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Luke-Acts in the Light of
Functional-Historical Christology

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As a guide for writing the thesis I have used Kate L. Turabian's A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses and Dissertations, 4th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973). All abbreviations of periodicals, reference works and books of the Bible follow the "Instructions to Contributors," Journal of Biblical Literature. Quotations from the Bible are from the Revised Standard Version.

Introduction

Christology lies at the heart of Christian theology. The question which Jesus asked, "Who do the people say that I am?" has inspired theological formulations from the testimony of the apostle Peter, through the councils and creeds of the Christian Church, to the renewed interest in Christological study in the modern day. Many attempts have been made by New Testament scholars to find further Christological clues within the earliest records in the hope of answering more completely that question.

A question which has often come to the fore is: how are the claims of 'divinity' made for Jesus to be understood? That question has led to a debate over the process by which the New Testament came to describe Jesus of Nazareth as the pre-existent Son of God. Recent Christological study has seen the proposal of yet another descriptive term to further a better understanding of early New Testament Christology. The term has also come to be used by certain systematic theologians. These scholars have begun to speak of a 'functional' Christology as distinguished from an 'ontological' Christology.

One of the people most responsible for the popularity of this term is Reginald Fuller. In a major work on Christology (1965), he suggested that at the foundation of New Testament Christology are three strata which he designated as 'Earliest Palestinian', 'Hellenistic Jewish' and 'Gentile Mission',

respectively. Fuller postulates that Christology in its earliest stage was functional in nature and that, when the gospel was proclaimed in the Gentile setting, Christology gradually took on an ontic form. Initially Christology was concerned with affirming what God had done and was doing through his Servant Jesus and only later did Christology take on the form of ontic statements about the 'nature' or 'being' of Jesus. According to proponents of a functional Christology, the objective of Jesus was not to teach a doctrine about his person but to perform a particular historical task. The Gentile mission, however, caused the Christology to advance to a manner of speaking ontically about Jesus with terms and statements about pre-existence and form.

The intent of this thesis is to explore and evaluate the hypothesis that within the New Testament, and more specifically within Luke-Acts, a functional Christology dominates. We shall then assess the strengths and limitations of applying such a category to the New Testament texts.

Our research will begin by asking some basic methodological questions in the attempt to clarify what is meant by a functional Christology and to ascertain whether the category is a useful one in Christological interpretation. The next chapter will then explore the category by placing it into the context of the different emphases in Hebrew and Greek thought. The heart of the thesis follows in chapter III. It is an attempt to test whether the functional Christology category is helpful in understanding the Christology of Luke-Acts. The common theme of God's saving

activity, climaxed in Jesus, will be explored by viewing Luke's Christology in the light of its Old Testament background and by pursuing in some detail two major aspects of Lucan Christology: the exaltation theme and the way in which Luke portrays Jesus as God's Messiah and Savior.

I. Functional Christology: The Validity of this
Category in New Testament Analysis

A. Introduction

The category of functional Christology has received varying estimations of its worth as a means of delineating Christology. While one New Testament scholar has stated that, "Functional Christology is the only kind that exists,"¹ a contemporary theologian has countered, "The choice between an ontological and a functional Christology is . . . theologically speaking, illusory and a position into which theology must not allow itself to be manoeuvred."² Other voices have added arguments and sought clarification.³

Can one speak of the New Testament as containing a functional Christology? Before testing the category of functional Christology by going to the New Testament text a number of preliminary questions need to be settled. The major questions which provide focus for this chapter are: What are the strengths and weaknesses of the category of functional Christology? Is the category of functional Christology valid from a methodological standpoint?

The meaning of the term functional, its relation to the functionalism of sociology and anthropology, its relation to the functionalist definitions of religion, and its relation to process philosophy and theology all require consideration. A further question raised by so-called functionalism is its exact distinction from ontology and speculative thought. When speaking of a functional Christology one must also consider the validity

of describing Christological development in terms of evolutionary 'strata'. There is also the very basic question of where one begins building a Christology, i. e., 'from below', 'from above', from a soteriological base, etc. Finally, is it possible to know the intention of a biblical writer?

Obviously not all of these questions can be dealt with in this chapter, but the intention is to recognize some of these preliminary questions prior to a consideration of the New Testament text. The first section of this chapter briefly considers the relation of functional Christology to sociology and to the functionalist definitions of religion, to mythopoeic thought and to process philosophy. The second section considers theological and philosophical perspectives on functional Christology by focusing on the Christological thought of two contemporary theologians. The essay concludes by evaluating, in the light of the previous discussion, the strengths and weaknesses of the functional Christology category.

B. Functional Christology: Some Considerations

The term 'functional' is indeed an ambiguous one and needs clarification and definition. It is used in several different fields of study, and in Christology its meaning often remains hazy. Our effort to clarify the term begins with a discussion of its various usages and then moves to consider functionalism in relation to several other descriptions of thought.

1. Towards a Definition

The terms functional and functionalism have been made popular by the disciplines of sociology and anthropology. These disciplines have taken the terms from the field of biology, applying them in a comparable fashion to the study of 'organic' society. Sociology and anthropology have basically used the terms to attempt to understand social phenomena in terms of their relationship to some system. The 'function' of an element is the part it plays in maintaining the system in a persisting state. Although Bronislaw Malinowski was the first to term a special method functionalism, Emile Durkheim and W. Robert Smith had already used the notions of functionalism in their pioneering work in social anthropology.

There are two distinct procedures which arise out of the attempt to understand social phenomena in terms of their relationship to the whole. One is to evaluate the part played by a particular pattern of behavior in the maintenance of the larger system of which it is a part.⁴ The functional view insists that "in every civilization, every custom, material object, idea and belief fulfills some vital function, has some task to accomplish,

represents an indispensable part within a working whole."⁵
A second type of functional analysis needs to be clearly distinguished from the first. "This is an attempt to explain the persistence of an observed phenomenon with the question of its causes in mind."⁶ The functional approach can involve, therefore, not only the assumption that every cultural item has a function, but also a directive to watch for 'functions' and commit them to further investigation.

That religion could also be analyzed through the functional approach was demonstrated by E.B. Taylor, Sigmund Freud and Emile Durkheim in the early stages of the development of the method. For Durkheim, the primary function of religion was the preservation of the social unity, while for Taylor and Freud the function was much more individualistic. Many others have spoken of the functional nature of religion, including Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown. More recently Milton Yinger, in seeking a definition of religion, has also argued that a definition must be concerned with function.

Religion, then, can be defined as a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with these ultimate problems of human life. It expresses their refusal to capitulate to death, to give up in the face of frustration, to allow hostility to tear apart their human associations.

Paul Tillich's functional definition of religion as "that which concerns us ultimately" is probably more widely known.

The question must now be posed; Is functional Christology related to this kind of functionalism? If not, to what does it refer? Though there are perhaps some common points between

the functionalism of the social sciences and the functionalism under study, it would seem that we are dealing with two different uses of the term. Functional Christology has to do with understanding Jesus primarily from the perspective of the functions which he performed on behalf of God. The interest here is in the activity of God in and through Jesus. This is generally contrasted with an ontological Christology, where the primary concern is said to be the 'being' or 'nature' of Jesus.

Reginald Fuller suggests, as do several others, that while the early Jewish-Palestinian affirmations tended to be functional, the Gentile mission eventually led to primarily ontic statements about the Redeemer.⁸ This trend is seen as completed in the highly ontological statements of the Christian creeds.

While the development is seen as natural and inevitable, it is suggested that new attempts must be made to understand the New Testament confession. Oscar Cullmann writes,

It must be acknowledged from a historical point of view, of course, that it was necessary for the Church at a certain period to deal with the precise problems resulting from the Hellenizing of the Christian faith, the rise of Gnostic doctrines and others . . . Its statement of the problem nevertheless was oriented all too exclusively in a direction which no longer completely corresponds to the manner in which the New Testament itself states it.⁹

Later he adds, "The New Testament hardly ever speaks of the person of Christ without at the same time speaking of his work . . . When it is asked in the New Testament 'Who is Christ?', the question never means exclusively, or even primarily, 'What is his nature?' but first of all, 'What is his function?'"¹⁰

H. W. Montefiore, in a similar vein, sees several shortcomings

within the Chalcedon Creed. Since the Jews did not think philosophically, he suggests, the biblical revelation is not expressed in philosophical terms. Its interest was with dynamic function and with personal relationship, not with ontological definitions. The concept of Covenant is the central concern of both the Old and the New Testament. Covenant has to do with conduct and relationships. In the New Testament, the primary concern revolves around what Christ did for men and what effect that has on our relationship with our fellow man and with God.¹¹ The titles given to Jesus and those he used himself were not ontological statements about him but were biblical 'imagery' ". . . to describe his messianic functions and his relations to God and to his fellowmen."¹²

Robert H. Balz in his study of methodology in New Testament Christology also expresses sympathy for functional Christology. On the Wesen of New Testament Christology he suggests that the New Testament is not setting forth Christological teaching but Christological proclamation. Doctrinal statements and summaries function as expressions of the beliefs and confession of the early Church. Members of the early Church did reflect on the event of Jesus of Nazareth using both Jewish and Hellenistic ideas and concepts to aid them in expressing the significance of the event of Jesus for their faith in the present Lord. "Aber diese christologischen Zeugnisse haben nicht den Charakter von ontologischen Urteilen, sondern von funktionalen Aussagen."¹³ Functional Christology focusses on Jesus as the function of God's salvation activity. This includes his descent, his death and

exaltation and the beginning of the eschaton. This type of Christology, Balz suggests, must have been there in the early expressions, grounded in salvation concepts and schemes, having its origin in the person and work of the earthly Jesus and finding its continuity in that expression.¹⁴

We return to the relationship of the functionalism of sociology to functionalist Christology. Although there are points in common, the theocentric nature of the latter gives it a framework and direction that is quite different from the scientific, and often reductionist, analysis of the former. It would seem best not to confuse one use of the term with the concepts and the categories of the other.¹⁵

2. Is it 'Mythopoeic' Thought?

Those scholars who speak of a functionalist Christology, we have seen, generally contrast it with an ontological Christology. While the former is said to speak of action, purpose, office or duty, the latter has to do with nature, essential properties, and fixed being. While the first mindset is primarily interested in activity and the concrete, the second enjoys working with the abstract and speculative. Could it be that these are not really different approaches to reality, equally developed and standing shoulder to shoulder, but that functional thought is a lesser developed system of thought, perhaps comparable to what has been termed mythopoeic or pre-logical thought?

H. and H. A. Frankfort have compiled an excellent survey

of some of the characteristics of mythopoeic thought.¹⁶ They point to the non-speculative, animate, mythical, dynamic, 'Thou' as opposed to an 'It' frame of thought, as characteristic of early man. Although there is much in the dynamic nature of Hebrew thought that is in agreement with the mythopoeic, they conclude that the Hebrew thought, dominated by the absolute transcendence of God, has reached so high a degree of speculation that it has largely left the realm of mythopoeic thought. And yet, they suggest, it remained to the Greeks to discover a form of speculative thought in which myth was entirely overcome because even the Hebrew conception of an only and transcendent God was not entirely free from myth. The Hebrew concept was not the fruit of detached speculation but of a passionate and dynamic experience. "Hebrew thought did not entirely overcome mythopoeic thought. It created, in fact, a new myth - the myth of the Will of God."¹⁷ According to their scheme the Hebrew pattern of thought is somewhere between the mythopoeic and the higher speculative thought of the Greeks on the evolutionary scale.

The argument here presented is inextricably bound to a value judgment made within the assumed evolutionary scheme. The Greek form of speculation is assumed as the finest and most mature type of thought. All other thought formations are designated as less completely evolved. Perhaps one can speak of development in thought formation but is not the single continuum too simplistic? The fact that in contemporary theology it continues to be possible to detect a Hebraic and a Greek approach (eg., the difference between Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich)