

Who Did Jesus Think He Was? Jesus' Self-Understanding in the Synoptic Gospels

Greg Forbes

Melbourne School of Theology

Introduction

In looking at the topic *Who Did Jesus Think He Was?* we are, of course, dealing with the Christology of Jesus. It is one thing to study the Christology of Paul, the Christology of the church fathers, or the Christology of a particular theologian. However, it is another thing altogether to examine the Christology of Jesus himself.

From the perspective of a New Testament scholar such an enterprise is fraught with difficulty. There are landmines along the path, and one cannot undertake a simple walk through the Gospel terrain to glean and gather whatever may appear desirable. For lurking below the surface is the dreaded nemesis of inauthenticity. And so, anyone who wants to write on the historical Jesus, be it his teaching or deeds, must first of all deal with methodological issues.¹

It is all too apparent that a particular view of Jesus, including what he may have thought about himself, is directly dependent upon the data under consideration. One only has to survey the material on the historical Jesus that has proliferated since 1980 to see that. So it is no real surprise that the view of Jesus presented by the Jesus Seminar, who admit 18% of the sayings material as authentic, is vastly different to that advocated by N.T. Wright, who has a much more positive approach to the Gospel data. We may well concur with Witherington's lament that some scholars do not "play with a full deck of synoptic playing cards,"² but that does not mean that we can introduce the full deck without some justifiable methodology.

¹ See Chris Forbes, "The Historical Jesus," in *The Content and Setting of the Gospel Tradition* (eds. Mark Harding and Alanna Nobbs; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 231–62. One of the more recent and perhaps novel approaches to methodology is that of James G. Crossley, *Jesus and the Chaos of History: Redirecting the Life of the Historical Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). Crossley suggests that other factors besides Jesus himself, such as cultural and political turmoil in Palestine and beyond, may equally explain the rise in popularity of the Jesus movement.

² Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1995), 103.

So does this bode well for a seminar on theology? I have neither the time nor the inclination in this particular setting to get bogged down in methodological procedures, yet I do feel that I am betraying my guild to some extent if I don't. So, it is going to have to suffice for the present moment to say that I am largely persuaded by James Dunn's well-argued insistence that what we have in the Synoptic Gospels is a faithful reminiscence of Jesus. In other words, the impact that Jesus made on his first followers has been preserved in the various strands of what we know as the Gospel tradition. We may not have the original words of Jesus (above all because Jesus spoke in Aramaic) but we have stories told and retold according to the norm of oral cultures. And that norm is the preservation of a core story with peripheral details varying in the telling and retelling.³

In any event, once the tradition is removed from the only context in which it has been transmitted anything is possible, and in fact the literature bears adequate testimony to this! So, for the moment, let us assume that Jesus' self-understanding is faithfully captured in the written Gospels. I will make some further observations on this as we proceed, and address it once more in my concluding comments.

So what then did Jesus think about himself? Obviously we do not have access to his mind, only to what has been written. So our picture will be necessarily incomplete. We must also take account not only of what Jesus said about himself but what he did, for it is true in many instances in the Gospels that actions speak louder than words. We will examine Jesus' self-understanding with respect to three areas: Messiah, Wisdom, and Son of God.

I. Messiah

a) Messiahship in first century Judaism

Messianic expectations in first century Judaism were fluid and varied, as evidenced by the popular messianic movements of the time, as well as the vast difference between, for example, the Qumran expectation of both a priestly and royal Messiah, and the Herodians who pinned their hopes on the Herodian dynasty. Nevertheless, common to most views was the expectation that the Messiah would be a catalyst for the restoration of Israel and to

³ James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered. Christianity in the Making. Volume 1* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 192–254. See also Dunn's third volume *Neither Jew nor Greek: A Contested Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 210–218.

usher in a golden age of peace and prosperity for the people of God.⁴

b) Jesus and the kingdom of God

Achieving a scholarly consensus is a rare feat in historical Jesus studies, but none deny that the kingdom of God was the focal point of Jesus' teaching. Not only was it the focal point of his teaching, but Jesus claimed that the kingdom was present in and through his ministry, and indeed himself. Because in numerous strands of Jewish thinking kingdom and Messiah went hand-in-hand,⁵ the teaching of Jesus regarding the kingdom of God obviously prompted questions regarding his own identity. Thus, his citation of Isaiah 61:1–2 in Luke 4:18–19 with respect to his own ministry is not only a declaration that the kingdom is present, but can also be construed as an implicit messianic claim.

This implicit messianic claim is reinforced by his ministry proper. The miracles and exorcisms he performed align to various degrees with kingdom expectations. Building on such texts as Isaiah 35:5 and 61:1–2 and filtered through second temple messianic expectations, the prospect emerges that the Messiah would be God's agent for bringing wholeness and restoration not only to the nation but also to individuals (e.g. 4Q521). This link between kingdom, Messiah, and healing is also evident in the reply that Jesus gives to John the Baptist, who it would appear is having a certain cognitive dissonance concerning the identity of Jesus. Jesus alludes to the above-mentioned texts from Isaiah and implies that his role as the "the coming one" should be painfully obvious (Matt 11:2–5).

Drawing on Isaiah 25:6–8 the expectation developed during the second temple period of God's people participating in a great banquet in the kingdom age (cf. Matt 8:11). There are also a number of places in the literature where the Messiah was to preside over this banquet (1QS^a 2:12–21; *1 Enoch* 62; cf. Mk 14:25; *2 Baruch*

⁴ See N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), 481–86; Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 447–55; 617–22; M. F. Bird, "Christ," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels. Second Edition* (eds. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown & Nicholas Perrin; Illinois: IVP Academic, 2013), 115–25.

⁵ Joel B. Green, "Kingdom of God/Heaven," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels. Second Edition* (eds. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown & Nicholas Perrin; Illinois: IVP Academic, 2013), 471–72; Stephen Voorwinde, "The Kingdom of God in the Proclamation of Jesus," in *The Content and Setting of the Gospel Tradition* (eds. Mark Harding and Alanna Nobbs; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 329–53.

29). Jesus' feeding of the multitudes and regular table fellowship with the marginalised should consequently be seen as a symbol and foretaste of this messianic banquet.⁶ If the John 6:15 postscript to the feeding miracle has any historical credibility,⁷ then the crowds obviously interpret the event messianically. Here we need not insist that Jesus rejected messianic status, only the popular conceptions of it.

c) Choosing and sending the Twelve

The selection of the Twelve places Jesus squarely in the realm of Jewish restoration eschatology. Although not many have been willing to accept N. T. Wright's Israel-still-in-exile paradigm,⁸ there is not much doubt that the hopes of the nation centered on the restoration of the twelve tribes.⁹ Consequently, if Jesus did not intend to imply the eschatological renewal of Israel in the selection of his disciples, then choosing twelve was a very careless choice. Wright also especially notes the choice of the inner three disciples – Peter, James, and John – which has obvious echoes of David's three mighty warriors (2 Sam 23:8–17), particularly given the association of Jesus with a Davidic royal ideology.¹⁰

d) Miracles

Not many scholars today, even those at the sceptical end of the spectrum, would deny that Jesus was known as a miracle worker and exorcist.¹¹ Most debate centres around the issue of the uniqueness of Jesus in this regard. However, to what extent such miracles were unique to Jesus is beside the point, for when interpreted against the OT background regarding the prophecies of the messianic age (Isa 35:4–6; 61:1ff), Jesus' actions must be seen as highly significant. In fact they must be construed as an implicit

⁶ See Craig L. Blomberg, *Contagious Holiness: Jesus' Meals with Sinners* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2005) for more on this topic.

⁷ The obvious question remains as to why the early church might add such a statement with its obvious political overtones. See George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1987), 88–89.

⁸ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 198–243.

⁹ See B. Pitre, *Jesus, the Tribulation, and the End of the Exile: Restoration Eschatology and the Origin of the Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005); E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 299–301, 431, 532.

¹⁰ Luke 1:32, 69; Mark 10:47; 12:35–37.

¹¹ See J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus. Volume Two: Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (New York Doubleday, 1994), 617–31.

messianic claim. In healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, and casting out demons¹² Jesus was proclaiming in his actions that: i) the kingdom of God was present, and ii) he was the agent of that kingdom, the messianic deliverer. This explains his otherwise enigmatic response to the question posed by John the Baptist (see above).

e) The Temple incident

For messianic expectations that embodied a royal focus (probably the dominant expectation) the temple was central. This is so because “temple and kingship went hand-in-hand.”¹³ The construction of the temple was planned by David and completed by Solomon, Josiah’s reform was bound up with the temple (2 Kings 23), Judas Maccabaeus cleansed and rededicated the temple, Herod the Great embarked on extensive temple rebuilding, and after the time of Jesus both Simon bar Giora and Bar-Kochba performed symbolic actions regarding the temple.¹⁴

Although Jesus’ action in the temple has been interpreted differently over the years, most nowadays regard the prime focus to be a prophetic sign of judgment regarding the temple’s destruction. His behaviour did not incur immediate action by the authorities, and does not appear to be an attempt to stop the cult. Probably limited in time and space it makes more sense to regard the action as having symbolic significance, that is, a prophetic sign.

Of course this comes on the back of the manner of Jesus’ entry to Jerusalem – riding an unriden colt down from the Mount of Olives. This is loaded with messianic symbolism, for Solomon, the initial son of David, was placed on the royal mule in his coronation/accesion ceremony (1 Kgs 1:28–55), and the Mount of Olives carried eschatological significance given Zechariah 14:1–5. Consequently Wright, in typically understated manner, claims that “if Jesus did *not* want to be thought of in any way as Messiah, the

¹² Note the expectation that Satan would be vanquished at the end of the age (Isa 24:21–22; 1 Enoch 10:4ff; Jub 23:29; T. Mos 10:1; T. Levi 18:12; T. Jud. 25:3; 1QS 4:18–19; Rev 20:1–3). Thus Jesus both has supreme power (to bind Satan) and authority to inaugurate the final age of blessing.

¹³ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 483.

¹⁴ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 203–206, 483. Josephus (*War*, 6.283–290) also tells of a false prophet who, during the Jewish War, exhorted the people to go to the temple where they would see miraculous signs of their deliverance.

Entry and the action in the temple were extremely unwise things to undertake.”¹⁵

f) Summary

It really makes very little sense to deny that Jesus had a messianic self-consciousness. We have only surveyed some of the relevant material here, but even that clearly points in one direction. If approximate contemporaries of Jesus (Judas the Galilean, Simon bar Giora, Bar-Kochba) could understand or portray themselves in messianic terms, and they did far less than Jesus to substantiate those claims, then why is it considered so astonishing by some that Jesus could understand himself to be the Messiah?¹⁶

But then, why was Jesus so reluctant to use or accept the title of *Messiah*? When the ministry of Jesus is understood against the background of Jewish messianic expectations we see that he had a far different conception of what being Messiah entailed.¹⁷ For Jesus, the Messiah was not one to fight Israel’s battle against pagan oppressors, nor was it about material prosperity and abundance, nor was it about earthly kingship. Rather, modelling himself on the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, Jesus understood his divine vocation to be to give his life as a ransom for many (Mk 10:45). Thus his messianic vocation was not triumph instead of suffering, but triumph through suffering. Given this dissonance with popular conceptions the reluctance of Jesus to accept messianic labels is quite understandable.¹⁸

2. Wisdom

Wisdom is one of the most enigmatic features of Jewish theology. Wisdom is not just about proper living in the sight of God, it is an aspect of God’s revelation.¹⁹ Human beings are exhorted to look at the created world around them, understand their lives as created

¹⁵ N. T. Wright, “Jesus, Israel and the Cross.” http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Jesus_Israel_Cross.pdf, Section IV. (accessed 15/06/2016) (italics retained).

¹⁶ N. T. Wright, “Jesus, Israel and the Cross.” http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Jesus_Israel_Cross.pdf, Section IV. (accessed 16/06/2016).

¹⁷ See James H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Messiah: Developments in Earliest Judaism and Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

¹⁸ In this connection it is interesting to note that post-resurrection the disciples still understand the ministry of Jesus in nationalistic terms (Acts 1:6). It takes the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost to change their perceptions.

¹⁹ In this sense most regard Wisdom as embodying general rather than specific revelation.

beings under God and order their lives appropriately. Thus wisdom can be understood as “divine truth mediated through human observation.”²⁰

The most relevant factor for our discussion here involves passages that personify wisdom in Proverbs and Sirach. The continuing debate concerning the origins of this personification need not delay us.²¹ More relevant is the question of what Wisdom is actually personifying. Proverbs 8 indicates that Wisdom is created by God (8:22) and yet is distinct from his creation in that she was present at creation and appears to be God’s agent of it (8:30; 3:19). So the relationship between Wisdom and God himself is quite enigmatic. Are we dealing here with an attribute of God poetically represented as separate transcendent being, or is Wisdom a personification of the order integral to creation itself?²² Whereas some may consider the former an overstatement, the latter does not do total justice to the statements made about Wisdom.²³ Consequently, it does not appear to be too far a stretch to say that certain Jewish authors could conceive of Wisdom in terms of a plurality in God in a way that was not thought to compromise Jewish monotheism.

Even if some do consider this too far a stretch with respect to the original Jewish context, it obviously is not once we move into the NT material. John’s Prologue and Paul certainly depict Jesus in wisdom categories, and this wisdom Christology is part of a multifaceted approach to describing the person of Jesus. However our concern here is how Jesus understood himself. So let us look at the relevant Gospel texts.

a) Matthew 11:18–19

In his defence of John the Baptist and critique of the fickleness of his contemporary generation, Jesus claims that his custom of eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners is defensible because

²⁰ D. J. Estes, “Wisdom and Biblical Theology,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry and Writings* (eds. Tremper Longman III & Peter Enns; Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2008), 855.

²¹ See E. C. Lucas, “Wisdom Theology,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry and Writings* (eds. Tremper Longman III & Peter Enns; Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2008), 905–906. Ben Witherington III, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 3–116.

²² Lucas, “Wisdom Theology,” 905–906.

²³ Lucas, “Wisdom Theology,” 906.

“wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”²⁴ In other words, Jesus as the Son of Man is equated with Wisdom, with the point being that as wisdom by definition cannot do anything wrong or false, Jesus’ actions will ultimately vindicate him.²⁵

b) Matthew 11:28–30

Here Jesus echoes the call of Wisdom in Proverbs and Sirach in summoning people to come and receive instruction (Prov 8:1–3; Sir 24:19–22; 51:23–27). Particularly relevant is Sirach 51:23–27 where Wisdom invites the uneducated to draw near and to place their neck under her yoke so that they may find serenity.

c) Matthew 12:42

In stating that “something greater than Solomon is here” Jesus is clearly referring to himself and his ministry.²⁶ Although Solomon was known as an exorcist in later Jewish tradition and in context of the Beelzebul controversy (vv. 22–32) the statement may be doing double duty with respect to Jesus’ authority as an exorcist, the prime focus is on the wisdom of Solomon. The obvious implication is that Jesus is greater than Solomon who was the epitome of wisdom.

d) Matthean redaction and the historical Jesus

The instances cited above where Jesus speaks of himself in wisdom categories appear to go beyond a mere personification of Wisdom. Wisdom is already personified in the Jewish writings, but something greater than personification is here. These sayings suggest that Jesus understood himself to be the incarnation of Wisdom – “that Jesus presented himself both as sage and message of the sage.”²⁷

²⁴ This reading has early and reliable support (κ B) but there is a well attested variant “by her children” that is more closely aligned with the Lucan parallel (Lk 7:35). Although “deeds” is more likely to be the original reading here in Matthew, debate still exists as to the original saying of Jesus. See Ben Witherington III, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 51.

²⁵ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13* (Word Biblical Commentary 33A; Dallas, Word, 1993), 311.

²⁶ The neuter *τις* requires the translation “something” rather than “someone.” This is meant to embrace the entire ministry of Jesus as well as his person (Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 355).

²⁷ Witherington, *Jesus the Sage*, 204. Also Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 355; Witherington, *Christology of Jesus*, 51–53.

However, might not this be explained in terms of Matthean redaction rather than reflecting the ideas of the historical Jesus? The call of Jesus to come to him and take his yoke upon oneself is unique to Matthew, and although Matthew 12:42 has a direct parallel in Luke 11:31, this is the least explicit of the three sayings mentioned above. In addition, the Lukan parallel to Matthew 11:18–19 (Lk 7:35) reads “wisdom is vindicated by (all) her children,” which need imply nothing more than Jesus and John the Baptist stand in the line of all those who have embraced wisdom. However, there is good reason to suppose that “all” is Lukan redaction,²⁸ and so here Jesus is likely affirming that both he and John the Baptist are the “culmination of all of Wisdom’s messengers.”²⁹

Another relevant saying occurs in Matthew 23:34//Luke 11:49, in the context of a series of woe sayings pronounced against the scribes and Pharisees. The Lukan version reads, “Therefore the Wisdom of God also said, ‘I will send prophets and apostles to them’,” whereas the Matthean version has, “Therefore I send prophets and wise men and scribes to you.” If Luke preserves the original saying³⁰ again we see that Matthew directly equates Jesus with Wisdom, and by following this immediately with the lament over Jerusalem he clearly indicates that Jerusalem is rejecting none other than Jesus as incarnate Wisdom.³¹

Although Witherington argues for the primacy of Matthew’s wording in the double tradition texts,³² most would argue that Luke more likely captures the original saying. Nevertheless, even if we follow the majority at this point it would be unwarranted to conclude that Matthew’s wisdom Christology is purely the product of his own fertile theological mind. Not only are there a couple of implicit links between Jesus and Wisdom in the double tradition

²⁸ So John Nolland, *Luke 1–9:20* (Word Biblical Commentary 35a; Dallas: Word, 1989), 346.

²⁹ F. W. Burnett and C. Bennema, “Wisdom,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels. Second Edition* (eds. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown & Nicholas Perrin; Illinois: IVP Academic, 2013), 996.

³⁰ So John Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34* (Word Biblical Commentary 35b; Dallas: Word, 1993), 667; I. Howard Marshall, *Commentary on Luke* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 502.

³¹ F. W. Burnett and C. Bennema, “Wisdom,” 998; Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28* (Word Biblical Commentary 33b; Dallas: Word, 1995), 675 .

³² Witherington, *Christology of Jesus*, 49–52.

sayings source, there is a strong wisdom Christology present in both John and Paul. Consequently, it would appear that a wisdom Christology is not a later theological development in the early church, but was present from early times. Not only this, it is present throughout the various strata of the NT. Consequently, it is likely that the seeds of this wisdom Christology were planted by Jesus himself, and taken up by the NT writers as an appropriate and at-hand category to use in their multifaceted Christology.

In this connection it is also instructive to note the affinities between the ministry of Jesus and the career of Wisdom. Wisdom has a unique relationship with and proximity to God (Sir 24:1–6), is the pre-existent agent of creation (Prov 8:22–31), grants life (Prov 8:35), is linked to truth (Prov 8:7) and the word of God (Sir 24:3), dwells among the people of God in Jerusalem (Sir 24:8–12), gives revelation and instruction, and after suffering rejection returns to God in heaven (1 Enoch 42).

In conclusion then, Jesus spoke of himself in wisdom categories and laid the foundation for a developing wisdom Christology whereby he would be not only be portrayed as personified Wisdom but Wisdom incarnate.

3. Son of God

Given the OT and ANE usage, the use of this title in and of itself is ambiguous and inconclusive. We will briefly outline the Jewish usage as this provides the prime background for the ministry of Jesus.

a) “Son of God” in the Old Testament and Judaism

In the plural, “sons of God” could be used of angelic beings (Prayer of Joseph 1:6–7; Gen 6:1–2 [possibly]), and was also a covenant term depicting Israel as the elect people of God (Ex 4:22; Hos 11:1). In the singular, it was used of Jewish miracle workers such as Hanina Ben Dosa,³³ but the most significant usage for our purposes relates to Jewish kings, especially David and his descendants in terms of the Father–son relationship expressed in the covenant of 2 Samuel 7:13–14. This *functional* usage is not to be understood in terms of divine sonship as evident in Greco-Roman culture and

³³ Hanina ben Dosa is addressed as “my son” by a (presumably divine) voice from Mount Horeb (*b. Ber.* 17b).

religion,³⁴ but represented the mediation of God's rule through the king and the intimate relationship the king enjoyed as recipient and heir of God's blessing.

The linking of son of God terminology with Davidic kingship led naturally to the linking of son of God and Messiah. With the discovery of the Qumran texts clear evidence is now at hand that this correspondence was made in Second Temple Judaism,³⁵ although how widespread this was is unclear. Nevertheless, the possibility remains that both Peter's confession, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matt 16:16), and the question of the high priest "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" (Matt 26:63) are not two separate statements/questions, but one.

So, in Jewish thought at the time of Jesus "son of God" was not a divine title, and could be used to designate a number of specific functional relationships between human beings and God, including that of Messiah.

b) The term "Son of God" in the Synoptic Gospels

In Luke's Infancy Narratives the angel Gabriel announces to Mary that her son would be called the "Son of God" (Lk 1:35). This proves to be the case but from somewhat unexpected sources. Those who call Jesus by this title are: i) the narrator of Luke and Mark (Mk 1:1; Lk 3:38); ii) the voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism (Mk 1:11 and par.), iii) Satan in the temptation narratives (Matt 4:3,6; Lk 4:3,9 – by means of a conditional statement), iv) demons (Mk 3:11 and par.), v) the high priest in the form of a question (Mk 14:61; Matt 26:63), vi) those who mock Jesus on the cross (Matt 27:40), vii) Matthew's version of Peter's confession (Matt 16:16), viii) the disciples after they saw Jesus walk on water (Matt 14:33), and ix) the Roman centurion in light of the death of Jesus (Mk 15:39; Matt 27:55). Only the final three are confessions of human beings in a positive sense, although we have already seen above that

³⁴ Whereas the Greeks could ascribe divine sonship to a living human being (e.g. Plato), the Romans reserved this status mainly for deceased emperors. A living emperor could be termed "son of God," in the sense that he was descended from one who was now deified. See A. Winn, "Son of God" in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels. Second Edition* (eds. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown & Nicholas Perrin; Illinois: IVP Academic, 2013), 887.

³⁵ 4Q174. There are a couple of other possible references in the Scrolls (4Q246, 1Q28a, 4Q369) but due to the fragmentary nature of the text these are less certain. See Winn, "Son of God," 886–87. The apocalyptic book *4 Ezra* also links "son" with Messiah.

Peter's confession was most likely more about messiahship than divine sonship. The confession of the Roman centurion serves a literary and theological function in Mark and even if the event was historical it is difficult to construe what the soldier meant by this statement. This leaves only Matthew 14:33. Yet even here, it is not necessary that the disciples understood Jesus to be God incarnate, but rather one sent from God with unique authority and power (i.e., his messianic agent).³⁶

But what relevance is this to a study of the Christology of Jesus? After all, we are examining what Jesus understood with respect to his own person, not what others thought of him. The significance lies in the fact that Jesus did not use the term "Son of God" of himself. There is no doubt whatsoever in Gospel scholarship that Jesus' preferred self-designation was "Son of Man," and this was so as a way of avoiding popular misconceptions regarding Messiah.³⁷ Nevertheless, there are a limited number of sayings in the Synoptics where Jesus refers to himself as simply "the Son," and all of these seem to imply "Son of God" rather than "Son of Man." We will examine each of these in turn:

i) The Johannine thunderbolt (Matt 11:27/ / Luke 10:22)

This is an extraordinary saying, not only because it transports the reader into the world of John's Gospel, it also represents "one of the highest points of synoptic Christology."³⁸ The relationship that Jesus describes here is not only intimate but unique in the sense of shared knowledge and delegation of authority. No doubt this saying explains to a large extent Jesus' conception of *abba* (see below). That is, he is God's unique son.

ii) The Parable of the Wicked Tenants (Mk 12:1–12 par.)

Not only is this parable true to life in first century Palestine, it should also be considered authentic due to the fact that the parable ends with the death of the son and the details of his death do not

³⁶ So Hagner, Matthew 24–28, 424–25. The fact that the disciples "worshiped him" also need not imply an understanding of divinity. The verb *προσκυνέω* is used a number of times in Matthew of paying homage (2:2, 8, 11), or of a state of humility when someone requests that Jesus act on their behalf (8:2; 9:18; 15:25).

³⁷ There is a significant debate regarding the linguistic background to Jesus' use of "Son of Man." See D. Burkett, *The Son Of Man Debate: A History and Evaluation* (SNTSMS 107; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

³⁸ Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 318.

match historically with the crucifixion.³⁹ If Jesus is alluding to himself as the “beloved son” (12:6) then he also claims to be heir of the vineyard. Given passages such as Isaiah 5:1–7 the Jewish audience would most naturally identify the vineyard with Israel and the owner with God. Again we are presented with a father-son relationship that appears to be deeper than functional.

iii) The Time of the End (Mk 13:32 par)

Based on the criterion of embarrassment this is one of the least disputed sayings of Jesus. Even though surrounded by Son of Man sayings the linking with “the Father” most likely indicates that “Son” should be taken in the sense of Son of God. The saying implies that even though the knowledge of the Son is limited, it is still superior to human knowledge.

iv) The Great Commission (Matt 28:19)

The triadic formula itself “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” is likely redactional, with the original saying probably reading “in my name.” This would align with early Christian preaching (represented in Acts) where new converts were baptized *in the name of Jesus*.⁴⁰ Even so, this saying should be considered as part of the collective evidence for Jesus’ understanding of his unique sonship, especially given his recognition that “all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”

c) Other synoptic texts that inform Jesus as Son of God

Although the synoptic texts where Jesus speaks of himself as Son (of God) are limited, there is more evidence to be considered. A person’s self-understanding is not only reflected explicitly in what they say concerning themselves, but implicitly in their wider speech and conduct. Consequently, we need to examine other claims, statements, and actions attributed to Jesus.

i) Mark 2:1–10 and par.

Although this is a Son of Man saying, in pronouncing forgiveness of the paralysed man’s sins Jesus is claiming divine prerogatives. The response of the Jewish authorities is predictably an allegation of

³⁹ Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20* (Word Biblical Commentary 34b; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 530–33, 536.

⁴⁰ Robert. H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*. Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 596; Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 887–88.

blasphemy. This presumption of access to the divine law courts is again made implicitly in the parable of the Tax Collector and Pharisee, where Jesus issues the surprising pronouncement that the tax collector returns home justified rather than the Pharisee (Lk 18:9–14).

ii) *Abba (Mk 14:36)*

Mark records the address of Jesus to God in the garden of Gethsemane in both transliterated Aramaic (Αββα) and Greek translation of the Aramaic *ὁ πατήρ* (father). Jeremias influenced a subsequent generation of scholars in contending that the Aramaic term was one of unparalleled intimacy and was equivalent to use of “daddy” by a young child. Jesus was doing something entirely new.⁴¹ However, this has since shown to be an overstatement. There is evidence from the Qumran scrolls of God being petitioned as father using this form of address,⁴² and other Jewish literature indicates that adult children addressed their fathers in this way, not just young children.⁴³ Nevertheless, the address by Jesus is distinctive and obviously made an impression on his followers. First of all, this is seen in the fact that the Aramaic is preserved in the tradition. This is not a common tendency and indicates some measure of the extraordinary. The natural assumption would be that this was remembered as Jesus’ habitual mode of addressing God. Second, we find Paul encouraging believers as adopted children of God to address him as “Abba, Father” (Rom 8:15–16; Gal 4:6). Given that this results from a new status of reconciliation with God, it is to be understood as both a position of privilege, and therefore a title of intimacy. This is underlined by the fact that believers participate in this relationship on the basis of sharing in the sonship of Jesus.⁴⁴ Indeed, it is the Spirit of his Son at work in the hearts of believers that prompts them to address God in this way.

iii) “My” kingdom

There are a couple of isolated sayings in Matthew where Jesus speaks of his own kingdom. This prompts the obvious question as to the relationship between the kingdom of Jesus and the kingdom of

⁴¹ J. Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1967), 96.

⁴² 4Q372 1.16; 4Q460 5.6

⁴³ Robert H. Stein, *Mark* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 662.

⁴⁴ See Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 715–718; Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20*, 412–13.

God. There is also the angelic announcement to Mary in Luke 1:33 in connection with him being called “the Son of the Most High” and ruling over the house of Jacob that “there will be no end to *his kingdom*.”

In terms of the birth announcement, the Davidic imagery and messianic implications tend to steer our understanding in the direction of Jesus being God’s vice-regent in ruling over his kingdom. Thus we should avoid the notion of the kingdom of Jesus being a this-worldly, temporal/historical reign as opposed to God’s kingdom being other-worldly and beyond history.

With respect to the two sayings in Matthew, the first occurs in an eschatological context as Jesus explains the Parable of the Weeds (Matt 13:36–43). At the end of the age the angels will purge all evil and causes of sin from *the kingdom of the Son of Man*. The righteous then “will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.” Jesus has previously explained that the field where the seed is sown corresponds to the world (v. 38), and so logically it would appear that there is some correspondence between the world and the kingdom of Son of Man.⁴⁵ It is possible that the kingdom of Jesus is pictured here as God’s reign on earth exercised through the Son in the present age. However, as we are in the world of parable we need to be careful about drawing firm conclusions from malleable language.

The second saying in Matthew (16:28) gives a different perspective. Here, the kingdom of the Son of Man is still future and is bound up with his return in glory and dispensing of judgment. The fact that he “comes with his angels in the glory of his Father” (v. 27) tends to militate against rigid separation between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the Son of Man.

So in these isolated sayings we find casual references to a kingdom that belongs to Jesus. The kingdom is evident in the current age, yet has a future dimension and is eternal in nature. The relationship of this kingdom to the kingdom of God is not clearly defined, yet the clarity and assuredness of his own kingship and reign at the very least informs directly on his messianic self-understanding and quite probably on the understanding of his relationship to the Father as Son. In other words, it is an outflow of his unique relationship with God that he can share in the rule of the kingdom with the Father. It

⁴⁵ So Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 394.

may well be that the tradition that recalled Jesus speaking of his own kingdom provided the impetus for Paul to speak of believers being “rescued from the power of darkness and being transferred into the kingdom of his beloved Son” (Col 1:13).

d) Conclusion

We are on reasonably firm ground in believing that Jesus did speak of his relationship to God in terms of Son-Father. Although nowhere using the title *Son of God* himself, it is implied in a couple of texts and informed by several others. What is less clear is how Jesus construed this relationship. It clearly goes beyond a functional usage found in the OT and other Jewish writings, yet Jesus does not elaborate on his person in terms of a Nicene and post-Nicene Christology. As Dunn states, “The Nicene Creed represents the crystallization of a process stretching over nearly three centuries. Our concern here is with the *beginning* of that process.”⁴⁶ I am also aware that we have not examined the Gospel of John in our discussion, but clearly there the Father-Son relationship is understood in terms of deity. Jesus implies this more strongly in the Fourth Gospel, and John states it directly in his opening verse.

So what can we say? Beyond doubt Jesus had an unparalleled sense of his own authority as one sent by God and the understanding of the relationship that he shared with God was distinctive and one of shared intimacy. This relationship was such that he assumed divine prerogatives and expected to participate in God’s sovereign rule. I again cite Dunn:

Only if this were the case would the Fourth Gospel’s massive expansion and elaboration of the Father-Son theme have been as justifiable in tradition-historical terms; and only so would the other elaborations and developments of the Son-christology have been as acceptable as in the event they proved to be.⁴⁷

Summary and Conclusion

It strains credibility to argue that Jesus did not reflect much on his own person, did not have a messianic self-consciousness, and that the Christology contained in the Gospels is purely the result of later church reflection. This type of thinking, rather than representing

⁴⁶ Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 708 (italics retained).

⁴⁷ Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 724.

“critical virility,”⁴⁸ owes more to a paranoid skepticism that wants to present an inoffensive Jesus that is conducive to the (post) modern mind. And so, rather than operating from a claimed position of objective neutrality, large swathes of Gospel texts are rejected on an *a priori* basis.⁴⁹ The vicious circle is not a playground reserved solely for the scholarly right.

Much more likely, the christological reflection of the NT writers and the early church, rather than originate from a well-meaning desire to portray their leader in lofty terms, arose directly as a result of the impact that Jesus had upon them. The disciples remembered that Jesus spoke in exclusive terms regarding his relationship with God, they remembered that he taught and acted from an unquestionable sense of authority, and they remembered that he attached prime importance to his mission.⁵⁰ The logic of history demands a close link between the historical Jesus and the proclaimed Christ.⁵¹

Finally, and flowing on from the above, when examining the Christology of Jesus it is not simply a case of looking at isolated sayings or pericopes in the Gospels and judging their authenticity or otherwise. We need to look at the tradition as a whole. The impression that Jesus made upon his followers does not come from isolated sayings, but from a life lived out among his disciples over an extended period. Jesus was not a talking head; he was a charismatic figure who was remembered as doing extraordinary things and teaching about the kingdom of God in vivid and confronting ways. Hence, Dale Allison is surely correct in arguing that if we cannot trust the overall impression of the Jesus tradition, then we can be sure of nothing at all regarding Jesus.⁵² And I have argued in this paper that the overall impression we gain from the

⁴⁸ The phrase is from Dunn, *Neither Jew nor Greek*, 58.

⁴⁹ The Jesus Seminar being an obvious case in point. For a critique, see Witherington, *The Jesus Quest*, 42–57; Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 28–35; Darrell L. Bock, “The Words of Jesus in the Gospels: Life, Jive, or Memorex?” in *Jesus under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus* (eds. Michael J. Wilkins & J. P. Moreland; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 73–99.

⁵⁰ Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 705–707.

⁵¹ Paul W. Barnett, *Jesus and the Logic of History* (New Studies in Biblical Theology No. 3; Leicester: Apollos, 1997), 34–35.

⁵² Dale C. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998).

Synoptics is that Jesus had a messianic self-awareness, that he understood himself as the embodiment of Wisdom, and that he was the Son of God in a unique and intimate sense.