

The DIVINE
CHRISTOLOGY
of the
APOSTLE PAUL

Retrospect and Prospect

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INTRODUCTION

AS SAUL OF TARSUS WAS TRAVELING TO DAMASCUS to arrest adherents of a new sect of Judaism having the audacity to claim that the Messiah had been executed and risen from the dead, he encountered the risen Christ and experienced a radical turning point (see the three accounts in Acts 9; 22; 26). Some years later, writing a letter to his ministry supporters in Philippi, he confesses: “Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him” (Phil 3:7-9). As this passage and many other parts of Paul’s letters imply, Jesus was the center of the apostle’s life and ministry and the recipient of his unreserved devotion (e.g., 1 Cor 2:2).

WHY THE DIVINE CHRISTOLOGY OF PAUL THE APOSTLE MATTERS

In what sense, however, was Paul able to reconcile his Jewish monotheistic faith (or his commitment to the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4 and the first two commandments of the Decalogue)¹ with his devotion to Jesus as a divine figure? How could a teacher in Israel, who once was so

¹Originally, the Hebrew term *Shema* is the first word of Deut 6:4 and is a second-person singular command, normally translated as “hear.” This term has been used by scholars to refer to slightly different yet generally overlapping things, namely, (1) Deut 6:4; (2) Deut 6:4-5; (3) Deut 6:4-9; (4) *Shema* as a liturgy combining three scriptures (Deut 6:4-9; 11:13-21; Num 15:37-41); or (5) any kind of confession on the unity and uniqueness of God in Jewish and early Christian contexts and the related texts. This book employs the term as a general reference to Jewish monotheistic confession, although our attention is often given to the monotheistic language and rhetoric of Deut 6 alluded to in 1 Cor 8, in particular—especially when those texts are specifically mentioned in our discussion. This footnote closely follows John J. R. Lee, *Christological Rereadings of the Shema* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 33n30.

passionately devoted to the worship of the one God and was willing to do violence against a perceived threat to this worship from the early Christians, see his faith in Jesus as the fulfillment of the Torah (Rom 10:4)? This was undoubtedly a crucial question in the first century, and it remains so two millennia later. Many people still claim—both at the scholarly and popular levels—that worship of Jesus as divine was impossible within Jewish monotheistic environments. Consequently, they argue the divine Christology of the New Testament reflects either a pagan influence over early Christians or an anachronistic projection of later theology into earliest Christian writings. Fortunately, we are not the first ones to wrestle with this important question of how Jewish monotheism and Christ’s divinity go hand in hand. The history of the church provides a rich pool of resources for this matter, and in recent decades, capable scholars, including the ones whom we will introduce in the subsequent chapters, have dealt with this very question intensely, advancing the conversation in meaningful directions.

The current landscape of Pauline Christology studies can, however, be overwhelming for many. There are several monographs and PhD dissertations that provide meticulous treatments of some specific details. But the discussions and arguments in these studies are technical and sometimes convoluted, leaving the non-specialist at a disadvantage when trying to benefit from those treatments.² There are, on the other hand, introductions to the issues of Christology and Pauline theology, but the discussions centered on Paul’s view of Christ, especially his divinity, are often not sufficiently specific, nuanced, or updated in those volumes.³

²Chris Tilling’s *Paul’s Divine Christology* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012) is a good example of a study on the forefront of scholarship in this area, but the book is primarily directed toward scholars and specialists. Erik Waaler’s *The Shema and The First Commandment in First Corinthians* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008) provides another example of a detailed and specific study of Paul’s Christology (focused particularly on 1 Cor 8:1-6), but, again, the book is intended predominantly for Pauline specialists and experts. On the other hand, N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), and especially chaps. 9–11, focuses on the apostle’s theology, including Christology, and appears to be relatively accessible compared to other volumes but can easily overwhelm readers with its 650-page discussion only for those three chapters.

³For example, see Frank Matera’s *New Testament Christology* (Louisville: John Knox, 1999); Raymond Brown’s *An Introduction to New Testament Christology* (New York: Paulist, 1994). While

Most of the literature gravitates toward the extremes on a spectrum, from intricate or complex treatments to broad or general overviews of various topics. Because of this, there is a need for books that fill the gap between the two extremes. This book seeks to help fill that gap on the subject of Paul's divine Christology. While the conversations in the academy are robust, it is important that such conversations continue to shape what is happening in the church. Far from being an inconsequential matter in theology, how we interpret Paul's understanding of Jesus shapes our personal spiritual formation as well as the very ecclesiology around which we build our Christian communities! The intent of this book is to guide the reader into the more detailed and often perplexing conversations surrounding the topic of Paul's view concerning the divinity of Christ, and to do so in an accessible manner.⁴

OUTLINE OF THIS BOOK

This book seeks to introduce the topic of Pauline divine Christology by surveying recent developments on the subject (chaps. 2–5), by evaluating those developments (chap. 6), and by exploring the exegetical grounds for the divine Christology of Paul the apostle (chaps. 7–10) prior to drawing our conclusions (chap. 11).

Following the introductory chapter, the first part of this book will survey the recent divine-christological proposals of Richard Bauckham, Larry Hurtado, Chris Tilling, and N. T. Wright (chaps. 2–5). We will observe many ways that the work of these scholars has advanced the conversation and provided profound insights into both the exegetical and

these studies each provide a digestible introduction to the basics of New Testament Christology, their respective discussions are a bit too broad, general, and dated.

⁴The recent publications that come close to our book with regard to its intent to bridge the gap that has just been identified are Gordon Fee, *Jesus the Lord According to Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), which largely condenses his 2007 monograph, *Pauline Christology*; and David Capes, *The Divine Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), which summarizes his 1992 monograph, *Old Testament Yahweh Texts in Paul's Christology* with some updates. Both of these books are helpful additions for the study of Paul's Christology and are certainly more accessible in tone and content as compared to the technical treatments mentioned in the preceding footnotes. We, however, believe that a more substantial and updated survey of and interaction with recent scholarship (chaps. 2–7) and various exegetical observations we present on the key Pauline texts (chaps. 8–11) make this book sufficiently distinct in comparison to these two recent and more accessible volumes.

theological foundations of Pauline divine Christology. Although we suggest several areas to sharpen their work (chap. 6)—and there are certainly areas of Pauline Christology that require further attention or more nuanced approaches—we nonetheless find many of their observations and findings helpful and remain grateful for the ways they have moved the conversation forward and shed light on various facets of Paul’s high or divine Christology.⁵

It will be important to note at the outset of this book that we do not intend to offer a thorough overview of recent scholarship on Pauline Christology or even on Paul’s divine Christology. Readers who hope to have a more comprehensive survey on the subject should consult the history of research chapters in monographs and PhD dissertations or journal articles with a similar thrust. Our modest hope is to provide a representative overview of the recent arguments in support of Paul’s divine Christology, offering snapshots of the current conversations and preparing our readers for subsequent engagement. We have chosen to focus more substantially on Bauckham (chap. 2), Hurtado (chap. 3), Tilling (chap. 4), and Wright (chap. 5) based on both the distinctive nature *and* the scholarly influence of their respective paradigms among recent conversations on Jesus’ divinity in Pauline epistles and the New Testament. Along with our discussion of these scholars, we have also included an appendix that acknowledges other noteworthy voices in this conversation (see appendix I). While not exhaustive, this appendix provides a broader overview of the recent research on Paul’s divine Christology.

Some readers will regard our prioritization of the four scholars (Bauckham, Hurtado, Tilling, and Wright) in part one to be overly

⁵In this book, we use *high Christology* and *divine Christology* interchangeably, unless noted otherwise. We acknowledge that a high Christology does not always mean a divine Christology in that one may regard Jesus in a lofty manner and as one without any true precedent in Second Temple Jewish tradition yet still not view him as divine in the way Israel’s God is. With that acknowledgment, we follow a scholarly convention of using the two phrases *high Christology* and *divine Christology* synonymously. On the other hand, while some scholars employ the term *divine* quite broadly and apply it to various transcendent beings (e.g., angels), we utilize that term specifically to refer to the biblical deity. That is, we do not appropriate the “divine” language, for instance, for impressive and remarkable archangels mentioned in some Second Temple literature, although we admit that what ultimately matters in academic discussion is a definition of the term and not just its use or nonuse.

subjective or limited in scope, but the same readers will likely agree with us on the inclusion of these four, given the latter's major contributions to the discussion of Pauline divine Christology. For Fee and Capes (see appendix I), we are of the view that their approaches are not sufficiently unique as compared to the four featured in part one; although these two scholars do not present their own unique paradigms, they leave us with rich exegetical data relating to Pauline Christology. Regarding the other scholars included in appendix I, their scholarly influences are not felt as strong as the four featured in part one of this volume, at least as of now, even if their approaches contain some distinctive characteristics.

Even only with a brief survey that we intend to provide in this volume, one fact seems to be clear enough: many of the stronger and, in our view, more compelling proposals on Pauline/New Testament Christology in recent years arrive at what we might call orthodox conclusions. That is to say, the more we press into the Christology of Paul's letters, the more we find that it presents a divine view of Christ, portraying Jesus of Nazareth as sharing in the very identity and authority of Israel's God, that is, the biblical deity. Though it may seem unlikely, Saul of Tarsus, a former Pharisee, appears to equate the crucified Galilean rabbi with the God of Israel and of the universe at various junctures in his writings.

In the second part of this book (chaps. 7–10), we will consider the relevant biblical data and highlight three aspects of Paul's divine Christology. We will note that, throughout his letters, the apostle holds to what we might call the highest Christology, as he depicts Jesus (1) as the "one Lord" of Israel (1 Cor 8:4-6; Rom 10:9), (2) as the embodiment of God, who humbled himself through his incarnation (Phil 2:6-11; Rom 9:4-5), and (3) as the ruler and sovereign of the creation and the new creation (Col 1:15-20; 1 Thess 3:11-13; 2 Cor 5:10-11). Consequently, the Lord Jesus, according to Paul, is due the worship that is reserved for Israel's God alone. As we consider each aspect of this divine Christology, we will largely focus on the text of Scripture itself, while still interacting with key scholars. Though one may disagree with some of our exegetical and theological findings, it seems difficult to dismiss their larger implications for Christology. Although there are a handful of texts that might be

interpreted in a way that go against the high-christological conclusions we reach, we find that such objections tend to rest on faulty exegetical and theological underpinnings.

Even with our relatively brief sketch of recent scholarship and exegetical overview of key christological texts in Paul's letters to be presented across this volume, it seems evident that Paul the apostle equated Jesus with the divine Lord and the God of Israel and of the universe who became a Jewish man in order to fulfill his covenant promises to his people and to the world—for this, he is indeed worthy of worship.

BROAD SCHOLARLY CONTEXT OF THIS BOOK

This book does not intend to offer a thorough scholarly overview of the works for or against a divine Christology in the Pauline epistles.⁶ Instead, it focuses on reviewing the four representative proposals that find a divine Christology in Paul's writings and on presenting key exegetical evidence for it. However, it is beneficial for the readers to understand the broad scholarly context of this book. The scholarly discussion surrounding Paul's divine Christology is more complex and uneven than what we can afford to offer here; yet this brief section will provide at least a general picture of the broader setting in which the scholars whom we will highlight in the subsequent four chapters have made their contributions.⁷

Perhaps the most influential voice among twentieth-century New Testament scholars on this topic was Wilhelm Bousset (1865–1920), who wrote the highly influential work *Kyrios Christos: Geschichte des Christusglaubens von den Anfängen des Christentums bis Irenaeus* (1913).⁸ Bousset was a German theologian who had formidable expertise in New Testament and

⁶For more detailed and comprehensive surveys of scholarly context for early and high Christology of Paul/the NT, refer to, for instance, Andrew Chester, “High Christology—Whence, When and Why?,” *Early Christianity* 2, no. 1 (2011): 22-50; Tilling, *Paul's Divine Christology*, chaps. 2–3; Brandon Smith, “What Christ Does, God Does: Surveying Recent Scholarship on Christological Monotheism,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 17, no. 2 (2019): 184-208; Michael Bird, *Jesus Among the Gods: Early Christology in the Greco-Roman World* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2022), chap. 3.

⁷For a broader context of more recent scholarship on Pauline Christology, see appendix I.

⁸In what follows, references are made to the English translation: Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos: A History of Belief in Christ from the Beginnings of Christianity to Irenaeus*, trans. John E. Steely (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970).

patristic studies, and is often regarded as one of the founders of the so-called history of religions school. His work, like many who followed after him, utilized a comparative religions approach that studied late Judaism and early Christianity in relation to their contemporary Hellenistic religions.

In his best-known work, *Kyrios Christos*, Bousset argued that early Christian devotion to Jesus originated from a Hellenistic setting where pagan religious influences such as Hellenistic mystery religions were more readily available to and accepted by Jesus-followers. Bousset suggested that early Christians appropriated the divine title κύριος for Jesus, incorporating syncretic practices. Therefore, in his view, the worship of Jesus was possible only in regions with minimal influence from Judaism—therefore, outside Palestine—such as Syrian Antioch, Damascus, and Tarsus.⁹

Bousset's proposal has been influential in scholarly circles since its publication. One of the most frequently quoted New Testament scholars of the twentieth century, Rudolf Bultmann, not only adopted Bousset's reading but also promoted and popularized it.¹⁰ Bultmann's introduction to the fifth German edition (1965) of Bousset's *Kyrios Christos* opens with superlative praise: "Among the works of New Testament scholarship the study of which I used to recommend in my lectures to students as indispensable, above all belonged Wilhelm Bousset's *Kyrios Christos*."¹¹ The publication of the book's first English translation in 1970, over fifty years after its original German publication in 1913, and the reprint of the English translation by Baylor University Press in 2013, illustrate the continuing influence of Bousset's study.

There is, however, a reason to challenge Bousset's distinction between Palestinian and Hellenistic Christian communities, which was also adopted by later scholars such as Bultmann. Here, Martin Hengel (1926–2009) is particularly helpful. Hengel was a prominent German scholar of the New Testament who served as professor of New Testament and early Judaism at the University of Tübingen. Hengel gave attention to Christian

⁹Bousset, *Kyrios Christos*, 119–52; cf. 153–210, where he discusses Paul in relation to mystery religions.

¹⁰Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. K. Grobel, vol. 1 (New York: Scribner, 1951).

¹¹Bousset, *Kyrios Christos*, 7.

origins and early Christianity in his research, and his work was highly influential during the latter decades of the twentieth century.¹²

One of Hengel's key contributions was to show that Hellenistic influences were widespread, and that Palestine was not necessarily an exception to such influences. Thus, in his view, an acute distinction between the Palestinian and Hellenistic Judaism (or Christianity) cannot be sustained.¹³ Likewise, the thesis that devotion to Jesus as Lord originated only outside Palestine does not seem true.

Another important contribution of Hengel concerns the chronology of divine Christology and the timeframe of Christian origins. By his close reading of the Pauline and other New Testament texts, and through his apt chronological analysis of the relevant data, Hengel refuted the notion that Jewish-Christian communities in Palestine, Jewish-Christian communities in the diaspora, and Gentile Christian communities were separated, and that there were distinct stages of christological evolution.¹⁴ Instead, Hengel has proved that the Pauline and other New Testament data show that the worship of the resurrected and exalted Jesus and the remarkable christological confession directed toward him already existed among his earliest followers in Palestine as early as AD 30–40.¹⁵ Hengel thus remarks, “The time between the death of Jesus and the fully developed christology which we find in the earliest Christian documents, the letters of Paul is so short that the development which takes place within it can only be called amazing.”¹⁶ Hengel, in summary, demonstrates that the origins of divine Christology are most likely both early and Jewish.

¹²See Larry Hurtado, “Martin Hengel’s Impact on English-Speaking Scholarship,” *The Expository Times* 120, no. 2 (2008): 70–76. Hengel’s major works include *Die Zeloten* (1961), *Judaism and Hellenism* (1974), *Son of God: The Origin of Christology and the History of Jewish-Hellenistic Religion* (1976), *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity* (1979), *Between Jesus and Paul* (1983), and *Studies in Early Christology* (1995).

¹³Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine During the Early Hellenistic Period* (London: SCM Press, 1974).

¹⁴Martin Hengel, “Christology and New Testament Chronology: A Problem in the History of Earliest Christianity,” in *Between Jesus and Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 30–47; originally published in German as “Christologie und neutestamentliche Chronologie: Zu einer Aporie in der Geschichte des Urchristentums,” in *Neues Testament und Geschichte, Festschrift O. Cullmann*, ed. Heinrich Baltensweiler and Bo Reicke (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1972), 43–67.

¹⁵Hengel, “Christology and New Testament Chronology,” 30–47.

¹⁶Hengel, “Christology and New Testament Chronology,” 31.

We have, in fact, substantial evidence for liturgical devotion to Jesus as Lord among early Aramaic-speaking circles of Jesus-followers. As already noted by various scholars,¹⁷ Paul's use of the Aramaic prayer $\mu\alpha\rho\acute{\alpha}\nu\alpha\ \theta\acute{\alpha}$ ("Our Lord, come"; see 1 Cor 16:22, which transliterates the Aramaic phrase in Greek) directed to Jesus implies that confession of his divine lordship was not necessarily a result of some syncretic activities under pagan religious influences but was a meaningful component of devotional practice among early followers of Jesus in Judean context.¹⁸ As Rawlinson notes, this Aramaic cry in 1 Corinthians 16 exposes "the Achilles heel of the theory of Bousset."¹⁹ Indeed, Bousset himself acknowledges this Aramaic phrase as counter evidence against his case. However, instead of dwelling on its relatively plain christological significance, Bousset transitions to other topics.²⁰

The scholars who advanced Hengel's argument for the origins of high Christology as early and Jewish include Richard Bauckham and Larry Hurtado, the best-known members of the so-called Early High Christology Club, a "self-designation coined by a group of scholars . . . who emphasize that an exalted place of Jesus in belief and devotional practice (including corporate worship) is evident in the earliest Christian sources and likely goes back to the first circles of Jesus' followers from shortly after his crucifixion."²¹ Bauckham's and Hurtado's influences are easily detected in recent discussions of Pauline Christology. A number of scholars have subsequently offered their own explanations of early and high Christology, but often their discussions revolve around the suggestions made by Bauckham and Hurtado. The two other scholars to whom

¹⁷For example, Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 172-75, where he cites Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 203-15; and J. A. Fitzmyer, *A Wandering Aramean: Collected Aramaic Essays*, SBLMS 25 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979), 123-25, in support of his argument. See also A. E. J. Rawlinson, *The New Testament Doctrine of Christ* (London: Longmans, Green, 1926), 231-37.

¹⁸For additional evidence for "Judean Christian Traditions in Paul's Letters," see Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 167-76.

¹⁹Rawlinson, *New Testament Doctrine of Christ*, 235.

²⁰Bousset, *Kyrios Christos*, 129.

²¹Larry W. Hurtado, "The Early High Christology Club (EHCC)," *Larry Hurtado's Blog*, February 6, 2013, <https://larryhurtado.wordpress.com/2013/02/06/the-early-high-christology-club-ehcc>.

we give substantial attention (Chris Tilling and N. T. Wright) and the various scholars we present briefly in appendix I are all in conversation with Bauckham and Hurtado in one way or another. In that sense, it is justifiable to begin our survey of recent scholarship on Pauline divine Christology with Bauckham (chap. 2) and Hurtado (chap. 3).

We acknowledge that not everyone accepts the view that Christians held to a divine Christology in the earliest years following Jesus' resurrection. To be fair, there are still tangible objections to and qualifications of it, often with various tendencies that regard divine Christology as incongruent with Jewish monotheistic sensibilities. Holding that Jewish people were repulsed by pagan notions, some scholars continue to question whether Paul's/New Testament Christology could truly be divine, while others propose more nuanced positions which evaluate Paul's/New Testament Christology as relatively high but not reaching a fully divine view of Jesus.²² Yet, an early and high Christology has attracted growing scholarly support over the last few decades partly due to the influence of Bauckham and Hurtado and has almost become an "emerging consensus," using Crispin Fletcher-Louis's phrase.²³

²²For some representative examples, see James D. G. Dunn, *Did the First Christians Worship Jesus? The New Testament Evidence* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010); P. M. Casey, *From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God: The Origins and Development of New Testament Christology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991); "Monotheism, Worship and Christological Development in the Pauline Churches," in *The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism*, ed. Carey C. Newman, James R. Davila, and Gladys S. Lewis (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 214-33; Adela Yarbro Collins, "The Worship of Jesus and the Imperial Cult," in Newman, Davila, and Lewis, *Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism*, 234-57; Bart D. Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014). While critiques of these works are readily available across various scholarly reviews, articles, and book chapters, the place where the readers can access critical interaction with these (and other similar) works most conveniently is probably Larry Hurtado's blog: <https://larryhurtado.wordpress.com>.

²³Crispin Fletcher-Louis, *Jesus Monotheism*, vol. 1, *Christological Origins, the Emerging Consensus, and Beyond* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 3.

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