

Understanding Christology: Synoptic Gospels

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Introduction

Confusion may occur in considering Jesus' function in the Gospels without comprehending the different terminology used for Him. Without a clear understanding of such terms that are applied to Jesus, one will be left with a fragmentary perspective of the person of Jesus, which will result in misinterpreting God's Word and miss His will for believers. The Gospels are the biographies¹ that develop the life of Jesus Christ.² They are the seed-bed from which Jesus' twelve apostles and other followers derived most of their theology and information about Him.³ Within the study of Christology found in gospel genre, understanding the following five terms gives a complete picture of Jesus: Christ, Lord, Servant of Yahweh, the Son of Man, and the Son of God.⁴

Like a kaleidoscope that contains different pieces of colored material—as glass—and two mirrors at one end that shows one beautiful pattern with each turn, understanding the different terms Christ, Lord, Servant of Yahweh,

¹ Gospels referred to as “genre” was debated at one point. However, today scholars acknowledge and classify this as a distinct type of literary genre that parallels Greco-Roman biographies, which present the ethos of a person by recounting the nature and manner of their lifestyle. It seems normal that the NT writers would be influenced by and employ this common literary convention of their day. In that regards the four Gospels appear to have this in common with the ancient world. Yet, the Gospel genre seems to go beyond the Greco-Roman biographies to highlight the kerygmatic record of Jesus' life as the Messiah with a heavy theological motif written for early Christians. In that regards this genre is unique and different than those of the Greco-Roman period (see L. W. Hurtado, “Gospel (Genre),” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992], 276-82).

² The term Gospels here apply to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. However, this article will investigate solely the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) since John's Gospel contains 92% of material not found in the Synoptics (James A. Borland, *A General Introduction to the New Testament*, revised 1995 ed. [Lynchburg, VA: University Book House, 1986], 198). As such, John's Gospel should be investigated separately; but there will be times when highlighting John's use of terminology regarding Jesus will need to be explained, since John's information forms part in determining either by complement or contrast how the Synoptics may have used terminology regarding Jesus. Furthermore, the Synoptics, as John, all form part of the complete picture by understanding how each of the terms for Jesus was applied.

³ From looking at the epistles, one can obviously see new revelatory information that Jesus might not have addressed (e.g., 1 Cor 7:12; Revelation) in His earthly ministry. However, most of the epistolary theology was derived from what Jesus taught His disciples while with Him, which was later brought to memory by the Holy Spirit (John 14:26). Also one must distinguish between the source of and result of the theology derived from the Gospels. Both can be seen.

⁴ One should not ignore Christ's deeds and teaching that also give part of the picture in the Gospels of who He is.

the Son of Man, and the Son of God, allows one to see, as one studies these terms, the many facets that comprise the person and work of Jesus Christ. As a result, it can help the reader from the danger of employing anachronistic interpretations when studying Christology in the Gospels.

The Term “Christ”

Understanding the term “Christ” is critical to understanding the biblical picture of Jesus. From the first time Jesus’ followers were called Christians in Antioch (Acts 11:26), His followers have never been called by another name, which was derived from the very term of “Christ.”⁵ To grasp the significance of this concept theologically, one must define the term “Christ,” and understand New Testament usage of the term outside and within the Gospels.

The Origin, Meaning and Background of the Term “Christ”

To define the term “Christ,” the origin, meaning and background information of the term are necessary. The origin of the English translation of the term “Christ” comes from the Greek word *χριστός*. The Greek word *χριστός* in the first century is itself a translation from the Hebrew word *מָשִׁיחַ*. The Hebrew word *מָשִׁיחַ* means “anointed.”⁶

This anointing was usually done with oil poured over the head of the person being anointed.⁷ The meaning and background of the term *מָשִׁיחַ*, to anoint, originates in the Old Testament. It carried a special significance of one that is set apart by God for a particular office (prophet, priest or king)⁸ and/or function.⁹

⁵ We should note, however, that the term “Christians” (i.e., messianics) was used initially in a derogatory way. This is perhaps similar to calling someone a “Jesus Freak” today. However, it appears that later the term dropped its pejorative connotation and came to refer to the group that followed Jesus’ teachings (see Acts 26:28), which was later embraced as an honorable mark of belonging to Him (see 1 Pet 4:16).

⁶ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (BDB), (Oxford: Oxford Press, 1907; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1979), s.v. “*מָשִׁיחַ*,” 603. The LXX translated *χριστός* by the Hebrew term *מָשִׁיחַ* 45 times.

⁷ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. by Donald A. Hagner, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974; reprint, 2001), 134.

⁸ Scriptures that show that anointing with oil is used to separate prophet, priest, or king for a special office or function are Ex 28:41; Lev 4:3; 6:22; 1 Sam 9:15–16; 16:3, 12–13; 1 Kgs 19:16.

⁹ L. W. Hurtado, “Christ,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press,

Although the term “the Messiah” never appears in the Old Testament, the term “Messiah” does occur with a qualifying genitive or a suffix attached to it, like “the messiah of Jehovah” and “my messiah.”¹⁰ Psalms 2:2 and Daniel 9:26 (using the term מָשִׁיחַ) points to an eschatological king. If the New Testament is allowed to play a commentary role here, Peter in Acts 2:22-36 and 4:25-26 (in context) interprets Psalm 2:1-2 as referring to Jesus.¹¹ This is not to say that Psalm 2 did not have Davidic or any other of Israel’s kings in mind in its *sitz im leben*. It did, but from looking at the New Testament it is obvious that it also has Jesus Christ as the referent in Psalms 2 (cf. Acts 13:33; Heb 2:5). In fact, Leupold suggests, there are three ways of possibly interpreting Psalm 2, “directly Messianic,” “typical Messianic,” or “a mixture of both, beginning with some theocratic king and gradually expanding in thought until it has transcended the narrow bounds of the earthly type.” He correctly opts for the latter view and concludes:

Throughout the psalm this earthly king would then serve as a type of Christ, not accidentally but by virtue of divine appointment. He would have experienced something on a lower level which is closely analogous to what the Messiah encounters on the higher level. He is not an accidental type but a divinely ordained type. He in his own person portrays the truth concerning the Messiah and knows that he does, and the writer presents him with this very thought in mind. This does not exclude the possibility that the author himself is this king.¹²

Also Matthew 22:7, Luke 19:43 and 1 Peter 2:21 (= Isa 53:8) are passages that seem to convey eschatological Messianic Jewish imageries found in Daniel 9:26.¹³

1992), 106, says that “*crastos*” is “originally an adjective meaning ‘anointed (with ointment or oil)’” that derived its meaning “from the verb *chriō*” that meant to “anoint or smear with oil or ointment.” In Greek culture the term “Christ” had no special meaning until the Jewish and Christian concept came to the forefront. Later the term “Christ” seems to have evolved and became a proper name (see Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 133).

¹⁰ Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 134.

¹¹ See Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Books Publisher, 1983), 66-67.

¹² H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969), 42-43.

¹³ Although in Dan 9:26 the prince that comes to destroy the city and sanctuary following the cutting off (i.e., the death) of the Messiah, appears to refer to the future antichrist (see 2 Thess 2:3-12) and does not seem to be the referent in the mind of Jesus in Matt 22:7 and Luke 19:43; rather in those contexts he seems to be saying this is a picture of what it will be like when he comes.

New Testament Usage of the Term “Christ” Outside the Gospels

Interestingly, the usage of the term “Christ” appears more outside the Gospels. Out of the 531 occurrences of the term *χριστός* in the New Testament, 383 of them appear in the Pauline letters.¹⁴ The rest of the other New Testament writers’ uses of *χριστός* are as follows: 1 Peter (22 times); 1 John (8 times); Jude (6 times); Hebrews (12 times); Revelation (7 times). L. W. Hurtado’s three assessments about the distribution and frequent use of the term *χριστός* outside of the Gospels establish a good case for questioning the common Jewish understanding of Messiah.¹⁵

The Gospel and extra-biblical evidence suggest that Judaism’s view of Messiah was one of a political conquering king who would come to overthrow their enemies.¹⁶ This view was not necessarily wrong (cf. Pss 2:9; 110:1–7; Zech 12, 14), but it was an incomplete picture of the Messiah, who first had to win the spiritual battle (Isa 52:13–53:12) before waging the political war. In the Hebrew Scriptures, Messiah would also have a priestly function (Jer 33:14–18; Ezek 46:1–8; Zech 4:1–14; 6:13), as the DSS also understood.¹⁷ Messiah’s mission was much broader than perhaps many understood in trying to interpret Jewish theology. Therein lies the reason for the broader and complementary picture that the Gospels present of the Messiah’s battle with demons, disease, and the dominion of sin to restore humanity.

The Term “Christ” as Used in the Synoptic Gospels

As mentioned above, the term *χριστός* does not appear as often in the Gospels as in the other genres: Matthew has 16 occurrences; Mark has 7; and

¹⁴ Hurtado, “Christ,” in *DJG*, 107.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* Hurtado says that the frequency of the term seems to indicate the differences of importance each writer gave the term. Yet, “the differing subject matter” that each author addressed may also account for the frequency of the term used by one NT author more than another. Second, Paul’s heavy use of the term *χριστός* —being the earliest writings (except for the epistle of James)—may indicate how important the term became after the resurrection and a very important part of the Christian church. Finally, since a small number of occurrences of the term *χριστός* are found in the Gospels, it may cause one to question the meaning and role of how the term was understood in these writings.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 107, 116; Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 135–39. See also J. Neusner, W. S. Green and E. Frerichs, *Judaism and Their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era*, (Cambridge: University Press, 1987).

¹⁷ For example, see CD 12:12–13:2; 14:19; 1QSa 2:12–22; 4Q249f fl 3:1–4; 4Q-249gf3 7:12–15.

Luke has 12.¹⁸ In these Gospel occurrences, the picture of Messiah as a conquering political king does not get brought to the forefront. Instead, the picture of Messiah is one—in the Synoptics as in John—of passion. While all four Gospels connect Jesus with the Old Testament prophecy of the coming Messiah, Matthew—due to his genealogy and Jewish nuances—connects Messiah more with His royal office.¹⁹ Mark seems to insist that the term *χριστός* derives its complete meaning as a title for Jesus as one who undergoes suffering and as one who is the Son of God (see 10:45 and the connections in Mark 8:29–31; 9:12 and 15:39). Luke, like Matthew, links Jesus as the Messiah of the Old Testament, but gives a redefinition to the term *χριστός* that is based on Jesus’ story, producing an effect founded on past expectation and current revelation which makes for a distinctively Christian notion of “the Christ.”²⁰

The Term “Lord”

The term *κύριος* at the inception of the church became a Christian confession. The word may mean “sir” (Matt 13:27), “master” (of a free steward [Luke 16:3] or of a slave [Matt 24:45]), “owner” (Mark 12:9), “authority/owner” (Luke 10:2), and “God” (Luke 2:9). Context always determines meaning in any given instance.

¹⁸ Hurtado, “Christ,” in *DJG*, 113, discusses Acts (which the term *χριστός* appears 25 times) while considering Luke’s section. He correctly reasons that Acts is part of a two-volume work. However, since Acts—in part—is a narrative of the church’s inception, Acts should not be discussed together while discussing Luke’s use of the term *χριστός*, because this might create anachronistic tendencies instead of creating a straight-diachronic reading of the text. The best method would be to examine all uses together and carefully distinguish the context of each use. In John the term “Christ” occurs 19 times.

¹⁹ “Son of David” in Matt 1:1 resonates regal imagery from 2 Sam 7:12-16 and Ps 2 of Messiah, which was also commonly used as a term for Solomon when alluding to his kinship (1 Chr 29:22; 2 Chr 1:1; 2 Chr 13:6; 2 Chr 30:26; 35:3; Prov 1:1; Eccl 1:1). Hence, when used in Matthew ten times (Matt 1:1, 20; 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30, 31; 21:9, 15; 22:42), as appose to Mark’s three uses (10:47, 48; 12:35) and Luke’s four uses (Luke 3:31; 18:38; 18:39; 20:41), Messiah’s royal prerogatives and office is in view.

²⁰ Hurtado, “Christ,” in *DJG*, 114. Although outside of the scope presented in this article, in John’s Gospel (as his theme 20:30-31 connected contextually with the concluding verse of the body of the Gospel 20:28 shows), the revelation of Messiah, as the Son of God, at the end once He rises from the dead is viewed as being equal in essence with God, the Father. Hence, John after this fact addresses the believers in the prologue that Jesus is God, which he also shows to carry Godlike prerogatives and function (see 1:1-3, 10, 18; cf. 14:7-9).

Jewish Background of the Term “Lord”

The term “Lord” (κύριος) is the most used word by Jews to address God. In the LXX, the term κύριος appears over 9,000 times, and 6,156 times it is used in place of God’s personal name Yahweh.²¹ This was a circumlocution the LXX employed by translating the word יהוה as source and substitution word for יהוה by the Greek κύριος.²² This was meant to avoid using the Tetragrammaton YHWH, which was sacred to the Jew.²³ Pagan background in Greek culture employs κύριος in the Caesar cult and in the mystery cults, which some believe it may have formed part of the background in Pauline usage.²⁴ However, disdain in employing pagan terminology and usage in Jewish and Christian circles was so prominent that one can safely conclude that this background is not what influenced Paul or any other NT writer’s terminology and use.²⁵ On the other hand, the earliest Christians seem to have been familiar enough with Aramaic terms that came from traditional “Aramaic-speaking Christian circles,” since the term “Lord” was employed to describe Jesus. For example, in 1 Cor 16:22 Paul restates an early Christian confession: “Let anyone who has no love for the Lord be accursed. Our Lord, come!” The well known Greek Phrase ΜΑΡΑΝΑΘΑ (from the uncials without spacing between letters) transliterate the Aramaic term ܡܪܝܢܐ ܡܪܝܢܐ. Hence calling Jesus “Lord” can be traced back to early Christian circles and tradition.²⁶ For Paul κύριος can take on transcendent, and even a divine aspect, especially when quoting the OT when Jesus is the referent of the term.

²¹ B. Witherington III, “Lord,” in *DJG*, 485.

²² For example, see where יהוה is translated from the Hebrew term יהוה (Gen 18:3; Exod 4:10, 13) and from the term יהוה (Gen 2:8; 12:8; 13:4; Exod 3:4; 9:6; Lev 26:2). In Judg 13:8; 16:28; 2 Sam 7:18-29, for example, both Hebrew appear together and are translated κύριος by the LXX.

²³ Accordance 7.4.1 helps the researcher see this evidence quickly in an electronic search using Emmanuel Tov, *The Parallel Aligned Text of the Greek and Hebrew Bible*, indicates 95% of occurrences where the LXX employs the term κύριος for the word יהוה. The term Tetragrammaton stands for the quadrilateral name of God that was unpronounceable for the Hebrews. When coming upon it in the Hebrew Scriptures, they would substitute it when reading out loud with יהוה (LORD).

²⁴ L. W. Hurtado, “Lord,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 561.

²⁵ Furthermore, Witherington III, “Lord,” in *DJG*, 489, also notes that such usage does not appear in the Gospels. That is, he believes we do not find any use of κύριος in the Gospels for pagan gods or emperors.

²⁶ David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Robert W. Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 775.

Thus, after the cross it appears that in Christian circles the term “Lord” was used with divine connotations.²⁷

The Use of the Term “Lord” in the Gospels

To get a clearer picture of the person of Jesus understanding what the Synoptics meant when they applied the term κύριος is vital. Out of the 717 times the term κύριος occurs in the New Testament, it occurs eighty times in Matthew, eighteen times in Mark, and in 104 times in Luke.²⁸

It is clear that in the Synoptics (including John) κύριος is used most of the time by employing various shades of peculiarities and meanings. It is these peculiarities and distinctions that one needs to notice below.

In Matthew’s Gospel, the term κύριος is not a primary title for Jesus, but it is used as an auxiliary title that is usually qualified by another term when a Christological concept is contextually in view.²⁹ On the one hand, when enemies or strangers in Matthew’s account approach Jesus, they refer to Him as “teacher” or “rabbi” and never as κύριος. Matthew 7:21-22 seems to point to an exception that Jesus’ enemies use the term κύριος; but even here these are people who only think they belong to Him. They address Jesus as such because they think they are doing His will unlike people who clearly know they are His enemies and know they are not.³⁰ This is also a passage that seems to occur in some future time after His resurrection and ascension. Thus, even in Matt 7:21-22 where the term “Lord” appears, in reality it occurs on the lips of those who do not think that they are Jesus’ and that they are not his enemies; hence, this does not disturb Matthew’s unique use of the term. On the other hand, Jesus’ disciples and people seeking to be healed address Him by the vocative use of κύριε. It could be reasonably argued that Matthew was fully aware of the LXX’s circumlocution of κύριος for Yahweh, and the meaning the term carried in Jewish circles—since Matthew is writing to a Jewish audience. Therefore, Matthew avoided—as the actual events revealed—putting this term in the lips of Jesus’ hostile audience.³¹

It appears that in Mark κύριος is never used to refer to Jesus as God, although it is used in some passages to refer to God, as YHWH of the Hebrew Scriptures.³² It seems since Mark’s theme (10:45) is to convey Jesus’ mission

²⁷ See e.g., Rom 10:13, and even Stephen’s prayer in Acts 7:59-60.

²⁸ See John where it is used fifty-two times.

²⁹ Witherington III, “Lord,” in *DJG*, 490.

³⁰ The will of the Father appears to refer to (at least primarily) to becoming a believer by faith in Christ, as shown by Matthean passages where rejecting instead of accepting Jesus as the Messiah as Savior appears to indicate. See for example, 7:13-22; 12:23-50 (similar words appear here as in 7:13-22); 18:12-14; 21:28-32; cf. John 6:40.

³¹ See footnotes 19 and 22.

³² In the following verses κύριος may appear as term of deity referring to Jesus, but one should not interpret them as such. In Mark 2:28, Jesus speaks of himself in an

of service. Yet interestingly, the term “Lord” is usually a term of authority that one renders service to (13:35; cf. Matt 24:45), which also conveys the opposite in Mark, as those who come to serve like Jesus and those who believe and follow Him, which are those of authority as Mark 10:35-45 suggests but are equally those responsible to serve.

In Luke’s Gospel, one may suggest that the term κύριος is used in an absolute and transcendent normal sense in the narratives where Jesus speaks. This, however, is anachronistic, since Jesus’ audience until after His resurrection would not have used the term in a transcendent sense.³³ How

usual way as “the Son of Man” as being “Lord of the Sabbath.” This simply may be understood as having authority to do good on the Sabbath, since “the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.” Hence, as the “Son of Man,” He, as David, had authority to do something good on the Sabbath that was contrary to the traditions of Jewish leaders (see Mark 2:24–3:6). In Mark 5:19, Jesus speaks of the Lord in the third person to refer to God, as the source of the miracle done through Him, as the former demon-possessed man claimed in 5:20. The other passage where Jesus is the referent in the OT addressed as Lord should not be viewed contextually in Ps 110:1 or in Mark 12:36-37 as referring to Messiah’s deity. It is highly unlikely that David thought that the second person mentioned by the term יהוה is equal to the first person named יהוה, who is clearly the monotheistic God of the Jews. Although the LXX and the NT translates both terms with κύριος, which is as a general reference for certain people of respect and authority as well as for deity, this should not cause one to view both usage of κύριος to have the sense and significance. Hence, what David (being a strict monotheist) clarifies in Ps 110:1 and Christ in Mark 12:36-37 is that Messiah has the authority that was given to Him by God to do all that He does, as Jesus finally answers here what the Jews asked Him at the outset of the context that began in 11:28, “By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave you this authority to do these things?” Thus, in 12:36-37, Jesus, by quoting David, says His authority comes from God. Although after His resurrection one discovers that He also possess the essence of God, this is not what this passage teaches. All other uses of κύριος appear not to be references to God (7:28; 11:3; 12:36-37; 13:35; 16:19-20), but others are (Mark 1:3; 11:9; 12:9, 11, 29, 30; 12:36-37; 13:20).

³³ See also the dialogue between Phillip and Jesus in John 14:7-9 and Thomas’ confession in 20:28. Even in John 8:58 and 10:30 one can culturally, contextually, and grammatically make an excellent case that Jesus is not claiming to be God but the Messiah, which in Jewish theology was not synonymous with deity; and presenting Jesus as the Messiah that gives eternal life is also in keeping primarily with Johannine theology in his Gospel, specially in this context that began the ἐγώ εἰμι statements followed by a predicate in 8:12, “I am the light of the world,” which was a common way to refer to Messiah simply as the one who would save and guide Jews and Gentiles (see Isa 9:2; 42:6, 16; 49:6; 50:10-11; 60:20; Matt 4:16; Luke 1:76-79; 2:32). Thus, all other ἐγώ εἰμι in point back to 8:12 as the Messiah, as even translators have noticed, supply in the English the pronoun *He* in 8:24, 28 (see e.g., the KJV, NKJV, NET, NASB, ASV, and RSV). In fact, the NET Bible’s footnote in 8:24 states this very thing. “‘Unless you believe that I am.’ In this context there is an implied predicate nominative (‘he’) following the ‘I am’ phrase. What Jesus’ hearers had to

could His disciples (that had more information than others) have known of His transcendence as God, since they did not even believe in His resurrection (or deity) until the end of His ministry (see e.g., Mark 16:10-14; Luke 24:10-12)? Furthermore, no Israelite would be amazed at God's power to control creation. Hence, the disciples' astonishment at Jesus' control of the wind and waves (Matt 8:18-27; Mark 4:35-41; Luke 8:22-25) also demonstrates how they had not come to realize the complete essence of Jesus during the majority of His earthly ministry but until hours before His death or certainly after His resurrection. Besides, miracles done by Jesus should not be used to prove Jesus' deity—as being significant in defining the term κύριος used in the Synoptics—since it is highly probable that He must have done miracles through the power of the Spirit and dependence on God (see John 5:19; although the son “gives life to whom He will” [v. 21]; yet, *how* that occurs seems to come about through prayer and God's spirit [cf. 11:39-43]). That is what makes Jesus the second Adam (complete and perfect man) who was totally dependent on God for all, and what makes Him the perfect example to follow for humanity, since humans

acknowledge is that he was who he claimed to be, i.e., the Messiah (cf. 20:31). This view is also reflected in English translations like NIV ('if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be'), NLT ('unless you believe that I am who I say I am'), and CEV ('if you don't have faith in me for who I am'). For a different view that takes this 'I am' and the one in 8:28 as nonpredicated (i.e., absolute), see R. E. Brown, *John* (AB), 1:533–38. Such a view refers sees the nonpredicated 'I am' as a reference to the divine Name revealed in Exod 3:14, and is reflected in English translations like NAB ('if you do not believe that I AM, you will die in your sins') and TEV ('you will die in your sins if you do not believe that 'I Am Who I Am').' What is inconsistent with the context is that most commentators do not follow this interpretation of ἐγώ εἰμι in 8:58. Here it should also be understood as Jesus claiming to exist as the Christ prior to Abraham (as the promise of Gen 3:15 suggests and many believed from then on). Since the Jews were questioning his Messianic prerogatives and aligning with Abraham, Jesus replies how they could not align themselves with Abraham because he believed in Him as the coming seed (v 56), even if Jesus was not yet fifty years old (v 57). Furthermore, the Tetragrammaton in Exod 3:14 is not just ἐγώ εἰμι but ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν in the Greek and יהוה יהוה יהוה in the Hebrew. That is, "I AM WHO I AM." This is not exactly the same thing Jesus says. Hence it makes more sense grammatically, contextually, and in keeping with John's theme to understanding Jesus as saying that He is the Messiah who existed and was giving eternal life prior to the existence of the Jews' great forefather Abraham. See Neusner, Green and Frerichs, *Judaism and Their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era*; James F. McGrath, *John's Apologetic Christology: Legitimation and Development in Johannine Christology*, Society For New Testament Studies, ed. Richard Bauckham, Monograph Series vol. 111 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 103-116, 117-30; *idem*, *The Only True God: Early Christian Monotheism In Its Jewish Context* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 61-70. McGrath makes a compelling case against reading many Synoptic (and Johannine) passages as Jesus claiming deity, but this writer does not agree with Him absolutely in denying Jesus' deity that are clearly and forcefully asserted in other passages (e.g. Mark 2:10; John 1:1-2, 11, 18; 14:7-9; 20:28; Titus 2:13; Heb 1:2-8; Rev 21:6; 22:13 should be compared to God in Rev 1:8 who is also addressed this way).

cannot turn off and on the power to control creation or do miracles, but only by dependence on God can the miraculous be tapped. Therefore, Luke is “careful not to place the term on Jesus’ own lips or on the lips of his interlocutors.”³⁴ Luke, as a God-inspired narrator, has the liberty—without corrupting the actual historical account by not making Jesus or His audience use the term “Lord”—to insert in the narrative information that would help His reader understand in an absolute sense who Jesus really is. Since Luke is a Gentile writing to a Gentile audience, he wants convey the grandeur of Jesus through the term κύριος, but in a careful way to allow a diachronic progression to later unfold more information about the person of Jesus.

Although this is outside of the scope of the Synoptics being discussed, it is highly relevant that Witherington notices three unique elements of the term κύριος as used in John’s Gospel.³⁵ First, Jesus does not refer to Himself as κύριος. Second, John seems to be careful in his use of the term κύριος by using it in his narrative framework and editorial comments. Finally, before John 20, whenever the disciples use κύριος, it is always used in the vocative, and it is never used clearly in any Christological context. John’s Christological concepts appear with the terms “Son of God” or “Messiah” (cf. 20:31, theme verse) rather than with the term “Lord.”

This term is used in many similar ways in the Gospels. Matthew does not apply the term κύριος primarily as a title for Jesus but appears as an auxiliary title that is usually qualified by another term when a Christological concept occurs contextually. When enemies or strangers in Matthew’s account approach Jesus, they refer to Him as “teacher” or “rabbi” and never as κύριος. Mark never uses κύριος to refer to Jesus as God, although it is used in some passages to refer to God. Instead Mark employs κύριος to express Jesus’ mission of service. Luke uses the term κύριος to illustrate Jesus’ splendor.

The Concept “Servant of Yahweh”³⁶

The “Servant of Yahweh” is a rich Old Testament concept that appears fifteen times within Isaiah 40–55, known as the “Servant Songs.” In this section, particular terms and concepts exposes a “suffering Servant” and “Servant of Yahweh” who comes to rescue His people. This concept is picked up by the Gospel writers and attributed to Jesus Christ.

³⁴ Witherington III, “Lord,” in *DJG*, 489. Although in Matt 24:42 Jesus refers to Himself as “Lord” in the third person the characters of the story seem vague enough for Jesus’ audience to think of Him as that Lord. Perhaps, only after the resurrection and ascension occur does Jesus’ audience understand the full identity and meaning of the characters in the story.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 490-91.

³⁶ While this title may not actually appear, the concept appears fifteen times in Isa 40–55 by the term עַבְדִּי (“My servant”; 41:8, 9; 42:1, 19; 43:10; 44:1, 2, 21, 26; 45:4; 48:20; 49:3; 50:10; 52:13; 53:11).

Time and space constraints do not allow a complete study or rebuttal of some scholar's denial of applying this term to Jesus.³⁷ However, one does notice that all Gospel writers directly or indirectly allude to this "Suffering Servant" as Jesus. Matthew draws from Isaiah's "Servant Songs" and applies them to Jesus healing ministry in 8:17. Also in Matt 12:12-21, My Servant appears in 12:18 quoted from Isa 42:1 as one who serves God by healing. Servant language also appears Matt 23:9-12 as doing God's will (see also Mark 9:35; 10:43. In Mark 10:45, the language of service and ransom recall the concept of vicarious atonement found in Isaiah 52:13-53:12. In Luke 1:54 it is used of God's servant Israel (i.e., Jacob) and David (Luke 1:69). In Luke 22:26-27 "service" language is applied (as in Isa 42:1; 53), but not as clearly as the other Gospels. While noting the latter, however, France says, "And while Matthew has almost exact parallels to Mark 10:45 and 14:24, the Lukan equivalents do not share the same clear allusions to the language of Isaiah 53. . . . This might suggest that Luke is less interested than Mark and Matthew in the Isaianic Servant as a model for Jesus' ministry."³⁸

It is evident that directly or indirectly the concept "Servant of Yahweh" is a profound idea used by the Gospel writers (although less clear in Luke's Gospel) to convey that Jesus is *the Suffering Servant sent by God*, which forms at least part of the sense of what Isaiah 40-55 meant in the "Servant Songs."

The Term "the Son of Man"

The term "Son of Man" was Jesus' favorite way of naming himself. It is used over sixty-five times. It is odd that this term never became a messianic title used in the church since it is one of the most important messianic designations found in the Old Testament.³⁹

³⁷ R. T. France, "Servant of Yahweh," in *DJG*, 745, mentions C. K. Barrett, C. F. D. Moule, and "most fully" M. D. Hooker as objectors.

³⁸ France, "Servant of Yahweh," in *DJG*, 746, is quick to point out, "But we should not forget that it is the same Luke who subsequently records the actual title 'Servant of God' used for Jesus (Acts 3:13, 26; note, however, that David is also described as God's *pais* in 4:25). (Cf. the verbal parallels between Acts 3 and Isa 52:13-53:12 [LXX]; Acts 3:13/Is 52:13; Acts 3:13/53:6, 12; 3:14/53:11)." John also in 1:29, 36, clearly points to Jesus as the "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," indicative of Jesus sacrificial service as God's supreme servant.

³⁹ Daniel 7:13 says, "I was watching in the night visions, And behold, One like the Son of Man, Coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought Him near before Him." I. H. Marshall, "Son of Man," *DJG*, 776, says the term "played no part in the confessional and doctrinal statements of the early church." It is possible that later the church viewed Jesus in a much higher light than a mere Messianic quasi-divine person but as the Lord/God, which the title "Son of Man" may not have been viewed to do justice. Hence, it went out of vogue for a much more weightier title emphasizing the essence of the deity of Jesus as newly impregnated term "Son of God" (now meant) or "Lord."

The Meaning of Jesus as the “Son of Man”

Several objections are raised about meaning of the “intolerable Greek” term ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, which is a literal translation of the Aramaic term.⁴⁰ Objection one says this term may be nothing more than a simple idiom that means, “man” or “humanity” (Pss 80:17; 144:3; Isa 56:2). Although the term “son of man” may not be a common messianic title, “it could be used as a messianic designation in the elevated diction of poetry and prophecy.”⁴¹

Objection two is that “Son of Man” is a substitute for the first person pronoun, i.e., “I” (Matt 5:11 and Luke 6:22). However, it was not customary of Jewish culture to “speak of one’s self in the third person,” and if Jesus did it was so uncommon that it seems an explanation would be required.⁴²

It seems best to define the term “Son of Man” in light of the human—yet supernatural—personage in Daniel 7:13, and as an eschatological figure who brings victory (as in *1 Enoch* and 4 Ezra that identifies him as “the Messiah, God’s Son and Elect One”).⁴³ However, as part of understanding Jesus’ use of this term, one must see how a privileged person gave up that position to become persecuted and put to death for the sake of humanity.

The Usage of the “Son of man” in the Gospels

The term “Son of Man” appears in all four Gospels: Matthew (30 times); Mark (14 times); and Luke (25 times).⁴⁴ Two recurring themes appear in all four Gospels (as shown in the definition above): The Son of Man is a natural and—at the same time—supernatural man who came to earth to suffer for humankind. In addition, He will also come in the future in glory to reign.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 144-45. The Aramaic term is *bar nāsā* (בַּר אֲנָשָׁא). This term could have simply been used to emphasize the humanity of Jesus or as a substitute for a personal pronoun. Outside the Gospels this term is hardly used. It is used by Stephen who applies it to Jesus in Acts 7:56, who He seems to believe carries prerogatives belonging to deity according to vv 59-60. Paul does not employ this term in any of his epistles. The author of Hebrews seems to apply it (υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου) to Jesus in 2:6. Revelation also appears to apply it to Jesus in 14:14.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Marshall, “Son of Man,” in *DJG*, 780.

⁴⁴ Although outside of this scope, John uses the term 13 times.

⁴⁵ Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 147, finds three categories that define the use of the term “Son of Man” in the Synoptic Gospels: “the Son of Man on earth serving; the Son of Man in suffering and death; the Son of Man in eschatological glory.” He sees a distinction between serving on earth and suffering. This writer prefers to link both of these terms together so that they either mean “coming to serve” (which includes death and suffering) or “coming to suffer” (which includes serving). Marshall, “Son of Man,” in *DJG*, 776, also sees these same three categories as used by the Gospel writers in describing the term “Son of Man.”

The Term “the Son of God”

The term “Son of God” (and its equivalents “the Son” and “my Son”) is by far the most important messianic title in the New Testament.⁴⁶ This term describes Jesus’ work in a unique way (through obedience and suffering for humanity), and His relationship to God, the Father (unlike anyone else).⁴⁷ Moreover, it is highly debated whether His ontological nature (one in essence with God)—His deity—was understood by many (if any) during His three-and-half years of ministry, or whether Jesus intended to communicate that aspect of His person before His final days and after the Resurrection.⁴⁸

The Meaning and Use of the Concept of Sonship in the Old Testament

The term “Son of God” in the Old Testament is used in relation to angels (Gen 6:2, 4⁴⁹; Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7; Dan 3:25), Israel (Ex 4:22-23; Hos 11:1; Mal

⁴⁶ D. R. Bauer, “Son of God,” in *DJG*, 769. He adds that the term occurs “more than 124 times in the NT, and may be the foremost christological [sic] category in each of the Gospels.”

⁴⁷ In John’s Gospel the term “Father” is mentioned more than the other Gospels (over 100 times), and it shows—unlike anywhere else before—Jesus’ unique relationship with the Father through this term (Ibid, 774-75).

⁴⁸ God had not revealed the Trinitarian concept to NT believers in the Gospels. The Hebrews regarded God as so transcendent that neither men nor angels—though they might bear His name and revelation—could ever be ontologically equated with God (cf. Ps 113:5; Isa 40:12–41:4). See Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73–150: A Commentary on Books III-V of the Psalms*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, ed. D. J. Wiseman, vol. 14b (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), 401-2; René A. López, “Identifying the ‘Angel of the Lord’ in the Book of Judges: A Model for Reconsidering the Referent in Other Old Testament Loci,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 20 (2010): 1-18. This explains why Jesus’ disciples and others were so hesitant to accept not only His death and resurrection but also His deity. For Jews, it was unthinkable that God would become human and die (Mark 4:41, John 14:7–9; cf. Num 23:19; Matt 22:32). Jews probably thought of passages where they blame Jesus for making himself equal to God (e.g., 5:18; 8:58; 10:30) as being equivalent (in function not ontology) by exercising authority that belongs solely to God. This view is not farfetched since Jesus, himself, admitted such a Jewish understanding between Messiah and God by saying in John 14:28, “My Father is greater than I.” Of course, John’s prologue 1:1-18 clearly presents Jesus as God to the readers; but what the readers are privy to must be distinguished from what the actors (or people) in the story know that appear in the body of the Gospel from 1:19–20:28. Thus John communicates to the readers roughly over 30 years after Jesus’ ministry what he knew after the fact. Readers must fight the tendency of anachronistically loading all the titles in the Synoptic Gospels with the meaning of deity.

⁴⁹ Some interpret this term here as Sethites (coming from Seth’s line perhaps illustrated by the genealogy of Gen 5). That is, the godly line as oppose to Cain’s evil

2:10; cf. 73:15 [72:15, LXX]; 103:13 [102:13, LXX]), judges (Ps 82:7) and the king (2 Sam 7:14; 1 Chr 22:10; Ps 2:7; 89:26–27).⁵⁰ As Bauer suggests, although relatively few Old Testament passages are found that refer to the king as God’s son, the use of the term as king “stands closer” to the New Testament meaning than the other two.⁵¹ However, at this point Bauer fails to mention a point he covers aptly in the Gospel of John section: the New Testament Gospels (and others in the NT) augment—to a great degree—the meaning of the term to include much more than regal kingship.

Matthew’s Gospel retains the same use of “Son of God” as Mark’s gospel defines by the suffering servant who obeys His Father (while adding ten more references as Jesus being Son [of God] and thirty-six more references as God being His Father).⁵² Perhaps, Matthew writing to a Jewish audience uses the term Son for Jesus in Matt 2:15 as representing the nation’s suffering and salvation (Hos 11:1) as “the embodiment of Israel.”⁵³ In Matthew the term “Son of God” occurs eight times. Five of the eight occurrences Jesus is challenged to prove whether He is the “Son of God” (Matt 4:3, 6; 26:63; 27:40, 43). The other three occurrences others after having divine guidance through miracles assert that He is “the Son of God” (8:29; 14:33; 27:54). The term in Matthew seems to carry the regal nuance of authority that belonged to God’s messianic ruler (as in Ps 2 Sam 7:14; 1 Chr 22:10; Ps 2:7; 89:26–27), which is why people are putting Jesus to the test to prove His sonship by exercising it.

Mark’s Gospel uses the concept “Son (of God)” eight times and Father (i.e., God) four times. Sonship in Mark, also found in Matthew but to a lesser degree in Luke and John, entails obedience that will further entail suffering. Mark connects the term “Son of God” always in contexts that entail suffering, rejection and obedience (cf. 1:1, 9–13; 3:11, [21–22]; 8:29 [=Matt 16:16], 31; 15:39). Sonship in Mark is developed through Jesus’ obedience to the Father.

line, two lines which are juxtaposed in the Genesis 4–5 that precedes the Gen 6 narrative. This writer prefers Bauer’s view. Furthermore, all of the referents that carry the term “son of God” in the OT or the NT have one thing in common: God directly created them. For example, angels are created directly by God, so is Adam (Luke 3:38), so is Israel, and so are the kings, as God’s representative and appointed directly by His prophets; finally the second Adam, Jesus, who was begotten of God through the Spirit also falls in this category (Matt 1:18, 20; cf. John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; Col 1:15, 18; Heb 1:6; 1 John 4:19; Rev 1:5). Of course, these passages are referring to Jesus’ human nature, as well as His unique status as the firstborn from the dead who will rule over all creation (Acts 13:33–34; cf. Heb 1:1–5).

⁵⁰ Bauer, “Son of God,” in *DJG*, 770.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, Word Biblical Commentary, (Dallas, TX: Word Book Publisher, 1993), 36, says, “Thus, the son of God, Israel, and the Son of God, Jesus, both in Egypt of necessity and both delivered by divine provision, Matthew sees Jesus as living out and summing up the history of Israel.”

Luke does more of a broad stroke—instead of using the term narrowly—as a historian (1:1-4) would want to do to convey the entire picture. Luke seems to use the term “Lord” instead of the term “Son of God.”⁵⁴ He seems to convey Jesus’ Lordship more from an OT traditional Christological point of view as inheriting the kingdom (Luke 22:28-39) and set apart as holy to save the people of God (termed “Lord” in Luke 1; cf. 2:11; 19:8, 31, 34), which leaves out any possible references to divinity (like those found in Mark 13:32 and 15:39 termed “Son of God”).⁵⁵ However, Luke’s three ways of using of the term certainly merit attention: Jesus is the “Son of God,” due to the Holy Spirit’s conception (1:35); as the “Son of God,” He rules as He sits at God’s right hand and inherits the kingdom (22:69–70; see also verses 28–30); as the “Son of God,” He is the only one able to save (as the context in 1:69-70 shows).⁵⁶

Certainly, out of all of the terms used for Jesus Christ in the Gospels, the term “Son of God” deserves recognition. Perhaps, this single term encompasses all of the concepts of Messiah that the others cannot, but it is the single most misunderstood term. Many read it as a title denoting deity, which is incorrect. One must shy away from such an anachronistic interpretation in superimposing such a grid on this and others terms used by Jesus and other Jewish recipients in the Gospels. It appears that the sense “Son of God” evolved at a later stage once Jesus rose from the dead and took on the connotation of deity.⁵⁷ Afterward, many of the Apostles and later progressive revelation unfolded what would have never been thought or received in a monotheistic Jewish theology at one time: that Jesus was equal to God, the Father, in essence. However, in the Synoptic Gospels one must guard against reading more into the term “Son of God” than the context or Jewish theology permits.

It seems clear that Matthew uses the term “Son of God” as it was understood in the Old Testament as having regal authority as God’s representative. Mark connects the term “Son of God” always in contexts that entail suffering, rejection and obedience. Finally, Luke emphasizes a broader

⁵⁴ The term “son of God” appears six times in contrast to the term “Lord” that appears eighty-four times.

⁵⁵ Whether “Son of God” in Mark 1:1, 13:32, 15:39 emphasizes Christ’s deity is highly debated and unlikely. Furthermore, Luke’s emphasis on Jesus’ Lordship here does not mean that one has to make Him Lord to have eternal life. Luke’s use of the term “Lord” as applied to Jesus simply refers to His use of Messianic prerogatives to exercise authority as prophesied from the OT and as those given to Him by God to rule (see Luke 10:19; 19:17; cf Matt 28:19-20; Luke 4:6, 32, 36; 22:25; Acts 2:36; Heb 1:2)

⁵⁶ These three concepts of Jesus’ Sonship in Luke are developed in Bauer, “Son of God,” in *DJG*, 774.

⁵⁷ See the section entitled “The Term the ‘Son of God,’” especially footnotes 39, 48 and 55. See also section entitled, “The Use of the Term ‘Lord’ in the Gospels,” specially footnotes 32 and 33.

picture when employing the term “Son of God” by using it in three ways: Jesus is the “Son of God,” due to the Holy Spirit’s conception; as “Son of God,” He rules and inherits the kingdom; and as the “Son of God,” He is the only one able to save Israel and mankind.

Conclusion

In conclusion, one can see how important understanding these five terms (Christ, Lord, Servant of Yahweh, the Son of Man, and the Son of God) are in having a correct definition of the person of Jesus Christ. Since the Synoptic Gospels are where we discover these terms (with some relevant exceptions in John), the Gospels are where we should begin to construct a correct Christology. Thus, without understanding how each writer uses these terms, one may not only misconstrue their understanding of Christology—that entails comprehending the person and work of Jesus Christ—but also misunderstands the theology and purpose that each Gospel author had for writing. Therein lies the reason for carefully considering how the Synoptic Gospel writers use of each of these terms to comprise a correct Christology.

--End--

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