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The Value of Christological Titles, in Conversation with Leander Keck

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Abstract

Forty years ago, Leander Keck criticised the ‘tyranny of titles’ in the study of New Testament Christology. While Keck rightly criticised early- to mid-twentieth approaches to titles for Jesus, there is no denying the importance of titles in New Testament texts. This article summarises classic twentieth-century approaches to christological titles and discusses the most important criticisms. The root issue of such approaches is the conflation of titles and concepts. A constructive proposal is offered for reading christological titles as literary strategies of characterisation. This approach begins by carefully defining what is meant by a title and how titles might be distinguished from common nouns and names. Six principles for the productive interpretation of titles are then discussed: 1) titles must be distinguished from other christological material like motifs, typologies, and references to biblical texts; 2) titles must be distinguished from each other; 3) titles are meaningful not because they refer to particular ideas but because of their relationship with biblical texts, religious life, and culture; 4) what a title does is more important than what a title means; 5) titles are flexible, polyvalent, and ambiguous; 6) titles must be read alongside other titles and non-titular material. Finally, it is demonstrated how this literary approach to titles will be fruitful for contemporary discussions in New Testament Christology and contribute to the renewal of New Testament Christology that Keck called for several decades ago.¹

Keywords: Christology; Jesus; titles; Leander Keck; history of religion school; literary criticism

1. Introduction

Almost forty years ago, in the pages of this journal, Leander Keck argued for a reorientation of the study of New Testament Christology. Central to his thesis was the claim that New Testament Christology had been replaced with the historical study of christological ideas in early Christian texts. Thus, he proclaims, somewhat tautologically, ‘The study of NT Christology will be renewed if it recovers its proper subject-matter – Christology – and its proper scope, the New Testament.’² Later in his essay, he takes aim at what he believes to be one of the most egregious sins in the study of New Testament Christology: the obsession with titles. He writes:

¹ An earlier version of this article was presented in March 2023 at the European Association of Biblical Studies Graduate Symposium in Jerusalem and benefited greatly from the insightful questions of those in attendance. I would also like to thank Matthew Novenson, Kristina Deusch, and the anonymous reviewers of this journal for their helpful feedback on earlier versions of this article.

² L. E. Keck, ‘Toward the Renewal of New Testament Christology’, *NTS* 32 (1986) 362.

Indeed, it is often assumed that NT Christology is a matter of the history of titles. Probably no other factor has contributed more to the current aridity of the discipline than this fascination with the palaeontology of christological titles. To reconstruct the history of titles as if this were the study of Christology is like trying to understand the windows of Chartres cathedral by studying the history of coloured glass.... Renewing the discipline of NT Christology requires, therefore, liberating it from the tyranny of titles.³

And then almost as an afterthought, he adds, 'though obviously they cannot be ignored'.⁴ This essay seeks to heed the warning of Keck and others by learning from the mistakes of previous titles scholarship while giving titles for Jesus the attention they still deserve in the study of New Testament texts. To this end, I will first summarise a few representative examples of twentieth-century approaches to titles, then discuss some of the major points of criticism, and finally put forward a constructive proposal for one way that New Testament scholars can work productively with titles and thereby, contribute to the renewal of New Testament Christology which Keck advocated for several decades ago.

2. Twentieth-Century Approaches to Titles

There are a number of ways to tell the story of twentieth-century approaches to titles for Jesus. For example, Edwin Broadhead in his thorough *Forschungsgeschichte* focuses on titles research as it relates to historical Jesus studies.⁵ However, like Keck, here we are interested in the study of titles as an aspect of the study of New Testament Christology, that is, the theological accounts of the mission and identity of Jesus to be found in New Testament writings.⁶

While nineteenth-century scholars were primarily interested in titles for recovering Jesus' self-understanding,⁷ by the turn of the twentieth century, scholars were primarily interested in titles for revealing the development of early christological thought as typified by the 'history of religion' school.⁸ One of the hallmarks of this approach was assuming that titles or the concepts standing behind them were borrowed and modified from other religious traditions, whether Judaism,⁹ Gnosticism,¹⁰ or Greco-Roman religion.¹¹ Wilhelm Bousset typifies this approach when he associates different titles with different early Christian communities, for example, *χριστός* and 'son of man' with an early Palestinian community influenced by Jewish ideas and *κύριος* with a Hellenistic community influenced by Greek ideas.¹² Bousset also associates different titles with different religious concepts. For example, when discussing the messianism of the early Palestinian community, he makes a division between two different kinds of messiahs: the one was

³ Keck, 'Toward the Renewal', 368.

⁴ Keck, 'Toward the Renewal', 368.

⁵ E. K. Broadhead, *Naming Jesus: Titular Christology in the Gospel of Mark* (JSNTSup 175, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999) 13–30.

⁶ See L. E. Keck's summary and criticism of twentieth-century approaches to Christology in general, 'Christology of the New Testament: What, Then, Is New Testament Christology?' in *Who Do You Say That I Am? Essays on Christology* (ed. M. A. Powell and D. R. Bauer, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999) 187–93.

⁷ See D. F. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined* (London: Chapman, 1846 (German 1835–36)) §61–9.

⁸ New Testament scholars identified with this school include Wilhelm Bousset, Johannes Weiss, and William Wrede. See W. Baird, *History of New Testament Research* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) II.238–53.

⁹ O. Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, rev. 1963 (German 1957)) 111–17.

¹⁰ R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Scribner, 1951–55 (German 1948–53)) I.164–83.

¹¹ W. Bousset, *Kyrios Christos: A History of the Belief in Christ from the Beginnings of Christianity to Irenaeus* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970 (German 1st edition 1913)) 138–47.

¹² Bousset, *Kyrios Christos*, 31–55, 119–52.

‘a powerful king from David’s tribe who, as a victorious ruler, would again establish the ancient throne of David’ and the other was a ‘transcendent Messiah’, ‘a supra-terrestrial, angel-like, and pre-existent being’, and for Bousset these two conceptions corresponded to two different titles: ‘son of David’ for the former and ‘son of man’ for the latter.¹³ According to Bousset, the primitive Palestinian community rejected the son of David idea and replaced it with the ‘Messiah-Son of Man idea’.¹⁴ He argues we can see traces of this polemic in passages like Mark 12.35–7.¹⁵ In this approach, the New Testament becomes a kind of fossil record of the history of different communities’ preferred titles for and conceptions of Jesus.¹⁶

For many scholars, therefore, titles were the key to understanding the development of Christology and the diversity of christological expression in the New Testament. The mid-twentieth century saw what might be called the golden age of title-dominated approaches to New Testament Christology with the flourishing of a number of works which outlined New Testament Christology according to various christological titles. These include especially works by Oscar Cullmann, Ferdinand Hahn and Reginald Fuller.¹⁷

Like Bousset, Hahn and Fuller assume that titles provide a window into the development of Christology as the doctrine of the early church came into greater contact with the Gentile world or experienced theological crises, such as the delay of the parousia.¹⁸ In many ways, these scholars offer a more nuanced picture of the background of these titles than Bousset. For example, while Bousset treats the exalted use of the title κύριος as an almost entirely Hellenistic innovation,¹⁹ Hahn offers a more complex historical and philological picture, arguing that κύριος as a concept developed separately in Palestinian and Hellenistic contexts.²⁰

Cullmann, by contrast, offers a more theological approach when he structures his analysis not according to a historical reconstruction of the development of christological thought but according to the place that each title has in salvation history, dividing titles according to those which have to do with Jesus’ earthly work, his future work, his present work and his pre-existence.²¹ Even still, like the history of religions school which came before him, he approaches the question of Christology in terms of borrowing and modifying distinct concepts that are encapsulated by various titles:

In order to answer the question ‘Who is Jesus?’, the first Christians had at their disposal certain concepts which were already present in Judaism, especially in Jewish eschatology. Therefore the christological question was presented in the earliest period in the following way: To what extent did Jesus fulfil what these concepts implied? To what extent did his actual work go beyond what they implied?... When the first Christians in a Hellenistic environment answered the question about Jesus with a title which in Greek culture designated a divine mediator, one must investigate

¹³ Bousset, *Kyrios Christos*, 31–2.

¹⁴ Bousset, *Kyrios Christos*, 49.

¹⁵ Bousset, *Kyrios Christos*, 34–5.

¹⁶ Geological and palaeontological metaphors abound in this scholarship, for example, F. Hahn, *The Titles of Jesus in Christology: Their History in Early Christianity* (New York: World, 1969 (German 1963)) 11; R. H. Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology* (London: Lutterworth, 1965) 183; Keck, ‘Toward the Renewal’, 362.

¹⁷ Cullmann, *Christology of the New Testament*; Hahn, *The Titles of Jesus*; Fuller, *Foundations*. V. Taylor is also worth mentioning here, who examines forty-two different titles for Jesus in *The Names of Jesus* (London: Macmillan, 1953).

¹⁸ See Hahn, *Titles of Jesus*, 347–51; Fuller, *Foundations*, 16–17.

¹⁹ Bousset, *Kyrios Christos*, 128.

²⁰ Hahn, *The Titles of Jesus*, 73–114.

²¹ See Cullmann, *Christology*, 9–10.

from the point of view of the New Testament to what extent the early Church connected with that title the same or different ideas.²²

Of course, Cullmann also differs significantly from previous approaches to titles when he criticises them for assuming that ‘Christology had necessarily to conform to the conceptual scheme already present in Judaism and Hellenism’ and instead emphasises the importance of the self-consciousness of Jesus and the effect of the first Christians’ religious experiences as they sought to describe Jesus using the concepts available to them.²³

Ultimately, despite all the differences between these scholars, what they all have in common is that their true object of study is not titles themselves but the christological concepts which are assumed to stand behind titles or to which titles are assumed to refer. As Hahn writes, ‘The christological ideas of the earliest church have nevertheless obtained far-reaching expression in the strata of tradition which are stamped with a definite title of majesty’.²⁴ They study these concepts in order to address historical questions regarding the development of Christian doctrine in the first century. The New Testament and the traditions preserved within it are simply the primary dataset for answering these diachronic questions. Texts are for them a window into history.²⁵ Thus, it is natural for them to conflate titles with concepts because christological concepts are their real object of study. And it is this methodological tendency to conflate titles and concepts that has, in my view, drawn the most significant criticism and should form the focal point of a new approach to titles.

3. Criticisms of Early- to Mid-Twentieth-Century Approaches to Titles

The classic twentieth-century approaches to titles have been criticised on a number of fronts.²⁶ As mentioned, the most significant overarching issue is the conflation of words and concepts. This conflation has two primary effects which detract from these approaches’ contribution to New Testament Christology which will be examined here in turn: 1) title-dominated approaches fail to understand titles, and 2) these approaches fail to deal adequately with New Testament Christology overall.

Regarding the first objection, it is rightly pointed out that such approaches often, in the words of Keck, rely on ‘an inadequate view of language’ wherein the ‘difference between a word and a concept is blurred’.²⁷ This is, of course, not an issue limited to the study of titles, as James Barr has pointed out in his pointed criticism of Kittel’s *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*:

Is there one ‘concept’ for each word, or not? Does the lexical stock correspond to the ‘concept’ stock? Does a particular occurrence of a word imply the signification of the whole of the corresponding ‘concept’ or only of part of it? Is the concept made up from the totality of the occurrences of the related word, or is the ‘concept’ fully present each time the word appears?²⁸

²² Cullmann, *Christology*, 4–5. See also Fuller, *Foundations*, 16.

²³ Cullmann, *Christology*, 5. See also Fuller, *Foundations*, 15.

²⁴ Hahn, *The Titles of Jesus*, 11.

²⁵ Fuller, *Foundations*, 17.

²⁶ I rely especially on the criticisms offered by Keck, ‘Toward the Renewal’, 368–70, and idem, ‘Christology of the New Testament’, 196–7, as well as Broadhead, *Naming Jesus*, 13–30. See also M. Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul* (London: SCM Press, 1983) 30–47; S. E. Porter and B. R. Dyer, *Origins of New Testament Christology: An Introduction to the Traditions and Titles Applied to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023) xvii–xxv.

²⁷ Keck, ‘Toward the Renewal’, 368–9.

²⁸ J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961) 209.

Additionally, as Barr points out, the situation is further muddled when German writers use the term *Begriff*, which can mean either ‘word’ or ‘concept’.²⁹

For titles research, this blurring between word and concept can be seen in the over-reliance on background material. If one is studying the use of titles in New Testament writings as words, then background material is of only limited usefulness. While a diachronic investigation of a word may helpfully trace how the meaning of a word has changed over time, it can easily lead one astray if, for example, an older meaning of a word is obsolete. However, if one is not investigating words but concepts or ideas, then it becomes more difficult to know when one’s investigation of background material has degraded into parallelomania.³⁰ The distinction between words and concepts is critical for determining the relevance of background material.

Furthermore, when titles are assumed to refer directly to concepts, scholars often assume that different titles must refer to fundamentally different Christologies, as we have seen, for example, with Bousset’s assessment of ‘son of man’ and ‘son of David’, discussed above.³¹ However, this is not necessarily true, as Martin Hengel has argued, ‘The multiplicity of christological titles does not mean a multiplicity of exclusive “Christologies” but an accumulative glorification of Jesus.’³² Keck also concurs, ‘What is characteristic of communities is their capacity to affirm multiple and diverse Christologies simultaneously.’³³ Whatever one makes of the diversity and development of early Christian thought, titles cannot necessarily be assumed to correspond to competing conceptions of Jesus.

Other errors of history, exegesis and linguistics have been noted as well,³⁴ especially with respect to particular titles like son of man³⁵ or messiah.³⁶ The rise of narrative-critical approaches in the late twentieth century has also seen classic twentieth-century approaches to titles criticised for their insensitivity to the way that titles function in narratives.³⁷ These are all reasons why many find that title-dominated approaches have typically not done justice to titles themselves.

The second objection to these approaches is perhaps even more damning than the first. Not only do title-dominated approaches misinterpret titles, but they also fail to give an adequate account of the theological portraits of Jesus in New Testament writings. This is because such approaches do not offer the interpretive tools to deal with texts which do not use titles. For example, Keck criticises scholars who interpret passages which do not use any titles as if there were a title that must stand behind the text, ‘So strong has been the influence of titles, however, that frequently scholars have supplied them as if the creators of the text had forgotten to include them.’³⁸ Perhaps the best example

²⁹ Barr, *Semantics*, 210.

³⁰ S. Sandmel, ‘Parallelomania’, *JBL* 81 (1962) 1–13.

³¹ Somewhat surprisingly, this assumption often leads interpreters to devalue titles. If different titles must refer to different and competing Christologies, then the presence of numerous titles in one writing could mean that some or all of the titles have lost the meaning they once had. This can be seen, for example, in H. Conzelmann’s assessment of Luke’s ‘promiscuous use of titles’, *The Theology of St. Luke* (London: Faber, 1960) 170–2.

³² Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul*, 41.

³³ Keck, ‘Toward the Renewal’, 371.

³⁴ See, for example, P. Vielhauer’s critique of Hahn’s overly rigid division between Gentile Christianity and Jewish Christianity (‘Zur Frage der christologischen Hoheitstitel’, *TLZ* 90 (1965) 586–87).

³⁵ See, for example, the criticism of Bousset’s reading of ‘Son of Man’ in L. W. Hurtado, ‘Wilhelm Bousset’s *Kyrios Christos*: An Appreciative and Critical Assessment’, *Early Christianity* 6 (2015) 17–29.

³⁶ See M. V. Novenson, *The Grammar of Messianism: An Ancient Jewish Political Idiom and Its Users* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

³⁷ See C. K. Rowe, *Early Narrative Christology: The Lord in the Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009) 17–23.

³⁸ Keck, ‘Toward the Renewal’, 369.

of this phenomenon is the much-debated concept of a θεῖος ἄνθρωπος or ‘divine man’ in the Gospels.³⁹ As Jack Dean Kingsbury notes in his survey of this debate in Mark, despite the total lack of the term in the Gospels and its rarity in classical sources, ‘those who use it to characterise the Christology of Mark or his tradition have tended to work with it as though it were a fixed concept with precise meaning’.⁴⁰

Furthermore, since titles are not concepts but only one strategy of theological characterisation among many, an adequate approach to New Testament Christology must be able to deal with other strategies of characterisation used in New Testament texts. Anthony Thiselton has argued for the importance of implication as a strategy of characterisation in the Gospels.⁴¹ For example, after Jesus calms a storm, his disciples openly wonder, ‘Who then is this that he commands both the winds and the water, and they obey him?’ (Luke 8.25).⁴² No answer is given, but the raising of the question invites the reader to contemplate the answer. Camille Focant discusses the effect of secrecy and misunderstanding in Mark, how the reader learns to see Jesus as beyond understanding: ‘Il perçoit combien Jésus et le Règne qu’il annonce sont insaisissables.... [S]on identité échappe à toute prise.’⁴³ Other scholars, such as Dale Allison and David Moessner, have argued that the Gospels typologically portray Jesus as a new Moses even though no ‘Moses’ title is ever used.⁴⁴ Both Donald Juel and Richard Hays have in their own ways examined the importance of the interpretation of Israel’s scriptures in New Testament portrayals of Jesus’ identity and mission.⁴⁵ Gregory Lanier has explored the use of conceptual metaphors from Israel’s scriptures as a christological strategy in Luke’s Gospel.⁴⁶ Others have focused on how literary elements, such as plot, affect Christology in the Gospels.⁴⁷ Traditional title-dominated approaches are not able to deal with such christological strategies because they must either ignore them or unnaturally force them into a titles-based approach. Any renewed approach to titles must be able to deal with the non-titular strategies in a more nuanced way.

Of course, it is also widely recognised that titles cannot be ignored. Christology might not be merely a matter of titles, but titles are an important strategy of theological characterisation and can be found in every writing of the New Testament except for 3 John. In fact, one will notice that none of the issues thus far highlighted have been issues with the christological significance of titles themselves. Rather, critics have pointed out issues with poor approaches to titles. While it may be commonplace to emphasise that titles do not fully answer many of the questions that we want to ask of New Testament portraits of Jesus,⁴⁸ titles undeniably play a key role in New Testament texts. Titles are some of the

³⁹ See, for example, Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 1.130–1.

⁴⁰ J. D. Kingsbury, ‘The “Divine Man” as the Key to Mark’s Christology—The End of an Era?’, *Int* 35 (1981) 243–51.

⁴¹ A. C. Thiselton, ‘Christology in Luke, Speech-Act Theory, and the Problem of Dualism in Christology after Kant’ in *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ: Essays on the Historical Jesus and New Testament Christology* (ed. J. B. Green and M. Turner, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 453–72.

⁴² All translations from ancient texts are the author’s own unless otherwise stated.

⁴³ C. Focant, ‘Une christologie de type “mystique”’, *NTS* 55 (2009) 20.

⁴⁴ D. C. Allison Jr., *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993); D. P. Moessner, *Lord of the Banquet: The Literary and Theological Significance of the Lukan Travel Narrative* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989).

⁴⁵ D. Juel, *Messianic Exegesis: Christological Interpretation of the Old Testament in Early Christianity* (Library of Early Christology; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); R. B. Hays, *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014).

⁴⁶ G. R. Lanier, *Old Testament Metaphors and the Christology of Luke’s Gospel* (LNTS 591; London: T&T Clark, 2018).

⁴⁷ For example, C. Karakolis, ‘Narrative Funktion und christologische Bedeutung der markinischen Erzählung vom Tod Johannes des Täufers (Mk 6:14–29)’, *NovT* 52 (2010) 134–55. See also the discussion of narrative Christology below.

⁴⁸ See N. Henrichs-Tarasenkova, *Luke’s Christology of Divine Identity* (LNTS 542; London: T&T Clark, 2016) 4–6.

key terms by which our sources discuss the mission and identity of Jesus and therefore cannot be ignored, as Kavin Rowe has noted with regard to the Gospel of Luke:

Not one of Keck's objections disallows a focus on the narrative use of a title in which the Gospel narrative determines the meaning and significance of the word, so long as one avoids grandiose claims to a totalizing Christology. Moreover, despite the uncontested sophistication of his reflections, Keck seems to overlook a simple matter in the christological interpretation of a Gospel: the Gospel writers themselves privilege certain titles.⁴⁹

But how then do we approach titles without falling into the same errors of previous interpreters?

4. A Literary Approach to Titles

What follows will outline one productive approach to titles as a strategy of theological characterisation in early Christian writings. This approach seeks to correct the characteristic errors of previous approaches while providing guidelines for the reading of titles in the New Testament. Other approaches are certainly possible, including sociological, linguistic and historical approaches.⁵⁰ This approach, however, seeks to move past the 'pre-occupation with history' that in Keck's assessment has often plagued the study of New Testament Christology⁵¹ and is instead interested in titles from a literary-critical perspective. In other words, this approach is not interested in answering questions like, 'What can titles tell us about the development of early Christian thought?' or 'What titles did Jesus himself use and what did he mean by them?' Rather, this approach is interested in how the titles used in New Testament texts can help us understand the Christology of these texts.⁵² This proposal centres around the following key insight: the root issue of classic twentieth-century approaches to titles is in conflating titles and concepts. This is by no means an error that only twentieth-century scholars are guilty of. Even contemporary scholars who are careful to avoid the errors of previous approaches often find themselves slipping into this same issue.⁵³ As has been discussed, this conflation has caused scholars to misunderstand titles and to misunderstand Christology. However, this error can be corrected by attending more carefully to the formal features of our texts and how they use titles. This will require a greater appreciation for how titles function linguistically and how they are related to concepts.

⁴⁹ Rowe, *Early Narrative Christology*, 23–4. See also M. de Jonge, 'The Earliest Christian Use of *Christos*: Some Suggestions', *NTS* 32 (1986) 321–43.

⁵⁰ For a sociological approach, see B. J. Malina and J. H. Neyrey, *Calling Jesus Names: The Social Value of Labels in Matthew* (Sonoma: Polebridge, 1988) 35–42; for a linguistic approach to 'son of man', see M. Casey, *The Solution to the 'Son of Man' Problem* (London: T&T Clark, 2009); for a particularly historical approach to 'son of man', see R. Bauckham, *Son of Man: Early Jewish Literature* (vol. 1; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023). Keck likewise affirms the validity of such approaches ('Toward the Renewal', 376 n. 12).

⁵¹ Keck, 'Toward the Renewal', 365.

⁵² M. B. Dinkler provides a helpful account of what it means to engage in a literary critical approach to christological questions against classic historical approaches (*Literary Theory and the New Testament* (AYBRL, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019) 137–62).

⁵³ In their recent book, Porter and Dyer are at pains to distinguish their approach from classic approaches to titles, especially with respect to the confusion 'between a term and a concept' (*Origins of New Testament Christology*, xxiii). However, in seeking to study both 'titles' and 'traditions' without carefully distinguishing the difference between the two, they make a similar conflation. This can be seen, for example, in their treatment of the title/tradition, 'messiah', when they distinguish between figures in Israel's scriptures who are anointed yet are not fully messianic (*Origins of New Testament Christology*, 139). Porter and Dyer make a fair distinction, but in using 'messiah' to refer to both a term and a concept, it becomes unclear which they are trying to study.

Before proceeding further, we should clarify what is meant by a title. It is not enough to simply refer to the set of classic titles: Christ, Lord, son of God, saviour, son of man, and so on. While these are all key terms used to refer to Jesus in our texts, we must be able to give an account of how these terms create meaning. After all, if these terms are not concepts, then what are they? For this approach, titles are best understood as a literary feature of New Testament texts. It is, therefore, important to properly interpret a title for the same reason it is important to properly interpret other literary devices like metaphors or hyperboles.

Titles are a particular strategy of characterisation. Figures can be characterised through a variety of strategies. Their speech can be reported: 'Jesus says, "Follow me"' (Matt 8.22). Or their actions can be reported: 'Jesus wept' (John 11.35). They can be described with adjectives: 'He is faithful and just' (1 John 1.9). They can have all kinds of other things predicated of them, like abstract ideas: 'Christ is the end of the law' (Rom 10.4). They can also have nouns predicated of them: 'He is a propitiation for our sins' (1 John 2.2). In our texts, titles are definite nouns that are either predicated of characters or used to refer to characters.

One characteristic that distinguishes titles from common nouns is that titles are particularly marked nouns, that is, they help distinguish a character from others in some meaningful way.⁵⁴ For example, consider the following passage where an angel of the Lord announces the birth of Jesus to a group of shepherds, 'A saviour is born to you today in the city of David who is the messiah Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby swaddled and lying in a feed trough' (Luke 2.11–12). The angel uses four nouns to refer to Jesus: 'a saviour', 'the messiah', 'Lord', and 'a baby'. We may fairly distinguish the first three nouns as marked in this discourse, while the last noun is relatively unmarked. That the newborn child is a baby is for the reader of Luke's Gospel already known and hardly notable. This can be demonstrated by the fact that 'baby' could be replaced in English with 'him', and the meaning of the sentence would be largely unchanged.

Another characteristic that distinguishes titles from common nouns or even other marked nouns is that titles demonstrate a higher degree of conventionality, that is, their uses are generally recognisable as instances of broader patterns of referring to distinguished individuals, especially in formal contexts. This is in contrast to a marked but ad hoc way of referring to characters such as, 'Is this not the one who would sit and beg?' (John 9.8).⁵⁵ This conventionality can be apparent from the term itself, for example, 'the Lord', or from a particular syntactical construction into which any number of terms can be placed and new titles formed, for example, 'Alexander the Great', 'Ivan the Terrible', and so on. This conventionality allows titles to call to mind for the reader associations with other texts, social conventions and so on. This conventionality helps give titles their particular force and meaning.

⁵⁴ Markedness is a concept from discourse analysis and is defined as follows by J. Read-Heimerdinger: 'Usage by any particular author that is normal, not intended to create a special effect, is identified as their "default" or unmarked usage. Where patterns are disrupted for any reason, such as to underline something, that usage is said to be "marked"' (*Luke in His Own Words: A Study of the Language of Luke-Acts in Greek* (LNTS 672, London: T&T Clark, 2022) 11). A default way of referring to a person might be with a pronoun or a common noun like, 'a person'. 'Default' is not to be confused with numerical frequency. So then, the frequency with which our texts refer to Jesus with titles does not make titles unmarked. See also S. E. Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament: A Practical Introduction for Teaching and Exegesis* (Lexham Bible Reference Series, Peabody: Hendrickson, 2010) 6–8.

⁵⁵ Conventionality is not fixed and can be easily created. This is arguably what has happened with 'one like a son of man' from Dan 7.13 which is conventionalised in the Gospels, e.g., Matt 24.30, note the addition of the definite article.

It may be noted that this analysis hardly offers a clear boundary between titles and common nouns. Markedness and conventionality are qualities that may be possessed by degree. There is no way to draw a clear line between titles and common nouns.⁵⁶ This is not a mistake. Titles and common nouns are not fundamentally different kinds of things and therefore cannot always be disambiguated. Interpreters may sometimes disagree about when a noun or noun phrase is titular and when it is not.⁵⁷ Determining whether something is a title or not is less important than interpreting the meaning of a noun or noun phrase in a given text. A disagreement about whether something is a title may turn out to be little more than a disagreement about where to draw the line between common nouns and titles. This is a disagreement not about the text but about our own categories. If instead, the disagreement is about how the noun or noun phrase departs from default usage (markedness) or interacts with prior usage of similar language (conventionality), then this is a disagreement about meaning.

Titles are also often distinguished from names. However, this is not merely an issue of distinguishing one set of words (e.g. Jesus, Andrew, Mary) from another set (e.g. Lord, saviour, messiah). Rather, titles are frequently distinguished from names in terms of how they function semantically. This is particularly salient for the term *χριστός*, which is often identified as sometimes acting as a title and sometimes as a name, especially in the Pauline corpus.⁵⁸ Matthew Novenson summarises the commonly proposed linguistic distinction in the following way: ‘a title carries with it a sense or set of senses, but a name does nothing more than refer to a thing in the world. Titles have sense, but names have only reference’.⁵⁹ However, while this black-and-white distinction might be philosophically satisfying, it does not reflect the way language is used in the real world. It is certainly true that names in most situations tend to be primarily referential and therefore carry little semantic weight. However, this depends on how the name is used. Names can be and often are semantically meaningful (e.g. Matt 1.21). The semantic difference between names and titles is, therefore, as Novenson argues, ‘relative, not absolute’.⁶⁰ Our assumptions regarding the meaningfulness of names are products of our own culture and cannot be assumed to be shared by ancient people.⁶¹ Thus, for our purposes, it is unhelpful to sharply distinguish names from titles as if they were fundamentally different kinds of things. Names and titles are both nouns that can be used to meaningfully refer to characters in our texts. Whatever potential semantic weight may be carried by names is indeed often latent until attention is called to it.⁶² However, this semantic latency is not only true for names but also some titles, for example, ‘son of man’.⁶³

⁵⁶ For example, consider the text cited above, Luke 2.11–12. Both ‘saviour’ and ‘messiah’ are relatively marked. However, while ‘messiah’ clearly has the requisite conventionality to make it a title (see Luke 3:15), reasonable people may disagree about whether ‘saviour’ does as well.

⁵⁷ Some interpreters may find it helpful to make even finer distinctions in particular instances, especially based on historical usage, such as the distinction between *χριστός* as a title or an honorific, for example, J. W. Jipp, *The Messianic Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020) 152. The usefulness of such distinctions will need to be demonstrated in the interpretation of texts. It may turn out that these are distinctions without a difference.

⁵⁸ On this issue see M. V. Novenson, *Christ among the Messiahs: Christ Language in Paul and Messiah Language in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) esp. 64–97.

⁵⁹ Novenson, *Christ among the Messiahs*, 68.

⁶⁰ Novenson, *Christ among the Messiahs*, 70.

⁶¹ F. Bovon, ‘Names and Numbers in Early Christianity’, *NTS* 47 (2001) 271.

⁶² For a fascinating study which pursues this possibility with the name of Jesus, see B. R. Wilson, ‘Directly Addressing “Jesus”: The Vocative Ἰησοῦ in Luke 23:42’, *JBL* 136 (2017) 435–49.

⁶³ J. A. Gibbs, *Matthew* (3 vols., Concordia Commentary, St. Louis: Concordia, 2006) 1.434–7.

5. Principles for Interpreting Christological Titles

The rest of this approach will be explicated through six basic principles for interpreting titles in New Testament texts. It is not enough merely to say that titles must not be confused with concepts or that titles are best understood as literary or rhetorical features. I am not the first to make these points. Many interpreters have claimed to be committed to these points but, in their interpretation, end up falling into the same trap as classic approaches to titles.⁶⁴ Thus, these principles offer a constructive proposal to help interpreters avoid conflating titles and concepts and, thereby, falling into the same errors as classic approaches to titles. These principles will help interpreters appreciate how titles function as literary strategies of characterisation. I have arrived at these principles by observing how interpreters tend to interpret titles and what they tend to get wrong in doing so.

First, titles must be distinguished from other kinds of christological material like motifs, typologies or references to biblical texts. This is because titles are a literary feature. They are not simply the names of particular christological concepts. Hanna Stettler is, of course, right when she writes, 'Es ist durchaus möglich, daß ein Autor das, was ein bestimmter Titel beinhaltet, aussagt, ohne den Titel zu verwenden.'⁶⁵ For example, Jesus is portrayed as a prophet regardless of whether he is explicitly called a prophet as in John 4.19, or whether he simply engages in typical prophetic activity, such as foretelling destruction, as in Mark 13. Even still, portraying Jesus as a prophet is not the same thing as calling Jesus a prophet because titles cannot be equated with ideas. The presence of an idea is not the presence of a title. However, many scholars often fail to make this distinction. For example, in his discussion of the alleged title, 'the servant', Edwin Broadhead asserts that the only time this title is used in the Gospels is in Matthew 8.16–17, despite the fact that the key term, *παῖς*, shows up nowhere in these verses.⁶⁶ Matthew does quote from Isaiah 53, one of the so-called servant songs, and presents Jesus as fulfilling what was spoken of the 'servant' in the Isaiah passage. This is not a use of a title, however. It is a use of a biblical text to characterise Jesus.

Second, titles must also be distinguished from each other. Despite titles all being similar strategies of characterisation, they are not all used in the same way. For example, titles often differ in how they are used syntactically.⁶⁷ In the Gospels, with the exception of Mark, the title *κύριος* is frequently used vocatively (e.g. Matt 7.21; Luke 5.8; John 4.11), while the title *χριστός* is only ever used once in the vocative in the New Testament (Matt 26.68).⁶⁸ Furthermore, it is frequently noted that while Jesus often refers to himself with the phrase, 'son of man', other characters almost never do and the term is surprisingly rare in the rest of the New Testament.⁶⁹ Relatedly, while many titles are often used in predication of Jesus (e.g. *χριστός* (Matt 16.16); *κύριος* (Rom 10.9)), 'son of man' is almost

⁶⁴ Broadhead, unfortunately, does exactly this. While he helpfully focuses on narrative or literary methods for reading titles, he still fails to properly distinguish between titles and concepts. This can be seen, for example, in his treatment of the title 'Nazarene' (*Naming Jesus*, 31–42). He assumes that because the title has no background in the history of religions, it is therefore like an empty container that has meaning indiscriminately poured into it from the surrounding context. This is, however, not how words work. While words are often quite flexible, they are not empty containers. By treating 'Nazarene' as an empty container, Broadhead still approaches titles as concepts. Broadhead simply constructs his concept from the narrative data in Mark instead of background material.

⁶⁵ H. Stettler, *Die Christologie der Pastoralbriefe* (WUNT 2/105, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998) 24.

⁶⁶ Broadhead, *Naming Jesus*, 104. Oddly enough, the term *παῖς* is used to refer to Jesus in Matt 12.18. Perhaps Broadhead has referenced the wrong passage. Even still, it is not clear that the term *παῖς* has the kind of conventionality necessary to function as a title.

⁶⁷ See the comments by N. A. Dahl, 'Sources of Christological Language', in *Jesus the Christ: The Historical Origins of Christian Doctrine* (ed. D. H. Juel, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 116.

⁶⁸ Notably here the term is used to mock Jesus during his trial.

⁶⁹ The only exceptions used to refer to Jesus include Luke 24.7; John 12.34; Acts 7.56; Heb 2.6; Rev 1.13; 14.14.

never used in predication of Jesus, the only exception being John 5.27.⁷⁰ If titles are concepts which acquire their meaning from their background, then these sorts of differences are largely immaterial. However, if titles are literary features and therefore acquire their meaning from how they are used in context, then these sorts of differences are essential for understanding their significance in New Testament writings.⁷¹

Third, titles are meaningful not because they refer to particular ideas but because of their relationship with biblical texts, religious life, cultural practices and so on. As has already been discussed, titles have a complex relationship with ideas. Some usage of titles seems to presuppose a larger idea. Consider, for example, Luke 3.15 where the crowds wonder whether John the Baptist might be the *χριστός*. The crowd assumes that *χριστός* refers to some kind of expected eschatological figure. They are not simply asking whether John has recently had oil poured onto him. Except, even here, *χριστός* is meaningful because of the use of the term in Israel's scriptures (e.g., 1 Sam 24.6; Ps 2.2; Isa 61.1), the historical practice of anointing and even the phenomenon of messianic movements. Many interpreters have been inclined to distil these associations into an idea to which key terms like *χριστός* are assumed to refer.⁷² Scholars such as Hahn and Fuller do something similar with other titles.⁷³ Regardless of whether or not these distillations are good descriptions of ancient people's ideas, it is to put the cart before the horse to assume that titles are meaningful because of their associations with such ideas. In any language, words are meaningful because of how they are used, not because of some idea that allegedly stands behind them. Likewise, titles are meaningful because of their rich linguistic and cultural associations. As noted by Marinus de Jonge, a title 'does not stand for a fixed concept, but rather brings with it a wealth of connotations made more or less explicit in a given context'.⁷⁴ The interpreter must decide which of the many possible connotations are being evoked in context.

Fourth, what a title *does* is often more important than what a title *means*. Because titles do not simply refer to concepts, the interpreter should pay attention to what a title is *doing* in a narrative or discourse. This is what Steven Runge has called the difference between semantic meaning and pragmatic effect.⁷⁵ In other words, there is a difference between what a word means according to a dictionary and what speakers may be doing with a word when they use it. To call someone by a name or a title is not merely to assert something about them but also to do something, for example, to insult them, to flatter them, to honour them. This is what philosophers of language mean in calling utterances 'speech-acts'.⁷⁶ For example, it is surely important that in Matthew 8.29 the demons refer to Jesus as 'son of God'.⁷⁷ The reader learns from this verse that the demons think Jesus may have come to torment them. Why do the demons call their potential tormentor 'son of God'? What are they doing in calling Jesus by this title? The background of titles is certainly still relevant here (e.g., Ps 2), but the background helps to inform the *use* and *function* of these titles. Nils Dahl makes a similar point when he compares Christology

⁷⁰ For a comparison of 'son of man' with other titles in Matthew see J. D. Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988²) 95–102.

⁷¹ For example, it may be helpful to study a title specifically as it is used in a particular phrase, for example, J. T. Hewitt, *Messiah and Scripture: Paul's 'In Christ' Idiom in Its Ancient Jewish Context* (WUNT 2/522, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020).

⁷² For example, S. Mowinckel, *He That Cometh* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1954 (Norwegian 1951)).

⁷³ Hahn, *The Titles of Jesus*; Fuller, *Foundations*.

⁷⁴ De Jonge, 'Christian Use of Christos', 329.

⁷⁵ Runge, *Discourse Grammar*, 4–6.

⁷⁶ See, for example, J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962); J. R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

⁷⁷ See W. Grundmann, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* (THKNT, Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1968) 263.

to a game of chess. The origin of the game and its background are largely irrelevant, ‘what really matters...are the rules of the game’.⁷⁸

Fifth, titles are often flexible, polyvalent and ambiguous. Many titles can be used in a variety of senses. For example, κύριος can be used to refer to the God of Israel, to refer to someone who owns a slave or as a polite form of address, like the English, ‘sir’. These flexibilities can be exploited to great effect. Kavin Rowe explores this dynamic in Luke’s Gospel.⁷⁹ For example when a character addresses Jesus with the vocative κύριε (e.g. 5.8), this certainly makes sense as a polite form of address. But what is to be made of the fact that κύριος is used of Jesus in exalted senses (e.g. Acts 2.36)? Is it perhaps the case that the implied reader is to see that the characters who call Jesus ‘Lord’ as a polite form of address speak more truthfully than they are aware? Only an overly simplistic view of language could preclude this possibility. Joel Marcus has argued as well that the title χριστός was often perceived to be ambiguous enough that sometimes New Testament texts must specify precisely what sort of χριστός they have in mind.⁸⁰

Sixth and finally, titles cannot be studied on their own but must be read alongside other titles and non-titular material. As Martin Hengel notes regarding the Gospel of John, ‘We should not try to isolate the titles of Jesus in John; it is their manifold interplay which makes John’s Christology so fascinating and full of tension and power.’⁸¹ In our texts, different titles often help inform the meaning of others. Of course, titles are also only one key strategy of theological characterisation, among others. The study of titles, therefore, cannot by itself offer a full picture of a New Testament text’s characterisation of Jesus’ identity and mission. Other material must also be consulted. For example, in John’s Gospel, while recourse to certain background material will certainly be of some utility in seeking to understand what the prologue means in calling Jesus ‘the Word’, the rest of the Gospel’s presentation of Jesus will also clarify the use of this title even if the title is never used in quite the same way again.⁸² Titles may not refer to concepts, but they do call to mind concepts and help construct concepts. Thus, if we are interested in the concepts that authors construct with titles, we must pay attention to other material which authors use to construct these concepts.

6. Conclusion

In the past forty years since Keck’s call for renewal, New Testament Christology has changed significantly with the reassessment of old approaches and the rise of new ones, many of them along the lines of Keck’s proposal. It is my argument that the renewed study of titles, along the lines advocated here, can help contribute to the continued renewal of New Testament Christology in the twenty-first century.

This proposal is not necessarily advocating a return to the voluminous treatments of titles from the mid-twentieth century. While additional work on titles may be welcome, this is unlikely to be a productive approach for giving an overview of New Testament Christology as a whole. Other approaches, such as a book-by-book approach, are more promising and have been successfully written.⁸³ Instead of serving as the organising principle of one’s account of New Testament Christology, the study of titles is more likely to be helpful as one interpretive tool among several others.

⁷⁸ Dahl, ‘Sources of Christological Language’, 133.

⁷⁹ Rowe, *Early Narrative Christology*.

⁸⁰ J. Marcus, ‘Mark 14:61: “Are You the Messiah-Son-of-God?”’, *NovT* 31 (1989) 125–41.

⁸¹ M. Hengel, *Studies in Early Christology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995) 370.

⁸² See B. G. Schuchard, *The Word from the Beginning: The Person and Work of Jesus in the Gospel of John* (Bellingham: Lexham, 2022).

⁸³ For example, F. J. Matera, *New Testament Christology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999).

One reason this approach to titles will contribute to the renewal of contemporary discussions of New Testament Christology is that it will allow approaches interested in what is often called ‘narrative Christology’ to heed the call of critics like Michal Beth Dinkler to ‘attend more closely to the constitutive features of narrative’.⁸⁴ Narrative approaches have been criticised on a number of fronts.⁸⁵ However, one that is rarely mentioned is that narrative Christology sometimes falls into the trap of merely summarising the narratives of the Gospels.⁸⁶ While narrative critics are right to be sensitive to the theological presentation of the Gospels specifically as narratives, the Gospels do not merely tell stories about Jesus, they make claims about Jesus and invite their readers to draw conclusions about him on the basis of the narratives they tell (e.g. John 20.31). Since titles for Jesus are both formal features of these narratives as well as a key part of what these narratives want to claim about Jesus, they offer a fruitful area of study for narrative Christology.⁸⁷ Of course, this approach will be beneficial not only for narrative works like the Gospels and Acts but also for non-narrative works such as Epistles and Revelation. Titles are also often a key part of the rhetorical strategies of these texts as well, and the approach outlined here will help interpreters focus on how writers use these terms to talk about Jesus instead of focusing on background material.⁸⁸ Good candidates for this approach include Paul’s use of *χριστός*⁸⁹ or Revelation’s use of *ἄρνιον*.⁹⁰

Another benefit of this proposal is that it offers a more textual approach than many current, often quite ‘conceptual approaches’ to New Testament Christology. These approaches work extensively with non-textual categories like divinity or monotheism because of their focus on the question of Jesus’ relationship to God.⁹¹ Even ‘messianism’ is frequently treated as another abstract category.⁹² Scholars have been chastened by the criticisms of classic titular approaches and are well aware that they cannot answer these questions merely by an analysis of certain titles.⁹³ Instead, scholars often make their arguments by recourse to certain key concepts, like the much-disputed ‘monotheism’, which are typically not the object of discussion in ancient Christian and Jewish sources but are the rules according to which such discussions take place.⁹⁴ These are important areas of

⁸⁴ M. B. Dinkler, ‘A New Formalist Approach to Narrative Christology: Returning to the Structure of the Synoptic Gospels’, *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 73 (2017) 4; examples of narrative Christology include E. S. Malbon, *Mark’s Jesus: Characterization as Narrative Christology* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009); Rowe, *Early Narrative Christology*.

⁸⁵ For an appreciative assessment, see S. Hultgren, ‘Narrative Christology in the Gospels: Reflections on Some Recent Developments and Their Significance for Theology and Preaching’, *Lutheran Theological Journal* 47 (2013) 10–21.

⁸⁶ For example, despite his effective literary analysis, this tendency can be observed in the work of J. D. Kingsbury, *Conflict in Luke: Jesus, Authorities, Disciples* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991); and idem, *Matthew as Story*.

⁸⁷ A recent study along these lines is D. Gustafsson, *Aspects of Coherency in Luke’s Composite Christology* (WUNT 2/567, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck: 2022).

⁸⁸ See Dahl, ‘Sources of Christological Language’, 132–33.

⁸⁹ See Novenson, *Christ among the Messiahs*.

⁹⁰ Much of the discussion of the lamb in Revelation focuses on the lamb as symbol, its conceptual origins and its relationship to the abstract theme of violence (see L. L. Johns, *The Lamb Christology of the Apocalypse of John: An Investigation into its Origins and Rhetorical Force* (WUNT 2/167, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck: 2003)).

⁹¹ See the literature review in B. D. Smith, ‘What Christ Does, God Does: Surveying Recent Scholarship on Christological Monotheism’, *CurBR* 17 (2019) 184–208. Some key works in this area include R. 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); L. W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

⁹² See, for example, R. A. Bühner, *Hohe Messianologie: Übermenschliche Aspekte eschatologischer Heilsgestalten im Frühjudentum* (WUNT 2/523, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020).

⁹³ See again Henrichs-Tarasenkova, *Luke’s Christology*, 4–6.

⁹⁴ See R. A. Bühner, *Messianic High Christology: New Testament Variants of Second Temple Judaism* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2021) 12.

research. But it is also true that some of the problems of the old history of religions school are also present in the new history of religions school,⁹⁵ namely, the focus on conceptual abstractions and the underlying concern to explain the christological development between the New Testament and later patristic Christology. However, there is much more to say about New Testament theological portraits of Jesus than how they envision the status of Jesus with respect to God. The questions that animate the Christology of later centuries, while in some sense present in New Testament texts, cannot be assumed to be the only driving questions of these texts. A literary approach to titles offers a helpful alternative for two reasons: 1) it focuses on textual features rather than concepts, and 2) it is, therefore, open to a broader set of christological questions because it is less concerned with giving an account of development.

Fittingly, Keck himself calls for a renewed focus on the texts of the New Testament themselves and the exploration of a more varied set of christological questions. He writes, 'A focus on texts will deal with the text or corpus of texts as they actually exist and, so far as possible, with what they were designed to do.'⁹⁶ Perhaps, despite his criticism of their study in his day, titles can actually help lead the way to the very renewal of New Testament Christology that Keck called for several decades ago.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

⁹⁵ See Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 11–13.

⁹⁶ Keck, 'Toward the Renewal', 371.