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CHRISTOLOGY

A Global Introduction

VELI-MATTI KÄRKKÄINEN



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The Gospel Silhouettes of Jesus

The Rich Plurality of the Biblical Testimonies

That the New Testament contains various complementary faces of Christ is illustrated most aptly by the existence of four Gospels. Why four Gospels? Why not just one? This fact has been acknowledged and pondered by Christians for centuries. Already in the second century, attempts were made to harmonize the four Gospels into one whole in order to make the story of Christ more coherent. Even the first Bible readers noticed that having four stories not only added to the richness of the overall story but also created problems such as contradictions between various details related to the same story. The church and Christian theology, however, decided in favor of a plurality of testimonies at the expense of harmony in every detail.

How much do we know of the history of Jesus? A dramatic shift happened in theologians' estimation at the time of the Enlightenment. While until then the Gospel records' testimonies were taken at face value, after the advent of modernity, skepticism became the default position. That put the historical question at the center.¹

1. For a detailed, well-documented, and accessible account of the "history of Jesus," that is, how much and with what certainty we can know historical details of Jesus's life in reference to non-theological sources, see chap. 2 in Hans Schwarz, *Christology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). For nonbiblical sources and opinions about Jesus of Nazareth, see C. A. Evans, "Jesus in Non-Christian Sources," in *DJG* (1992), 364–68.

The most popular approach to biblical Christology has involved focusing on the various titles given to Jesus Christ. There is an old Latin saying, *nomen est omen*, which means "name is an omen." In ancient cultures, as well as many cultures in today's two-thirds world, the name given to a person reflects either a distinctive personal characteristic or significant events related to that person. Clearly, various titles given to Christ serve that function. Although no longer at the center of New Testament Christology, the theological implications of the titles should be properly considered.

The more recent method of New Testament Christology involves reading each book as it stands without necessarily trying to pull all the differing materials into a coherent whole. In other words, the specific contribution of each of the Gospels is appreciated on its own terms. Thus, there is a Christology of Matthew, of Mark, of Luke, and of John. Before looking at these, however, two preparatory tasks lie ahead of us. First, in order to locate the Jewish Messiah in his own milieu, we take a short look at the Jewish background. Second, in order to orient the reader to the thought forms and ways of naming Jesus in the Gospels, a brief look at the titles of Christ will be provided. Thereafter, the bulk of the chapter is devoted to profiling each Gospel's distinctive account of the Messiah.

The Jewishness of Jesus the Messiah

Until recently, Christian theology in its discussion of Christology neglected its most obvious background, namely, the Jewish messianic milieu. Although it is true that precritical exegesis often added notes on the Old Testament prophecies and allusions to the Messiah, the implications of Jesus's Jewishness were not allowed to shape Christian theological understanding. Even worse, more often than not the Jewish religion was conceived in negative, "legalistic" terms as opposed to the religion of "grace." This development started early and was evident already in much of patristic theology. This misconception divested theology of its messianic dimension.²

Happily, the most contemporary Jesus research as conducted by biblical scholars shows a wide and variegated interest in the Jewishness of Jesus.³ What has hindered the integration of these discoveries into systematic and

2. See further Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 69–70; chap. 2 in Gerald O'Collins, SJ, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

3. "Twentieth-century [New Testament] scholarship has at least one great advantage over its predecessors. . . . It has been realized that Jesus must be understood in his Jewish context."

constructive theologies is that too often biblical and systematic disciplines have not engaged each other in a way that we would hope for.⁴ This omission, however, is in the process of being slowly corrected even among doctrinal theologians.

Differently from most systematicians, Moltmann begins his major monograph on Christology with a careful investigation of "Jewish messianology."⁵ Note that the subtitle of his book is *Christology in Messianic Dimensions*. Moltmann takes Old Testament messianic hopes and metaphors as the presupposition of Christian theology of Christ as Israel's Messiah.

The religious categories of the Jewish faith provide the explanatory framework for New Testament Christology. Christian hopes for Christ are based on the development of the hope for the Messiah and the figure of the Son of Man (especially in Dan. 7:14) in the Old Testament.⁶ It can safely be said that, on the one hand, behind much of Jewish messianic expectations is the distinctive Jewish apocalypticism that, as is routinely mentioned, laid the framework for the Gospels' presentation of Jesus;⁷ on the other hand, as current scholarship also knows well, there are a number of types of messianic expectations in Second Temple Judaism, rather than one generally held.⁸ As a result, it is highly important for Christian theology, both for its proper self-understanding and its relation to the Jewish people, to reflect carefully on the Jewish roots of its faith.

This book seeks to be sensitive to the Jewishness of Jesus in more than one way. First, in discussing the meaning of Jesus's person and work (as manifested, for example, in the many "titles" stemming from the Old Testament), Jewish and Old Testament background will be carefully noted. Second, when looking at Christology in the context of the contemporary pluralistic world, Jewish interpretations of Jesus Christ will be included as well.

N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, COQG 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 5; see also 91–98, with numerous references to current scholarship.

4. Among biblical scholars, N. T. Wright particularly has been keen on the *theological* implications of his massive scholarship on the origins of Christian faith. Other such figures include J. D. G. Dunn and R. Bauckham in their respective ways.

5. Moltmann, *Way of Jesus Christ*, xv. Chap. 1 as a whole deals with Old Testament background. In this orientation, Moltmann follows the program he introduces in *Theology of Hope* and further develops in many other publications, such as his *Trinity and the Kingdom*, implying that Jewish/Old Testament expectations and metaphors laid the presuppositions for all of Christian theology.

6. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 486; for a careful theological analysis, see Moltmann, *Way of Jesus Christ*, 5–27.

7. See William C. Placher, *A History of Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 28–31.

8. For a detailed discussion and literature, see Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, chap. 11.

How Jesus Is Named in the Biblical Record

The Message of the Kingdom of God

Before anything else, the student of the Christologies of the Gospels should be reminded of the center and major theme of Jesus's proclamation—which came mostly in the form of the parables—that is, the kingdom of God. While many historical questions are under dispute among Gospel scholars, no one disputes that talk about the righteous rule of God (which is what the kingdom means) lies at the heart of the Nazarene preacher's proclamation.⁹

Although Jesus did not address his Father as "king," a favorite designation in the Old Testament (particularly in Psalms but also elsewhere), the language of God's "kingdom" was frequently on Jesus's lips. Although—as the ensuing historical discussion will reveal—much ink has been wasted among biblical scholars as to the exact meaning of the concept of the kingdom, it is safe to say the following in light of mainstream biblical scholarship: on the one hand, the kingdom had already arrived in the person and ministry of Jesus (Matt. 12:28; Luke 11:20, and so forth), and, on the other hand, it was yet to appear in its final eschatological consummation (Mark 1:15; 9:1; Matt. 4:17; Luke 11:2, and so forth). To the proclamation of the advent of God's rule belongs the summons to repentance and change of mind and behavior. It "was a warning of imminent catastrophe, a summons to an immediate change of heart and direction of life," first to Israel and then to others.¹⁰

If parables were the teaching device to illustrate various facets of the dawning rule of the righteous God, miracles and powerful deeds were another integral way of reference. Just recall this saying: "But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you" (Matt. 12:28 NRSV). All four Gospels narrate numerous healings and miraculous cures,¹¹ and the Synoptic Gospels add to the picture acts of deliverance and exorcisms. Indeed, "among all the activities ascribed to Jesus in the New Testament gospels, exorcism and healing are among the most prominent."¹²

Each of the Synoptic Gospels highlights different aspects of Jesus's proclamation and embodiment of God's kingdom. Although in John the concept hardly appears, he speaks of God's presence and salvation in the world using other terms,

9. For a detailed discussion, see C. C. Caragounis, "Kingdom of God/Heaven," in *DJG* (1992), 54–59.

10. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 172.

11. A reliable, nontechnical discussion is Harold Remus, *Jesus as Healer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

12. Amanda Porterfield, *Healing in the History of Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 21.

such as “life” and “glory.” Although, curiously, kingdom language becomes marginal in Pauline theology, it is safe to say that “the idea of the kingdom of God or kingdom of Christ is certainly foundational to the whole” of his theology.¹³

Christ/Messiah

One of the most important christological titles is “Christ,” which appears over five hundred times in the New Testament.¹⁴ It seems at times almost that “Christ” functions as a proper name in the New Testament. Theologically we may say that it means “‘Jesus is the Christ’ or ‘Jesus is the Messiah.’”¹⁵ “Christ” (*Christos*) is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew “Messiah” (*mashiach*), which means literally “the anointed one.” Several key persons in the Old Testament were anointed for a task appointed by Yahweh, particularly kings (Saul in 1 Sam. 9–10), prophets (Elisha in 1 Kings 19:16), and priests (Lev. 21:10–12).

In Jesus’s times, there were also a number of self-made messiahs who sought political deliverance or a position in earthly society. Jesus declined that role (see John 6:15). Jesus did not want to identify with this primarily political messianic expectation and wanted to avoid conflict with the political and religious establishment until the time had come for him to die. That context may help us understand a curious aspect of Jesus’s messiahship, what William Wrede, nineteenth-century pioneer of research into the Gospels, called the “messianic secret” in his *Messianic Secret in the Gospels* (1901). Rather than encouraging his followers to spread the good news of the Messiah who had come, Jesus forbade those he healed to tell anyone (Mark 7:36).

An important locus for the Christ/messianic sayings has to do with Jesus’s sufferings. Indeed, “Messianic themes emerge most clearly in the accounts of Jesus’ death to the extent that ‘we cannot ignore that the Messiah questions [*sic*] runs through the Passion story of all the gospels like a red thread.’”¹⁶ Recall that at the turning point of Mark’s Gospel (8:29) stands Peter’s confession of Jesus’s Christhood: from there on the shadow of the cross guides the narrative. Importantly, the very last occurrence of “Christ” in Mark also appears in the context of the cross.¹⁷ Similarly to the Gospels and Paul, especially in 1 Peter the title Christ is connected with the sufferings of Jesus (1:11; 2:21; 3:18, and so forth).

13. L. J. Kreitzer, “Kingdom of God/Christ,” in *DPL*, 524.

14. This discussion is based on M. F. Bird, “Christ,” in *DJG* (2013), 115–25; see also O’Collins, *Christology*, 25–29.

15. Bird, “Christ,” 115.

16. *Ibid.*, 119; the citation is from M. Hengel, *Studies in Early Christology* (London: SCM, 1995), 45 (emphasis in original removed).

17. See Bird, “Christ,” 119–20.

It is worth noting that while all the Gospel writers, each in his own distinct way, appropriates the title “Christ,” Paul uses the term by far the most frequently; more than half of all New Testament occurrences are found in his writings.¹⁸ The heavy concentration of the term in Paul’s letters, the earliest New Testament writings, suggests that very early the term became an important part of the vocabulary of Christian faith. *Christ* is undoubtedly Paul’s favorite title for Jesus.

Even though Jesus fulfilled the hopes of Israel’s Messiah in a way incompatible with the dreams of a majority of the people, he still was and is Israel’s Messiah, not merely the Messiah of the gentiles (in biblical terminology, all non-Jews are gentiles). As said, Christian theology has too often lost sight of this perspective throughout history, resulting in unfortunate implications for Christian-Jewish relations.

Son of God

Two parallel names have become part of Christian theology’s vocabulary from the beginning: Son of God and Son of Man. Naturally, one would assume that the former refers to Jesus’s divinity and the latter to his humanity. This was, indeed, taken for granted until the twentieth century, when a more careful exegesis of biblical texts created ambiguity regarding these two titles. In fact, exegetically, both assumptions—that Son of God denotes divinity and Son of Man denotes humanity—are inaccurate.

In the Old Testament, the concept of the son(s) of God is elusive, as it may refer to the people of Israel (Exod. 4:22), or the king (particularly David and his successors [2 Sam. 7:14]), or even angels. Reference to kingship, particularly Davidic, is the main New Testament background. Yet, in Israel (differently from some surrounding nations), sonship does not mean divinity. The Old Testament does not speak explicitly of the Messiah or of a specifically messianic figure as the Son of God.¹⁹

Jesus used the term rarely, but according to the Synoptic Gospels he did understand himself and his mission according to the idea of divine sonship. Some scholars have questioned the authenticity of those rare passages in which Jesus refers to himself as the Son, but the majority of scholars think that at least some of the sayings come directly from Jesus (Matt. 11:27; Mark 12:6; 13:32; Luke 10:22).

Examination of the authentic sayings of Jesus regarding the “Father” and the “Son” reveals the following emphases. First, Jesus claimed personal

18. For details, see Ben Witherington III, “Christ,” in *DPL*, 95–100.

19. Main sources are Adam Winn, “Son of God,” in *DJG* (2013), 886–94; and L. W. Hurtado, “Son of God,” in *DPL*, 900–906.

intimacy with the Father. This comes to the fore especially in the *abba* sayings of Jesus (Mark 14:36); this Aramaic term denotes a warm, close address similar to “daddy.” Second, the use of “Son” signified obedience to the will of God, as is evident especially in Jesus’s prayer in Gethsemane (Mark 14:32–42). Finally, “Son” referred to the uniqueness of his status. Jesus’s relation to the Father as Son is exclusive. This becomes evident in the distinction Paul makes between Jesus’s sonship and our sonship, using two different Greek terms: believers are adopted and called sons or children (*tekna*), but Jesus is the Son (*huios*).

For Paul, the divine sonship of Christ is a major christological category; it also plays an important role in Hebrews. According to Romans 1:4 he was “designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord” (RSV). At the same time, the term’s use indicates not only Jesus’s divinity but also his intimacy with God, similar to the Gospels, particularly John. While exclusive to Christ, for Paul and the Gospel writers, Jesus’s relationship to the Father applies to believers as well in a derivative sense.

One of the concerns of our day is the question of inclusive language: should “son” be replaced by “child” in order to be inclusive? The New Testament usage of “son” is not sexist: it includes both sexes. The discussion of feminist and other female interpretations of Christ in chapter 7 delves into this problem.

Son of Man

No other title comes even close to “Son of Man” as Jesus’s self-designation. Indeed, it is used only by Jesus himself (except in John 12:34, though in reference to him). A regular term in all four Gospels, curiously it disappears in the rest of the New Testament (except for Acts 7:56).²⁰

In Aramaic, Jesus’s native language, it is less a title and more a description—and can often be translated as “the human one.” The Old Testament term *ben adam*, “Son of man,” refers to both the proper name “Adam” and the noun denoting the human person. The Hebrew term is used in three contexts. First, in the book of Ezekiel, the term appears over one hundred times as a form of address to Ezekiel. Second, it is used to emphasize the frailty of human nature, as in the famous saying in Psalm 8:4. Third, christologically, the most significant usage is that of Daniel 7:13–14, which speaks of “one

20. The main source here is D. L. Bock, “Son of Man,” in *DJG* (2013), 894–900. Among the Gospel passages the following are representative (as listed on p. 896): Matt. 8:20; 9:6; 10:23; 13:37, 41; 17:9, 12; 26:2, 24, 45, 64; Mark 2:10, 28; 8:31, 38; 9:9, 12, 31; 14:21, 41, 62; Luke 5:24; 6:5, 22; 7:34; 9:22, 26, 44, 58; 18:8, 31; 19:10; 24:6–7; John 1:51; 3:13, 14; 5:27; 8:28; 9:35; 12:23, 34; 13:31.

like a son of man . . . [who] came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom" (RSV). Christian theology has seen in Daniel's Son of Man the Messiah, who came in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

It is customary to classify the Son of Man sayings under three interrelated categories. The expression is used in much the same way in each of the Synoptic Gospels. New Testament scholarship basically agrees that as a christological title, "Son of Man" in the Synoptic Gospels is related to the following:

1. Jesus's present ministry and authority (e.g., Mark 2:10, 28, and par. in Matthew and Luke)
2. Jesus's suffering and resurrection (e.g., Mark 8:31; 9:9; 10:33, and par. in Matthew and Luke)
3. Jesus's glorious coming (e.g., Mark 8:38; 13:26, and par. in Matthew and Luke)

Remarkably, in the authority sayings the Son of Man assumes for himself the authority of God, for example, over the Sabbath, the divinely sanctioned holy day. With regard to suffering, the sayings make it clear that Jesus as the Son of Man came to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many. The sayings that refer to the future coming of the Son of Man "in clouds with great power and glory" (Mark 13:26) are associated with his being seated at the right hand of God.

The title "Son of Man" has a distinctive usage in John's Gospel: it is used with the expression "be lifted up," which may refer either to the cross or to Christ's exaltation (John 3:14; 8:28; 12:34). Perhaps the author preserved the ambiguity on purpose, wanting his readers to make both connections. John also contains the unique sayings about the Son of Man coming down from heaven (3:13) and ascending to where he formerly was (8:28).

Lord

The early Christian confession was "Jesus is Lord" (Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 12:3; Phil. 2:11).²¹ Surprisingly, this attributes to Jesus the same name that in the Old Testament was applied to God: *kyrios*, "Lord."²² At the same time, in the Roman context it challenged the "lordship" of the emperor. Not infrequently,

21. This section is based on B. Witherington and K. Yamazaki-Ransom, "Lord," in *DJG* (2013), 526–35; L. W. Hurtado, "Lord," in *DPL*, 560–69.

22. *Kyrios* is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word for "Lord," used when reading to render the written Hebrew term YHWH, the tetragrammaton that denotes the name of God.

the emperor was worshiped as a semi-god. Various mystery religions also used the term *kyrios*. In other words, in both Jewish and secular contexts the use of “the Lord” by Christians in relation to Jesus was daring and bold.

The most explicit passage in which Jesus applies the title *kyrios* to himself is Mark 12:35–37, which is based on Psalm 110:1: “The LORD says to my lord: ‘Sit at my right hand.’” If this passage is an authentic saying of Jesus—and there is no compelling reason to deny that it is—it means that Jesus considered himself equal to the Old Testament Lord, Yahweh; sitting at the right hand is the place of highest status and honor.

A noteworthy observation about the use of *kyrios* with regard to Jesus in Matthew is that only the disciples use this address; outsiders prefer the neutral term “teacher” or “rabbi.” It took spiritual insight to see who Jesus was. The title “Lord” was not loosely used.

The main passage in the Pauline corpus is Philippians 2:10–11, which most scholars believe is a pre-Pauline hymn. The passage says that as a result of his obedience to the Father, Christ was granted the title “Lord,” which implies equality with God.

Other Titles of Jesus

Son of David

The christological title “Son of David” naturally links Jesus to the royal Messiah in the line of David, Israel’s king.²³ In his person and ministry, Jesus fulfills the promises of God given to the Davidic dynasty in the Old Testament (2 Sam. 7:12–16). Rejecting popular royal expectations, as the Suffering Servant Jesus laid down his life for the sake of others and their salvation. Among the Gospel writers, the title plays the greatest role in Matthew, as he writes with a Jewish audience in mind; Matthew begins his Gospel with the Davidic lineage (1:1–17).

Logos

This title is the transliteration of a common Greek word that generally means “word,” “speech,” and “wisdom.”²⁴ As a christological title, it occurs only in John, with the main references in the beginning of the Gospel (1:1; 1:14). With roots in both pagan philosophy (Plato) and the Old Testament

The Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament is called the Septuagint, literally “seventy,” and abbreviated LXX.

23. Y. Miura, “Son of David,” in *DJG* (2013), 881–86.

24. B. E. Reynolds, “Logos,” in *DJG* (2013), 523–26.

concept of the “word” of Yahweh, it was relevant in both contexts. John 1:1 contains an obvious allusion to the beginning of the Old Testament, to the creative word of Yahweh. John says that in the beginning of creation the *Logos* existed. The *Logos* was not only with God but also was God. John 1:14 describes the incarnation of the *Logos*.

Having discussed the main christological titles in the New Testament, we turn next to the distinctive features of Christology in each of the four Gospels. The main method of current New Testament scholarship and theology is to appreciate the specific contribution of each of the New Testament books in general and the Gospels in particular in order to do justice to the rich pluralism of the biblical witness to Christ. The rest of the chapter follows the order in which scholarship believes the Gospels were written: Mark, Matthew, and Luke, which are the Synoptic Gospels, and then John.

The Suffering Servant in Mark

Routinely dated now as the first Gospel, on which the other two Synoptics (Matthew and Luke) built,

the Gospel of Mark is a case study in paradox. On the one hand, it leaves its readers breathless in its presentation of Jesus the Messiah (Mark 1:1) as one who comes teaching with authority, driving out powerful demons and performing spectacular miracles. On the other hand, there is no other Gospel in which Jesus remains so misunderstood and so fiercely resisted by all manner of people, including at times his most devoted followers. If the kerygma—the proclamation of the early church—was essentially a narrative about divine triumph despite and indeed through human suffering, then arguably there is no other text in which this paradox comes into crisper expression than the Gospel of Mark.²⁵

Mark’s Jesus narrative is fast-paced, beginning with the appearance of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ, and climaxing in the conflict between Jesus and the religious and political leaders. Its narrative nature should be properly acknowledged: “the Christology of Mark’s Gospel is in the story it tells.”²⁶ The story identifies Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, whose destiny is to suffer, die, rise from the dead, and return as the glorious Son of Man to gather the elect.

25. N. Perrin, “Mark, Gospel of,” in *DJG* (2013), 553. In addition to Perrin (553–66), this section draws mainly from Frank J. Matera, *New Testament Christology* (Louisville: Westminster, 1999), 5–26; Schwarz, *Christology*, 119–20.

26. Matera, *New Testament Christology*, 24.

From the very first sentence, Mark's Gospel is christologically focused, starting the narrative with "the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1 RSV). Until 8:29, Jesus's public ministry, with teaching, healings, exorcisms, and pronouncements of forgiveness, is on the ascending scale, so to speak, despite much opposition. Thereafter, the shadow of the cross dominates the narrative.

Jesus's role as the Messiah is confirmed at his baptism with the voice from heaven (1:11). Echoing the royal coronation psalms (see Ps. 2:7), the Father's voice from heaven also declares Jesus to be the Suffering Servant whom God equips with the Spirit (see Isa. 42:1).

More than any other Gospel writer, Mark highlights the role of Jesus as miracle worker and healer. Beginning from the first three chapters, Jesus appears as exorcist, healer, and overcomer of infirmities that bind people. After he teaches in chapter 4, Jesus continues his ministry of deliverance. In the words of Frank Matera:

The Messiah is the Spirit-anointed Son of God who proclaims the arrival of God's kingdom in word and deed. He heals the sick, expels demons, and even extends his ministry to Gentiles. Most important, he gives his life as a ransom for the many. Having suffered, died, and risen from the dead, he will return as the glorious Son of Man.²⁷

The presence of miracles and wonders in Jesus's ministry, however, is ambiguous. After encountering initial enthusiasm, the Messiah faces increasing opposition. No amount of miracles will stop people, especially the religious leaders, from getting angry at his person and claims. Consequently, it is not the miracles and authority but rather the suffering and death of the Messiah that are the ultimate focus of Mark's story of Jesus. In this light it is understandable that it is only after Jesus has explained what kind of Messiah he is that he dares to confess to be the Messiah. The title "Messiah," therefore, becomes visible in the latter part of the Gospel, where the approaching death looms over the narrative. In fact, after the opening words of 1:1, *Christos* does not appear in Mark until 8:29–30. Thereafter, it is used more frequently, especially with regard to Jesus's approaching clash with the religious leaders and the cross.

While Jesus is reserved in his use of "Christ" and "Son of God" as self-designations, he freely uses the designation "Son of Man" publicly. Why did Jesus prefer this title, which is at best ambiguous? Perhaps the reason lies in

27. Ibid., 24–25.

the ambiguity: Jesus did not want his audience to understand his role clearly until he was ready to suffer and die. Recall the term “messianic secret,” mentioned above. Matera summarizes in a helpful way the distinctive Markan picture of Jesus:

For Mark, Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, because he fulfills the destiny of the Son of Man. Were Jesus not to fulfill this destiny, he would not be God’s messianic Son. Markan Christology, then, can be summarized in the terms “Messiah,” “Son of God,” “the Son of Man.” And yet, none of these can be understood adequately apart from Mark’s narrative; for the Christology is in the story, and through the story we learn to interpret the titles.²⁸

The King of the Jews in Matthew

Matthew’s audience is Jewish.²⁹ For that purpose, Jesus’s Davidic genealogy in the beginning of the Gospel makes a great contribution. Indeed, the infancy narratives (chaps. 1–2) not only identify Jesus as the Son of David but also link Jesus with the whole history of Israel going back to Abraham. No wonder Matthew emphasizes the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies and frequently cites Scripture.

Matthew labors to paint his portrait of the Jewish Davidic Messiah, making significant additions to the Markan outline, particularly the five great speeches of Jesus: the Sermon on the Mount (chaps. 5–7), the sending of the Twelve (chap. 10), the parables (chap. 13), and speeches on the church (chap. 18) and on eschatology (chaps. 24–25). To accommodate to Jewish sensibilities, the “kingdom of God”—his main theme—translates into “kingdom of heaven” in order to avoid mentioning God’s name.

To speak to Jews, tutored under the instruction of the Torah, the teaching ministry of Jesus is the focus of Matthew, as distinct from Mark’s interest in miracles. The main form this rabbi’s teaching ministry takes is parables. In light of the centrality of Jesus’s teaching ministry, it is highly ironic that only non-disciples describe Jesus as teacher (8:19; 9:11; 19:16, etc.). The disciples of Jesus never call him “teacher” but rather “Lord” and similar titles.

The emphasis on his teaching ministry, however, is not to say that healings, exorcisms, and other wondrous deeds do not play a role in Matthew’s presentation of the Christian Messiah. In fact, he records a myriad of healings,

28. *Ibid.*, 26.

29. This section draws mainly from the following: J. K. Brown, “Matthew, Gospel of,” in *DJG* (2013), 570–84; Matera, *New Testament Christology*, 26–48; Schwarz, *Christology*, 120–22.

exorcisms, and nature miracles (such as walking on the sea and multiplying food). For example, in chapters 8 and 9, he recounts no less than eight healings and several other miracles. But even these have ultimately a pedagogical aim, along with showing compassion.

Against the backdrop of Matthew's Gospel, the centrality of the idea of the kingdom of heaven, Jesus acts as the inaugurator of the kingdom. This he accomplishes in three moments: his public ministry, his passion, and his vindicating resurrection. After the resurrection, the disciples of Christ are sent into the world to preach the good news and to invite all nations to obedience to the master, teacher, and king (28:18–20). This emphasis on the universal scope of Jesus's ministry culminates in the last verses of the Gospel, but it runs through the narrative as a dominant theme, beginning with the visit of the gentile magi to the newborn king of the Jews in chapter 2.

The Friend of All in Luke

If Mark is the dynamic, fast-paced story of Jesus, and Matthew a carefully constructed Jewish portrait of the Messiah, then, "from the early church to the present, Luke's Gospel has functioned like a warehouse of scenes and stories from which favorites might be drawn, whether in discussions of the virginal conception or of everyday ethics, whether by preachers or theologians or artists."³⁰ Luke's narrative comes in two parts, the Gospel, with the focus on Jesus, and the book of Acts, centering on Jesus's people, the church. When it comes to his Gospel, somewhat similarly to Mark's (but differently from Matthew's five-part template), it is divided into two parts: beginning from the latter part of chapter 9, Jesus sets his eyes toward Jerusalem with the anticipation of suffering, death, and resurrection. Whereas Mark writes to gentiles and Matthew to Jews, Luke's portrait of Jesus is meant for both of these groups. Here is the plot:

The Messiah of God comes to his people Israel as the Spirit-anointed Son of God with a gracious offer of salvation: the forgiveness of sins. Despite this gracious offer, Israel does not repent. Nonetheless, its rejection of the Messiah paradoxically fulfills God's plan that the Messiah must suffer in order to enter into his glory so that repentance and forgiveness can be preached in his name to all nations.³¹

30. Joel B. Green, "Luke, Gospel of," in *DJG* (2013), 540. In addition to Green (540–52), this section draws mainly from Matera, *New Testament Christology*, chap. 2 (which includes both Luke and Acts); Schwarz, *Christology*, 122–25.

31. Matera, *New Testament Christology*, 51.

Although writing to gentiles as well, Luke also makes explicit the connection between Jesus and Israel; just consider the narrative in 2:25–32 about Simeon and the “consolation of Israel” when dedicating the infant Jesus. The Gospel ends with the identification of the resurrected Jesus as Christ (24:26–27, 44–47).

The idea of Jesus as a prophet emerges in his inaugural sermon at Nazareth, his hometown (4:16–30), based on the messianic passage in Isaiah 61. This messianic figure is sent to preach the good news, offer forgiveness, heal the blind, and set captives free. Old Testament prophets Elijah and Elisha are depicted as parallels to Jesus (4:25–27), and people soon recognize Jesus as a prophet (7:16; 9:7–9, 19). A special concern for the poor, widows, and children characterizes this prophet. Women especially receive a great deal of attention in this Gospel (7:12, 36–50; 8:40–56; 10:38–42; 13:10–13; 15:8–10; 18:1–8; 21:1–4; 23:55–56).

Not merely a prophet among others, for Luke, Jesus is also God’s Christ, the Davidic Messiah. The way Luke presents the intimate relation of the Son to the Father is with prayer. Jesus is depicted as praying at every critical turn in his ministry, beginning at his baptism (3:21). Not surprisingly, prayer characterizes also his followers’ lives in Acts.

Jesus as the Son of Man is introduced as early as Luke 5:24, and the title appears frequently in Luke, as it does in Mark and Matthew. Luke highlights the role of the Son of Man in his mission to save the lost (19:10) and to suffer and die for sinners (chap. 24). This theme and Jesus’s status as Lord become the focus of dispute later in the Gospel (20:41–44; 22:67–71).

It is significant that while all the Gospel writers mention the resurrection, only Luke narrates the ascension. This is of course the bridge to Pentecost and the birth of the church in Acts. The Acts narrative is carefully constructed in a manner that makes Jesus’s life—from birth to baptism to ministry in the Spirit—parallel to the birth, baptism (with the Spirit), and ministry of the church. Jesus’s exalted status as the ascended one is highlighted time after time in the sermons of the book of Acts, the first missionary speeches of the incipient community.

The Word of Life in John

Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:30–31)

In this passage, the purpose of the Fourth Gospel is stated explicitly, and its focus is on Christ and his ministry and significance.³² Although the goal of the narrative is stated clearly, namely, to elicit faith, there is also ambiguity (and confusion), so characteristic of John's portrayal of people's response to Jesus: we wonder whether the Greek phrase translated as "that you may believe" refers to the hope of conversion (after which one believes) or affirms the continuing belief of the faithful.

Be that as it may, John's presentation of Jesus is dramatically different from the three Synoptics. Rather than Galilee (as in Mark, Matthew, and Luke), Judea is the center of the ministry. Jesus's public ministry seems to last three years (not one year). Among many other differences, it is highly significant that the Johannine Jesus does not cast out evil spirits. The number of healings is meager: three altogether and one resuscitation (Lazarus, chap. 11). His actions are called "signs" and have an obvious symbolic importance. The Jesus of the Fourth Gospel does not teach in parables, in contrast to the Synoptics; Jesus delivers seven "I am" oracles. Even the structure of the Gospel of John is unique compared to the other Gospels: after the prologue about the Word (1:1–18), the first part, the "Book of Signs" (1:19–12:50), contains miracles and speeches, and the second part, the "Book of Glory" (chaps. 13–20), tells about the farewell speeches of Jesus, his suffering on the cross, and his subsequent resurrection. A later appendix is attached to the Gospel (chap. 21).

Whereas Mark begins his Jesus narrative from baptism as the gateway to public ministry, Matthew connects Jesus's pedigree with Abraham, and Luke goes all the way back to Adam, John links Jesus with creation and unity with God (1:1). The prologue (1:1–18) introduces many of the main themes of the Gospel's portrayal of Jesus, such as light, life, truth, Word, and incarnation. The most distinctive feature is the application of the title *Logos* to Christ, which connects Jesus with both the Old Testament beginning—the Word as creative force in Genesis 1—and the Greek concept of wisdom. His unique intimacy with the Father is depicted in these terms: "No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known" (v. 18 RSV). Indeed, intimacy becomes one of the central themes; just consider chapter 5.

Typical of John is his dual emphasis on the humanity and the divinity of Jesus. John's Gospel is in many ways the most human portrayal of Jesus: Jesus experiences fatigue (4:6) and anguish (12:27); he weeps (11:33) and changes his mind (7:1–10). On the other hand, Jesus is "God's Word," the

32. The main sources are C. S. Keener, "John, Gospel of," in *DJG* (2013), 419–36; Matera, *New Testament Christology*, 215–37; Schwarz, *Christology*, 125–29.

Logos. He speaks as no man has ever spoken (7:46); he is the one who reveals the Father (1:18).

A number of unique metaphors, titles, and symbols are used by John in describing Jesus, including the Lamb of God (1:29, 36), Rabbi (1:38), Messiah (1:41), “the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph” (1:45), Son of God and King of Israel (1:49). Then there are the seven “I am” sayings: the “bread of life” (6:35, 48), “light of the world” (8:12; 9:5), “gate for the sheep” (10:7), “good shepherd” (10:11), “true vine” (15:1), “resurrection and the life” (11:25), and “way and the truth and the life” (14:6). The epithet “I am”—which also appears a few times without an attribute (4:26; 6:20, among others)—invokes the “I am” of Yahweh in the Old Testament. Furthermore, Johannine symbolism is also enriched by names (1:42) and numbers (2:1; 21:11), especially the number seven, which denotes perfection.

In keeping with the ambiguity and symbolic presentation of Jesus in John, even Jesus’s death and resurrection are put in ambiguous, mysterious terms: John talks about Jesus “being glorified” (7:39; 8:54, etc.) and “being lifted up” (12:34)—yes, lifted up on the cross but also put down to death, to be raised to life immortal! Similarly, miracles, described as “signs”—curiously seven in number, perhaps corresponding to the seven days of the new creation—are depicted in a highly ambiguous way with regard to their reception: the more Jesus performs these signs, the more confusion he creates. Indeed, from early on the people start asking, “What sign can you show us to prove your authority?” (2:18) and “What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you?” (6:30). In the midpoint of the Gospel, it has become clear to the author (confirming Isaiah’s experience in Isa. 6:10) that Jesus’s signs did not lead to belief in him (12:40).

The existence of four Gospels in the canon provides an everlasting testimony to the richness and legitimate plurality of the biblical picture of Jesus Christ. While they all share a common historical and theological basis, they do not have a forced uniformity. Rather, like a rainbow with many colors, the four Gospels highlight various aspects of the life, death, and resurrection of the one who was and is confessed as Lord and Savior.