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THE HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF EARLY
CHRISTIAN CREEDS IN ORTHODOX CHRISTOLOGY

PAPER 2

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INTRODUCTION

- I. Existence of creeds in the study of the historical Jesus contrasted to the historical study of other major religious figures

The main idea for this paper is that early Christian creeds are vitally important for reconstructing an accurate Christology in the earliest era of Christianity. The early creeds contain the essence of the seed of the Gospel that inspired and shaped the proclamation of the apostles. Why is the study of the historical Jesus important? Luke Timothy Johnson stresses the importance of such an academic venture as follows:

Simply as the pivotal figure in the shaping of Western culture, the human being Jesus must be engaged. Ignorance of Jesus when studying the character of European or American civilization is an inexcusable as omitting consideration of Muhammad in seeking to understand the culture of the Middle East, or skipping over Confucius when trying to grasp Chinese culture.¹

If Johnson's observation is correct about the necessity of understanding the historical Jesus in order to grasp Western culture, then it follows that without a warranted picture of the historical Jesus, the potential for misunderstanding Christianity is monumental.

The study of the historical Jesus is an anomaly in the world of comparative religions. Not only is the historicity of Jesus almost universally accepted but also the picture of who Jesus was, in terms of manuscript evidence, so far outmatches every other ancient religious leader that there is simply no comparison.² In order to understand the gravity of the early Christian creeds one must see, by way of comparison, the incredible gap of historical studies of founders of other major world religions. The sheer magnitude of raw information on Jesus, both in terms of volume and precision, compared to that of Muhammad, Buddha, and Krishna (although not a

¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*, James K. Beilby & Paul Rhodes Eddy, eds. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009), 153.

² Robert Price holds that Jesus never existed. For his argument, see, *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*, 55-104.

founder per se of Hinduism, nonetheless ranks very high as a significant figure in Hinduism). To illustrate this concept, a brief survey of several religious figureheads is provided.

Historical Muhammad

The new religion, born out of the deserts of modern day Saudi Arabia, that took the Middle East by storm in the 7th century, is surprisingly historically anemic concerning verifiable facts about Muhammad. Of this intriguing evidential gap, Von Irving M. Zeitlin writes:

With regard to Muhammad's Meccan period, practically nothing is known for sure except his marriage and his preaching. The Quran itself provides no coherent biographical narrative, and as (F.E.) Peters aptly observes, "For Muhammad, unlike Jesus, there is no Josephus to provide a contemporary political context, no literary apocrypha for a spiritual context and no Qumran scrolls to illuminate a Palestinian 'sectarian milieu.' . . . The original text of Ibn Ishaq's biography was lost, and no extant copy of the original exists. All we have is the recension by Ibn Hisham who died more than 200 years after the Hirja. . . the truth, then, is that the quest for the historical Muhammad is beset with difficulties and problems, the chief of which is the nature of the sources."³

The primary problems arising from "the nature of the sources" is that they are from non-eyewitnesses far removed by several generations from the actual events. Unlike the study of the historical Jesus, which has mountains of eyewitness testimonies, as well as enemy attestation within less than one hundred years, there is no such manuscript evidence for the historical Muhammad. On this note, Peters laments:

The historicity of the Islamic tradition is . . . to some degree problematic: while there are no cogent internal grounds for rejecting it, there are equally no cogent external grounds for accepting it . . . The only way out of the dilemma is thus to step outside the Islamic tradition altogether and start again.⁴

Undoubtedly, parallel or contemporary sources can greatly assist understanding the historical basis of one's religion but to have to comprehensively "step outside" of the sources

³ Irving M. Zeitlin, *The Historical Muhammad* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2007), 1-2.

⁴ Francis E. Peters, *Muhammad and Origins of Islam* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), 312.

altogether should be a cause for serious concern. As will be demonstrated, the existence of the early Christian creeds alleviates the study of the historical Jesus from such a dire predicament.

Historical Krishna

R.C. Majumdar argues for the historicity of Krishna, “There is now a general consensus of opinion in favour of the historicity of Krishna.”⁵ While Edwin Bryant recounts that, “Early Buddhist sources also provide evidence of the worship of Krishna prior to the Common Era,” the portrait of Krishna is, at best, hazy whether one looks at the *Nidessa* from the fourth century B.C.E. or the *Mahabharata* (dated anywhere from 3100 B.C.E. to the fourth century C.E.).⁶ While it is reasonable to conclude that Krishna was indeed a historical figure, the shaky sands of corroborating historiographical and manuscript evidence handicap the ability of scholars to establish anything other than a very vague outline of Krishna.

Such a lack of solid historical evidence, even for making a minimal facts argument, must inevitably spill over into either vagueness or a disconnect from accepted religious tradition to religious practice. Hindu ethics have long been recognized as anything but absolute (compared to the classical monotheistic religions, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity). In this light, Hindu ethical relativism.

There is no strict separation between “is” and “ought” in Hindu ethics . . . The answer to “What ought I to do?” is more complex in Hindu ethics than in the Western religious ethics like Christianity. Of course, a simple but formal answer to this question is: “Do what dharma dictates,” or “Do whatever your dharma is.” This answer, however, is empty of content. It is like the captain of the team advising his or her players, “Do your best,” which cannot guide the players’ conduct. Unlike a single scripture such as the Bible, which is the primary authority in moral matters for Christianity, there is no single book or a single authoritative church in Hinduism to interpret what one’s dharma is.

⁵ R.C. Majumdar, *The History and Culture of the Indian People*, vol. I (Bombay [Mumbai], Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1951), 303.

⁶ Edwin Francis Bryant, *Krishna: A Sourcebook* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4.

Moreover, Hinduism is a pluralistic religion and has no central authority to say conclusively what one ought or ought not to do in moral matters. Each individual is therefore responsible to find out what one's dharma is and act accordingly.⁷

There well could be a connection between the historical uncertainty about Krishna and the other Hindu avatars and the fluidity of dharma and ethics. One could argue that a high historical probability of the overall portrait of a religious figure would solidify the parameters of religious practice and ethical belief. A lack of the former could conceivably foster a lack of security that the received religious ritual was indeed correct. Hence, in order to compensate for considerable historical uncertainties, a wide girth in religious practice, namely ethics, could be allowed. What is not being argued for is the imposition of a contemporary requirement for historical proof upon ancient Hinduism or an unwarranted conclusion such as the lack of historical certainty or high probability always alters religious practice. Rather, that vagueness of a historical grounding point inevitably produces different historical accounts, which lead to different religious practices. Moreover, if the gist of those accounts tends towards Hindu relativism then a diversity of religious ritual would inevitably increase, not only in practicality but also in doctrine.

Historical Buddha

A similar problem confronts the scholar who attempts to ascertain some semblance of the historical Buddha. Hans Penner observes, "The issue here is are the words in the text the words of a historical person? Clearly, the only sources we have for an answer to that question are late Buddhist texts."⁸ Manuscripts of Buddhist scriptures which speak of the Buddha are extremely late in comparison with the New Testament. If the nature of the sources is a quandary for the

⁷ Robin Rinehart, ed., *Contemporary Hinduism: Ritual, Culture, and Practice*, "Hindu Ethics," by S.S. Rama Rao Pappu (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO Inc., 2004), 166, 169.

⁸ Hans H. Penner, *Rediscovering the Buddha: Legends of Buddha and their Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 128.

historical Muhammad, then the sources for the historical Buddha are, historiographically, almost without value. Edward Conze, translator of, *Buddhist Scriptures*, laments the deplorable state of the reconstruction of the historical Buddha:

Buddhist tradition differs fundamentally from that of Christianity. In Christianity we can distinguish an ‘initial tradition’, embodied in the ‘New Testament’, from a ‘continuing tradition’, which consists of the Fathers and doctors of the Church, the decisions of councils and synods, and the pronouncements of various hierarchies. Buddhists possess nothing that corresponds to the ‘New Testament’. The ‘continuing tradition’ is all that is clearly attested. The bulk of the selections in this book was written down between A.D. 100 and 400, in other words about 600 to 900 years after the Buddha’s demise. For the first five hundred years the Scriptures were orally transmitted . . . different schools wrote down different things. Much of it was obviously composed centuries ago, and some of it must represent the direct and actual sayings of the Buddha himself. At present we have, however, no objective criterion which would allow us to isolate the original gospel. All attempts to find it are based on mere surmise, and the discussion of the subject generally leads to nothing but ill will and fruitless disputes.⁹

In light of these facts, not only does the quality of the New Testament shine brighter but also the early creeds, embedded in the New Testament, exponentially increase in historical value, especially for constructing an early Christology. There is simply no parallel in Buddhism. In an exchange with Japanese Buddhists, Paul Tillich posed the historical inquiry to the truth claims of Buddhism:

‘If some historian should make it probable that a man of the name Gautama never lived, what would be the consequence for Buddhism?’ After noting that the question of the historicity of Gautama Buddha has never been a central issue for Buddhism, one scholar responded by saying, ‘According to the doctrine of Buddhism, the *dharma kaya* [the body of truth] is eternal, and so it does not depend upon the historicity of Gautama.’¹⁰

One would doubtfully uncover a presupposition more foreign to the Christian conception of truth claims than this. Keith Yandell and Harold Netland portray the vivid distinction between the non-necessity of Buddha’s historicity and the historicity of an orthodox Christ, “Christian

⁹ Edward Conze, trans. *Buddhist Scriptures* (New York: Penguin Books, 1959), 11-12.

¹⁰ ‘Tillich Encounters Japan,’ edited by Robert W. Wood, *Japanese Religions*, vol. 2 (May 1961), 48-50. Cited in, Keith Yandell and Harold Netland, *Buddhism: A Christian Exploration and Appraisal* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 197-198.

faith, by contrast, is inextricably rooted in the historical person of Jesus so that Christian teachings cannot be separated from his life, death and resurrection.”¹¹ The proposition of this paper is not only that, as Yandell and Netland argue, Christian teachings cannot be separated from the historical Jesus but also the clearest picture of the actual Jesus is found within the creeds recorded in the New Testament.

Historical Jesus

Not only does the manuscript evidence about Jesus outweigh the evidence for every other ancient religious leader but secular leaders as well. Gary Habermas, recounts:

The New Testament is easily the best attested ancient writing in terms of the number of manuscripts. Ancient classical works have comparatively few manuscripts, with twenty entire or partial copies generally being an excellent number. By comparison the New Testament has over 5000 copies. Such a wide difference would provide the New Testament with a much better means of textual criticism, which is crucially important in ascertaining the original readings.¹²

Habermas’ point concerning textual evidence is of great import. If one can grasp, at the very least, for example, a hazy picture of the life of Tiberius Caesar, then, in terms of manuscript evidence filtered through the sieve of textual criticism, the picture of the historical Jesus becomes even more high definition by comparison. If one chooses to discard such overwhelming manuscript evidence, one would also be obligated to essentially disengage the serious study of ancient history altogether. Given the tools of historiography, this is altogether unnecessary.

¹¹ Keith Yandell and Harold Netland, *Buddhism: A Christian Exploration and Appraisal* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 198.

¹² Gary R. Habermas, *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ* (Joplin: College Press, 1996), 54. See F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), especially p. 16; John A.T. Robinson, *Can We Trust*, especially p. 36 (Habermas’ note).

Objection: Between the death of Christ and the composition of the New Testament, the New Testament writers changed Jesus from a charismatic leader to Christ

John Dominic Crossan calls the thirties and forties of the first century “the lost years of earliest Christianity . . . dark ages.”¹³ R.T. France criticizes a similar approach by Wrede, “For Wrede, Mark’s presentation of Jesus as Messiah was not a development from Jesus’ own claim but a falsification of it.”¹⁴ While Crossan is certainly on the fringe of historical Jesus studies, on the popular level, there is a strong hermeneutic of distrust not only of religion but of history itself.

Bart Ehrman, an academic heir of Crossan’s views, has certainly capitalized upon such a groundswell of popular distrust of ancient sources, (a distrust that has long since debunked on the academic level), by publishing a number of books. One of the most popular is, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story of Who Changed the Bible and Why*. Ehrman writes of the alleged “problem” that initially loosed him from his evangelical moorings:

So rather than actually having the inspired words of the autographs (i.e., the originals) of the Bible, what we have are the error-ridden copies of the autographs. One of the most pressing of all tasks, therefore, was to ascertain what the *originals* of the Bible said, given the circumstances that (1) they were inspired and (2) we don’t have them. I must say that many of my friends at Moody did not consider this task to be all that significant or interesting . . . For me, though, this was a compelling problem.¹⁵

These questions formed into doubts and the doubts grew into positions. Ehrman later discarded evangelicalism and adopted Crossan’s view that not only did Jesus not rise from the dead but that his body was probably left on the cross to rot or was thrown into a shallow grave

¹³ Paul Barnett, *The Birth of Christianity: The First Twenty Years* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 1.

¹⁴ R.T. France, “Development in New Testament Christology,” *Themelios* 18 (1992), 5. Cited in, Paul Barnett, *The Birth of Christianity: The First Twenty Years*, 2.

¹⁵ Bart Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story of Who Changed the Bible and Why* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2005).

and eaten by dogs.¹⁶ Ehrman later penned an even more provocative work, *Forged: Writing in the Name of God—Why the Bible’s Authors are Not Who We Think They Are*. The aim of this paper is to provide an undercutting defeater to the claims of Crossan and Ehrman by reconstructing an accurate early Christology within the early church from not only the early creeds but by the persecution of the early church by both the Jewish religious establishment and the Roman Empire.

II. What did the earliest Christians believe between the ascension of Christ and the composition of the New Testament?

The early Christian creeds are inestimable in value for acquiring the earliest picture of the historical Jesus, especially of what the earliest Christians believed between the ascension of Christ and the composition of the New Testament.¹⁷ In order to gain a clear concept of the early creeds, the main kinds of creeds will first be examined.

1. Lordship Creeds

Bruce Demarest defines a creed as, “(from the Lat. *Credo*, ‘I believe’), an authoritative statement of the main articles of the Christian faith to which believers are expected to assent.”¹⁸ The early Christian creeds are by far the best evidence that we have for an accurate picture of early Christology among the earliest Christians. J.N.D. Kelly writes, “The most primitive

¹⁶ John Dominic Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), 187-188.

¹⁷ Skeptics still unpersuaded by the veracity of the resurrection of Christ, much less his ascension, would do well to read *Did the Resurrection Happen?: A Conversation with Gary Habermas and Antony Flew*, by Gary R. Habermas and Antony Flew, edited by David J. Baggett (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009). Flew, the most prolific writer for atheism in recorded history, dialogues with Gary Habermas, a world-renowned expert on the resurrection account and the historical Jesus. Flew converted to theism before his death and penned the shocking book, *There is a God: How the World’s Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).

¹⁸ Bruce Demarest, *New Dictionary of Theology*, Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, & J.I. Packer, ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 179.

confession had been ‘Jesus is Lord’, and its import had been elaborated and deepened in the apostolic age.”¹⁹ The two main examples of this Christological creed are recorded by the Apostle Paul in Romans 10:9 and Philippians 2:11. Romans 10:9 reads, ‘ὅτι ἐὰν ὁμολογήσῃς ἐν τῷ στόματί σου κύριον Ἰησοῦν καὶ πιστεύσῃς ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ σου ὅτι ὁ θεὸς αὐτὸν ἤγειρεν ἐκ νεκρῶν, σωθήσῃ.’ Philippians 2:11 reads, ‘καὶ πᾶσα γλῶσσα ἐξομολογήσεται ὅτι κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς εἰς δόξαν θεοῦ πατρὸς.’ One can almost see a fulfillment of the advancement of the Gospel throughout the Roman Empire in these two texts. Whereas Romans 10:9 portrays the promise of God to the individual who will “*confess (ὁμολογήσῃς) in/with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe (πιστεύσῃς) in your heart that God raised (ἤγειρεν) him from the dead, you will be saved (σωθήσῃ),*” Philippians 2:11 contains the eschatological crescendo of the gospel preached by the Apostle Paul (this verse follows what is probably an early creed sung at Christian baptisms).²⁰

In Romans 10:9, both the confessional aspect of the Gospel, an understood repentance coupled with faith, and the act of regeneration, as seen in the passive voice of σωθήσῃ, indicating that the individual who confesses the Lordship of Christ and believes in him in no way generates the act of salvation. Rather, God is in view as both the one who provides the possibility of salvation and actualizes it via the regeneration of those who call upon him. Daniel B. Wallace makes a striking Trinitarian observation concerning the use of κύριος in verse 9 and verse 13, πᾶς γὰρ ὃς ἂν ἐπικαλέσῃται τὸ ὄνομα κυρίου σωθήσεται, which is a direct quote from Joel 2:32a (Joel 3:5 in the Hebrew Bible), which reads, טַלְמִי הַיהוָה יִשָּׁב אֶרְקִרְשָׁא לְכָּ הַיהוָה.. The ESV translates it as, “*And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.*” Wallace observes:

¹⁹ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* 5th ed. (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 138.

²⁰ Bruce Demarest, *New Dictionary of Theology*, *ibid.*

Thus to confess that Jesus is *the* Lord is to confess that he is the Lord mentioned in v 13. This verse is a quotation of Joel 3:5 (Hebrew; 2:32 in LXX), in which “Lord” is in reference to Yahweh. Such an allusion is hardly accidental, but part of the Pauline soteriological confession. For Paul, to confess that Jesus is Lord is to confess that he is Yahweh.²¹

Not only is this text evidence of a early high Christology but also of orthodox Trinitarianism. Any hint of syncretism, Jesus as a mere prophet, or an intermediate being is altogether absent. In terms of syncing with Judaism, as Wallace illustrates, this creed could not have been more abrasive. To equate Jesus with Yahweh or κύριος (the word used in the LXX for יהוה), was blasphemy in the eyes of 1st century, Palestinian Jews. Moreover, it excludes all other paths to God. It is altogether exclusive. This explains why, from the earliest eons of the existence of the Christian church, that all other gods and idols were entirely rejected. If Jesus is indeed Lord then there are no other co-equals. Jesus is far superior to any pantheon of Roman gods or elaborate system of intermediary spiritual beings. The gravity of such a Christology is of massive import in understanding the rejection of idols by the church and the ensuing persecution by the pagan Roman world.

Philippians 2:11, as mentioned previously, contains the essence of Romans 10:9 yet with an extended emphasis on the inexorable advance of the gospel into the eschatological horizon. Notice in the text the connection between the confession of Jesus as Lord and the glory of God:

καὶ πᾶσα γλῶσσα ἐξομολογήσεται ὅτι
κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς
εἰς δόξαν θεοῦ πατρὸς (Philippians 2:11).

The ultimate point of this text is not the salvation of persons but the glory of God coming from that salvific act. Central to the proclamation of the early church was that short,

²¹ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 188.

inflammatory statement, both to devout Jews and pagan Romans, “Ἰησοῦς κύριος,” that early Christians held fast to even though they knew it would lead to exile, prison, and even death.

1 Corinthians 12:3 also contains a Trinitarian allusion. The text reads, “διὸ γνωρίζω ὑμῖν ὅτι οὐδεὶς ἐν πνεύματι θεοῦ λαλῶν λέγει· Ἀνάθεμα Ἰησοῦς, καὶ οὐδεὶς δύναται εἰπεῖν· Κύριος Ἰησοῦς, εἰ μὴ ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ.” Here one finds the “κύριος Ἰησοῦς,” confession tied to the Apostle Paul’s admonition concerning discernment with spiritual gifts. Notice that God the Father, in reference of His Spirit (πνεύματι θεοῦ), God the Son (Κύριος Ἰησοῦς), and God the Holy Spirit (πνεύματι ἁγίῳ), are all both necessary and understood as cooperating in order to make the distinction between truth and error in the Corinthian church.

2. Baptismal Creeds

Philippians 2:5-11 contains one of the most beautiful pictures of the relationship within the Trinity in all of the New Testament. Some commentators believe that it was a creed sung as a hymn at Christian baptisms.²² C.S. Keener argues that the majority of New Testament scholars hold this text to be “a pre-Pauline hymn.”²³ From this text, several snapshots of an early and high Christology stand out. (1) The absolute magnificence of Christ in his pre-incarnate state, ὃς ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων οὐχ ἄρπαγμὸν ἠγήσατο τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ, (2:6), (2) the humility of Christ in the incarnation, ἀλλὰ ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν μορφὴν δούλου λαβὼν, ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος· καὶ σχήματι εὐρέθεις ὡς ἄνθρωπος (2:7), (3) the extreme humility and obedience of Christ to the will of the Father in enduring a horrific crucifixion, ἔταπείνωσεν ἑαυτὸν γενόμενος ὑπήκοος μέχρι θανάτου, θανάτου δὲ σταυροῦ (2:8), (4) the exaltedness of the Son by the Father

²² D.A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary: 21st century edition* 4th ed. (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), in *Logos Library System* [CD-ROM].

²³ C.S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), in *Logos Library System* [CD-ROM].

through the resurrection, διὸ καὶ ὁ θεὸς αὐτὸν ὑπερύψωσεν καὶ ἔχαρίσατο αὐτῷ τὸ ὄνομα τὸ ὑπὲρ πᾶν ὄνομα (2:9), (5) the absolute Lordship and dominance of the name of Jesus over every other name (herein is the essence of every early creed: the Lordship of Christ), ἵνα ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ πᾶν γόνυ κάμνη ἐπουρανίων καὶ ἐπιγείων καὶ καταχθονίων (2:10), (6) and the subsequent eschatological subjection of all creation under the Lordship of Christ, καὶ πᾶσα γλῶσσα ἐξομολογήσεται ὅτι κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς εἰς δόξαν θεοῦ πατρὸς, (2:11). The preservation of such a pre-Pauline hymn deals a serious undercutting blow to the claim that the New Testament presents an edited Jesus, altogether different than the historical Jesus.

3. Resurrection Creeds

In a sense, the Lordship creeds have an embedded belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Without a bodily resurrection, there can be no conquering of death. Without a conquering of death, the title of Κύριος Ἰησοῦς seems awkwardly pale. Probably the most poignant confession of the resurrection account is found in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4.²⁴

Jesus' physical resurrection provides the only grounds upon which the early church could claim that Jesus is Lord. Had the early church advocated a laughable sort of spiritual resurrection, it is highly improbable that the Jews would have sent out counter-missionaries to the gospel claiming that disciples had stolen the body, as they most certainly did. Matthew claims "this story has been spread among the Jews to this day" (Matthew 28:15). Dates for Matthew's gospel range from the early 60's to the early 80's C.E. Overall, the claim of a purely spiritual resurrection would have probably elicited no more than a shrug and the rolling of eyes from the Jews. Aberrant theological theories were rampant during the first century. It was all about the body. Such a message struck at the bastion of both Jewish and Roman authority.

²⁴ This passage will be studied in detail in 4. Timeframe of Origination.

For Jews, it meant that the prophet from Galilee was the one, as the Apostle Paul writes, “who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Timothy 1:10). For Romans, it meant that Caesar would have to give up his title as κύριος to a Jewish carpenter from Galilee. After the Roman Republic was assassinated by the ambitiousness of Julius Caesar, from its remains arose the grotesque monster of the Roman Empire; an extensive imperial cult that revolved around the worship of an Emperor of a people who had thrown off the yoke of autocratic tyranny hundreds of years earlier. An example of the degree of Emperor worship is seen from what was spoken of Augustus Caesar, “Divine Augustus Caesar, son of a god, imperator of land and sea, the benefactor and savior of the whole world.”²⁵ Paullus Fabius Maximus, proconsul of Asia, proposed beginning the new year on Augustus’ birthday:

(It is hard to tell) whether the birthday of the most divine Caesar is a matter of greater pleasure or benefit. We could justly hold it to be equivalent to the beginning of all things...; and he has given a different aspect to the whole world, which blindly would have embraced its own destruction if Caesar had not been born for the common benefit of all.²⁶

Compared to the cruel insecurities and bizarre atrocities committed by many of the Emperors who succeeded him, Augustus was very amenable. Hence, the claim that Jesus rose from the dead, taken together with the claim that He is Lord, would have struck at the core of both Roman politics and Roman religion.

In light of an undeniably high Christology within a hostile environment would easily explain Jewish persecution by Saul the Pharisee and the maelstrom that struck the Jerusalem church and scattered it. Claudius’ expulsion of the Jews from Rome, likely caused by the

²⁵ David Braund, *Augustus to Nero: A Sourcebook for Roman History*, 66. Cited in, Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 125-126.

²⁶ ET in Price, *Rituals and Power*, 55. Cited in, Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 133.

bombshell of Christians witnessing within the Jewish community, is yet another bit of evidence pointing to the unchanging gospel of an orthodox Jesus from the very beginning.²⁷

4. Timeframe of Origination

An objection arises at this junction. The skeptic demands an explanation of the grounds upon which one bases the claim that these creeds are early. Unquestionably this is a valid question. Upon what basis can one claim that these creeds are the earliest evidence of Christian belief concerning the central issues of the faith? Examination of the conversion of the Apostle Paul is particularly helpful here. N.T. Wright argues:

While engaged in a violent persecution of the church, he was confronted, on the road to Damascus, with a blinding vision of the risen Jesus. He continued to Damascus, and there regained his sight and was baptized *c.* AD 34 (Acts 9:3-19). In obedience to his new Lord he began at once to preach Jesus as Messiah in the synagogues, and became in his turn the object of Jewish persecution . . . at this point he apparently spent some time in Arabia (Gal. 1:17), returning to Damascus for three years before going to Jerusalem (Acts 9:26-29).²⁸

Even if Wright is wrong about the date of Paul's baptism, it cannot be by more than a few years. Paul did not waste time investigating the experience that shattered his worldview on the road to Damascus. What exactly did Paul begin "at once to preach," shortly following his conversion? Even outside of taking into account Acts 9:20 "*And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God,"*" the violent plot of the Jews to murder Paul should cause the thinking inquirer to conclude that Paul's message was not accepted as an alternate theological theory by the religious establishment of the Jews. Given the vehement

²⁷ Albert Henry Newman, *A Manual of Church History*, vol. 1 (Chicago: The American Baptist Publication Society, 1948), 56. It is doubtful that Claudius knew the details of Christian theology or even Judaism for that matter. It is reasonable to assume that his conclusion was that it was an internal Jewish religious issue and the most pragmatic political solution was removal of the entire Jewish population from the Eternal City.

²⁸ Bruce Demarest, *New Dictionary of Theology*, 496.

hatred of Jewish religious leadership against the message that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah and Paul's nocturnal escape in a basket being lowered over a city wall, points to the possibility of him preaching such an inflammatory message. Paul was undoubtedly very acquainted with the confession of the fledgling church because he was the lead persecutor of it. One could argue that Paul's role as leading persecutor of the early church qualified him as an expert on their most basic confession: Ἰησοῦς κύριος. It must be kept in mind that the earliest Christians were Jews who still kept the Old Testament Law. They were devout according to the Mosaic Law. Why would Paul persecute fellow Jews? Simply put, their confession that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah, the Son of God, an unquestionably high Christological confession. Paul Barnett claims that the impact of Paul's persecution of the fledgling church "is difficult to overestimate" because "had these events not occurred, Christianity may have remained a Jerusalem-based sect to be swept away in the Roman invasion of 66-70 together with groups like the Essenes and Sadducees."²⁹

Even circumstantial evidence of the background of Paul, before or even outside of his conversion, is sufficient to build a minimal case for the high Christology of early church creeds. The unrelenting persecution by Saul, a Pharisee, is entirely unwarranted unless there was something qualitatively different in the proclamation of the early Christians. At the heart of this difference, David Aune describes as, "Perhaps the single most important historical development within the early church was the rise of the cultic worship of the exalted Jesus within the primitive

²⁹ Paul Barnett, *The Birth of Christianity: The First Twenty Years*, 32.

Palestinian church.”³⁰ Such a development makes the Jewish-instigated persecution entirely plausible.

All of the other apostles (except for traitor Judas Iscariot), were alive when Paul became a convert to the group that he had previously wanted to exterminate. Thus, the account of 1 John 1:1-3 carries over into what was inevitably taught to Paul:

What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life—2 and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us— 3 what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ (ESV).

Not only was Paul acquainted with the early confessions with a high Christology but received his message from a generation of eyewitnesses. Even more curious is Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 15:1-3:

Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, 2 by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. 3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures (ESV).

Paul paints a powerful connection in verse one and two between the Gospel that he preaches and what he had received in verse three, “παρέδωκα γὰρ ὑμῖν ἐν πρώτοις, ὃ καὶ παρέλαβον, ὅτι Χριστὸς ἀπέθανεν ὑπὲρ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν κατὰ τὰς γραφὰς 4 καὶ ὅτι ἐτάφη καὶ ὅτι ἐγήγερται τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῇ τρίτῃ κατὰ τὰς γραφὰς.” There is a noticeable fluidity here in the Greek text. Paul delivered or handed over (παρέδωκα), what he had first received (πρώτοις, ὃ καὶ παρέλαβον). There is simply no room in the text for Paul formulating a new doctrine of Jesus.

³⁰ David E. Aune, *The Cultic Setting of Realized Eschatology in Early Christianity* (NovTSup 28; Leiden: Brill, 1972), 5. Cited in, Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 127.

One has to step outside the circle of textual evidence in order to construct a theory in which Paul hijacks the Jesus of the early church.

Could Paul have intentionally distorted the account? Regardless of one's view of inspiration, historiography and textual criticism both must apply Ockham's Razor, the *lex parsimoniae*, or that postulates must not be multiplied beyond necessity.³¹ The most cohesive explanation is that Paul received the message of the orthodox Jesus, as contained in the early creeds, and preached that same Jesus throughout the Roman Empire.

Most importantly, Paul hinges this received gospel as the one "by which you are saved." Hence, Paul connects the content of his preaching to the past and the future: to the past because it is what he had received from the early believers (some of which he may have persecuted), and the present and future reality of God continuing the save all those who call upon the name of Jesus. Paul also argues in Galatians 2:2,6 that the Apostles validated the gospel he had preached to the Gentiles and "added nothing to me" (Galatians 2:6). Therefore, the gospel that Paul received, preached, was validated by the other Apostles in Jerusalem, had come full circle having endured the crucible.

This begs the question of what the beginning in 1 John is referring to. In this sense, "the beginning," clearly refers to the public ministry of Jesus and the calling of the disciples. J.N.D. Kelly identifies the later, "tradition of the fathers," as:

Doctrine which the Lord or His apostles committed to the Church, irrespective of whether it was handed down orally or in documents, and in the earlier centuries at any rate they

³¹ Patrick J. Hurley, *A Concise Introduction to Logic* 8th ed. (Belmont: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2003), 568.

prefer to employ other words or phrases to designate the Church's unwritten traditional teaching.³²

What did the Apostles do since the beginning? John makes it clear that they proclaimed this message. Kelly also highlights an often overlooked aspect in the study of early Christianity:

There is no reason to infer, however, that the primitive Church regarded the apostolic testimony as confined to written documents emanating from, or attributed to, the apostles. Logically, as it must have done chronologically, *the testimony stood prior to the documents*, and it would be more correct to say that the latter were valued precisely because they were held to enshrine the former.³³

The connection with the historical Jesus and early creeds is simply that earlier historical accounts are probably the best. Given the report is not erroneous, clarity usually increases the closer the historical account is to the historical event. How then can one know that the New Testament, or even the early creeds, is what the Apostles actually preached? The answer is quite simple. Churches were founded upon the gospel that the Apostles preached and those churches both believed and passed down the same message. One does not find any evidence of a coup d'état within the circle of the Apostles, the early churches, or among the authors of the New Testament. From the dawn of the earliest Christian house gatherings to the Council of Nicea in 325 C.E., the core of the gospel message was continually preached and affirmed. Had Paul or any of the other Apostles altered what the earliest Christians believed, one would have much reason to believe there would have been a theological collision of epic proportions.

Despite the fact that the early church has never had respite from doctrinal assault, such as the invasion of Judaizers (Galatians 2:14), the church held fast to the Gospel. To edit Jesus from a charismatic teacher to Christ would have surely caused a seismic split within the early church.

³² J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 30-31. Emphasis mine.

³³ *Ibid*, 33.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the existence, transmission, and preservation of the early creeds, all of which exhibit an incredibly high Christology, severely undercuts the claims of Crossan and Ehrman. Not only is it possible to gain an accurate picture of the historical Jesus, but the stark evidential difference between the historical Jesus and the historical study of other major religious figures is simply incomparable.

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