A Continuing Crisis
For Incarnational Doctrine

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One of the most overworked words in theological journalism surely must be "crisis." It seems that almost anyone with a special concern about a particular issue has the license to dub it a crisis in the hopes of generating interest in an often-times apathetic readership. But there are great issues of decisive import which, when put to the test, merit the word. And there are few doctrines in Christianity, perhaps none, which can lay claim to greater significance than that of the Incarnation.

With the rise of modern theology incarnational doctrine has been subjected to a series of crises from which it has never escaped. Indeed, church historians of the future may someday marvel at the survival of the church in spite of her problematic underpinnings. Anyway, nearly every major new departure in theology, especially New Testament theology, has further complicated the study of the origins of incarnational thought. Before one debate can be settled another arises, and so on. The doctrine of the incarnation is left suspended somewhere in Limbo. One may well wonder where that leaves the church.

The following essay aims at clarifying some of the questions which threaten a basic doctrine of the Christian faith. A variety of factors behind the crisis are briefly reviewed. The focus is upon the issues as they relate to the New Testament and examines their significance for the origins of incarnational doctrine. Then, having placed the crisis in perspective, additional observations will be made by way of contribution to the debate.

There are two main sources of problem for the investigation of the earliest church's incarnational dogma: 1) theological, and, 2) historical. On theological grounds it is difficult to maintain that the incarnation was of central importance to the early church. Apart from a handful of mostly liturgical elements, and portions of the Fourth Gospel, the New Testament has nothing to say on the subject. Moreover, the doctrine of the incarnation is conspicuously absent from the outlines of the earliest preaching of the church at Jerusalem and of Paul himself. Hence there is scepticism as to whether incarnational doctrine was essential to the theology of the early church.

The second, and more important source of problem for incarnational doctrine, is historical. The incarnation itself has been called into serious question. The nagging suspicion is that it never really happened. The paucity of references to the subject in the New Testament not only makes questionable its theological centrality but also underscores the fact that it rests upon the slimmest historical foundations.

As a result, many scholars have gone so far as to claim that incarnational doctrine was invented lock, stock, and barrel by the early church. This position has been challenged, for example, in the recent publication, The Son of God, by Martin Hengel. He acknowledges that no comparable doctrinal development occurred in the subsequent seven centuries of the church's history, and so he doubts whether such a doctrine would
have been invented during the first two decades. However, against Hengel, the history of ideas suggests that it is precisely at the emergence of a new idea or complex set of ideas, like Christianity, that the strongest creative forces are present. Hengel's argument here is weak. The possibility certainly did exist for the introduction of unprecedented doctrinal innovations in the church's earliest years.

Yet scepticism about the incarnation on historical grounds would have remained relatively toothless had it not been for the appearance of strong supporting arguments. Impressive developments in modern New Testament theology have provided historically adequate explanations for the origin of incarnational doctrine without supposing it had any basis in fact. Areas in which such formidable advances have been made can be enumerated briefly as follows: 1) the refinement of the historical-critical method, 2) the comparison of early Christianity with the history of religions, and 3) the clarification of the nature and function of myth. All three are interrelated. Together they exert the severest pressure upon traditional interpretations of the incarnation. They will be investigated in turn below.

The perfection of the historical-critical method since the Reformation has been of the foremost consequence for the New Testament. Its application to the gospels, for example, has resulted in the discovery that they are composed of materials which previously had been circulating orally for decades. They represented the church's resource for preaching and teaching, and they had been adapted and modified in order to be appropriate for the needs of the church's mission. The question then arose naturally enough as to whether it was possible to find the original form and meaning which these materials had had when they first came fresh from the mouth of Jesus. To the extent that it was doubted that the original form could be recovered a measure of doubt attached to the authenticity of the tradition in question. Thus no important gospel tradition was left unchallenged, including that of the incarnation. And since Jesus' divinity is attested unambiguously in the Fourth Gospel alone, much greater doubt was attached to the authenticity of such a claim on his part than was attached to traditions found in two, three, or all four of the gospels, for example.

Employing the historical-critical method, it became apparent that a vast difference might exist in principle between Jesus the man, as he really was, and Jesus the legend, as people wanted to believe he had been. The more radical practitioners of the method suspect that Jesus' earliest followers transformed him from being the carpenter's son into being a Superman. In their desire to find the true Jesus, the Jesus of history, these scholars understand their task to be the unwrapping of the layers in which the supernatural Christ is packaged until a figure of more credible dimensions emerges.

At first glance their argument seems formidable. One is but too familiar with instances in which well-meaning disciples get carried away in their enthusiasm to claim all sorts of things about their leader which have little or no basis in fact. There seems to be no guarantee for the professional historian that the earliest Christians were immune from typically human weakness in this respect. Consequently, a significant portion of scholars for several generations have subjected the exalted figure of Christ in the New Testament to wholesale diminution in an effort to find an irreducible kernel of historical truth.

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Nevertheless, as many other scholars have noted, the difficulty with the radical approach to Christian origins is to know when to stop. If the Christ of the early church, the Christ of faith, is rather more like an onion than a package, then the peeling process may not end until nothing remains. Hence the majority of scholars have not been content to give unbounded historical scepticism the last word.

They too can appeal to historical generalities. For instance, from the field of comparative religions they cite the Buddha, Confucius, and Mohammed, as clear cases in which their basic characteristics and teachings are discernible behind, and even despite, the traditions and legends about them. Since there seems to be no good reason to claim that Jesus is an exception, the distinct probability is that the Jesus of history also shines through the traditions about him.

However, the question remains as to how much of the striking image of Christ in the New Testament is fact, and how much fiction. It is readily acknowledged on all sides that an appeal merely to historical probabilities is scarcely a sound way to bridge the gulf between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. Responding to the challenge, the scholarly community has renewed the search for lines of continuity between Jesus as he was first known and later proclaimed.

To date research has traced a substantial core of the Christ of faith's sayings and deeds recorded in the gospels back to the Jesus of history. After the application of stringent historical methods enough material survives to lend factual credibility to the portraits of Jesus as a wonder-worker, an exemplary prophet-sage, a populist/reformist candidate for the throne, and as one about whom later claims regarding his messianic status and dignity were not without their justification. Reliable evidence also remains for what would have had to have been tantamount to a messianic self-consciousness on Jesus' part.

The trend has even been felt in the discussion of the origins of incarnational doctrine, C. F. D. Moule's recent publication, *The Origin of Christology*, disputes the view that incarnational theology was invented by the early church. Numerous scholars have supposed that in the course of the early church's mission christological thought underwent evolution as it was adapted to varying problems and situations until ultimately the idea of Jesus' divinity was born. Moule argues that it is just as easy to interpret this process in terms of development rather than evolution. He prefers to regard the early church as having grown in her appreciation and understanding of the significance of Jesus as experienced by his original followers until she was compelled to recognize his divinity. Therefore, Moule finds no obstacle in the way of concluding that the divine Christ of faith is rooted in fact.

It would appear that the historical-critical method is presently associated with a rehabilitation of the historical foundations of incarnational doctrine. Nevertheless, so much work yet needs to be done that the exercise of this exacting discipline will continue to put incarnational dogma to the test.

Moreover, as long as related issues remain unresolved which might undermine traditional interpretations of the incarnation, whatever the results may be of the Jesus of history/Christ of faith debate, they will not be decisive. One such issue is the outcome of
the comparison of early Christianity with the history of religions, particularly Hellenistic religions. The historian's spade has unearthed evidence which makes incarnational language appear exceedingly ambiguous. It has become possible to agree that the doctrine of Jesus' divinity is not simply a fabrication of the early church and yet still maintain on historical grounds that it ought not be interpreted at face value.

For generations scholarship has recognized that Jesus was not the sole figure of Greco-Roman civilization to attract divine descriptions. Various cultic figures, and notables like Heracles, Alexander the Great, and the Caesars, to name but a few, were honored with similar ascriptions. For Jesus to have been styled, "Lord," or, "Son of God," for example, need not necessarily imply that he enjoyed personal preexistence and equality with the Almighty anymore than it does for these others. No one today would make the mistake of believing for a second, say, that Caesar Augustus was one bit more divine than the immortal Bugs Bunny. Therefore, the difficulty is to show how Christian incarnational language ought to be taken more seriously, as it were, than other kinds of divine descriptions from the period.

Being inconclusive, the recent attempt, for instance, by Michael Green to come to grips with the problem merely emphasizes its intractability. In an essay in The Truth of God Incarnate he observes that the Hellenistic heroes with whom Jesus has been compared offer but imperfect analogies. The language of deity used to describe Jesus is so distinctive, according to Green, that the validity of Christian claims is thereby enhanced. But Green fails to appreciate the full significance of the radical principle which characterized Hellenistic thought in general and religious thought in particular, a hyperactive syncretism.

Prior to any given application of divine language to a personage was a positive, creative urge to draw upon divine categories in order to express whatever was perceived to be of unusual or outstanding significance. There are two memorable instances of such activity in the New Testament itself. When Herod Agrippa I was acclaimed by the crowds as possessing the voice of a god, God passed a sentence of death on him because he failed to give God the glory, and thereby disclaim divine honors (Acts 12:21-3). Then again, when Paul performed a miracle at Lystra, Barnabas and he were hailed as Zeus and Hermes respectively, which interpretation they were required to deny vigorously (Acts 14:8-18). In an environment which had divinized to varying degrees a throng of personalities Jesus' divinity might appear simply as one more syncretistic convulsion belonging to the essence of Hellenistic religion. Against Green, therefore, the distinctive character of Christian incarnational language may be no more than relative.

Thus New Testament theologians would be well within their rights to suppose that it was only fitting for Jesus to win divine accolades. They might even have found cause for surprise had Jesus failed to excite divine honors, since one good test, so to speak, of a Hellenistic personage's originality and ability seems to have been whether ascriptions of divinity and apotheosis were obtained. The impetus behind incarnational language could then be attributed to the intense desire by Jesus and/or his disciples to do justice to the sweeping impact God was making through him upon the immediate course of events. Seen in this light, it becomes irresistible for some scholars to find in Jesus' res-
urrection the obvious stimulus for his subsequent apotheosis. Even within a milieu of Jewish monotheism the tremendous pressures released by the God-explosion in the Christ-event might tend to melt away the distinction between God Himself and the Bringer of God.

Also, scholars recognize that Jesus' divinization would have been a boon to early Christian missions. A garb of deity would have been invaluable in enabling the message about Jesus to compete with established religious personalities and their devotees. As religious propaganda, or public relations, Jesus' elevation would win him the public attention that it was felt he merited. Investiture with divinity would help to finalize his accomplishments, and magnify his uniqueness. Translation into the world of immortality would have secured him a prominent niche in the Pantheon of heroes and heroines. For all these many reasons and more, historians are generally highly sceptical of the foundations of Christian incarnational language and are unable to take its claims at face value.

Yet a word of caution is in order. The isolation of an important element in the early church's missionary success does not demonstrate conclusively that Jesus could not in fact have shared the nature of God. Because a message about Jesus which included references to his divinity might be better received by virtue of that fact, does not prove that the doctrine was invented for the purpose or arose strictly from related impulses. Moreover, supposing Jesus was God in the traditional sense, the mere fact there were so many divinized Hellenistic personalities would complicate any attempt to reconstruct the origins of incarnational theology. Despite these reservations, however, the relationship of the history of religions to early Christianity seems bound to continue to raise serious questions about the New Testament's interpretation of the incarnation.

Along with the historical-critical method and the history of religions there is a third, related source of difficulties for New Testament incarnational theology. The role of mythology in the New Testament generally and in incarnational dogma in particular has been perhaps the most hotly contested issue of the three. Much of the discussion has turned on differing estimates of the nature and function of myth. Since it is only fairly recently that a consensus of opinion seems to have emerged, the bearing of a large portion of previous debate upon the origins of incarnational doctrine needs to be revised. To begin, a sketch of that consensus will be made, and then its significance for the New Testament's interpretation of the incarnation will be explored.

When the topic of mythology comes up in contemporary conversation, all too frequently there is an inclination still to think immediately, for instance, of Greek or Roman mythology. That is, mythology is imagined to be a particular set of stories and traditions venerated by a culture distantly related to our own. Some will concede, no doubt, that our own culture also has its mythology, for example, "Star Wars," PROGRESS, John F. Kennedy, and The Great American Dream. Yet even these examples will probably be regarded as relatively weak cousins of the Greek or Roman type.

However, as scholars have come increasingly to acknowledge, mythology consists not so much of a peculiar collection of legends or worldviews as of a mode of thought responsible for all such products. Mythological expression is understood to be an activity
common to every known culture. The mythological mode of thought serves the human need to interpret events and forces which are perceived to influence or control human life and destiny. The models which result may contain numerous features which are themselves incapable of verification but are not less important because of that fact.

For example, the myth of PROGRESS preserves a utopian, optimistic conviction about technological achievement which has been absolutely indispensable to the vast changes in the social, political, and economic organization which have been made in the West during the past century. Of course, it is equally possible to regard the consolidation of technological advance as ultimately sowing the seeds of its own destruction. There is simply no way to verify how well-founded such utopian optimism is, but that fact has scarcely affected the power which this myth continues to exercise in our culture.20

Then again another popular misunderstanding concerning myth is the inclination to equate it with something untrue. To label something a “myth” is to condemn it as false. Yet such an attitude clearly does an injustice to the myths of “Star Wars,” PROGRESS, John F. Kennedy, and The Great American Dream, all of which contain distinct elements of truth.

Scholarship has come to accept that myth is a mode of expression which is usually found in the service of truth. It has commonly served to objectify and portray insights about and attitudes toward the human condition. As regards Greco-Roman civilization, the mythological mode of thought was the chief interpretative principle. Excepting to a degree several philosophical traditions, civilization had not yet attained to powers of articulation equal to the task of formulating and communicating such knowledge with commensurate precision. In order to say something profoundly important the ancients tended to fall back upon myth, whereas today, along with the option of mythologizing, there is the possibility of expressing similar ideas in very different and far more scientific terms.

Since the mythological mode of expression dominated Hellenistic culture, and since Jesus and the early Christians evidently claimed to possess far-reaching truths about the human condition, scholars have been inclined, naturally enough, to suspect that in various ways Christianity also used the mythological mode of thought. The New Testament itself attests that some early Christians were definitely prone to mythologizing.21 Hence the necessity arises to determine the significance of mythology for the development of early Christian theology, and especially for the New Testament’s interpretation of the incarnation.

Not all students of Scripture have undertaken such a study with equal relish. The examination of the mythological dimensions of the earliest Christian theology has produced more controversy than assured results. In part, the popular misconceptions about myth sketched above are no doubt at fault. The notion that mythological dimensions exist in the gospel is found offensive by many because it sounds, on the one hand, as if Christian mythology were no different from, say, pagan Greek or Roman mythology, and, on the other hand, as if Christian mythology were basically false or unreliable. As already argued, neither suspicion is well-founded. Christian mythology ought to be regarded as the mode of interpretation appropriate within Greco-Roman civilization for
expressing the significance of the sphere of divine influence which was observed to center around the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth.

The mythological mode of thought can be understood to belong to the related structures by which God chose to disclose himself, accommodating his revelation to the limitations of human thought and communication of the period. After all, the most common biblical and contemporary means for talking about God is anthropomorphic to character.22 We speak about him as if he were, like ourselves, immersed in time and space, possessed of a body, a mind, emotions, volition, etc. We draw upon the familiar network of our experiences and relationships to model a personality and behavior for One who eludes our finite understanding.23 In this respect the mythical dimensions of the New Testament may be regarded positively and uncontroversially as indicative of the effort to offset the general impoverishment of human language when discoursing about the transcendental.

However, popular misconceptions about mythology are not the only causes for the furor which surrounds the whole subject. Popular misconceptions about science also play a major part. The rise of modern science has had the effect of discrediting the reliability of the biblical witness, including its worldview. Related to scepticism about the Bible is the scepticism about the existence of God and other transcendent beings, and the possibility of miracles, interventions, etc. The result has been a conviction in many scholars that in order to be credible such mythological elements in the biblical worldview must be reinterpreted when possible, and rejected when impossible.

To question their presuppositions meets with little success, but much ridicule. Nevertheless, it is necessary to continue to call attention to the fact that a commitment to scientific method is not incompatible with a commitment to a biblical worldview. One may have an unqualified commitment to scientific method without supposing for a moment that it is the sole criterion for truth. There is no way to prove that scientific method is the sole criterion, or even the most important criterion, for truth, and to insist on it is to be dogmatic.24

Then again, it is often mistakenly supposed that because the universe is ultimately reducible to scientific explanation and prediction no room is left for transcendent beings to intervene. The difficulty is that by definition an intervention is unpredictable, such that without it the natural course of the universe remains unaltered. The conviction from the outset that the observable structure of the universe ought to provide evidence in support of the possibility of miracles seems misplaced. It boldly claims in effect that whatever is unknown can be explained in terms of the observable and the known without actually commanding a position which is able to be certain that all the unobservables have been taken into account. A practical estimate of the limits of the applicability of scientific method suggests humility in the face of what can or cannot be the case. It is prudent to be cautious and allow for the possibility of transcendental interventions, despite the difficulties in that view, rather than to exclude miracles out of hand.25

The conflict around the subject of mythology, therefore, is not between religion and science, properly speaking, but between worldviews. One worldview is sympathetic towards the mythology of the Bible whereas the other worldview is sympathetic towards
the mythology of *SCIENTISM* and *MODERNISM*. If sympathy towards the latter worldview goes so far as to introduce positivistic presuppositions into biblical exegesis then the inevitable result is the restriction upon the capacity of God to intervene, etc.²⁶

The impact of such an approach upon the interpretation of the incarnation is enormous. If there is resistance at the start to the idea of divine intervention, then it will be all the more likely there will be frank denial before the fullest possible kind of divine intervention imaginable, the incarnation. Hence, not only is the study of mythology a direct source of difficulty for the interpretation of the incarnation, but it is also an indirect source, inasmuch as it has sharpened the conflict between worldviews upon which interpreters depend when they approach Scripture.

Thus far three areas of New Testament theology have been discussed which have had vast influence upon the problem of the historical foundations of the incarnation: 1) the historical-critical method in its refined state, 2) the comparison of early Christianity with the history of religions as to the role of divine personalities, and, 3) the clarification of the nature and function of mythology. It is evident that these areas are broadly interrelated to one another. It is evident as well that singly or in combination they raise many questions for traditional interpretations of the incarnation which will continue to keep incarnational doctrine in a state of crisis.

Now it remains to sketch the two forms which responses to that crisis have assumed in the field of New Testament theology: 1) existential reinterpretations, and, 2) *functional* christologies. Both forms reflect in various ways attempts to take into consideration problems arising from the historical-critical method, the history of religions, and mythology.

Existential reinterpretations of the New Testament's incarnational dogma usually focus on how the incarnation can have meaning for us today.²⁷ They pick up the element of transcendence in order to stress the universal applicability of the message about the Kingdom of God which Jesus brought. The incarnation tends to be treated as a dramatic symbol of the unity of God and humanity, such that the highest aspirations of humanity and the commands of God coincide, leading to the conclusion that obedience brings the realization of authentic human life. Existential reinterpretations may preserve considerable amounts of traditional incarnational doctrine, as in the theologies of Moltmann and Pannenberg, and in some of the Liberation theologies. More commonly, however, existential reinterpretations thoroughly demythologize the biblical worldview and substitute a mythology more compatible with contemporary, rival worldviews. In either case, the historical reconstruction of the origins of New Testament incarnational doctrine is of secondary concern.

By way of contrast, historical reconstruction is of primary concern for the second major approach to the crisis in incarnational doctrine. *Functional* christologies seek alternative ways to explain how Jesus could bring salvation without having to be divine. *Functional* christologies, as opposed to *ontological* christologies, discount the traditional notion that Jesus somehow shared God's nature. Instead, it is claimed that Jesus did not have to be God in order to be like God and to act in God's place. Historical reconstruction becomes so valuable for functional christologies because it provides the op-
portunity to demonstrate graphically how much of the redemptive significance traditionally attributed to a divine Christ can still be retained for a non-divine Christ.

For example, in a recent publication G. W. H. Lampe has tried to relocate the theological significance of a physical incarnation in the activity of the God who is spirit. Lampe regards the immanent and thoroughgoing activity of God's spirit in creation to be so complete that the need for a physical incarnation disappears. Lampe finds no reason for supposing that God was unable to empathize and identify fully with his human creatures so that he would have had to become incarnate. Here it may be observed that one way or the other functional christologies attempt to justify the claim that Jesus was functionally equivalent to God, and that frequently it is God's spirit or Spirit which makes up the difference through self-accommodation.

Accordingly, the possible varieties of functional christologies seem nearly limitless. They share the same essential thrust. Jesus is not God; he is God's tool. Jesus is God's agent and representative. The more traditionally oriented the functional christology happens to be the more stress there is upon Jesus' uniqueness as agent. Thus universalists as well as the more orthodox can find the creation of functional christologies useful for their purposes.

The attraction of functional christology lies in its simplicity. It is no longer crucial to determine whether Jesus was truly divine before his theological usefulness can be estimated. It suffices for functional christologies to note that God possessed the power to delegate to his Messiah, the person of his choosing, all of the authority and might normally reserved for himself in order that his Messiah might accomplish his plan of salvation. The apparent advantage of functional christologies as opposed to ontological christologies is that the riddle of how a human being could simultaneously be God can be effectively by-passed. The net result for functional christology may even seem to be the same as for ontological christology: Jesus need be no less central or indispensable for salvation than if he were God of very God.

The implications of functional christology can be dramatized when viewed in relation to a work like that of C. F. D. Moule. Even if his demonstration is accepted that the historical Jesus merited the chief christological titles, Son of Man, Son of God, and Lord, functional christology might still argue that these titles expressed nothing more than Jesus' capacity to act like God and perform the mighty works of God. Rather than interpret the titles as fairly straightforward statements about Jesus' divinity, among other things, the element of the divine to which functional christologies devote themselves is Jesus' achievement of God-likeness. Jesus' mission is understood to have been the role of one who flawlessly reflects what God is like and what it is like to be like God. Jesus' attainment is first and foremost ethical, and even if the possibility that he was divine is not entirely discounted, yet his moral perfection eclipses all else. His imitation of God fulfils the substance of Old Testament theology.

Functional christology therefore regards these main titles of Jesus, and related materials from the New Testament, as means for characterizing Jesus' divinely inspired and directed behavior. A functional christology might agree with Moule that Jesus called himself the Son of Man without supposing that Jesus believed he had to be divine in order to perform the vindication of the People of God and the Last Judgment. A
functional christology might agree that he called himself the *Son of God* without supposing that Jesus intended it to be understood that he shared God's nature. Instead, a functional christology could claim that Jesus' enjoyment of an unprecedented dependency upon, and intimate fellowship with, God would suffice to explain his daring use of the Father/Son metaphors and his address of God as, "*Abba,*" precisely those features most often cited in support of claims for his divinity. Finally, the proponents of a functional christology might agree that Jesus invited the use of the divine title, *Lord,* without supposing that he intended to assert more than the already startling claim that everything in heaven and on earth was or would be subordinated to himself. Functional christology maintains that all this would be possible and more simply if Jesus possessed a unique empowering by the Spirit which sustained him in his relationship to God.

It should now be evident that functional christologies can accommodate themselves much more easily to the questions raised by the historical-critical method, the history of religions, and mythology. The paradox of how God became man is avoided, and so is the embarrassment it has caused theologians! Hence, if it becomes awkward at any point to justify the origins of ontological christology on historical grounds, then functional christology may seem to be the best alternative which sacrifices the least while preserving the most. In view of the serious problems facing ontological christology, as long as functional christology can provide formidable alternatives, the foundations of incarnational doctrine will hang in the balance.

Having placed the continuing crisis in incarnational doctrine in what is hoped to be a more manageable perspective, the opportunity may be taken to present some fresh considerations which relate to the historical foundations of incarnational dogma.

A start can be made by recalling the nature of the environment in which the idea of Jesus' divinity was first expounded and defended, Judaism. The incarnation first scandalized the Jews, because it threatened their commitment to radical monotheism. Christian Jews, like Paul or John, had to wrestle with the possibility that they were compromising that faith. What is more, the doctrine surely represented an obstacle in the church's mission to Judaism. Hence, the Jewish leadership of the infant church had to have had very deep convictions about the incarnation or they would have abandoned it. It seems that they were able to reconcile Jesus' divinity with the oneness of God, although they were unable to resolve entirely the tension between the two. Therefore, a promising means of approach to the problem would be to determine the reasons for their compulsion to retain the incarnation.

Since no single factor in the early church's experience generated as much theological force as the resurrection, it is reasonable to begin the search by looking for possible connections between it and incarnational doctrine. To be sure, it did not necessarily follow from the fact of the resurrection that Jesus had to be divine; otherwise all who await resurrection should also be divine. Rather, the resurrection constrained the disciples to reassess the words and deeds of the Jesus they had known. During the process of reflection, had any portion of the Jesus-tradition put forth a claim by Jesus to divinity, then the resurrection would have been viewed as God's certification of the claim. God would never raise a blasphemer.
Among the materials of the Jesus-tradition which came under scrutiny at the time were the "son of man" sayings. For example, Mk. 8:38 reveals that Jesus proclaimed that his ministry would be vindicated someday when the heavenly Son of Man (Dn. 7:13) intervened to bring the Judgment. At first it would have been natural for the disciples to suppose Jesus meant some figure other than himself. They may well have distinguished between sayings in which Jesus referred to the Son of Man and sayings in which Jesus employed the Aramaic circumlocution for the first person singular, "son of man." The disciples may have had little or no reason to suppose that Jesus intended to identify himself with the figure of Dn. 7:13, that is, except for one saying in particular.

At his trial before the high priest Jesus had unambiguously identified himself with the figure of Dn. 7:13. In answer to the high priest's question whether Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus may or may not have answered in the affirmative, but what he did assert took Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin by surprise. Jesus openly claimed that they would see him coming upon the clouds of heaven such that there could be no doubt that he intended the expression "the Son of Man" both to designate himself by means of the accepted circumlocution and to identify himself with the heavenly being of Daniel's vision.

The high priest was able to construe Jesus' claim as patent blasphemy, and sufficient grounds for the sentence of death. There is every reason to suppose that the evidence by which the Sanhedrin convicted him would become common knowledge as is often the case for sensational trials. Moreover, it would have been to their advantage to disseminate their findings, since the sin of blasphemy would have branded Jesus in the popular mind as one undeserving of their loyalty. Hence, any widespread support for Jesus would have vanished overnight. As late as Stephen's martyrdom the blasphemous identification of Jesus with the Son of Man was still well-known. Therefore, at least one of Jesus' sayings known to his disciples showed that he thought of himself as the heavenly figure from Dn. 7:13, and presumably they too were shocked.

What has always puzzled scholars is the rationale behind the Sanhedrin's decision that Jesus' confession constituted blasphemy. There is no known evidence from the period that the claim to Messiahsip was a breach of the Law, supposing Jesus actually did respond affirmatively to the high priest's question at that point. The problem, accordingly, seems to lie in Jesus' identification of himself with this heavenly being, and not with Messiahsip.

The answer may be found in the contemporary interpretations associated with the expression, "one like a son of man." It appears that the expression was understood by Judaism of the period to be applicable to transcendent beings alone. The point of the simile was understood to be anthropomorphic. Though one resembled a human being, in fact one was divine or angelic. Since it was evident to all concerned at Jesus' trial that he was not an angel, his claim to be the Son of Man in Daniel's vision strongly suggested, if not necessarily implied, he was somehow divine in the strict sense. It is little wonder that the high priest was enraged. Jesus' assertion was clearly intended to be provocative. No further evidence was needed. Jesus' claim to equality with God put him in the tradition of the sin of Adam, Satan, and others.
In order to reinstate Jesus’ credibility nothing short of the resurrection was required to validate that claim. The resurrection accomplished many aims at once, but the obvious meaning of the resurrection was to overrule the Sanhedrin’s otherwise well-founded judgment, despite the fact that their original motives may not have been the best. Jesus had not erred in his claim, and the church was obliged to face up to the ramifications from the beginning, or ignore the resurrection.

The unequivocal revelation of Jesus’ divinity to those who could not discredit their own eyewitness experience of his resurrection inevitably rippled through the disciples’ whole approach to the Jesus-tradition. Previously ambiguous or preposterous statements by him which might have alluded to his transcendence would have been clarified as a result. The famous Father/Son terminology found at Mt. 11:27/Lk. 10:22 would belong here. So too would the claims about something “greater” than the Temple, Solomon, and Jonah, from the same passages. Also, the possibility cannot be precluded that Jesus provided a select group of his disciples with esoteric teaching which would have become immediately applicable to his divinity. In any case, shortly after the resurrection there would have been numerous opportunities to pour divine content into the chief titles of Jesus: Son of God and Lord.

The process of elaboration and reinterpretation may be properly called, in Moule’s terms, one of development. Development may be defined as the working out of necessary implications which are carried seminally in particular ideas and events. The resurrection-vindication and Jesus’ identification of himself with the Son of Man qualify as the point of departure which drove the early church to proclaim the incarnation. But there remains the possibility of genuine evolution of incarnational doctrine, as well, if evolution may be defined for present purposes as the working out of possible implications which are not necessarily implied and yet are consistent with fundamental concepts.

Scripture itself provided the early church with the myth by which the significance of Jesus’ divinity might be fruitfully elaborated once it had been established independently. The figure of personified, preexistent Wisdom from Proverbs eight and nine was apparently read as a scriptural hint about Jesus’ divine status. Scripture was seen to allude to at least one co-equal with the Almighty in a fashion which involved no blasphemy. The Wisdom myth could then be adapted to help resolve the tension between Father and Son in a radically monotheistic milieu. The Wisdom myth had already displayed an attractiveness and adaptability within intertestamental Judaism before the church’s birth, securing for itself unsurpassed prominence as a source of theological speculation and innovation.

The door was then opened to the earliest disciples for any number of applications of the myth to expand upon the significance of Jesus. A natural consequence appears to have been for the disciples to view any of Jesus’ sayings or deeds which were reminiscent of the Wisdom tradition as intentionally ambiguous self-disclosures by Jesus concerning his Wisdom identity. In the Fourth Gospel the acme of the phenomenon is reached for the whole New Testament with a host of echoes from the Wisdom myth used to portray Jesus’ person and behavior. Evidently, the link between Jesus’ resurrection and his
identity as Wisdom made manifest was not a necessary one, but it seems to have been an emergent one which might be characterized as strictly evolutionary.60

Furthermore, the figure of Wisdom herself may have presented the early church with an altogether different means for arriving at the notion of Jesus’ divinity. It was understood that Wisdom was the co-agent of God in creation (Prov. 8:22-31). She was also understood to be instrumental in sustaining and renewing creation.61 No interruption of this picture occurred until Jesus’ resurrection. Through it he was revealed as the administrator of the Holy Spirit and of life and death in this world and the next. Renewed Creation centered on his authority and power. In brief, it may well have appeared to the eyes of his disciples that Jesus had superseded the role reserved exclusively for Wisdom.

Yet, rather than suppose a second co-agent had taken the first one’s place, especially considering Scripture’s silence about such a possibility, it would have been distinctly less difficult to imagine that Jesus was Wisdom, that he had always been Wisdom, and that he was merely the eschatological manifestation of the Wisdom that had always existed from the beginning. Thus the co-agency of Wisdom would remain intact, continuous, and unbroken. On this view the personified figure of Wisdom in Scripture and Jewish tradition would be interpreted as God’s foreshadowing of the astonishing advent in time and space of God’s co-agent, Wisdom incarnate. It may not be possible to demonstrate beyond reasonable doubt that the early church argued accordingly, but the possibility is well within her style of theologizing.62

Again it seems unavoidable to speak of an evolutionary tendency operative in the early church’s attempts to come to grips with the totally unexpected vindication of an accursed Messiah. The Wisdom myth taught by Scripture offered the first disciples a handle on a torrent of events within which they desperately needed to locate God’s plan, that is, to search out the wisdom behind it all. Without any prodding from the historical Jesus himself, the early church may still have felt compelled to dare to proclaim his divinity.63

Though there has not been ample opportunity to review and discuss more than a sample of the issues related to the historical foundations of incarnational doctrine, at least there seems to be enough evidence to warrant more optimism for ontological christology than the debate has frequently allowed to date. Surely, if the discussion has furnished anything in the way of positive accomplishments it is that the continuing crisis for incarnational dogma offers opportunities for coming to a greater appreciation of those first, most momentous interpretations of the person and destiny of Jesus. The exceeding richness and diversity of the earliest christologies has been underscored. It may even be safe to say that the early church did not view Jesus’ divinity so much as a burden for her mission to Judaism as a blessing which opened the way to understanding that God had fulfilled his promise to his people to take up permanent residence among them.
FOOTNOTES

1 Traditional confessional formulas, like the Nicene and Chalcedonian Creeds, seldom give complete satisfaction even to their authors, have met with the severest criticism in the modern period. To many theologians they appear to contain irresolvable problems concerning the two natures of Christ, divine and human, and so their trustworthiness and usefulness are suspect. At best, they are irredeemably inadequate, and at worst, hopelessly contradictory. Either way, a certain disenchantment with incarnational doctrine has set in which has communicated itself beyond the bounds of historical theology and has tainted the whole subject. For a refreshing exception, see T. F. Torrance, Space, Time and Incarnation London: Oxford UP, 1969).

2 The Synoptics and Acts do not refer explicitly to Jesus' divinity. The sharp contrast with the Johannine literature is obvious, especially with the Fourth Gospel. Nor is it developed in the Pauline literature. The following list of references, many of which are doubtful, are found in fragments of salutations, benedictions, prayers, confessions, and hymns: II Thess. 1:12, Gal. 4:4, I Cor. 8:6, II Cor. 8:9, Rom. 8:3, Phil. 2:5-11, Eph. 1:12, Col. 1:15-20, 2:9, Tit. 2:13, Heb. 1:1-5, II Pet. 1:1.


4 Yet the mere fact that the references to Jesus' divinity are concentrated in liturgical traditions shows that somewhere along the line the early church had a widespread and vital interest in the doctrine.


6 Ibid., pp. 1-2.


8 See Kuemmel, above, for the relevant literature.

9 See, for example, N. Perrin, Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus, (New York: Harper and Row, 1967).


13 Esp. pp. 1-10.


16 He does note the existence of syncretism but in another context, claiming (erroneously) that early Christianity was impervious to syncretism. See p. 39. There is a wealth of heterodox and Gnostic literature to the contrary, reflecting traditions much older than the documents in which they are often found. The worship of angels at Colossae (cf. Rev. 19:10, 22:8) is an obvious example of worship not exclusively devoted to the divine Christ, Col. 2:18.

17 Since the mythological form of the dying and rising god was well-known to the Hellenistic world, it is supposed that the resurrection would naturally have been viewed in that light.


19 Typical is the viewpoint held by the various scholars who contributed to The Myth of God Incarnate, op. cit.

20 Herein is sufficient proof that modern sophistication does not eliminate the need for mythological expression.

21 I & II Tim., Tit., II Pet., and Jude indicate that Christians were prone to follow "fables," or, muthoi, from which the transliteration "myth" comes. The point is that genuine Christian modes of thought must have been difficult to distinguish, by some anyway, from counterfeits. The fact confirms scholarly suspicions that Christian communication conformed to a degree with current practice, as would be expected in any case.


24 The author does not intend to disparage scientific method, but to respect the bounds within which it may operate.

25 The author does not overlook the notorious philosophical problems raised by the issue of miracles, but there is no place here to discuss them.
Which is not to say that natural explanations are not to be sought behind many events which are deemed miraculous in the Bible.

R. Bultmann, G. Ebeling, and E. Fuchs, are three leading proponents of thoroughgoing existential reinterpretation along these lines.

See the article which immediately follows by Dr. C. B. Kaiser for extensive criticism of Lampe's thesis.

The names of J. A. T. Robinson, A. T. Hanson, and R. H. Fuller, are among those who have most recently defended functional christologies.

Again, the contributors to The Myth of God Incarnate reflect similarly broad theological tendencies which can all be served by functional christologies.

The Fourth Gospel frequently is directed as an apology precisely to scandalized Jews (eg., 5:18, 10:33).

Since most of the leadership of the early Church was Jewish, the problem was a pervasive one.

It remained controversial throughout succeeding generations of Jewish-Christian debate, and is still a chief difficulty.

Of course, they were not alone in their failing. No successful resolution of the problem has ever been made!

It might be argued that the early church soon turned its back on Judaism in favor of the Gentiles for whom the doctrine of Jesus' divinity posed no problem, so that no great effort would have been required to maintain the doctrine after the initial period. Even if that were the case, and it does not seem likely, it would still not explain how a radical monotheist like Paul (Rom. 11:36) could write to the Jewish-Christian congregations of Rome and allude to Jesus' divinity (Rom. 8:3) without qualification. It seems rather that Jewish-Christians were able to satisfy their fears about compromising monotheistic faith without rejecting the divinity of Jesus.

The reason the resurrection held such theological import is as simple as it is the object of neglect by so many historians. Only a portion of Judaism actually believed there was to be a resurrection sometime in the future.

Sadducees, for example, did not accept the doctrine (Mk. 12:18-27, Acts 23:8). Of the Jews who did believe there is no evidence from all the literature of the entire period that the resurrection was thought to be anything other than a general resurrection of the whole body of righteous believers that was to occur with the coming of the Messiah, or have some association with his reign. No one was expecting the resurrection of a single individual at some time before this general resurrection. Hence, there was no basis for any hope in the disciples, unconscious or subconscious, which might have led to a mass hallucination, or anything of the sort. It is therefore highly improbable that the idea of Jesus' resurrection could possibly have been invented.

Moreover, having died on a cross, Jesus was understood to have suffered God's curse according to Dt. 21:23. Suffering God's curse removed the possibility that one could ever be righteous enough to hope for resurrection. As Martin Hengel has shown, Judaism never applied its martyr-theology to those who had been crucified (see his important study, Crucifixion, London: SCM, 1977, pp. 84-5). The cross remained a scandal to the Jew regardless of who hung upon it. Therefore, there is a second sound reason to conclude that the fabrication of Jesus' resurrection would have served no purpose, since no Jew would have believed it unless it was impossible to deny it. Only after the fact of Jesus' resurrection could the theological significance begin to be appreciated precisely because some kind of theological significance had to be found for what was previously thought to have been unthinkable, that God should somehow reverse the eternal Word of Scripture.


For the whole problem see C. Colpe's article in TDNT, vol. viii, pp. 400-77, esp., pp. 403-4, for the circum-location.

Whatever subsequent modifications the saying may have undergone the reference to the "clouds of heaven" clearly pointed to the text from Daniel.

Compare Jesus' open admission to being Messiah in Mk. 14:62 with the more ambiguous statement in Mt. 26:64, and the very different account in Lk. 22:67-71.

The supposed "fickleness" of the Jerusalem Passover multitude, changing from enthusiastic acclaim for Jesus to crying out for his crucifixion, is therefore understandable as the natural reaction by a movement that feels betrayed by its leader. They sought to avenge their misplaced loyalties on the blasphemer.

See Acts 7:56, which is universally agreed to go back to early sources. See the similar account of the martyrdom of James, the Lord's brother, in which he confesses Jesus to be the Son of Man (Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, II, 23). Eusebius took the account from Hegesippus, a Jewish-Christian, so the tradition attests at the very least to the early second century Jewish interpretation which associated the title with Jesus' blasphemy.

See the commentaries.

I rely upon the brilliant analysis of apocalyptic vision terminology by Dr. Seyoon Kim in his doctoral thesis,
The obscure figure of Daniel's vision had invited, and continued to invite much speculation in Judaism. The most likely candidate was the Archangel Michael, the mightiest of all the angels and the patron angel of Israel (every nation had an angelic overlord). Possibly, Jesus' confession was taken to be an insult to the angelic majesty. Yet that would not alter the approach of the disciples in the wake of the resurrection from which it was clear that Jesus was the Son of Man and equally clear that he was not an angel. As an exalted heavenly being in Daniel's vision, Jesus might have been thought to be like the angels, since this was commonly expected to be the state of those who were to enjoy resurrection (Mk. 12:25). However, the passage in Daniel clearly and forcefully distinguishes the nature of the "one like a son of man" from all the righteous saints of the People of God who throng about him, implying that he, like these, had the appearance of being human, but that for him it was something remarkable. By process of elimination, since Jesus was not an angel it could only have been remarkable for him to appear like a man if he were divine. Curiously enough, there may be a clue here behind the very earliest christological heresies of docetism and adoptionism in which it was often claimed that Jesus had been an angel or transformed by an angel.

So too the parable of the wicked tenants who slay the owner's son, Mk. 12:1-10.

Jesus certainly did reserve some of his teaching for his immediate supporters. The figure of the Beloved Disciple in the Fourth Gospel as Jesus' confidant also supports the notion. Then again, many early Gnostic-Christian sects may have known of precedents honored by "orthodox" circles in which claims were made to have special access to private teaching from Jesus through particular disciples, which would explain the rise of similar, recurring claims amongst Gnostic groups.

An analogous kind of argument might be found in the use of Ps. 82:6 in Jn. 10:34ff.

A suggestion made to C. F. D. Moule, op. cit., p. 43, by P. A. Glendinning.

Against Moule, as above.


See Mt. 23:34/Lk. 11:49 in which the process of reinterpretation was occurring as late, apparently, as the composition of one or the other of these gospels.


Against Moule, as above.

Some kind of explanation is necessitated by the fact that the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel, and to Hebrews, and the hymn in Col. 1:15-20, read like midrashic interpretations of the text from Proverbs. As in 1 Cor. 8:6, Jesus is the original co-agent in Creation, and not just the eschatological co-agent. He has assimilated the details of the Wisdom myth nearly completely. It is easier to suppose he was interpreted to be the revelation of a major portion of God's hidden wisdom than that he was something else altogether different and new, so 1 Cor. 2:7-8.

Yet it seems preferable to allow for a combination of developmental and evolutionary processes in the formation of the earliest Christian incarnational doctrine.