



O'Neill, J. C.

Who Did Jesus Think He Was?

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

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In chapter 1 O'Neil challenges a basic assumption that Jesus was adopted as Lord and Messiah at his resurrection. He persuasively argues that adoptionist readings of Acts 2:36 and Romans 1:3-4 are unsatisfactory and are not enough to overthrow the overwhelming majority of the NT witness to Jesus' status as Messiah. He points out how the language of being 'begotten' and 'made' (Lord) is consistent with the enthronement of the king and shows appointment to a position that one was already/always worthy of.

Chapters 2 and 3 focus on Jewish messianic expectations prior to the fall of Jerusalem. O'Neill argues that all Jews shared a common expectation for *the* Davidic Messiah to come. The argument that many varieties of messiahs were expected is found wanting as:

All Jewish groups agreed to look in scripture for information about the forerunner of the Messiah, about the priest at the time of the Messiah, and for types and antitypes of the Davidic Messiah... The preference of some writers for this type and of other writers for that type has misled modern scholars into thinking that the different types represented radically different views about the Messiah. The differences derived from the variety of different clues God was believed to have planted in the sacred scriptures, not from any disagreement that the final redeemer would be David's son. (41)

But the Messiah was also expected to be hidden, only to be revealed by God. O'Neill suggests that this is what made Jesus' claim to be the "Son of God" (an epithet that O'Neill takes as a messianic title) at his trial blasphemous. He cites a law concerning false prophets from the Mishnah (Sanhedrin 11.5) which says that "he that prophesies what he has not heard and what has been told him not," but adds the words "to tell" at the end of the citation in order to make his point. He says that "The Messiah was told not to tell that he was the Messiah." (53)

Chapter 4 focuses exclusively on the Teacher of Righteousness in the Dead Sea Scrolls. O'Neill argues that the Qumran sectaries believed the Teacher of Righteousness to have died a shameful death (possibly by crucifixion) at the hands of the Wicked Priest (see pp. 57-9) and expected him to return as "the *Prophet and Messiah of Aaron and Israel*" (68); the "Son of God and Judge, the [heavenly] Melchizedek who is called *God*;" a "*glorious Man* who would fight for them in the last battle." (73) In other words, their beliefs about the Teacher of Righteousness were that he was both Messiah and God incarnate. O'Neill turns to the NT and other ancient Jewish texts in chapters 5 and 6 to show that such a belief was not without precedent.

In chapter 5 O'Neill argues for the doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation in the NT based largely on the lack of evidence that there was any controversy regarding them. He does well to show the threefold themes, patterns, and formulae in the NT that informed the early Christians and ultimately led to formalized creedal expressions of the doctrine of the Trinity, but to claim that the "New Testament in all its parts turns on the *dogmas* of the Trinity and Incarnation" (93, italics mine) is anachronistic. It would be more accurate to simply say that the data available in the NT is consistent with the later and more organized doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation. Claiming full grown doctrines based on the argument that "[t]here is no evidence that Christians ever were without these dogmas" (93) is going to convince, I suspect, very few readers.

And to take things further, in Chapter 6 O'Neill claims that the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation were pre-Christian Jewish doctrines, that is, if there was no controversy surrounding the early Christian belief in these doctrines then they must have been pre-Christian Jewish precedents for them! He does this by pointing to threefold patterns elsewhere, patterns that don't clearly describe the Son and the Spirit, although at points he claims that they do. And there's nothing like the consubstantiality that O'Neill admits in chapter 5 is foundational for the doctrine of the Trinity to be found in any of his examples. At best he can argue that pre-Christian Judaism was not strictly opposed to the development of trinitarian conceptions of God (which I believe is a tenable position), but to argue that it was itself trinitarian is incredible.

The evidence he sets forth for a *doctrine* of the Incarnation in pre-Christian Judaism isn't much better. After rejecting the notion that the origin of the doctrine of the Incarnation can be found in texts that depict angels (or other heavenly beings) coming in human form, or texts that

describe human beings who had undergone apotheosis, he appeals to a variety of pseudepigraphical and deuterocanonical texts, (heavily focusing on the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs). But that he can show theophanic language in eschatological passages does not a *doctrine* of the Incarnation make. Once again, he'd have done better to argue that there existed a conceptual framework in which a later doctrine of Incarnation could have been born out of (and this does seem to be the case).

In Chapter 7 O'Neill takes the position that Jesus never overtly claimed (or denied) to be the Messiah, but that this, in and of itself, is evidence that he was in fact the Messiah, whom all Jews (as argued in chapter 2) expected to be hidden. For Jesus it wasn't what he claimed, but rather how he acted, that was evidence of his messiahship (see pp. 117-9). Unfortunately for O'Neill's thesis, there is data suggesting that Jesus did claim to be the Messiah at both his trial in Mark 14 (and par.) and all throughout John's Gospel. O'Neill's solution to this problem is to relegate the material in John's Gospel as non-historical (this is the argument of chapter 9, but in that chapter he argues that some of the material "belong[s] to a larger body of revelations that, within the New Testament, are peculiar in style and content to the Fourth Gospel, the First Epistle of John, and Revelation" [164]; he also claims that that John's Gospel bears witness to the same kind of 'Messianic silence' as the Synoptic Gospels) and thus unattributable to the historical Jesus (although as he also argues in chapter 9, John's Gospel records "words and actions of Jesus that are similar to the words and actions we find in the Synoptic Gospels" [164]).

He deals with Jesus' statement to the high priest at his trial by saying that the text of Mark 14:62 is uncertain based on a couple of manuscripts and the witness of Origen. He prefers the reading of Matthew ("You say that I am") which he believes is an avoidance of the question rather than an affirmation of Jesus' messiahship. When dealing with "the Son of Man" passages O'Neill suggests that the title can be understood as a reference to others, a self-reference, and a Messianic title depending on the context. He suggests that Jesus never used it (not even in the Olivet Discourse!) as a Messianic title in reference to himself. Chapter 8 provides case studies from the Synoptic Gospels in support of the argument from chapter 7; this chapter is meant to be used for reference.

Who Did Jesus Think He Was? is a mixed bag. On the one hand O'Neill's argument against the scholarly consensus on adoptionist readings of Acts 2:36 and Romans 1:3-4 is brilliant. I'd suggest that this alone makes the book worth reading and giving careful attention to. O'Neill also shows an impressive familiarity with a wide array of ancient texts beyond the Old and New Testaments. The detailed footnotes, bibliography, and author/subject index also fall in the 'positives' category. But on the other hand, there are the contrived theories of pre-Christian *doctrines* of the Trinity and Incarnation. There are times when O'Neill performs some exegetical gymnastics that are completely unconvincing (see e.g., pp. 86-8 and his exegesis of Philippians 2:6-11). It seems that at times (for the most part?) O'Neill has begun with his conclusion and

then read the texts to fit his conclusion, rather than fitting his conclusion to the texts. Students of Christology will want to interact with this text for sure, but this book presents a perfect case of the need to, as my pastor says, "eat the meat and spit out the bones."