

## 18 The Problem of “High” and “Low” Christology

A very common and popular form of modern scholarship which it is necessary to study when analyzing the Bible is the debate between so-called “high” and “low” Christology. This is a debate which is characterized by many complex terms and involved debates, but the core of the debate is easy to understand.

The theory is that there are works in the Biblical canon (and outside of it) which speak show a “high” Christology (by which the proponents of this theory mean a declaration or understanding that Jesus is God). Then there are other works which show a “low” Christology – namely, that Jesus is not God, but is merely a man (albeit one with some very good ideas). A number of the proponents of the theory are of the opinion that the supernatural elements (miracle accounts, in general) in the so-called “low” Christological works (in which group they usually include the Gospels) are simply metaphors and – most importantly – were understood as such by the authors.

It is this distinction which is key – there are many atheists who advance the notion that the Gospel accounts are inaccurate or false, but this is not what those who advance the high vs. low Christology debate. They say that the *authors* of the synoptic Gospels did not believe that Jesus was God, and that there are no references to the divinity of Christ in any Gospel except John. This theory states that the understanding that Jesus is God only came later to Christianity – perhaps as early as the writing of the Fourth Gospel, but perhaps even later.

A number of the proponents of this theory challenge the idea that Jesus is *actually* divine, and say that this was a “later addition” which Christianity needs to reject.

As mentioned earlier, the purpose of this class is *not* to advance a particular theological agenda, merely to show facts and history concerning the Bible, and to follow the Biblical evidence where it leads. The actual question of Jesus' divinity (i.e. is Jesus God?) is one which this class cannot answer. However, the question “do the so-called 'low' Christological works say that Jesus is God or not?” can and should be answered.

The short answer is that, yes, the so-called “low” Christological works *do* make it clear that Jesus is God. They do not, in general, use explicit phrases akin to “Jesus is God!” but they do make it clear that the authors thought that Jesus was God, and that they intended the readers to understand this.

There are many examples of the depiction of Christ's divinity in the so-called “low” Christological works – one of the most classic examples is the fact that Jesus says that He can forgive sins. When the Pharisees question this, saying that only God can forgive sins, Jesus makes it very clear that He considers Himself to have the power to do so. Thus, Jesus is saying that He is God. The fact the author reports this shows that he agrees with Jesus. There are many other examples of this.

Additionally, the letters of Paul are *very* explicit about the divinity of Christ – and these are the earliest elements of the New Testament. This shows that the notion of Christ's divinity is not a later addition or mythological accretion, as many modern scholars have suggested.

It is very important to recognize that this scholarship is simply sloppy – that the so-called “low” Christological works are, in fact, quite clear about the divinity of Christ. It is vital that a serious scholar – whether a Christian or not – is able to address this issue and recognize it for what it is; namely poor academic work with an agenda.

This agenda is very clear – namely, to ultimately deny the divinity of Christ by suggesting that He did not make it clear that He was God and that His early followers did not believe He was God, and then to suggest that perhaps He did not *know* He was God, and then ultimately to suggest that He was not God. This, needless to say, undermines the entire theological foundation of Christianity. Regardless of what a particular scholar feels about Christianity, it must be made clear that there is no such thing as “high” or “low” Christology – there is just Christology. Christianity has always regarded Jesus as God, from the very earliest days. Even if people didn't immediately “get it”, it is clear that that was what Jesus was trying to tell them!