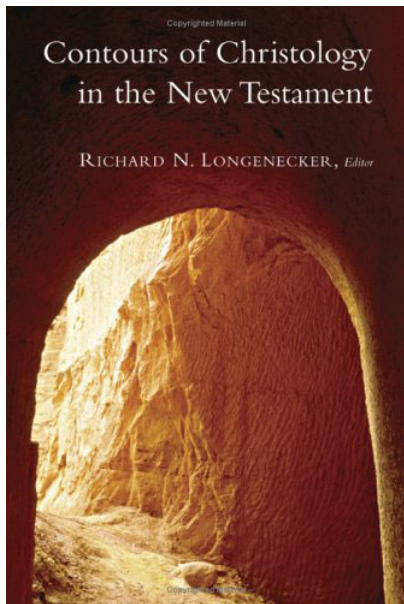


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Contours of Christology in the New Testament

McMaster New Testament Studies

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The seventh volume in the McMaster New Testament Studies (MNTS) series focuses on Christology in the New Testament. Despite the fact that this topic is dealt with “extensively in monographs, commentaries, systematic theologies, and devotional writings of the Christian church,” the editor is of the opinion that “it deserves a better critical, historical, exegetical, and ‘biblical theology’ treatment than is usually received in either the scholarly or the popular press” (vii). It is precisely questions regarding method that form the rationale behind this compilation of essays on the Christology of the New Testament: “Should our approach be dominantly critical, historical, literary, exegetical, theological, developmental, circumstantial, or devotional?” (xii). The direction chosen to treat New Testament Christology is finally a “biblical theology” point of departure, “that is, (1) with sensitivity to the concerns and circumstances within which the authors of the New Testament wrote, (2) attempting to use the best critical-historical-literary-exegetical tools available in analysing what they wrote, (3) allowing each of them to speak in his own way, in line with his own purposes and emphases, and (4) desiring to be true to the various contingencies present within the materials and to discern what is at the heart of the matters, with a recognition of both ‘contingency’ and ‘coherence’ in the New Testament witness” (xii–xiii).

Compiled are thirteen contributions on Christology by well-known New Testament scholars from the United Kingdom, United States, and Canada under the editorship of Richard Longenecker. The focus of the volume “is on the portrayals, statements and presentations of the New Testament writers themselves. There is no attempt to analyze the self-consciousness or self-understanding of Jesus,” but the focus is rather “entirely on the understandings of the various writers of the New Testament *about* Jesus” (xiii). Their “respective christological portrayals” and “differing features” could be described as “differing christologies.” “More appropriately, however, they should be seen as contours in the overall christology of the New Testament, with the term ‘contours’ suggesting undulations in terrain or somewhat differing emphases of the respective authors within a basic commonality of conviction” (xiii). With this image as the combining factor, the editor presented a particular landscape of New Testament Christology as different Christologies. This is a valuable recognition of the different perspectives on Jesus by the various New Testament writers.

The collection is divided into four sections. Section 1 is the “Setting” of the understanding of the New Testament authors: “that is, with Jewish messianism of the day, Jesus as the basis for and focus of the writers’ thought, and christological materials that circulated within the early Christian communities” (xiii). These three areas are discussed in this order and respectively by William Horbury (“Jewish Messianism and Early Christology”), Ben Witherington III (“Jesus as the Alpha and Omega of New Testament Thought”), and Richard N. Longenecker (“Christological Materials in the Early Christian Communities”). According to Horbury, “early Christian conceptions of a crucified but spiritual and glorious Messiah are best interpreted by Jewish representations of the Messiah as a glorious king embodying a superhuman spirit” (23). Witherington is of the opinion that the “preoccupation with Jesus the Christ in the Gospels, in Paul’s letters, and throughout the rest of the New Testament” reflects “a group of people who had had profound religious experiences that they interpreted as encounters with the living Lord—that is, with Jesus the Christ.” Christ is, therefore, indeed “the basis for and focus of New Testament thought because he was believed and experienced to be the basis for and focus of early Christian life” (44–45). The synthetic and systematic theological nature of this contribution would have made it also an appropriate contribution at the end of the editor’s collection. Longenecker’s thesis is that, in addition to all the recollections about Jesus of Nazareth, various christological materials, both written and oral, circulated within the early Christian communities. This brought much of the earlier testimony together. Four bodies of material are being dealt with: “(1) passion narratives and reports, (2) an eschatological tractate and traditions, (3) a Logia or Sayings collection, and (4) confessional portions—with, undoubtedly, other related materials also existing within the

early Christian communities” (48). These materials were used as the building blocks in the portrayals and presentations of the New Testament writers (75).

Section 2 deals with the Gospels and Acts, with contributions by Morna D. Hooker (“‘Who Can This Be?’ The Christology of Mark’s Gospel”); Terence L. Donaldson (“The Vindicated Son: A Narrative Approach to Matthean Christology”); I. Howard Marshall (“The Christology of Luke’s Gospel and Acts”); and Richard Bauckham (“Monotheism and Christology in the Gospel of John”). Mark’s prologue provides “a succinct summary of his Christology” (81) and “functions as the key to his Gospel” (83) for Hooker. “What is *distinctive* about Mark—as also about *each* of the evangelists—is the way in which he tells his story, and so presents his Christology” (84). According to Hooker, Mark’s description of Jesus is that he is “supremely the *Son of God*” (87). This “sonship is clearly linked both with obedience to God’s will and suffering,” “the power that is at work in Jesus is said to be that of the Holy Spirit,” “the whole of Jesus’ ministry is seen as the fulfilment of God’s kingdom,” and “Jesus himself speaks of his own vocation as the ‘Son of man’ ” (97). For Donaldson, the Christology of Matthew’s Gospel “is to be sought not simply in the individual titles or other christological descriptions predicated of Jesus, but in Jesus’ role as a character in the story told in the Gospel as a whole” (120). The Christology of Luke-Acts, on the other hand, “is much more coherently organized around the twin foci of ‘Christship’ and ‘Lordship,’ ” according to Marshall. He reckons that “one possible way of bringing ‘Christ’ and ‘Lord’ together might be to exploit the term ‘King’ ” (144). Moving to John’s Gospel, Bauckham comes to the conclusion that “the one true God reveals himself savingly only in the Son, who can reveal God and communicate eternal life only because he is one with the Father”; “the Fourth Gospel, therefore, redefines Jewish monotheism as christological monotheism” (165).

Section 3 deals with the Pauline Letters, with contributions by Douglas J. Moo (“The Christology of the Early Pauline Letters”); Ralph P. Martin (“The Christology of the Prison Epistles”); and Philip H. Towner (“Christology in the Letters to Timothy and Titus”). Moo concludes that “with the application of the title ‘God’ to Jesus, we reach the high point of Paul’s Christology in his early letters.” However, the “major and complex question,” which remains open at the end of Moo’s contribution, is: “How could Paul call Jesus God and at the same time preserve his bedrock belief in monotheism?” (190). Moving with Martin to the “Prison Epistles,” “The Christology of Philippians is focused in a noble depiction of the cosmic Lord in the Christ hymn of 2:6–11” (200). That of Colossians is that “You died with Christ from being under the control of the elemental spirits of the universe (2:20).” “You are assured of Christ’s victory that he has ‘reconciled’—that is, drawn the hostility of—these malign spirits” (208). Philemon, in turn, “sheds light on practical Christianity at work in uniting those separated by social divisions” (210), while “Ephesians builds on the cardinal doctrine of the one true God

who is all-powerful and all-wise and who ‘in Christ’ has a loving design for the world” (217). Regarding Christology in the Letters to Timothy and Titus, Towner is of the opinion that “1 Timothy reflects a decided emphasis on the humanity of Christ,” while “Titus and 2 Timothy fashion Christology into shapes that are as distinctive from one another as they are from 1 Timothy” (243).

Section 4 deals with Hebrews, the Catholic Epistles, and the Apocalypse, with contributions by Donald A. Hagner (“The Son of God as Unique High Priest”); J. Ramsey Michaels (“Catholic Christologies in the Catholic Epistles”); and David E. Aune (“Stories of Jesus in the Apocalypse of John”). Without the book of Hebrews, the breadth and depth of a particular contour in Christology would have been lost. Emphasizing both the deity and the full humanity of Christ, only John’s Gospel comes close to Hebrews. No wonder, then, that Hagner typifies the Christology of Hebrews as one that “clearly constitutes one of the high peaks of the entire New Testament.” He points to “a three-stage Christology that is reminiscent of the Christ hymn in Phil 2:6–11—that is, one that includes pre-existence, incarnation, and exaltation” (265). But the Christology of Hebrews extends beyond a factual description of stages in Christ’s existence; it “presents a Christology that showers abundant benefits on those who believe” (266). For Michaels, even James “exhibits a high Christology in the very context of promising vindication to God’s people.” He comes to this conclusion because, “for James, ‘God’ and ‘Lord’ are interchangeable” (274). Moving to 1 Peter, Michaels does not want to see it as “a ‘higher’ Christology than James, only that it is richer and more fully developed” (274). “Christology in 1 Peter is the key not only to individual salvation but also to life in community” (279), while that of 2 Peter “centers on revelation” (280). Jude, in turn, “felt compelled to defend ‘the faith’ against a very specific threat,” and this threat “evidently centered on ethics and Christology.” When it comes to the three so-called “letters of John”—although 1 John is not a letter and the other two not “general” (285)—the most striking difference in their Christology “and the rest of the Catholic Letters is the absence of the title ‘Lord,’ and consequently the phrase ‘the Lord Jesus Christ’ ” (286). According to Aune, “two different descriptions of Jesus Christ are presented in the Apocalypse of John: ‘One like a Son of Man’ in 1:9–20 and ‘the Divine Warrior’ in 19:11–21. Both describe the protagonist in language normally thought appropriate only for God” (318).

The contributors presented their papers during the “H. H. Bingham Colloquium in New Testament” at McMaster Divinity College during June 2001. With the exception of two to three cases, literature referred to in select bibliographies at the end of each contribution thus predates the colloquium. The selection of sources referred to as a “selected bibliography” differs substantially from contributor to contributor according to unwritten individual criteria. Some are of fair length, include languages other than only English, and serve as a good springboard for those who would want to advance their reading on

the topic, such as those of Longenecker and Marshall. Others are brief, only deal with English literature, and are limited in value, such as those of Hooker and Bauckham. Although some very prominent works—especially commentaries—are not to be found in the bibliographies, the traces of many years of involvement with these materials can be detected in the contributors' arguments.

Despite the fact of the common theme and purpose subscribed to by the contributors, the individual nature of each contributor's methodological approach and theological and confessional perspective can clearly be seen. The editor deliberately chose this approach, as stated in the introduction: "Uniformity of perspective, stance, or method has not been called for and should not be expected" (xiv). This becomes clear in the fact that not all contributions present an overall conclusion at the end of the essay (e.g., Hooker, Moo), that some chose more conservative standpoints regarding authorship (e.g., Moo accepts 2 Thessalonians as a Pauline letter [169], as does Martin regarding Colossians and Ephesians [193]), while others display great caution in this matter (Towner on 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus [220]).

This collection of essays is an easy-to-read introduction to the Christologies of the New Testament and forms a good starting point for "intelligent lay people, theological students, and ministers" (xiii) with some basic knowledge of New Testament scholarship. What the editor prays "is that by such a truer and abler presentation, Christians will be instructed and challenged to live more genuine lives as Jesus' followers and the Christian church will be benefited in carrying out its God-given mission" (xiv).

Contours of Christology in the New Testament is recommended for what it sets out to achieve. It not only adds to the repertoire of sources on the Christologies of the New Testament but also to an understanding of the different perspectives presented by the individual New Testament authors on their understanding of Jesus of Nazareth. These contours reflect the outlines of the christological landscape for the Christian church today.