

Was Adoptionism the Earliest Christology?

A Response to Bart Ehrman

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In the early Christian movement, a significant dissimilarity arises with its treatment and view of Jesus. Jesus is unequivocally believed to be the Messiah as the early creeds in the New Testament (hereafter NT) attest (Rom. 1:3-4; 1 Cor. 15:3-4)¹. He is also given the title ‘Son of God’, and while scholars agree that this title was not unique to Jesus alone as it could have been used of angels (Job 2:1) or of the Davidic king (Psa. 2:7) in the Old Testament (hereafter OT), it was used of Jesus in a unique sense. The Christian use of this filial term denoted a divine connotation in that Jesus was uniquely Son of God in ways that others were not.² While the Judaism and paganism of Jesus’ day used this term, it was never used or understood the way Christians applied the term to Jesus.³ In this respect, there is a notable dissimilarity. An early Christian creed contained in Rom. 1:3-4 indicates that in the resurrection of Jesus, he was declared to be “Son of God”.⁴ Ehrman and a number of other scholars have argued that Rom. 1:3-4 reflects an adoptionist position in the early Christian movement wherein Jesus was adopted by God as his “Son”

¹ The belief in Jesus as the Messiah appears to have been unique even in the first century. Raymond Brown makes the interesting comment that “in all Jewish history before A.D. 130... we have no evidence that any living Jew was ever referred to as the Messiah except Jesus of Nazareth.” Raymond E. Brown. *An Introduction to New Testament Christology*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 73.

² This point is very pronounced in the Fourth Gospel where Jesus alone is referred to as the “unique” Son of God (John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18). John further reinforces this idea by reserving the title the Son of God to Jesus alone, whereas he refers to believers in Jesus as “children of God” (John 1:12; 11:52 cf. 1 John 3:1-2, 10; 5:2).

³ Douglas McCreedy. *He Came Down From Heaven: The Preexistence of Christ and the Christian Faith*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 56.

⁴ “and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord,” (Rom. 1:4). I. Howard Marshall comments on this passage that Jesus did not become Son of God because of the resurrection but rather that he was raised from the dead because he was the Son of God. I. Howard Marshall. *Jesus the Savior*. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 157. The former position that Jesus became “Son of God” at the resurrection was the position of the adoptionists, whereas the belief that Jesus was already the Son of God was the position held by the proto-orthodox.

at the resurrection.⁵ In short, Jesus was a mere man who became the Son of God by adoption in the resurrection. Secondly, from the evidence that we have about the Ebionites which is second hand in that the material is written by their opponents, the proto-orthodox, the Ebionites held that Jesus was adopted as God's son at his baptism, *not* his resurrection. It should be noted that adoptionists like the Ebionites believed in the resurrection of Jesus but he was never an object of worship among them.

While Ehrman argues that the view of the adoptionists was probably the original view of Jesus held by the earliest Christians⁶, this argument however fails on a number of points. First, it does not adequately explain the worship of Jesus in the context of communal and corporate worship among early Jewish Christians. In an adoptionist context, the worship of Jesus would amount to the idolatrous worship of a mere man, although he may have been adopted as God's son, he was nevertheless a man. Furthermore, it does not address the tension between the worship of Jesus within a monotheistic frame work of first century Judaism. The same categories of worship in Judaism towards God such as prayers, invocations, creedal confessions and hymns, are now being rendered to the risen Jesus by his followers. This practice is very early in the Christian movement. In order for this Jesus worship to be quickly attested in the nascent stage of the Christian movement, as dissimilar as it was, a satisfactory cause must be accounted for it. It must be a catalyst type of cause to quickly integrate such a phenomenon as the worship of Jesus. The direction again points to the resurrection of Jesus. Included in these acts of worship are also the applications of OT texts that have Yahweh or the Lord as their referent and now have Jesus as their reference point. This bespeaks a high Christology which was absent in adoptionist circles. Indeed if adoptionism was the earliest view of Jesus, this high Christology would not be prevalent at all or attested in the earliest texts of the NT. Adoptionist Christology would not necessarily be deemed incommensurate with Judaism nor provoke the Jewish sensibilities about monotheism.

The earliest clashes that the early Christian movement encountered with their Jewish contemporaries was mostly theological particularly their notion of Jesus as a

⁵ Bart Ehrman. *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* (New York / Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1993), 71.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

rightful recipient of worship or of placing Jesus in theistic categories reserved for God alone. Secondly, there appears to be an inconsistent historical problem. Most adoptionists took the position that Jesus was adopted by God as his son at his baptism and this appeared to be the dominant view among them. If this was the case, then why is this not attested in the NT? Ehrman suggests that orthodox scribes are to blame for removing this teaching from the NT text. Another major problem is that Ehrman believes “some” adoptionists held that Jesus was adopted as God’s son at his resurrection. In essence, we are presented with two views of adoptionism, what may be called baptism-adoptionism and resurrection-adoptionism. Ehrman however, never produces and fails to present any evidence as to who exactly these adoptionists were who held this belief, particularly the resurrection adoptionists. Perhaps the reason is there were none. From all the evidence that is available, the clear consistent position seems to be that adoptionists held to the view that it was the baptism of Jesus that marked his adoption as God’s son, not his resurrection. Given the two possibilities for the moment of Jesus’ adoption as God’s son, his baptism and his resurrection, it would seem that the latter would be given preferential priority since it was the central point of the Christian faith (Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 15:3-4).

While the baptism of Jesus is well documented in the NT and overwhelmingly accepted by virtually all scholarship, it is by far the resurrection which becomes the definitive moment for early Christianity and for that matter, Christology. It was not the baptism of Jesus which birthed NT Christology, but rather the resurrection of Jesus. Why then was it the predominant view among adoptionists like the Ebionites, that the baptism of Jesus was the definitive moment? The answer seems to lie in the gospel accounts that the divine voice from heaven had declared, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11).⁷ Ehrman mounts his major argument and thrust of his thesis on the variant reading in Luke 3:22, “You are my Son; today I have fathered you.” This

⁷ Cf. par. Matt. 3:17, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased”, Luke 3:22, ““You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” This voice from heaven is not unique to the baptism of Jesus alone but also appears in the Synoptic parallel accounts of the Transfiguration: Matt. 17:5, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”, Mark 9:7, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!”, Luke 9:35, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”

This Synoptic tradition on the Transfiguration later endured in some Christian circles as attested by 2 Pet. 1:17-18, “For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’ We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.”

reading however is attested in only one Greek MS, Codex Bezae (D), and several Latin MSS and Church Fathers.⁸ The majority of scholarship rejects Ehrman's argumentation at this point for accepting the variant reading of Codex Bezae (D) as the original reading. I also believe that Ehrman's arguments for the validity of Luke 3:22 (D) are unconvincing. The fact that this variant reading is only attested in one Greek MS namely D, makes it highly suspect. Furthermore, the fact that the earliest gospel does not contain this longer reading but has the shorter reading, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11) presents some difficulty in accepting the reading in D. Luke as well as Matthew is believed to have utilized Mark, it seems therefore extremely inexplicable why Luke would have added this phrase which was lacking in Mark. As stated above, all MSS of Luke agree with Mark 1:11 with the exception of D. Codex Bezae is known to be a text with tendencies of harmonization and additions. An example of this tendency would be the way it adds and attempts to harmonize the genealogy of Jesus as presented in Matthew and Luke. In Luke 3:22 (D) there is clearly an addition or expansion to the "heavenly voice" as found in the all other reading of the Synoptics. Codex Bezae adds the reading from Psa. 2:7.⁹

It is significant that one of the features of D is that it also contains along with the gospels, the book of Acts. The reading from Psa. 2:7 also appears in Acts 13:33. I believe that its appearance in Acts 13:33 is a probable clue to understanding its inclusion and expansion in Luke 3:22 (D). It seems odd that if this later reading was original as Ehrman maintains, and that the longer reading was a quotation from a Scriptural source (Psa. 2:7), why would it be omitted in all other Greek textual witnesses? Ehrman would respond because it was excised by proto-orthodox scribes. This however is speculation at best on the part of Ehrman. It is little wonder that the majority of scholarship rejects Ehrman's

⁸ Church Fathers (Ju [CI] Meth Hil Aug). The Latin readings that bear this "Western" textual variant most likely followed Codex Bezae which contained two columns, one in Greek and the other in Latin. The only NT books found in Codex Bezae are the four gospels, Acts, and 3 John (vss. 11-15). The epistles are absent.

⁹ Psa. 2:7 is quoted in the NT in three places Acts 13:33; Heb. 1:5; 5:5. Bruce Metzger makes the point that the longer reading in Luke 3:22 (D), "appears to be secondary, derived from Ps. 2:7". Bruce M. Metzger. *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* 2nd ed. (Stuttgart : Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2002), 112-113.

thesis on this point as Ehrman himself admits.¹⁰ What Ehrman never explains is if Luke held to an adoptionist Christology according to the reading in Luke 3:22 (D) which placed Jesus' adoption as God's son at his baptism, how is it that the same writer, Luke, in Acts 13:33 quotes Psa. 2:7 (taken by Ehrman as supporting an adoptionist Christology) but applies it to the moment of Jesus' resurrection, not his baptism? This would create an inconsistent tension in Luke. Ehrman seems to think that such inconsistencies and incongruities are indicative of scribal tampering in Luke.¹¹ This however is equally speculative as his former charges with respect to Luke 3:22 (D).

When did Jesus become Son of God, at his baptism or his resurrection? Is it more probable to understand these titular designations in Luke's accounts as instead functioning as indicators that are intended to highlight notable events which amplified, and emphasized the identity of Jesus as Son of God rather than attempting to show them as the origin of Jesus' sonship to God? I think that this is the more logical route for as we have seen Luke identifies Jesus with various titles (Lord, Son of God, Christ, Savior) throughout his life, from birth to resurrection and ascension. There is no designated point of causal origin for these titles rather the impression is that these are rightful titles belonging to Jesus. As with the title "Lord" being used by Luke for Jesus at his birth, ministry, passion, and resurrection, it is also true that Luke ascribes the titles "Son of God", "Christ" and "Savior" in the same manner.¹²

Perhaps the most convincing argument against Ehrman's thesis that adoptionism was the earliest Christology is the fact that the earliest NT sources, namely the Pauline literature refutes it. Most scholars accept the notion that Paul believed in the pre-existence of Jesus prior to his coming into the world. If our earliest NT writer believed in the pre-existence of Jesus and he claims to have received much of his tradition from the initial disciples of Jesus (eg. 1 Cor. 15:1-3), then it follows that adoptionism is false

¹⁰ Ehrman. *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, 62.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹² Jesus as (a) "Son of God": Luke 1:32-35 (birth); Luke 3:22 (baptism); Luke 4:3, 9 (temptation); 8:28; 9:35 (ministry); Luke 22:70 (passion); Acts 13:33 (resurrection); Acts 2:33 (ascension; sonship of Jesus implied in this passage, "having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit").

(b) Jesus as "Christ": Luke 2:11, 26 (birth); Acts 10:37-38 (baptism?); Luke 4:41; 9:20 (ministry); Luke 22:67; 24:26 (passion); Luke 24:26, 46; Acts 2:36 (resurrection).

(c) Jesus as "Savior": Luke 1:69; 2:11 (birth); Acts 13:23-24 (ministry); Acts 5:31 (resurrection and/or ascension).

which maintains Jesus was only mere man who became the adopted Son of God at his baptism. According to Paul, Jesus was already the Son of God prior to his coming into the world. Most significant is the ‘sending passages’ found in Paul’s writings (Rom. 8:3; Gal. 4:4) which a number of scholars take as suggestive of the pre-existence of Jesus.¹³ Once again, if Paul represents a tradition which is older than his own, namely a pre-Pauline Christology, then one would have to conclude that such a Christology would be very high, but also early. Hengel has argued that the main features of Paul’s Christology was already fully developed towards the end of the 40’s C.E.¹⁴ Ehrman however attempts to prove that an adoptionist Christology can be seen in Rom. 1:3-4 in what is believed to be a pre-Pauline creed. Ehrman however alleges that the creed was originally adoptionistic, but that Paul changed and tampered with the text by interpolating his own words!¹⁵ Ehrman posits the idea that in Rom. 1:3-4 there appear non-Pauline terms such as “appointed” or “declared” and “spirit of holiness” and the reference to Jesus’ Davidic descent.¹⁶ In this case, these words are *hapax legomena* for Paul. This would be expected since the creed Paul is citing is not his own. Ehrman however argues that Paul interpolated the words “in power” into the creed.¹⁷ The phrase “in power” Ehrman notes

¹³ Scholars also acknowledge that the pre-existence of Jesus is not only affirmed in Paul but also in John and the letter to the Hebrews. There is an interesting passage which is germane to this discussion found in John 20:21, “Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’” Jesus compares his being sent from the Father in the same way to his sending of the disciples. From a logical point of view as the disciples clearly pre-existed their sending forth by Jesus, so Jesus also pre-existed his being sent by the Father. This notion is clearly harmonious with the overall Christology of the Fourth Gospel (John 1:1-3, 14; 3:16; 17:5; also note 1 John 4:14). The verbs used here in John 20:21, “sent” and send” are the same cognate verbs which Paul uses in his discussion of the sending of God’s son into the world (Rom. 8:3, and Gal. 4:4). Paul’s use in Gal. 4:4 of the third person aorist active verb “to send forth” is very emphatic as it denotes the meaning of ‘sending out’, ‘sending away from’, a ‘sending forth’. Paul uses the same verb to describe the sending of “the Spirit of his Son” to the Galatians (Gal. 4:6). Commenting on Gal. 4:4, A.T. Robertson states, “...one must admit that Paul believed in [Christ’s] actual personal preexistence with God (2Co 8:9; Php 2:5-11), not a mere existence in idea.” A.T. Robertson. “Gal. 4:4” in *Word Pictures in the New Testament*. (Nashville: Broadman, 1934).

¹⁴ Martin Hengel. *Between Paul and Jesus: Studies in the Earliest History of Christianity*. trans. J. Bowden. (London: SCM Press, 1983), 31.

¹⁵ Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, 71-72.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 48. The reference to Jesus’ Davidic descent is also mentioned in 2 Tim. 2:8, “Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David”.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

is a common Pauline phrase. Ehrman argues that without the addition of these words, the reading “appointed Son of God” would suggest that Jesus’ “appointment” as Son of God began at his resurrection thus reflecting an adoptionist Christology. Ehrman’s arguments are not really convincing at this point but again are purely speculative at best. He overstates his case. I. Howard Marshall comments on this passage that the thrust of the creed is to show that Jesus did not become Son of God because of the resurrection, but rather that he was raised from the dead because he was the Son of God.¹⁸ This is consonant with Paul’s Christology wherein he sees Jesus as the pre-existent Son of God who was “sent” into the world (Rom. 8:3; Gal. 4:4). Perhaps it is this Pauline Christology which scholars in the past have so naturally assumed was at odds with the “Christology” of the “Jerusalem church” that has driven them including Ehrman to the hasty conclusion that Paul doctored the creed of Rom. 1:3-4 and manipulated the message of Jesus for his own interests. More scholars at present are coming to the realization that Paul was consistent with and faithful to the early teachings of Jesus rather than being the founder of “Christianity” divorced from its Jewish matrix.¹⁹ The participle *horisthentos* can mean “appointed”, but it also carries the meaning of “designated”, and “declared”. The resurrection of Jesus was believed to be a definitive event for Jesus in that it designated or declared him to be the Son of God. In the *Carmen Christi* of Phil. 2:6-11 which is also regarded by scholarship as pre-Pauline, the same emphasis is evident. It is particularly at the event of his exaltation that Jesus receives “the name that is above every name” (Phil. 2:9) and receives the universal confession that he is Lord (Phil. 2:11).

Thus the resurrection/exaltation of Jesus is the high light, the definitive moment of the expression of his true identity. This point reinforces my thesis that the resurrection is the causal factor to the worship of Jesus in the light of his identity. Paul not only links

¹⁸ I. Howard Marshall. *Jesus the Savior*. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 157.

¹⁹ In defense of Paul’s position as a follower of Jesus as opposed to the founder of “Christianity”, see David Wenham. *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995). Also N.T. Wright. *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans / Cincinnati, Ohio: Forward Movement Publications, 1997). A dated but still challenging read is, J. Gresham Machen. *The Origin of Paul’s Religion* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1921).

the Son of God title of Jesus to his resurrection by his reference to the creed of Rom. 1:3-4, but later Paul will link the use of the divine title Lord to the resurrection of Jesus as well (Rom. 10:9). There is no reason as Ehrman contends for thinking Paul tampered with the creed of Rom. 1:3-4 because of the use of the phrase “in power”.

It is noteworthy that while Ehrman believes and makes it a central tenet of his thesis that the second and third century writings of the Apostolic Fathers and/or the Ante-Nicene Fathers are invaluable resources to understand and reconstruct the evolution of Christianity, these very sources do not support Ehrman’s treatment of Rom. 1:3-4. If indeed Rom. 1:3-4 did reflect an adoptionist Christology as Ehrman so vehemently suggests, then why was this passage never used by adoptionists? Further to the point, why is it that in the polemical treatment of adoptionism, the Church Fathers never mention Rom. 1:3-4 as an adoptionist ‘proof text’?²⁰

As we have seen, this expression seems completely consonant and compatible with the pre-Pauline materials such as the *Carmen Christi* where the exaltation of Jesus marks a definitive moment. The contention by Ehrman that the earliest Christology in the NT was an adoptionist one²¹ is seriously refuted by the pre-Pauline evidence itself.

Since the *Carmen Christi* is admittedly pre-Pauline and early, and it asserts a pre-existence for Jesus (Phil. 2:6ff), it follows from this that this was not Paul’s own material or theology, but that of his predecessors who followed Jesus, the leaders of the Jerusalem church. It therefore stands to reason that adoptionism was *not* the earliest Christology of the early Christian movement, but as the *Carmen Christi* proves, the view of the pre-existence of Jesus was already secure prior to Paul. Paul’s pre-existence Christology therefore appears to be an extension of what his forbears already believed in and not original to Paul at all. One more point should be stated about the pre-Pauline creed of Rom. 1:3-4. There is material in this early creed that also appears in Paul’s writings, namely the phrase “according to the flesh” (*kata sarka*) in Rom. 1:3 which Paul uses to qualify and express Jesus’ Davidic descent, a typical un-Pauline theme. However, Paul

²⁰ Rom. 1:3-4 is quoted by Ignatius. *Smyrn.* 1; *Adver. Haer.* 3.22.1; Tertullian. *De carne Christi.* 22; *Adver Praxeas.* 27; and Origen. *Commentary on John.* 10. 4; *Commentary on Matthew.* 11. 17. In none of these works, is Rom. 1:3-4 ever treated in an adoptionist context nor are there any polemical responses to an adoptionist misuse of this passage.

²¹ Ehrman. *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, 48.

also uses the same phrase “according to the flesh” in Rom. 9:5 to describe Jesus’ descent from the Israelites.²² This indicates that the phrase “according to the flesh” is not necessarily unique to Paul since it too is found in the pre-Pauline creedal material of Rom. 1:3-4 and yet Ehrman does not charge that that phrase is a Pauline interpolation. In a similar vein, Ehrman has no grounds for dismissing the phrase “in power” as a Pauline interpolation.

The problem here is that Ehrman is driven by his theological presupposition, not the textual evidence, that adoptionism was the earliest Christology and on this score, Ehrman is grossly in error. The Pauline literature which constitutes the earliest material in the NT and which preserves creedal material which is earlier still, does not support an adoptionist Christology. The reason for this as I have suggested above is that the available evidence supports an early and high Christology. Secondly, the worship of Jesus which is a corollary of this early, high Christology renders an adoptionist Christology highly unlikely in earliest Christianity.

²² The phrase “according to the flesh” (*kata sarka*) also appears in Rom. 4:1; 9:3; 1 Cor. 10:18 where Paul describes human nature and earthly descent.

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