

THE MYSTERY OF GOD INCARNATE

“If he [Jesus] was indeed God incarnate, Christianity is the only religion founded by God in person, and must as such be uniquely superior to all other religions.”

John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*

“And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.”

John the Apostle

John Hick admits that his religious pluralism depends upon the identity of Jesus of Nazareth. Of course, Hick has labored strenuously to argue that

the historical Jesus did not make the claim to deity that later Christian thought was to make for him: he did not understand himself to be God, or God the Son, incarnate. Divine incarnation . . . requires that an eternally pre-existent element of the Godhead, God the Son or the divine Logos, became incarnate as a human being. But it is *extremely* unlikely that the historical Jesus thought of himself in any such way. Indeed he would probably have rejected the idea as blasphemous.¹

Therefore, the Christian Church throughout the centuries has incorrectly understood Jesus’ identity. The burden of this paper, however, is to demonstrate that the biblical witness is faithful to Jesus’ self-referential claims, ascribing to him no more or no less than what he himself believed, and that time did not allow for an evolving Christology as Hick claims.

Some Historical-Critical Considerations

Hick declares of those who take C. S. Lewis’ apologetic that “someone claiming to be God must be either mad, or bad, or God; and since Jesus was evidently not mad or bad he must have been God. . . . continue to be unacquainted with modern bible study.”² Christians must recognize, according to Hick, that it is erroneous, under nineteenth- and twentieth-century “historical scrutiny,” to move from “Jesus’ own claim to the much less certain ground of the church’s subsequent attempts”³ to affirm his deity.

This is an important critique leveled against the modern church. After all, Lewis’ ‘trilemma’ is assuming something Hick is not, namely, “that the gospels give entirely accurate accounts of the actions and claims of Jesus.”⁴ Blomberg says if one accepted the Gospel record

¹John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic Age* (Louisville: Westminster, 1994), 27, emphasis his.

²Ibid., emphasis mine, 29.

³Ibid.

⁴Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1987), xx.

as “legend,” then a fourth possibility is introduced against Lewis’ ‘trilemma,’ allowing the possibility of denying Jesus’ deity. This is precisely the move Hick makes, appealing to liberal, though “modern,” New Testament scholarship. He conveniently ignores other modern attempts that sufficiently demonstrate the historical reliability of the New Testament documents.⁵

Hick demonstrates his view of the historicity of the Bible when he states that

it is widely agreed that the earliest New Testament documents—some of the letters of Paul—were written about twenty years after Jesus’ death (i.e. around 50 CE), with the earliest of the Gospels, that of Mark, some twenty years later and the remainder during the next thirty or so years, moving towards the end of the century. *None of the writers was an eye-witness of the life that they depict. The Gospels are secondary and tertiary portraits dependent on oral and written traditions which had developed over a number of decades. . . .* We also have to remind ourselves that the Gospels were written, in a period between forty and seventy years after the time of Jesus, *in a quite different cultural milieu from that of the original events.*⁶

Hick appears to follow somewhat conservative scholarship with respect to New Testament dating. But, what about the charge that none of the writers (presumably of the Gospels) were eyewitnesses? Though Mark and Luke were not, Matthew and John were. External evidence dated from the late second century claiming John, the son of Zebedee and one of the twelve, authored both the Fourth Gospel and the three epistles of John is virtually unanimous.⁷ Luke claims that he made use of eyewitness accounts, as well as other resources available to him, in faithfully and accurately recording Jesus’ teachings (Luke 1:1-4). The Gospels are different portraits of the same objective reality—Jesus of Nazareth.

Moreover, because Jesus’ biographers were eyewitnesses of his life, death, and resurrection, Hick is correct in his assessment that the Gospels are “secondary and tertiary portraits dependent on oral and written traditions which had developed over a number of decades.” This does not, however, require that the Gospel records are unreliable history.

⁵On the historicity of the New Testament see F. F. Bruce *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*, 5th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982); I. Howard Marshall, *I Believe in the Historical Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979); Blomberg, *Reliability*, Philip Edcumbe Hughes, “The Truth of Scripture and the Problem of Historical Relativity,” in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 173-194..

⁶Hick, *Metaphor*, 16, 17, emphasis mine.

⁷Cf., D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 23-29. Also, see 1 John 1:1-3 where the author, regardless of who it is thought to be, claims to be an eyewitness.

Granted, the culture was “not one of the written word but of the spoken word.”⁸ Also, it is true that the oral world stands between what Jesus said and what was subsequently written down. But, just *how* different was the cultural milieu from the actual events of Jesus’ life and teaching? Even if it were substantially different, and Hick gives no reasons to believe it was, he does not show how the few decades between Jesus’ life and the penning of the New Testament *necessarily* results in unreliable teaching about the identity of Jesus of Nazareth. It is possible to have historically reliable truth while writing it down later.

The dating of some early New Testament works, which is in accordance with Hick’s own dating, would probably put 1 Thessalonians around 50 A.D. and Galatians possibly earlier. This significantly reduces the time between Jesus’ death and a fully-developed Christology to approximately twenty years. It is unlikely that the Apostle Paul simply imagined his Christology on the spot at the time of his writing. In addition, if Paul did presume his Christology spontaneously, there would be little if any reason for accepting his teaching as true. Some believable explanation would have to be given as to how it is that Paul could have deceived so many.

The integrity of Paul’s teaching is evidenced in his desire to be held historically accountable. He was careful to mention when he had preserved and passed on oral tradition, and when he had not received some previously held teaching (cf., 1 Cor. 7:10, 12; 15:3; 1 Tim. 1:15; 3:1; 4:9; Tit. 3:8; 2 Tim. 2:11). Also, there are two Pauline texts of Christian hymns or poetry which indicate previous familiarity that were most likely dated not later than the 50s (Phil. 2:6-11; Col. 1:15-20).⁹ It seems, then, that this short time would virtually rule out any gradual evolution of Christology for the early Church.¹⁰

Moreover, the charge that Hick seems to be leveling against the New Testament writers is that they created sayings of Jesus and put words in his mouth. This assumes a fluidity in the oral tradition that, more than likely, was not there. Being an oral, pre-literate culture, there were well-established standards in the recording of authentic history during biblical times. Though the author’s right to summarize rather than cite every word was recognized, there was

⁸Darrell L. Bock, “The Words of Jesus in the Gospels: Live, Jive, or Memorex?” in *Jesus Under Fire* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 74.

⁹Craig L. Blomberg, “Where Do We Start Studying Jesus?” *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁰I. H. Marshall, *The Origins of New Testament Christology*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 40-41. Cf., Galatians 1:11-12; 4:4; 1 Thess. 3:13; 5:23 for examples of Paul’s high Christology.

an intense concern for accuracy in what counted as history, both in the Greco-Roman tradition and the Jewish tradition.¹¹ An accurate memory is necessary in preserving *ipsissima verba* or *ipsissima vox*.¹² The primary issue is between summary versus citation. But, as Bock reminds us, “it is possible to have historical truth without always resorting to explicit citation.”¹³

If the Gospel writers intended to present word-for-word accounts of Jesus’ teachings, but instead summarized, then there is a problem with the integrity of the New Testament record. But, if the Gospel writers merely intended to summarize Jesus sayings and did so, then their accounts should be judged on the basis of their intention, and nothing more. It is possible that God inspired the Gospel writers to give *their* account of Jesus’ teachings. Feinberg says “if the sense of the words attributed to Jesus by the writers was not uttered by Jesus, or if the exact words of Jesus are so construed that they have a sense never intended by Jesus,”¹⁴ then one such as Hick would have a basis for this implicit charge. However, the burden of historical proof would be upon him, or others, to show that the New Testament record is unreliable in recording Jesus’ teachings. Bock nicely summarizes:

One can present history accurately whether one quotes or summarizes teaching or even mixes the two together. To have accurate summaries of Jesus’ teaching is just as historical as to have his actual words; they are just two different perspectives to give us the same thing. All that is required is that the summaries be trustworthy—a factor made likely not only by the character of the writers and the nature of their religious convictions, but also by the presence of opponents and eyewitnesses who one way or the other could challenge a fabricated report.¹⁵

It would appear that Hick offers little substantive support for claiming the New Testament is an unreliable record of Jesus’ thought regarding himself. Assuming something to be so does not make it so. That is, to suppose that the time-gap significantly altered the disciples’ beliefs about Jesus of Nazareth does not entail there being a noteworthy shift in

¹¹For excellent examples of this in the recording of Greco-Roman history and Jewish history see Bock, “Words,” 78-81. Also see n. 7, 11, 12 at the end of the chapter for references on the historiography of the two traditions.

¹²*Ipsissima verba* literally means “exact words” whereas *ipsissima vox* means “exact voice” or the presence of Jesus’ teaching summarized. It should be noted that since Jesus, more than likely, spoke Aramaic, closing the gap between *ipsissima verba* and *ipsissima vox* is considerably more difficult. However, language translation does not seriously impugn trustworthy historiography.

¹³Bock, “Words,” 75.

¹⁴Paul Feinberg, “The Meaning of Inerrancy,” in *Inerrancy*, ed., Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 301.

¹⁵Bock, “Words,” 88.

memory, nor a loose oral approach. In addition, looking at the events and sayings of Jesus' life through the eyes of a resurrected Christ may involve some human interpretation, but this is a far cry from proving that what was recorded is unreliable history. It is logically possible that the humans who interpreted the events and sayings of Jesus were inspired to do so inerrantly as they wrote down their thoughts. And, it is theologically necessary that God inspired the human authors *if* the Bible is indeed *God's Word*. Therefore, this appeal to the decades intervening between the life of Jesus and the recording of the New Testament documents does nothing to disprove the historical validity of the New Testament witness.

Hick is not alone in his claim that the material in the New Testament reflects early Christian thinking rather than that of Jesus himself. R. Bultmann states that "Jesus' call to decision [namely, to commit to the kingdom of God] implies a christology,"¹⁶ but he does not allow for Jesus to have drawn this implication himself. However, Marshall makes an important observation: "how could Jesus adopt the position of the proclaimer of the kingdom of God and yet not determine his own relation to the kingdom?"¹⁷ With correspondence gone between the recording of Jesus' teaching and what he believed about himself, one may as well do away with the historical Jesus altogether. Yet, Bultmann and Hick do not go this far.

So, "if it is not true that Jesus refrained from expressing a Christology, then some at least of the earliest Christology goes back to his sayings and not simply to the creative genius of the early church."¹⁸ Conversely, if it *is* true that Jesus refrained from expressing a Christology, then none of the earliest Christology goes back to his sayings and the christological claims *are* interpolation by the early Church. It remains to be shown that some assertions which the writers of the New Testament make regarding the identity of Jesus of Nazareth are in accordance with his own self-referential claims.

Some Biblical Considerations

In the quote at the beginning of this chapter, Hick states that Jesus did not think of himself as God the Son. He also says that "the most important fact about Jesus must have been his strong and continuous awareness of God as *abba*, 'father.'"¹⁹ Therefore, it seems that Jesus'

¹⁶R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (1952), I, p. 43. Quoted in Marshall, *Origins*, 29.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, Marshall, *Origins*, 29.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 29-30.

¹⁹Hick, *Metaphor*, 18.

own use of the expressions “Son” and “Son of God” will help us focus upon his filial consciousness. Hick suggests that many passages (e.g., Matt. 11:27; Mk. 13:32) have had their authenticity seriously questioned. He quotes James Dunn’s conclusion that we are unable to give a clear historical answer, and turns to the problem of interpreting a text in light of a pre-conditioned [Chalcedonian?] Christology.²⁰ Explaining his concerns, Hick writes:

Provisionally, I see his [Paul’s] thought as roughly a third of the way along the historical path leading from the honorific designation of the human Jesus as ‘son of God’, and then more particularly as ‘the son of God’ (with the capital S in due course supplanting the lower case), and finally, after several centuries of debates, as God the Son, second person of a divine Trinity.²¹

However, Blomberg wisely reasons that “if it is unfair to begin historical enquiry by superimposing a theological interpretation over it, it is equally unfair to ignore the theological implications that arise from it.”²² Hence, if it can be shown that some New Testament passages are authentic sayings of Jesus’ *ipsissima vox*, or *ipsissima verba*, then the dispute over what Jesus thought of himself is considerably minimized. It is to some of these passages that I now turn.

In Matt. 11:27 (= Lk. 10:22) Jesus claims that his Father (i.e., God, cf., vv. 25-26) and the Son (himself) share a reciprocal and unique knowledge of each other. The text reads: “all things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” This passage is not found in Mark and, therefore, is most likely in the “Q” sayings that most likely predate all four Gospel accounts.²³ This would put it very close, chronologically, to Jesus’ utterance. Moreover, since Jesus frequently referred to God as Father, and if he was in the habit of speaking of himself in the third person, then there is no good reason to doubt that he referred to himself as “the Son” (cf., Matt. 8:20; 12:8; Mk. 8:38; 9:31; Lk. 9:22; 18:8; Jn. 3:13-14; 13:31-32). Put differently, “if Jesus’ use of *Abba* is authentic, then his language about sonship in

²⁰James Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (London: SCM Press, and Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), 29. Quoted in *ibid.*, 33.

²¹Hick, *Metaphor*, 44.

²²Blomberg, *Reliability*, 257.

²³“Q” is understood to be a hypothetical written source of Jesus’ teachings (approx. 250 verses) common to both Matthew and Luke, but not found in Mark. Verbal parallelisms between these non-Markan sayings of Jesus strongly suggest the existence of a common written source available to both Matthew and Luke. On the pros and cons of positing the existence of such a source, as well as relevant bibliographic information, cf., D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 1992), 34-36.

Matthew 11:27 par. should also be accepted.”²⁴ And if his language about sonship is accepted, it is a short distance to accept what he says about his unique relationship with God the Father. Indeed, there is no reason not to.

Earlier in the same passage, Jesus addressed God as “Father” (vv. 25, 26). In Matt. 11:27 he declares himself to be a Son in the exclusive sense of mediating knowledge of the Father to whomever he chooses. This presupposes a unique relationship of the Son to the Father. Especially interesting is the claim that “no one knows the Son except the Father.” This is a claim no mere mortal could make, since what is known of the Son is available only to the Father and no other. Craig states that since the “verse says the Son is unknowable [as to his essential identity as God], which is not true for the post-Easter Church . . . This strongly implies a pre-Easter origin of the saying.”²⁵ More astounding, however, is the claim that “no one knows the Father except the Son.” In effect, Jesus is saying that persons must acquire their knowledge of God from him.

“No one knows the Father except the Son and *those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him*” is Jesus’ claim to be God’s Son in an absolute and unique sense. He is the *only one* who can reveal the Father. This unique role in revealing the Father is because of Jesus’ unequalled relationship to God the Father; a relationship that no other could possess. Though a filial consciousness is involved between Jesus and God the Father, it is like no other.

The uniqueness of the relationship is seen in Jesus’ claim to know and reveal the Father to whomever he pleases. This is not just another expression of a father and son relationship. The relationship Jesus has with God the Father is a peculiar one. To have mutual knowledge of God the Father is to have the mind of God. To have the exclusive right to reveal God the Father is to possess the sovereignty of God. As Reymond states, “a higher expression of parity between the Father and the Son in possessing divine knowledge and sovereignty and dispensing saving knowledge is inconceivable.”²⁶

More importantly, if Matt. 11:27 is a “Q” saying, then it seriously upsets the notion of an evolving Christology. This pre-Johannine statement by Jesus dissolves the idea of a steady

²⁴Blomberg, *Reliability*, 251.

²⁵William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, rev. ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994), 246.

²⁶Robert L. Reymond, *Jesus: Divine Messiah* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1990), 73.

development toward a Johannine Christology. Hence, Matthew and Luke (cf., Lk. 10:22) must have already had in place the possibility of a deity Christology. Simply because some of the Gospel writers do not explicitly make all, or even some Christological claims in the way that, say, John did (e.g., pre-existence of the Word, cf., Jn. 1:1), does not mean they did not believe them. Silence concerning an idea is not the same as ignorance of that idea.

The primary focus of Jesus' statement is on the flow of revelation. Revelation passes from the Father to the Son, who in turn passes that revelation on to those whom the Son chooses. The process is that the Father, whom Jesus has already identified as "the Lord of heaven and earth," commits both knowledge and authority to the Son, whom Jesus has identified as himself. This unique mutual knowledge of God the Father guarantees that the revelation the Son gives is true.

Moreover, if Matt. 11:27 is read in light of earlier christological beliefs that had already come to be accepted, it is hardly difficult to dismiss it for what it actually says and means. For example, no less than eleven times is Jesus referred to as the "Lord Jesus" in 1 Thessalonians (1:1, 3; 2:15, 19; 3:11, 13; 4:1, 2; 5:9, 23, 28). Including Galatians we have an additional three times where Jesus is explicitly referred to as Lord in early New Testament writing (1:3; 6:14, 18). It is important to see that the Father and the Son are named together as the origin of salvation and the attributes of the one are the attributes of the other (Gal. 1:3; 1 Thess. 1:1).

Furthermore the pre-existence of the Son of God, who's identified as Jesus of Nazareth, is clearly not a late development (cf., Gal. 4:4f). Paul is able to say that he did not receive his apostleship from a man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father (Gal. 1:1). The close proximity of Jesus to God in Gal. 1:1, and the contrasting of Jesus and God to "men," demonstrates that Paul puts Jesus on the divine side of reality.²⁷ Therefore, this early attestation of a 'God the Son Christology' puts Matthew 11:27 in a far more defensible light, historically speaking.

At Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin, he was asked by Caiaphas if he claimed to be the Son of God (Matt. 26:63 = Mk. 14:61; Lk. 22:70). Jesus replied he was the Son of Man who would one day sit in judgment over them (Mk. 14:62). The response of the High Priest (Mk. 14:63), and the entire Sanhedrin (Mk. 14:64) is clear that they understood him to claim deity, not strictly as a

²⁷I. H. Marshall, *Jesus the Savior: Studies in New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 209.

political Messiah, but as the Son of God.²⁸ It is only fitting that Jesus' titles come together as the Son of God, Son of Man/Judge, and Messiah at the culmination of his divine mission (Mk. 14:61-62).

While John's Gospel gives the most detailed description of Jesus' trial before Pilate (Jn. 18:29-38), the trial itself is paralleled in the Synoptic accounts. When asked by Pilate if Jesus was the King of the Jews, the Synoptics have him answering affirmatively (Mt. 27:11; Mk. 15:2; Lk. 23:3). However, the expression Jesus used is actually quite ambiguous.²⁹ This may be because Jesus did not want to admit he was the Messiah *in the sense* that Pilate understood.

Furthermore, just prior to Jesus' trial he stood before Caiaphas and was specifically asked "Are you the Christ?" (Matt. 26:63-64). Mark has Jesus clearly answering "I am" (Mk. 14:62).³⁰ Jesus was not confused, nor were his biographers. The reason for the disparity between Jesus' answers was, more than likely, that Pilate's sense of a Messiah and Caiaphas' sense of a Messiah were quite different; the former was political, while the latter was primarily spiritual.

The designation "Son of Man" for Jesus is found eighty-one times in the four Gospels; sixty-nine in the Synoptics. Of the thirty occurrences in Matthew, thirteen are with reference to an *eschatological* Son of Man, ten refer to a *soteriological* Son of Man who suffers; seven occur in the context of an *earthly* Son of Man.³¹ Mark reports sayings of Jesus from all three classifications, "Q" has only one saying regarding a suffering motif, while Matthew and Luke contain numerous sources of the earthly and eschatological motifs.³²

It is significant that Jesus alone used this designation for himself. In fact, one criterion of form criticism (= pre-Gospel, oral tradition) is *dissimilarity*. Those sayings which have no parallel in either Judaism or the early church are, more than likely, authentic. The idea that the "Son of Man would appear on earth in humiliation to suffer and die has no parallel in Judaism

²⁸George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, hereafter *TNT*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 168.

²⁹Marshall suggests the statement could be a denial. See I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 853.

³⁰The variant reading on this text is, according to Walter Wessel, unsupported who opts for the shorter reading. See Walter W. Wessel, "Mark," in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, ed. F. E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 770.

³¹For references see D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, ed. F. E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 209-210.

³²Cf., Ladd, *TNT*, 148-150.

or in the early church.”³³ Hence, the Son of Man title may very well have been Jesus’ own self-designated title. Moreover, this title is found only once outside the four Gospels, which may indicate that “the designation of Jesus as ‘Son of Man’ was not a title that arose in later Christian usage and was then read back into the gospels.”³⁴

As *the earthly Son of Man*, Jesus has the divine prerogative to forgive sins and has authority over the Sabbath (Mk. 2:10; 28 = Matt. 9:6 = Lk. 5:24; Matt. 12:8 = Lk. 6:5). The Son of Man has the prerogative not merely to *pronounce* sins forgiven but actually grant forgiveness of sins.³⁵ This can only be done by God. Once again the *dissimilarity* criterion demonstrates the strong possibility for this saying to be historically authentic.

Jesus is hardly implying merely a human messianic claim, for there is apparently no Jewish tradition that the Messiah or any other creaturely being has the right to forgive sins on his own authority. Furthermore, Jesus does not speak as an agent, priestly or prophetic or angelic, assuring the man of God’s forgiveness, nor does he offer the provisional pardon of a human court to be later ratified by God. He makes a flat affirmation of what he and the theologians know to be a prerogative of God.³⁶

The eschatological Son of Man is, without question, the most controversial. Yet there are three sayings included in each account of the Synoptics: Mk. 8:38 (= Matt. 16:27; Lk. 9:26), Mk. 13:26 (= Matt. 24:30; Lk. 21:27), and Mk. 14:62 (= Matt. 26:64; Lk. 22:69). Jesus’ reply to the High Priest before the Sanhedrin is pointed: “But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Matt. 26:64, also see, Matt. 24:27, 30). The response of the high priest is a clear indication that he understood Jesus’ claim to deity. It is also possible that someone “sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One,” as represented in the temple, somehow violated God’s very presence. In fact,

the idea of anyone sitting in God’s presence was offensive to many rabbis . . . the temple *and those things and the Person whose presence it represents* were viewed with a special sense of holiness. Everything about practice at the temple declared its sanctity and thus the

³³Ibid., 151.

³⁴Craig, *Faith*, 243.

³⁵Contra Hick, *Metaphor*, 32. Cf., J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Law. Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville: Westminster, 1990), 27.

³⁶E. Earle Ellis, “Deity-Christology in Mark 14:58,” in *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ*, ed. Joel B. Green and Max Turner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 194.

sanctity of heaven and the God who dwells there. It is this background that explains why Jesus' remark would be seen as blasphemous.³⁷

The thought of Jesus being in that position was the ultimate blasphemy as far as Jewish leaders were concerned. In effect, Jesus is saying the High Priest has no right to sit in judgment over him. "Rather than the leadership having the right to judge Jesus, this Galilean teacher was claiming the right to represent God's way and be their judge."³⁸

The perplexity over this title is evident by those who asked "Who is this 'Son of Man'?" (Jn. 12:34). This is clearly a link to Jesus' suffering. Even his closest disciples could not comprehend a "Son of Man coming in all his glory" who must first suffer and die on behalf of others (Matt. 16:13-16). The divine mission of Jesus as the exalted Son of Man who was to return in power and glory was imminently connected to a cross. Palestinian Judaism expected a triumphant and eternal Son of Man (Psalms of Solomon 17:4).³⁹ Jesus of Nazareth, on the other hand, spoke of death and humiliation as the means of his triumph (John 12:23-24, 34). The coming of Jesus, his death, burial, and resurrection, *though foretold in Old Testament Scripture* (cf., 1 Cor. 15:3-4), had completely blown the conceptual categories Judaism had come to accept as the truth. Consequently, Jesus is God's ultimate mystery who was revealed (Hebrews 1:1-3). So, it is Christologically irresponsible not to accept the implications arising out of historical inquiry.

Jesus as the Mystery of God Incarnate

Peter, as an eyewitness, flatly denies he followed any myth.⁴⁰ "We did not follow cleverly invented stories [*μύθοις* = myths] when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty" (2 Pt. 1:16). Paul forewarned Timothy that some would follow myths rather than the truth. "For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine . . . they will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths [*μύθους*]" (2 Tim. 4:3-5). Moreover, Paul insisted that any notion of a fable that was

³⁷Darrell L. Bock, "The Son of Man and the Debate over Jesus' 'Blasphemy,'" in *Jesus of Nazareth*, 189, emphasis his. See esp., the quotes from Jewish sources in *ibid*.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 189-190.

³⁹Carson, *John*, 445.

⁴⁰Though Hick may deny Petrine authorship, this passage, like 1 Jn. 1:1-4, claims that, whoever the author is, he was among eyewitnesses and writes authoritatively on that basis.

not fact, even if the religious context were Judaism, was to be rejected (cf., Tit. 1:13-14; 1 Tim. 1:4; 4:7).

Instead of claiming that Jesus is the “myth” of God incarnate, he claims that Jesus is God’s mystery (Col. 2:2). Though Christ is identified with the mystery rather than with God in Colossians 2:2,⁴¹ verse 3 says that Christ is God’s mystery because⁴² “in him [= Christ] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” Since Paul just affirmed the supremacy of Christ in his creative activity (1:15-20), and he goes on to affirm Christ as the complete embodiment of the divine essence (2:9), the wisdom and knowledge here are most likely divine wisdom and knowledge. In other words, all that is deepest in God is mysteriously summed up in Christ. There were false teachers who were trying to deceive the Colossian believers by claiming they were a better source of esoteric wisdom and knowledge (cf., 2:4, 8, 16, 18). Paul counters, in effect, by saying that Christ is the ‘once-hidden-but-now-revealed-God’ – the divine secret made known by his bodily presence. True spiritual knowledge lies nowhere else but in Christ who is God’s wisdom (cf., 1 Cor. 1:24, 30; Col. 2:8).

A mystery is something hidden in the past, but revealed at a latter point (see, e.g., Rom. 16:25-26; 1 Cor. 15:51; Eph. 1:9; 3:3-4, 6, 9; Col. 1:26). Markus Barth says that, “all Ephesian and Colossian verses that contain the noun *μυστήριον* convey the information that it is now ‘revealed,’ ‘known,’ ‘understood,’ and frankly ‘spoken out.’ In all cases a noetic or cognitive event is mentioned.” And, Barth goes on to say that Jesus Christ is “the essence and contents [sic] of the revealed secret (Col. 2:2).”⁴³

Nevertheless, what Paul said about Christ in Colossians 2:2 is spelled out more fully in 1 Timothy 3:16. He writes: “beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory” (1 Tim. 3:16). Though Paul’s primary concerns for Timothy are pastoral and ecclesiastical, this text does contain explicit incarnational language. Paul just finished saying that the church is the pillar and foundation of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15), then he gives Timothy a foundational truth for the church. The context of 1 Tim.

⁴¹*Χριστοῦ* is in apposition to *τοῦ μυστηρίου* (objective genitive), not *τοῦ θεοῦ* (possessive genitive), so NRSV. Cf., Harris, *Jesus*, 265 and Murray J. Harris, *Colossians and Philemon: Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 81.

⁴²More than likely, *ἐν* is causal in verse 3. Cf., Harris, *Jesus*, *ibid.*

⁴³Markus Barth, *Ephesians 1-3*, vol. 1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), 125.

3:16, in conjunction with a series of “trustworthy sayings” Paul gives to Timothy (cf., 1 Tim. 1:15; 3:1; 4:9; 2 Tim. 2:11), makes it highly probable that 1 Tim. 3:16 is another brick in the church’s foundation and should be regarded as another ‘trustworthy saying.’

Murray Harris canvasses all the grammatical problems with reading 1 Tim. 3:16 as “God was manifest in the flesh” (so, KJV, NKJV) and concludes “1 Timothy 3:16 is not an instance of the christological use of *θεός*.”⁴⁴ Instead, it should read “He appeared in a body” (so NIV, NASB, NRSV, NEB). The problem is that there is no explicit antecedent of who or what is being referred to. Harris says “all the ancient versions presuppose the relative pronoun, whether ο}” or ο} [masculine or neuter], and the earliest uncial [all capital letters] in the original hand that reads qeo;” . . . dates from the eighth or ninth century.”⁴⁵ Therefore, the better reading is with the relative masculine pronoun, “he.”

However, reading 1 Tim. 3:16 this way is not without its grammatical problems. If the antecedent to the relative pronoun is *μυστήριον*, then there is the problem with concord. The gender of ο}” is masculine, whereas the gender of *μυστήριον* is neuter. That would make the reading “he appeared in a body” the more difficult reading. Hence, the propensity for scribal correction is greater. However, Harris points out that it is not uncommon for ο}” to begin a christological hymn or affirmation (e.g., Phil. 2:6; Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3) and, therefore, “the transition from τὸ τῆς εὐσεβείας μυστήριον [the mystery of godliness is great] to ο}” [he] becomes explicable.”⁴⁶ Hence, textual critics are virtually unanimous in reading ο}” as original.⁴⁷

Though space will not allow an entire exposition of every line in this text, the first line pertains particularly to the subject of the incarnation. Paul implies the pre-existence of Jesus in 1 Tim. 1:15, and his human descent from David in 2 Tim. 2:8. This hymn (1 Tim. 3:16) is the combination of the heavenly and earthly origins of Jesus of Nazareth. Moreover, humankind is not commonly spoken of as “appearing” or “manifesting in the flesh” (*ἐφανερώθη ἐν σαρκί*), yet the New Testament says repeatedly that Jesus’ incarnate life was “revealed” (cf., Jn. 1:14, 31;

⁴⁴Harris, *Jesus*, 268.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 267.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 268.

⁴⁷Cf., Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1971), 641.

Col. 2:9; Heb. 9:26; 1 Pt. 1:20; 1 Jn. 1:2; 3:5). Paul is here referring to something or someone that was revealed in the flesh. I. Howard Marshall concludes that,

although no subject is expressed (the AV ‘God was manifest’ follows a late text), the language is based on that used elsewhere to describe how the Son of God was incarnate. The thought is of an epiphany in human form, and the implication is that a divine or heavenly subject is intended. The reference is certainly to the earthly life of Jesus and not to his resurrection appearances.⁴⁸

So, the mystery of God was made manifest in the flesh.

One final note regarding the early attestation of Jesus as God Incarnate. Murray Harris finds seven instances where *θεός* is explicitly used of Jesus of Nazareth as a christological title (Jn. 1:1, 18; 20:28; Rom. 9:5; Tit. 2:13; Heb. 1:8; 2 Pt. 1:1). Hick alleges that this notion of believing Jesus was literally God incarnate is a late rendition. Again, Hick’s own words bear clear witness:

We know of him [Jesus] only because others responded to him, with yet others responding to their responses, so that a movement developed which almost inevitably came to regard him as divine in the highly elastic sense in which outstanding religious and political figures were often so regarded in the ancient world. This ‘soft’ divinity, expressed in the ‘son of God’ metaphor, eventually developed into the ‘hard’ metaphysical claim that Jesus was God the Son, second person of a divine Trinity, incarnate.⁴⁹

Of course, this assumes that a certain amount of time must pass before the thinking of Jesus’ disciples could mature enough to make such bold claims as ‘Jesus is God Incarnate.’ But, Harris points out that “it is not the passage of time in itself but dramatic events that effect any deepening or broadening of human thought.”⁵⁰ As to the historical credibility of Jn. 20:28, a key passage affirming Jesus as God Incarnate, Harris demonstrates that there are references of time and place surrounding the pericope in which Thomas makes the claim, putting the Fourth Gospel in an historically verifiable setting (e.g., Jn. 20:19).⁵¹ Harris says of this incident that, “as it stands, the pericope has so many signs of verisimilitude that its historicity may be confidently assumed, and since the confession in verse 28 is pivotal and climactic in the story it may be reckoned *ipsissima verba Thomae*.”⁵²

⁴⁸Marshall, *Jesus*, 173.

⁴⁹Hick, *Metaphor*, 36.

⁵⁰Harris, *Jesus*, 277.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 113-119.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 119.

So, in dating these seven texts in which *qeō;*" is explicitly used of Jesus of Nazareth, Harris suggests the following chronological order: Jn. 20:28 (30 or 33 A.D.); Rom. 9:5 (ca. 57); Tit. 2:13 (ca. 63); 2 Pt. 1:1 (ca. 65); Heb. 1:8 (60s); Jn. 1:1; 18 (90s). If these dates are accurate, "the Christian use of *qeō;*" as a title for Jesus began immediately after the resurrection."⁵³ Though mystery may be involved, the reality of Jesus as God Incarnate was well established in earliest Christian thought.

Hick's charges, then, that the deity of Jesus was a late development in the Christian Church can be dropped with good historical and grammatical reasons. There may have been some development in conceptualizing and formulating what originally came to pass in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. After all, interpretation does occur *after* the interpreted. The amount of time, though, between Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection, and the recording of those events, could not be sufficient to fabricate a myth or a legend. Even Hick's dating of the New Testament demonstrates this.

Though there were various human interpretations of Jesus' person and works, what is recorded in the New Testament coincides with the substantive events and sayings of Jesus. If Jesus' actual words were not preserved, one can be reasonably sure that the 'gist' of Jesus' teachings was preserved and responsibly written down under divine inspiration. The result is that what the New Testament authors say when citing Jesus, Jesus himself says, and what Jesus himself says, God says.

⁵³Ibid., 278.