From Historical Criticism to Historical Materialism in the Study of Earliest Christology

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Deploying Fredric Jameson's model of Marxist literary analysis, this article explores the contradictions in developments of early reflections on Christology. Jameson distinguishes between three levels in such analysis: the immediacy of the political, the wider horizon of the social (class and ideology), and then that of history (now understood in terms of mode of production). The key is that texts never operate in isolation, for they become crucial negotiations – as imaginary resolutions of real social contradictions – of wider social and economic shifts. In this light, we may understand the tensions over different Christological models as dimensions of the ideological responses and contributions to the complex shifts in modes of production. Those models may be designated as follows: "personified divine attributes," "exalted patriarchs," "principal angels," "messiah," and Jesus as the embodiment of "divine agency."

Historical critical New Testament scholarship has long debated the origins of earliest Christology. Historical critical scholarship, however, for all its insights, has a habit of losing sight of the forest that is historical process for the trees that are events, texts and hypothetical sources. Historical materialism is one of several possible means by which the forest can emerge as an object of interest in its own right. Whereas the historical critic will ask "What did early Christians believe about Jesus?" the historical materialist will ask "Why did early Christians believe what they believed about Jesus?" Moreover, whilst historical criticism tends to denigrate if not albeit ignore the importance of the political, typically historical materialism approaches such issues as the origin of earliest Christology as explicitly political problems, wherein the political is construed in neither neo-liberal nor neo-conservative terms but in properly radical ones. In this paper I essay an answer to this properly historical materialist question,[1] arguing that earliest Christology was concerned at least in part with symbolically mediating the transition from one dominate mode of production to another.

I proceed methodologically more or less through the three semantic horizons laid out by Fredric Jameson. Suggests Jameson (1981: 76): "our first, narrowly political or historical, horizon, the 'text,' the object of study, is still more or less construed as coinciding with the individual literary work or utterance." Here I will exploit an ambiguity in Jameson's suggestion that the text is *more or less* construed as coinciding with an individual literary work and use as my text the entirety of the New Testament corpus. This understanding of the text is formally similar to but substantively distinct from canonical criticism. Whereas canonical criticism defines the New Testament in terms of Christian (most frequently Protestant) theological convictions about the canon, I begin instead with the empirical datum that the New Testament texts constitute our incontrovertibly earliest Christian writings. Since the boundaries of the New Testament corpus, thus construed in properly chronological terms, are somewhat "fuzzy," I can, if I so choose, include within this corpus other early texts, such as the *Ascension of Isaiah*, *Didache*, *First Clement*, *Shepherd of Hermas* and *Gospel of Thomas*. More important, by defining the New Testament corpus along roughly chronological rather than canonical lines, I can approach our most extensive body of literature pertaining to

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[1] Given the explicitly historical materialist orientation of this paper I have opted not to overly burden the text with references to historical critical studies of earliest Christology.

earliest Christology not as a set of discrete and clearly defined texts but rather as a single yet internally dynamic and porously-bounded symbolic field. For want of a better term, I call this symbolic field, this text, the New Testament, but with the recognition that this text does not necessarily coincide exactly with either the canonical New Testament or a particular form of the New Testament corpus, such as those found in the Nestle-Aland or the new SBL edition.

In the first horizon, then, I read the New Testament *intra*textually with an eye for what one might call its "Christological imaginary," i.e. that initially undifferentiated mass of images used to describe Jesus of Nazareth. The interpreter's main task in this first horizon is to discern some sort of symbolic structure within this mass. Towards this end I take a conceptual cue from contemporary queer theory, specifically of the post-structuralist variety. Sedgwick (1990: 47), in her classic monograph, *The Epistemology of the Closet*, argued that "issues of modern homo/heterosexual definition are structured, not by the supersession of one model and the consequent withering away of another, but instead by the relations enabled by the unrationalized coexistence of different models during the times they do coexist." Explicitly quoting this line from Sedgwick, David Halperin (2000: 91) elaborates that "we have retained at least four prehomosexual models of male sexual and gender deviance, all of which derive from a premodern system that privileges gender over sexuality, alongside of (and despite their flagrant contradiction with) a more recent homosexual model derived from a modern system that privileges sexuality over gender." In the field of early Christian studies, Daniel Boyarin (2004: 74), explicitly citing Halperin's argument, suggests "that the various elements of heresiology surely existed before Justin [Martyr]; the epistemic shift that this writer effected consisted in bringing together rules of faith, apostolic succession, and false prophecy under one principle – the principle of heresy."

The above conceptual apparatus provides me with a means by which I might begin to discern structural relationships among the Christological imageries present within the New Testament corpus. A hypothesis: the New Testament corpus reflects an epistemic shift in which are brought together a minimum of four pre-Christological Jewish models of divine agency alongside a fifth model. I borrow the language of "divine agency" from Hurtado's (1988) typology of Second Temple Jewish divine agents, as well as his three-fold typology of divine agents, which he designates "personified divine attributes," "exalted patriarchs" and "principal angels." I add a fourth pre-Christological model of divine agency, namely the "messiah," which is absent from but I think could be added to Hurtado's typology (as "messiah" as a type of divine agent cf. Collins and Collins 2008). These four pre-Christological models each had their own semi-autonomy within the symbolic field that was Second Temple Judaism. The fifth model is the very figure of "Jesus," now understood not as person but as a model of divine agency in its own right, a symbol around which cluster the other models. This fifth model emerges ultimately as dominant over the other four, but not such that they are either submerged or superseded. Rather they maintain their semi-autonomy within this emergent Jewish Christological symbolism.

We see these four-become-five models of divine agency co-existent throughout the New Testament as well as its textual predecessors and successors. For instance, we can detect at least four models of divine agency in John's Gospel: divine agency through personified divine attribute; divine agency through exalted patriarch in the declarations that Abraham and Moses stand as witnesses to Jesus' identity; divine agency through messiah; and, of course, divine agency through Jesus as the coordinating model. Only divine agency through principal angels seems to be absent, although arguably one could understand Jesus' post-resurrection body as generally more-than-human and specifically angelic. Whether or not one sees the principal angel model present in John's Gospel, it is certainly found elsewhere in the New Testament; Revelation 1 presents as a particularly clear example.

Standing back to look at the forest, we might borrow language from Sedgwick and suggest that earliest Christology was structured not by the supersession of one model of divine agency and the

consequent withering away of another, but instead by the less-than-entirely stable relations enabled by the under- if not un-rationalized coexistence of different models, and that in fact the very emergence of earliest Christology can itself be understood in part as a movement towards rationalizing these already coexistent models within the logic of a newly emergent symbol, Christ Jesus. The very fact of this coexistence thus emerges as a problem with which we can wrestle.

We can now open ourselves to Jameson's (1981: 77) second semantic horizon, wherein

we will find that the very object of our analysis has itself been dialectically transformed, and that it is no longer construed as an "individual" text or work in the narrow sense, but has been reconstituted in the form of the great collective and class discourses of which a text is little more than a *parole* or utterance. Within this new horizon, our object of study will prove to be the *ideologeme*, that is, the smallest intelligible unit of the essentially antagonistic collective discourses of social classes.

Within this second semantic horizon, then, to again quote Halperin (2000: 90), we begin an effort to "capture the play of identities and differences within the synchronic multiplicity of different but simultaneous traditions of discourses that have existed through the ages as well as the play of identifies and differences *across* the diachronic transition effected" by the antagonistic collective discourses of Second Temple Jewish life.

It is, of course, rarely if ever the case that we can unequivocally identify *x* symbolism with *y* collectivity or class. Again, Sedgwick's (1990: 1) post-structuralist analysis of contemporary discourses surrounding homosexuality is conceptually instructive, especially when she indicates that she will be studying contradictions, but "not in the first place those between prohomosexual and antihomosexual people or ideologies. . . . Rather, the contradictions that seem most active are the ones internal to all the important twentieth-century understandings of homo/heterosexual definition, both heterosexist and antihomophobic" (Sedgwick 1990: 1). *Mutatis mutandis*, when thinking about the co-existence of various models of divine agency within ostensibly sealed texts and corpora, the very fact that the same models can be marshaled to different religio-political ends becomes itself an object of discursive analysis. Such analysis emerges as historical materialist whenever we recognize that these different religio-political ends are themselves constituted at least in part by class antagonism.

However, class antagonism itself needs to be contextualized within a broader horizon, Jameson's (1981: 76) third, of which he says:

When finally, even the passions and values of a particular social formation find themselves placed in a new and seemingly relativized perspective by the ultimate horizon of human history as a whole and by their respective positions in the whole complex sequence of the modes of production, both the individual text and its ideologemes know a final transformation, and must be read in terms of what I will call the *ideology of form*, that is, the symbolic messages transmitted to us by the coexistence of various signs systems which are themselves traces or anticipations of modes of production.

Working within this horizon we can reconsider the epistemic shift evidenced by earliest Christology, through which a fifth model of divine agency, that of Jesus, emerges alongside the four previous Jewish models of personified divine attribute, exalted patriarch, principal angel and messiah. We begin to suspect that the emergence of this new model is somehow "a sign of the times," that the tremendous productive energy immanent within the emergence of earliest Christology has something to do with the ways in which this new model functioned to, in Jameson's (1981: 77) memorable phrase, effect an "imaginary resolution of a real contradiction," or more properly *contradictions*, within Second Temple Judaism. Moreover, a properly historical materialist analysis

begins to suspect that these tensions had something specifically to do with the transition from one mode of production to another.

Here I turn to Roland Boer's (2003: 226-228; 2009b: 108-11) suggestion that both Daniel and the letters of Paul were written at a time when the sacred economy of the Ancient Near East was being displaced by the slave-based system of the Greek and Roman empires. Following classical Marxian vocabulary, Boer describes this as the succession from the Asiatic to the Ancient modes of production (the word "Ancient" in the latter not to be identified with the word "Ancient" in the term "Ancient Near East"; they are formally identical but substantively worlds apart).[2] No doubt this could open up quite interesting perspectives upon the Pauline corpus, putting into a new, world-historical, light such seeming tensions as that between freedom in Christ and enslavement to Christ, or freedom from the law and fulfillment of the law. However, what interests me here is specifically earliest Christology, and for this Boer's comments on Daniel provide more immediate grist for the analytical mill. Suggests Boer (2003: 227): "In Daniel there seems to be an idiosyncratic fusion of both the mediated politics of the Ancient mode of production and the dominance of the sacred of the Asiatic mode of politics. Thus Yahweh dominates the scene and the thought-world of the text is not conceivable without him, yet Yahweh is now a highly mediated figure, represented by Gabriel and Michael and other unnamed heavenly visitors."

With the above in mind we might suggest that Daniel mediates a symbolics of sacral divine agency inherited from the Asiatic mode with an emerging symbolics of mediated divine agency inherited from the Ancient. The very idea of divine agency begins to present itself anew as mediation between a symbolic field structured by the Asiatic mode of production and a symbolic field structured by the Ancient. Thus we can construe both the Danielic text and the New Testament corpus as symbolic mediators of a broader political-economic transformation, i.e. the revolutionary movement from one mode of production to another, from the Asiatic to the Ancient. This transformation was more "advanced" by the time at which earliest Christology emerged than when the Danielic text underwent final redaction, and indeed represents this "advance" whilst also advancing the transformation itself.

By "advance," of course, I make no value judgment, but simply mean to say that world-history moved on between Daniel and the New Testament, and that during this period the Ancient mode achieved for itself a greater degree of political-economic and thus symbolic autonomy. Thus we can suggest that earliest Christology stands as a sort of "crystallization" (but *not* the end product) of transformations entailed by this "long revolution" covering centuries. Lest this narrative be misread as triumphalist, however, it must be recalled that earliest Christology was not the only creative, which is also to say productive, model of divine agency which emerged near the turn of the era. I have in mind specifically imperial theology, whose formal similarities to earliest Christology cannot be neglected. I would suggest that the emergence of earliest Christology and imperial theology in relatively close spatio-temporal proximity is not a coincidence, but rather that imperial theology too was aimed at symbolically and discursively mediating the transition from the Asiatic to the Ancient mode, precisely by structuring the co-existence of previous Graeco-Roman models of divine agency around the newly emergent symbol of the emperor. Both earliest Christology and imperial theology aimed at the aesthetic resolution of real social tensions (and this notwithstanding the real social and more to the point administrative changes entailed by the transition from republic to empire).

Of course, earliest Christology and imperial theology symbolically mediated the transition from the Asiatic to the Ancient modes in ways quite distinct from one another. Earliest Christology tended

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[2] There has long been discussion on whether we should properly speak in terms of an Asiatic mode of production as distinct from an Ancient mode. Boer (2007; 2009b: 99-113) has provided a particularly accessible account of these debates, with the needs and concerns of biblical scholars in mind. This study follows traditional Marxian vocabulary and adopts the terms Asiatic and Ancient for these modes of production.

to view this transition from the perspective of the periphery, whereas imperial theology viewed it from the center. Moreover, earliest Christology was not the only "peripheral" ideology seeking to mediate the transition, nor imperial ideology the only "central" one. One thinks in particular of the various forms of Judaism which emerged during the first centuries C.E. However, if we look ahead to the fourth century, Jesus and the emperor have emerged as central yet competing symbols of a near-complete transition to the Ancient mode. Jesus, as a figure mediating a transition from one mode to another, aesthetically resolving real social tensions, has moved from the periphery and into the centre. By this point, of course, we see intimations of the Feudal mode which would eventually displace the Ancient. Indeed, perhaps the eventual coexistence of Jesus and emperor within the politics known as "Christendom" should be read as indicative of the shift from Ancient to Feudal modes.

Over these first four or five centuries of the Christian era we witness a rationalization of the co-existence of the five models of divine agency. Such rationalization entails a process of exclusion wherein certain strategies for rationalizing this co-existence are eventually recognized as official whereas others are not. Thus emerges the distinction between orthodoxy and heresy, between those rationalizations which are acceptable to the powers-that-be and those which are not. If Nicene Christology emerged as official within Christendom, it was at the expense of those competitors labeled as heretical. In fact, in a real way Nicene Christology *had* to label its competitors as heretics, for orthodoxy is meaningless without such a category. Crucially, both Nicene and non-Nicene Christologies remain equally symbolic strategies to negotiate the transition from Asiatic to Ancient modes. Such strategies were existentially necessary because human subjectivity is defined always within the rhyme and rhythm of our lives, and these in turn are structured ultimately by the social inconsistencies and contradictions immanent within any mode of production. It is historical materialism, not historical criticism, which is best suited to consider these inconsistencies and contradictions, and thus, although historical criticism can offer many insights, I am unconvinced that it can ultimately tell us where earliest Christology fits into the great human adventure. Historical materialism might not be able to tell us this on its own, but it can make a significant contribution.

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