

# WHAT WAS THE ORIGINAL IN-/CON-TENT OF "CHRIST" IN "JESUS CHRIST"?

Craigville Theological Colloquy IX.4

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Biblical literalists believe that Peter's answer to Jesus' question--the Colloquy theme, "Who do YOU say I am?" Mt.16.15 M.8.29 L.9.20--destroyed the question. (Irony: How close, in mental spirit, are scriptural & scientific fundamentalists! Susan Sontag, one of the latter: "The only real answer to a question is one that destroys the question.") For them, the question is **closed**.

The Colloquy planning committee works on another set of assumptions: (1) That Peter made a courageous stab at answering; (2) That the Synoptics applaud his stab; & (3) Jesus' question is **open**, addressed to all Christians in all ages, and pressing upon us today. As the Colloquies' primary pertinence is to the United Church of Christ, the question becomes "Who do YOU UCC Christians, personally & collectively, say I am?"

1 Titles & metaphors flew around Jesus like a flock of birds, but only one landed on him & became a part of his name, which is not eg "Jesus Lord" (though "Jesus is Lord" was the earliest Christian confession) or "Jesus Savior" (though saving is the NT's comprehensive term for his work) but only "Jesus Christ." In this light, Peter's answer--"You are the Christ"--expresses settled early Christian doctrine--indeed dogma, a proper word for settled doctrine. (Slight variations: Mt., "... the Son of the living God"; L., "The Christ of God"; cf. Jn.1.49, Nathaniel's outburst, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!", & 6.68f, Peter's response to Jesus' question to the disciples as to whether they would "like to leave" him, "Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words that give eternal life. And now we believe and know that you are the Holy One who has come from God.")

2 Whether or not the association of Messiah-Christ with Jesus originated with the historical Jesus (I among many scholars think so, many scholars think not), the **intent** of the association is clear: Jesus made upon his disciples the impress the messianic tradition made upon Israel, viz hope, anastrophic expectation against catastrophic fears. Since Jews continue in hope fed by their messianic tradition, it is an objective fact that Jesus has not exhausted the **content** of "Christ" for everybody whose Book is, or includes, the Hebrew Bible. To appropriate Sontag's term here, Jesus is not the answer that destroys the Messiah question. While this is patently so in the case of the Jews, we Christians speak of a deferred fulfilment of "Christ": our messianic expectation in & through Jesus awaits the Second Coming for its full-come-ness. Toward improved Jewish/Christians relations, nothing is more hopeful than this overlap of unfulfilment--the Jews having viewed the Second Coming as an awkward cover for Jesus' failure to fulfil the role of Messiah, we Chrsitians pointing in the NT to messianic seeds sprouting toward the return of "this same Jesus" (Ac.1.11). We can join in common prayer for the full-coming of God's Kingdom-Reign-Rule; we could pray together the Our Father (without calling it "The Lord's Prayer"); we can work together on projects on which there is a clear biblical OT-NT mandate.

3 The recent scholarly tendency to date earlier than previously the NT's John literature (Gospel, I-III Jn.) gives greater historical weight than was formerly accorded these materials. We may be here closer to the painful struggle that split the church off from the synagogue ("the Jews"), giving Jn. a more anti-Jewish atmosphere than that of the Synoptics. (The fact that contemporary antiChristian literature is not now used in synagogues, while contemporary antiJewish literature [in the NT] continues to be used in the churches, creates the illusion that the early Christians were more antiJewish than their opponents were antiChristian. The suggestion that antiJewish materials should be bowdlerized out of the NT [1] is antihistorical & [2] misunderstands the nature & function of sacred literature.)

In THE QUEST FOR THE MESSIAH: THE HISTORY, LITERATURE AND THEOLOGY OF THE JOHANNINE COMMUNITY (T&T Clark/91), Jn. Painter shows how complex were the first-century Jewish messianic expectations, & what use "John" made of this complexity. Jn. the Evangelist (ie, Gospel author) saw this

variegated messianic yearning as a **quest for life** parallel with other quests for life. This universalization bridges from all quests to Jn.'s own theological & christological views, which then illumine all these quests, but especially the Jewish. From the eminence of this Jesus-as-the-Christ theology of religions, John looks down on the tribal Jewish messianisms as so many betrayals of the true content of "Christ," which is to say also the true divine intent in the messianic tradition, viz to transcend Judaism in a universal religion.

I must add that the danger in Jn.'s attack on tribalism was that his version of Christianity was less protected than was Paul's against drifting away from history into gnosticism: Jn. is the favorite Gospel not only of evangelicals but also of Christian Science & (to the extent that it takes notice of Christianity) New Age spirituality, from which may the Lord & the Jews deliver us!

4 How does the Synoptics' Jesus respond to Peter's confession (ie, affirmation of faith)? In all three Gospels he tells them to keep his messiahship secret, then immediately predicts his suffering & death. This secrecy stricture is the diametrical of instructing his disciples to preach his messiahship. Rather, he intends that nondisciples continue to speculate about his identity, as they had been doing (Jn. Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah [only in Mt.], or "one of the ["old," only L.] prophets). "Christ" was capacious enough a confession to **close** Jesus' question to the disciples, but the question remains **open** for others. Note the ambiguity of postapostolic disciples: for us, the question is both closed (in that we are disciples) & open (in that we are daily confronted, in our here-&-nowness, with the question who Jesus is as actionally defined in how we relate to him & conceptionally defined by how we think of him).

Of the Synoptics, only Mt. provides a speech-response of Jesus to Peter's confession (16.17-19). Peter's insight is a revelation from "my Father." Peter &/or his confession is the "rock" on which "I will build my [undefeatable] church." The binding/loosing power-announcement then follows "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven."

5 All of the above needs to be factored into our judgment of the Jesus Seminar's rejection of the historical authenticity of "Who do YOU say I am?" In #2524.7 I mentioned one of their assumptions here, viz that Jesus did not have our modern self-"image" concern. Consonant with this is their assumption that he did not deliberately step into the messiah role. (Paul Verhoever has made a film using only the minimal, "red-letter" words of Jesus. I'm eager to see whether this reductionism, in film form, is so radical as to make inconceivable the disciples-apostles' faith in & through Jesus. If he turns out to be "nothing but" your typical first-century-Palestine radical rabbi, how come he became to his followers "something more" than any of the other radical rabbis became to their followers?)

It's good to remind ourselves of three **facts**: (1) Quotation marks are a recent invention, serving the cool function of tongs to hold at a distance & the warm function of arms to embrace. We moderns hunger for the *ipsissima verba*, to know "exactly what was said." The ancients practiced not this rigidity but rather what we may call creative remembrance. (2) NT hermeneuts must assign zero-sum weights to the early church's development of what originated with Jesus & invention of what did not originate with Jesus. A radical instance of the latter is the notion that Paul invented the Christian religion. As to the former, I (contra the Jesus Seminar) believe Jesus saw the messianic hope as being fulfilled in & through him (as, therefore, Messiah-Christ)--else how account for so close an identification of Jesus/Messiah in the mind of the early church that "Christ" became part of his name? (3) Our historiographic interest in "the historical Jesus" does not exist in the NT, which records Jesus' communications both before & after his resurrection. Before Jesus, God "spoke through the [Hebrew-Jewish] prophets" (Heb.1.1); after his resurrection, Jesus spoke through Christian apostles-&-prophets. (See M. Eugene Boring's SAYINGS OF THE RISEN CHRIST, 1982, & his less technical 1991 Westm./Jn.Knox THE CONTINUING VOICE OF JESUS)

6 Why do I pay so much attention to the Jesus Seminar's conclusions?

Because I like to begin exegesis of the biblical text with a minimalist textual base: what do all competent biblical scholars agree on as authentic? I may conclude, as I do vis-a-vis the Jesus Seminar, that the authentic text is more extensive than many of my colleagues think; but, both as Christian & as scholar, I want to hear them. So I ask you to hear the Jesus Seminar further (as in #2523, Funk & Smith, THE GOSPEL OF MARK):

Black, the category of "Who do YOU say I am?," means either "I would not include this item in the primary data base for determining who Jesus was," or "Jesus did not say this; it represents the perspective or content of a later or different tradition."--xxii

And *in loco*, This is "a stylized scene replete with Christian motifs. Similar episodes in Thom.13 & John 1:35-42,6:66-69 indicate how readily the primitive Christian community invented scenes of this type. The leading disciple or disciples are asked to make the good confession, which they do (note similar examples in John 6:68,11:27). Their faith becomes the model for the faith of others."

I ask again: "invented" or developed? The genre model of question-to-confession is not, I think, a post-Jesus invention, but a development from Jesus' own style of discipling (training) the disciples. The disciples' post-resurrection reflections on how as well as what he taught doubtless were a shaping force in the text as we have it. Consider the last chapter of Luke. Jesus asks (v.17) "What are you talking about?" Before the resurrection, he'd told them (eg, after "Who do YOU say I am?" in all the Synoptics) that he was to suffer & die; now he asks (v.26) "Wasn't it necessary for the Messiah to suffer these things and then to enter his glory?" In the very next verse we can see the disciples pouring over their sacred texts for the inter-illumination of text & their experience of Jesus--a study that here is presented as Jesus' continuing to teach them, to "master" his disciples: "Jesus explained to them what was said about himself in all the Scriptures." Was it indeed Jesus (in the Spirit) who did this explaining? As scholar I can have no answer; as Christian, I say yes. A modern historico-critical exegesis of the OT cannot find a suffering messiah in any, not to say "all," the Scriptures. But the disciples' experience of Jesus fixed the suffering/messiah connection, which then illumined scores of Hebrew Bible passages, thus creating the Old Testament (which means the Hebrew Bible seen through Christian eyes of faith in Jesus Christ)....But were the Christians honest interpreters? Of course they were. They violated no contemporary hermeneutic canons. Are the Jews wrong in saying you can't get a suffering messiah out of the Hebrew Bible? Of course they're not. Rather, the Christians had binocular vision, one eye on "Moses and the writings of all the prophets" (v.27; cf. seeing Jesus with Moses & Elijah in the Transfiguration, which in Mt. immediately follows "Who do YOU say I am?" & Jesus' foretelling of his suffering & death), the other eye on Jesus.

One further instance of Christian exegesis. The Ethiopian eunuch (Ac.8) can't understand Isaiah "unless someone explains it to me" (vs.31). Then Philip uses Is.53.7f(LXX), which speaks of an unjust sufferer, to expound (vs.35) "the Good News about Jesus."

If the OT is reduced to the Hebrew Bible--a reductionism now practiced in some Christian seminaries--the Christian religion is eliminated. Christian spiritual formation is to see all things, including the Hebrew Bible, through Christian eyes with "the mind of Christ" (Phil.2.5-11 uses this to support Christian humility; elsewhere it's used to support other virtues).

7 Please refresh your mind as to this Thinksheet's title. I've been working on the original in-/con-tent of "Christ" in "Jesus CHRIST." Now I want to conclude with two assertions as to the importance of the full name "Jesus Christ":

(1) It accurately depicts the name of the Christian religion as a conflation of historical (Jesus) & transhistorical (Christ) realities.

(2) It's prophylactic against the polar heresies of **tribalism** (the deterioration of the Faith back into a Jewish sect) & **mysticism** (a floating away from history into gnostic mysteries, such as the current neo-pagan New Age, with its root conviction that nature is sacred).