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THE UNIQUENESS OF CHRIST: THE NEW TESTAMENT WITNESS

by T. FRANCIS GLASSON

DR. GLASSON, Lecturer in New Testament Studies at New College, University of London, is well known for his writings on Christian eschatology. The present paper, originally read to a group of university teachers of theology meeting at King's College, London, deals with an issue of unsurpassed importance for the nature of Christianity and of Christian witness in the world.

A FEW years ago in India a Christian girl, a student in a Basic Education Training College, was asked by the Hindu principal why she refused to join in the singing of a lyric in praise of Krishna when the Hindu girls were quite happy to join in the singing of "All hail the power of Jesus' name". The girl tried to explain and eventually blurted out, "I can't sing to anyone but Jesus". The deeply rooted feeling at the basis of the girl's refusal has been present in the Christian tradition from the outset. We are sometimes apt to imagine that it is in recent times that this question has arisen in an acute form, and that the encounter with other faiths and our deeper knowledge of a variety of religious leaders and teachers has brought a new issue to us, "Is there a way to God for man apart from Jesus Christ?" But in one form or another this question has been before the Church from the first century. Can Jesus be co-ordinated with other figures; is he one of a wider class or unique?

I would like to refer to a few New Testament contexts which are particularly relevant: Mark 8: 27-9: 8; Col. 1: 15-17; Heb. 1: 1-3; and John 1: 1-18, passages which come from four different writers.

I

The transfiguration story should be taken in close conjunction with the confession of Peter at Caesarea Philippi. Men had been debating the problem "who Jesus was". Some had suggested he was John the Baptist raised from the dead; or it may be that some were saying, "This is just John the Baptist all over again", as though history were repeating itself. Others thought that Elijah had re-appeared in accordance with the promise of Mal. 4; others that Jesus was another prophet like the great prophets of the Old Testament. "But who say ye that I am?" asks Jesus. "You are the Messiah." Jesus replies in terms of "the Son of man", foretells

His sufferings and gives the conditions of discipleship. Then follows the Transfiguration story, which could be regarded as a divine confirmation of what Peter had affirmed, though carrying his confession into far deeper waters. With the glorified Jesus there appear Moses, representing the Law, and Elijah representing the prophets. Peter cries, and it is his statement that I would emphasize, "Let us make three tabernacles, one for Moses, one for Elijah, and one for thee". Jesus is thus placed on a level, as it were, with the two great figures of Old Testament faith. The evangelist excuses him with the words, "He knew not what to answer". But the vision swiftly changes. The divine voice declares, "This is my beloved Son; hear ye him"; Moses and Elijah disappear and they see no one but Jesus only.

The historicity of these events is not our immediate concern. Some scholars have objected to the Caesarea Philippi incident on the ground that Jesus knew perfectly well what men were saying about Him without asking. This, however, ignores the well-established fact that He often taught by asking questions; He asked them not because He was seeking information but because He wanted to stimulate men's minds.¹ With regard to the much more difficult narrative of the Transfiguration, there is a widely held view that this is a Resurrection story which has become misplaced. This is only a possibility and I would refer to A. M. Ramsey's book on the subject for a more likely explanation and a full discussion.² But for our present purpose these matters are not of primary importance. This is a part of the New Testament witness about Christ. Note particularly the words of Mark 9: 5 and 7: "three tabernacles, one for thee, one for Moses, one for Elijah". Is not this in line with later attempts which have been made, right up to the present day, to put Jesus in a pantheon? But the divine voice declares, "This is my beloved Son". Jerome makes the comment, "Thou dost err, Peter; and . . . knowest not what thou sayest: Think not to seek three tabernacles, when there is one tabernacle of the gospel in which law and prophets are to be recapitulated. But if thou seekest three tabernacles do not make the servants equal with the Lord . . ." As R. H. Lightfoot has put it, "St. Peter in his halting, frightened utterances equates the three celestial figures, Moses, Elijah, and the Lord. 'Let us make three tabernacles . . .' But the heavenly voice corrects his error;

¹ Cf. also Dr. Morna Hooker's positive approach to the incident (*The Son of Man in Mark*, 104).

² *Glory of God and Transfiguration of Christ*.

“this (person only), *he is my unique Son; hear ye him*’.”³

The word for beloved, *agapētos*, is often used for “only”, and this may well be the meaning here. In this case it would be equivalent to *monogenēs*. The stress upon the word Son is characteristic of Mark from the opening verse⁴ to the centurion’s words at the Crucifixion, “Truly this man was the Son of God” (15: 39). Jesus Himself in the parable of the Wicked Labourers distinguished the messengers sent to collect the produce of the vineyard from the one who was finally sent: “He had yet one, a beloved son: he sent him last unto them saying, They will reverence my son” (12: 6). According to 13: 32, a saying which could hardly have been invented by the early Church since it ascribes ignorance to Jesus, he speaks absolutely of the Father and the Son, the latter being named after the angels: “But of that day or that hour knoweth no one, not even the angels in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father”.

All this is in keeping with Mark’s opening section. He quotes from Isa. 40: 3, “the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make ye ready the way of the Lord”. In Isa. 40 there is no mention of the Messiah; the one whose way is prepared is indicated in 40: 9-10, “Behold your God. Behold the Lord God will come . . .”. V. Taylor is surely right in saying that in Mark Jesus is presented as *Deus absconditus*. “The sheer humanity of the Markan portraiture” (he writes) “catches the eye of the most careless reader; and yet, it is but half seen if it is not perceived that this Man of Sorrows is also a Being of supernatural origin and dignity, since He is the Son of God”.⁵

II

In the early Church it appears that attempts were made by incipient Gnostics to fit Christ into some kind of hierarchy. This provides the background for Colossians. Asia Minor, as we know, was a hot-bed of syncretism and all sorts of amalgams could be found in which Jewish and pagan ideas provided ingredients. Where could Jesus be accommodated? It was admitted that He was beyond the limitations of human categories. But somewhere, perhaps, among the supernatural beings which flourished so plentifully, principalities, powers and the rest, some niche could be found for him. But the Christian answer to all these attempts

³ *Gospel Message of St. Mark*, p. 43. Cf. C. H. Turner’s commentary on St. Mark, at 9: 5; and his note on *agapētos* in the comment on 1: 11.

⁴ “Son of God” should probably be retained here as in R.S.V. and N.E.B.

⁵ V. Taylor, *Mark*, 121.

is clear. It is Christ "who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation (*prōtotokos*; NEB, his is the primacy over all created things), for in him were all things created, in the heavens and upon the earth, things visible and things invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers; all things have been created through him and unto him; and he is before all things, and in him all things consist" (Col. 1: 15-17).

Reading Paul's letters is a little bit like reading the answers to examination questions when you have lost the question paper. Usually it is possible to divine the problem that is being handled, but not always! So with Paul's correspondence; we can usually surmise the situation and the matters that have been referred or reported to him. And in regard to Colossae it makes sense to assume that there was a mixture of Jewish, Gnostic and Christian ideas and in the resultant scheme Christ was only one among a number of supernatural powers. Paul's answer to this is uncompromising and the words just quoted make it clear that whatever powers there may be, angelic or demonic, Christ is above them all, their very existence came about through Him. Colossian Christians were complete in Christ "for in him the whole fulness (*plērōma*) of deity dwells" (2: 9-10); they had no need to supplement their faith in Christ by superfluous asceticism or secret gnosis or the worship of angelic beings. Christ is all and in all.

In his commentary on this epistle C. F. D. Moule has written:

It is worth the effort to recall that these stupendous words apply . . . to one who, only some 30 years before (and possibly less), had been crucified. The identification of that historical person—the Nazarene who had been ignominiously executed—with the subject of this description is staggering, and fairly cries out for some explanation.

He finds the main answer in the Resurrection.

III

In the Epistle to the Hebrews the uniqueness of Christ is equally clear. T. W. Manson suggested that this epistle was sent to the same area as the Colossian letter. In this way he explains the attention given to angels in Heb. 1-2. But, quite apart from such possibilities, this passage is sufficiently explained by the tradition that the law was given through angels, and everything in ch. 1 is intended to lead up to the warning of 2: 1-4; we have now to do not with a word spoken through angels, but with a great salvation spoken through the Lord, the Lord who (as ch. 1 has established) is so much greater than the angels, with a more excellent name than they. The opening words of the letter (or homily as some prefer

to regard it) distinguish between the prophets of the old regime and the Son through whom God has now spoken, "through whom he made the worlds, who is the effulgence (*apaugasma*) of his glory, and the very image of his substance, who upholds all things by the word of his power". So it is elsewhere in the letter. Moses as a servant was faithful in God's house, but Christ as a son (3: 5-6). He is the true high priest ministering in the heavenly sanctuary of which the earthly sanctuary was but a copy; the old regime is now aged and vanishing away, since it has been replaced by the heavenly reality.

It is interesting that the opening words of the epistle reflect the Wisdom literature, particularly Wis. Sol. 7: 26 where similar expressions are used.⁶ The importance of this link will be clearer when we have considered the Prologue to St. John, for it is a notable fact that the three great theologians of the New Testament—Paul, John, the writer to the Hebrews—all have a Wisdom Christology.

IV

The phraseology of John 1: 1-18 is taken in large measure, as J. Rendel Harris demonstrated years ago,⁷ from the outstanding Wisdom passages, Prov. 8; Sirach 24; Wis. 7-8. The material has been presented in its clearest form by C. H. Dodd in his *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (274f.), where he has drawn upon Harris's work and has set out in two columns the Johannine phrases and statements, and the Wisdom passages from which they are obviously derived. But leaving this point for the moment, let us look at the movement of the Prologue. The Logos is related first to God (vv. 1-2), then to the universe (v. 3), then to the world of men. He who was in the beginning with God, through whom the universe was made, was also the light and life of men. Then at length "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory as of the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth". The Logos is personal, for he is with God and may be received and trusted by men (vv. 11-12). While the term Logos does not recur in the Gospel, pre-existence is affirmed in other ways, particularly in 17: 5 and 24: "the glory which I had with thee before the world was"; "for thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world".

⁶ "For she is an effulgence (*apaugasma*) from everlasting light, and an unspotted mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness".

⁷ *The Origin of the Prologue to St. John's Gospel* (1917).

According to the Prologue the Incarnation marks a new epoch in the story of the world. All preceding history has witnessed in some way the shining of the light in the darkness, in Israel and elsewhere, for he is the light that enlighteneth every man; but at length the Word became flesh. That there could be any rival to Christ is simply unthinkable.

One of the main stresses of the passage is that the true knowledge of God is not to be found in the Law but in the Son of God. The Jews had identified Wisdom with Torah; it was (so they came to affirm) through the Torah that the world was made, it was the Torah that enlightened men, that lay in the bosom of God.⁸ But the Prologue reveals that Sophia is to be identified rather with the eternal Son of God. The change from Sophia to Logos was probably made for a number of reasons; a masculine term was more appropriate; and, more important, the term Logos brought in the rich Old Testament associations of the *Dabar* of the Lord; it also made use of a conception familiar to Greek readers, thus making a bridge to them; and no doubt another factor was the influence of Philo. The opening verse declares not only that the Logos was in the beginning with God but also "was God". The climax of the Gospel answers to its opening when Thomas falls before the risen Christ saying, "My Lord and my God".

Now, the figure of Wisdom which, as we have seen, plays an important part in New Testament Christology, could be explained in some Old Testament passages as a poetical personification. But as we trace the development from Job 28 and Prov. 8 to Sir. 24. Wis. 7-8, Baruch 3-4, something more than this appears to be involved. So great an emphasis had been placed upon the divine transcendence that increasing importance became attached, particularly in the inter-testamental period, to hypostases, as they are sometimes called, to such conceptions as the Shekinah, the glory, the Spirit, the Logos, and Wisdom. May it not be claimed that these bear witness to the dissatisfaction of the Jews with a monolithic doctrine of the divine unity? Is there not an unconscious preparation for the time when, without any surrender of monotheism, distinctions within the Godhead would be discerned such as we seek to express in the doctrine of the Trinity? Light is one, but when passed through a prism it shows all the colours of the rainbow. So the Jews were perhaps preparing for a time when this "prismatic" element in the Godhead would be revealed. Whatever the origins of these various conceptions may have been (Boström

⁸ *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 83-86.

e.g. finds the influence of Ishtar behind the figure of Wisdom⁹), it can be claimed that there was a providential preparation for a new disclosure which came to the world through Christ; and at all events the Church found a whole set of terms available when it sought to expound all it had found in Him.

I have referred only to a few outstanding New Testament passages but they are completely in line with the teaching of all the 27 books which make up the Canon. The letters of Paul disclose deep cleavages and debates on his own apostleship, on the validity of the Law, on circumcision, but there is not a hint of any dispute among the leaders concerning the supremacy and uniqueness of Jesus. "Jesus is Lord" was the fundamental conviction. The dying Stephen prays, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (Acts 7: 59). There was no interval in which a human leader slowly passed through a process of apotheosis. It took a long time to work out intellectually all that was involved; that task is not completed yet; but the convictions expressed in the Creeds and hymns of the Church were implicit from the beginning. A place was accorded to Christ which took it for granted that he was on the Godward side of reality. He was not just a questing, sinning human being in the vanguard of the race; he was God's response to man's needs. The New Testament writers show great variety in the ways they set forth the faith; there is a Pauline theology and a Johannine, a Lucan and a Matthaean, etc., each with its own approach and presentation; but through this dome of many-coloured glass there shines the same white radiance. The attitude taken by humble believers should be taken into account as well as outstanding Christological passages. From the beginning Christians were those who called upon the name of Christ; they were baptized into his name. Jewish believers, uncompromising monotheists, who would die rather than worship a human emperor because one should worship God alone, found themselves praying to Christ and ascribing honour, glory and dominion to him that sitteth upon the throne *and* to the Lamb. Old Testament sayings and phrases about Yahweh came to be applied without argument to Jesus. It is He who searches the hearts of men (Rev. 2: 23), it is He who is the first and the last (2: 8).

How far Jesus Himself was conscious of His uniqueness is a question which it is not essential for us to answer. But one or two points may be mentioned. There is the striking use of the word *Abba*. It has been shown that while Jews referred to God as Father,

⁹ See the closing chapter of O. S. Rankin's *Israel's Wisdom Literature*.

our Father, this particular term (used by children as a form of familiar address to their earthly father) had never been used in addressing God. As Jeremias says, "Jesus' use of the word *Abba* in addressing God is unparalleled in the whole of Jewish literature". "He spoke to his heavenly Father in as childlike, trustful, and intimate a way as a little child to its father".¹⁰ Even the Jewish scholar I. Abrahams says, "Jesus indeed was animated by a strong, one may even say unique sense of his own relation to and unbroken intercourse with God" (*Studies in Pharisaism and the Gospels* I. 142).

Mention may also be made of the Q saying usually known as the *Jubelruf* (Matt. 11: 25-27; Luke 10: 21-22) which includes the words: No-one knoweth the Son save the Father: neither doth any know the Father save the Son and he to whomsoever the Son willeth to reveal him". This cannot be summarily dismissed as a Hellenistic revelation saying. It is quite Semitic in character. W. D. Davies has given special attention to it in his book *Christian Origins and Judaism* (1962) and he has a chapter with the title "Knowledge in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Matthew 11: 25-30" (119-144). His conclusion is that it is quite unnecessary to go outside a Jewish milieu to account for our passage. A. M. Hunter in a paper read to the New Testament Society in 1961 claimed concerning Matt. 11: 27 that "if men reject this logion, they reject it not because they have proved it a Hellenistic revelation word, or because its Johannine ring condemns it, but because they have made up their minds, *a priori*, that the Jesus of history could not have made such a claim".¹¹

It is relevant also to observe the way in which Jesus speaks with authority, opposing his sovereign "I" to the dictates of the Law and moving amongst men as the Divine Forgiveness incarnate.¹² Mohammed claimed to be no more than a human prophet; Buddha at the end of his long life told his followers, "Be ye lamps unto yourselves". But Jesus appeared to identify himself with the Kingdom of God, and called men to renounce all things, their own lives also, if they were to follow Him.

According to the New Testament Christ is indeed unique, but He does not remain alone. Those who receive Him are, as it were, taken up into His sonship; indwelt by His Spirit they now cry *Abba, Father*. They are drawn into the intimacy with God which is His. The New Testament has hints of the universal fatherhood

¹⁰ *Parables of Jesus* (1954), 134.

¹¹ *NTS* 8.241ff.

¹² Cf. V. Taylor, *Person of Christ in N.T. Teaching*, 136f.

of God; but its emphasis is upon the way men may enter into a new sonship by living in Christ. "God sent his own son . . . that we might attain the status of sons. To prove that you are sons, God has sent into our hearts the Spirit of his Son, crying Abba! Father!" (Gal. 4: 4-6, NEB).

The Fourth Gospel has a similar message. Christ is the only-begotten; but to those who receive him the right is given to become the children of God (1: 12-13). Hebrews puts matters in a different way; but the fundamental thought is the same. Christ as our high priest has entered into the holy place of God's immediate presence, and he takes us with him. The humblest believer is invited to draw near with boldness and to enter into the holy place by the new and living way which he has dedicated for us (10: 19ff.). Thus will God's purpose to bring many sons to glory be fulfilled.

It is in this way that Christ is the firstborn of many brethren. C. H. Dodd accepts Moffatt's rendering of Rom. 8: 29, "the first-born of a great brotherhood", and adds the comment: "a brotherhood which, as we are to be told later, will ultimately include all mankind (Rom. xi. 32)".

Mention may be made at this point of the belief, held by some Christian thinkers over the past centuries, that the Incarnation would have taken place apart from the sin of man; it was part of God's original plan in creation. Westcott has explored this matter in his splendid essay "The Gospel of Creation".¹³ The crowning act of love, the consummation of all finite being (so he suggests), was not contingent upon man's conduct but was part of the divine purpose from the start.

It has been urged recently that we should exchange a "person Christology" for an "event Christology" and should be satisfied to say that in Jesus God was at work in a unique way. This is certainly a departure from what has always been understood as the essence of the faith and does not approach an adequate expression of all that Christ has been to His people through the generations. But mention of it may serve to remind us of the fact that His coming was the climax of a long process of development in which God was indeed at work. Jesus is the Messiah as well as the Son of God (John 20: 31) and the same Gospel which gives us such comprehensive interpretations also tells us that salvation is of the Jews (4: 22). Christ could not come until a people had been prepared to receive him. It was in the fulness of time that He came, when the Law as a schoolmaster had been making ready the way, in order

¹³ Included in his commentary on St. John's Epistles, 271-315.

that men so disciplined might enter at length into their predestined sonship. In a sense the call of Abraham was the beginning of the preparation for the Incarnation. A perfect plant cannot take root without the right kind of soil and environment. If Bach had been born in an African forest he would have been knocked on the head as useless before reaching the age of 12; he could only grow and be appreciated amongst a musical people. Similarly there had to be a people made ready for the Lord. His coming was not a sudden unrelated irruption of the divine which just happened to take place in Palestine. All this shows another reason for holding fast to the uniqueness of Jesus. God has a plan and a purpose for the world; there is a continuity in the stream of fellowship we know as "the people of God". In Israel it narrows to the faithful remnant and finally to the one righteous man; with his resurrection it begins to widen to take in men of every race, until at last all things are summed up in Christ, and all powers, earthly or heavenly, are reconciled to God through him.¹⁴ Here is the revealed secret of the divine purpose; this is what God is doing in the world. This at any rate is the Christian's faith and it is either true or untrue. If it is untrue it should be wound up and scrapped as a wasteful deception; it is not worth combining with any other set of ideas but it should go. But if it is true, it has no place whatever for any rivals to Christ, any amalgamations with other systems, for in all things he must have pre-eminence.

This does not mean that Christians are unable to approach other faiths with appreciation and discernment. St. Paul at Athens was glad to make use of Stoic phraseology and concepts and to quote "certain of your own poets". Years ago Stanley Jones made the distinction that syncretism combines, selectivism picks and chooses, but life assimilates. Through the generations the Christian faith has shown this ability to utilize thought-forms and insights from many quarters in interpreting what has been given to men in Christ. Some of the Fathers called this "spoiling the Egyptians"; the holy tabernacle, the shrine of the divine presence, was partly made of materials taken from the Egyptians when Israel went forth from the land of bondage (Ex. 12: 36). Arnold Toynbee in his Burge Lecture of 1940, *Christianity and Civilization* (with which I find myself in more sympathy than with his later writings), pointed out that through the work of the great Alexandrian theologians valuable elements of Greek philosophy were incorporated into Christianity.

¹⁴ See C. H. Dodd's commentary on Romans, 186, and the diagram on 187.

and that the same process may be repeated with Oriental philosophy. All that is best in Hinduism and Buddhism may live on in the Christianity of the future, which may thus be left as the spiritual heir of all the other higher religions, and of "all the philosophies from Ikhnaton's to Hegel's, while the Christian Church as an institution may be left as the social heir of all the other churches and all the civilizations".

Wise men from the East will still come and among their gifts will be new insight, understanding and questionings leading to fresh discoveries from the unsearchable riches of Christ, for our Western ways of thought (if I may use the words of W. R. Matthews) "have not been adequate to grasp the full meaning and reality of the manifestation of God in Christ".

Oliver Quick once wrote:

the Gospel, while unique, is also universal. Its light is so strong that it finds reflections everywhere. The Christian does not say, "You have your truth and I have mine, we shall find a synthesis some day". He says, "I know in whom I have believed; therefore I recognize His work in non-Christian and secular systems". Christianity always has built on the things that it found—Jesus used the Jewish conception of the Kingdom of God, St. Paul the language of Hellenic Religions, the early Fathers Plato, the Schoolmen Aristotle, and so on.

The divine purpose is to sum up all things in Christ (Eph. 1: 10); so that at length every knee shall bow to him and every tongue confess that he is Lord.

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