

The *Jesus Monotheism* Project

The Jesus monotheism project is the principal research project of Dr Crispin Fletcher-Louis, who teaches at the University of Gloucestershire, UK and is the director of Whymanity: Research and Training Ltd.

Aims and objectives

1. To show that, on the evidence of the writings of Paul, the earliest preserved gospel traditions, and related writings, the first (Jewish) followers of Jesus believed that, in and through his life, death and resurrection, the identity of the one God, Yahweh (*Kyrios-LORD*), had been freshly revealed as two persons in one God. Jesus' first disciples believed that the identity of the one God included the man Jesus of Nazareth as a unique incarnation [sic] of the eternal divine Son, whom they also worshipped as "LORD Jesus Christ," alongside God the Father.¹
2. To set out a series of historical, text-interpretative and theological proposals that provide a simple, sufficient and compelling explanation of the origins of this freshly defined understanding of the identity of the one God, as well as the early Christian pattern of devotion to Christ Jesus, alongside God the Father, that it precipitated.
3. To set out the reasons to think that the simplest and most plausible explanation of the origins of this distinctive pattern of belief and worship is the man Jesus' own (divine) self-understanding, his self-claims (in word and deed), combined with the vindication of that understanding and those claims made in what he achieved, what happened to him in his death, and in its aftermath.

The means to the fulfilment of these aims and objectives

These aims and objectives are being pursued through:

1. The application of industry-standard philological, literary, exegetical, historical, theological and philosophical methods of biblical scholarship.
2. In collaborative conversation with other specialists, the development of new insights into, as well as fresh readings of, and theological proposals for, the shape of Israel's scriptures. For example, we propose that, in the Pentateuch there is a programmatic monotheism that is iconic, not aniconic, in the role envisaged for the office of Israel's high priest as living divine cult statue of Yahweh (see below).
3. ... the development of new insights into, as well as historical and theological proposals for, the shape of the earliest Christological texts (especially those in the New Testament). For example, we have presented substantive arguments to think that in his letter to the Philippians (written c. 53 A.D.), Paul includes a piece of hymnic praise of Christ (Phil 2:6–11; 3:20–21); for his incarnation and eternal personal identity as LORD Jesus Christ, alongside God the Father (Fletcher-Louis, *The Divine Heartset* [2023]) (see further below). In a similar way, the project includes new interpretative proposals for often-studied early

¹ The role, place and identity of the divine spirit (or Spirit) in relation to God the Father and LORD Jesus Christ is not the focus of this project. But we expect that its arguments and findings will have implications for our appreciation for the traditional Christian belief in the Spirit's divine identity alongside God the Father and Jesus the Son.

Christological texts (e.g. John 5, 1 Cor 8:6, Hebrews 1:1–4, the gospel Son of Man sayings, among others), as well as for material whose potential significance has been neglected in recent interpretation.

4. The development of a series of discrete proposals for the historical character—in practice and belief—of Israelite, Jewish and early Christian religions, as well as *a model* in which, together, the proposals described here provide an explanation for what can otherwise be confidently established for the character of the earliest Jesus movement’s beliefs about God and Christ. For example, the project’s explanatory model squarely faces the fact that the beliefs about Jesus’s divine identity and the worship of him came about after his death, but these are anticipated only occasionally and not in any settled and corporately shared way during his earthly life.
5. Also, conceptually—theologically and philosophically—the project’s explanatory model honestly faces and seeks to explain the big picture problems that have long been recognized in the study of Christological origins. For example, as a primary burden of the project, the model that we develop offers a satisfactory explanation for why a community of Jewish disciples could both remain ardently faithful to their native traditions and, yet, so quickly adopt a thoroughgoing reworking of their cardinal belief in one God, so as to reframe the Shema as an expression of one God in two persons (1 Cor 8:6). In a similar vein, the project also aims to explain how and why it was that the earliest belief in Jesus’ divine identity was so confidently expressed through the creative interaction with some of the language and categories of Greek philosophy (as is the case, for example, in the metaphysical prepositions of 1 Cor 8:6; John 1:1–12; Heb 1:1–3 and the creatively reworked Platonic cosmology, epistemology, and teleology of Phil 2:6–11 and 3:20–21).

Presentation of arguments and findings

Principally, aim is to publish the project in four volumes that summarize and chart the main steps of the argument: *Jesus Monotheism: Volumes 1–4*

Volume 1 (published in 2015)

Jesus Monotheism Volume 1. Christological Origins: The Emerging Consensus and Beyond introduces the *Jesus Monotheism* project with a survey of the current state of scholarship, some critical evaluation of the most important contributions, a few modest proposals to support the arguments of what I judge to be an emerging consensus, led by the likes of Larry Hurtado and Richard Bauckham, and some desiderata for research and discussion.

Part 1 endorses several of the principal arguments put forward by Hurtado, Bauckham and their colleagues. The earliest Christian documents (in the NT) propound a “Christological monotheism” (N.T. Wright’s expression) or a Christology of divine identity (Bauckham), in which Christ Jesus is fully identified with the one God of Israel’s scriptures. He receives worship or cultic devotion as such (Hurtado’s contribution). Historically, these two—a remarkably high, or fully developed, Christological *belief* and *practice*—are attested in the earliest phase of the new movement that arose after the crucifixion. So, this divine Christology took shape when the movement was thoroughly Jewish in its membership, leadership makeup, and culture. The conceptual building blocks for a divine Christology were found in Israel’s scriptures, as well as the experience and accounts of Jesus’ life. The earliest divine Christology is not, apparently, the product of later or external factors, such as the influence of Greek thought. Some observations on the numerical structure of one key text—the confession in 1 Corinthians 8:6—lend fresh support for the emerging consensus account of Christological origins.

Part 2 identifies some problems and lacunae in the emerging consensus account of both the *shape* of the earliest divine Christology and an explanation of its *origins*. In terms of *shape*, the emerging consensus scholars pay insufficient attention to the central role of a belief in Christ's incarnation in the NT texts and sometimes underplay the distinct identities of God the Father and Lord Jesus Christ. There are also problems with the way that they understand the "Son of Man" expression in the gospels. In terms of the *origins* of a divine Christology, the model(s) developed by Hurtado and Bauckham have not yet provided a satisfactory account of its principal causes. Hurtado thinks that powerful religious experiences after Jesus' death led to Christ devotion. Bauckham has not published a full account of his view of Christological origins, but he emphasises especially the role of scriptural interpretation. There are problems with both models, especially with Hurtado's eschewing the possibility that Jesus himself made divine self-claims. Both seem, to some extent, to sideline the New Testament's own witness, according to which it all began with Jesus' self-understanding, that was vindicated at the resurrection. Such problems mean the pressing historical questions have yet to be answered in a way that are likely to warrant wider scholarly agreement or consensus.

Another problem in the workings of these emerging consensus scholars has been their insistence on a radical discontinuity between the earliest beliefs about Christ's divine identity and anything in Israel's scriptures and late Second Temple Judaism that might be thought to have anticipated such a belief and the concomitant worship of Christ. Part 3 of *Jesus Monotheism, Volume 1* adumbrates the arguments of later volumes, with three case studies examining possible precedents for that worship: 1. The portrayal of the Enochic Son of Man in the *Similitudes of Enoch* (in the light especially of the studies of scholars in the Enoch Seminar), 2. A possible worshipful devotion to a Jewish ruler or messiah figure (a thesis put forward by William Horbury) and, 3. The worship of Adam as God's image in a *Worship of Adam* story, attested in *Life of Adam and Eve* 12–16.

Part 3 also includes critical discussion of the understanding of the absolute qualitative difference between God and all reality that emerging consensus scholars, following Bauckham, espouse.

Volume 2

Jesus Monotheism, Volume 2. Texts (Philippians and John, and the Synoptics) that Call for a new Paradigm.

Volume 2, Part 1 will: 1. summarise and consider the implications for Christological origins of the interpretation of the Christ Hymn in Philippians presented in *The Divine Heartset* (2023); 2. review recent advances in scholarship on the Christology of the Synoptics and Paul (since the publication of *Jesus Monotheism Volume 1*); 3. survey the texts in the Synoptic gospels which express a divine and incarnational Christology, and 4. set out the historical and theological questions which have yet to be satisfactorily answered by those working in the field.

Volume 2, Part 2 will present substantially new data that points towards a whole new paradigm to account for the origins of a belief in Jesus' divine identity (as the incarnate LORD and Son of the Father), as it is expressed, for example, in Philippians 2. This will include new interpretative proposals in a series of discrete textual case studies: the Christologically focused material in Mark 8:27–9:13 (at Caesarea Philippi and in the Transfiguration); Luke 10:17–42; 17:20–37, and John 5. One chapter will summarise the arguments (set out in detail in a separate volume, see below) for thinking that the author of the Philippians Christ Hymn and Paul himself in his writing of that letter are indebted to the Gospel of John, which should therefore be dated to the early 50s A.D.

Part 2 will include and consider the implications of gospel evidence that Jesus put forward a new interpretation of the first verses of the Shema (Deut 6:4–5) in which he identified himself with the *Yhwh-Kyrios* of Deut 6:4. So, it was Jesus' own, "Christological," interpretation of the Shema

that warranted the creation of the rewritten Deut 6:4 in 1 Cor 8:6. There will also be an exploration of evidence that Jesus interacted creatively with Greco-Roman categories and patterns of belief in a way insufficiently recognised by the scholarship that has produced an emerging consensus that there was a very early high Christology (reviewed in *Jesus Monotheism, Volume 1*).

The review of existing scholarship (in Part 1) and the new data (in Part 2) lay the ground for the presentation of the new paradigm in the third and fourth volumes of the *Jesus Monotheism* series. Volume 2's content does that in two ways. The data and arguments of Parts 1 and 2 point to Jesus' self-understanding and his claims as the decisive factor in origins of a divine Christology. Equally, some of the arguments and findings of Volume 2, Parts 1 and 2 pose new questions and problems which have hitherto not featured in the quest to understand the origins of a divine Christology.

Volume 3

Volumes 3 and 4 set out, in seventeen Propositions, a new historical and theological paradigm. The paradigm explains both Jesus' explicit divine self-claims in the four-gospels and the origins of the early Christian belief (as attested in Paul) that the man, Jesus of Nazareth, was the LORD incarnate ("LORD Jesus Christ"); an eternal divine person, alongside God the Father, and worshipped as such. Furthermore, the paradigm explains why, in the light of the resurrection, the belief in Jesus' unique divinity is believable today.

Jesus Monotheism. Volume 3. Iconic Messianic Monotheism and Forgotten Features of the Gospel according to Moses and the Prophets.

Volume 3 sets out the first ten propositions for the paradigm. These all have to do with the theological, political, and spiritual or affective character of Jewish monotheism, Israel's distinctive belief in one God above all other spiritual and "divine" realities. This monotheism, I contend, was an "iconic," not an *aniconic*, monotheism.

The volume draws on recent critical advances in our understanding of the theology of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, combining the results of the work of specialists with a few of my own insights. In doing so, the volume freshly describes the theology of Israel's scriptures as one within which it now becomes intelligible that the human individual, Jesus of Nazareth, believed himself to be, and was hailed by some of his fellow Jews, as the one God incarnate. In some respects, the volume critiques and rejects long well-established judgements about the religion of Israel that in the last two centuries have rendered the gospels' portrayal of Christ as an incarnate divine person, implausible and unintelligible. It also proposes we consider factors that mean Israel's distinctive monotheism was more conceptually subtle and open to transformation or further refinement than has been previously considered.

Proposition 1: the one God's sovereign and creative character is revealed, in anticipation of *the* Incarnation (Propositions 11–17), in his free decision to create the human as his *šelem* and *dēmût*; that is, *in a certain limited sense*, as one "divine," in both being and function. Proposition 2: Adam (and Eve), created to be the image and likeness of Yahweh God—to be his living divine cult statues, rebelled against their maker, doing lethal harm themselves in their tragic decision to believe the serpent's offer of an independent but faux divine identity. Proposition 3: through his saving presence, in the calling of a chosen people and the establishing of the covenant relationship with them, God's manifest presence in the cosmos, was uniquely available in Israel, in the nation's worship and, above all, in and through the high priest (Exodus 28)—a divine cult statue (God's *šelem* and *dēmût*)—that is, as one who, in a certain limited sense, was "divine" and worthy of veneration as such. Proposition 4: Israel's high priest was to be the "divine" cult statue in the temple-as-Eden and the temple-as-microcosm; on a cosmic stage, not in the towns and villages of Judah and Israel. Proposition 5: In speaking of Israel's high priest in these ways we should think in terms of one whose identity—whose divinity—is confined within the office, not fully manifest in

the persons who held that office. This means the high priest's "divinity" was limited and, crucially, he was no threat to the singular identity of Yahweh God. Proposition 6: Israel's scriptures give to the priesthood a privileged position, over against any Israelite king, as an expression of its deepest theological truth-claims and as a response to the political and religious dangers of ancient forms of monarchy. Proposition 7: sacramentally speaking, the high priest was co-creator in the temple-as-microcosm. Proposition 8: in accordance with Israel's Scriptures, the priesthood had a position of primacy in Second Temple politics and messianic hope. Proposition 9: Daniel 7 exemplifies the centrality of temple and priesthood in Second Temple theology, both in its cosmic drama and, especially, in its hope for a new (messianic and royal) high priest (the "one like a son of man" of Dan 7:13–14). Proposition 10: Apocalyptic literature, that was so important for the formative context of early Christianity, was generated by the spirituality and cosmology of the Temple (and Torah) and the belief that humanity in general, and Israel's priesthood in particular, was created to be God's divine cult image and likeness, that is, the locus of his oracular presence.

These ten proposals describe the main features of the Jewish theology and lived religion—of what is best now labelled "Iconic Messianic Monotheism"—in relation to which it is possible to make sense of the historical Jesus' self-understanding and the first disciples' responses to him. Having set out these proposals, Volume 3 explores, in a series of excurses, their implications for current issues and questions in the study of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and late Second Temple Judaism.

Volume 4

Jesus Monotheism. Volume 4. Jesus and the Revelation of Divine Persons.

Volume 4 sets out a further seven proposals which explain, in the light of the new paradigm's account of iconic Jewish monotheism, how it was that the first disciples of Jesus so readily and without apparent disagreement, redefined their native Jewish faith so as to include LORD Jesus Christ as an eternally divine person in the identity of the one God.

I argue that, in the light of Propositions 1–10, firstly (Proposition 11), all four Gospels present a plausibly historical account of a man, Jesus of Nazareth, who believed himself to be the uniquely divine, incarnate, manifestation of Israel's God, *Yhwh-Kyrios*. Proposition 12: in so-called "Christological monotheism" Christ Jesus fulfils humanity's original calling to be God's divine image and likeness. Proposition 13: in the New Testament's "Christological monotheism," Christ Jesus fulfils Israel's hopes for a true, eschatological, and royal high priest. Proposition 14: according to the Gospels, expressions of Christ devotion were precipitated by the conviction that, *inter alia*, in his life and death Jesus had been Israel's true eschatological high priest. Proposition 15: in the Gospels, because of the inevitably hostile reaction to his claim to a priestly kingship—that challenged Torah's subordination of royalty to priesthood—Jesus of Nazareth carefully manages the unveiling of his self-understanding. Proposition 16: the divine identity of Jesus is a matter of his own deeds, character and power as Israel's priestly king. So, on analogy to the character of pagan "divine" rulers, and for other reasons that have to do with Jesus' peculiar self-understanding and conduct, Jesus is a divine "person" and the one God is now revealed to be two persons. So, Jesus' monotheism was this "Jesus monotheism".

Proposition 17: the NT offers a "believable" explanation of the "historical" origins and shape of "Jesus Monotheism": an historical Jesus whose aims, objectives, words and deeds arose from his own belief that he had come to earth as Israel's God incarnate and as a uniquely divine, "human" person, and whose "resurrection" confirmed the truth of those self-beliefs for his followers.

Ancillary Publications

The summary of the project's main arguments in *Jesus Monotheism* Volumes 1–4 will be supported by ancillary monographs and articles. These publications fulfill several purposes.

- Some provide careful philological, historical and theological arguments to back up the main proposals of the project.
- Some ancillary publications explore wider implications of the project's principal findings; in terms, for example, of moral and political theology, ancient Jewish and early Christian spiritualities and practical theologies, and, especially, a fresh vision the creative arts and education.
- Some offer accessible prospective summaries and teasers for future, more in depth, publications.

1. [*The Divine Heartset: Paul's Philippians Christ Hymn, Metaphysical Affections, and Civic Virtues \(2023\)*](#)

The Divine Heartset offers an interpretation of the dense Christological narrative, or “hymn,” in Philippians 2:6–11, taking inspiration from advances in our understanding of the letter's Greek and Roman setting and predominantly Gentile audience. On the one hand, the book advances proposals which, viewed from the perspective of the modern history of interpretation, are either entirely new or have been marginal opinions in the period of modern scholarship. On the other hand, in their implications and conclusions, the proposals amount to a recovery of theological judgements that were once uncontested.

The hymn's praise of Christ engages the language and themes of Hellenistic ruler cults, Platonic metaphysics and moral philosophy, popular (Homeric) beliefs about the gods, and ancient ways of thinking about true love. In so doing, it articulates a scripturally-grounded theology in which God is revealed, through an event justifiably labelled an “incarnation,” to be one in two “persons” or characters (*prosōpa*) in a divine and human drama; God the Father and LORD Jesus Christ giving of themselves for the salvation of humas.

The volume also explores hitherto unseen ways in which the Christ Hymn, that is cited not just in 2:6–11, but also 3:20–21, is tightly connected to the rest of the letter's argument, through which the apostle sets out a distinctive vision of human flourishing and civic virtue. In some ways, this vision anticipates the advances many have made in our own day; in, for example, the unpacking of the incarnation in terms of a call to a particular kind of Christ-shaped empathy. In others, it offers resources to meet the greatest challenges and questions of our time; in, for example, a vision of true love that is defined by Christ's self-gift, as a counter-model to the controlling and destructive desires that often taint erotic desire.

Along the way, this 1000+ page volume advocates new or recently proposed translations for numerous words and phrases (in, e.g., 1:8, 11, 27; 2:3, 4, 6, 11; 3:2, 4, 6). Perhaps of especially far-reaching significance is a new, non-Stendahl, approach to Paul's boasting in 3:4–6. Following Krister Stendahl's influential 1963 essay, these verses have undergirded the increasingly common view that Paul the apostle still thought of himself as one entirely at home within the framework of the practices and beliefs (viz “Judaism”) in which he was raised and nurtured (even as “a Pharisee” 3:5).

However, one corollary of the Christological findings of *The Divine Heartset* is a new interpretation of these verses, that gives due recognition to how well they are integrated into the rest of Paul's letter. *Philippians 3:4–6 is not straightforward autobiographical prose*. Rather, Paul boasts as if, by the standards of Greek civic virtue, he is the worst of sinners. In these verses, Paul has failed in the calling, in accordance with the Delphic maxim “Know Thyself,” to live with the, Christologically-warranted, virtue that is σωφροσύνη “sound mindedness, prudence, moderation, self-control”. He boasts as one who, judging by the criteria of Israel's scriptures (criteria that Paul evokes in 3:2–3) is a strange kind of, idolatrous, pagan Pharisee. His boastful self-praise is the antitype to the worshipful praise of the self-knowing Christ of Phil 2. It is a prideful (not a humble

minded) vain boasting (cf. Phil 2:3) that prepares for the conversion to Christ that Paul sets out in Phil 3:7–11.

2. *Philippians, John, and the First Gospel*

Two Johannine specialists, George van Kooten (Cambridge) and Michael Gorman (St Mary's Seminary and University, Baltimore), are in the process of writing and publishing studies boldly arguing for a new approach to the dating of John's Gospel. Van Kooten thinks John is the first gospel and was published in the early 60s A.D. Gorman, likewise, thinks Paul's theology is deeply indebted to John, which must, therefore, antedate the apostle's letters.

In the same vein, my monograph sets out the case for an early dating of John, prior to Paul's letter to the Philippians. Paul's language and concerns in Philippians (esp. 1:27; 2:1–2, 14–16; 3:3, 14, 19–20) are Johannine, in a way that is best explained if Paul writes from Ephesus (c. 53 C.E.), where (a form of) John's Gospel was in circulation. In the light of my comprehensive new approach to the Philippians Christ Hymn in *The Divine Heartset* (2023), this book explores seventeen points of thematic and linguistic connection between the Philippians, its Christ Hymn, and John.

The monograph also sets out some proposals for a new approach to the historicity and theology of Johannine tradition, illustrated through a close study of John 5. I present a new approach to John 5 in the light of proposals for: (a) a well-known Jewish response to the Hellenistic ruler cult, (b) a scriptural and Jewish understanding of the priesthood's sacramental participation in the ongoing work of creation, (c) the variety of Jewish responses to the Greek and Roman competitive culture of honour, and (d) a temple and high priestly reading of Daniel 7 (verse 13 of which is cited in John 5:27). If John 5 is read in the light of these four phenomena it is at once possible to see how that chapter might accurately record an episode in the life of Christ.

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