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Christology beyond the Judaism-Hellenism dichotomy

A few remarks on the history of Christological scholarship



The Christological question at the centre of New Testament scholarship

- portrayed by Wilhelm Bousset (1865–1920) as a choice between
 - Jesus as a Jewish apocalyptic Son of Man
 - or
 - a Hellenistic *Kyrios Christos*

Bousset's description a pivotal point in the discussion



Liberal view

No or low Christology
in Eretz Israel

High Christology
building on Gentile influences

≈AD 35

≈AD 100



The Judaism-Hellenism dichotomy a fundamental heuristic tool

- the Judaism-Hellenism dichotomy an idealistic construct, born after 1800
- before that a Hellenist was known as one who spoke Greek, without any philosophical or cultural connotations
- J. G Droysen changed this with “Geschichte des Hellenismus” operating within a Hegelian scheme: Hellenism is a synthesis of Oriental and Greek > the foundation for Christianity



In the wake of F.C. Baur in Tübingen on the development of early Christianity

- Also Hegelian
- dichotomy between:
 - Palestinian and Hellenist Christianity
 - Geographical: Palestinian vs. diaspora Judaism
 - Church Historical: Jewish vs. Gentile Christianity
 - Peter vs. Paul
 - two ‘church theologies’



From Jerusalem to Antioch

- The tale of a split in the Jerusalem church between Hebrews and Hellenists
- Hellenists moving to Antioch to found a universal Christianity, different from the Hebrew ‘particularist’ Christianity
- Hellenists becoming the real bridge between Jesus and Paul
- Problematic historiography: Hellenists in Acts were indeed legalistic Greek speaking Jews



Bousset: syncretistic Hellenism

- With Bousset, Hellenism wasn't just Greek any longer
- Hellenistic-Oriental syncretism: a synthesis of Gnosticism, mystery religions, Hermeticism
- Sharp division between the Palestinian *Urgemeinde* and Hellenist Christianity; Bultmann, inspired by this school contrasts two theological 'church theologies'



Grundmann: a racist interpretation

- Jesus was not Jewish but Hellenistic
- Born in the Galilee of the gentiles, a Hellenist area
- ‘Roman’ (or even Germanic or Nordic) ancestry on his father’s side
- non-Jewish on his mother’s



Example: Jesus according to two opposing views

- both liberal theologians in the religionsgeschichtliche Schule:
 - Johannes Weiss (1863–1914) and
 - Wilhelm Bousset
- based in Göttingen with Albrecht Ritschl as mentor
- cultural Protestantism as fundamental concept



Weiss: Jesus as Jewish eschatological Son of Man

- Weiss groundbreaking work *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes* (1892) depicts Jesus as a Palestinian Jewish apocalyptic preaching the Kingdom of God as a super worldly entity
- Jesus had a self-understanding as Messianic and the coming Son of Man—basically a Jesus and kingdom picture according to the synoptics
- Far-reaching continuity between Jesus and contemporary Judaism



Bousset: Jesus in contradiction of Judaism

- direct counterpart to Weiss
- no continuity with ‘Late Judaism’, a particularistic, legalistic and apocalyptic religion—he is not under the ‘spell of Judaism’
- Jesus an idealistic, suprahistorical figure: universalist, anti nation, people (Bousset in line with Semler, de Wette, Schleiermacher, Baur)
- Bousset’s Jesus fits in cultural Protestant Germany



Bousset: syncretistic Kyrios Christos

- studies the cult of different ‘Hellenist’ religions: Zeus Kyrios, Kyria Athena, Kyrios Dionysios, Gnosis et cetera
- finds that *kyrios*, Lord, is impossible in the Jewish environment, but rooted in this Hellenist environment
- Kyrios as cultic term:
 - “it is in the Hellenistic community in which this development so important for the history of religions took place, through which, out of the future Messiah Jesus, the present cult-hero as Kyrios of this community came into being.”
- I.e., the cult to Jesus as divine is a later Hellenistic development



Before the Holocaust: quite stable dichotomic views

- After the Holocaust a slow waking up, with Weiss as the most clear view of Jesus as Jewish among Christian scholars
- Later a 'Jewish Turn' in New Testament exegesis, with e.g., Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon scholars at the forefront



Christology beyond the Judaism-Hellenism dichotomy

- After the Holocaust a slow waking up, with Weiss as the most clear view of Jesus as Jewish among Christian scholars
- Later a 'Jewish Turn' in New Testament exegesis, with e.g., Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon scholars at the forefront
- I will try to argue that some more recent developments are breaking up the Judaism-Hellenism dichotomy in the area of Christology, taking two examples



Larry Hurtado and Daniel Boyarin

- Larry Hurtado (b 1943): influential through *One Lord, One God*, 1988 and a range of follow-ups
- Daniel Boyarin (b 1946): Orthodox Jewish rabbinic scholar
- both studying the Jewish environment of the New Testament, *and* an area which interested Bousset: the angelic world of Second Temple Judaism
- Hurtado respectful and critical of Bousset, but published a new edition of *Kyrios Christos*, using similar method: religio-historical, cult-oriented, focussing on religious experience



Larry Hurtado: An early Christian mutation

- Rejects the Judaism-Hellenism dichotomy
- Inspired by Martin Hengel, Richard Bauckham and research into Second Temple Judaism, he argues that devotion to Jesus (as divine) could happen, and happened, in the Jewish environment of Apostolic Christianity
- Studying the research on divine agency i Second Temple Judaism, he argues that there was “belief in various powers or figures in heaven who “are participating in some way in God’s rule of the world and his redemption of the elect,” especially “God’s chief agent”
- Monotheism was maintained, but he argues for an “early Christian mutation,” “the basic Christian conviction that the crucified Jesus had been exalted to a position of heavenly glory.”
- Key to this argument is “*early*,” in contrast to a research tradition holding that high Christology is a late development



Larry Hurtado: contd.

- *Jesus an object of worship*: studies hymns, prayers, the use of the name of Christ, the Lord's Supper, confession of faith in Jesus, and prophetic pronouncements, visions and other experiences of the risen and exalted Christ (Hurtado missing to endorse a Dan 7-Son of Man and Jesus' miracle ministry)
- Early Christians *respond with devotion* to these and what they see in Jesus' ministry, and their eschatological expectation of his future role
- This worship is to Hurtado a response to a powerful experience of Christ: "among these earliest believers there were powerful *experiences* of revelatory force that conveyed certain new convictions about Jesus' exalted status." (my emphasis)
- My point: Hurtado shows that *we are not bound to choose between a low Christology in early Palestinian setting or a high Christology formed in a syncretistic Gentile milieu, but a high Christology drawing on a serious religio-historical analysis of the religious environment of earliest Christianity*



Boyarin: an internal-external voice

- In many ways the same kind of argument as Hurtado and others, trying to show a continuity between Second Temple Judaism and the New Testament—it's more Jewish than we think
- His book *The Jewish Gospels: the Story of the Jewish Christ*:
 - argues against a purely inner-worldly view of Jesus as in much of historical-critical New Testament scholarship
 - “It may have been necessary that Jesus was so extraordinary for such compelling narrative of divine being and function to have developed”
 - the faith in Jesus as God as a construction out of the *expectations* of Judaism in combinations with this Son of Man-figure and what the people saw in and heard from Jesus
 - “All of the ideas about Christ are old; the new is Jesus,” that he is the Son of Man, however, is “an enormous declaration and huge innovation.”



Boyarin: contd.

- “The notion of the humiliated and suffering Messiah was not at all alien within Judaism before Jesus’ advent”
- Boyarin is controversial (as always), but his analysis shows again that Christology is better investigated and described beyond the Judaism-Hellenism dichotomy than bound by it
 - *inside* Second Temple Judaism Boyarin finds space for the a Christological development
 - but an important difference between Hurtado and Boyarin: Hurtado is more careful to maintain that his results doesn’t jeopardize monotheism



Conclusions

- My purpose with this discussion has been to describe the emergence and development of both the Judaism-Hellenism dichotomy and development of different Christological attempts dependent on this and that the dichotomy is no useful heuristic tool—not to come with solutions in the ongoing debate
- A reverse heuristics shows that what was regarded Hellenistic very well could be found in the Jewish environment
- As for Christology, among the most promising today is what both Boyarin and Hurtado see, even if differently: a Jewish Jesus who is also a supernatural person, and, as the early Christians said: the *Kyrios*, the Son of Man and the Saviour.
- So: Weiss was on the right track, with an embryo to what we can find today
- Bousset, however, was trapped in his idealistic views, even though he had understood that worship to the *Kyrios* was a key question



Plausible 'new view':
Early devotion to Jesus as *Kyrios*
beyond the Judaism-Hellenism dichotomy

Early High Christology in Eretz Israel
responding to the resurrection etc

Explicated by Paul with growing
clarity and by others from the 50's on

Fully expressed in the
worship of Revelation

≈AD 35

≈AD 100