



into the Melting Pot

the question is more important than the answer

Sunday 16 March 2014

When Jesus Became God

Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels

Jesus is portrayed as a charismatic teacher, healer (and exorcist) in the mystic Jewish tradition, who spoke often about the present and (near) future 'kingdom of God'.

Miracle stories are included, but few concerning nature.

Son(s) of God

Not literally participation in the divine nature, due to Jewish monotheism, but representing divine characteristics.

The phrase is used in references to Israel, pious Jews, kings of Israel at their enthronement, Jesus, his disciples and followers.

'My Son' appears in the baptism story.

'The Son' is used in only one instance (Matthew 11:25) and then not in all manuscripts.

Jesus bore the title due to his closeness to God; he actively avoided the 'Christ' or 'Messiah' label.

The very early Church

'Followers of the Way', also known as the Nazarenes and Messianists (Christians), were a sect within Judaism – just as the Pharisees, Sadducees, and the Essenes.

A community who saw God's love as (distributive) justice in action – the poor, the widower, . . .

The cultic entry was by baptism, and the sign of acceptance was the receiving of the Holy Spirit, later formalised by the laying on of hands (power and control by the hierarchy). One additional ritual was a communal meal held on 'the first day of the week'.

Non-Jews were welcomed, just as they were into Judaism (which also used symbolic baptism).

The Second Coming

The Parousia - there was a strong belief that Jesus' return was imminent, and within the lifetime of that generation. Evident throughout Acts and Paul's (genuine) letters, although tempered as time passed. This eventually disappeared from church life by about 150CE.

Jesus & Paul

Paul claimed to have seen the 'risen Jesus' – several years after the appearances recorded in the Gospels, and thus after the 'ascension'.

His missionary work among the Diaspora Jews (and God-fearing non-Jews – referred to as 'Gentiles' or 'Greeks') led to conflict with the (Jewish Christian) church in Jerusalem, as well as with the Jewish authorities.

Baptism was important; the communal meal (Eucharist) became symbolic of the redeeming death of Jesus the Christ.

Paul was not concerned with the teachings of Jesus – only the Easter event.

Jesus was not God (1 Corinthians 11:3); Jesus as 'Lord' (not LORD) (eg Romans 10:9) was the profession of faith, effectively the first creed.

Jesus in John's Gospel

Apart from one instance, the teachings about the kingdom of God are absent, as are the synoptic parables. Miracles are the basis of the strong structural form of the gospel, demonstrating Jesus' power over nature.

Here, the titles 'Son of God' and 'Messiah' are openly used throughout, in a more elevated form than the Synoptic use.

Not only does John see Jesus as 'sent by God' to redeem, he introduces the title 'Lamb of God' and the idea of the sacrificial death of Jesus.

John introduces the 'I am' statements, a clear reference to Jahweh. More telling is the phrase 'Word of God' elevating Jesus toward divinity, but not an equal to God.

First and Second Century Church

The Didache or 'Teaching of the Twelve Apostles', written in the second half of the first century, nowhere mentions 'Christ', 'Messiah' or 'Son of God'. Jesus is throughout referred to as 'Lord' and occasionally as 'the Servant of God'.

Clement (95CE) also uses this phrase, along with 'Son of God' and 'High Priest'.

Ignatius of Antioch (~110CE) lifts the bar: 'our God Jesus Christ' is used throughout his letters, which contain early creedal statements including 'Jesus is . . . both Son of Man and Son of God'.

2 Clement (~140CE) confirms this move: 'Brothers, we must think about Jesus Christ as we think about God' is his opening phrase.

Diognetus (second half of the second century) uses the word 'Demiurge' (from Philo and Greek Platonism), the heavenly craftsman through whom the world was created, tying this in with 'the Servant' and Johannine 'Word' and thus blending then current philosophy with Christian theology.

Third Century Church

Throughout the years, with periods of persecution from Rome (and the challenge of Roman theology and paganism) along with Greek philosophy and Gnostic (wisdom) ideas, and the perceived need to bring all the disparate Christian communities together, both in theology and practice, various leaders arose to steer the early church in particular directions.

Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria and Origen, among others, all took part in the development of statements of faith and ideas concerning the role of the Eucharist, the literal nature of Jesus' 'virgin' birth, the meaning of Jesus' death in redemption and atonement, eternity, salvation and damnation, the identity of the Holy Spirit, and in particular the very ideas of orthodoxy and heresy.

The question of Jesus' divinity was one such area of controversy, where Jesus was afforded the title 'God' but, along with the Holy Spirit, was secondary to God (the Father).

Arianism (Athanasius)

In 312CE, Constantine won a battle over Maxentius and became Caesar. It had been preceded by a vision of a cross in the sky and this was seen as a portent: he stopped the ongoing persecution of the Christian church, and adopted Christianity as the state religion (in a bid to support unification of the east and west wings of his empire).

In 318CE, a presbyter called Arius, in the city of Alexandria, set out clear teachings on Jesus. In summary, Jesus was 'God in name' but not 'true God'; he had an origin (at his birth) and is not eternal. Arius' bishop, Alexander, along with his successor Athanasius, held an opposing view, that Jesus was begotten from all eternity; Alexander presented Arius with a confession, which he refused to sign and so he was then excommunicated and declared anathema (along with all those who held such beliefs).

Less conservative bishops called Episcopal councils, and Arius was declared blameless and reinstated. However, the debate continued.

Constantine took an active interest in these theological debates, wishing to produce harmony. He called the first Council of Nicea in 324CE. Only 220 or so bishops of the 1200 invited attended, with the majority coming from the eastern part of the empire. Months of wrangling settled on a new word being used, generally translated as 'of one substance'. Arian views were deemed heretical. However, the debate continued! Further Councils were called, with selective invitations, and excommunications and anathemas bounced back and forth depending on the majority attending.

Council of Constantinople 381CE

The then Caesar, Theodosius, decided to finally settle the issue, and proclaimed a Creed at the first Council of Constantinople. This included the crime, punishable by death, of those holding Arian views or documents. From this point on, Jesus was officially God, and the notion of the Trinity followed soon after.

Questions

What is the meaning of 'Divine'?

What is 'Son of God'?

What is 'Logos', the 'Word of God'?

Was Jesus Divine?

Does it matter?

What is the idea of the 'Trinity'?

Comparison between the Creed of 325 and the Creed of 381

The following table, which indicates by [square brackets] the portions of the 325 text that were omitted or moved in 381, and uses *italics* to indicate what phrases, absent in the 325 text, were added in 381, juxtaposes the earlier (325 AD) and later (381 AD) forms of this Creed in the English translation given in Schaff's work, *Creeeds of Christendom*.

First Council of Nicea (325)

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty,
Maker of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God,
begotten of the Father [the only-begotten; that
is, of the essence of the Father, God of God],
Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten,
not made, being of one substance with the
Father;

By whom all things were made [both in heaven
and on earth];

Who for us men, and for our salvation, came
down and was incarnate and was made man;

He suffered, and the third day he rose again,
ascended into heaven;

From thence he shall come to judge the quick
and the dead.

And in the Holy Ghost.

[But those who say: 'There was a time when he
was not;' and 'He was not before he was made;'
and 'He was made out of nothing,' or 'He is of
another substance' or 'essence,' or 'The Son of
God is created,' or 'changeable,' or 'alterable'—
they are condemned by the holy catholic and
apostolic Church.]

First Council of Constantinople (381)

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty,
*Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things
visible and invisible.*

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the *only-begotten*
Son of God, begotten of the Father *before all
worlds (æons)*, Light of Light, very God of very
God, begotten, not made, being of one
substance with the Father;

by whom all things were made;

who for us men, and for our salvation, came
down *from heaven*, and was incarnate *by the
Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary*, and was made
man;

*he was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and
suffered, and was buried, and the third day he
rose again, according to the Scriptures, and
ascended into heaven, and sits on the right
hand of the Father;*

from thence he shall come *again, with glory*, to
judge the quick and the dead;

whose kingdom shall have no end.

And in the Holy Ghost, *the Lord and Giver of
life, who proceeds from the Father, who with
the Father and the Son together is worshiped
and glorified, who spoke by the prophets.*

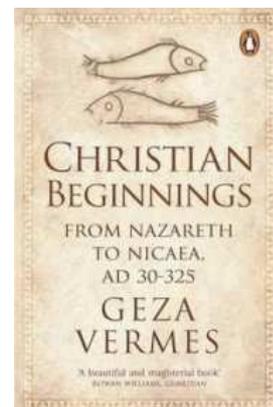
*In one holy catholic and apostolic Church; we
acknowledge one baptism for the remission of
sins; we look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen*

Book Reviews

Christian Beginnings - From Nazareth to Nicaea AD30-325

Geza Vermes

2013 :: Penguin :: £9.99 :: ISBN 978-0-141-03799-8 :: 244 + 28 pages



Geza Vermes died in 2013, and this book is a fitting testimony to his life's studies being a scholarly summation of his earlier books. He was born a Jew, became a Catholic priest and then the first professor of Jewish Studies at Oxford University – he was a world renowned expert on the Dead Sea Scrolls and early Christianity.

This is a methodical journey through time, examining the writings of the Jews and early Christians, exploring charismatic Judaism from Moses to Jesus, showing how Jesus built upon these foundations and then how the nascent church took these ideas, developing and changing them.

Pauline and Johannine Christianity are carefully dissected, seeing how they both added their own particular colour and direction to the Jesus movement story as recorded in the Synoptic Gospels.

Other early writings are considered (Didache, Barnabas & Qumran) as well as the conflicts between Jewish and Greek Christians, and the impact of a number of views (Gnosticism, Docetism, etc), each time seeking the key points of theology that were under review (Kingdom, wisdom, word, Eucharist, Logos, etc).

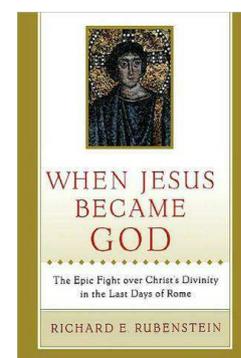
The Apostolic Fathers (eg Clement, Ignatius), second century apologists (eg Justin, Irenaeus), through to later philosophers (eg Tertullian, Origen) and up to the fourth century issues surrounding Arius and Constantine all have their turn, with particular emphasis on the development of the divinity of Jesus, as well as an overview of the early church, its leadership and scriptures.

This book has given me a real feel for those early writings (without the need to read them all in detail!) and Vermes has managed the huge task of such a summary with a scholarly approach without any personal gloss.

When Jesus Became God – the struggle to define Christianity during the last days of Rome.

Richard E Rubenstein

1999 :: Harcourt Books :: £15.00 :: ISBN 10 0-15-601315-0 :: 267 pages



Rubenstein is Professor of Conflict Resolution & Public Affairs at George Mason University.

This is a detailed history from surviving records pieced together to tell the (very sorry) story of the development of Christian theology from 220 to 382CE, although mostly focussed on the last 70 years of that period.

It is a well written and engaging story of religious zeal, political intrigue, intimidation, mob violence and murder – and that's just the bishops. Throw in the power struggles of the many Caesars trying to hold together a vast empire from Britain to Palestine and North Africa, and their use of religious ideas (paganism, Caesar worship, and Christianity) and persecution to enforce servitude and you have a volatile mix.

I found it fascinating to read, but so sad that 'the church' can have such a bloody history in complete disregard to the teachings of its founder!

In short, the religious arguments centred around the 'Arian controversy' – whether Jesus as the 'Son of God' was subordinate or equal to God. When Constantine adopted Christianity as the state religion in order to give the empire some cohesion, little did he know that the Council of Nicaea in 325CE was just the beginning.

Many Councils and multiple Creeds (and Emperors) later, with the theology and those excommunicated alternating depending on who had the upper hand at the time, it was eventually settled by the current Caesar, Theodosius, who proclaimed a Creed at the Council of Constantinople. This included the crime, punishable by death, of those holding Arian views or documents. That sorted it! By the way, the answer is 381CE – when Jesus became God 'officially'!