

TITLE:

What (if anything) is the *predominant* christological concern of Luke's Gospel?

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1. *Introduction*

There are almost as many opinions on the emphasis of Luke's christology as there are scholars to offer them. This is significant, because it reflects the diversity of approach within the Gospel (and the Book of *Acts* too)¹. By assessing the reasons for this, we will be in a better position to understand Luke's main interests, and how they are influenced by, or differ from, messianic views in the Jewish community and the Church of his time.

2. *Christological Titles in Luke*

In the past, many studies were based on an analysis of the christological titles used by Luke, especially in comparison with the other synoptic gospels. This method is crude, but gives some idea of the scope of his interest.

If one takes in this way the absolute number of occurrences of such terms, the commonest by a fair margin is *κύριος*, Lord. But the majority of these references are in the form of simple addresses by those speaking with Jesus, and it has been pointed out² that *κύριε* was often no more than a polite term of respect in both Jewish and Greek usage. However Luke's use of the word in *Acts* means much more than this, for the climax of Peter's address in 2.36 declares Jesus to be '*both Lord and Christ*', and by this

Peter associates salvation 'in the name of the Lord
[*Yahweh in Joel 2.32*]' with the exalted Jesus.³

There are some indications of this subsequent use of '*κύριος*' in the Gospel. For example 20.41-44 has Jesus seeking '*to lure his audience into a careful and deep reflection*'⁴ on the nature of his pre-existent Lordship. Luke's

failure to emphasise the title prior to Jesus' resurrection glorification may show a historian's avoidance of anachronism, or simply be a result of the fact that there are few instances where believers refer to Jesus in the third person, as there are in *Acts*. But whatever the reason, the theme of Lordship is only peripheral in the Gospel, and so mainly beyond the scope of this essay.

The other commonest titles are, in descending order, *Son of Man* (25 refs.), *Son of God* (17) *Christ* (12) and *Son of David* (9), with a few references each to *Holy One*, *Prophet* and *the One to Come*. These figures, however, hide important observations. *Son of Man* is used exclusively by Jesus of himself: we will return to its significance later. *Son of God* always has a supernatural source (either God, the voices of demons, or Jesus himself), except where it is part of the blasphemy charge against Jesus (22.70), and this too is instructive of Luke's understanding of the term, as we shall see. The relative infrequency of the word *Christ* conceals the fact that it is used at three key points of the book: the testimony of the angel at 2.11, the testimony of Peter at 9.20 and the (indirect) testimony of Jesus himself at 22.67-69 & 23.1-3.

This to me suggests that for Luke *χριστος*, representing of course the Hebrew *māšîach*, *anointed*, is the central concept of his Gospel's christology. But we will attempt to show that it summarises his whole understanding of Jesus, as expressed in all the other titles, rather than being a narrowly defined concept in itself.

3. *Broader christological emphases*

The narrative and teaching material greatly expand the limited picture of *Luke's* christology gained from its use of titles. It is hard to do justice to

this material in the space available since virtually none of the Gospel can be completely divorced from Luke's christological intentions. Much of it, though, reinforces and amplifies the titles we have examined.

Thus the birth narratives centre on God's provision of an anointed Davidic king, in fulfilment both of his covenant with David, and his promises to Israel of salvation from their enemies. This idea was at the centre of the Jewish messianic hope expressed in the word *Christ*, in the term *Son of David*, and possibly *Son of God* as well (*vide infra*). Jesus' authority reinforces this messianic concept, and many of the kingdom parables show him as a king (19.11*ff.*), a shepherd (15.1*ff.*, *cf.* many OT allusions to the king as shepherd), as a landowner or farmer (8.4*ff.*, 13.6*ff.*, 13.19*ff.*, 20.9*ff.*) or as a houseowner (12.35*ff.*, 12.42*ff.*, 13.24*ff.*, 14.16*ff.*).

At the same time, Luke develops the theme of Jesus' endowment with divine power and honour, already introduced in the birth narratives, through his miraculous acts, his sovereignty over nature, his provision for his disciples on their mission journeys, and especially in the divine affirmations at his baptism and transfiguration. These seem most often to correlate with the term *Son of God*, actually used by God, of course, in the last two instances.

Another important theme relating to Jesus' glory is the eschatological picture of his coming on the clouds of heaven, being in the presence of God, *etc.* Jesus' use of *Son of Man* in these passages make it clear that he has in mind Daniel 7, from which it is therefore clear that, indirectly (*vide infra*), the term at least in part derives.

One other major concept, seen as largely hidden from the disciples until after the resurrection, is the necessity of Jesus' suffering. Jesus also introduces this in connection with the term *Son of Man*, his own 'secret' appellation, rather than though, say, the suffering servant passages of Isaiah which we might, as Christians, expect. But Jesus seems to have seen that

Daniel's Son of Man, representing God's faithful people, is called upon to endure suffering in the same way as Deutero-Isaiah's Servant. [E.g. 7.21, 25; 11.33]... By this means they will refine, purify and cleanse the whole nation (11.35).⁵

The title of *prophet* we noted above takes on rather more prominence when we take this broader look at the Gospel. Many of Jesus' words and actions reflect those of the prophets of old, and are seen to do so by the crowds (7.16). There are clear (and probably deliberate) parallels with the miraculous works of Elisha and Elijah, the latter of whom was by some expected to return in a messianic way, though Jesus specifically rejects this interpretation of himself. There are also hints (but no more) of Jesus fulfilling the Deuteronomic promise of the *Prophet like Moses*: like Moses he feeds the people in the wilderness (9.10-17), and at the transfiguration he discusses with Moses his forthcoming *exodus*.

But after all this, we have still not seen one predominant emphasis.

4. *Synoptic comparisons*

Much has been made of the differences between Luke and his presumed sources (*Mark* and *Q* in the two-document hypothesis). For the most part, he reproduces the christological emphases of his sources. In some places he alters them, but mostly for stylistic or contextual reasons rather than to alter

the doctrinal balance. So, for example, in the parable of the wedding feast, Luke's protagonist is a man, whereas in Matthew it is a king. However in the parable of the 10 minas and its Matthean equivalent the reverse is true.

Looking overall, it is hard to see a statistically significant difference between the prevalence of various titles across the synoptics. It is as if the Church had a broad unified understanding of christology which, within limits, could be represented by several interchangeable terms.

The only exception is Luke's marked preference for dropping Matthew's use of *Son of David*. We have already seen that this term could be synonymous with *Christ*, but it has a more nationalistic flavour that Luke, writing for gentiles, wished to downplay. He is not ashamed of that national hope, for the birth narratives are full of it, but there definitely seems a more universalistic concept of *Christ* than we find in Matthew.

Another difference is the somewhat modified nuance of Jesus' Sonship in Luke. All the synoptics share an 'eschatological'⁶ view of this, *i.e.* viewed through his intimacy with and obedience to God. There is also a sense in which *Son of God* may be synonymous with *Christ*, for example the demons shouting that Jesus is the Son of God because they know he is the Christ (4.41). But Luke, though not expressing the pre-existent Sonship of John's Gospel, at least approaches an ontological understanding through the Lord's provocative question, '*Whose son is the Christ?*', and through his miraculous conception:

Jesus was Son of David by his line of descent, but more important he was Son of God because his conception was an act of creative power by the Spirit.⁷

Luke's christology also seems to see *Son of God* in a representative, substitutional sense, through the genealogy that makes Adam a son of God. Jesus, the faithful Son, is able to restore the estranged sons of Adam to their Father, so that they too can pray, '*Father*' (11.2).

So we see some difference in emphasis from the other Gospels. But

We should not overestimate the significance of these differences ... We may justly draw attention to the particular emphases of the respective New Testament writers, but we should not make the mistake of assuming that they are seeking thereby to mark of their view from each other, in opposition to each other.⁸

5. *Jewish Messianic expectations*

There was no single monolithic and uniform 'messianic expectation' among first-century Jews... In the surviving literature, 'when an individual Messiah is envisaged, his role and character remain vague and undefined'.⁹

We can assume that Luke wrote from the viewpoint of a Church which

...took a vague general idea of the Messiah, and redrew it around a new fixed point, in this case Jesus, thereby giving it precision and direction.¹⁰

This being so, the diversity of christological concerns in Luke may well reflect a historically accurate diversity of expectation in Jesus' own day, synthesised in the mind of the writer by his own theological background.

Nevertheless, several strands of Messianic hope are known to have existed around the time of Jesus. For example, a fragment from Cave IV at Qumran collates various Scriptural texts to foresee a Davidic Messiah: 2 Sam.7.10-11, Amos9.11 and Ps.2.1¹¹. The Psalms of Solomon have a similar passage¹².

Here we have evidence that some Jews of the Roman period were reading their Bible with a definite view of a Messianic figure, prophesied therein, who would come and deliver them from the Gentiles.¹³

Regarding the *Son of God*, although this designation was applied in various ways both in the OT and intertestamental literature, it was certainly also applied to the Davidic Messiah. Another Qumran text reads:

He will be called the Son of God; they will call him Son of the Most High.¹⁴

And the previously cited fragment goes on to say:

Interpreted, this saying [Ps.2.1] concerns [the kings of the nations] who will [rage against] the elect of Israel¹⁵.

It has been asserted that *Son of God* was a title claimed by the Davidic kings (hence Pss.2, 110), and therefore synonymous with Messiah through this usage. But if this was true in OT times it is by no means clear that it was so understood by Jesus' time. The last quotation suggests that it was considered *specifically* a Messianic prophecy, and thus carried a more supernatural import. This seems to be reflected in Luke's trial account, contrasted with the other gospels. The Jews do not ask if he is the Son of God (as a synonym for Messiah), but if he is the Christ.

From Jesus' reply in terms of the Son of Man's sitting at the right hand of God, the judges infer his claim to divine Sonship: *σὺ οὖν εἶ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ*; And in an oblique way Jesus consents to this inference.¹⁶

Since this admission is the basis of their blasphemy charge, then Luke's supernatural view of Sonship would seem to reflect existing Jewish understanding.

As regards the *Son of Man*, the link with Dan. 7 has been doubted on the basis that 'one like a son of man' refers not to an individual, but by apocalyptic symbolism to the people of God who eventually triumph over the Gentile empires. But once again, whether this was the only, or even a common, interpretation in Jesus' time is less certain. 4 Esdras, 2 Baruch and 1 Enoch all show various stages of transition to an individualistic, and even Messianic, understanding of the passage. Thus

For 4 Ezra the 'one like a son of man' represents, in the literary sense, the Messiah, who in turn represents, in the sociological sense, the remnant of Israel.¹⁷

This will be seen to be quite close to Luke's representational idea of the Son of God in his genealogy.

So far, there seems a dichotomy between the Davidic Messiah and the Danielic *Son of Man*. But Wright has presented a good case from the writings of Josephus¹⁸ to show that

...some first century exegetes, combining Daniel 9 (which is explicitly messianic) with Daniel 2 (which can be made so via the figure of 'the stone' (which is a messianic term elsewhere) had achieved ... a radical new possibility; a messianic, *i.e.* individualised, reading of Dan.7.13f.¹⁹

Thus we see the possibility that the main strands of Luke's christology were present among the Jews of Jesus' time, though in an unfocused form.

At the beginning of the Christian era, the Davidic hope already constituted a relatively fixed core of Messianic expectation, both in Palestine and in the Diaspora. Exegetical interconnections attest that 'the son of man' is likely to have acquired, within its wide range of meaning, definite associations with this hope.²⁰

6. Conclusions

The structure of *Luke*, as I have suggested, focuses attention primarily on Jesus as Χριστός, the anointed Messiah of God. But within this term he encompasses a whole rich palette of ideas reflecting, and refining, Jewish messianic expectation of Jesus' own time. Because he is concerned to show the fulfilment of all these, and to explain where the Gospel diverges from them all (especially in the necessity of Christ's suffering), the result appears somewhat complex.

Luke ... saw no difficulty in affirming *several* christologically decisive moments in Jesus' life and ministry.²¹

His particular contributions, in contrast to the other synoptics, are

- A more divine, less nationalistic perspective on messiahship.
- A theological basis for applying this messiahship, particularly in its filial aspect, to the Church as the sons of God redeemed by the suffering servanthood of the representative Son of Man and Son of God.

This provides the christological basis for the *Book of Acts* to show Jesus as the risen and glorified Lord and Christ, extending his Kingdom through the witness of his Spirit-empowered people.]]]

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References

¹ 'Luke's christology is complex. Its diversity makes it difficult to reduce to simple classifications.' Buckwalter, in Marshall & Peterson, 1997, p.108. He goes on to list the variety of current views.

- ² E.g. Green *et al.*, 1992, pp.484-6.
³ Buckwalter, *op.cit.*, p.118.
⁴ Green, *op.cit.*, p.487.
⁵ Russell, 1964, p.338.
⁶ Dunn, 1980, p.61.
⁷ *ibid.*
⁸ *ibid.*, p.62.
⁹ Wright, 1992, p.307.
¹⁰ *ibid.*, p.310.
¹¹ 4Q174. 1.10-13.
¹² 1Q5b.5.23-9.
¹³ Wright, *op.cit.*, p.312.
¹⁴ 4Q246. Col.2.1.
¹⁵ 4Q174. *loc.cit.*
¹⁶ Kim, 1993, p.4.
¹⁷ Wright, *op.cit.*, p.316.
¹⁸ War 6.312-15; Ant. 10.210-11.
¹⁹ Wright, *op.cit.*, p.314.
²⁰ W Horbury, in Charlesworth 1988, p.118.
²¹ Dunn, *op.cit.*, p.62.

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