

Jesus: Son and Priestly Companion of God's Throne

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How Jesus understood himself is subject to so many conflicting interpretations, but a forthright judgement by the distinguished exegete Martin Hengel focuses the central issue. He is troubled by the way so many writers hold that 'Jesus never possesses a messianic claim of divine mission', seeing it rather as the product of post-resurrection communities:

'...if the eleven disciples with Peter at their head, on the basis of appearances of the resurrected Jesus so difficult for us to comprehend, and completely unprompted, reached the view that Jesus was the Son of Man exalted to God, knowing that in reality he had been merely a simple proclaimer of the imminent kingdom of God, a rabbi and a prophet, knowing nothing at all of eschatological offices, dignities and titles, did they not then completely falsify the pure (and so unmythologically modern sounding) intention of their master? Does the Christian faith then not rest on a grandiose self-deception? Is it not the case that not only Judas, but also the disciples, wallowing in messianic mythology against their master's will, were -- viewed historically -- at bottom betrayers of Jesus, since they misunderstood his cause as thoroughly as it could possibly be misunderstood? ¹

If it is shown that the Church's interpretation of Jesus is radically discontinuous with how Jesus saw himself, then it follows that Christianity originates not in the mind of Jesus himself but in the minds of those who interpret him after the resurrection. And if you hold this, do you have any answer to the sceptic who says 'Jesus wasn't the founder of Christianity; St Paul was'? By making Christological development originate in the faith-filled minds of others, and not in Jesus' own understanding, we are in fact marginalizing the mind of Jesus from the substance of Christianity. In which case, how Jesus saw himself neither contributes to the Church's faith in him nor does it exercise any controlling influence on how the Church is to consider him. Unless the central ideas of Christology and soteriology originate in Jesus' understanding of himself and his mission, then they can be dismissed as the later imposition of categories which people impose on Jesus because they need him to be a particular kind of revealing, saving figure.

John Dominic Crossan and the Jesus Seminar present the historical Jesus as a provocative hippy who lives out a counter-cultural vision of egalitarian Israel as an alternative to the stratified social order of Galilee in which patronage and favouritism rule the day. Open commensality (table fellowship) and free healing are the features of this Palestinian Alice's Restaurant. How does Crossan see Jesus' death? I quote from Mark Powell's summary of Crossan's view of the events in Jerusalem:

¹ Martin Hengel, *Studies in Early Christology* (T.& T.Clark, 1995), 14-5

He [Jesus] visited Jerusalem, where the act that had played so well in rural Galilee was met with swift and brutal resistance. His message of spiritual and economic egalitarianism crated a disturbance at the Temple ('the seat and symbol of all that was nonegalitarian') and this time soldiers were on hand who were well trained at dealing with such disturbances. Jesus was hauled outside the city and crucified. He died. The soldiers then either left his body on the cross or threw it on the ground and covered it with dirt. In either case, it was eaten by dogs. ²

We shouldn't spend too much time on these ideas from Crossan: from the point of view of NT scholarship, they are simply deplorable. But they are culturally significant and influential. Increasingly, modern people distrust the truth claims of Christianity because the whole thing seems to be an unwarranted ascription to Jesus, prophet, healer and Jewish teacher, of a divine status at odds with his own self-understanding. If over-zealous Christians misinterpret their founder so badly, why should they be trusted to tell the truth about anything? Hence the widespread feeling that while *faith-driven Christology* distorts Jesus by claiming too much for him, *neutral historical research* restores the real Jesus by fostering a Jesus only minimally connected with Christological claims.

I am going to take the line that Jesus himself is the first and best Christologian and that it is possible to uncover the main features of his self-interpretation in a way that makes later Christian doctrinal teaching about him both credible and necessary. I will distinguish between two dimensions within Life of Jesus Research: the first deals almost exclusively with the text of the Four Gospels, while the second pays more attention to writings in the New Testament other than the Gospels. I will argue that the most secure way of identifying how Jesus understood himself is by supplementing what can be established through the Gospels by what the non-Gospel material transmit of the early traditions going back to the Jerusalem Mother Church, and therefore plausibly to Jesus himself. As we shall see, this is also, in part, a distinction between, on the one hand, those public traditions about Jesus included in the Church's normative written sources (Gospels) to be used in catechesis and liturgy, and, on the other hand, those esoteric teachings about his death and destiny that derive from Jesus' private instruction of his disciples. I will suggest that a fourfold paradigm of *sonship, temple-building, enthronement as companion of God's throne and priestly intercession* gives us the elements of Jesus' self-interpretation.

I

The first and most common form of research is based upon the judgement that the primary sources are the canonical gospels which have to be mined for the deepest and earliest data about Jesus. Through analysis of the traditions that flow among the Gospels and probable judgements about the traditions that flowed into the Gospels, exegetes try to identify the foundational traditions and the developmental processes that culminate in the Church's Gospels. They identify criteria (dissimilarity, multiple attestation, etc.) which are used to sift authentic Jesus-material from among the surrounding Church-materials in which it is set: it is an archaeological dig, sifting

² Mark A. Powell, *The Jesus Debate: Modern Historians Investigate the Life of Christ* (Lion Publishing, 1999), 101

through different layers in order to classify developments and uncover a substratum of foundational material that will tell us about ‘the historical Jesus’.³

Conclusions will differ, of course, depending on the judgements made about the nature of the Gospels and their reliability. So, for example, if the Gospels are judged to convey accurately the actuality of Jesus, admittedly developed and presented in the light of the Church’s later understanding, then one can hold that how Jesus saw himself is accurately interpreted and amplified in the Church’s faith. In this perspective, continuity, fidelity of interpretation, organic development and trustworthy connections link Jesus’ self-understanding and the Church’s interpretation of him.

But if the Gospels are judged to be primarily the projection onto Jesus of what the later Church wanted Jesus to be, then of course, in principle, there is no end to the variety of interpretations of Jesus which you can bring forward: Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza presents him as a proto-feminist whose radical challenge to Jewish patriarchy was undermined by the no less patriarchal Church; S.G.F.Brandon holds that Jesus was a political Messiah and that his followers knew this, but the Church later dampened the political issue in order to ingratiate itself with its Roman landlords; Geza Vermes presents him as a Galilean holy man and miracle-worker whose speech and actions did not exceed that context; others think that he saw himself only as the final prophet whose significance the later Church exaggerated in ‘divine’ terms; Schweitzer saw as a deluded apocalyptic visionary expecting the end of the world, the failure of whose predictions had to be coped with by the early Christian Church; Barbara Thiering makes Jesus a member of the Qumran community who marries Mary Magdalene, had two sons and a daughter, divorced her, married someone else and died in his 60s. Once the hermeneutical tie between Jesus and the Gospels is severed, there can be an indefinite number of versions of history which the Gospels can be said to conceal and which contemporary exegetes are now in a position to recover.⁴

Even theologians who ought to know better seem to be infected with a programmatic scepticism and reductionism in the way they interpret Jesus’ self-understanding. One of the leading Catholic theologians in the post-Conciliar period, Edward Schillebeeckx, for example, accords a high place to the theme of ‘the latter-day prophet’ which he presents as the matrix out of which exalted titles such as the Christ, the Lord, Son of God, develop:

All the Gospels preserve the memory of the first identification of Jesus’ person, suggested by his own life: Jesus is the prophet of the approaching – and in and through his public ministry already manifested – final kingdom of God.⁵

³ The term ‘the historical Jesus’ needs to be used with some care because most of the time it designates ‘the Jesus who is reached by applying certain criteria to evaluating the historicity of the Gospel text’. It is, most often, a literary and critical construct guided by the interpreter’s judgements and (often hidden) assumptions.

⁴ Some modern fantasy writers use this freedom to write books which feed upon a cultural disquiet about the veracity of Christian truth: *The Da Vinci Code*, for example, may be nonsense, but it is *our* post-Christian nonsense and therefore it matters.

⁵ E.Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (Collins, 1979), 479

Schillebeeckx speaks of ‘the prophetic self-understanding of Jesus’ and says: ‘it is highly probable, historically speaking, that Jesus understood himself to be the latter-day prophet’.⁶ He also judges that ‘no certain logion [word] of Jesus is to be found in which Jesus himself might be thought to ascribe a salvific import to his death’:⁷ so even the important Marcan statement that the Son of Man came to give his life as a ransom for many (Mk 10.45), with its deliberate reference to the Servant of Is 53.10-12, is attributed to the creative work of the later Church and not to Jesus. The Eucharistic words at the Last Supper are treated with no less scepticism: they convey the community’s later understanding of how Jesus’ death mattered. Unable to say clearly how Jesus interpreted his death, Schillebeeckx can only offer woolly and unconvincing statements about Jesus’ attitude to his impending death:

Jesus felt his death to be (in some way or other) part and parcel of the salvation-offered-by-God, as a historical consequence of his caring and loving service of and solidarity with people.⁸

In what follows, notice what Schillebeeckx does *not* say because that is more important than the platitudes that he does offer:

But there is no getting round the historical fact that in the very face of death Jesus offers the cup of fellowship to his disciples. This is a token that he is not just passively allowing death to overcome him but has actively integrated it into his total mission, in other words, that he understands and is undergoing his death as a final and extreme service to the cause of God as the cause of men, and that he has communicated this self-understanding to his intimate disciples under the veiled sign of extending to them the fellowship-at-table shared with his friends.⁹

What is missing from all this? In one word: atonement. Schillebeeckx is unable to bring himself to say that Jesus saw his death as an offering for sins. His Jesus thinks of himself primarily as the eschatological prophet and does not positively interpret his death as directed towards the atonement of human sin. Schillebeeckx may be the characteristic post-Vatican II theologian, but he is simply not good on Jesus.

Let me make three clear statements so that you know my assumptions. First of all, I do not think that the features of the historical Jesus can be best established by deconstructing the text of the Gospels with a heavy reliance on the criterion of dissimilarity. Methodologically, this is a doubtful way of proceeding; Christologically, it is badly flawed because at its worst it produces a Jesus discontinuous with both his Jewish context and the subsequent Christian community that acclaimed him as Lord. Secondly, I do not believe it is the case that the Gospels tell us more about the early communities than about Jesus. Hypotheses about the so-called ‘Marcan community’ are much more speculative than the actuality about Jesus conveyed in the Gospels: we know virtually nothing for certain about the origin of Mark’s Gospel. Thirdly, it is an unwarranted assumption that Christological development goes from ‘low’ Christology, (Christ as a prophet) to ‘high’ Christology (Christ as divine). The Gospel of Mark, dated around 69-70CE, is said to have a

⁶ *Op.cit.*, 306

⁷ *Op.cit.*, 310

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Op.cit.*, 311

lower Christology than the Gospel of John (85-90CE?). But if Christological development goes from low to high, then we would expect to find that traditions earlier than Mark will show an even lower Christology. But scratch the surface of the earliest Christian writings and you will find no evidence of an original 'low' Christology: when you read the Epistles of Paul, you find multiple evidences of high Christology, the most striking of which is the Philippians hymn in which Jesus is described as being 'in the form of God, but he did not count equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied himself, being born in the likeness of men' (Phil 2.6f).¹⁰

One cannot help but feel that the model of Christological development from early/low to late/high is a Liberal Protestant myth designed to support the normative priority of low Christology over late dogmatic Catholicism with which Liberal Protestantism has many problems. And of course, what is rarely pointed out is that this model of Christological development lends implicit support to the notion that Jesus himself (being earlier than anyone, of course) had an even lower Christology, which is what many people either want to prove or simply assume. *Ab initio*, it seems to me, Christology is full and high and I will argue that this is grounded in Jesus' own high estimate of his identity.

II

Earlier I said there is a second approach to the historical Jesus which offers something not given in the first approach, and to make the connection with this from within Gospel studies, I draw your attention to a writer whom I regard as the great figure in Gospel Life of Jesus Research: Ben Meyer's *The Aims of Jesus*, published in 1979, seems to me one of the most important works in late twentieth century research.¹¹ Both N.T. Wright and E.P. Sanders acknowledge that their works are guided by his insight that Jesus is concerned with the restoration of Israel.¹² The very title of his book tells you that Meyer is confident that we can actually ascertain with a high degree of probability what Jesus intended and, simultaneously, how Jesus understood himself. Meyer's argument is that Jesus thinks of himself as the Son of God who is the master-builder of God's Temple, the definite dwelling-place of God among men, and that he does so as one who knows that he

¹⁰ It is hard to see how the interpretation of this hymn as offering simply an Adamic parallel can do justice to the second stage in which Christ 'takes the form of a slave' and is born in the likeness of mortal human nature, having been previously in the form of God. More to the point is the contrast with rebellious angels who assert themselves in opposition to God and are subsequently cast down; Christ's path is the reverse: by emptying himself, he comes to receive the divine name of LORD.

¹¹ Cf. J. McDade, 'Jesus: Peasant Messiah or Master-builder' *The Month* (November 1995), 439-45

¹² N.T. Wright's *Jesus and the Victory of God* brings out the political context more strongly than does Meyer. Wright's account seems to me to go beyond the evidence in positing the existence of an aggressive Pharisaic religious nationalism at the time of Jesus. Raymond Brown distinguishes between pre-Agrippa (AD 6-41) and post-Agrippa (AD 44-66) Palestine. The latter was turbulent and ends in the Jewish revolt and the destruction of Jerusalem; the former was peaceful: 'Thus if we think of Jesus' adult years as from age twelve to his death (from ca AD 7 to 30/33), our sources for the prefecture of Judea *in that period* supply no evidence of an armed revolt or of Roman execution of notorious brigands, would-be kings, prophets of revolutionaries. Guevara (*Ambiente* 259) concludes his most detailed study of the political context in Judea with these words: "The response of the sources is very clear. The epoch of the public life of Jesus was a peaceful epoch." (R.E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah* (Geoffrey Chapman, 1993), 678-9) Were Galilean Pharisees at the time of Jesus' ministry as nationalist in intent as Wright makes them out to be?

will share the divine throne because he is acting with nothing less than the authority of God:

Jesus understood his immediate messianic task to be the division between faith and unfaith; and he understood his messianic destiny (formally, enthronement and rule) to be scheduled for fulfilment only as the outcome and reversal of repudiation, suffering and death.¹³

Meyer holds that the complex of teachings and actions which focus on Temple-building expresses Jesus' understanding of his identity and mission, the core of his intentionality: the preaching of God's Kingdom is the earlier counterpart to the later symbol of building the community of God's Temple. The key Old Testament text is Nathan's prophecy to David about his offspring who will build God's temple. Meyer's case is that Jesus is a self-interpreting exegete, applying this text to himself and acting out of the understanding that as Son, he will build the definitive dwelling place of God by gathering the nucleus of restored Israel which will become the locus of divine presence for the world's salvation:

When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son.' (2 Sam 7.12-4)¹⁴

Notice the related themes of *sonship*, *temple-building* and *enthronement* in this passage because they surface in a linked way in the Gospel narratives. For example, in Mark's account of Jesus' trial, when the charge is brought that Jesus spoke about the destruction and rebuilding of the Temple, the High Priest immediately asks him, 'Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?' The intriguing point is that the High Priest connects this claim to build the Temple with the claim that Jesus is Son of God – and of course this is the connection made in Nathan's prophecy – the Davidic Son does who is also God's Son builds God's Temple. Jesus' response confirms this and he adds the third element of enthronement, linked to the vision of the Son of Man in Daniel 7.13: 'I am; and you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power and coming with the clouds of heaven' (Mk 14.61-2).

Mark presents Jesus' threefold claim to sonship, the construction of God's Temple and enthronement on the divine throne as the blasphemous charge on which he is condemned by the Judean religious authorities (he had after all provocatively 'cleansed the Temple'). Jesus expects that the Jerusalem Temple will be destroyed in the tribulation that is coming upon Israel and this is given classic expression in the Temple Riddle attested in all four Gospels: 'Destroy this Temple and in three days I will rebuild it'. The first limb of the Riddle envisages the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple and the second the building of another Temple. In the second limb, the rebuilt Temple

¹³ Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (SCM, 1979), 216

¹⁴ On the theme of the indwelling of God's 'Name' as the mode of his immanent presence, Cf. J.E. Fossum, *The Image of the Invisible God: Essays on the influence of Jewish Mysticism on Early Christology* (NTOA, 1995), 124: 'God himself is transcendent, but his Name can dwell in an earthly habitat. This is repeated many times, especially in Deuteronomy'. It also bears upon the Johannine interpretation that the Word became flesh: 'Jn 1.14a-b implies that Jesus is the new sanctuary, the dwelling place of the Name of God' (125)

designates the community that Jesus convokes to become the divine dwelling.¹⁵ These double themes of destruction and building are also a feature of Jesus' cleansing of the Temple when he signals a repudiation of the present form of Temple worship, acts out prophetically the judgement that is coming upon the Temple and enacts the coming of the Lord to the Temple to establish a house of prayer for all nations in fulfilment of Isaiah 56.6-7:

And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants... these I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

Jesus' prophetic purification of the Jerusalem Temple is intended to have a wide significance; Meyer begins by quoting Sundkler:

'As Yahweh in the old Testament enters the Temple, so Jesus purifies the temple and thereby renews the whole world; for the temple is the centre of the cosmos and the mission which Jesus willed is cosmic regeneration.' The concrete specification of this symbolism, according to Jesus' esoteric teaching was his coming death for 'the many' and his vindication on 'the day of the Son of Man' that would bring in the reign of God and the renewal of the world. For the temple cult Jesus would substitute, climactically, the expiatory and covenantal offering of his own body and blood.¹⁶

Restored and purified Israel will then be 'the mountain of the house of the Lord to which all the nations shall flow, and many peoples shall come and say, 'Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.' (Is 2.2-3) Israel will be the light of the world and the focus of divine indwelling in which all the nations will come and find mercy. (This is why Jesus' mission is restricted to Israel; he deals with Gentiles and envisages that they will come from East and West and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven (Mt 8.11), but the *ecclesia ex circumcissione* must be summoned first.) Jesus' aim, says Meyer, was 'the messianic task of building on rock, secure against death, the living temple of the last days'.¹⁷ And it is this which lies behind Jesus' words to Simon at Caesarea Philippi in Matthew 16.17-9: 'You are Peter (*Petros*) and on this rock (*petra*) I will build my church and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it'. According to Meyer, the text evokes the Jewish tradition that the Jerusalem Temple is built upon the cosmic rock, the foundation stone of the entire edifice of the creation, 'the navel of the world', linking heaven, earth and the underworld and the symbolic location of God's great encounters with his world:

To the rabbis the cosmic rock was the site of creation, of Paradise and the tree of life, source of the rivers of the world, proof against the Deluge. Here was the altar on

¹⁵ The Gospel of John offers a later interpretation of the riddle in which the Temple to be destroyed and raised is Christ's own body (Jn 2.20-1).

¹⁶ Ben F. Meyer, *The Early Christians: Their World Mission & Self-Discovery* (Michael Glazier, 1986), 64

¹⁷ Ben F. Meyer, *Aims*, 188. Jon D. Levenson's excellent *Sinai & Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1985) discusses Zion as the cosmic mountain on pp.111ff. J.Z. Smith in *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp.84f offers a summary of the mythology; this is included as an appendix at the end of this article.)

which Abraham was ready to sacrifice Isaac; here, too was the altar of Melchizedek; here the house and throne of God and the destined locale of the judgment of the world. ¹⁸

Picking up these traditions, the (much later) Talmudic tract *Yoma* presents the Foundation Stone before the Ark of the Covenant as the foundation of the entire earth:

Just as the belly-button is positioned in the centre of a man, thus is the land of Israel positioned in the centre of the world, as the Bible says, 'dwelling at the very navel of the earth' (Ezek 38.12), and from it the foundation of the world proceeds... And Jerusalem is in the centre of the land of Israel, and the Temple is in the centre of Jerusalem, and the Great Hall is in the centre of the Temple, and the Ark is in the centre of the Great Hall, and the Foundation Stone is in front of the Ark; and beginning with it, the world was put on its foundations. ¹⁹

If these are the traditions about the rock at the centre of the Temple, then they are evoked in the words of Jesus to Simon when, symbolically, he makes him the foundational rock on which Jesus' *ekklesia* will be built, secure in the end-time against the forces of evil. The Jerusalem Temple is about to be destroyed in the tribulation (*peirasmos*) coming upon Israel but the community of the last days will be built upon a new foundation, Simon bar-Jona. 'The conclusion, with a good rating or probability, is that Jesus did in fact give Simon the totally new name *Kepa* [Rock]... the scheme supplies the context, the only known context in ancient Palestinian Judaism, in which 'rock' is intelligible as the appellation of a man.' ²⁰

The text's operative presupposition is that the task of 'the Messiah, Son of the living God' (Mt 16.16) is precisely to build the eschatological temple. Here temple is translated by 'church', the community of restored Israel, or rather by 'my church', for the restored community of Israel is messianic. ²¹

The complex of Christ, Temple and God's dwelling place is also richly elaborated in the Gospel of John. Jarl Fossum argues that the theme of Christ as the Name of God tabernacling among us lies behind not only the Johannine Prologue but also the Johannine variation on the Temple Riddle in which the Temple that is destroyed and rebuilt is explicitly stated to be the Temple of Christ's body (Jn 2.21). 'Jn 1.14a-b [..the Word became flesh] implies that Jesus is the new sanctuary, the dwelling place of the Name of God. ²² Fossum judges that the theme of Jesus as the new Temple as the background to Jesus' great statements on the Feast of Tabernacles: 'If anyone thirst, let him come to me. And let him drink who has faith in me. As scripture says: *Out of his body shall flow rivers of living waters*' (Jn 7.37-8): ²³

¹⁸ *Aims*, 185ff. Cf. Ben F.Meyer, 'The Temple: Symbol Central to Biblical Theology', *Gregorianum* 74 (1993), pp.223-40.

¹⁹ Levenson, *Sinai & Zion*, 118.

²⁰ *Aims*, 186, 194

²¹ *Aims*, 186

²² On the theme of the indwelling of God's 'Name' as the mode of his immanent presence, Cf. J.E.Fossum, *The Image of the Invisible God: Essays on the influence of Jewish Mysticism on Early Christology* (NTOA, 1995): 'God himself is transcendent, but his *Name* can dwell in an earthly habitat. ...' (124-5).

²³ The background is the Old Testament prophecies which envisage a spring of salvation gushing forth from the Temple: Ezek 47.1-2; Zech 14.8; Joel 3.18; Is 12.3.

Jesus is the source of the living waters, the new temple, the dwelling-place of the Name. In Jewish traditions the waters of salvation are said to come forth from the altar of burnt offerings. The altar was seen as the 'Foundation Stone' of the world, the Primordial Rock with which God sealed the mouth of the Deep, the waters of chaos. The Name of God was inscribed upon this Stone: 'The Name is distinctly engraved upon the Foundation Stone, with which God sealed up the mouth of the Deep' (*Ps Jon.Tg* Exod 28.30). John 7.37-8 may be thus taken to imply that Jesus even is the new altar, the Foundation Stone of the world, upon which was engraved the Name of God and from which the waters of salvation were believed to come forth.²⁴

Let us return to the trial scene: Jesus' words about the Son of Man 'sitting at the right hand of Power' [God] evokes Ps 110.1, "The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand and I will place your enemies under your footstool". This is 'the Old Testament text which appears most often in direct quotations or in indirect references in the New Testament', sixteen passages in all, of which seven are direct quotations.²⁵ Mt 22.43 justifies the Christological and Messianic use of this Psalm by saying that the verse is spoken by David who calls the Messiah 'Lord'; David then is presented as the Scriptural witness to the Lord who is seated on the throne, namely Christ (cf. Acts 2.34-6). That this text should be used of Christ who died a criminal's death is remarkable. I quote Martin Hengel again:

It is, therefore, all the more significant that the disciples of Jesus could claim that a historical person, who was put to death in a disgraceful fashion in Jerusalem as a leader of the people, was enthroned as the companion of God on the throne in accordance with Ps 110.1. Here lies the greatest mystery of the origin of the earliest Christology. Doesn't this unspeakably audacious and at the same time provocative step necessarily have a basis in the teaching and the bearing of Jesus himself?²⁶

As soon as we raise the theme of a human figure sharing the divine throne, we are brought into contact with Jewish mystical traditions which are becoming recognised among scholars today as the creative matrix within which early Christian theology takes shape. We know that there was in the first century CE a tradition of Jewish mysticism based upon a visionary ascent to the divine throne, called *merkabah* mysticism.²⁷ Rabbis practised a visionary ascent to the different levels of heaven, their journey based upon the vision of the throne-chariot of God seen by Ezechiel, with its description of God's glory and a human figure seated on the divine throne:

And above the firmament over their [the 'living creatures'] heads there was the likeness of a throne in appearance like a sapphire, and *seated above the likeness of a throne was a likeness as it were of a human form*. And upward from what

²⁴ Fossum, *op.cit.*, 131

²⁵ Hengel, *op.cit.*, 133.

²⁶ Martin Hengel, *op.cit.*, 203

²⁷ Qumran gives us evidence that this mystical tradition that previously could be dated only to the 3rd Century CE was in existence in 1st century CE Palestine. 'The Angelic Liturgy [of Qumran] is pre-Christian and could not have appeared later than the first century CE. It contains many oblique references to the divine hierarchies, the seven heavens inside one another, and the appearance and movements of God's throne-chariot, familiar to scholars of Merkabah mysticism.

had the appearance of his loins I saw as it were gleaming bronze, like the appearance of fire enclosed round about; and downward from what had the appearance of his loins I saw as it were the appearance of fire and there was brightness round about him. Like the appearance of the bow that is the cloud on the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about. *Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.* (Ezech 1.26-8)

When these mystics are given a vision of God, they see a human form at the centre of the divine glory. If God is beyond sight, then who is the human figure seated on the throne of God? ²⁸ Alan Segal summarises:

‘A human figure on the divine throne is described in Ezechiel 1, Daniel 7, and Exodus 24 among other places, and was blended into a consistent picture of a principal mediator figure who, like the angel of the Lord in Exodus 23, embodied, personified, or carried the name of God YHWH, the tetragrammaton.... There is adequate evidence that many Jewish mystics and apocalyptists sensed a relationship between the heavenly figure on the throne and important figures in the life of their community.’ ²⁹

The Jewish tradition records the ascent of many figures to heaven where they experience transformation, enthronement and are given to understand heavenly secrets. One of those Jewish mystics is St Paul: his account of the experience of ‘a man in Christ’, who is ‘caught up into Paradise – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows –and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter’ (2 Cor 12. 2-4) is of this *merkabah* kind. Morray Jones makes a convincing case that Paul’s (usually ignored) auditory vision in the Temple, recorded in Acts 22.17-21, was a *merkabah* vision in which Paul ascends to the heavenly Temple and sees Christ as the enthroned glory of the Lord. ³⁰ Both Psalm 110 and the ascending visionaries speak of a human figure seated on the divine throne; Christians very quickly will identify Christ with the figure and think of him as the visible manifestation of divine glory. ³¹ For example, referring to Isaiah’s vision of God on his throne (Is.6.1ff), the Gospel of John quotes Isaiah’s words

²⁸ ‘In the Old Testament, being seated on the throne of heaven is reserved for Yahweh alone, and in subsequent Jewish tradition it is rare to find any reference to someone sharing the throne of God.’ J.M.Scott, ‘The Triumph of God in 2 Cor 2.14: Additional Evidence of Merkabah Mysticism in Paul,’ *New Testament Studies* 42 (1996), 260-81; quotation from 260. Scott points to the Similitudes of Enoch where it is stated the son of man will ‘sit on the throne of glory’ (45.3) and to the later related tradition of the exalted angel Metatron who is enthroned.

²⁹ Cf. A.F.Segal, *Paul the Convert: the Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* Yale University Press, 1990), 34-71.

³⁰ ‘If the ascent to paradise means entry into the celestial Holy of Holies, this incident clearly corresponds to such an experience. Paul has been transported in his ecstatic trance (hence his uncertainty as to whether his body accompanied him) from the earthly to the heavenly temple and into the celestial Holy of Holies, where he sees Christ as the enthroned *kabod* [glory]’. C.R.A. Morray Jones, ‘Paradise Revisited (2 Cor 12.1-12: the Jewish Mystical Background of Paul’s Apostolate. Part 2: Paul’s Heavenly Ascent and its Significance,’ *Harvard Theological Review* 86 (1993), 265-92; quotation 286.

³¹ Uncertainty about the identity of the human figure gives rise to the view that there are ‘two powers’ in heaven against which the Rabbis fulminate. The ground-breaking study is A.F.Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1977). Early Christian theology builds upon these and related traditions about a differentiation in God as it comes to formulate Binitarian and Trinitarian patterns consistent with a belief in divine unity.

and says, 'Isaiah said this because he saw his glory and spoke about him' (Jn 12.41): we are to understand that Isaiah saw Christ when he saw the Lord on his throne. Similarly, Abraham is said to have seen Christ's 'day' and rejoiced (Jn 8.56). In other words, when God is seen (in the OT theophanies), Christ is seen. What begins in these currents of mystical Judaism as a differentiation between God and his visible manifestation will develop into Christian Trinitarianism.

What is intriguing for our purposes here is the question of how the tradition of Christ sitting at the right hand of God, which we have seen as an interpretation of Ps 110, relates to the Jewish mystical tradition of the human form at the centre of the divine glory seen by Ezechiel and the Jewish mystics. Now nothing authorises us to say with complete confidence that Jesus saw himself as this figure seen by Ezechiel, but there is good reason to think that his Baptismal experience was an ascending vision of this *merkabah* kind: 'he saw the heavens opened' is a phrase which signals mystical entry into heaven. Did Jesus experience at his baptism being placed on the throne of God, hearing God say to him, 'You are my Son, the beloved' and experiencing the power of the divine Spirit filling him (Is 11.2)? Was he given to understand then that a later enthronement at the right hand of God would follow upon his performing the great atonement on earth by which God would establish his presence in a sanctified humanity? These are the fascinating suggestions made by Margaret Barker in *The Risen Lord*.³² I quote from a summary which I published earlier of her views:

Jesus understood himself as the Lamb, the Servant, the LORD, come to deliver his people by making a sacrifice for the definitive atonement of Israel, and subsequently to be enthroned in the divine presence. Drawing on these two traditions Barker thinks that Jesus saw himself as the great high priest who was to shed his blood for the great Atonement, and that it is this high priestly paradigm that is the generative core of the earliest Christology and soteriology.

This, she says, offers a new paradigm which replaces the distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. From his baptism onwards, he is the Lord who has risen into the presence of God, and so he conducts his ministry with a sense that he comes 'from above' -- in which case the Johannine pattern of descent from above becomes plausible -- with a clear sense of himself as the LORD who rescues his people by an atoning sacrifice in his blood, after which he would be exalted and enthroned in heaven as the companion of God's throne.³³

III

These ideas lead us to the second strand in our proposal about how Jesus saw himself. The first was through an examination of the Gospel materials; the second approach is based on the judgment that the non-Gospel writings of the New Testament may give us a better account of early Jewish-Christian religion than do the Gospels; they may contain important insights which go back to Jesus himself and may actually convey deeper aspects of Jesus' self-interpretation than are expressed in the public, forensic character of the Gospels which were presumably intended for liturgical and catechetical use.

³² Margaret Barker, *The Risen Lord: the Jesus of History as the Christ of Faith* (T.&T.Clark, 1996), 27-55

³³ J.McDade, 'Jesus in Recent Research', *The Month* (December 1998), 495-505; quotation 503-4.

The insights in the non-Gospel traditions are esoteric and bear upon the mysteries of Christ's death, and because these themes did not form part of Jesus' public proclamation of the Kingdom, this may be why they are so little represented in the Synoptic Gospels. It is possible that the key features of Jesus' understanding of the meaning of his ministry and death are better recorded in these non-Gospel writings than the Gospels. We should not be afraid to think of a deep organic continuity between what they say and how Jesus himself thought. Indeed, it seems eminently sensible to think that what flows into these early traditions – and as we shall see, the important ones come from the early Mother Church of Jerusalem – comes from Jesus' own private teaching.

I have indicated what I think is the importance of Ben Meyer's analysis of the triad of Son – Master-Builder of the Temple – enthronement. The fourth element to be added to this is the theme of priestly intercession, and this, like the other three themes, is indisputably early, coming in the non-Gospel traditions. Remember that early Christian theology is exegetical: it arises out of the interpretation of Biblical texts, and our focus is the interpretation of Ps 110, 'The Lord says to my lord, "*Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool*". The earliest written instance (56/57CE) of the theme of Christ as companion of God's throne is in Paul's letter to the Romans, 8.34: which speaks of Christ Jesus who has been raised from the dead, and it makes a double statement about him: 'who is at the right hand of God, who intercedes for us', a formula which brings together the themes of enthronement and priestly intercession. It feels like a formula from the earliest Jerusalem tradition which Paul is quoting here.³⁴

The connection between 'sitting at the right hand' and priestly intercession comes directly from Ps 110 itself because verse 4 of the Psalm, presumably spoken to the lord who is to sit at the right hand of God, says, 'You [the Lord at the right hand of God] are a priest for ever according to the order of Melchizedek'. So the one who sits at the right hand of God is a priest and this priest shares in the cosmic sovereignty of God.³⁵ The connection between sitting at the right hand and priestly intercession is elaborated most fully in the Epistle to the Hebrews: Christ is now 'seated at the right hand of God on his throne' (12.2); 'we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of majesty in heaven, a minister in the true tent, the heavenly sanctuary' (8.1-2); 'once he had made purification for sins he sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high' (1.3).

³⁴ 'Paul presupposes that in the congregations in Corinth and Rome a knowledge of the christological concepts that were connected with Ps 110.1 – concepts to which he only alludes – was unquestionably present. He can use these formulas because he knows that the congregations understand them. In the manifold quotations and allusions in the New Testament only after-effects of the original meaning of Ps 110.1 for the beginnings of christology are visible.' Hengel, *op.cit.*, 137-8.

³⁵ I quote a summary of Richard Bauckham's description of the implications of sharing the divine throne: Bauckham argues 'That the divine throne functioned in Second Temple Judaism as a potent symbol for God's sovereignty over the world; a sovereignty thought to belong by right to Yahweh alone as creator. By implication, any indication that Jesus shared Yahweh's throne would imply that he also participated in God's sovereign rule.' From Darrell D.Hannah, 'The Throne of his Glory: the Divine Throne and Heavenly Mediators in Revelation and the Similitudes of Enoch', *ZNW* 94 (2003), 68-96; quotation p.79. The reference is to Richard Bauckham, 'The Throne of God and the Worship of Jesus' in *The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism: Papers from the St Andrews Conference on the Worship of Jesus*, eds. C.C.Newman et al (Leiden 1999), 43-69

So we are in touch with a tradition earlier than the written Gospels which understands Christ as the companion of the divine throne, as a priest who exercises a sacrificial ministry for sins and as sharing the divine sovereignty. We have seen good reason to think that the triad of sonship, Temple-building and session at the right hand originates in Jesus's self-understanding. What of the theme of priestly intercession? Reflect on what took place in the Temple: the chief work was atonement for sins which the High Priest performed once a year on the Day of Atonement, entering behind the veil into the divine presence bearing blood and sprinkling it on the *kapporet* (the cover of the Ark of the covenant or the mercy seat) where, according to Leviticus, God appears in the cloud (Lev 16.2). The High Priest enters the Holy of Holies accompanied by incense 'so that the cloud of incense may cover the mercy seat lest he see God and die' because this is a place of contagious holiness (Lev.16.12-3). 'Thus he shall make atonement for the holy place, because of the uncleannesses of the people of Israel, and because of their transgressions, all their sins' (Lev 16.16).

It [the ark] is overlaid with gold, and on top of it is placed a golden cover (*kapporet*), which is the place where the divine glory is located, and which perhaps reflects a knowledge that Yahweh's throne was thought to be above the ark. It is upon this cover over the ark, placed at its two ends, that the cherubim are now to be situated...It is from above the cover of the ark, and between the two cherubim, that the very presence of Yahweh is to be found.³⁶

The *kapporet* is where God is, where God receives the sacrificial offering for sins and whence atonement comes to the whole land and people of Israel when the High Priest, having sprinkled the sacrificial blood on the mercy seat comes out, symbolically coming from God, passes back through the veil into the earthly world and spreads the atoning blood symbolically on to the land and people of Israel.³⁷

It is important for our discussion of enthronement and priestly sacrifice that the ritual involves the bringing of blood to the divine throne itself because the throne that is sprinkled with sacrificial blood is the throne where Christ is enthroned. When the Epistle to Hebrews says that 'once he had made purification for sins he sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high' (1.3), it is asking us to think that Christ sprinkles his sacrificial blood on the divine throne, and then is received by God as the companion of his throne. The divine throne is now the mercy seat where the crucified and risen Christ sits as the priestly intercessor whose 'once and for all' sacrifice for sins is eternally efficacious.

We know that, in a creative interpretation of profound significance for subsequent Christian belief, the earliest Jerusalem community came to understand that the events on Calvary Mount should be viewed in the light of the priestly atoning ritual on the Mount of the Temple. This insight, relating Jesus' death to the Temple ritual, seeing the shedding of his blood as the priestly act of atonement, more than any other is the generative core of Christian faith. The earliest testimony comes in Paul's quotation of a Jerusalem tradition: in Romans 3.25, Paul speaks of

³⁶ R.E.Clements, *God and Temple: the Idea of the Divine Presence in Ancient Israel* (Blackwell, 1965), 119; cf. pp.28-39

³⁷ On *kapporet* in the Tabernacle/Temple as the throne of God, Cf. M.Haran, *Temples and Temple Service in ancient Israel* (Oxford:Clarendon Press, 1978), 246-59;

Messiah Jesus whom God put forward as the *hilasterion* (Heb: *kapporet* propitiation or mercy seat) in his own blood for the remission of sins committed in the time of God's forbearance (Rom 3.25)

The implication is clear: the blood of the crucified Messiah on Calvary is to be viewed as the blood which atones for sins in the presence of God.³⁸ And when this was first composed and when it was repeated by Paul in his letter to the Romans, everyone knew that the Temple in Jerusalem with its holy of holies and its mercy seat, was still standing. But already the atoning work that takes place in the Temple is being transferred to Calvary and the shedding of Christ's blood on the cross is now seen as the act of atonement for sins. The insight emerges *before* the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple that its atoning work has now passed to a new location and to the ministry of a different High Priest.

Now if Jesus understood himself to be the Son, Master-builder of the definitive temple, the one destined to be the companion of God's throne, could he not have taken the next step and understood his death as the atoning sacrifice which would render the community he was gathering holy, sanctified and worthy of bearing the divine glory? Someone made the connection. Why not Jesus himself? The insight given to him at his Baptism, on the basis of which he conducts his ministry, may have been that he is to offer himself 'for all', so that all would become the holy dwelling place of God. As Meyer puts it:

for the temple cult [that is about to end] Jesus would substitute, climactically, the expiatory and covenantal offering of his own body and blood.³⁹

(That the core of Eucharistic theology is 'expiatory and covenantal' has implications, of course, for how we think of the Eucharist; in recent years we have so focused on the aspect of the Eucharist as a sacred meal that we have forgotten that Eucharistic theology is atonement theology because it centres on the priestly Lord offering himself for sins. You cannot get to the notion of atonement for sins from what is contained in Passover theology: Eucharistic theology comes from the Day of Atonement, not from Passover.⁴⁰)

The Christianity that flows from Christ's self-interpretation will foster a strong sense that it is the living Temple intended by Christ during his ministry. It will view his ministry as deliberately *ecclesial*, directed towards the composition of a single community, summoning first the house of Israel and then Gentiles, to be the dwelling place of God and the light to the world. It will think of itself as the flowering of what Christ intended: first of all, a convocation from the body of Israel (*ecclesia ex circumcissione*) and then, on

³⁸ *Hilasterion* is the Greek Septuagint translation of *kapporet*. Ben F. Meyer, 'The Pre-Pauline Formula in Rom 3.35-6a' in *The Early Christians: Their World Mission & Self-Discovery* (Michael Glazier, 1986) 84-104

³⁹ Ben F. Meyer, *The Early Christians: Their World Mission & Self-Discovery* (Michael Glazier, 1986), 64

⁴⁰ Margaret Barker, *The Great High Priest* (T.&T.Clark, 2003), 56ff. 'There are immediate and obvious problems trying to link the Eucharist with Passover as we recognize it: *the Passover was the only sacrifice not offered by a priest* and the essential element was that the offering was whole (Exod 12.46), whereas the descriptions of the Last Supper in their various forms emphasize that the bread was broken. Further, the cup at the Last Supper is linked to the covenant... and the Letter to the Hebrews links the death of Jesus to the covenant renewed in the Day of Atonement. (Heb 9.11-15)

an equal basis, a convocation from the nations of the earth (*ecclesia ex gentibus*). Hence the visual representation of the Church in the mosaics of the church of Santa Sabina in Rome, in which two dignified matrons represent the equal participation of Jews and Gentiles in constituting the community of final salvation. It is the confirmation of God's promises to Israel and their extension to Gentiles because Christ's ministry extends to both groups (Rom 15.8-9) and incorporates them into a single body (Eph. 2.14ff).

In later Christian tradition, the medieval images of the Throne of Grace, in which the Father, seated on the throne, both displays the crucified body of the Son, wonderfully expresses the offering of the priestly Son received by the Father. Hugo Van der Goes' 15th Century painting of the Trinity in the National Gallery of Scotland shows the Father on the divine throne holding and displaying the body of the crucified Christ and breathing the Spirit of love over him. El Greco's painting of the Trinity (illustration below) shows the Father's reception of the offering of the crucified Son. This is the throne of God which is simultaneously the mercy seat. These are the great Western Christian images of the Blessed Trinity and of the high priestly work of Christ who has 'entered once and for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption' (Heb 9.12). The Father gazes lovingly on the dead Son whose body bears the marks of human brutality; death is taken into the very life of God. They are also images of resurrection because over this dark mystery of the sorrowful Father and the dead Son hovers the Holy Spirit, the love which unites them in this work of redemption and which raises the incarnate Son to a transformed union with God which we call resurrection.

We have looked at a way of understanding the historical Jesus which permits due attention to be given to the relationship of four strands in the earliest traditions about Jesus which are plausibly grounded in Jesus' own understanding of himself and his ministry: sonship, Temple-building, sharing the divine throne and priestly intercession. In the light of this approach, I offer the judgement that Jesus understood himself to be

- **the Son who builds God's Temple of the last days, the community of restored Israel, his *ecclesia ex circumcisione* (the church from the people of Israel), to which will come in time the *ecclesia ex gentibus* (the church from the nations) to form the Church of God in its catholicity.**
- **the Son who is the priestly companion of God's throne, by whose offering of himself on the Cross for the atonement of sins, humanity is enabled to become the sanctified dwelling place of God.**

With this approach, we are quite far from the minimalist eschatological prophet of Edward Schillebeeckx and even farther from the egalitarian hippy imagined by John Dominic Crossan. But we are not all that far from the claims made by the Church in its Christological teachings and the related teachings about the Blessed Trinity: these are how it tries to think through consistently the insights which come from Christ himself about his identity and significance. If the ideas presented in this article have any merit, they may enable us to think the later doctrinal teachings about Christ as the divine Son inseparable from the mystery of God, whose self-offering in death was the act of atonement for the world's sins, are grounded in what was conveyed to the disciples by the first and best Christologist, Jesus himself.

Appendix: Jewish Mythology about the Foundation Stone in the Temple

'Later Jewish traditions developed a complex mythology about the Temple and its 'stone of foundation' (*'eben setiya*), beginning with creation.

1. It is the place where the waters of the "Deep" were blocked off on the first day of creation;
2. it is the source of the first light of creation;
3. the Temple site was the first place in the world, hence, it is the 'centre' of the world;
4. it is the place from which the dust was gathered to create Adam;
5. it is the location of Adam's first sacrifice;
6. it is the site of Adam's grave;
7. it is the place where Cain and Abel offered sacrifice and, hence, the location of Abel's murder;
8. the flood was caused by lifting the Temple's foundation stone and releasing the waters of the deep;
9. the Temple site was where Noah first sacrificed after the flood;
10. Abraham was circumcised at the Temple place;
11. the Temple site was the location of Melchizedek's altar;
12. the Temple was the site of the altar prepared for the sacrifice of Isaac in the story of the Akedah [the Binding of Isaac in Gen 22];
13. Jacob's Bethel vision occurred at the site of the future Temple;
14. the foundation stone was the rock from which Moses drew water;
15. YHWH stood on the Temple site to recall the plague;

and so forth. Indeed, in one narrative, the Stone itself testifies to its significance in direct speech to David while he is digging the foundations of the Temple b. *Sukkah* 53a-b and parallels) – thus guaranteeing that the Temple was built at the "right" place. (Many of these events were correlated temporally as well as spatially: they are said to have occurred on the eve of Passover.) The same identifications are retained in Islamic traditions concerning the Dome of the Rock, and in Christian discourse, they have been transferred to Golgotha. (J.Z.Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp.84-5f.)

El Greco's painting of the Trinity in the Prado, Madrid



