Christology According to the Scriptures: Complementing Nicaea with Jewish Narrative, Vocabulary, and Symbols

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The composition of the Nicene Creed – technically the "Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan Creed," as the statement of faith first drafted at Nicaea in 325 was only completed at Constantinople in 381 – stands as a defining moment in Christian theology, establishing the orthodox framework for understanding Jesus Christ's divinity and humanity. Formulated in response to fourth-century controversies, particularly the Arian crisis, Nicene Christology serves as a safeguard against heresy, delineating the boundaries of what the church expresses its faith in Christ. The creed accomplished precisely what it was designed to do: protect the church's lived experience of the triune God from teachings that would undermine that reality.

However, the creed was never intended to express the entire Christian story but rather to clarify certain key elements and to establish a protective boundary around it. The same fathers who crafted these conciliar definitions were deeply immersed in the biblical narrative – preaching from the Scriptures, writing commentaries on biblical texts, and living within the story of God and his covenant people. Their use of Greek philosophical terminology – *homoousios* (one in essence), *hypostasis* (substance or person), and *physis* (nature) – was a pastoral necessity, not a preference. Faced with sophisticated heretical challenges couched in philosophical language, they had to respond in kind to preserve the church's encounter with the living God. The vocabulary was a tool pressed into service, not a replacement for the biblical story that remained the heart of their faith and practice.

The challenge we face today is not that the fathers somehow "Hellenized" the faith – after all, Second Temple Judaism itself was already a thoroughly Hellenized environment – but that in subsequent centuries, not least in the last few hundred years under the influence of modern rationalism, many have mistaken the protective fence for the actual content of Christian faith. The creed has been elevated from its

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proper role as guardian of orthodoxy to a supposed summary of the gospel itself. This represents a fundamental category error: reducing a narrative-based system of communal experience and embodied practice to a set of dogmatic propositions requiring intellectual assent.

Our faith in Christ must be more than an abstract, philosophical articulation; our Christology must be rooted in the story of God and his people Israel, as revealed in the Scriptures. The phrase "according to the Scriptures" appears in the Nicene Creed itself, though directly connected only to the resurrection. This biblical reference signals something crucial that we have largely forgotten: the conciliar fathers were fundamentally biblical theologians who never intended to redirect Christians away from the scriptural narrative toward abstract philosophical formulations. Their aim was to protect the church's participation in the story of Israel's God – the God who creates, redeems, and saves through concrete historical acts. They sought to preserve, not replace, the rich tapestry of biblical symbols, narratives, and vocabulary through which believers encounter the living Christ.

Christian faith proclaims that Jesus is the fulfilment and recapitulation of Israel's history. He is the Messiah of Israel, the embodied presence of YHWH in human flesh, the long-awaited king who brings God's promises to completion. To fully confess Jesus Christ, one must do so within the framework of the Scriptures that bore witness to him, and within which he identified himself. The Greek philosophical terms that dominated Nicene-era debates, while valuable and necessary for precision in countering specific heresies, remain secondary to the biblical narrative, vocabulary, and symbols from which the apostles and early followers of Jesus drew their understanding of him.

The task before us is not to jettison Nicene Christology – it remains an indispensable fence protecting orthodox articulations of Christian faith – but to recover the biblical territory it was designed to protect. We must return to the rich narrative world of Scripture[1] where faith (*pistis*) means covenant love and trust, not merely rational belief in propositions. This is not about changing the wording of the Nicene Creed or supplementing its text but about turning our eyes back to the whole story that the creed was meant to safeguard.

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[1] Roughly 43% of the Bible is narrative, telling stories. About 33% of the Bible is poetry, including books like Psalms, Proverbs, and Song of Solomon, as well as poetic sections within other books. The remaining portion, approximately 24%, consists of prose discourse, such as laws and other non-narrative or non-poetic text.

If we take the Scriptures seriously as the primary source of Christology, we discover that early Christian understanding of Jesus did not emerge in a vacuum but developed within the theological world of Second Temple Judaism. The idea that the God of Israel could manifest in multiple ways was not foreign to first-century Jews. The notion of a divine figure revealed through theophanies and experienced by his people in an immanent way alongside the transcendent "most high God" – constituting a narrative theology of "two powers in heaven" – was actively debated in Jewish circles long before the birth of Jesus. Texts from this period speak of a heavenly figure, the *Son of Man*, enthroned beside the *Ancient of Days*, ruling over all creation.

To make sense of their encounter with Christ, the gospel writers, Paul, and other early followers of Jesus worked within Second Temple Jewish tradition and engaged in what can best be described as a storied interpretation or *midrash on the Scriptures*. Paul's letters provide some of the most striking examples of a scriptural Christology. While remaining committed to Jewish covenantal monolatry, Paul's response to the Christ event is to insert Christ into traditional formulations of faith in the one God of Israel. The gospels likewise present Jesus within the framework of Israel's story: Mark identifies him as the *Son of Man*, Matthew portrays him as the recapitulation of Israel's story, and John echoes the language of divine presence, presenting Jesus as the *Word* who was with God and was God from the beginning.

Beyond explicit textual references, five key symbol sets from Israel's Scriptures further shape the early Christian understanding of Jesus: Wisdom, Torah, Tabernacle, and divine Presence and Glory. Each of these themes contributes to a robust biblical Christology that does not rely on Hellenistic categories alone but emerges organically from the scriptural narrative. To complement Nicene Christology with these scriptural categories is not to undermine the theological formulations of the fourth and fifth centuries but to recover a fuller, more deeply rooted Christological vision.

To complement Nicene Christology with the scriptural categories from which it emerged is not to undermine the theological achievements of the fourth and fifth centuries but to recover the fuller, more deeply rooted and storied Christological vision that the council fathers themselves inhabited. Such a narratively-grounded Christology opens new possibilities for dialogue – both within Christianity and with Judaism. Non-Chalcedonian Christians, who share Orthodox Christian practice

and experience but historically rejected certain Greek formulations of Christology, may find common ground in a more narrative theological framework. Likewise, Jews who have long viewed Christian theology as a pagan departure from Israel's faith may recognize in this scriptural expression of faith in Christ a continuity with Jewish theological traditions. By articulating their beliefs within biblical narrative, vocabulary, and symbols, Christians can reaffirm their shared worship alongside Israel of the one true God who created and sustains all things – and deepen their relationship with Jesus, who can only truly be known as Messiah of Israel.

1. The Vocabulary of Nicene Christology in the New Testament

The theological language that emerged from the fourth-century ecumenical councils represents the culmination of centuries of doctrinal development within the early church. From the apostolic writings through the ante-Nicene fathers – Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, and others – Christian thinkers gradually developed increasingly sophisticated vocabularies to articulate their experience of Christ. This evolution was neither accidental nor misguided; it reflected the church's faithful response to both internal pastoral needs and external intellectual challenges across multiple generations.[2]

The Rule of Faith (*regula fidei*), traceable to the second century, already contained the essential elements that would later be refined in the great creeds. Irenaeus's anti-Gnostic writings, Tertullian's trinitarian formulations, and the theological schools of Alexandria and Antioch all contributed vital insights that shaped conciliar definitions. The vocabulary of Nicene Christology – terms such as *ousia*, *hypostasis*, and *physis* – thus emerged from this rich patristic tradition, representing the church's collective wisdom rather than a fourth-century innovation imposed upon earlier simplicity.

Yet these technical terms, while essential for defining orthodoxy against specific heresies, often diverge from the language used in Scripture itself. This divergence is not problematic in itself – the church has always possessed the authority and responsibility to develop appropriate theological language for new contexts. The challenge arises when we forget that this evolved vocabulary, necessary as it was, represents a translation

[2] For the best treatment of the theological controversies of this period and the gradual development and categories of credal orthodoxy, see John Behr, *The Nicene Faith, Part One: True God of True God* (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004) and *The Nicene Faith, Part Two: One of the Holy Trinity* (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004).

of biblical revelation into categories demanded by particular historical circumstances.

The terms that proved so crucial in the fourth century were drawn from the broader Hellenistic philosophical milieu that had shaped intellectual discourse for centuries. Importantly, this was not an alien imposition upon an originally "pure" Hebrew Christianity – such a dichotomy would misunderstand both the nature of first-century Judaism and the continuity of the church's theological development. Second Temple Judaism was already thoroughly Hellenized, and the earliest Christian writers, including Paul and the evangelists, worked within this mixed cultural environment. The philosophical categories that later proved essential for conciliar definitions were already part of the intellectual atmosphere in which Christian theology first took shape.

What we observe in the New Testament, however, is that while some of these later technical terms do appear, they carry meanings quite different from their eventual theological usage. This observation is not intended to call into question the legitimacy of conciliar developments – the Holy Spirit guides the church's understanding across centuries, not merely decades – but rather to highlight how the scriptural foundation continued to require fresh articulation in each generation. The church's theological vocabulary necessarily evolved as it faced new challenges, yet this evolution was always in service of preserving and communicating the same apostolic witness.

This recognition also helps us appreciate why the early church's narrative and symbolic approaches to Christology remain essential complements to later dogmatic formulations. The patristic literature itself is rich with biblical imagery, typological interpretation, and narrative theology. The same fathers who crafted precise philosophical definitions also wrote biblical commentaries filled with the symbolism of Wisdom, Word, Temple, and Glory. They understood that the technical vocabulary of the councils served to protect this richer biblical imagination, not to replace it.

The church's theological development thus represents neither a corruption of original purity nor an arbitrary departure from Scripture, but rather the Spirit-guided process by which the apostolic deposit of faith was preserved, defended, and appropriately expressed across changing cultural contexts and in the face of specifically articulated challenges. Understanding this evolutionary process helps us appreciate both the necessity of conciliar language and the continuing importance of the biblical

narrative framework from which it emerged and which it was designed to protect.

To appreciate this development fully, it is instructive to examine how the technical vocabulary of the councils relates to its scriptural foundations. Terms such as *ousia*, *hypostasis,* and *physis*, while essential for fourth-century precision in defining orthodoxy, appear in the New Testament with meanings that had not yet acquired their later theological specificity.

Ousia, a key term in Nicene Christology for denoting divine essence, appears in the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15 in reference to the father's wealth or "living":

> The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the wealth [*ousias*] that will belong to me." So he divided his assets between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant region, and there he squandered his wealth [*ousian*] in dissolute living.

The term *ousia* is also built into a word in the Lord's prayer as recorded in Matthew (6.11) and Luke (11.3): "Give us each day our daily [*epiousion*] bread." The full word *epiousion* is a *hapax legomenon*, only occurring in Greek literature in these two instances, making its meaning difficult to ascertain. It is perhaps best rendered as "that which is needed for living," connecting to the wider meaning of *ousia* in the first century for what may be required for sustaining life, without rising to the philosophical concept of a foundational principle of being.

The term *hypostasis* as used in the New Testament is even less helpful for explicating Nicene vocabulary. In 325 at the council of Nicaea *hypostasis* was used interchangeably with *ousia,*[3] but when the creed was completed at second ecumenical council of Constantinople in 381 it came to denote the distinctiveness of the Son and the Spirit from the Father, rather than the essence they held in common. It had evolved from its root etymology, literally meaning "substance" and thus a synonym of *ousia*, to something more like "concretised being" or a "distinct manner of existing." In the writings of the New Testament, however, it means primarily "confidence" or "assurance." In Hebrews, for instance, the author states "we have become partners of Christ, if only we hold our first confidence [*hypostaseos*] firm to the end" (3.14) and later asserts that "faith is the assurance [*hypostasis*] of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (11.1). Paul uses the word in a similar way in his second epistle

[3] Behr, *The Nicene Faith, Part One*, 68, 155.

to the Corinthians (9.4 and 11.17). Only in Hebrews 1.3 does *hypostasis* reflect something closer to the Christology of the fourth century councils: the Son is "the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being [*hypostaseos*], and he sustains all things by his powerful word." The suggestion, however, that the Son has effectively the same *hypostasis* as the Father was the theology of Nicaea[4] but was no longer an orthodox formulation by the end of the fourth century.[5]

A similar problem attends to the use of *physis* (nature) in the writings of the New Testament. Unlike the two terms above, *physis* is used rather frequently in the Greek texts, referring to all things "natural," or indeed "physical," "instinctive," or "by birth." It is in the second epistle of Peter that we encounter the term in a more theological vein. The apostle writes that God has given "his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust and may become participants of the divine nature [*physeos*]." This verse is often quoted in support of the Greek patristic theology of salvation as *theosis* or "deification," meaning eschatological communion with God in his glory. The same eastern Christian theology takes care to distinguish between what it means to share in the divine life by *grace,* which is what *theosis* is about, and what it means to be divine by *nature*, which is proper to God alone. Another way of expressing that is that we can participate in God's uncreated energies, but not his essence. The verse from 2 Peter, if taken literally to mean sharing in God's *physis* is dogmatically flawed.

These semantic shifts illustrate how the church's theological vocabulary naturally evolved to meet the demands of new pastoral and

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[4] In the anathemas following the creed of 325, the fathers of the council state: "And those who […] affirm that the Son of God is of another *hypostasis* or *ousia*, or mutable or changeable, these the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes." As cited by Behr, *The Nicene Faith, Part One,* 155, quoting the most complete critical edition of the text, Giuseppe Dossetti, *Il simbolo di Nicea e di Costantinopoli* (Rome: Herder, 1967), 226–41. Behr goes on to point out that this "awkward expression" was not universally viewed by the eastern fathers at the council as indicating that *ousia* and *hypostasis* were synonyms. He writes that "it is not surprising that when Athanasius quotes the Nicene Creed several decades later, he reduces the clause to include only the word *ousia*." *Ibidem*, 158.

[5] This new orthodoxy was defined by the theology of the Cappadocian fathers, especially Basil the Great. Behr writes: "for Basil, 'essence' refers to that which is common to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, while the term *hypostasis* indicates that which is particular to each. It is clear that Basil is working along the lines of the distinction made by Aristotle in his Categories between primary substance (*ousia*), that is, a particular or individual substance (primary because this is encountered first), and secondary substance, that is, the common or generic substance designated by the qualitative characteristics of the particular object (derived by an act of reflection, and so second, at least in epistemological order)." Behr, *The Nicene Faith, Part Two,* 297.

intellectual challenges. The language of the ecumenical councils developed not as a departure from scriptural precedent but as a faithful translation of biblical revelation into categories necessary for defending the apostolic deposit against sophisticated heretical arguments like Arianism. The church's adoption of terms such as *ousia*, *hypostasis*, and *physis* represents a legitimate and Spirit-guided development of theological language, even though these words carry different meanings in their New Testament contexts than in their later conciliar usage. This evolution demonstrates the church's wisdom in employing whatever vocabulary proved necessary to preserve the fullness of apostolic faith across changing cultural contexts. At the same time, it reminds us that the rich biblical idioms and theological categories of Scripture remain the foundational source from which all subsequent development flows. Let us therefore explore how this scriptural foundation continues to nourish our understanding of Christ, examining what the apostolic witness sounds like when expressed in its original narrative theological context within the monolatrous faith of Second Temple Judaism.

2. Christology Before Jesus: Second Temple Judaism and Its Narratives

Within modern critical scholarship it has long been conventional to cast the development of Christology as an incremental process over many centuries. Gradually Jesus the man, a simple itinerant preacher from Galilee, was "upgraded" in successive generations of Christian theological development, slowly becoming a semi-divine messianic figure and eventually the pre-existent and consubstantial Son of God as expressed in Nicene Christology.[6] This framework was even used to put texts in chronological

[6] Numerous scholars present the idea that Jesus was originally an ordinary human teacher or prophet who was later transformed into a divine figure by Paul, the gospel writers, and the early church. These include the following. Bart D. Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2014): Ehrman argues that Jesus was a Jewish apocalyptic preacher who was not originally considered divine but was later exalted by his followers after his death. He examines how different strands of early Christianity contributed to his eventual deification. Maurice Casey, *Jesus of Nazareth: An Independent Historian's Account of His Life and Teaching* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010). Casey, a historical Jesus scholar, suggests that Jesus was a first-century Jewish teacher and prophet whose followers later ascribed divine status to him, particularly under the influence of Paul. James D. Tabor, *Paul and Jesus: How the Apostle Transformed Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012). Tabor argues that Paul was instrumental in changing the original message of Jesus and elevating him to divine status, diverging from what Jesus himself actually taught. Richard Carrier, *On the Historicity of Jesus: Why We Might Have Reason for Doubt* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2014). Carrier takes a more radical approach, arguing that Jesus may

order – for instance, John's "high Christology" means he must have been the last of the gospels[7] – or to sort genuine apostolic writings from the pseudepigraphal – so Ephesians could not have been written by Paul because its Christology is too developed.[8]

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not have even been a historical person, but rather a mythical figure whose divine status was developed through early Christian literature. Burton L. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament? The Making of the Christian Myth* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1995). Mack suggests that early Christian communities created a variety of narratives about Jesus, gradually elevating his status from a teacher to the divine Son of God. Geza Vermes, *Christian Beginnings: From Nazareth to Nicaea, AD 30–325* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012). Vermes, a scholar of Jewish history, argues that Jesus was originally a charismatic Jewish teacher and healer who was later reinterpreted as divine by his followers. Reza Aslan, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Random House, 2013). Aslan presents Jesus as a Jewish revolutionary who was later transformed into a divine saviour by his followers. John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1991). Crossan sees Jesus as a radical social reformer who was later reinterpreted through a theological lens. Ed Parish Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993). Sanders does not deny Jesus's existence but argues that his divinity was a later development in Christian theology.

[7] Many scholars argue that the Gospel of John is later than the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) owing to its high Christology, meaning its portrayal of Jesus as divine from the outset. Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Westminster: John Knox, 1971). Bultmann argues that John's Gospel reflects later theological developments, particularly in its portrayal of Jesus as the pre-existent Logos (John 1.1-14). He saw this as evidence of a more developed Christology than in the earlier synoptics. James D.G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996). Dunn argues that John's presentation of Jesus as divine from the beginning (rather than gradually revealing His identity, as in Mark) suggests a later stage of theological development. Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God* and *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Ehrman argues that the high Christology of John – where Jesus explicitly claims divinity – reflects later theological thinking rather than the historical Jesus's self-understanding. This view is held even by more traditional Christian scholars like Raymond E. Brown. See *The Gospel According to John* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966).

[8] Following Ferdinant Christian Baur, a 19th-century scholar and founder of the Tübingen School –in his *Paul, the Apostle of Jesus Christ* (1845, reprinted by Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2014) – numerous scholars have argued that Paul did not write Ephesians due to its high Christology, suggesting it reflects a later theological development. Ernst Käsemann, *Essays on New Testament Themes* (London: SCM Press, 1964): Käsemann discusses the Christological and ecclesiological shifts in Ephesians that suggest a later, post-Pauline authorship. Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997): Brown presents the case that Ephesians' lofty Christology and its theological distance from Paul's undisputed letters suggest a later author. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998): Dunn notes how Ephesians' cosmic Christology (Christ as the unifying force of all things) differs from Paul's undisputed letters. Ehrman, *Forged: Writing in the Name of God – Why the Bible's Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2011). Ehrman argues that Ephesians was written in Paul's name by a later

Yet scholarship in recent decades has shown that, long before the birth of Jesus in Nazareth, there was already a full-blown Christology embedded within Second Temple Jewish narrative theology. While first-century Jewish theology did not attempt an inner analysis of the being of the one true God, in exploring the roots of Christology within the late Second Temple era, we discover a vibrant period in which multiple strands of Jewish belief and practice yielded the conceptual building blocks later employed by early Christians. Far from being a sudden invention, the notion of a divine or semi-divine messianic figure – one who stood alongside the God of Israel – drew upon older narratives and symbols that were already available within Second Temple Judaism. In the following sections, we shall survey the narrative theology of the "two powers in heaven," the depiction of the Son of Man in Jewish literature, and the pre-existent figure of the Angel of the Lord.

The "Two Powers in Heaven"

Among the most pivotal developments during this era was the belief in what would later be termed "two powers in heaven." In traditional rabbinic parlance, the phrase signalled any theology positing a second divine agent next to or identified with the God of Israel. The notion that there could be more than one divine figure (what would be later called a separate *hypostasis*) – closely aligned with God's being – did not originate in Christian circles in response to the Jesus event. Rather, it reflected an inherited tradition of Second Temple Judaism.

Peter Schäfer, in his study *Two Gods in Heaven*, notes that the Jewish Scriptures contain the seeds of this idea, exemplified by exalted figures who act as God's agent yet seem to share in divine authority.[9] By the time of the Second Temple period, strands of apocalyptic thought in texts such as the prophecy of Daniel furnished a second heavenly figure, "one like a son of man," enthroned beside the "Ancient of Days" (Dan.

follower who expanded Paul's theology to a more cosmic scale. Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians. Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 42* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 1990): Lincoln argues that Ephesians' exalted view of Christ and the universal role of the church suggest a later author building on Paul's ideas.

[9] Peter Schäfer, *Two Gods in Heaven: Jewish Concepts of God in Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020). Schäfer writes: "the rabbinic phrase 'two powers in heaven' (*shetei rashuyyot*) […] clearly implies two divine authorities side by side […]" and "two gods who rule side by side and together – in different degrees of agreement and correlation." *Ibidem,* 6. Schäfer, together with Daniel Boyarin and other scholars, is building on the earlier work of Alan Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven*: *Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012).

7.13). This enthronement imagery was remarkable for suggesting that a new figure shared dominion and received the worship due to God alone. Over subsequent centuries, rabbinic authorities reacted strongly against certain "two powers" interpretations – especially when Christians began explicitly equating that heavenly figure with the risen Christ. Judaism's rabbinic guardians sought to police the boundaries of divine unity, labelling any such "binitarian" views as heretical. Yet, as Schäfer demonstrates, the motif survived quite some time, its traces found in both rabbinic disputations and mystical texts well into the first millennium. The tension was part and parcel of the Jewish heritage itself, not simply an external infiltration by a later creed.

The Son of Man in Jewish Literature

An especially important template for understanding the question of "two powers" is the Son of Man figure in Daniel 7. While many earlier scholars interpreted the "one like a son of man" purely symbolically, representing faithful Israel, Daniel Boyarin argues that its plain sense depicts a pre-existent divine figure alongside the Ancient of Days.[10] Boyarin shows that by reading Daniel 7 in its context – without adopting the interpretative lens imposed by the book's own angelic interpreter – one can see a binitarian possibility lurking: the Ancient One (the transcendent Most High God) and the younger, ascending figure who receives the kingdom. This exegetical tradition reappears in later Jewish writings, testifying to a lively belief in a heavenly redeemer in human form.

One finds examples of this Son of Man motif in extra-biblical works like 1 Enoch (specifically the Similitudes) and 4 Ezra.[11] In 1 Enoch, the Son of Man emerges as a divinely appointed, pre-existent agent who judges the nations. Not only does Enoch's vision place this Son of Man on a throne of glory, but it also exalts him as one to whom all will offer obedience. The same concept surfaces in 4 Ezra (sometimes labelled 2 Esdras), where the Son of Man is described as a mysterious figure who appears, stands on Mount Zion, and brings deliverance or judgement. While these texts do not refer to Jesus, they demonstrate that a category for a semi-divine, exalted redeemer figure was indeed established before Christianity.

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[10] Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (New York: New Press, 2012). See especially chapter 4, "The Suffering Christ as a Midrash on Daniel," 129–156.

[11] *Ibidem,* chapter 2, "The Son of Man in First Enoch and Fourth Ezra: Other Jewish Messiahs of the First Century," 71–100.

A further surprising element in some strands of Jewish thought concerns a suffering or humiliated messiah. While many might assume that a "suffering Messiah" was a stark departure introduced only by Christians to reconcile the crucifixion, portions of Jewish midrash and later rabbinic texts also contemplate a messiah who endures suffering. Already in the Qumran material known as the "Self-Glorification Hymn," we glimpse a figure who is simultaneously exalted to a throne in heaven and endures reproach: "I shall be reckoned with the gods, and my dwelling place is in the holy congregation [...] Who has been despised on my account? And who can be compared with me in my glory? Who bears all griefs as I do? And who suffers evil like me? No one!"[12] This passage presents a figure who is exalted among the divine beings and yet experiences suffering and reproach, reflecting the concept of a suffering-yet-exalted redeemer. This unique combination of exaltation and suffering within a heavenly enthronement context suggests early Jewish messianic expectations that resonate with later Christian interpretations of the suffering Messiah.

In short, the Son of Man in Second Temple Jewish literature occupies a liminal space: he is a heavenly agent who shares in God's dominion, or in some cases a glorified human endowed with divine prerogatives. This pattern laid the groundwork for early Christian claims about Jesus as the definitive fulfilment of these expectations, while remaining rooted in a pre-existing Jewish narrative.

The Angel of the Lord as a Pre-Existent Divine Figure

No less important to the shape of Second Temple Christology is the figure known in the Torah as the "Angel of the Lord." At many points in the Hebrew Bible – Exodus 3 at the burning bush, Judges 6 for Gideon, or elsewhere – this Angel acts and speaks as YHWH, yet remains distinct from God. He bears the Divine Name, receives worship, forgives sins, and leads Israel as God's personal emissary, marking a clear phenomenon of God's presence in a second hypostasis.

Such a figure complicates strict monotheistic readings of Israel's Scriptures. Even in earliest rabbinic and Targumic traditions, one often encounters "the Word" (*memra*) or "the Glory" (*shekinah*) of God functioning as semi-divine extensions who appear or speak on God's behalf, tangibly bridging heaven and earth. This conceptual vocabulary was widespread in Jewish tradition. By the dawn of the Christian era, it was

[12] Esther Eshel, "4Q471B: A Self-Glorific Hymn," *Revue de Qumran* 17/65–68 (1996): 184–85. As cited by Schäfer, *Two Gods,* 34.

but a small step for early believers like Paul or John to identify Christ as that very Angel – the agent who led Israel, conversed with Moses, and physically manifested God's presence.

This identification emerged strongly in the New Testament: Paul writing that the rock that followed Israel in the desert "was Christ" (1 Cor. 10.4) is effectively fusing the older "Angel who guides Israel" theology with Jesus's role as divine deliverer. In the Johannine writings, we see a parallel move: the divine Logos "made flesh" is the new interpretative lens for that ancient figure who "tabernacled" in Israel's midst (Jn. 1.14). Here, the text recasts the Angel of the Lord – who once dwelt among his people in a pillar of cloud and fire – as now definitively embodied in Jesus.

What is crucial to note is that none of these identifications were mere novelties conjured from an alien worldview. On the contrary, from the vantage of Second Temple Jewish interpretative traditions, the idea of God's personal Word, Wisdom, or Angel stepping fully into history had been contemplated in multiple ways. Whether in Targumic expansions, apocalyptic visions, or Hellenised wisdom speculation, the biblical text was widely seen to accommodate a second, pre-existent figure who could carry out the divine will. Early Christians thus found in the Angel of the Lord tradition fertile ground to explain how Jesus both "was with God" and "was God."

The rich tapestry of Second Temple Judaism provided the essential grammar and vocabulary that would become early Christology. Belief in a "second power" or second hypostasis alongside God was not invented by nascent Christian theology but had significant precedent in Jewish apocalyptic texts, wisdom literature, and scriptural narratives of the Angel of the Lord. While much of rabbinic tradition eventually distanced itself from binitarian connotations, the textual remains from Qumran, apocalypses like 1 Enoch and 4 Ezra, and the strong focus on the Angel of the Lord in the Torah point to varied and overlapping Jewish discussions about a figure who shared in God's authority and presence.

When Jesus's earliest followers proclaimed him as the "Son of Man" – one who would be vindicated with the clouds of heaven – and identified him with the Angel of the Lord, they were tapping into interpretative streams already present within Judaism. Far from constituting a radical breach, these Christological claims at first resonated with a long tradition of speculation about God's principal agent, enthroned alongside the Ancient of Days. Only in later centuries would boundary lines between orthodox rabbinic monotheism and Christian faith become firmly

delineated, as each community elaborated its own theological structures in conscious distinction from the other.

Nevertheless, these formative Jewish narratives are indispensable for understanding how Christology could arise at all. Rather than a sudden intrusion or novel dogma, early Christian views of the incarnate Word or the divine Son of Man are the fruit of centuries of Jewish imaginative exegesis, which posited that God could act through a second, glorious figure to redeem and judge the world. In this sense, the story of Christ's origins draws us back not only to first-century Galilee but also to the high points of Jewish apocalyptic and interpretative creativity – where the seeds of a "two powers" framework, a divine Son of Man, and a heavenly redeemer dwelling in the Angel of the Lord, had been waiting for a decisive moment of fulfilment.

3. The Christology of the Early Jesus Followers as a Midrash on the Scriptures

A major key to understanding earliest Christian belief lies in seeing how Jesus was interpreted through, and as fulfilment of, Israel's Scriptures. The earliest Jesus followers did not invent a radically new religion from scratch but rather re-read their existing sacred texts in a fresh light, seeking to explain how Jesus could be Israel's God in the flesh, redeeming all creation. From Paul's letters, where Jesus is implicated in the very identity of the One God of Israel, to the gospels, which evoke central biblical themes such as Daniel's Son of Man and Israel's covenant story, the first generations of believers created a theological tapestry interwoven with their ancestral Scriptures. Through this midrashic process, they remained covenantally monolatrous – worshipping one God – yet came to include Jesus within that worship.

Paul's Christology as Covenantal Monolatry

One of the most striking features in Paul's letters is the way he identifies Jesus with the God of Israel, all the while affirming strict devotion to the one Lord. In 1 Corinthians 8.4-6, Paul addresses the Corinthian believers about foods offered to idols: he concedes that although there may be so-called "gods" and "lords" in abundance, for followers of Jesus "there is one God, the Father… and one Lord, Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 8.6). This becomes a radical insertion of Jesus into Israel's Shema, the foundational confession that "the LORD our God, the LORD is one" (Deut. 6.4). In essence, Paul reshapes the Shema to read: "For us there is one God, the

Father… and one LORD, Jesus Christ," thus naming Jesus within the unique sovereignty and identity of Israel's God.[13]

In ancient Jewish tradition, to say "the LORD is one" was not an abstract monotheistic formula only, but a worship-pledge: Israel offered exclusive devotion (monolatry) to the covenant God, amidst the many competing "powers" populating the wider religious landscape. Paul's reworking of the Shema places Christ into that same sphere of devotion, authorising the giving of worship to Jesus without compromising the oneness of Israel's God. The "powers" or false gods remain real in the sense that pagans do worship them, but they cannot rival the One who shares the Father's Name. This identification, moreover, is not a pagan addition or a denial of Jewish monotheism, but an expansion from within: the God of Israel has placed his Name, indeed his very life, in Jesus. Early Christian worship thus remains fully covenantal and exclusive yet has now broadened to include Jesus alongside the Father. The short, almost passing statement in 1 Corinthians 8.6 exemplifies how elegantly Paul integrates Jesus into the worship due to the One God of Israel.

A second major Pauline text highlighting the inclusion of Jesus into Israel's divine identity is Philippians 2.5-11. Often called the "Christ Hymn," these verses narrate Christ's voluntary self-emptying (*kenosis*) and subsequent exaltation by God. The crescendo declares that at Jesus's name every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess his lordship "to the glory of God the Father." It is an allusion to Isaiah 45.23, where YHWH proclaims that "to me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear."

In applying Isaiah's language about YHWH to Christ, Paul makes a clear statement: Jesus receives the same devotion – bowing of knees and confessing of lips – that the prophet had said belongs to God alone. Israel's prophets had condemned worship of any figure besides YHWH, yet Paul, steeped in that heritage, finds no contradiction.[14] Rather, the worship directed to Christ fully glorifies the Father, for it is at "the name of Jesus" that every tongue confesses (Phil. 2.10-11). The conviction that "Jesus is LORD" resounds as a fresh articulation of God's name-bearing

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[13] Nicholas Thomas Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005.), 94. As Wright explains: "Within his monotheistic argument, to make a monotheistic point, Paul quotes this, the best-known of all Jewish monotheistic formulae, and once again he puts Jesus into the middle of it."

[14] *Ibidem* 73. As Wright says, "within this very monotheism Paul is locating Jesus, in a manner which once more demands a fully trinitarian explanation although Paul never gets round to providing one explicitly."

envoy, much like Wisdom in earlier Jewish traditions or the Word (*memra*) in the Aramaic Targums.

For Paul, the point is not an abandonment of monotheism; it is a dynamic outworking of "covenantal monolatry," such that the universal worship of God now necessarily includes Jesus. This is "the name that is above every name" (Phil. 2.9): not a rival deity, but the one who shares YHWH's unique sovereignty.

The Gospels as Midrash on Israel's Story

While Paul's letters crystallise how faith in Jesus was combined with Israel's God in worship, the gospels show how Jesus's life, ministry, and identity became the subject of narrative interpretation – what we might call midrash – on Israel's Scriptures. Each evangelist draws heavily on biblical motifs, images, and language to show that Jesus's story recapitulates, fulfils, and intensifies the scriptural hope.

Mark: Jesus as the Divine Son of Man from Daniel 7

The Gospel of Mark – believed to be the earliest of the canonical gospels – presents Jesus proclaiming the arrival of God's reign, performing works of power, and revealing his identity in subtle yet potent ways. Central to Mark's Christology is the figure known as the "Son of Man," a title Jesus assumes for himself. Modern readers can hear that phrase as simply "a human being," but within Mark's biblical world, the "Son of Man" recalls Daniel 7.13-14, where "one like a son of man" appears before the Ancient of Days and receives everlasting dominion and glory. Ancient Jewish tradition often read Daniel 7 as the enthronement of a second, younger divine figure: a "messianic redeemer" to be worshipped by the nations.

By having Jesus identify himself as the "Son of Man," Mark's narrative draws directly on that Danielic image. Hence, Jesus can declare that the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins, to heal, and to interpret the Sabbath (Mk. 2.5-12, 2.27-28). He can also predict that "they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory" (Mk. 13.26). In Mark's climactic trial scene, the high priest demands whether Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the Blessed," and Jesus replies, "I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming with the clouds of heaven" (Mk. 14.61-62). Invoking Daniel 7 this explicitly amounts to a bold claim to share in God's unique sovereignty. For the high priest, this is blasphemy, a claim to divine status. For Mark,

it is precisely midrashic fulfilment of the old biblical drama: Jesus is that exalted "human-like" redeemer whom Daniel beheld in his visions.[15]

Matthew: Jesus as the Recapitulation of Israel's History

Whereas Mark emphasises Jesus's identity as Daniel's Son of Man, Matthew focuses on Jesus's recapitulation of Israel's entire story. Matthew famously opens with a genealogy tying Jesus to Abraham and David, underscoring his place in the covenant lineage. The early chapters see Jesus "out of Egypt" (Mt. 2.15), through the waters of baptism and into the wilderness, thus retracing Israel's Exodus journey. He is shown as the new Moses figure who ascends a mountain (Mt. 5) to give the definitive Torah teaching – commonly known as the Sermon on the Mount.[16]

Throughout Matthew, the evangelist laces his narrative with fulfilment formulas: "All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet…" (Mt. 1.22 – there are nine such expressions in the gospel narrative). This is not proof texting in the modern sense so much as creative reuse of scriptural motifs and pointing deeply into the truth of the narrative of God and Israel. Just as ancient Jewish interpreters wove new stories from biblical fragments, so Matthew gives a portrayal of Jesus that resonates with Israel's epic saga. He is the Davidic Messiah – the legitimate heir to the throne – and the Mosaic prophet who reveals God's instruction in its fullness.

Although Matthew's gospel emphasises Jesus's earthly heritage (Davidic kingship) and role as teacher, it also affirms his divine identity. Already at his birth, he is "God with us" (Mt. 1.23, echoing Isa. 7.14). He claims universal authority, sending the disciples to teach all nations in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Mt. 28.18-20). Matthew's portrait thereby intermingles Davidic and Mosaic traditions with a

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[15] Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels,* 37.

[16] Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992). 384–90. See also R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, from the *New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007): France discusses how Matthew deliberately structures Jesus's life to mirror Israel's Exodus, wilderness testing, and covenant renewal. Craig Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009): Keener emphasises how Matthew portrays Jesus as embodying Israel's history, particularly through Moses typology (for instance, the Sermon on the Mount as the new Sinai). Jonathan Pennington, *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009): Pennington explores how Matthew presents Jesus as true Israel, fulfilling the nation's mission and bringing heaven and earth together.

conviction that Jesus participates in God's own identity – a thoroughly midrashic approach that sees Jesus as the apex of Israel's covenant story.

John: The "I AM" Statements as Direct Claims to YHWH's Identity

If Mark points to Daniel's Son of Man, and Matthew shows Jesus as Israel's story in person, the Gospel of John goes further still in its Christological expression. John opens with a cosmic prologue: "In the beginning was the Word (*logos*), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (Jn. 1.1). Here, the evangelist draws from Jewish "Wisdom" traditions and the concept of God's Word (*memra*) as an active, personified agent in creation. John's bold claim is that this Word "became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn. 1.14), identifying Jesus as the incarnate logos who was "with God and was God."

Within John's narrative, Jesus repeatedly uses "I AM" statements – "I am the bread of life" (Jn. 6.35), "I am the good shepherd" (Jn. 10.11), "I am the resurrection and the life" (Jn. 11.25), and so forth. On one level, these evoke biblical imagery (bread in the wilderness, the promised shepherd of Israel, resurrection hope). Yet they also echo God's self-disclosure in Exodus 3.14, "I AM WHO I AM." On one occasion, Jesus simply says, "Before Abraham was, I AM" (Jn. 8.58), prompting his audience to try to stone him for blasphemy, since he appears to be using the divine Name.

This is not John casting aside Jewish monotheism but using the language of Scripture in a midrashic manner: re-reading Israel's text about God's self-revelation in Exodus and applying it to Jesus. Already in some Aramaic targums, God's creative Word (*memra*) stands in for the divine presence among humanity. John's gospel extends that thread by declaring that the divine Word is present in the man Jesus – and that in seeing him, one encounters Israel's God.[17]

[17] Numerous scholars have explored John's high Christology in relation to Jewish Wisdom traditions, the Logos, and the use of "I AM" statements as divine self-disclosure. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008): Bauckham argues that John's Gospel uniquely presents Jesus within the identity of Israel's God by using the "I AM" statements and applying scriptural monotheism to Jesus in a midrashic manner. Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005): Hurtado discusses how John's Gospel integrates Jesus into Jewish monotheism by applying divine titles such as Logos and "I AM" to him. He explores how Jewish traditions, including "Word" (*memra*) shape John's portrayal of Jesus. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1999): Wright argues that John's Gospel takes the story of Israel's God dwelling among his people to its highest point, showing Jesus as the divine Word embodying the presence of Israel's God. He also high-

All four gospels, along with Paul's letters, thus attest a creative reading of Scripture. Like first-century midrash, the earliest Jesus followers gleaned from biblical motifs – be it Daniel's heavenly figure, Moses's role as redeemer, David's kingly line, or YHWH's "I AM" – and showed how these strands converge on the person of Jesus. Many subsequent Christians would adopt Greek philosophical idioms for articulating Jesus's. Yet the biblical and second-temple Jewish backdrop explains how earliest believers, still thoroughly within Israel's sacred heritage, could proclaim Jesus as fully divine without forsaking their devotion to the one God.

From this angle, their Christology is best characterised not as an abrupt departure from Scripture but as a "midrash on the Scriptures." The Shema is maintained, yet Jesus is included in it (1 Cor. 8.6). Daniel's "one like a son of man" who receives the worship of the nations, finds its culmination in Mark's crucified and vindicated Messiah. The mosaic and Davidic patterns find their apex in Matthew, while the tabernacling Word from Exodus becomes flesh in John's prologue.

The earliest Christians, then, understood their faith as consistent with Israel's covenant faith in God. Their claim was not that they suddenly believed in multiple gods, but that God's oneness mysteriously embraced the Son, so that worship of Jesus honours, rather than competes with, the Father. If some around them objected to this as blasphemous, it cannot be that the notion of a second divine figure was itself shocking, but rather that they did not accept that the man they knew as Jesus could be that figure.

This midrashic dynamic remained the heartbeat of early Christian theology. Paul and the gospel writers, each in his own idiom, insisted that seeing Christ through the lens of Scripture was not an abandonment of the Shema but its eschatological fullness. For them, the one God had acted decisively in Jesus to reconstitute Israel and open salvation to all nations. Their interpretative framework was, in short, a thoroughly Jewish one: weaving texts, reapplying old symbols, and finding that Jesus had stepped into Israel's story as the long-awaited Son of David, new Moses, and even the embodiment of YHWH's own presence. Such is the richly

lights John's use of Wisdom traditions and Exodus imagery. C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John,* 2nd edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1978): Barrett explores how John presents Jesus as the personal embodiment of God's Wisdom and Word – a divine agent active in creation and now incarnate among humanity. Craig Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2009): Keener draws parallels between John's Logos theology, Jewish Wisdom traditions, and Aramaic targums, showing how John frames Jesus as the incarnation of divine presence.

creative result of reading Scripture with Jesus in view, or what we may call the earliest Christian midrash.

4. Five Symbol Sets from Israel Used to Fill Out the Narrative Picture of Christology

A rich way of articulating Christology, especially if we follow Paul's lead and seek to think biblically rather than primarily in the dogmatic formulas of the ecumenical councils, is to draw upon the symbol sets of Israel's Scriptures. In doing so, we complement Nicene definitions with a thoroughly Jewish framework. The five symbols below – Wisdom, Torah, Tabernacle, Shekinah, and Glory – were all part of Israel's experience of God's nearness, and early believers identified them afresh in Jesus of Nazareth.[18]

*Wisdom of God (*Chokhmah/Sophia*) – Jesus as Divine Wisdom*

The idea of Christ as Wisdom (cf. Prov. 8, "The Lord created me at the beginning of his work") vividly surfaces in the New Testament, especially in Paul's letters. In 1 Corinthians 1.24, Paul describes the Messiah as "the power of God and the wisdom of God," thus echoing Jewish traditions of Wisdom as God's co-worker in creation. Though traditional conciliar language often uses Hellenic terms like *ousia* and *physis,* Paul's move suggests a narrative statement: the wisdom through which God made and now sustains the world is personally revealed in Jesus. This resonates with John 1's vision of the Word who was "with God" in the beginning – echoing Personified Wisdom's pre-existence and cosmic function. Paul's "Wisdom Christology" thus highlights Jesus as the living embodiment of God's creative, redemptive plan.

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[18] These five themes from Jewish narrative theology were suggested by Wright, "Jesus and the Identity of God," *Ex Auditu* (1998, 14): 42–56. The idea that Wisdom, Torah, Tabernacle, Shekinah, and Glory frame a Christology deeply rooted in Israel's story is a theme explored by several scholars, particularly those working on Jewish backgrounds of early Christology and John's Gospel. Bauckham, *Jesus:* Bauckham argues that John's Christology integrates Jesus within Jewish monotheism, using symbols like Wisdom, Shekinah, and Glory to describe how Jesus embodies the divine presence. Larry W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 1988): Hurtado focuses on Jewish monotheism and how Jesus is identified with God's attributes, including Wisdom, Shekinah, and Glory. He also discusses how Torah themes are reinterpreted around Jesus. Keener, *Gospel of John*: Keener provides an in-depth discussion on how Jesus is portrayed as the divine Wisdom, the new Torah, and the Shekinah/tabernacling presence of God. Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (New York: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018). Williams explores how the early Church understood Christ in relation to Israel's sacred symbols, including Torah, Wisdom, and Glory.

When the Council of Chalcedon in 451 declared Christ to be "truly God and truly man… acknowledged in two natures without confusion, without change, without division, without separation," it was protecting the same mystery that Wisdom traditions had long contemplated: how divine Wisdom could be both transcendent (participating in God's eternal counsel) and immanent (active in creation and redemption). Wisdom is both distinct from God and intimately united with God's creative work. This biblical symbol thus provides narrative content for what the ecumenical councils expressed in philosophical precision.

Torah (Covenant Word) – Jesus as the Living Torah

Torah in Israel's story is far more than legal stipulations: it is God's self-revelation, the very "Word" that shapes Israel's communal life. Interpreting Jesus as the incarnate Word (Jn. 1) follows a Second Temple tradition in which some saw the Torah as that pre-existent blueprint for creation. In a related move, Paul repeatedly situates Christ as the telos ("goal" or "fulfilment") of the law (Rom. 10.4). This is not a contradiction of Torah so much as its deepest completion: God's instruction now converges on the person of Christ. As he proclaims the mind of Messiah – what he calls "the law of Christ" in Galatians 6.2 – Paul is effectively testifying that Jesus does what the Torah did: summon, instruct, and guide God's people into holiness. Much like how first-century Jews revered Torah as God's presence among them, early Christians proclaim Jesus himself as that living Word, speaking God's heart and covenant purposes directly.

The incarnational logic embedded in Torah Christology parallels the conciliar understanding of the hypostatic union. Just as Torah was understood in Jewish tradition to be both divine (God's eternal word) and accessible to human participation, so Christ embodies both divine and human natures without either being diminished. The Chalcedonian insistence that Christ's two natures exist "without confusion" protects the same truth that Torah symbolism conveys: God's word comes fully among us without ceasing to be fully divine. When John declares that "the Word became flesh," he employs Torah imagery to express what later councils would define as the mystery of one divine person assuming human nature.

Tabernacle (Dwelling of God) – Jesus as the New Dwelling Place of God

Israel's tabernacle and, subsequently, the Temple, was the sacred place where heaven and earth overlapped – where God's presence "pitched its tent" among the people. In John 1.14 ("the Word became flesh and dwelt

[literally, *tabernacled*] among us"), we see that notion explicitly: Jesus is presented as God's dwelling on earth. Paul mirrors this in 2 Corinthians 5, describing how in Christ's body we encounter the fullness of God's reconciling presence. More widely, he envisions the entire congregation of believers being "in Christ" as a temple of God's Spirit (1 Cor. 3.16). Where Nicene language speaks of "consubstantiality," Paul offers a Temple/Tabernacle metaphor: God habitually encountered among us in the Messiah, shaping our identity as a Spirit-indwelt community. Jesus thus embodies, in personal form, that holy meeting place once localised in Israel's portable sanctuary.

The Tabernacle symbol provides crucial background for understanding the conciliar formulations of the divine person assuming human nature. Just as God's glory filled the Tabernacle without the structure ceasing to be a tent made by human hands, so the divine Son assumes human nature without that humanity being absorbed or transformed into divinity. The Chalcedonian "without change" (*atreptos*) finds its narrative precedent in the Tabernacle theology: God's presence sanctifies the material structure while preserving its creaturely integrity. This symbol helps explain how the incarnation involves real assumption rather than mere appearance or docetic illusion.

*Presence (*Shekinah*) – Jesus as the Embodied Presence of God*

Closely tied to the Tabernacle theme is Shekinah, the rabbinic term for God's indwelling presence or glory-cloud. In Jesus' own words, "something greater than the Temple is here" (Mt. 12.6). For Paul, the presence that overshadowed the ark in the Holy of Holies now radiates through Christ's resurrection life and the gift of the Spirit. Indeed, as "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1.15), Christ personalises the Shekinah. This intensifies the claim that the living God is encountered supremely in the Messiah, making the old geographic boundary (Temple precincts) now transcended in him. Many devout Jews of Paul's day expected God's glory to fill a restored Temple at the end of exile; Paul boldly proclaims that in Christ's body, death and resurrection, that restoration has erupted already

The Shekinah represents God's true presence, not merely a created effect or angelic intermediary. When applied to Christ, this symbol supports the conciliar insistence that Jesus is "true God from true God" rather than a subordinate divine being. The Shekinah traditions help explain why the church rejected Arian formulations: if Christ is the embodied Shekinah, he must share fully in God's essence, not represent a lesser

divine reality. This biblical category thus anticipates the metaphysical precision of Nicaea while grounding it in Israel's experience of divine presence.

*Glory (*Kavod/Doxa*) – Jesus as the Full Manifestation of God's Glory*

Hebrew Scripture repeatedly celebrates God's *kavod* – God's weighty, radiant reality – particularly revealed at Sinai and in the Temple. In John 17, we hear Jesus speak of having shared God's glory "before the world existed," a claim Paul similarly echoes in Philippians 2, describing how Jesus "was in the form of God." Far from mere metaphysical speculation, Paul's emphasis on Christ's glory resonates with the biblical tradition of God's self-revelation in splendour. Jesus' cross and resurrection, for Paul, turn conventional glory upside down, displaying divine self-giving love as the pinnacle of that radiance. The wondrous interplay of humility and triumph clarifies that Christ's "glory" is no abstract luminescence, but the very character of God laid bare.

The Glory traditions of Scripture illuminate the conciliar understanding of Christ's divine person. In biblical thought, God's *kavod* is not an attribute God possesses but the radiance of God's very being. When Christ is identified as the "radiance of God's glory" (Heb. 1.3), this points toward what Nicaea would express as consubstantiality: Christ does not merely reflect divine glory but *is* the personal manifestation of that glory. The Chalcedonian formula protecting Christ's divine nature "without change" preserves what Glory Christology had always implied: that in Christ we encounter not a diminished or modified deity, but the full brilliance of God's own being made visible in human form. This symbol bridges the gap between biblical imagination and conciliar definition, showing how both point to the same ineffable mystery of God's self-revelation in the incarnate Son.

Together, these five symbol-sets – Wisdom, Torah, Tabernacle, Shekinah, and Glory – frame a Christology that stands firmly within Israel's story. Paul's writings, albeit couched in first-century Jewish ways, are equally telling us "Christ is all in all" precisely because he is the embodiment of God's wise Word, covenant instruction, holy dwelling, presence, and splendour. Such a narrative approach does not displace Nicene definitions but complements them, recapturing the biblical poetry and temple imagery that animated Jewish belief. By speaking of Jesus in these thoroughly Jewish categories, the earliest Christ-followers – including

Paul – showed how the one God's identity and presence are decisively revealed in the Messiah's life, death, and resurrection.

Conclusion

Nicene Christology stands as an indispensable achievement in Christian theology, providing essential boundaries that safeguard the church's proclamation of Christ as fully God and fully human. In response to fourth- and fifth-century controversies, the Nicene and subsequent conciliar formulations offered much-needed precision: they protected the mystery of Christ's divinity without compromising his humanity, and they preserved the unique, triune identity of the one God of Israel. These doctrinal definitions serve their intended purpose perfectly – establishing secure parameters around orthodox faith. Yet, as the councils themselves understood, such formulations represent protective boundaries rather than exhaustive descriptions. They do not encompass the full landscape of Christ's identity as portrayed in the Scriptures that the conciliar fathers themselves revered and expounded.

The theological development that culminated in Nicene Christology represents neither an abandonment of Scripture nor an arbitrary philosophical imposition. Rather, it reflects the Spirit-guided wisdom of the church across multiple generations – from the apostolic writings through the ante-Nicene fathers to the great councils – as believers sought to preserve and articulate their encounter with the living God in the face of new challenges. The evolution from biblical imagery to technical vocabulary was a faithful translation process, enabling the church to defend apostolic truth in contexts that demanded precise philosophical language.

Understanding this historical development helps us appreciate both the necessity of conciliar definitions and the continuing vitality of the scriptural foundation from which they emerged. The same fathers who crafted formulations about *homoousios* and *hypostasis* were deeply immersed in biblical commentary, drawing constantly upon the rich symbolic vocabulary of Wisdom, Word, Temple, and Glory. They understood that their technical precision served to protect, not replace, the living narrative of God's covenant relationship with his people.

Recovering this biblical foundation offers significant benefits for contemporary Christian understanding and dialogue. When we complement conciliar language with the symbol sets of Israel's Scriptures – recognizing Christ as divine Wisdom incarnate, the living Torah, God's dwelling place, the embodied Shekinah, and the full manifestation of divine Glory

– we access theological resources that can bridge historical divisions and open new conversations.

For ecumenical relations, this approach offers fresh possibilities. Non-Chalcedonian Christians who share orthodox faith and practice but historically struggled with certain Greek philosophical formulations may find common ground in the more directly scriptural vocabulary that preceded and undergirded conciliar definitions. When communities can speak of "Wisdom incarnate" or "divine Word tabernacling among us," they may discover shared understanding that transcends the linguistic and cultural barriers that have long divided Eastern and Oriental Orthodox traditions.

For Jewish-Christian dialogue, this biblical framework presents the Christian confession in categories that resonate with Jewish theological sensibilities. Rather than appearing as a foreign Hellenistic or pagan intrusion, Christology expressed through Torah, Wisdom, and Temple imagery emerges as a development within Second Temple Jewish thought itself. The shared vocabulary of *memra* (Word), *shekinah* (indwelling presence), and divine Wisdom preserves the fundamental commitment to monotheistic worship while allowing for meaningful conversation about God's self-manifestation. This approach honors the continuities between Jewish and Christian faith rather than emphasizing only the discontinuities.

Most importantly, for Christians themselves, this recovery of biblical imagination enriches devotional and theological life. While conciliar formulations remain essential for maintaining orthodox boundaries, they can inadvertently encourage a static, proposition-based approach to faith. The scriptural narrative, by contrast, invites believers into a dynamic, lived relationship with the God who actively creates, redeems, and sanctifies. When Christians understand Christ as the fulfilment of Israel's story – as the Word through whom all things were made, the Wisdom by whom all things are sustained, the Temple where heaven and earth meet – they encounter not merely abstract theological definitions but the living reality of God's ongoing covenant love.

This narrative approach does not diminish the importance of precise doctrinal language but situates it within its proper context. The technical vocabulary of the councils provided necessary tools for specific historical challenges, particularly the sophisticated arguments of Arian and other heterodox movements. These formulations continue to serve their protective function, ensuring that Christian proclamation does not drift into subordinationist or docetic errors. Yet they were never intended to

exhaust the mystery of Christ's person or to replace the rich biblical imagination that continues to nourish Christian faith.

The phrase "according to the Scriptures" in the Nicene Creed itself points toward this fuller reality. The conciliar fathers were not departing from biblical faith but defending it, not replacing scriptural categories but protecting them. Their achievement lay in demonstrating that the church could employ whatever theological vocabulary circumstances demanded while remaining rooted in the apostolic witness. This principle continues to guide us: we honour both the protective boundaries of conciliar orthodoxy and the life-giving narrative from which those boundaries emerged.

By embracing this complementary approach, Christians can stand before the mystery of Christ not merely as subscribers to carefully worded propositions but as participants in the ongoing story of God's people. The Nicene boundaries remain essential, ensuring we do not lose sight of Christ's full divinity and genuine humanity. Yet within those boundaries lies a vast territory of biblical symbols, narratives, and experiences through which believers encounter the living Word of God. This territory is immeasurably richer than any single formulation could express, offering inexhaustible resources for worship, reflection, and witness.

Such a vision invites all Christians – and indeed all people of biblical faith – to approach Christology not as an abstract puzzle requiring intellectual solution but as a living mystery calling for faithful participation. In this understanding, the fence of orthodox doctrine serves its proper purpose: protecting the sacred space where believers encounter the same God who called Abraham, delivered Israel, and in the fullness of time revealed himself definitively in Jesus, the Messiah promised to Israel and the hope of all the nations of the world.