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From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God: The Origins and Development of New Testament Christology

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address these issues leaves us with many questions and the rather unsatisfactory assumption that Amos and his book were a bolt from the blue. Nevertheless, taken as a whole this volume is a substantive contribution which pastors and scholars alike will consult with great profit for many years to come.

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From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God. The Origins and Development of New Testament Christology

Maurice Casey

Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991

197 pp.

Maurice Casey, lecturer in New Testament and Christian Origins at the University of Nottingham, has written a delightfully provocative book, the thesis of which aims not only for an accurate historical reconstruction of New Testament christology, but ultimately a revision of Christianity itself. The book is in the liberal British Anglican tradition, similar in aim and methodology to the book of essays edited by John Hick in *The Myth of God Incarnate* (London: SCM, 1977), whose contributors, liberal Anglican theologians, sought to present a contemporary, rationally defensible account of the Christian faith. As such, Casey's book represents both the best and worst of the liberal Anglican tradition: a rigorous, brutally honest, historically grounded appropriation of the Christian faith, but one that ultimately fails to satisfy existentially and begs important questions about the multiple meanings and interpretation of Christian texts. The book would be of interest to anyone who is interested in seeing how more radical New Testament theology is done in the United Kingdom.

Casey's thesis is that the christology of John's Gospel, in his estimation fully incarnational and latest in the New Testament canon, bears no resemblance to the historical self-understanding of Jesus and that one may discern a development in the Christian canon from affirmation of Jesus as a prophet (as testified especially in Q sayings and the historically authentic self-designations of Jesus) to the incarnate, pre-existent Word of God of John. The book is an attempt to account for that development. To do this Casey describes three stages of New Testament christological reflection. The earliest stage occurred when the Jesus movement was still exclusively Jewish. Christological affirmations from Jesus' own mouth and those of his immediate followers, such as Messiah, Son of Man, Son of God, prophet and teacher, when compared with analogous intertestamental titles for agents or emissaries of God, show that neither Jesus nor his first followers believed that he was God *simpliciter*, but rather a prophet who in teaching

and life-style fully embodied the ideals and aspirations of Israel. Casey is especially concerned to demonstrate (in my view, successfully) that earliest christological reflection was limited by a concern not to violate monotheistic convictions. Thus the first followers of Jesus will have hardly been prepared to assign Jesus a rank equal to, or even ontologically like, God.

Having established this historical depiction of Jesus' christology, Casey goes on to account for the development of New Testament christology. How did the prophet become incarnate God? To answer this question Casey looks to intertestamental reflection on human, semi-divine and divine intermediary figures (e.g., Moses, Enoch, the Maccabean martyrs, Wisdom, the Word). This is perhaps the most intriguing discussion in the book (pp. 78-96). Rather than focusing on static parallels between figures and titles in the intertestamental and Later Testament literature, Casey attempts to identify places where there is evidence of a development of titles and designations to describe messianic and intermediary figures. He argues that there was a direct correlation between the need for intertestamental groups to define themselves, especially when marginal and in opposition to the status quo, and the development of more dramatic claims about intermediary figures. It is precisely this dynamic process and the reasons for it which provide Casey with the key for unlocking the mystery of christological development in the Christian Testament.

Stage two in the movement toward an incarnational christology was occasioned by St. Paul's gospel of inclusion of Gentiles in God's covenant with Israel. Paul's christology was primarily functional: reflection on Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection and their connection with baptism and eucharist was done in order to explain how God was at work in Jesus to draw Gentiles into a covenantal relationship with God. The result was a nudging of christology toward fuller incarnational affirmations, a process not unlike those identified in the intertestamental period. Though the presence of Gentiles certainly helped to undermine the strict monotheism of stage one christology, Paul's Judaism and that of the Jews of his mission kept the movement from asserting unqualifiedly that Jesus is God.

For that affirmation, the third and final stage, we need to look to John's Gospel. Here Jesus is identified unqualifiedly as divine. Again, the development is accounted for functionally. John's high christology was forged in the crucible of Jewish persecution. The predominantly Gentile community expressed its opposition to Judaism by developing a christology that affirmed the community as divinely elected by a pre-existing God. Now that there were few Jews, there was no longer worry about monotheism: the way was open for a full identification of Jesus with God. But in the process, and here Casey shifts from descriptive to evaluative considerations, John's community so wholly departed from Judaism and the religion of Jesus that it was no longer in any way connected with the historical ideals and interests of its religious founder.

According to Casey, it is John's christology that the Church has inherited. And so she finds herself in the uncomfortable position of asserting

faith in a Christ whose identity the historical Jesus would have eschewed as a blasphemous violation of the first commandment. The Jesus of the Chalcedonian definition is a denial of the Jesus of history and, based as it is on the false and dangerous witness of John's christology, is profoundly anti-semitic. Casey's prescription is as radical as the diagnosis: the church ought to jettison the historical error of a high christology and recover an appreciation of Jesus more in harmony with Jesus' own ideals and those of his earliest followers.

The thesis is vigorously and soberly argued, supported by careful, if sometimes laboured, exegesis of texts. There are certain points where one would like to quibble: is Jesus' self-designation as Son of Man merely a circumlocution for human being; can we ever really recover Jesus' self-understanding or his intentions; is it not reductionist to treat New Testament christologies functionally as means of establishing community cohesion and identity; did they not express and create human experience of God; is John's Gospel as high in its christology as Casey argues (J. A. T. Robinson, *The Priority of John* [London: SCM, 1985] suggests a different picture); is it not a genetic fallacy to argue that because John's christology was shaped as part of a strategy to argue for God's rejection of Israel that wherever that christology is appropriated the result is necessarily anti-semitic? But all this is indeed to quibble. Far more questionable in my estimation is the classical liberal agenda of establishing a religiously satisfying christology on the basis of a historical-critical reconstruction of Jesus' intentions and self-understanding, or those of his first followers. Casey would have us look behind the texts to get at historical origins; I prefer to stand in front of the texts and allow them to produce new meanings and creative new ways of responding to the world as community horizons and needs change. Far from being limited by the self-understanding of Jesus or trapped in the vicious debates of ancient Christians and Jews, the reader is invited to rediscover in the Christian Testament stories of Jesus ever new christologies, scarcely conceived by New Testament authors, relevant to the contemporary situation of his or her community. To rephrase a saying from Leo the Great, the formulator of the Chalcedonian definition: *lex legendi, lex credendi*.

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The Living Psalms

Claus Westermann (Trans. J.R. Porter)
Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing
Company, 1989
306 pp.

This volume, a translation of *Ausgewählte Psalmen* (originally published, 1984, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen) is now available to the English reading public.