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"Heaven Came Down to Earth When No One Expected It": Reassessing Seven Christological Titles in Light of Insights from Contemporary Jewish-Christian Conversations [1]

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It goes without saying that one of the most persistent questions in Jewish-Christian conversations and disputations throughout history has been the identity of Jesus of Nazareth. For Christians, he is inevitably the most important person who has ever lived; to employ the title of one of Rowan Williams's books, the protagonist in the New Testament is "The Heart of Creation."[2] Christians believe that it is through Jesus of Nazareth that they have come to know and have begun worshiping the God of Israel, as Paul writes: "you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God" (1 Thess 1:9). And Christians are called Christians precisely because Jesus was confessed as the Christ by his followers: "And it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called 'Christians' [*Christianoi*]" (Acts 11:26).

For an overwhelming majority of Jews from antiquity to the present day, however, the protagonist in the New Testament has had no such significance. Given the frequency with which Jews and the Jewish tradition appear in Christian texts, many Christians are surprised when they realize that the person, proclamation, and passion of Jesus seldom are discussed in the rabbinic texts; and when Christians and Christian theology *are* mentioned, it is often the problematic Christian triumphalist proclamation that governs the discussion, e.g., that the Christian Church is the new Israel that replaces carnal Israel. One illustrating example of this is the argument put forward in *Tanchuma* that the *Mishnah* must remain oral tradition (although, eventually, it was written down), since God foresaw that the peoples of the world

[1] Heartfelt thanks are due to Annika Wenemark and Göran Larsson for stimulating conversations about several drafts of this article. For a more comprehensive survey of Christologies and their implications for the contemporary Jewish-Christian dialogue, see Jesper Svartvik, *Vägen som är mödan värd: En handbok om judisk-kristna relationer* (Stockholm: Proprius, 2024), 98–156.
[2] Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018).

one day would read the *Torah* in Greek and solemnly declare: *Anu Yisrael* ("We are Israel").[3] But since these gentiles, although asserting that they are the true or the new Israel, do not know the *Mishnah*, which is God's "secret" (Hebrew: *sod*) and "mystery" (Hebrew: *misterin*; cf. Greek: *mystêrion*), they cannot be what they claim to be: hence, the people of Israel remains God's Israel.

This article seeks to further intra-Christian theological reflection and contemporary Jewish-Christian dialogue by surveying seven Christological terms that frequently appear in the New Testament and Christian discourse: Rabbi, Christ / Messiah, Son of God, Son of Man, Lord, Wisdom, and Word of God. What is particularly striking is that these Christological terms are far from monolithic. When exploring them, we quickly notice that they are surprisingly multifaceted. Indeed, they are even ambiguous and enigmatic, inviting readers of the New Testament to reflect on one of the most important questions for Christians (Matt 16:15, Mark 8:29, and Luke 9:20): "Who do you say that I am?" Christians constantly return to this lingering question.

However, too much ink and blood have been spilled in attempts to convince non-Christians that Jesus of Nazareth is what these Christological titles have been made to suggest; when, instead, the titles could have been the starting-point for an intra-Christian and soul-searching reflection on what these seven titles once *meant* in antiquity, what they *have meant* in history, and what they can *mean* for Christians today.[4]

Rabbi

The title "rabbi" is probably both the most indisputable title and the least common in Christological literature: it is *indisputable* because Jesus of Nazareth lived and taught in a Jewish context; it is *unusual* because he has often been removed from this Jewish environment.[5] But in the oldest sources—the four New Testament gospels—we find the contours of a person who lived his whole life *within* the Jewish tradition: he was dressed in traditional Jewish clothes, e.g., he had the prescribed tassels (*tzitziyot*) on his mantle (*tallit*) (Matt 9:20, 14:36, Mark 6:56, and Luke 8:44).[6] And it was the Sabbath and the other Jewish festivals that he observed, it was the Jewish sacred Scriptures—the *Torah*, the Prophets, and the other Writings—that he expounded in his teaching, and it was to synagogues he regularly went (Luke 4:16).

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[3] *Midrash Tanhuma*, ed. Solomon Buber (Vilna, 1885; reprint: Jerusalem, 1964), *Va-Yera* 6.

[4] On the distinction between what the text *meant* and what it *means*, see Krister Stendahl, "Biblical Theology, Contemporary," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. G. A. Buttrick, 4 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962–1978), 1.418–432.

[5] One of the most notorious cases is Walter Grundmann, *Jesus der Galiläer und das Judentum* (Leipzig: Georg Wigand, 1940), but other examples, even if they do not go as far, are *legio*. The litmus test for sound theology is whether Second Temple Judaism is presented as Jesus's theological contrast or his historical context.

[6] Hence, what is criticized in Matt 23:5 is not the fringe *per se*, but its length.

Jesus was a person who was well-versed in the Scriptures. If the term had not been so negatively charged among Christians, they would most probably not hesitate to call him a scribe. People close to him in the Gospels call him "rabbi" (Matt 26:25, 49, Mark 9:5, 11:21, 14:45, John 1:38, 3:2, 26, 4:31, 6:25, 9:2, and 11:8) or "*rabbouni*" (Mark 10:51 and John 20:16). Sometimes this original Semitic word is found in the Greek texts, sometimes the Greek word *didaskalos* or the vocative *didaskale* (Matt 8:19, 12:38, 19:16, 22:16, Mark 10:17, Luke 18:18 *et alii loci*), behind which we most likely find *rabbi* or a similar word. *Rabbi* in Hebrew literally means "my great [teacher or master]." Hence, it is with respect for the knowledge and wisdom that Jesus possesses that he is called rabbi.

In the Gospels, Jesus is asked how Jewish beliefs and traditions should be put into practice. His interlocutors' questions are so familiar to many Christians that they easily forget how inherently *Jewish* they are. Some of them are strikingly practical: Is it right or wrong for Jews to pay taxes to the Roman emperor (Matt 22:15–22, Mark 12:13–17, and Luke 20:20–26)? The famous answer is: "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." Other questions clearly relate to the Ten Commandments: "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Matt 19:16–30, Mark 10:17–22, and Luke 18:18–30), which triggers Jesus and the questioner to discuss how the commandments of the Scriptures should be interpreted and applied. A recurring question in the Gospels is what is permitted and what is not permitted to do on the Sabbath (e.g., Matt 12:1–8, Mark 2:23–28, and Luke 6:1–5). All these discussions show that the Sabbath commandment is binding for both his questioners and Jesus alike. That the Sabbath commandment is valid is the unspoken premise. What is questioned, however, is the *abuse* of the Sabbath commandment, not its Jewish *usage*, which quite simply is taken for granted. Finally, nothing anchors Jesus in the Jewish tradition to the same extent as the discussion of which commandment is the greatest in the Scriptures (Matt 23:34–40, Mark 12:28–34, and Luke 10:25–28).

What are the implications for Christians today that Jesus of Nazareth was called "rabbi"? Numerous Christians around the world regularly confess that Jesus was, to use the wording of the ancient creed, "true man." One expression of this belief is to confirm that he was called "Rabbi." That he was truly human implies—indeed, necessitates—that he lived in a certain time, in a certain place, in a certain context; that he spoke and understood certain languages, taught certain texts, and emphasized certain theological thoughts. In short, to confess that he was truly human implies that he was a truly *Jewish* person, who lived in a *Jewish* environment. Hence, one should not be troubled by but rejoice at the similarities and parallels between Jesus's teaching and then contemporary Judaism. It was, so to speak, in the synagogue's "*Saturday* school" that he had learned to teach about the Kingdom of God by means of parables (a fact that numerous Christians have learned in *Sunday* school). That is where he heard the Scriptures read aloud, that is where he learned their importance for his neighbors and fellow villagers: in short, for the people of Israel.

The Christological discussion must therefore begin with discerning, recognizing, and celebrating Jesus's Jewishness.[7] Hence, what in German is called *die Heimholung Jesu ins Judentum* ("bringing Jesus back home [again] to Judaism") is not only an exegetical enterprise, but also an indispensable part of Christology. The Danish minister, theologian, and hymn writer N. F. S. Grundtvig coined the anthropological expression *Menneske først og kristen saa* ("Human first, then a Christian").[8] His statement could be applied to Jesus of Nazareth: he was a Jew first; for Christians he is obviously more than this—but he is *never less* than a Jew.

It seems remarkably difficult for Christians in general to deal with the Jewishness of Jesus.[9] Often it does not take many minutes before the preacher presents Jesus's historical context as his theological contrast.[10] When this happens, the first Christological title comes to our rescue: Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew among Jews. Christian teaching seeks to articulate the ways in which Jesus as a *person* was unique—but that does not mean that Jesus's *proclamation* was unique in every respect. Hence, the first Christological title emphasizes that he joins the ranks of scribes and rabbis who have taught the Jewish people about the God of Israel with the help of the Jewish scriptures. Whereas Jesus as rabbi is seldom presented as a Christological title, the next title is the most common—and perhaps also the most complex.

Christ / Messiah

The Greek word *Christos* (and behind it the Hebrew *Mashiach*) form the linguistic basis of the very term "Christology." But in what sense do Christians believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ? In *The Messianic Idea in Israel*, Joseph Klausner defines the Jewish belief in the Messiah as:

> The prophetic hope for the end of this age, in which a strong redeemer, by his power and his spirit, will bring complete redemption, political and spiritual, to the people Israel, and along with this, earthly bliss and moral perfection to the entire human race.[11]

But Jesus of Nazareth did not achieve what Klausner's definition indicates: the power of Rome was not crushed, the Davidic kingship of Israel was not restored,

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[7] For the three verbs discerning, recognizing, and celebrating, see Walter Kasper, "Address on the 37th Anniversary of Nostra Aetate": "Since [Nostra Aetate in] 1965 many things have occurred. […] … we Catholics became aware with greater clarity that the faith of Israel is that of our elder brothers, and, most importantly, that Judaism is as a sacrament of every otherness that as such the Church must learn to discern, recognize and celebrate." https://www.ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/kasper/wk02oct28 (accessed November 26, 2025).

[8] The expression was probably coined in 1837 (or possibly in 1838), see, e.g., K. E. Bugge, "Menneske først: Grundtvig og hedningemissionen," *Grundtvig-Studier* 52:1 (2001), 115–165.

[9] For examples, see Philip A. Cunningham's article in this issue.

[10] For discussion of this trope, see Adam Gregerman's article in this issue.

[11] Joseph Klausner, *The Messianic Idea in Israel: From Its Beginning to the Completion of the Mishnah* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 9 (italics in the original).

and the Jews in the Diaspora did not return to the Land. *Au contraire*, the first century was the beginning of a two-millennia long *galut* (Hebrew for "exile").

It seems quite clear that in the Scriptures, the term "Messiah" refers to a historical person who reigned over Israel, the one who was Israel's king—nothing more and nothing less.[12] The Christian answer to this observation has traditionally been that the reign of the Messiah is to be divided into two phases: first the earthly activity of Jesus (presented in the New Testament), followed by the return of the Christ at the end of time (predicted and proclaimed in the New Testament, see, e.g., Acts 3:20f.). Generally speaking, for two thousand years Jews have objected to such a division, stating that he cannot be the Prince of Peace unless the Kingdom of Peace is palpably present.

The essential difference between Jews and Christians is not the question of whether Jesus is the Messiah, but rather what Christians believe that Jesus is *in addition to (allegedly) being the Messiah*. In the words of Paul M. van Buren,

> … none of the possible uses of the term "messiah" is sufficient to catch even a modest part of what the Church wants to say of the things concerning Jesus of Nazareth. The term "messiah" says far too little.[13]

In other words, *Christian Christology—in its established, wide sense—is far more than Jewish Messianism*. Of all the seven Christological titles discussed in this chapter, Jesus as the Christ / Messiah seems to be the one that is most *fraught*—and, at the same time, the one that is the least *wrought* in contemporary Christian piety. Hence, a question needs to be posed: what do Christians today mean when they confess Jesus as the Christ / Messiah?

One example of the persistent ambiguity of how Christians use the Christ / Messiah discourse is the popular song *El Shaddai*, written by Michael Card and John Thompson, often sung by Amy Grant.[14] The first half of the song describes some of the most well-known and cherished passages in the Hebrew Bible: Hagar giving God a name (Gen 16), the binding of Isaac (Gen 22), and the splitting of the Red Sea (Ex 14). The second half of the song addresses the fact that most of the Jews in antiquity—and throughout history—did not become Christ-believers:

> Through the years You've made it clear,
> That the time of Christ was near,
> Though the people couldn't see
> [originally "Though the Jews just couldn't see,"
> later "though the people failed to see"]
> What Messiah ought to be.

[12] For an important survey, see, e.g., Matthew V. Novenson, *The Grammar of Messianism: An Ancient Jewish Political Idiom and Its Users* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
[13] Paul M. van Buren, *A Theology of the Jewish-Christian Reality*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Harper & Row, 1980–1988), 3.10.
[14] Amy Grant, "El Shaddai," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8txqw-u4V78&list=RD8txqw-u4V78&start_radio=1 (accessed September 23, 2025).

Though Your Word contained the plan,
They just could not understand
Your most awesome work was done
Through the frailty of Your Son.

What ought to be pointed out in this discussion is that people in general and Jews in particular cannot really be expected to confess Jesus as the Christ / Messiah if it is correct that there is such a discrepancy between Jewish Messianism and the Christian conviction of a "frailty of [God's] … Son." One cannot first solemnly declare that Jesus is the Messiah, and then state, in addition, that he is *something else than* the Jewish Messiah, and, in addition, that Jews have misunderstood the *true* meaning of the Messianic texts in the Jewish Scriptures: "what [the] Messiah ought to be." In short, one cannot have one's Jesus-is-the-unmistakable-fulfilment-of-all-the-Christological-prophesies cake and simultaneously eat it.

What are the implications for Christians today that Jesus of Nazareth was called the Christ? Jesus was neither literally a king (ruling his people as an earthly king) nor a successful political leader (although his followers eventually gained considerable political influence). His followers can therefore only claim that he was Messianic in a figurative sense. The Romans did indeed call him "King of the Jews" and gave him a crown of thorns and a robe—but they did so with the aim of mocking him. Already in the Gospels we see that the concept is ambiguous: the evangelists may claim that he is the king of his followers—but he is a different kind of king (e.g., Luke 22:25f. and John 18:36).

The discussion in this section of the Messianic idea within ancient Judaism is reminiscent of the old story of the speaker who had written in the margin of his manuscript: "Argument weak—raise your voice." In fact, Christians have often raised their voices and accused the Jewish people of not clearly seeing a Scriptural message that is not particularly clear in the Scriptures.

Two wide-spread assumptions need to be questioned. First, there was no clear-cut set of Messianic expectations in the beginning of the common era that Jesus of Nazareth fulfilled literally. Such a "hand-in-glove Christology" is quite simply historically inaccurate. Secondly, nor is a dichotomous Messianic mission—i.e., that the Messiah two thousand years ago initiated what will be fulfilled by the Son of Man, but only at his return at the end of times—manifest in the Jewish Scriptures. This interpretation most likely arose from the painful experience of the first generations of Christ-believers that the Kingdom of Peace did not come as the followers of the Prince of Peace had hoped and expected. Judaism is sometimes likened to the slave in ancient times who was instructed to whisper in the ear of the successful emperor: *memento mori* ("remember [that you will] die," often translated: "remember that you are mortal"). By its very presence, Judaism poses the critical question to Christians: Where is the Kingdom of Peace? It has been—and still is—a thankless task to point out that the theology of others is flawed.

A foundational text for this discussion is Peter's confession in Mark 8:29: *Sy ei ho Christos* ("You are the Christ"), situated almost exactly in the middle of the Gospel. Up until then, Jesus's public ministry has been marked by success: large

crowds have flocked around him to listen to his teaching as he expounds the message of the Scriptures. But after the climax of the Gospel—Peter's Messianic confession in Caesarea Philippi—a new period begins in the Gospel and in Jesus's life. Fewer people listen to his teaching, he is abandoned by his disciples, his last words on the cross even indicate that he felt abandoned by God Godself. The Greek word for the turning point in a drama is *peripeteia*. It is highly likely that this arrangement of the material in the Gospel of Mark is a deliberate stylistic device. The evangelist has thus chosen to place the confession that Jesus is the Christ at the center of the Gospel—in order to present a Christology that deviates from the one we might expect: instead of success, he encounters adversity, instead of a triumphant victory, there is a miserable loss, instead of an abundant life we read about his death on a cross, executed by the Romans. If it is correct that the author of the Gospel of Mark seeks to challenge some Christ-believers' misconceptions of true Messiahship, then it is not others' perceptions but *the Christ-believers' own thoughts and theologies that need to be challenged*.[15]

Son of God

When studying the Christological titles, in no other case is the difference as palpable between, on the one hand, what many take for granted that the term most certainly means, and, on the other hand, what it appears to mean in the Jewish Scriptures and the oldest Christian texts. In systematic discussions, the term "Son of God" often implies that Jesus is, in the words of the Nicene Creed, "the only begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all time, God of God, light of light, true God of true God." A frequently occurring chain of thought in Christian contexts, especially with an apologetic bent, is that Jesus is divine because he is the Son of God, and he is divine because Joseph is not his father, since the Gospels of Matthew and Luke narrate the Virgin Birth. But such a reductionist chain of thought is not compatible with how the concept "Son of God" developed within Judaism, referring either to the people or to earthly kings.

The earliest evidence in the New Testament for the view that Jesus is the Son of God is found in 1 Thess 1:10 (which is probably the oldest preserved document written by and to the members of the Jesus movement): "and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath."[16] There is thus evidence in the epistles for the view that Jesus was "the Son," but it is especially in the Gospel of John that this way of thinking is frequent. The unique relationship between the Father and the Son is the axis around which everything else in this gospel revolves (see John 2:16, 5:17, 43, and 6:32).

The question to be asked now is how the concept of "Son of God" was used in ancient texts—and what consequences this has for our understanding of the New Testament texts. At least three usages can be found:

[15] See, e.g., Theodore J. Weeden, *Mark – Traditions in Conflict* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979).
[16] Cf. Rom 1:3f., Gal 1:16, 4:6, 1 Cor 15:28, and Rom 8:32.

(i) It often refers to *the people of Israel* (Exod 4:22, Deut 14:1, Isa 63:8, Hos 11:1, and Wisd of Sol 2:18). In the Sermon on the Mount we find a similar perspective: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God" (Matt 5:9). Although the term "son of God" is more common, the expressions "daughter" and "daughters" also occur (Micah 4:8, 10, 13, Lam 1:6, and Zech 9:9). Hence, the Jewish tradition of Jesus's time was well acquainted with the concept of "Son of God": it referred either to the Jewish people as a whole or, more specifically, to a pious and righteous person among them. In that sense, it would be most remarkable if Jesus had not been called a son of God.

(ii) The second usage, which is more specific, refers to *the ruler of the people of Israel*, most clearly in 2 Sam 7:14: "I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me." We also find this in several of the Psalms, for example in the second psalm that was probably used at the king's accession to the throne (v. 7): "You are my son, today I have begotten you" (cf. 89:27f.).

(iii) In the Greco-Roman world the term also referred to *Roman emperors and pagan divinities*. This is probably the most relevant parallel to how it is used in the New Testament. If the Roman emperor was called the son of God (Latin: *divi filius*), this means that similar claims in the New Testament constitute not only an alternative to, but also a threat to, the cult of the emperor. The question that arises is who is really the son of God: is it the emperor or is it Christ?

Michael Peppard has surveyed the connotations in the ancient world of the dove at the baptism of Jesus, when a heavenly voice (Hebrew: *bat qol*) declares that Jesus is the beloved Son (Matt 3:17, Mark 1:11, and Luke 3:22; cf. John 1:34). He compares it with the Roman eagle which represented the King (*basileus*), what is warlike (*alkimôtatos*), the Empire (*tês hêgemonias tekmêrion*), and a divine sign of victory (*klêdôn*).[17] A dove, Peppard argues, represents the opposite—and thus the evangelists portray Jesus as a counter-emperor to the Roman emperor. This line of thought, "cultural mimicry," is particularly associated with Homi K. Bhabha.[18] In this case, mimicry is used subversively: the Christ-believer's cult is presented as an alternative to the cult of the emperor.

What are the implications for Christians today that Jesus of Nazareth is called "Son of God? The New Testament outlines a latent conflict of interest between earthly powers and Jesus Christ: It is not Alexander the Great who is the Lord, nor the Roman emperors. It is Jesus, the Son of God, who should stand at the center of the lives of Christians, not earthly leaders. Christian belief therefore becomes a challenge to all forms of political rule that have excessive claims and thus occupy the place that ultimately does not belong to them. This is a Christology that expresses Christian faith using the language of the surrounding world. In short, it is Christ—not the emperor—who is the son of God. Is Peppard right when suggesting

[17] Michael Peppard, "The Eagle and the Dove: Roman Imperial Sonship and the Baptism of Jesus (Mark 1.9–11)," *New Testament Studies* 56:4 (2019), 431–451.

[18] See, e.g., Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994). For a particularly disturbing usage of the term mimicry, see Joseph Goebbels's article in *Das Reich* (July 20, 1941), quoted and translated in, e.g., https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/goeb18.htm (accessed September 26, 2025).

that the dove at Jesus's baptism can be interpreted as an antithetical parallel to the imperial eagle? If so, does the dove of peace challenge the belligerent eagle?

The notion that Jesus is the son of God challenges all political systems that are elevated from politics—that which has to do with the "city" (cf. the Greek word *polis*)—to ideologies with slogans that claim to own and offer all answers. Political "isms" tend to offer too much and, consequently, at the same time, too little. There is—or should be—a latent conflict of interest between all totalitarian ideologies and the claims of Christian faith. Those who trust in earthly leaders risk being both disappointed and betrayed (Ps 146:3–6):

> Do not put your trust in princes, in a mortal [*be-ven adam*, lit. "in a son of man"], in whom there is no help [*teshu'ah*, cf. Jesus's name *Yeshu'a*].

Son of Man

In history and still today, the term "Son of Man" is often used to describe the Christian belief that Jesus Christ was and is truly *human*. It is often used to emphasize that Jesus is "one of us," e.g. by Dietrich Bonhoeffer: *Der Mensch für andere* ("a human being for others"), as the Church ought to be for others: *Die Kirche ist nur Kirche, wenn sie für andere da ist* ("The Church is only Church when it exists for others").[19] However, even a cursory reading of the New Testament makes it clear that the concept cannot be interpreted simply as a synonym for "true man." For a fuller understanding, we need to survey three possible interpretations.

(i) In Hebrew it is obviously an idiomatic expression meaning "(hu)man." This is how it is used in Ps 8:5: "what is a human being [*enosh*] that you are mindful of him, and a son of man [*u-ven adam*] that you care for him?" Is this perhaps the original meaning of Jesus's words in Matt 8:20 and Luke 9:58: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head"? Did these words of Jesus originally refer not only to Jesus but to all people? This statement becomes especially relevant if we consider that the early Christian movement reached new places because there were itinerant preachers who, like Jesus, taught about the Kingdom of God. These preachers could certainly identify with Jesus in this regard. Perhaps they felt that this word of Jesus was particularly significant for them when they, not without great hardships and tribulations were walking the roads of the Roman Empire?

(ii) A second possibility is that it expresses an emphatic self. With one exception, the expression Son of Man appears in the Gospels only in Jesus's statements about himself. Does this mean that it is a paraphrase for "I"?

(iii) The third possibility is that it was an established theological expression in New Testament times. In that case, a shift must have taken place from the general meaning—a person—to something considerably more specific. In the New Testament Gospels, Jesus of Nazareth is likened to a figure described in Daniel 7:13f.: a

[19] Quoted in, e.g. Leslie Houlden, "Son of Man" in Leslie Houlden, ed., *Jesus: The Complete Guide* (London / New York: Continuum, 2003), 784–787.

heavenly being sent by God, reflecting divine reality—but in the form of a human being (lit. "as a son of man").

What are the implications for Christians today that Jesus of Nazareth was called "Son of Man"? All seven concepts presented in this article have undergone a transformation, but it is quite possible that the alteration of the concept Son of Man is the most striking. Originally an idiomatic expression for a human being (as it still is in modern Hebrew: *ben adam*), in the centuries BCE—when the Book of Daniel was translated from Aramaic into Greek—it probably became a theological term, and as such, it appears in the New Testament Gospels in Jesus's words about himself, especially in statements about the future, about the return of the Son of Man. As that usage over time lost its relevance and original resonance, the expression became a concept in the Christological debate about the humanity of the Son. He was, Christians emphasized, not only *true God* but also *truly human*, a connotation closer to Hebrew and Aramaic: a son of man is, as a matter of fact, a (male) human being. But if we interpret the statements in the New Testament Gospels solely in this way, important nuances are lost. Four stages in the development of the concept can be identified: first, in the Scriptures it denotes a human being, secondly, in the Book of Daniel it refers to a heavenly being (although in the form of a human being), thirdly, in the New Testament it is used of Jesus of Nazareth, and, fourthly and finally, in the history of Christian dogma it refers above all to the true humanity of Jesus.

It may sound strange that this almost forgotten concept may possibly turn out to be one of the most relevant for Christians today. Jesus, like Ezekiel, is a human being, a prophet sent by God. He is also, like the figure in the Book of Daniel, a heavenly being sent by God. He meets his disciples in the form of a human being—and yet he represents and reflects the divine reality (Heb 1:3), but always in the form of a human being. "He became like one of us" (Phil 2:7), as Paul writes. It is a term that, according to the Gospels, Jesus uses about himself. It also seems to occur primarily in texts about the future: about the return of the Son of Man. This may explain why the early Christian movement came to develop the idea that everything is not accomplished even though the Son of Man had come. It is only at the time of his return that everything will be completed.

As we have seen, whereas in the history of dogma it came to be used to emphasize Jesus's *humanity*, it was originally intended to describe his *heavenly* origin. Given how the term is used in modern Hebrew, the circle is thus closed. In short, the history of interpretation of this concept contains both the truly human side of Christology and a touch of Heaven.

Lord

The difficulties that arise when interpreting the Hebrew word *Adonai* and the Greek word *Kyrios* are well-known. Reaching from a polite "sir" in everyday conversations all the way to the venerating substitute for the Tetragrammaton, it is notoriously difficult to establish its meanings in New Testament texts.

Ralph P. Martin's classic work *Carmen Christi* analyzes the hymn in Phil 2:5–11 about him who emptied himself, and, taking the form of a slave, humbled himself and became obedient to the point of the death—and therefore is exalted and given the name that is above every name.[20] What is particularly striking is that if we are correct in asserting that this Pauline letter was written around 60 CE or possibly already in the fifties, and if Paul here quotes a Christian hymn that was sung when Christ-believers gathered to worship the God of Israel, then this would prove to be *the oldest preserved hymn for Christ-believers*. An emphasis on the exaltation of Jesus ("the name that is above every name") is thus not found in one of the *youngest* texts of the New Testament, but in the very *oldest* hymn, even older than the New Testament's oldest stratum. This suggests that the *evolution* theory of high Christology (*pace* Wilhelm Bousset *et alii*)[21] is less plausible than the *explosion* theory of Martin Hengel and Larry Hurtado, namely that Christology exploded like a volcanic eruption, rather than being the result of a gradual process taking several centuries. As Hengel writes, more happened in Christological reflection within these early few years than in the whole subsequent seven hundred years of church history.[22]

What are the implications for Christians today that Jesus of Nazareth is called "Lord"? We have seen that the oldest evidence for the Christological title "Lord" most probably is found in the Philippian hymn, which Paul quotes because he wants to urge the recipients of the letter to unity, humility, and altruistic service for one another (Phil 2:1–4). This is worth pondering: the oldest evidence for high Christology is thus found in an exhortatory context, the purpose of which is to contribute to greater humility among Christ-believers. The person and proclamation of Jesus of Nazareth constitute a different way of thinking, speaking and acting than the worldly, as the Lukan Jesus emphasizes (22:26): "But not so with you."

How does God reveal Godself? What is God like? Two concluding quotations illustrate how both Jews and Christians are urged to turn away from triumphalist theologies in which the *Kyrios* is not to be likened to earthly rulers.

(i) In an article on Jewish-Christian relations and various models of Messiahship, Irving Greenberg describes how he understands a theophany, a revelation of God, from a Jewish perspective:

> God's self-presentation is deeply humble, not triumphalist. God is identified with the weak and defeated and with the power of persuasion by model rather than victory by intimidation. […] Both groups [Jews and Christians] would

[20] Ralph P. Martin, *Carmen Christi: Philippians ii.5–11 in Recent Interpretation and in the Setting of Early Christian Worship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967).

[21] See, e.g., Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos: Geschichte des Christusglaubens von den Anfängen des Christentums bis Irenaeus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1913).

[22] Martin Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul: Studies in the Earliest History of Christianity*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1983), 39f. See also Paula Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews: A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism: With a New Postscript* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 52: "'High' claims about Jesus occur in the very earliest stratum of our evidence, from mid-first century: the letters of Paul."

> show that we understand that as believers, we are channels and vehicles of the divine, not the imperialist owners of God.[23]

(ii) The second example is taken from Alfred North Whitehead's Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh in 1927–1928, in which he sketched a vision for a Christianity that does not articulate its image of God with the help of the attributes of the Roman emperor:

> When the Western world accepted Christianity, Caesar conquered … […] The brief Galilean vision of humility flickered throughout the ages, uncertainly. […] But the deeper idolatry, of the fashioning of God in the image of the Egyptian, Persian, and Roman imperial rulers, was retained. The Church gave unto God the attributes which belonged exclusively to Caesar. […] There is, however in the Galilean origin of Christianity, yet another suggestion that does not fit in very well. […] It does not emphasize the ruling Caesar, or the ruthless moralist, or the unmoved mover. It dwells upon the tender elements in the world, which slowly and in quietness operate by love, and it finds purpose in the present immediacy of the kingdom not of this world.[24]

Wisdom

When comparing the older texts in the wisdom literature with the younger, a development is discernible. In the oldest layers, the term wisdom often refers to good advice and insights: it is about what one should know in order to become wise (or at least a little wiser). But in the last centuries BCE, another theological thought grew stronger: it emphasized Wisdom to such a degree that it came to be thought of and presented as an independent being: Wisdom became personified. And since the Hebrew word *chokhmah* and the Greek *sophia* are both grammatically feminine words, the feminine pronoun is used for Wisdom.

Matt 11:27 (par. Luke 10:22), with its noteworthy Father-Son discourse, has famously been called "a bolt from a Johannine blue" (although it would probably be more correct to describe it as a Johannine bolt from a Synoptic blue).[25] In the following verses the Matthean Jesus encourages his followers to take his yoke upon them, and in a previous paragraph he has stated that "Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds" (v. 19). In short, we find in Matt 11 interrelated motifs that are of relevance for the present article: Jesus, wisdom, and yoke.

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[23] Irving Greenberg, "Judaism and Christianity: Their Respective Roles in the Strategy of Redemption" in Eugene J. Fisher, ed., *Visions of the Other: Jewish and Christian Theologians Assess the Dialogue* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1994), 22 and 27.

[24] Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: Corrected Edition*, ed. David Ray Griffin & Donald W. Sherburne (New York / London: Free Press 1978 [1st ed. 1929]), 342 and 343.

[25] W. D. Davies & Dale C. Allison trace this description back to Karl von Hase, who coined it as early as in 1876, see Davies and Allison, *The Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988–1997), 2.282.

There are striking parallels to the Wisdom motif in Sirach (e.g., 6:23–28 and 51:23–27). Hence, it is hardly likely that the image of the yoke is *exclusively* referring to hardships in general in the Matthean community. In an intra-Jewish context at the time of Jesus, it was a reference to the yoke of the *Torah*, because although studying the *Torah* may be at times laborious, it is always rewarding.[26] Walking the way to wisdom is not always easy, but the yoke, despite being a yoke, will prove to be easy to carry for those who realize how precious it is.[27]

Hence, it is plausible that the Matthean Jesus wanted to convey the message that his interpretations of the *Torah*, although at times strict and demanding (as in the Sermon on the Mount), were nevertheless—ultimately—liberating and refreshing. *Didache*, which theologically and chronologically is close to the Matthean text, states in 6.2: "If you can bear the whole yoke of the Lord [*holon ton zygon tou Kyriou*], you will be perfect, but if you cannot, do what you can."

Within a couple of generations, a theology would evolve that identified Jesus of Nazareth not only with Wisdom, but also with the Word, as seen in the Gospel of John (e.g., 1:14). The Wisdom motif in the entire passage Matt 11:25–30 provides a theological background and perhaps even the momentum for that influential development. Jesus of Nazareth not only conveys wisdom, but he embodies Wisdom. He not only teaches *Torah*, but he incarnates *Torah*. The Parabler became the principal Parable of God.

What are the implications for Christians today that Jesus of Nazareth is likened to Wisdom? In recent decades, a growing number of Christians have increasingly begun to doubt that God can and should be described only with masculine images, having become more aware of the limitations of androcentric language. It is certainly true that many descriptions of God in the biblical texts and the Christian tradition are grammatically masculine, but is not God ultimately beyond all human concepts? This brings to mind a statement in Hos 11:9 where God declares: *ki El anokhi ve-lo ish* (NRSV: "for I am God and no mortal"). Interestingly, the last word of this sentence in Hebrew (*ish*) is usually translated in this verse as "human" or "mortal," not as "man." Is it not noteworthy that the Hebrew word is translated *inclusively* when the masculine word is used not to describe what God is—but what God is *not*?

In many Christian contexts today, an inclusive language is sought for so that the message of the gospel is experienced as liberating and uplifting for both men and women alike. Since the Hebrew *chokhmah* and the Greek *sophia* are grammatically feminine, both the personification of Wisdom and the notion that Christ for Christians can be described as the Wisdom of God are particularly relevant. Paul writes in 1 Cor 1:24 that "Christ [is] the Wisdom of God" (*Christon … Theou sophian*). In other words, everything that the protagonist in the New Testament means to Christians cannot be captured with only androcentric images. The Wisdom motif

[26] *Mishnah Avot* 3.5 states that the one who accepts the yoke of the *Torah* (*'ol Torah*) is excused from societal duties (*'ol malkhut*; lit. "the yoke of the Kingdom") and mundane care (*'ol derekh eretz*), For the expression "the yoke of the Kingdom," see also *Mishnah Berakhot* 2.2.

[27] For additional comments on Matt 11:28–30, see, e.g., Jesper Svartvik, *The Jewish Foundations of the New Testament: Addressing the Roots of Antisemitism* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2025), 32–36.

has been able to open new doors for many Christians, communicating the old message in new ways. This takes us to the seventh and last of the Christological titles that this article surveys.

Word of God

One of the most important theological contributions of the Fourth Gospel is found in John 1:14: "and the Word [*ho logos*] became flesh and lived among us." The *logos* Christology conveys that Jesus is the articulation of divine will and thought. Interestingly, the seventh Christological title is remarkably *functional*: the emphasis is on what the Word accomplishes, as in Gen 1:3–2:3, where the Word of God brings forth creation. (One is reminded of the fact that the Tetragrammaton is a form of the verb "to be" (*h-y-h*); possibly—perhaps even plausibly—the causative form, which emphasizes *accomplishment* and *realization*.)

The protagonist in the New Testament not only faithfully taught the Word of God; his followers would eventually also see him as the embodiment of the very same Word of God. This is indeed profoundly different from the widespread enterprise of contrasting, in an antinomian fashion, on the one hand, his proclamation and, on the other hand, the *Torah*! An example of a contrast that completely ignores the historical background of *logos* Christology is the paraphrasing *The Living Bible*, where John 1:17 is translated thus: "For Moses gave us only the Law with its rigid demands and merciless justice, while Jesus Christ brought us loving forgiveness as well." This paraphrase of John 1:17 conveys a false image of Jewish *Torah* piety, and, hence, also a false presentation of Christian faith, since Second Temple Judaism was the spiritual tradition that nurtured Jesus of Nazareth. Regrettably, such a contrasting theology is found not only in the theological contexts that have given rise to *The Living Bible*.

Christians seeking a fuller understanding—i.e., a fuller *Christian* understanding—of the Jewish tradition need to reflect on the role of the *Torah* in their theology. And *one* way to do this is to relate the *Torah* to what is most important in their own theology: i.e., Jesus of Nazareth. According to this understanding, both the Torah scroll and the itinerant sage are vehicles of revelation (dare we even call both of them *embodiments*?), of the divine Word, of the *logos*, which is like black fire written on white fire.[28]

What are the implications for Christians today that Jesus of Nazareth is described as "the Word"? Logos Christology is exceptionally important for Christian theology. This means that the bifocal revelation (*Torah* for Jews and Jesus Christ for Christians, respectively) that has been described above could appeal to many Christians who are looking for new ways of talking about and relating to the Jewish tradition.

The seventh and final Christological title is very much, so to speak, a *functional* Christology because it emphasizes how the Word works and what the Word accomplishes. For the uninitiated, it can take a lot of time and effort to begin to

[28] See, e.g., *Talmud Yerushalmi Shelamim* 6.1, 49d.

understand what some of the other Christological titles originally meant, what they have come to mean, and what they can mean today. But with *logos* Christology, it is somewhat different. Even without profound knowledge of philosophy in antiquity, *logos* Christology is intriguing, inviting us to ponder its implications. Hence, what role can a *logos* Christology play in the Jewish-Christian dialogue? That question brings to mind the following words of Didier Pollefeyt:

> Jews have received from God the unique possibility to encounter the Logos through the Torah. This possibility is not given (in the same way) to the Christians. Christians have received the unique possibility to encounter the Logos through Christ, incarnating the Logos in a unique and irrevocable way. This experience is difficult to understand and experience (in the same way) from the Jewish perspective. It is God Himself who will bring together the final eschatological interpretations of Jews and Christians. From this hope, it is impossible that what has started as a deep and intimate bond in God will not be reconciled by God when all interpretations and all things come together. In the meantime, what remains for Christians is to recognize and express the lasting, indestructible dignity of Judaism.[29]

The Implications for Contemporary Jewish-Christians Relations

This article has discussed seven Christological titles: Rabbi, Christ / Messiah, Son of God, Son of Man, Lord, Wisdom, and Word of God. All of them have proven to be both ambiguous and multifaceted. Christians' fascination with the protagonist in the New Testament, their love for him, and their reverence for his Mystery have always been expressed in various ways. This can be seen already in the New Testament, and the study of the seven Christological titles clarifies this. In short, there has never been a single, unified Christology with an overarching Christological title. Given that there is a veritable plethora of Christologies, are some of them likely to be particularly helpful in the contemporary Jewish-Christian dialogue? I would like to suggest that three of the seven key terms may be of particular relevance in this ongoing conversation.

(i) The first title—*Rabbi*—places Jesus of Nazareth in the context in which he was born, lived, and died: Second Temple Judaism in the Land two thousand years ago. He was a gifted teacher who taught the message of the Jewish Scriptures: he quoted it, he discussed it, he applied it, and he died with the words of the Scriptures

[29] Didier Pollefeyt, "Unrevoked Covenant – Revoked Consensus – Indestructible Love? The Reception of *Nostra Aetate* 4 in Jewish-Catholic Relations," in Dries Bosschaert & Johan Leemans (red.), *Res Opportunae Nostrae Aetatis: Studies on the Second Vatican Council Offered to Mathijs Lamberigts* (Leuven: Peeters, 2020), 498. In an e-mail sent on April 18, 2024, Pollefeyt comments the verb *reconciled*: "It is not so much about 'reconciling' in the theological sense of the word, but about 'reconciling' in the secular sense of the word. […] Now what I mean by 'reconciled by God' is the assumption, the belief, the hope that God will eventually (eschatologically) resolve this paradox (in that sense 'reconcile' two viewpoints) where we intellectually fail (fully) to do so today. […] It reminds me of Paul's statement: 1 Cor. 13:12: 'For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.'"

on his lips. The Jewishness of the historical Jesus cannot be questioned—and describing him as rabbi, as in the gospels, helps us remember this profound theological stance.

(ii) A second Christological title of importance could be *Son of Man*. The survey of the interpretative history of the term has revealed a fascinating oscillation between the divine and the human realms: the term was originally a synonym for a human being. However, during the period between the Book of Daniel and the emergence of the Synoptic Gospels, the word came to be used of a heavenly being, and in Christian dogmatics the term has been associated, once again, with the human dimension of Christology. The term thus vibrates with different meanings, which can serve as a starting point in discussions about how Christian faith can be expressed today.

(iii) A third concept that is undoubtedly relevant for Christological thinkers involved in interreligious dialogue is *Word of God*, communicating immanently what the Transcendent wishes to convey: a message of divine longing and love. A *logos* Christology also draws attention to the similarities between the meaning of the *Torah* for Jews and the meaning of Christ for Christians.

Another conclusion is that there are two neglected Christologies that deserve more attention. They seem to point in different directions: at present they *diverge*, but perhaps they will *converge* at the end of the road?

(i) A first Christology that deserves to be highlighted in this context is Irving Greenberg's suggestion that, from a Jewish perspective, Jesus need not be seen as a *false* Messiah figure, even if the Kingdom of God did not come as many of the Christ-believers had believed—even if his work is unfinished. As the work of the matriarchs and patriarchs, Moses, Aaron, Miriam, and the prophets was not in vain—so the work of Jesus of Nazareth, Greenberg argues, was not in vain. Even though Moses did not reach the Land, he is and remains the most important figure in Judaism.[30] Although never mentioned in the *Haggadah shel Pesach* (the ritual for the Passover meal), Moses is the unquestionable trailblazer of his people on their way from slavery to freedom. His grandeur, however, does not consist in him reaching his goal, but being "very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth" (Num 12:3).

(ii) The second neglected Christology takes its starting point in the very oldest New Testament writings, namely the Pauline letters. Paul's main task was the gentile mission, based on his firm conviction that God through Jesus of Nazareth had called Paul to proclaim that non-Jews now were entreated to turn to the God of Israel in prayer and worship. Paul's time perspective was short: he was convinced that the end of time was near, and he wanted to proclaim the good news (Greek: *to euangelion*) to as many non-Jews as possible. He was convinced that God had now, at the end of times, graciously prepared a way for non-Jews to walk together with the people of Israel.

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[30] Greenberg, "Judaism and Christianity," 21: "A more accurate description from a Jewish perspective would be that Jesus was not a 'false' but a 'failed' Messiah. He has not finished the job, but his work is not in vain."

However, the future did not turn out as he imagined: the end was not as close as he thought. But in another respect, he was—unfortunately, we must add—correct. In Rom 11:18–20 he admonished the gentile Christ-believers not to exalt themselves by looking down on the Jewish people. He had evidently seen signs of this and therefore warned of this ominous tendency. As we know, in time this became much more than a tendency—it developed into an inclination and, indeed, a predisposition: throughout the ages, Christians have more often than not belittled Jewish faith, and defamed, mistreated, and persecuted Jews. Paul saw and warned against this way of thinking and acting, by arguing in favor of a theology of respect for the Jewish people. He shares this view with the Lukan figure of Simeon, whose message is that there is a bifocal perspective (Luke 2:32): on the one hand, "a light for revelation to the Gentiles," and, on the other hand, glory to the people of Israel. In other words, *what had been revealed for gentile Christ-believers was not at the expense of the revelation that had already been given to the people of Israel*. The tentmaker Paul dedicated his life to proclaiming that the God of Israel had welcomed gentiles into the covenantal tabernacle. In short, tentmaking was his occupation, his *technê*, both practically and theologically.

When Christians think of themselves and speak of themselves as "the new Israel" or "the true Israel" (Latin: *verus Israel*) in contrast to "the old Israel" (*vetus Israel*), their theology will most probably also be "against Israel" (*versus Israel*). We need to realize that there is no Christian supersessionist theology that is not anti-Jewish. Any Christian theology that takes the concept of "Israel" from the people of Israel and applies it to the Church necessarily becomes anti-Jewish. Christians should abstain from using "the true Israel," "the new Israel," and similar concepts about themselves. Instead, they should concentrate on what Christians actually are: *Christ-believers who worship the God of Israel*. That statement takes us back to the Pauline vision and mission: the main point of the very oldest texts in the New Testament is that non-Jews are invited to turn to the God of Israel in individual prayer and communal worship, in Paul's own words (Rom 15:15f.):

> … the grace [has been] given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

This is the reason for Paul calling himself "the apostle to the Gentiles" (Rom 11:13 and Gal 2:8)—and it is because of this belief that many hundreds of billions of people throughout history have worshiped the God of Israel, even though they are not Jews. The Pauline vision was particularly successful in this regard.

Hence, two neglected Christologies were presented above: Greenberg's reflections on Jesus's unfinished messianic mission, and the Pauline vision that the gentiles should, as he writes in Romans 15:9, "glorify God for his mercy." They *diverge* because Greenberg focuses on the fact that the dream of a better world is still only a dream, but they *converge* because the Pauline vision has, at least in part, been fulfilled. The fact that the Psalms are recited and sung all over the world, that magnificent cathedrals have been built, with church windows containing biblical

quotations from the Jewish Scriptures, and that these Scriptures are read in these churches—all of this is an outgrowth of the Pauline vision that also non-Jews are invited to turn to the God of Israel. In this respect, the two Christologies can be said to converge: both Greenberg in Toronto and Paul of Tarsus focus on what has taken place, on what God has already done in this world. If the New Testament texts are read in this way, their message emerges more clearly, namely, both revelation with light to the nations of the world, and glory to the people of Israel.

The insights from this survey of seven Christological titles trigger ideas that could be summarized in the following seven points: (i) *Jesus of Nazareth was a human among humans*. No statements, however sophisticated and high Christological, can contradict this indisputable fact. In order to avoid the docetic bias, a sound Christology must constantly emphasize the humanity of Jesus. He may be more than human for Christians, but he must never be presented as less than human. This means that his Jewishness and his Jewish context must not be denied, silenced, or distorted.

(ii) For Christians, *he is much more than the Messiah*. While it is true that the title *Christ / Messiah* has given rise to the entire research area we know as "Christology," we have, nevertheless, seen that *Christian Christology is far more than Jewish Messianism*.

Jesus of Nazareth is for numerous Christians an icon, a window into the divine world. The most important thing for many Christians is that he is divine—and thus he is also *more than the Messiah*. Indeed, he is even, in this sense, *something else than the Messiah*, since the belief that he is divine is quite different from the confession that Jesus is the Christ—these are two quite different Christologies, and we need to acknowledge that his divinity has been far more central to Christians throughout history than the messianic suppositions of the first generations. Indubitably, he matters to Christians, but not primarily because of a messiahship.

(iii) *The importance of nurturing and revering the Mystery*. In the New Testament we do not find a uniform and unambiguous Christology that all Christians always have acknowledged and that all Jews always have rejected. And it is even more important to realize that Christology for Christians is about Someone who is a Mystery, ultimately incomprehensible and beyond all human concepts and ideas. Comprehensible Christology is flawed Christology. A good piece of advice is never to introduce the Mystery too early and always to make sure that there is something left of the Mystery at the end. This is not least true in Christological reflection and meditation.

(iv) *Christology evolved within the framework of Jewish monotheism*. Even today, it is an axiom for an overwhelming majority of the world's Christians that their faith is monotheistic, even though it differs from, for example, Jewish and Muslim monotheism. The words of the symbola—*credo in unum Deum …* ("I believe in one God …") —are not hollow but reverberating with meaning.

Now, there are different ways of approaching the challenge to combine Christology and monotheism. One option is to draw from the Jewish sources from the beginning of our era that describe divine Wisdom and the divine Word as independent subjects. What united the two Christological titles Wisdom and the Word

was that both are *personified* in the texts: although they are the Wisdom of God and the Word of God, they appear almost as independent beings. For some, this is a series of stepping-stones to a high Christology.

A second possibility is to indicate the limitations of some inherent Christian statements. An example of this is a section in the Roman-Catholic document *Christianity and the World Religions* (*Christianismus et Religiones*), written by the International Theological Commission, and presented in 1996 to Joseph Ratzinger, then Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, who gave his approval for its publication.

> He [Jesus of Nazareth] is *totus Deus* [wholly God] because he is the active love of God on this earth, but he is not *totum Dei* [the whole of God] since he does not exhaust in himself the love of God. We could also say: *Totum Verbum, sed non totum Verbi* [wholly the Word, but not the whole Word]. The Logos [the Word], being greater than Jesus, can be incarnate also in the founders of other religions.[31]

A third way to proceed is to emphasize that Christology is not an end in itself: it always points beyond itself, as van Buren writes: "*every correct Christological statement, however 'high,' will make clear that it gives the glory to God the Father.*"[32] Similarly, Christopher M. Tuckett notes that although Jesus does ask his disciples questions about his identity ("Who do people say that I am?" and "Who do you [disciples] say that I am?"), these two questions do not seem to be decisive for him. In his teaching—especially as presented in the Synoptic Gospels—the crucial topics for him were God, the Kingdom of God, and how people should relate to each other. Here Tuckett uses the word theology in its literal and strictest sense: "the doctrine of God."

> Any focus on Christology at the expense of the "theo"-logy (strictly speaking) is perhaps a slightly dangerous one. […] Christology must at the end of the day be subservient to theology.[33]

(v) *In the monotheistic stream, Christology flows into the Sea of Trinitarian theology*. This survey of seven Christological titles has shown that early Christian Christologies were not monolithic but multifaceted. Christ-believers made room for this doctrinal diversity by developing the Trinitarian discourse. By talking about God as Father, Son, and Spirit, Christ-believers sought to embrace the multivarious ways to express their faith.

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[31] International Theological Commission, *Christianismus et Religiones* 1.5 (21). https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_1997_cristianesimo-religioni_en.html (accessed September 22, 2025).

[32] van Buren, *A Theology of the Jewish-Christian Reality*, 3.xviii (italics as in the original). See also p. 106: "it will therefore be a Christocentrism that clearly gives the glory to God the Father."

[33] Christopher M. Tuckett, *Christology and the New Testament: Jesus and His Earliest Followers* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 232 and 233.

As early as in the New Testament we see an emerging way of thinking, speaking, and writing about God that is based on the experience of the first Christ-believers that God acted in Jesus of Nazareth in a special way. In these texts we find evidence that the first generations of Christ-believers spoke of God in a "proto-Trinitarian" way, although it would take several centuries before this language was systematized and articulated a full-fledged Trinitarian theology. For many Christians, the Trinity of God is a veritable Mystery that cannot be solved—because God is inaccessible to human thoughts, theories, and theologies. God is by definition beyond all human concepts and theological interpretations. Trinitarianism is not an equation to be solved, but a life to be lived. Robert W. Jenson writes that Trinitarian theology is Christians' effort to identify the God who has called them: "… we need to know who [God] … is, to know how our lives hang together. Trinitarian discourse is Christianity's answer to this need."[34]

(vi) *When at the crossroads, do Christians choose a triumphalist or a servant Christology?* The very oldest evidence for the confession "Jesus Christ is Lord" is most probably the hymn that Paul quotes in Phil 2:6–11. It is indeed thought-provoking that by quoting this hymn Paul wants to counteract "selfish ambition or conceit" among the Christ-believers (see v. 3). Christians ought to ask themselves soul-searchingly whether one can detect such a triumphalism in Christian theology, especially when Christology is discussed. Instead of being a *bat* to use in disputes, Christology could be likened to *boomerang*, which—if we handle it correctly—returns to Christians who eagerly and humbly seek answers to the age-old question of the identity of Jesus of Nazareth.

Indeed, are not theological triumphalism and Christological arrogance *the very opposite* of the incarnational motif as it is expressed in the hymn in Phil 2, which presents a *kenôsis* protagonist who empties himself? There is a humble incarnational theology that is filled with wonder, awe, and, with Abraham Joshua Heschel's term, "radical amazement" when reflecting on who God is and what God does: the God who is greater than all our thoughts and concepts—and, yet, who reveals Godself.[35] This Christology is often glimpsed in Christian psalms and hymns, as early as in the kenotic hymn quoted by Paul.

There are thus Christologies that are filled with wonder before both the God of creation and the divine mystery of the incarnation. Without such radical amazement, the incarnation is often distorted into apologetical clichés.

(vii) Finally, we need to ponder *the importance of apophatic Christology*.[36] One of the most important texts about how the God of Israel reveals Godself is 1 Kings 19:11f.: God was not in the great wind, nor in the strong earthquake, nor

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[34] Robert W. Jenson, *The Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 5.

[35] On radical amazement, see Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Noonday, 1951), 30, and *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Noonday, 1955), 45. Heschel is not discussing Christology, however, but *theo*-logy in its strictest sense, i.e., God.

[36] For apophatic Christology, see Didier Pollefeyt's article in this collection. For a survey of silence in Christian thought, see Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Silence: A Christian History* (London: Penguin, 2014).

in the consuming fire, but in "a sound of sheer silence": *qol demamah daqah*. The word *demamah* occurs only thrice in the Hebrew Bible. In Job 4:16 it refers to the silence that is broken when someone speaks: *demamah va-qol eshma'* ("[first there was] silence and [then] I heard a voice"). Secondly, Ps 107:29 described how God calms the storm at sea: *yaqem se'arah li-demamah* ("he made the storm a silence"). The third and final instance is 1 Kings 19:12. In all three cases *demamah* is the opposite of noise and various strong forces in the world: e.g., the storm, the earthquake, and the fire. Against these bombastic forces the still sound of silence is thus set—a paradoxical image of importance also in Christological reflection. What can Christians do to recuperate their sensitivity when reflecting Christologically? What theological sensorium needs to be developed to make this possible? These are pivotal questions that may help Christians formulate a humbler Christology, in the words of a Swedish Christmas hymn, well worth singing and contemplating throughout the entire year:

> So soundlessly and so unnoticed
> [Swedish: *så stilla och så oförmärkt*]
> the gift of God is given unto us,
> and Heaven came down to Earth,
> when no one expected it.
> We cannot hear the steps.
> Yet he is approaching us,
> and suddenly, as a stranger,
> he is standing in our midst.[37]

[37] *Den svenska psalmboken* 115:2. The hymn is a paraphrase by Anders Frostenson (1976) of "O Little Town of Bethlehem" by Phillips Brooks (1868), cf. v. 3: "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is giv'n! So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heav'n. No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in."