* and *proskyneō*; doubtless some of the reasons cannot be retrieved with any degree of certainty. But it appears that one of the contributing factors, at least in some of his usages, is that the words are ambiguous. Interpreted narrowly, the words do not permit an anachronistic reading of the church's mature theology back

[p.111]

into Jesus' day; yet at the same time, no reader in Matthew's day could fail to read those same words without recognizing that the full response of worship before Deity is required by his or her full understanding of the Gospel, an understanding achieved in part by being located a little later in the flow of redemptive history than those who knew Jesus in the days of his flesh.

### **Son of God**

It quickly becomes clear that this and related expressions are very important in the Gospel of Matthew (2:15; 3:17; 4:3, 6; 8:29; 14:33; 16:16; 17:5; 26:54; 27:40, 43, 54; *cf.* also certain parables, especially 21:33ff.). Matthew preserves almost all of Mark's references to Son (of God), takes over three from Q material, but adds six of his own. Moreover, the theme is probably related to another, *viz.* God as Father, of great importance to Matthew.

I cannot here enter debate on whether 'Son of God' is the paramount Christological confession in Matthew,<sup>34</sup> nor examine peculiarities in Matthew's treatment of the title (*e.g.* his clear linkage of Jesus the Son with Israel the Son, 2:15; 4:3, 6),<sup>35</sup> nor even examine each passage closely to defend the authenticity of what is purported to have taken place. It is sufficient for my purposes to show that *in principle* there is no historical implausibility in thinking that Jesus during his ministry was confessed as Son of God, that good arguments can

---

<sup>33</sup> This argument, of course, presupposes that Ps. 8 is not messianic. This is almost certainly the case. Even in the NT, application of Ps. 8 to Jesus (1 Cor 15:27; Heb. 2:6) is due not to any messianic character of the psalm, but to Jesus' role in introducing humanity to the heights God designed for it—as most commentators now acknowledge. The earliest treatment of Ps. 8 as messianic by ancient Jewish authorities is the targum on Ps. 8 (*cf.* F. J. Maloney, 'The Targum on Ps. 8 and the New Testament', *Salesianum* 37, 1975, pp. 326-336) which almost certainly postdates the NT.

<sup>34</sup> *Cf.* n.3, *supra*.

<sup>35</sup> For convenient and recent discussion, *cf.* James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (SCM, 1980), pp.48-50; Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, pp. 303-312.

be advanced for even the most difficult occurrences, and that in any case the understanding held by the participants during Jesus' lifetime is demonstrably short of that of the Evangelist himself.

Pre-Christian Jewish literature does not provide us with uncontested evidence that 'Son of God' was used as a title for the expected Messiah; but 4QFlor.10-14 comes close, referring to an apocalyptic figure who is the son of a king, presumably David, and thus picks up Old Testament references to a royal 'son'.<sup>36</sup> Not less important, three Synoptic passages make the connection between 'Son of God' and 'Christ' explicit. In Matthew 26:63f. (*cf.* Mk. 14:61f.; Lk. 22:66f.), the high priest, Caiaphas, says, 'I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the *Christ, the Son of God*.' Again, in Luke 4:41, when the demons cry to Jesus, 'You are the *Son of God*', Luke comments that Jesus would not allow them to speak 'because they knew that he was *the Christ*'. The third, and by far the most important and the most complex, is Matthew

[p.112]

16:16 (*cf.* Mk. 8:29; Lk. 9:20), where Matthew's account adds to Peter's famous confession 'You are the Christ' the equally famous apposition, 'the Son of the living God'. The majority of contemporary scholars assign 'the Son of the living God' to Matthean redaction and judge it inauthentic. Recently, however, Meyer has offered substantial reasons for judging the Matthean addition authentic.<sup>37</sup> At the risk of oversimplifying his well-crafted arguments, we may list the most prominent: 1. Matthew's account better explains the genesis of all the other forms, including 'You are the Christ' (Mk.), 'The Christ of God' (Lk.), and 'the Holy One of God' (Jn. 6:69), than can Mark's simpler confession. 2. 'Son of God' may well have had *for Peter* no more than purely messianic significance. If so, it does not, *as far as Peter is concerned*, say much more than *ho Christos*. 3. There are several details in the pericope as a whole which plead Matthean priority (especially in 16:17-19).

Some other passages present various difficult questions, but no reason to doubt their authenticity. It is not entirely clear, for instance, whether the confession of the centurion and his men, 'Truly this was the Son of God!' (27:54), should be taken in a hellenistic, pagan sense (they perceived Jesus to be some kind of 'divine' being, in a pagan sense), or in the Jewish sense (they perceived him to be the Messiah: *cf.* Mt. 16:16 and 26:63). Certainly the lack of an article with *huios* is no impediment to the latter view;<sup>38</sup> and since Pilate's soldiers were probably non-Jewish natives of the land, rather than Romans from far-off pagan lands, it is intrinsically likely that they were familiar with Jewish categories. In any case, there is no historical implausibility in the account.

It appears, then, that Matthew is able to distinguish several things from one another. Demons, soldiers, disciples—all can confess Jesus as 'the Son of God', within the period of Jesus' ministry. By this they do not mean more than that they perceive Jesus to be the Messiah, the Christ; and even their understanding of 'Christ' remains totally inadequate, as we have seen,

---

<sup>36</sup> *Cf.* Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *A Wandering Aramaean: Collected Aramaic Essays* (Scholars Press, 1978), pp. 102-107. For full discussion, *cf.* M. Hengel, *The Son of God* (Fortress, 1976).

<sup>37</sup> Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (SCM, 1979), pp.189-191.

<sup>38</sup> *Cf.* C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom-Book of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge, 1959), p.116.

since it does not include anything of the suffering Servant, or of an ontological connection with Deity. At a second level, Jesus himself reflects a level of self-conscious sonship with his Father which finds its climactic statement in Matthew 11:25-30. I have discussed the critical questions surrounding these difficult verses elsewhere,<sup>39</sup> but at very least they reflect Matthew's recognition that Jesus enjoyed an astonishing reciprocity with his Father. It is one thing to say 'no one knows the Son except the Father'; it is quite another to say 'no one knows the Father except

[p.113]

the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him'. But Matthew does not pretend that this was understood by the first disciples; and certainly nothing like it is presented in the form of a confession. As with Jesus' pre-passion references to his death and resurrection, and as with Jesus' bifocal relationship to David, so also here: some Christological truths were not understood until after Jesus' resurrection and exaltation. *And Matthew is able and willing to tell the difference*. This is made especially clear when we look at a third level of Christological understanding, that of Matthew himself. Although 'Son of God' is not used in Matthew 1-2, it has often been demonstrated that the account of Jesus' virginal conception is meant to show that Jesus was not only 'Son of David' (1:1-17) but also 'Son of God' (1:18-20).<sup>40</sup> No reader of Matthew's Gospel could go through his text without knowing something that the people of Jesus' day did not know; and thus from Matthew's perspective they would be brought to see how the early confession of Jesus as 'the Son of God' pointed to deeper truths than the first confessors could have recognized.

## Son of man

Even more complex ambiguities surround the title 'the Son of man'. Elsewhere I have tried to assess recent research on this topic.<sup>41</sup> Although I cannot argue the case here, it is likely that Jesus chose 'the Son of man' as his favourite self-designation *precisely because it was ambiguous*.<sup>42</sup> It could conceal as well as reveal. At times, it was no more than a self-reference; but always lurking in the background was the eschatological figure of Daniel 7, so that especially toward the end of his ministry, whether alone with his disciples and talking about eschatological matters (24:27, 30), or when under oath at his trial (26:63), Jesus could use the title with unambiguous messianic significance. Simultaneously, we should not shy away from the observations of Bowker,<sup>43</sup> who points out how many Semitic contexts (Ezk., Ps. 8, the Targums) use the title to make explicit the chasm between frail, mortal man and God himself. This kind of connotation admirably suits a number of Synoptic references where the frailty, suffering and death of the 'Son of man' is in view. It is best to suppose

---

<sup>39</sup> As in n. 9, *supra*.

<sup>40</sup> The issues are complex. Cf. R. E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Geoffrey Chapman, 1977), pp. 122ff.; Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew*, pp. 42-53; and the classic work of J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1930).

<sup>41</sup> See the Excursus "'The Son of Man' as a Christological title" in the commentary referred to in n.9, *supra*.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Richard N. Longenecker, "'Son of Man' Imagery: Some Implications for Theology and Discipleship', *JETS* 18, 1975, pp.8-12; I. Howard Marshall, *The Origins of New Testament Christology* (IVP, 1976), pp. 76ff.; E. Schweizer, 'The Son of Man', *JBL* 79, 1960, p.128.

<sup>43</sup> John Bowker, 'The Son of Man', *JTS* 28, 1977, pp. 19-48.

[p.114]

that Jesus purposely combined these multiform backgrounds, precisely because his own understanding of messiahship was laced with themes both of royal authority and of suffering and death. It would have been extraordinarily difficult for Jews expecting a purely political Messiah to grasp exactly what the title meant; and just when they might begin to think they had nailed it down, it would show some other hue and slip from their grasp again—*until after the resurrection and exaltation*. At that point, Jesus' disciples could not help but detect in Jesus' frequent pre-passion use of the term a messianic claim. It is a mark of the Evangelists' (including Matthew's) fidelity to the history of redemption that they reserve the expression for the lips of Jesus alone.

Much more could be said about each of these Christological titles; and others (*e.g.* 'servant', 'the coming one') have not even been introduced. But enough has been said to conclude that Matthew successfully attempted to distinguish between his own Christological understanding at the time he wrote, and that of Jesus' contemporaries, including his disciples, during the days of his ministry. Yet at the same time, he set forth his Gospel in such a way that he revealed his own Christological commitments, and showed what conclusions he expected his readers to draw. All of the titles take on new light in the wake of the cross and the empty tomb; and yet the pre-passion usages anticipate and point to the fullness of revelation about to dawn.

In short, close study shows Matthew to be both faithful historian and profound theologian, and very much interested in the question 'how we moved from there to here'. Doubtless this analysis could be developed into a book-length monograph; but it is offered in this form to honour a scholar with high respect for the text of Scripture, a Christian who places little value on uncontrolled speculation, whose cautious scholarship is always reverent and fair, and whose most valued works, while conservative, never stoop to obscurantism or obfuscation. *In multos annos!*

---

© 1982 Inter-Varsity Press. Reproduced by permission of the publisher.

Prepared for the Web In October 2006 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

---

The Gospel According to Matthew is the first book of the New Testament and one of the three synoptic gospels. It tells how Israel's Messiah, rejected and executed in Israel, pronounces judgement on Israel and its leaders and becomes the salvation of the gentiles. The gospel reflects the struggles and conflicts between the evangelist's community and the other Jews, particularly with its sharp criticism of the scribes and Pharisees: prior to the Crucifixion they are referred to as Israelites, the The Gospel of Matthew, easy to navigate and thematic images. Read and listen to the Gospel of Matthew in English and other languages of the world. 23 And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people. 24 And his fame went throughout all Syria: and they brought unto him all sick people that were taken with divers diseases and torments, and those which were possessed with devils, and those which were lunatick, and those that had the palsy; and he healed them. 3 D.A. Carson, "Christological Ambiguities in the Gospel of Matthew," in *Christ the Lord. Studies in Christology Presented to Donald Guthrie*, ed. Harold H. Rowdon (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1982), 111. 4 Bauer, "The structure of Matthew's gospel: A study in literary design," 145. 1. 842066O Mary Jones days in the wilderness when each time, he is able to resist temptation turning instead, to the wisdom of the Old Testament (Mt 4:1-11). Jesus is described by God, Peter, centurions and demons as the Son of God and describes himself in this way also. 5 In the passag



