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# NEW TESTAMENT ROOTS TO THE THEOTOKOS

## I. Introduction

My assigned title advisedly uses the word "roots." And perhaps with an even wider appropriateness, for this is the year of concern with roots. Alex Haley would not claim or want to claim that he himself was an exact reproduction of Kunta Kinte. But he would claim that there is some continuity between him and his African ancestor. We should look then, not to "prove" the legitimacy of "theotokos" from Scripture, but rather to see whether there is any continuity between the christological affirmations of the NT, especially in connection with Jesus' birth, and the later christological doctrine of the *theotokos*.

Apart from its mariological implications, which are theologically and historically secondary, the "theotokos" poses two major questions. One concerns the *origin* of Jesus (represented by the *tokos*) and the other concerns His divinity or deity (represented by the *theo-*). In order to explore the New Testament roots of this term we will investigate first what the New Testament has to say about the origin of Jesus and then what it has to say about His deity.

## II. The Origin of Jesus

The very early christological formulae<sup>1</sup> had very little to

<sup>1</sup> For differing reasons, J. A. T. Robinson, F. Hahn and the present writer have located the very earliest Christology in the kerygmatic speech of *Acts* 3:12-26, esp. verses 13-15, 20-21. This is a "two-foci" Christology, looking backward on Jesus' historical career and forward to his consummation of all thing as Son of man. See J. A. T. Robinson, *The Most Primitive Christology of All?* in *JTS* NS 7 (1956), 177-89; repr. in

say about Jesus' origin. They were concerned with what Jesus had "become" (the word is placed in quotation marks because the question is raised in functional rather than in ontological terms).<sup>2</sup> Jesus is described in the Pentecost speech of Peter as "a man attested by God, whom the Jews crucified but whom God has made Lord and Christ." This formula is often called adoptionist, as though Jesus was a man who was made divine at the resurrection. However, not only do the post-resurrection titles indicate that it is a new function rather than a new nature (as we have already noted above) that is given to the exalted One, but already His earthly life was initiated and made operative by God. Jesus was "a man *attested by God* with mighty works and wonders which God did through him in your midst" (*Acts* 2:22). A similar formula in a later kerygmatic speech makes the same point: "he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for *God was with him*" (*Acts* 10:38). These early "adoptionist" formulae do not even suggest that an ordinary man was elevated to Messianic function. Already in His earthly appearance Jesus had a special relation to God: God "attested" Him, or God "was with Him." The same is true of another early pre-Pauline<sup>3</sup> "adoptionist" formula which underlies *Rom.* 1:3. It reads:

(Jesus) who was descended from David according to the flesh, and appointed Son of God in power. . . .

*Twelve New Testament Studies* (SBT 34; London: SCM, 1962), 139-53; F. Hahn, *Christologische Hoheitstitel* (FRLANT 83; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963), 184-86. ET *The Titles of Jesus in Christology* (London: Lutterworth, 1969); R. H. Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology* (LL; London: Lutterworth, 1965), 158-59.

<sup>2</sup> For the functional and historical character of Hebraic-biblical thought, see G. Dix, *Jew and Greek* (Westminster: Dacre, 1953) 3-4. O. Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959) 3-4.

<sup>3</sup> On the wide acceptance of the pre-Pauline origin of this formula see most recently M. Hengel, *The Son of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 59-60 and the bibliography there cited.

Here we have a contrast between Son of David (a designation of Jesus in His earthly existence) and the new function as Son of God to which He was appointed at His resurrection. He was already "Son of David" in His earthly life. Moreover, this formula alludes for the first time to His birth (*genomenon* = having come into being as the Son of David) as a christological "moment."

The next pattern<sup>4</sup> is one which expresses God's "sending" Jesus into history. It is to be found at *Gal.* 4:4 in what is probably a pre-Pauline formula, which reads:

God sent forth his Son  
born of a woman

.....

that we might receive the adoption of sons.

There exists today a strong consensus<sup>5</sup> that the origin of this sending pattern is to be sought in the wisdom mythology as developed particularly in Hellenistic Judaism.<sup>6</sup> This means that the "Son" in this pattern is understood as a pre-existent

<sup>4</sup> For the preference of "pattern" over "formula," the term previously used by W. Kramer, *Christ, Lord, Son of God*, (SBT 50; London: SCM and Allenson, Naperville, Ill., 1966) 186-89, see Hengel, *Son* (n.3). See also E. Schweizer, *Zum religionsgeschichtlichen Hintergrund der 'Sendungsformel'*, in ZNW 57 (1966) 199-210, repr. in *Beiträge zur Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (Zürich: Zwingli, 1970) 83-95, esp. 90 n. 39. In the German the word used for pattern is "Schema."

<sup>5</sup> The shift of opinion on this matter even with the Bultman school has been remarkable. Until recently, his pupils generally agreed with him in finding the origin of pre-existence Christology, including the sending-of-the-Son pattern, in the so-called pre-Christian gnostic redeemer myth. The latter theory was shattered by C. Colpe, *Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule* (FRLANT 78; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961). The alternative theory that the pre-existence Christology, which is now gaining ground even within the Bultman school, seems to have been first established by E. Schweizer in a series of articles. The earliest I have identified is: *Zur Herkunft der Präexistenzvorstellung bei Paulus*, in *EvTh* 19 (1959) 65-70, repr. in *Neotestamentica* (Zürich: Zwingli, 1963) 105-09.

<sup>6</sup> See esp. Schweizer "Hintergrund" (n.4), 84-90.

figure.<sup>7</sup> Until recently I shared this view myself.<sup>8</sup> However, I have been led to reconsider this thesis for a number of reasons. First, where the wisdom background is operative it is usually to say something about either the mode of existence of the pre-existent One (*Phil.* 2:6) or his pre-existent activity (*Col.* 1:15-17; *Heb.* 1:2b-3a) or both (*John* 1:1-3). Second, it has been questioned in another connection whether the idea of "sending" in connection with wisdom is really an aspect of Jewish sophiology. In the normal form of the myth wisdom "comes" on her own initiative.<sup>9</sup> Third, I find a closer analogy between *Gal.* 4:4 and the sending of the son in the parable of the vineyard (*Mark* 12:1-9 parr.) than with the sophiological hymns. In both cases we are speaking of a historical appearance which is initiated with God. The nearest analogy for this is God's "sending" of the prophets. Thus I would now argue that the sending pattern will have a salvation-historical rather than a sophiological background. As God raised up and sent prophets in the course of Israel's salvation history, so finally He sends His Son. Of course this is a unique sending, to be distinguished from the sending of the prophets, for this is God's unique and final act of sending. But I don't think that in the sending pattern christological reflection has got beyond the uniqueness of this emissary in salvation history. Remember, we are talking here of the pre-Pauline sending pattern: it is highly probable that Paul himself who also, as we shall see, drew upon the sophiological hymns, reinterpreted the sending

<sup>7</sup> So Schweizer, *Hintergrund* (n. 4), 93, who thinks that the title "Son" penetrated the wisdom-sending-pattern from its earlier use in a prophetic context (Jesus as the culmination of the sending of the prophets, *Mark* 12:1-9).

<sup>8</sup> See *Foundations* (n.1), 231.

<sup>9</sup> In a review of M. J. Suggs, *Christology and Law in Matthew's Gospel* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1970), M. D. Johnson, *Reflections on a Wisdom Approach to Matthew's Christology*, in *CBQ* 36 (1974) 44-64, pointed out that the concept of sending is not characteristic of Jewish wisdom speculation. Rather, wisdom comes on her own initiative and seeks abode among the sons of men.

pattern in the light of the pre-existent concept which those hymns involve. A similar sending pattern Christology is echoed in *Rom.* 8:3, which reads:

sending his son in the likeness of sinful flesh.

This too is probably a pre-Pauline schema,<sup>10</sup> similar to the one in *Gal* 4:4. Once again, Paul himself probably interpreted it in terms of his pre-existence Christology; indeed the emphasis upon the Son's assumption of the "likeness of sinful flesh" suggests a little more strongly the presumption that He had previously existed in a state without the flesh.

One more point is to be noticed. Let us return to *Rom* 1:3. Paul prefaces this formula with the phrase "his Son." This brings that formula into conformity with the sending schema: it is now God's Son who is being sent into the world, although Paul retains the thought that He embarked upon a new stage of His sonship at the resurrection.

It is interesting and significant to see how Paul can combine two different christological traditions of varying origin, the Son of David Christology and the sending-of-the Son Christology. This is an important fact with wide implications. It supports our contention that Paul himself could have combined the Son-sending schema with his other christological pattern of pre-existence. It explains how the infancy narratives, to which we are coming in a moment, could combine the Son of David and the sending-of-the-Son Christology. And most important of all, it will facilitate our understanding of the combination of the virginal conception with the pre-existence Christology in the post-New Testament period.

Recall for a moment that Son in the pre-Pauline sending pattern will still refer, not to metaphysical quality, but to the

<sup>10</sup> Its pre-Pauline origin is upheld by Kramer (n. 4), 115, following O. Michel *ad loc.* Kramer further points out that the material from the formula fits awkwardly into Paul's sentence.

role which is to be played in salvation history. It is in this connection that the coming into being or birth of the Son becomes a christological moment (*genomenou*, Rom. 1:3; *genomenon* Gal. 4:4). What by implication in this passage the mother of Jesus bore was One who was destined to play a unique role in salvation history. There is no reflection upon pre-existence, or upon the state in which He pre-existed. And though it is a christological moment, the birth is essentially preparatory for His future role.

A more clearly defined account of the origin of Jesus is given in the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke, particularly in the annunciation stories in those gospels.<sup>11</sup> Here conception/birth is considerably enhanced as a christologically significant moment. We are not here concerned with the virginal conception, but with *what* it was that Mary conceived and bore, or rather with what the christological significance was of what Mary conceived and bore.

The birth narrative in Matthew brings together a number of christological titles accorded to the child whom Mary bore. It is not certain whether "Christos" in Matthew 1:18 is intended as a christological title, or whether by this time it has become practically a proper name. The angel's address to Joseph, "son of David" and Joseph's acceptance of the child of Mary into his family indicate that Mary's child is also a son of David. The name "Jesus" has a soteriological import: He will save His people from their sins. This name "Jesus" is further explicated in the citation formula, added as a comment by the Evangelist, to mean "Emmanuel," which he further translated for the readers' benefit as "God with us" (*Matt.* 1:23). After the birth of the child, the magi come seeking Him who was "born *king* of the Jews" (*Matt.* 2: 2:2 ) and the

<sup>11</sup> The most recent and thoroughly scholarly treatment of the infancy narratives is that of R. E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977). See my review article of this book in *CBQ* (forthcoming).

Evangelist goes on to indicate that king here means the Christ, the Messiah (*Matt.* 2:4). The formula citation added by the Evangelist to the narrative of the flight into Egypt, "out of Egypt have I called my son" indicates further that the child is the Son of God. The whole system of formula quotations employed by Matthew indicates the birth of Mary's child is interpreted to mean the entrance into the world of the salvific event to which the whole of Israel's salvation history had pointed.

Mary therefore gives birth to the Messiah, the King of the Jews, the one who will be the Savior of his people, the Son of God, and Emmanuel meaning "God with us." It is clear particularly from the tense of the verb in the quotation, "he *will save* his people from their sins," that all of these titles have reference not to the ontological quality of the child in a pre-existent state or even at the moment of conception or birth, but to the role he will play in salvation history. This is true even of the title Emmanuel. It would be an anachronism to interpret Matthew's meaning to be that Jesus is ontologically identical with God.<sup>12</sup> He is the one through whom God's presence will become available to His people through His salvific work. The final fulfillment of this promise comes when the exalted One declares to His disciples at the end of the Gospel, "Lo I am with you always, to the close of the ages" (*Matt.* 28:20). That in the Matthean birth narrative we are still within the orbit of salvation history and of functional Christology is further indicated by the annunciation genre in which the birth of Mary's child is first proclaimed. For the annuncia-

<sup>12</sup> See the comment by Brown, *Birth* (n. 11), 152-53. Brown interprets Emmanuel to mean that in the coming of Jesus "the presence of God had made itself felt in an eschatological way." That affirmation of course is made in the light of the Christ event as a whole, upon which the early community looks back; the conception of Jesus marks the inauguration of the Christ event, but it is properly a prelude to the central aspect of the event, the ministry, life, death, and exaltation of the Christ.



tion pattern is a regular Old Testament device to convey the role the child to be born will play in salvation history.

The case is very similar with the Lucan birth narrative. The Lucan annunciation story even more clearly than Matthew's expresses that what is being announced is the future role of the child in salvation history:

He will be great, and will be called  
the son of the Most High  
and the Lord God will give him  
the throne of his father David,  
and he will reign over the house of  
Jacob for ever;  
and of his kingdom there will be no end  
(*Luke 1:32-33*).

The future, functional salvation-historical character of the title "Son" is to be read equally into the second promise of the angel:

therefore the child to be born  
will be called holy,  
the Son of God  
(*Luke 1:35*).

He is to be called these things because of the salvation He is to accomplish in history, not because of His inherent nature.

In the visitation story Mary is greeted by Elisabeth as "the mother of my Lord" (*Luke 1:43*). It is very striking that a messianic title of majesty is attributed to the unborn child by another human being. Given the idea of the messianic secret, there is of course no question that this is a historical record. In fact, the verse is probably redactional.<sup>13</sup> Luke per-

<sup>13</sup> Hahn, *Titles* (n. 1), 260 and 275, n. 132, regards this verse at least as Lucan, though he thinks the visitation scene itself rests on pre-Lucan tradition. Brown, *Birth* (n. 11) regards the whole scene as a Lucan composition.

mits the same title of majesty to be ascribed to the child in the angelic announcement of His birth:

For to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is  
Christ the Lord

The conjunction of *kyrios* with the other titles *Christos* and *Sōtēr* indicates that we are still within the realm of functional and historical Christology which speaks of the unique and final role the child is to play in salvation history. Since Luke is at pains throughout his birth narratives to demonstrate the superiority of the role of Jesus over John the Baptist in salvation history, Elisabeth's salutation can clearly mean Luke's intention no more than just that.

We need not concern ourselves with the virginal conception as such.<sup>14</sup> But we need to note that it is a narrative way of affirming the Christology of the sending pattern. The emphasis lies on the pneumatic origin of the conception. The whole history of Jesus has its origin in an act of God: it is "*Gottgewirkt*." The conceptual birth is a christological moment, but only as a prelude for the Christ event as a whole. The other major aspect of the infancy narratives, the Davidic sonship, which has often been thought to be contradictory to the virginal conception, had already been combined with the sending-of-the-Son pattern in *Rom.* 1:3-4, so it should not pose any particular problem here.

The pre-existence-incarnation Christology is a third way of

<sup>14</sup> See Brown, *Birth* (n. 11), 517-33. Brown accounts for the conception Christology by a combination of two factors, 1) the historical fact that Mary became pregnant before the completion of her marriage with Joseph; 2) a successive retrojection of the Son of God Christology from the moment of resurrection/exaltation through the baptism to the conception. In my review of Brown's work in *CBQ* I observe that the basis for 1) is unfortunately tenuous. For 2) we propose as an alternative here that the conception Christology is a dramatization (modelled upon the annunciation patterns in the Old Testament) of the sending-of-the-Son Christology.

expressing Jesus' transcendental origin. Perhaps the earliest literary appearance of this Christology is in 1 *Cor.* 8:6, where Paul speaks of "the Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist." This implies that there was incarnated in Jesus Christ a pre-existent reality which had acted as the agent of creation. There is as we have seen already a growing consensus that the source of this concept is to be sought in the development of the idea of wisdom in Hellenistic Judaism.<sup>15</sup> Paul also identifies Christ with the wisdom of God already in 1 *Cor.* 1:30, and in his exegesis of the Rock in the Exodus story in 1 *Cor.* 10:4 Paul may also be identifying Christ as the incarnation of wisdom who has previously been active in Israel's salvation history.<sup>16</sup>

But the clearest expression of the pre-existence-incarnation pattern in the homologoumena is to be found in *Philip* 2:6-11, which is usually (and in my opinion correctly) designated a pre-Pauline hymn with slight Pauline modifications.<sup>17</sup> For our purposes the important part of the hymn reads:

(who) being in the form of God  
did not count equality with God  
a thing to be clung to<sup>18</sup>

but emptied himself,

<sup>15</sup> See the works by Schweizer, Hahn and the present writer cited above. Cf. also J. M. Robinson and H. Koester, *Trajectories through Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 232-68.

<sup>16</sup> E. Schweizer, *Neotestamentica* (n. 5), 106.

<sup>17</sup> G. Bornkamm, *Zum Verständnis des Christus-Hymnus Phil. 2. 6-11*, in *Studien zu Antike und Urchristentum* (Ges. Aufs. I; BzEth 28; Munich: Kaiser, 1959) marshals the arguments for the pre-Pauline origin of the *Carmen Christi*. For a contrary view, see M. Hooker *Philippians 2:6-11*, in E. E. Ellis and E. Grässer, *Jesus und Paulus* (Kümmel Festschr.; Göttingen; Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975) 151-64.

<sup>18</sup> For this interpretation of the much controverted word *harpagmos*, see E. Käsemann, *Kritische Analyse von Phil. 2, 5-11*, in *ZThK* 47 (1950) 313-60. ET in R. W. Funk (ed.) *God and Christ* (JTC 5; New York: Harper, 1968) 45-88, esp. 63-65.

having taken the form of a servant

having become (*genomenos*) in the likeness of human being . . .

*Philip. 2:6-7*

This hymn expresses a Christology quite different from the sending-of-the-Son pattern. It speaks in mythological rather than salvation historical terms of the pre-existence of a heavenly being in a mode of existence equal to that of God Himself. It speaks further of the entrance of the pre-existent One into history as an act undertaken by His own initiative, rather than as an act initiated by God. But like the sending-of-the-Son pattern it identifies the birth of the incarnate One as a christological moment (cf. the *genomenon* of *Philip. 2:7* with the *genomenon* of *Gal. 4:4*). This shows that although the two Christologies are quite distinct in origin, a potentiality exists for their combination, just as the Son of David and sending-of-the-Son Christologies had already been combined in *Rom. 1:3-4*. There is a further point to be made. Like the sending-of-the-Son Christology, the stress lies upon the soteriological goal: the divine mode of existence is mentioned only because the pre-existent One surrendered it, emptied Himself, and humbled Himself in a life culminating in death, a death which has the soteriological effect of subjugating the cosmic powers of evil. This shows that although this Christology introduces an ontic and a cosmological-speculative element into consideration, its purpose is similar to that of the earlier Christologies, viz. to affirm the soteriological significance of the Christ event in its totality.

<sup>19</sup> H. Grass, *Christliche Glaubenslehre I* (Stuttgart/Berlin/Mainz: Kohlhammer, 1973) 124, claiming the support of Bultmann and Käsemann, draws a distinction between two types of pre-existence Christology, the inactive type of the *Phil.* hymn and the active pre-existence of the other hymns. It is doubtful whether such a distinction can be sustained. Both types are rooted in Hellenistic-Jewish sophiology, and Paul had already used the idea of the pre-existent One's mediatorship of creation in *1 Cor. 8:6*, so that the *Phil.* hymn probably presupposes it. There is a difference

The next wisdom hymn to be examined occurs in the possibly deutero-Pauline *Col.* 1:15-17f. It reads:

He is the image of the invisible God  
the firstborn of all creation;  
for in him all things were created.

.....

He is before all things,  
and in him all things hold together.

This hymn, like the Philippians hymn, affirms the pre-existence of the Redeemer ("firstborn of all creation;" "he is before all things"). Like the Philippians hymn, it too speaks, though in somewhat different language (*eikōn* instead of *morphē*), of the divine mode of being of the pre-existent One. But unlike the Philippians hymn, it stresses the activity of the pre-existent One as the agent of creation ("through him all things were created... all things were created through him") and of preservation ("in him all things hold together"). This idea was already present in the Pauline homologoumena (1 *Cor.* 8:6). But the most important difference is that this hymn does not speak of the entry into the world of the pre-existent One. Yet it is implied, for the next stanza goes on to say that He is resurrected from the dead, and becomes the head of the Church.

The third pre-existence hymn is in *Heb.* 1:2. It reads:

(a Son) whom he appointed heir of all things,  
through whom also he created the world.  
He reflects the glory of God  
and bears the very stamp of his nature. . . .

Again we notice similarities and differences with the other

of emphasis, however, in that the *Phil.* hymn stresses the condescension involved in the incarnation, the other hymns the cosmological functions in pre-existent state.

hymns. The pre-existent One's divine mode of being is again affirmed, again in slightly different language (*apaugasma tēs doxēs* and *charaktēr*) but still derived from the wisdom mythology. It states that the pre-existent One was the agent of creation ("through whom he created the world..."). Like the Colossians hymn it goes on to imply, but does not explicitly assert, the entry of the pre-existent One into history ("when he had made purification for sins"). But the most important point to note about this hymn is that it identifies the pre-existent One with the Son of God and speaks of the Son as the culmination of God's revelatory activity in the prophets. Here we may see a real combination of the sending-of-the-Son Christology with the wisdom Christology (note that nothing is said here of the Son's initiative; an indication that the author of Hebrews ascribes the initiative to God).

The final hymn to be considered is the prologue to John's Gospel. The relevant portions are:

In the beginning was the Word,  
and the Word was with God,  
and the Word was God.

He was in the beginning with God;

all things were made through him,  
and without him was not anything made that was made . . .  
and the Word became flesh,  
and dwelt among us.

Once again we see the familiar wisdom themes: the pre-existent figure, His divine mode of existence, His pre-existent activity as agent of creation (in its pre-Gospel form the hymn went on to speak of the revelatory activity of the pre-existent One in the world in general and in Israel's salvation history in particular). It also speaks, like the Philippians hymn, of the

entry of the pre-existent One into history: "the Word became flesh."<sup>20</sup> But there are differences. First, this hymn uses the title Logos; however, this is not significantly different from wisdom. Much more important is that it is the first time that the deity of the pre-existent One is explicitly affirmed. "The Word was God." True, there is still a distinction between the deity of the pre-existent One and the deity of God Himself, for *theos* in verse 1c is anarthrous, and the Logos is still "with God," *pros ton theon*; turned toward God in a relation to Him. Nevertheless, for the first time we encounter the word "theos" predicated of the pre-existent One.

Now this Logos/Wisdom Christology is open to combination with other Christologies. The Logos incarnate is also the Son (verse 14), and if we read "Son" rather than God in 1:18, "Son" can also be applied to the pre-existent One. Throughout John's gospel great prominence is given to the sending of the Son (cf. only *John* 3:17) into the world.<sup>21</sup>

It has frequently been pointed out that John's Gospel has no infancy narrative (although it makes one allusion to Jesus' birth in connection with the role He is to play in history, *John* 18:37). Jesus' mother figures twice in the gospel, but there

<sup>20</sup> The Fourth Gospel uses the Logos hymn as an introduction to the baptism, not to the birth, for it has no birth narrative. See my article, *Christmas, Epiphany and the Johannine Prologue*, in W. B. Green and M. L'Engle (eds.) *Spirit and Light* (Edward West Festschr.; New York: Seabury, 1976) 63-73. I also argued that in the pre-Gospel form "the word became flesh" would have referred to the incarnate life in its entirety, not to any specific moment in it. But the parallel between *egeneto* and *genomenon* (*Phil.* 2:7) suggests now that we should include the birth as christological moment though as in *Phil.* only as the prelude to the total Christ event.

<sup>21</sup> In my article, *The Incarnation in Historical Perspective*, in W. T. Stevenson (ed.) *Theology and Culture* (C. L. Stanley and A. T. Mollegen Festschr.; ATR supp. series; Nov. 1976) I sought to show that this sending cover the whole earthly history of Jesus in its entirety. For the Evangelist, the Baptism of Jesus, with which the Gospel starts, is probably the initial moment of that sending. The birth, however, is a necessary prelude to that sending (cf. *John* 18:37).

is no christological reflection on the significance of her giving birth to Jesus. It is often argued from this circumstance that the conception Christology of the Matthean and Lucan birth narratives and in the pre-existence-incarnation Christology we have two fundamentally irreconcilable Christologies.<sup>22</sup>

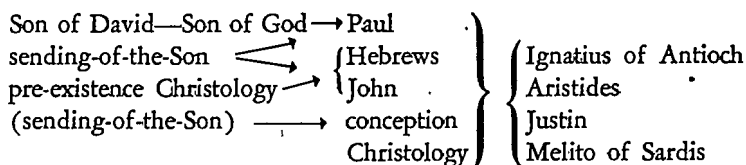
Now, it is true that these particular Christologies are not combined by any New Testament writer.<sup>23</sup> But there are three considerations to be urged against the view that conception Christology and pre-existence Christology are theologically irreconcilable.<sup>24</sup> First, we have noticed already a tendency within the New Testament for different Christologies to be combined: the Son of David and the sending-of-the-Son Christologies are combined in *Rom.* 1:3-4 and in the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke. The sending-of-the-Son and pre-existence Christologies, both present though separated in the Pauline homologoumena, are combined in Hebrews and John. Second, the conception Christology of the birth narratives is, we argued, a dramatization of the sending-of-the-Son Christology. Thus we have a series of christological trajectories in the New Testament which are destined to converge. They may be represented diagrammatically thus:

<sup>22</sup> So R. Bultmann, in H. W. Bartsch (ed.) *Kerygma und Mythos* (ThF 1; Hamburg: Reich & Heidrich, 1948) 24. ET *Kerygma and Myth* (London: SPCK, 1953) 11; J. A. T. Robinson, *The Human Face of God* (London: SCM, 1973) 50-66. R. Brown, *Birth*, is right in prescinding from the pre-existence Christology in his exegesis of the birth narratives. What Matthew and Luke intended is not identical with what the later Church discovered in these texts. When brought into relation with other writings within the canon they acquire deeper meaning.

<sup>23</sup> Brown, *Birth* (n. 11), 141 note 27, says this thought process was probably at work in Ignatius of Antioch. It is clearly expressed in Aristides, *Apol.* xv 1; Justin, *Apol.* xxxi and xxxiii; Melito of Sardis, *Discourse of Faith* 4.

<sup>24</sup> I am not arguing for their harmonization as historical or supra-historical events. Form-critically the pre-existence Christology is mythological and the conception Christology a legend. But the synthesized Christology explains inalienable truths about God and His self-disclosure in creation history, salvation history and the Christ event.





Third, our tracing of the conception Christology to its origin in the sending-of-the-Son pattern has revealed that the major difference between the two patterns is that in the conception Christology it is God who takes the initiative, whereas in the pre-existence Christology it is wisdom who does so. Now, this is no novelty: we have here a difference which appears in the earthly stage Christology and in the post-existence Christology as well. In the earthly stage Christology we find the pattern "the Son was given up" (*Rom.* 4:25, reverential passive) on the one hand (cf. *John* 3:16), and "the Son of God who . . . gave himself up for me" (*Gal.* 3:20; cf. *Eph.* 5:2, 25). In the post-existence stage we find "God raised him (Jesus) from the dead" (*Rom.* 10:9) or "Christ was raised from the dead" (1 *Cor.* 15:4, reverential passive) and also the outspoken claim "I have power to lay (my life) down, and I have power to take it up again" (*John* 10:18). We touch here upon the deepest paradox of Jesus' earthly existence. His whole life was one of active obedience and yet it was in and through that obedience that God performed His eschatological act. This paradox is extended to the pre-existence and post-existence Christologies, because these Christologies interpret the ultimate significance of His history. Also, the presence of all these Christologies in what later became the canon of the New Testament indicates that the continuation of these trajectories past the New Testament is a legitimate, not an illegitimate development. Our conclusion thus far is, therefore, that the New Testament points toward a development in which the origin of Jesus will be expressed in terms of the pneumatic-virginal conception of the pre-existent One, who may be described in the

ontic language of mythology as the pre-existent wisdom being in the form of God, on an equality with God, the image of God, the pre-existent Son, the reflection of God's glory, the very stamp of His nature, the Word who was with God, and finally in a carefully defined sense "God," though to be distinguished from God.

### III. *The Deity of Christ*

Does the New Testament justify the calling of the incarnate One God? The nearest the synoptic Gospels come to this is in the Matthean title, Emmanuel. That, as we have seen, is not however to be interpreted ontically, but functionally and in terms of salvation history. And it finds its fulfillment in the promise of the exalted One (*Matt.* 28:20). The Pauline passages are much disputed. *Rom.* 9:5 is the only passage in the Pauline homologoumena in which God is possibly used as a predicate for Christ: "Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever" (RSV margin). But doxologies in the Pauline homologoumena are normally addressed to the Father (*Gal.* 1:5; *Phil.* 4:20; *2 Cor.* 11:31; *Rom.* 1:25 and 11:36), and the RSV text is probably to be preferred: "... Christ, God who is over all the blessed for ever." And even if it refers to Christ, it is the exalted One. The same is probably true of other textually ambiguous passages, such as *2 Thessal.* 1:12; *Titus* 2:13 and *2 Peter* 1:1. In all of these two-membered phrases God and Christ are probably meant to be taken as separate persons. And again, if they do refer to Christ, it is to the exalted One.

In the Epistle to the Hebrews the title *theos* originally applied to Yahweh in *Ps.* 45:7 is transferred to the (exalted) Son (*Heb.* 1:8). But in that same Psalm verse there is a second occurrence of *theos* which Hebrews retains for Yahweh. In other words, the exalted Son of God, but with a difference. It is significant that this becomes possible unequivocal predication of deity in a document which expresses a wisdom Christology.

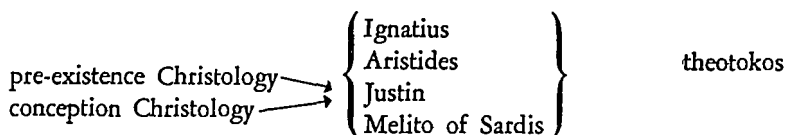
The same is true of the Fourth Gospel. There again the title

*theos* is predicated of the Son in His pre-existent state (*theos ēn ho logos*, 1:1) and as far as we have seen, less certainly in His incarnate state as Revealer in *John* 1:18 (i.e., reading *monogenēs theos*),<sup>25</sup> but quite certainly of the resurrected One in Thomas' confession (*kyrios mou kai theos mou*, *John* 20:28). Finally, as a Church confession we have *houtos* (sc. Jesus Christ) *estin ho alēthinos theos*. This presumably refers to the pre-existent, incarnate and exalted One. It is significant that this occurs again in a stratum of the New Testament in which the wisdom Christology pattern is central. It was the identification of Jesus as the incarnation of the divine wisdom that made possible within the New Testament the eventual designation of Jesus as *theos*. But the wisdom Christology itself warns us that it is not complete ontological identity. Jesus is identified as the incarnation of God *in a certain aspect of His being*: in the being of God which is turned toward the cosmos, to mankind, to Israel and to the Church in revelatory and redemptive action. The later ontological Christology was careful to say that it was *God the Son* that became incarnate in the man Jesus, and precisely not God the Father. This is the limitation of the popular expression "God was made man," or that Jesus is God

<sup>25</sup> Commentators are divided on the reading to be preferred here. R Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes* (KeKNT<sup>14</sup> Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1956) 55-56 note 4. ET *The Gospel of John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971) 81-82 note 2; C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London: SPCK, 1955) 144, favor the reading *huios* on grounds of internal probability. But *theon* has the best MS support (the recently discovered p<sup>66</sup> and p<sup>75</sup> support it, as well as aleph and B). This reading is preferred by R. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (AB 29; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966), surprisingly by H. Conzelmann, *Grundriss der Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (Munich: Kaiser, 1968) 368. ET *An Outline of the Theology of the New Testament* (NTL; London: SCM, 1968) 337 and most recently by B. Lindars, *The Gospel of John*, (NCB; London: Oliphants, 1972) 98. Opinion seems to be veering in favor of the reading *theon*. If so, it would be the only NT passage where *theos* is explicitly predicated of the incarnate One in his earthly life—a very important step along the trajectory to the *theotokos*.

incarnate. We can say Jesus is God only with a particular nuance, a nuance that is derived from revelation in salvation history. Thus the wisdom Christology is on a trajectory which leads through the identification with the Son in a revelatory salvation-historical sense to an ontological Christology which affirms Him to be God the Son.

The New Testament documents which affirm the deity of Christ in this particularly nuanced sense say nothing of His birth by Mary. The *theotokos* became possible only after the wisdom mythology of pre-existence and incarnation was combined with the conception Christology of the birth narratives after the New Testament period. And the step was only taken when that mythological Christology was ontologically defined. But the *theotokos* undoubtedly stands at the end of a trajectory which is rooted in the New Testament. We may thus complete the trajectories which were diagrammed above (p. 16) thus:



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