

THE ORIGINS OF JESUS-DEVOTION

A RESPONSE TO CRISPIN FLETCHER-LOUIS

L. W. Hurtado

Summary

The critique of my work on Jesus-devotion by Dr. Fletcher-Louis (in a previous issue of this journal) combines an essentially correct brief summary of some broad contours of my views and a few interesting points for further discussion; but, unfortunately, the main criticisms are often directed against over-simplified or exaggerated portrayals of my views, and also involve at least one serious red herring. In this brief response, therefore, I try to correct and clarify some key matters in the hope of promoting a more productive discussion of the remarkable devotion to Jesus that characterised earliest Christianity.

1. Introduction

Scholars obviously hope that others will notice and engage their published work, and so I take some encouragement from the appearance of the recent forty-five page critical review of my studies of early Jesus-devotion by Dr Crispin Fletcher-Louis.¹ In justification of his rather extensive essay, he opines that my work ‘needs more careful critical consideration than it has so far received’, judging that most reviews have been ‘superficial and have missed its real problems’. Though I welcome further discussion of matters, I have to say that I find this a strange judgement about scholarly engagement with my studies heretofore. For example, I am aware of well over sixty reviews

¹ Crispin Fletcher-Louis, ‘A New Explanation of Christological Origins: A Review of the Work of Larry W. Hurtado’, *TB* 60 (2009): 161-205. I am grateful to Dr Peter Williams, Editor, for the invitation to give a response in the pages of this journal. I thank Dr Fletcher-Louis for commenting on an earlier draft of this response to his essay.

of my 2003 book, *Lord Jesus Christ*, by scholars around the world and in a variety of specialities, most of them appreciative, a few pointedly negative, and several making valid observations that have spurred me to further reflection and analysis.² Moreover, I was invited to formal colloquia in which this book was the focus of probing critical analysis by various scholars in Indiana (Concordia Seminary, 2005), Berlin (Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft für Theologie: NT-Projectgruppen-tagung, 2005), and Salamanca (Universidad Pontificia, 2005).³ My other books have also received quite serious attention from capable scholars, and sometimes critical comments. So I hardly feel that I have been given an ‘easy ride’!⁴ Nevertheless, of course I welcome the continuing interest in my work and, more importantly, the shared interest in early Jesus-devotion reflected in Fletcher-Louis’ essay.

He describes his purpose as ‘an appreciative critique’ of my work, and the first several pages of his essay give an essentially accurate summary of some main points in my proposals, and some affirmations of what he regards as positive contributions. Acknowledging that my work addresses wider chronological parameters of early Jesus-devotion, down through the late Second Century AD, he confines his attention, however, to what I have written about ‘the earliest decades and the New Testament material’.⁵ For NT scholars, no doubt, this is the most interesting period. But part of my aim, particularly in *Lord Jesus Christ*, has been to address a wider horizon of ‘earliest Christianity’ that includes developments down into the late Second

² L. W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

³ Those giving formal critical appraisals in Berlin included Cilliers Breytenbach, Jens Schröter, Jörg Frey, H. Löhr, and Christoph Marksches. The Indiana colloquium featured reviews by Peter J. Scaer, David P. Scaer, Charles Gieschen, and James Voeltz. In Salamanca, reviewers were Santiago Guijarro Oporto, Jacinto Núñez Regodón, and Jorge Fernández Sangrador. On the receiving end of their probing analyses, I can give assurances that they were by no means superficial! I am also encouraged that the book has been translated into Spanish, Italian and French (other translations in progress), and has attracted the notice of scholars beyond NT studies: e.g. Terrence W. Tilley, ‘Remembering the Historic Jesus—A New Research Program?’, *TS* 68 (2007): 3-35.

⁴ E.g. in addition to those critical reviews of various of my studies cited appreciatively by Fletcher-Louis, see recently the counter-proposal by Adela Yarbro Collins, ‘“How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?”: A Reply’ in *Israel’s God and Rebecca’s Children*, ed. David B. Capes, April D. DeConick, Helen K. Bond, Troy A. Miller (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007): 55-66. This is not the place to respond to specifics of her essay.

⁵ Fletcher-Louis, ‘New Explanation’, 161-67. Quote from 162.

Century AD, and there really are some interesting things to note beyond the first decades and the NT.⁶ Nevertheless, Fletcher-Louis' restricted chronological focus still affords him plenty of scope to lodge a number of criticisms. Indeed, the main part of his essay, the final thirty-eight pages, comprises a veritable fusillade of negative judgements about specific features of my work.

In addition to numerous allegations of serious historical problems, he also lays charges of philosophical naïveté and even theological error. If taken at face value, these would amount to a rather damning assessment. Indeed, one could wonder how I have accumulated such a combination of what he portrays as rather obviously erroneous and misguided views. Among his many critical comments, Fletcher-Louis does offer what seem to me a few interesting points for further reflection and discussion. But (and I honestly intend no antagonism in saying so), in my view, too many of his criticisms are premised on dubious judgements about key evidence, and (more disappointing) allegations that are red herrings, and surprisingly inadequate or incorrect representations of my own work. These problems unfortunately detract from what otherwise might have been a more productive dialogue/debate on the relevant historical issues. In the hope of promoting a more fruitful discussion, therefore, in this brief response I must focus a good deal on correction and clarification of some particularly important matters. Though focused on the origins of Jesus-devotion, Fletcher-Louis' critique stretches across a wide swathe of texts and issues, and it would exceed the space available (and perhaps the patience of readers) to give a point by point response. Instead, I concentrate on some key topics that I regard as comparatively more crucial.

⁶ Interesting texts and developments include extra-canonical 'Jesus books' (e.g. *Gospel of Thomas*), Valentinianism, Marcion, the formation of a four-fold Gospel, patterns of prayer and worship, and the initial efforts to engage the wider philosophical currents of the day (esp. Justin Martyr), all of which are noteworthy for what they tell us about devotion to Jesus in this period. See my discussion in *Lord Jesus Christ*, 427-653.

2. Christological Development

My first objection about his characterisation of my work is to his imputation of a three stage schema of christological development.⁷ In fact, I have explicitly rejected any model of unilinear, multistage christological development for the earliest period of Jesus-devotion.⁸ His imposition of this schema works mischief in several ways that require correction.

I commence with his complaint that I refer to the beliefs of earliest Aramaic-speaking Christians, and not the time of Jesus' own ministry, as 'the 'first' stage of christological development'.⁹ He gives no reference, and the only place where I can find the expression 'first stage' in *Lord Jesus Christ* is in my statement that 'a messianic claim was characteristic of the very first stage of Christian proclamation in Judaeian circles', where I contend that this is consistent with the routine use of 'Christ' for Jesus in Paul's letters.¹⁰ It should be obvious from the context of the statement that my point was simply to posit a strong *continuity* between Paul and Judaea/Jewish Christians in their ascription of messianic status to Jesus. There are no subsequent references to second or third stages of christological development, and I cannot find in any of my published works anything that would suggest the sort of multistage schema that Fletcher-Louis attributes to me.

I refer to earliest circles of Judaeian/Jewish believers, and not Jesus' own ministry, as 'the very first stage of Christian proclamation'. But surely that reflects what the NT portrays, for example in passages such as Matthew 28:16-20; Luke 24:46-49; Acts 1:6-8, in which the risen Jesus is depicted as ordering the commencement of a gospel proclamation that is to extend to all nations. That gospel certainly has Jesus of Nazareth as its core subject, but surely this proclamation of him as Messiah and exalted Lord through whom God now will consummate redemption commenced only in the post-Easter situation.

⁷ Fletcher-Louis, 'New Explanation', 168-70. He incorrectly claims that 'these three distinct stages in Christology' are also noted in the review of *Lord Jesus Christ* by Delbert Burkett, *JOAS* 124 (2004): 128-29, but he has misunderstood Burkett, who instead refers to 'three main ways' in which the NT ascribes divinity to Jesus, and notes that I argue that all three likely go back to Jewish-Christian circles.

⁸ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, esp. 13-24, where I engage such schemas offered by Bousset and various more recent scholars.

⁹ Fletcher-Louis, 'New Explanation', 169.

¹⁰ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 170.

Curiously, Fletcher-Louis further complains that my characterisation of earliest (Judaean/Jewish) Christian faith is ‘a post-resurrection/exaltation faith, *not an incarnational one*: Jesus is accorded divine honours as the one who has now been raised to the right hand of God, the Father ... not, at first, worshipped as a pre-existent divine being who then becomes incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth’.¹¹ There seems to me to be some confusion in his statement. For the record, I can think of nowhere in my discussion of Judaean/Jewish Christian circles where I deny to them any belief about Jesus’ ‘pre-existence’, and Fletcher-Louis gives no citation to back up his statement.¹² But, in any case, he confuses two distinguishable things.

It is obvious that the initial historical *impetus and basis* for the Jesus-devotion that erupted so early in the post-Easter period was the conviction that God had raised Jesus from death, exalted him to heavenly glory, and now required him to be revered as ‘Lord and Christ’ (e.g. Acts 2:32-36). So how can I be criticised for noting this? Clearly, however, at some very early point (so early, in my judgement, that the belief is already presupposed in Paul’s letters) Christians ascribed to Jesus a ‘pre-existence’ and saw him as the agent through whom God created the world. In fact, I have proposed that this belief likely arose in early Jewish Christian circles, and that the belief was shared by them and Pauline churches.¹³ But, however early the beliefs appeared, ‘pre-existence’ and ‘incarnation’ are nowhere portrayed in the NT as the *basis* for worshipping Jesus. Even in Philippians 2:6-11, where most scholars concur in finding a direct reference to Jesus’ divine pre-existence (vv. 6-8), the *basis* for the universal acclamation of Jesus as *Kyrios* is clearly stated as God’s exaltation of him and bestowal on him of ‘the name above every name’ (vv. 9-11).¹⁴ So, I am puzzled about why Fletcher-Louis seems to think that an emphasis on the exaltation of Jesus must be taken as an alternative to positing his pre-existence and incarnation. I certainly give no basis for thinking this.

¹¹ Fletcher-Louis, ‘New Explanation’, 169.

¹² I refer readers to my effort to identify evidence of the Jesus-devotion of Judaean/Jewish Christianity in *Lord Jesus Christ*, 155-216.

¹³ See, e.g. my discussion in *Lord Jesus Christ*, 118-26, esp. 125-26.

¹⁴ I offer an extended analysis of Phil. 2:6-11 in L. W. Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God? Historical Questions about Earliest Devotion to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005): 83-107.

To cite another important example of an unfortunate misconstrual of things, I note his claim that ‘in effect’ I posit ‘a third stage’ in which ‘a number of significant steps in christological thinking and behaviour were taken’.¹⁵ It appears that he refers here to my discussion of the Gospels (especially in *Lord Jesus Christ*, chs. 5–6). He attributes to me specifically the view that in the Gospels Jesus is first accorded ‘the biography familiar to classic christological orthodoxy: the pre-existent Lord becomes incarnate in Jesus who then returns, at this [*sic*] resurrection and exaltation, whence he came’.¹⁶ Moreover, in the same paragraph he also apparently imputes to me the notion that with the Gospels we have the earliest indication of a discovery of ‘the life and activity of the pre-existent Lord in the Old Testament story’.¹⁷

As he notes, however, I do not actually posit any such ‘third stage’. More significantly, in fact I do not portray the Gospels as marking some significant shift in christological beliefs of the nature that he attributes to me, and I do not ascribe to these texts the earliest manifestation of the ‘charismatic exegesis’ that involved finding Jesus prefigured and even referred to widely in the OT. As to the latter, I rather clearly argue that the earliest, and perhaps most vigorous, setting in which the scriptures were searched and pondered for references to Jesus was probably in the first months and years in Judaeans/Jewish Christian circles.¹⁸

As for what the Gospels represent, equally clearly, I subscribe to the view that the authors ‘drew upon traditions about Jesus that had probably circulated in Christian circles for decades’, and I posit that these writings were ‘heavily conditioned and shaped by the basic pattern of proclamation that characterised known Christian circles from

¹⁵ Fletcher-Louis, ‘New Explanation’, 169–70 (citation from 169).

¹⁶ Fletcher-Louis, ‘New Explanation’, 170. In footnote 26 he refers to my *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?*, 102 in support of his claim that I present the Gospels as marking this significant christological development, but there is no such view there or elsewhere in my work. On the nature and significance of the Gospels, cf. my extended discussion in *Lord Jesus Christ*, chs. 5–6.

¹⁷ Fletcher-Louis, ‘New Explanation’, 170.

¹⁸ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 184–85, also 73–74. In any case, I note that this approach to the OT is clearly reflected in Paul’s letters (e.g. 1 Cor. 10:4; Phil. 2:9–11), decades earlier than the Gospels. I borrow the expression ‘charismatic exegesis’ from David Aune, ‘Charismatic Exegesis in Early Judaism and Early Christianity’ in *The Pseudepigrapha and Early Biblical Interpretation*, ed. James H. Charlesworth and Craig A. Evans. (JSPSup 14; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993): 126–50. But my own view on the activity involved differs somewhat from Aune’s. Cf. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 73 (n. 130).

the earliest decades of the young religious movement' (to cite my own phrasing).¹⁹ Indeed, I indicate that this early proclamation involved a basic narrative structure, focused on Jesus' death and resurrection but also connected with the OT story of God and Israel. I do contend that, their quasi-biographical literary genre makes the canonical Gospels 'a notable development in the literary history of first-century Christianity', and 'a particular kind of dedicated literary expression of devotion to Jesus'.²⁰ But their contents and christological beliefs reflect 'a direct relationship to at least some influential patterns of proclamation and teaching that circulated among various Christian groups of the first century'. That is, they represent 'a significant new development in literary genre', but not 'revolutionary theological statements'.²¹ I am at a loss to grasp how my discussion of the matter was so misunderstood.

Moreover, sadly, it is misleading for Fletcher-Louis to characterise my view of the Gospels as 'an allegorical reading' in which 'the veneration of Jesus by the disciples during his earthly ministry is not historical but is a kind of code for the veneration of Jesus by Christians in the early decades of the church'.²² I have offered a specific analysis of the Gospels' references to people reverencing the earthly Jesus and the relationship to post-Easter devotion to Jesus, and I can only refer readers to it to judge for themselves.²³ In brief, I agree that the earthly Jesus was revered by his followers and by supplicants, but this did not amount to the programmatic pattern of devotional actions that erupted in the post-Easter period. It seems to me entirely reasonable to see that the Gospels' accounts of Jesus' being revered in his own setting were written in ways that were intended to resonate with the devotional stance of the believers for whom they were written. That is

¹⁹ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 270.

²⁰ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 270. I also emphasise the contrast between this strong narrative quality (with lots of historical specifics) and texts such as the *Gospel of Thomas*.

²¹ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 272. In considering the significance of narrative genre of the canonical Gospels, I acknowledge the stimulus of Richard A. Burridge, 'Gospel Genre, Christological Controversy and the Absence of Rabbinic Biography: Some Implications of the Biographical Hypothesis' in *Christology, Controversy, and Community: New Testament Essays in Honour of David R. Catchpole*, ed. David G. Horrell and Christopher M. Tuckett (Leiden: Brill, 2000): 137-56.

²² Fletcher-Louis, 'New Explanation', 170.

²³ Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?*, 'Homage to the Historical Jesus and Early Christian Devotion', 134-51, published initially in *JSHJ* 1 (2003): 131-46.

not to reduce the Gospels to allegory, but to take seriously the pastoral purposes of their authors.

Contra Fletcher-Louis' claim, I do not subscribe to the view that the canonical Gospels are to be read simply as allegories of late first-century Christianity. I do insist that the gospel authors did not aim simply to provide 'accurate records of the life of Jesus' to suit ancient or modern antiquarian or academic purposes, but sought, instead, to link Christian believers emphatically with Jesus, the first-century figure who was crucified and resurrected for their sakes, and whom they revered as their exalted Lord (e.g. Luke 1:1-4; John 20:30-31). Toward this end (and reflecting the basic narrative nature of earliest proclamation), these authors all chose to present their 'Jesus books' as quasi-biographical narratives of that Jewish man from Galilee.²⁴ I do hold that the authors intended their readers to read these narratives of the earthly Jesus in light of his exalted status, and that these texts were written, not merely as reminiscences about Jesus and his disciples in their original setting, but more fully as inspiration, instruction, and encouragement for Christian readers. The merging of the horizons of the earthly Jesus and the readers is explicit in some places (e.g. Mark 13:14, 37), and everywhere implicit. Fletcher-Louis seems to suggest that any real configuring of Jesus-tradition by the authors of the Gospels to make their texts more readily relevant and meaningful to their readers would threaten the texts as 'accurate records'. But I repeat that I do not characterise the Gospels as presenting an allegorical 'code', and it is a distortion to suggest otherwise.

Granted, in my view, the Gospel of John is a distinctive instance of this merging of horizons of Jesus and readers.²⁵ As I see matters, the author of this fascinating text has rather more explicitly and programmatically presented the historic ministry of Jesus with the benefit of the post-Easter revelation of Jesus' true glory by the *Paraklētos* (e.g. John 14:12-15). With this revelatory hindsight, the author claims that those who saw the historic Jesus (although they did not realise it at the time) saw the 'glory as of the only Son from the

²⁴ Again, I refer readers to my discussion of the distinctive nature of the canonical Gospels in *Lord Jesus Christ*, particularly 259-82.

²⁵ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 353-400; and now also L. W. Hurtado, 'Remembering and Revelation: The Historic and Glorified Jesus in the Gospel of John' in *Israel's God and Rebecca's Children*, ed. David B. Capes, April D. DeConick, Helen K. Bond, Troy A. Miller (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007): 195-214.

Father' (John 1:14), and through his text he means for readers as well to perceive more fully Jesus' true significance and glory. There is, thus, what one might call a certain 'deliberate anachronism' in John, reflected, for example, in the unique sort of explicit christological claims uttered by Jesus only in this text. But in John 14–16, the author gives readers the basis for this forthright rendition of the historic Jesus seen through the revelatory work of the Spirit. Nevertheless, the author insists that the glorified Son who came from heaven and is ascended there again is Jesus of Nazareth, whom he portrays also as authentically human (sometimes distinctively, as in 11:33–37) and whom he firmly locates in the geographical and cultural setting of Roman Judaea. Whatever one makes of the particulars of this view of the Gospel of John, I regard it as simplistic to represent me as treating the gospel text as allegory.

I must also object to his wider claim that I subscribe to the view that 'the New Testament christological claims have distorted the history of christological development which must be reconstructed through a peeling away of the layers of textual tradition and careful reconstruction of phases in Christian practice and belief'.²⁶ These are erroneous and unfair characterisations of my views. The main evidential difficulties in historical analysis of earliest Jesus-devotion are that (1) even the earliest extant texts (Paul's epistles) more presuppose than explain key christological beliefs and devotional practices, and that (2) though we must be grateful for what we have, we could wish for more, particularly more direct evidence of non-Pauline Christian circles of the first few decades. These difficulties are why we must engage in serious efforts to reconstruct the historical factors and developments involved. Nevertheless, although it is a demanding task, what we have is sufficient to allow us to formulate cogent proposals about earliest christological beliefs and devotional practices, as I hope to have demonstrated in the contributions that I have offered over the last twenty-five years or so.

3. Uniqueness of Christology

Fletcher-Louis agrees that early Jesus-devotion represents a significant innovation, and is without true parallel or precedent in second-temple

²⁶ Fletcher-Louis, 'New Explanation', 171.

Jewish tradition and the larger Roman religious environment.²⁷ But he objects to my proposals about how to understand the eruption of this innovation. I turn now to engage his objections on some major issues.

He devotes a considerable portion of his essay to an attack on my proposal that the extraordinary reverence given to Jesus, particularly the programmatic inclusion of Jesus in the devotional practices of earliest believers, must have been based on the conviction that God required Jesus to be revered in this manner, and that this conviction likely came through powerful revelatory experiences.²⁸ It is not possible to respond to all of his numerous specific assertions and arguments. So, again, I must select for discussion those matters that I think are most important.

My first observation is that his extended focus on my treatment of revelatory religious experiences does not adequately reflect the *four* ‘forces and factors’ that I propose as prompting and shaping earliest Jesus-devotion.²⁹ This is important for reasons clearly stated where I set out these matters in *Lord Jesus Christ*. I emphasise there that my proposal involves ‘multiple factors and not a simple explanation’, and also ‘the *interaction* of these factors’, ‘a dynamic (and varying) combination of the forces and factors’.³⁰ These include the biblical/Jewish tradition of the Roman period, particularly its ‘monotheistic’ emphasis, but also the ample readiness to accommodate what I have called ‘principal agent’ figures (e.g. high angels, OT worthies, personified divine attributes). Indeed, my 1988 book was heavily an investigation of the conceptual resources and precedents in Jewish tradition of the time available to earliest Christians in their efforts to accommodate Jesus alongside God.³¹ So, I reject Fletcher-Louis’ claim that I do not consider the possibility that there were ‘categories’ in Jewish tradition that might have made devotion to Jesus ‘acceptable’.³² I did consider matters rather fully, and have shown that

²⁷ His agreement on this matter is less explicit in his essay than in email exchanges between us subsequent to its publication. I draw upon his email comments here and at a few other points in this response, grateful for his permission to do so.

²⁸ Fletcher-Louis, ‘New Explanation’, 177-201.

²⁹ I have laid out a model of these multiple forces in *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998²): 114-24, and in subsequent publications, most fully in *Lord Jesus Christ*, 27-78.

³⁰ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 29.

³¹ Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*.

³² Fletcher-Louis, ‘New Explanation’, 175.

earliest Christians both drew upon conceptual categories, but also innovated in the programmatic inclusion of Jesus in their devotional pattern. Likewise, I also posit Jesus as another obvious factor that helped to prompt and shape subsequent Jesus-devotion.³³ But neither in Jewish tradition nor in Jesus' own ministry do we have a full precedent for this devotional pattern. So additional factors must be identified as well.

I do posit a particular role to 'revelatory' religious experiences in helping to generate the remarkable developments in beliefs and practices that comprise earliest Jesus-devotion. I make it clear, however, that the particular revelatory experiences of earliest Christians were shaped by their Jewish religious background and also by their historical setting. I also distinguish *revelatory* religious experiences quite clearly as those that recipients perceive as conveying some new cognitive content, some new insight or conviction, which then is taken up as formative for beliefs and behaviour of the recipient and others.³⁴ It seems to me inaccurate, therefore, to accuse me of treating early Christian religious experience 'as an undifferentiated phenomenon'.³⁵ There are, of course, many kinds of 'religious experiences', of varying intensity and with varying effects. I have underscored particularly those that strike recipients as conveying some new truth or conviction and that re-shape thereafter religious beliefs and practices of a group or movement that forms in response and identifies itself with reference to these beliefs and practices.

Moreover, I am disappointed that Fletcher-Louis focuses so narrowly on visions in his critique of my emphasis on revelatory religious experiences.³⁶ I do include prophetic visions (e.g. of the risen and exalted Jesus, and perhaps of him being revered in heaven) as one of the likely modes by which the conviction arose that he bore divine glory and was to be revered in Christian gatherings. But I also clearly state that there were likely several forms of revelatory experiences involved in the sudden emergence of this conviction, including visions, prophetic oracles, inspired songs ('spiritual songs'), and also what I term 'charismatic exegesis', that is, the prayerful and expectant searching of scriptures for understanding and confirmation of

³³ E.g. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 53-64.

³⁴ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 64-77.

³⁵ Fletcher-Louis, 'New Explanation', 184.

³⁶ E.g. Fletcher-Louis, 'New Explanation', 181-84.

Jesus' significance that led to the remarkable christological appropriation of OT passages.³⁷

My main point in discussing revelatory religious experiences of these various kinds is that something very powerful is required to explain why devout Jewish believers felt so free to reverence Jesus in the pattern of beliefs and practices that I have identified. As noted already, Fletcher-Louis grants that this devotional pattern amounts to a significant innovation in comparison with the devotional practices of other devout Jews of the time. Ancient Jewish scruples about giving cultic reverence to anyone other than the biblical deity make it difficult to imagine that devout Jewish believers would have included Jesus in their devotional life unless they felt, not simply permitted, but *required* to do so by God. So, how did this conviction emerge so early, and with such force? That is the question.

Fletcher-Louis seems to prefer to ascribe the key impetus to the earthly Jesus, and he claims that I reject 'the possibility that Jesus was the innovator of the decisive shift in understanding of Jewish monotheism that created a Christ-devotion'.³⁸ In fact, I characterise as 'a perfectly reasonable line of inquiry and argumentation' the suggestion that Jesus himself had powerful revelatory experiences that shaped his sense of himself and his mission, and I grant that 'in a certain sense Jesus could be thought of as a 'founder figure' whose own revelatory experiences helped to generate a significant religious innovation' already during his own ministry.³⁹ But I go on to observe that, whatever the contents of Jesus' own experiences and convictions, and whatever the nature of his communication of them to his disciples, the NT texts clearly portray a further 'significant reformulation of the faith of his followers and a new and powerful sense of revelation' astonishingly soon after his execution.⁴⁰ The emergence of the devotional pattern that I have laid out in specifics in a number of publications quite unarguably happened in the post-Easter period, not during the ministry of Jesus. So, the teaching and influence of the earthly Jesus are simply not enough by themselves to account for this.⁴¹

³⁷ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 72-74.

³⁸ Fletcher-Louis, 'New Explanation', 180. Note also his very brief concluding comments on p. 205.

³⁹ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 70-71.

⁴⁰ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 71.

⁴¹ In response to my email query asking for his own accounting for the post-Easter development of Jesus-devotion, he expressed the conviction that 'there is a

Contra Fletcher-Louis, I *have* taken account of the objection that the prior beliefs and outlook of people constrain and shape their religious experiences.⁴² I refer readers to my essay in which I discuss at some length relevant matters.⁴³ As I note there, *ordinarily*, religious experiences do essentially reinforce and reflect one's prior religious convictions. But, *occasionally and for some people*, there are experiences that have the effect of re-configuring prior beliefs and introducing what strikes the recipient as new insights and convictions. It is simplistic to ignore the clear testimony of this, whatever one makes of the religious claims involved.

Moreover, I do not claim that the readiness to worship Jesus was embraced 'uniformly across the whole group of early disciples'.⁴⁴ I only claim that in the circles reflected in *the extant NT evidence* the basic pattern of Jesus-devotion was practised, and that these include circles of Judean/Jewish believers in the earliest years of the Christian movement. My point is a chronological one, that this Jesus-devotion did not commence at some secondary stage but goes back to the earliest known circles of believers.

Another cause for frustration and puzzlement is Fletcher-Louis' claim that the NT essentially reflects a somewhat suspicious attitude toward revelatory experiences such as visions.⁴⁵ I find his discussion frustrating because, yet again, he exaggerates my position and then proceeds to refute this exaggeration. I am bound to say that this reflects either a curious failure to read my discussion carefully, or is what is commonly known as a 'straw man' argument.⁴⁶ Of course, one can find NT evidence expressing reluctance to an '*unequivocal*' acceptance of 'visions and associated mystical experiences'.⁴⁷ I never suggested otherwise. So, e.g., although Paul encourages prophecy (and by numerous believers) in the congregational setting, he also urges that

straightforward explanation', but indicated that he was still working out his views on the matter. It is, therefore, just a bit difficult for me to understand how he so confidently rejects my own proposals.

⁴² Fletcher-Louis, 'New Explanation', 181.

⁴³ Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?*, 'Religious Experience and Religious Innovation' (179-204), published originally in *JR* 80 (2000): 183-205.

⁴⁴ Fletcher-Louis, 'New Explanation', 181-82 (quoted words from 181).

⁴⁵ Fletcher-Louis, 'New Explanation', 194-201.

⁴⁶ I do regret having to say this, but the recurrence of this sort of thing in his essay makes me wonder.

⁴⁷ Fletcher-Louis, 'New Explanation', 194.

every prophecy be weighed by others (1 Cor. 14:29). 1 John 4:1-6 exhorts readers to 'test the spirits to see whether they are from God', insisting that true prophecy must affirm Jesus' high significance and the reality of his human life (also 2:22-23). Once a new revelation is accepted by a group, it then becomes a standard by which further claims of revelation are tested, and we see this in texts such as 1 John. But the standard against which 1 John insists that pneumatic claims be judged, the christological claims affirmed, comprise what was itself a new revelation that came at 'the beginning' (1:1; 2:20-25) of the religious movement out of which this text was written.

As indicated, I also find his discussion of the matter of visions and revelations puzzling. After all, Acts 2:17-21, for example, claims that Joel's prophecy of a time when 'your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions' is being fulfilled in the outpouring of the Spirit upon Christian believers. Paul portrays the worship setting as a venue in which prophecy and 'revelation' inspired by the Spirit are to be expected (1 Cor. 14:26, 30-32), and he exhorts the Thessalonian believers 'do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophesying', urging instead a testing of all Spirit-phenomena and an embracing of that which is deemed 'good' (1 Thess. 5:19-22). Further, Paul frequently refers to his own revelations (e.g. Gal. 1:15-16; 2:2; 2 Cor. 12:7). I cannot (and I would actually hope that I need not) argue the matter further here. I simply have to say that Fletcher-Louis' ascription of a much more suspicious and reluctant stance toward revelatory experiences in earliest Christianity seems unpersuasive to me, and I doubt that I am unique in this judgement.

On the other hand, one of the more productive points raised by Fletcher-Louis is that there is no one figure referred to in NT writings as *the* key individual through whom the revelatory conviction came that Jesus now bears divine glory and is to be revered accordingly, and that this appears not to fit the typical pattern of religious innovation in which a particular individual receives revelations which then are embraced by followers, the individual often becoming a defining figure for followers.⁴⁸ The most well-known example, of course, is Muhammad. Unfortunately, there is not sufficient space here to engage in any extended discussion of this intriguing matter. I will confine myself to the observation that the NT presents earliest

⁴⁸ Fletcher-Louis, 'New Explanation', esp. 179-80.

Christian circles as Spirit-endowed *communities*, i.e. circles in which there were (and were expected to be) *multiple* prophets and figures through whom revelations could come (e.g. Acts 13:1-3; 1 Cor. 14:29-32). That is, the ethos seems to have involved a strong sense of *corporate* Spirit-endowment and ‘gifts’. So, perhaps we simply have to note that in the case of earliest Christianity the revelations of Jesus’ divine significance came, not via some individual ‘minor founder’ figure, but through multiple believers and a variety of revelatory experiences such as I have proposed.

Fletcher-Louis contends that, if we accept my theory about revelatory experiences generating claims of Jesus’ divine significance, we should expect to have evidence of controversy among earliest believers over these claims, and he insists that the apparent absence of such evidence refutes my theory.⁴⁹ But it seems to me that his argument rests upon two dubious premises. The first is his notion that ‘the historical Jesus movement’ is to be taken as the ‘parent tradition’ out of which earliest Christian circles then appeared. Surely, however, for Jesus and all Judaeon/Jewish believers the parent tradition was their ancestral Judaism. Even if (as the Gospel of John might be taken to imply) Jesus’ ministry lasted as long as four years, that would be a very short time for a new tradition to have developed. In any case, the NT texts rather typically distinguish Christian convictions about Jesus from the views of Jewish opponents, indicating that the earliest believers saw themselves in the context of, and vis-a-vis, that tradition.⁵⁰

His second fallacy is the assumption that, if new claims about Jesus’ divine significance had erupted suddenly in the post-Easter period, this would have left evidence of a resulting controversy and dissidents among earliest believers. He sees no such evidence, and so questions the idea that such a powerful new impetus to Jesus-devotion erupted in the post-Easter period. The first thing to say in response is that we have only a limited amount of evidence from and about the very earliest circles of Judaeon/Jewish believers. In *Lord Jesus Christ* I offer my own attempt to probe back from what extant texts we have (particularly

⁴⁹ Fletcher-Louis, ‘New Explanation’, 180-81.

⁵⁰ Granted, by the time of Paul’s letters (some twenty years into the Christian movement), we see some marks of an emerging Christian tradition (e.g. 1 Cor. 11:2, 23).

Pauline epistles and Acts), but any such attempt cannot claim to give a comprehensive account.⁵¹

Nevertheless, it is, indeed, very interesting that in the extant texts we do not have direct indication of a major split in earliest Christian circles over Jesus-devotion.⁵² What seems to have galvanised and formed the earliest circles of believers in the post-Easter setting was the conviction that Jesus had been raised from death and exalted to heavenly glory by God, and that they were now to respond accordingly, treating Jesus as their 'Lord', and there is scant indication of a major difference of opinion among believers on this. Instead, the major issue seems to have been the terms on which Gentiles could be admitted as full co-religionists with Jewish believers, specifically whether Gentiles needed to become Torah-proselytes as well as baptised believers.

So, e.g., in his account of what was apparently an anxiety-filled meeting with Jerusalem leaders (Gal. 2:1-10) Paul refers caustically to 'false brothers', whom he portrays as trying to interfere with 'the freedom we have in Christ Jesus so that they might enslave us' (to full Torah-observance). He claims to have resisted these efforts successfully, for the sake of the integrity of the gospel and his Gentile mission, and also that he had the consent of the rightful Jerusalem leadership (2:4-10). I grant that the apparent absence of a serious difference over Jesus-devotion is noteworthy, but I do not agree to Fletcher-Louis' inferences. To my mind, we must simply conclude that the small circles of earliest (known) Jewish believers were basically agreed that the exalted Jesus bore divine glory and that God willed him to be revered accordingly.⁵³ That says nothing, however, against their convictions being novel in the post-Easter situation or having emerged through revelatory experiences that quickly obtained wide endorsement among them. It simply means that the new conviction that God had exalted Jesus to heavenly glory and now required him to be revered as 'Lord' quickly obtained affirmation in the particular circles reflected in NT texts.

⁵¹ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 155-216.

⁵² See e.g. my discussion of the 'Conspicuous Silence' involved, in *Lord Jesus Christ*, 165-67.

⁵³ But is it possible that the reference to those who 'doubted' in Matt. 28:16-17 (NB: a post-Easter setting) is an indirect indication that there were some Jesus-followers who did not fully accept the claims of others about the risen Jesus?

Another of Fletcher-Louis' critiques is directed against my case that there was early Jewish opposition to early Jesus-devotion.⁵⁴ After a very brief notice of *some* of the evidence that I offer, he then claims that the real cause of tension between the larger Jewish tradition and circles of early believers was their 'ethical particularity', and 'ethical differences'.⁵⁵ In his essay, it is not entirely clear what precisely he means by this expression.⁵⁶ In the immediate context, however, he then refers to a critical attitude toward Torah and temple/priesthood, and the impression one could take is that this attitude (or the attribution to Jewish believers of such a stance by opponents) was involved. I have two points to make in response.

My first point is that it is difficult to ascribe a strong criticism of Torah and temple among earliest Jewish believers, who are portrayed in NT texts as remaining interested in Torah-observance, and also seem basically positive toward the temple and the ritual activities associated with it.⁵⁷ My second point is that, in fact, the ample references to Jewish opposition against early believers most often portray it as directed against, and provoked by, their devotion to Jesus. For

⁵⁴ Fletcher-Louis, 'New Explanation', 171-76. Cf. Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?*, 'Early Jewish Opposition to Jesus-Devotion', 152-78, originally published in *JTS* 50 (1999): 35-58. His own view (not so explicit in this essay but evident from others of his publications) is that Jewish tradition included the worship of the High Priest as *ex officio* virtually a human embodiment of God, and so the worship of Jesus as divine was not so difficult to accommodate as I contend. I have already given my view of his position in *Lord Jesus Christ*, 37-42, and cannot devote further space to the matter here.

⁵⁵ Fletcher-Louis, 'New Explanation', 173 (emphasis his).

⁵⁶ In an email to me, in definition of 'ethical particularity' he ascribed to Jesus and his followers a stance on 'forgiveness outside the temple, purity redefinition (in terms of contagious holiness for all, not just for the high priestly office and the temple), a new vision of access to the heavenly realm ... , non-violence and open-hearted attitude towards the outsider (whether that be Gentiles or Jews who are usually deemed beyond the pale), the necessity of following Jesus in suffering, and so on'. There is not space here to examine these several claims, and so I confine my response to points as presented in his essay.

⁵⁷ Note, for example, the portrayal of Jerusalem believers in Acts (e.g. 2:46; 3:1; 21:20-26), and Paul's reference to the stance of the 'men from James' in Gal. 2:11-15. Paul's objection to them was on account of their efforts to require Gentile converts to observe Torah in addition to their faith in Jesus, not against Torah as such. Note also that Acts refers to the allegation that Stephen spoke against Torah and temple as specifically put by *false* witnesses (6:13-14), and that the climactic point in Stephen's speech that draws the ire of his Jewish listeners is his accusation that they are 'betrayers and murderers' of God's Righteous One, Jesus (7:51-53). Similarly, e.g. J. D. G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways Between Christianity and Judaism and their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (London: SCM, 1991): 56, 59-62.

example, this is reflected in the statements that believers are persecuted 'for my name's sake', 'on account of me', and for believing in Jesus (e.g. Mark 13:13; Matt. 5:11; John 9:22; 12:42).⁵⁸

It is also not as clear as he thinks that differences over Torah and temple would have generated charges of blasphemy (whether against Jesus or early Christians) and the level of bitter opposition portrayed in the NT texts. The Qumran sect seems to have held a critical view of the Jerusalem temple and/or priesthood, but I am not aware that they suffered the sort of persecution portrayed in NT texts.

In the context of his discussion of this, Fletcher-Louis accuses me of going against a scholarly phalanx of Dunn, Wright, and Sanders whom he cites as taking the charge of blasphemy against Jesus in Mark 2:7 as 'an accurate record' of objection to Jesus' perceived 'blasphemous challenge to temple and the priesthood'.⁵⁹ But, in fact, Sanders explicitly expressed hesitation about the historicity of Jesus' saying in 2:5, and also regarded the blasphemy charge as put on the lips of the Pharisees by Mark to insert a strong christological issue into the scene.⁶⁰ I mention this to illustrate that the inaccuracies in Fletcher-Louis' essay are not confined to my own work.

An additional quick correction pertains here. Contra Fletcher-Louis' claim that I am unable to find in early Christian texts evidence of attempts to rebut the charge of violating the uniqueness of God, I have in fact argued that the Gospel of John, in particular, gives quite explicit indications of such controversy. In John 5:18, Jewish opponents charge Jesus with making himself 'equal to God', and in 10:31-33 his Jewish critics move to stone him for blasphemously making himself 'a god' (NB: the anarthrous *theos*, v. 33). Over against these charges, however, John 5:19-23 insists that Jesus' status and authority are given to him by 'the Father', who now requires that 'all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father'. I propose that this passage reflects the sort of *apologia* that early Christians gave to justify their devotion to Jesus: God requires it of them. Likewise, I have proposed that Philippians 2:9-11 reflects a novel early Christian exegesis of Isaiah 45:22-25, which gives the rationale to believers and unbelievers for reverencing Jesus as *Kyrios* (and here too the basis is God's own exaltation of him).

⁵⁸ Again, I refer readers to my discussion of the evidence in *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?*, 152-78.

⁵⁹ Fletcher-Louis, 'New Explanation', 174.

⁶⁰ E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM, 1985): 273.

4. Historical Process

Finally, I have to note a red herring in Fletcher-Louis' essay, mainly because he makes so much of it. This is the repeated allegation that I 'echo', endorse, appeal to, and 'concede the point to' Lessing's famous dictum, 'Accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason'.⁶¹ Fletcher-Louis insists that this involves a major theological error on my part. But these allegations all amount to a red herring for two main reasons. First, I can think of no instance where I ever cite, much less appeal to approvingly, Lessing's saying or the viewpoint it represents. So it is more than a bit dubious to claim repeatedly that I align myself with Lessing. Second, and more seriously still, I can see no correspondence between my own views and Lessing's, and cannot imagine how Fletcher-Louis can have judged otherwise.

Gotthold Lessing was an eighteenth-century rationalist, who accepted Leibniz's theory of knowledge, in which he posited, on the one hand, 'necessary' truths of reason that are either intuitively known or at least commend themselves to human reason and need no proofs, and, on the other hand, contingent truths that are known by sense perception. The level of certainty of the latter type of truth is wholly based on the reliability of our sense and the data that they encounter.⁶² For Lessing, the only secure basis for religious truth was 'natural religion', i.e. the truths that he believed presented themselves to any right-thinking person through the inherent powers of reason. So, any beliefs about, or based on, historical revelation could not be regarded as compelling or 'necessary'.

Now, if there is any relationship between Lessing's views and my own approach to historical knowledge and the relationship of religious faith to historical revelation, it is a direct contrast. That is probably why I never cite Lessing! I do cite the dictum by David Strauss, 'The true criticism of a dogma is its history', but for the purpose of rejecting it as simplistic.⁶³ In *Lord Jesus Christ* I state my own view clearly: 'There is no obvious reason why, in principle, divine revelations could

⁶¹ Fletcher-Louis, 'New Explanation', 161, 167, 169, 202-204. See esp. Henry Chadwick, *Lessing's Theological Writings* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1956): 53 for the dictum itself.

⁶² Lessing's thought and its background are all admirably well described by Chadwick, *Lessing's Theological Writings*, 9-49.

⁶³ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 8.

not come through thoroughly historical processes involving people and events of particular times and places and conditioned by particular cultures'.⁶⁴ It seems to me that my view is about as far from Lessing's as you can get! I really can only express surprise, and some frustration, that Fletcher-Louis repeatedly tries to flog me with the claim that I endorse Lessing's position. This is a rather more serious misconstrual of my work, both because it seems so blatant and also because Fletcher-Louis presents it as so important a claim.

5. Conclusion

So, I genuinely regret to say that I find Fletcher-Louis' critique disappointing for a variety of reasons. He wrongly imputes to me a three-stage schema of christological development, and characterises my views incorrectly on a number of important collateral matters. This is not helpful for the aim of promoting careful consideration of evidence and arguments, and for progress in our understanding of the important matters concerning Jesus-devotion under examination. Such discussion requires an accurate engagement with the views of one's interlocutors, perhaps most particularly those with whom one believes there is disagreement. I hope that my effort here at correction and clarification will help to move the discussion forward into more fruitful paths of discussion and debate, and I welcome more of this kind of engagement.

⁶⁴ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 8.