



Casey, Maurice.

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

Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1991. Pp. 197. Paper. \$29.95. ISBN 9780664227654.

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God is a revised version of Maurice Casey's 1985 Cadbury Lectures delivered at the University of Birmingham. As the title suggests, Casey presents his reconstruction of the development (or perhaps more properly, evolution) of New Testament Christology, which he believes got increasingly higher as Christianity grew increasingly Gentile.

Basing much of his investigation on the thorny issue of identity, which he measures on a scale consisting of eight factors (ethnicity, scripture, monotheism, circumcision, sabbath observance, dietary laws, purity laws, and major festivals [12]), Casey argues that the only explicit divine Christology we find is in John's Gospel, which represents the *Sitz im Leben* of a predominantly Gentile Johannine Community, and has little, if any, historical veracity.

But John's Gospel isn't the only one to display the early church's *Sitz im Leben*; Casey also argues that the titles Messiah, Son of God, and Son of Man, as they appear in the Synoptic Gospels, all have "some connection with [Jesus'] historic ministry" (54), even if not used directly by Jesus or his disciples, but really tell us something about the situation of the early church who gave them meaning and significance that they did not originally have.

However, Jesus' earliest followers maintained seven of the eight identity factors (purity laws excepted) that Casey identified at the beginning of his study. He goes so far as to say that the

historical Jesus embodied Jewish identity. This is significant because it meant for his followers that a departure from the identifying features of Judaism would be a departure from Jesus' Judaism and a departure from God.

Second Temple intermediary figures are examined according to static parallels, which are known beliefs about intermediaries that can also be found in beliefs about Jesus, and dynamic parallels, which are evidence that such figures were involved in processes whereby their status/function increased (78). The bulk of the Casey's treatment is concerned with the second category, which features exalted patriarchs, personified divine attributes, and principal angels, beliefs about which were spawned by the needs of particular communities and limited only by Jewish monotheism.

Casey posits a three stage development (which is not strictly chronological as there is some overlap) in the 50 or 60 years it took for Jesus' status to rise to the level of deity. The Christian community was a Jewish subgroup in the first stage, while Gentiles entered the Christian community in significant numbers without becoming Jewish in the second stage, before finally Christianity was identified as a Gentile religion in the third stage.

The early chapters of Acts along with pre-Pauline confessional material (1 Cor. 11:23-25, 15:3-4, 16:22; Rom. 1:3-4) and the letter of James are situated within the first stage of development. The so-called Christ hymns of Philippians 2:6-11 and Colossians 1:15-20 present Jesus as highly exalted and nearly divine, but not full deity, and are situated within the second stage of development, of which Paul, who sowed the seeds for stage three with his lax attitude toward Jewish *halakhah*, is situated in general.

Revelation, Hebrews, 1 Peter, the Synoptic Gospels, and the latter part of Acts are all considered stage two developments that come short of attributing divine status and proper worship to Jesus. It wasn't until the members of the Johannine Community were thrown out of the synagogue that a Gentile community in conflict with "the Jews" would be born and develop their views of Jesus without regard for the identifying factors of Judaism. Thus the Gospel and Letters of John exhibit unambiguous belief in the full deity of Christ and his personal preexistence and Incarnation.

There is little, if anything, to commend about Casey's work here. He begins with questionable premises about an alleged Johannine Community, and while this view was largely held by scholars 25 years ago when Casey originally delivered these lectures, it has fallen on hard times in

recent years.¹ Martin Hengel was surely correct to quip that “nothing has led research into the Gospels so astray as the romantic superstition involving anonymous theologically creative community collectives, which are supposed to have drafted whole writings.”² But even if we were to grant the community hypothesis it is by no means evident that Casey’s reconstruction is to be preferred over others. Larry Hurtado can accept a form of the community hypothesis and come to the conclusion that the Johannine Community was Jewish Christians who were expelled from the synagogue for their Christ devotion.³

Casey also frequently argues from silence as in denying the historical reliability of John’s Gospel based on the absence of similar material in the Synoptic Gospels. It’s “incomprehensible,” according to Casey, that the Synoptics would omit the significant Christological statements and events recorded in John (24-26). Yet Casey seems to ignore that Luke was probably a Gentile whose audience was probably predominantly Gentile. What does this say about the similarity we should expect between the two Gospels? When Casey argues for the Johannine Community’s “Gentile self-identification” he rests a lot on the Johannine use of the term “the Jews”⁴ to describe those outside of the faith Christian community, but he notes that where John uses the term in his account of the temple cleansing, Matthew, Mark, and Luke do not (28). Why shouldn’t we expect similar usage from the Gentile Luke?

One also has to question the entire notion of “Gentile self-identification.” If the Gospels were intended to be circulated, as scholars such as Burridge, Bauckham, and Hengel have competently argued, then wouldn’t features such as the explanation of Jewish terms and festivals make sense if the author knew his material would reach a mixed or predominantly Gentile community? And

¹ See Craig S. Keener, [*The Gospel of John: A Commentary*](#) (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 1:105-08; Martin Hengel, [*The Johannine Question*](#) (London: SCM, 1989; repr. 2009); and Richard Bauckham, ed., [*The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*](#) [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998]).

² Martin Hengel, [*The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ*](#) (trans. John Bowden; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2000), 81.

³ See Larry W. Hurtado, [*Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 329-426.

⁴ What about similar Pauline use of the term in 1 Cor. 9.20; 2 Cor. 11.24; Gal. 2.13-15; 1 Thess. 2.14? Does this suggest Paul, who identifies himself as “circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee” (Phil. 3:5) is not a Jew? It seems that Casey wants to read more into the use of the term than is warranted.

contra Casey's understanding of John 10:16-17, wouldn't Jesus' identification of "other sheep" (Gentiles) who are "not of this fold" (the Jews) signal the Jewishness of John's immediate audience (or possibly the alleged Johannine Community)?

Casey's handling of other NT material in general is woefully inadequate. The use of OT YHWH texts in reference to Jesus in Paul is brushed aside (as is the case with the overall NT use of the OT); the significance of Jesus' place in the Lord's Supper in opposition to pagan deities in 1 Corinthians 10 is not properly accounted for; the *maranatha* prayer of 1 Corinthians 16:22 is not recognized as addressed *to Jesus*; Hebrews is breezed through with no exegesis of the opening chapter and its clear depiction of Christ's superiority over the angels by virtue of his eternity and immutability; Revelation is side-stepped by making the banal observation that the Lamb is distinguished from God; Colossians 1:15-20 is wrongly read as taking up Wisdom speculation, which therefore attributes a created status to Christ just as Proverbs does to Wisdom; and Adam figures much too prominently in Casey's interpretation of Philippians 2:6-11.

In every instance we see Casey's conclusion that "only the clarity of the Johannine prologue should convince us that an author did believe in the deity of Jesus" (114) driving his exegesis, if it can even be called that! And this bespeaks the general circularity of his overall presentation. Casey already knows what *is* so that determines for him what *can be*. The texts are constrained in such a way that they can only fit his conclusion; this is hardly responsible scholarship. And I've yet to say anything about Casey's suspect identifying factors and the manner in which he employs them. At times he confusingly assigns half-points (29, 32, 123) rather than whole-points and each point seems to have arbitrary significance. The issue of Jewish identity, both in antiquity and in modern times, is confusing enough without adding a contrived point system to establishing it!

In short, Casey's contribution to the inquiry into the origins of Christology is useful only in so far as it shows students/scholars/researchers how *not* to engage the evidence. One will certainly want to consult this work if they're interested in the history of scholarship on early Christology or if they're interested in radical views of its development, but in terms of compelling argument and reconstruction, they'll want to look elsewhere, such as in the works of Dunn, Hurtado, and Bauckham, who all offer inductive studies that draw conclusions (even if conflicting) based on responsible historical investigation and exegesis of the primary sources.