

Christological Titles

- I. New Testament
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I. New Testament

1. Introduction. For a long time, christological titles (esp. Son of God, Son of Man, Kyrios, Christ/Messiah, and Son of David) were considered the primary interpretative key for Christology. While this assessment overestimates their potential, they do remain crucial to comprehending the NT. In many cases, such titles draw on traditional language but do not reveal their explicit meaning apart from their respective contexts, thereby making such contexts as important, e.g., to the understanding of the title of Christ as the complex traditions on the Messiah.

The later so-called titles include metaphors and abstractions emanating from various language fields (“shepherd” evokes agriculture, “savior” social activity etc.). Motifs referring to Jesus’ work turn into predicates or else influence them (cf. Jesus’ mighty teaching and “teacher”). That renders a clear distinction of titles and predicates (emerging designations of a general nature) unfeasible.

Indeed, each stream of early Christianity sets its own priorities (e.g., the metaphor of the lamb occurs as passover offering in 1 Cor 5:7, as “Lamb of God” in John 1:29, 36, and differently in Rev 5:6 etc. as ἀρνίον, i.e., as a powerful young ram ready

for attack). Throughout the NT, new predicates develop (ἐπίσκοπος, “overseer,” in 1 Pet 2:25; ἀπόστολος, “messenger,” in Heb 3:1; “high priest” in Heb 5 and 7 are late). As a result, titles and predicates reflect of the conceptual variety represented within the NT.

2. The Earthly Jesus. According to extant evidence, Jesus desisted from referring to himself by a traditional title familiar to his environment. The people who met him, however, experienced a connection between his work and his person and attempted to provide appropriate descriptions. Since all the sources are written down later, it cannot be discerned if one or two of the predicates were already developed prior to Easter. The impressive picture portrayed in the Gospel tradition arises in the post-Easter period: Jesus is the “Holy One,” as he personifies God’s holiness (Mark 1:24; John 6:69). He is called “rabbi” (Mark 9:5; John 1:38) and “teacher,” as his proclamation (including his powerful deeds) is of divine authorization (frequent in the Gospels from Mark 4:38 to John 13:13); and sometimes he is referred to as “prophet” (an ambivalent designation; cf. Mark 8:28; John 6:14). He is as close to the father as a child, and as the anointed one, who served God in a unique way; here we encounter the roots of the titles “Son of God” and “Christ” (Mark 8:29 par.).

However, Jesus never referred to himself by any of the above predicates. The seeming exception – his apparent self-designation as Son of Man – did not contradict the tendency, as its meaning was polyvalent (against a definite title). It could designate a “human being per se,” “a special human being,” or “one like a human being coming with the clouds to appear before the deity.” The post-Easter congregation picked up this complexity developing words of the present, suffering, and coming Son of Man and concentrated it on Jesus’ exceptional glory (this development reaching its peak in John 1:51; 3:14–15; cf. the variant in Rev 1:13). The later systematic distinction of Son of God (for the divine nature) and Son of Man (for the human nature of Jesus) disrupts the high dignity of the latter predicate.

After Easter, further abstractions evolved from narratives. Jesus’ words on shepherds facilitated a Christology of the Shepherd (with a peak in John 10:11 and 1 Pet 2:25), while the phrasing in Luke 5:31 enabled his description as a “physician” etc.

3. “Majestic” Predicates. Titles such as “king” (Gk. βασιλεύς, which could also refer to emperors), “the illustrious/manifest one” (Gk. ἐπιφανής), “benefactor” (Gk. εὐεργέτης), “savior” (Gk. σωτήρ), and “Son of God” (Gk. υἱὸς θεοῦ; Lat. *D[ivi] F[ilius]*) were common epithets at the time the NT scriptures developed. Applying them to Jesus did, however, affect their meaning:

According to the NT, Jesus descended from “the seed of David” (Rom 1:3), but this dynasty had not

their influence. The most prominent son of David was Solomon. Should the earthly Jesus have been called son of David by supplicants (which is disputed), this title would have implied the distinctions of both, David, the ruler, and Solomon, whom Jesus resembled with regard to his wisdom and healing powers (cf. Mark 10:47, etc.). Yet, in accordance with Mark 12:35b–37a, this description was not sufficient for Jesus; later and only gradually did the idea of Jesus as the majestic son of David (in combination with 2 Sam 7:11b–16) succeed (reaching its peak in Luke 1:32–33).

The hesitation was founded. As Jesus challenged the malpractices of human leadership (Mark 10:42–44), his followers had to reflect a critique of giving honor through titles. The predicate “benefactor” – a title of kings since the Hellenistic empires – fell victim to this critique (Luke 22:25). Never in the 1st century CE was this title attributed to Jesus, even though his deeds would have allowed for it (cf. Acts 10:38); likewise, the epithet “epiphanes,” “the illustrious,” was avoided (in spite of 1 Tim 6:14, etc.).

The accounts of the passion added to these differences. Jesus was convicted as βασιλεύς, “king” (Mark 15:26). Should this most common designation for rulers attain a positive connotation at all, it had to serve as a title “not of this world,” which happened only gradually (perfected in John 19:33–36), even if tensions could never be averted entirely (cf. the contrast in Rev 19:16–19).

It is disputed whether the reproaches against Jesus included his alleged claim of being the “Son of God” and the “Davidic Messiah” (Mark 14:61). The major importance of the titles “Son of God” (cf. Mark 15:39) and “the anointed” (“Christ,” a translation of *māšīaḥ*) has perhaps one of its roots here, but surely not the only one (cf. §§ 1 and 2): In Israelite tradition “Son (Child) of God” can also refer to the flawless, righteous Israelite or to Israel in its entirety (cf. Matt 2:15). In addition, the resurrection influenced the title’s christological usage substantially (Rom 1:4). At the time of the NT, “anointed” could designate not only rulers but also priests and prophets (hence the nuance of High Priest affecting the predicate in Heb 5:5). Therefore the christological motifs of the unique Son and Christ combine pre- and post-Easter traditions.

4. “Savior,” “Lord,” and “God.” The name “Jesus” implies God will give deliverance (Heb. root *yšc*), so it is not far-fetched to call Jesus “savior.” However, competition with other “saviors” of his time (esp. the Roman emperors) deferred the success of this epithet. It was not until the 50s of the 1st century CE that σωτήρ (“savior”) gained acceptance (Phil 3:20). But one generation later, the amplification “savior of the world” arose, fearing not any more the earthly competition (John 4:42 alongside the imperial epithet IG II/2:3273, etc.).

Older and more important is the predicate “Lord.” The honoring salutation, the experience of Jesus’ authority and power, as well as the paschal acclamation “come, our Lord” form the background of this title. Yet the most important impulse for its use seems to have been its association with the divine name (Gk. κύριος representing the translation of the Heb. term *ʾādōnāy* in the LXX). The post-Easter congregation was convinced that God had imparted his own name to Jesus (Phil 2:9–11). Accordingly, κύριος is a key for understanding the Christology of majesty and glory.

The Septuagint combined this predicate with traits of power similar to δεσπότης (“Lord/Sovereign”). Therefore δεσπότης became a frequent title of the one God too (see in the 1st cent. CE Josephus). The NT also transfers this predicate onto Jesus (2 Pet 2:1). In this way, the pendulum was moving toward a Christology of might (cf. also Pantokrator). That needs to be balanced hermeneutically.

Unlike κύριος, the designation “God” (θεός) was ambivalent and reminiscent of the various beings, including heroes and rulers, referred to as deities in the 1st century CE. For a long time, early Christianity shied away from applying this epithet to Jesus for fear it might be taken as a sign of polytheism. It was only at the end of the 1st century CE – when Jesus’ majesty and glory were clarified – that Christianity dared using this predicate as well as some venturous adaptations of it (John 20:28 along with κύριος; Titus 2:13). The later high Christology of the early church reduces that complexity and yet has roots in the NT.

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Martin Karrer