Jesus Left Loose Ends

Collected Essays



William R G Loader

Bill Loader has been one of the leading New Testament scholars not just in Australia, but globally, for half a century. It is, therefore, a boon and a blessing to have so many of his seminal essays collected together in a single volume. What is immediately apparent is that the clarity of communication and the exceptional precision in analysing the details of ancient texts, which are the hallmarks of his scholarship, were present even in the earliest essays. While the range of deep knowledge is breath-taking, there is something even more impressive. In the preface Loader mentions that Eric Osborn once encouraged him to understand that 'the best contribution you can make for the church is to be a good scholar.' Loader has not only fulfilled, but surpassed that goal by being not simply a good, but a superlative scholar. Without exception every essay in this volume is a contribution of exceptional insight for all who seek to learn from an exemplary scholar.

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William RG Loader

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William RG Loader

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1. 'New Testament Christology and Evangelical Responsibility' in *Minimag. A Methodist Ministerial Magazine*, 2 (1973): 4–8.
2. 'Luke's Historical Docetism: The "Golden Age" Approach to Christian Origins' in *Dialogue on Religion. New Zealand Viewpoints 1977* (edited by P Davis and J Hinchcliff; Auckland: Auckland University Chaplaincy, 1977), 59–63.
3. 'Christ at the Right Hand – Ps. cx.1 in the New Testament' in *New Testament Studies*, 24 (1978/79): 199–217.
4. 'Son of David, Blindness, Possession, and Duality in Matthew' in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 44 (1982): 570–85.
5. 'Jesus Left Loose Ends – Reflections on Jesus and the Church' in *Pacifica*, 2 (1989): 210–28.
6. 'Jesus and the Rogue in Luke 16, 1–8A. The Parable of the Unjust Steward' in *Revue Biblique*, 86 (1989): 518–32.
7. 'Hellenism and the Abandonment of Particularism in Jesus and Paul' in *Pacifica*, 4 (1991): 245–56.
8. 'The Historical Jesus Puzzle' in *Colloquium. The Australia New Zealand Theological Review*, 29 (1997): 131–50.
9. 'Worthy Worship' in *Christian Worship in Australia: Inculturating the Liturgical Tradition* (edited by Stephen Burns and Anita Monro; Strathfield, NSW: St Pauls Publications, 2009), 109–16.

10. 'Approaching the New Testament as Source of Faith and Witness to Faith' in *Hermeneutics and the Authority of Scripture* (edited by Alan H Cadwallader; Adelaide: Australian Theological Forum, 2011), 79–96.
11. 'Attitudes to Judaism and the Law and Synoptic Relations' in *New Studies in the Synoptic Problem* (BETL 239; edited by A Gregory, P Foster, JS Kloppenborg and J Verheyden; Leuven: Peeters, 2011), 347–69.
12. 'The Mosaic Law in Paul and Mark – Continuity?' [Conference on Moses in Second Temple Judaism and early Christianity, Pretoria, August, 2012] *forthcoming.*
13. 'Good News for the Poor and its Survival' (previously unpublished).
14. 'What light does Matthew's use of Mark in Matthew 1–4 throw on Matthew' theological location?', in *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies*, 72(4), a3284. http://dx.doi. org/10.4102/hts. v72i4.3284.
15. 'Paul on Same–Sex Relations in Romans 1', in *Interpretation*, 74 (2020): 242–52.
16. 'Forgiveness Monopoly? Identity Formation and Demarcation in the Jesus Movement', in *Tempel, Lehrhaus, Synagoge. Orte jüdischen Gottesdienstes, Lernens und Lebens. Festschrift für Wolfgang Kraus* (edited by Christian Eberhart, Martin Karrer, Siegfried Kreuzer, and Martin Meiser; Paderborn: Schöningh, 2020), 351–64.
17. 'Mark at the Interface of Cultures' forthcoming in the Festschrift for Professor Anatoly Alexeev, to be published by the Institute of Linguistic Studies, St Petersburg, Russia.

Foreword

When asked by Hilary Regan, Managing Editor of ATF Press Publishing Group if I would be interested in publishing a selection of my writings beginning from my early career as a scholar, I wondered. Would I really want to republish pieces that had their origin almost half a century ago?

I decided, therefore, to look at my early work as though I was reading the work of a stranger, not in order to disown them but to subject them to critical scrutiny. Far from cringing, I found myself surprised, indeed, to set modesty aside for the moment, impressed. They are as pertinent today as they were then and likely to be useful for scholars, preachers and people alike seeking an informed faith. Then I remember that the late Professor James Dunn encouraged me in those days. He said my papers were really good and should be made more widely available internationally. A bit late, but here are some of them!

Apart from some reformatting to achieve consistency of style throughout the collection, translation of foreign languages, some corrections and minimal clarification of ambiguities, I have left these texts intact. In my comments below I note where these days I might add some perspectives but in all I can stand by what I have written—partly to my own surprise!

The first piece, 'New Testament Christology and Evangelical Responsibility', was an address I gave at the Annual Conference of the Methodist Church of New Zealand in November 1973. At the beginning of the year I had returned from Germany where I completed my doctorate with Professor Ferdinand Hahn in Mainz, Germany: *Sohn und Hoherpriester. Eine traditionsgeschichtliche*

Untersuchung zur Christologie des Hebräerbriefes (Son and High Priest. A tradition-historical Investigation of the Christology of the Letter to the Hebrews). It was part of a wider exploration of those times into the different ways that the first Christians tried to explain how it was that in Jesus they encountered God. I decided that people needed to know about these developments in the early church and not simply assume that the formulations of the later creeds said all there was to say or said it in the only way it could be said. New Testament writers and those who proclaimed the gospel before them made use of a wide range of images to express this encounter and it seemed to me and still does, that we should do the same. It is as important today as it ever was.

The dissertation had to be abridged for publication, which occurred in 1981 with the same title. As a result of the abridging, one of its significant contributions had to be published separately. This was the study of Psalm 110: with its image of the king enthroned at God's right hand, a major motif which made its way also into our creeds. This was published in 1978 as 'Christ at the Right Hand - Ps. cx.1 in the New Testament' and appears here in chapter 3.

Before that I gave a paper at the Third Religious Colloquium held at Auckland University in 1976, entitled 'Luke's Historical Docetism: The "Golden Age" Approach to Christian Origins'. In some ways it was revisiting a theme which that great New Testament scholar, Ernst Käsemann, perhaps the twentieth century's greatest, had suggested to me as a dissertation topic before I switched to working with Ferdinand Hahn at the suggestion of another great scholar, Eduard Schweizer. It, too, focus on diversity, by highlighting Luke's approach to faith and contrasting it with that of others, as well as showing its impact through to the present time. Today I would give greater emphasis to Luke's espousal of a very Jewish understanding of hope, envisaging fulfilment of the dreams of Zechariah and Mary in the opening chapters, including emphasis on good news for the poor, but the core challenges to Luke still stand.

These papers were outcomes of trying to find time amid parish ministry in Remuera, Auckland, New Zealand, to keep myself alive as a New Testament scholar and not surrender to pressures to see achieving a doctorate as primarily a qualification to teach after which one could leave that level of research behind. I had to work hard and in relative isolation at "the end of the earth" to remain research active

without the infrastructure support which a university academic context provides. At the same time, I relished opportunities to share the fruits of scholarship with people wanting an informed faith and to think through their practical implications for life and faith today.

Having moved in 1978 to Perth, Western Australia, to my first and in effect through all its modulations my only full time lecturing position, I found greater support, especially after the partnership developed between the Perth College of Divinity, of which the Perth Theological Hall of the Uniting Church was a part, and Murdoch University, developed and we taught on campus from 1986.

My paper on the title, 'Son of David', in Matthew was produced during a stay in Melbourne made possible by the generous research support provisions of the Perth Theological Hall. In Melbourne I could access the McCaughey Library and meet with scholars like Eric Osborn, who encouraged me to see, as he put it, that the best contribution you can make for the church is to be a good scholar. There I also did what I consider to be important research on the way Matthew portrays Jesus as judge to come. In this collection it comes to expression in the 2016 paper, 'What light does Matthew's use of Mark in Matthew 1–4 throw on Matthew's theological location?' (chapter 15).

Grappling with Matthew also opened to me the major issue of how gospel writers and ultimately Jesus viewed the Jewish Law, that is, the scriptures. How to approach scriptures remains central to the concerns of people of faith today, as a source of both inspiration and division. My comprehensive treatment appeared in 1997, *Jesus' Attitude towards the Law. A Study of the Gospels* (WUNT 2.97; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), which included also discussion of the Gospel of Thomas and the second century material.

What began as study of images and titles of Jesus in early tradition became a study of attitudes of Jesus both at the level of how the documents variously portrayed them and at the more tentative level of what one might say of the historical Jesus. Part of the latter entailed engagement with the re-emerging interest in historical reconstruction to sift through to what we might still say with confidence about the historical Jesus. I benefitted greatly from the revived interest in Jewish heritage, partly stimulated by the gradual publication of the library of writings found in caves by the Dead Sea and partly by more careful attention being given to the rich array of Jewish writings from

the period, from apocalypses to the extensive writings of Philo and Josephus.

The papers, 'Jesus left loose ends' (1989), which gives this volume its title, 'Hellenism and the Abandonment of particularism' (1991), 'The Historical Jesus Puzzle' (1997), and 'Good News for the poor and its Survival' (unpublished, but written in honour of J Dominic Crossan) belong here. The paper on the parable of the Unjust Steward, 'Jesus and the Rogue in Luke 16, 1-8A' (1989), also arose in this context, offering a new reading in the light of such early tradition about Jesus.

The concern with how we interpret scripture and how they did then also informs the paper on 'Hellenism' above and especially 'Approaching the New Testament as Source of faith and Witness to Faith' (2011), presented at a conference in Canberra in 2007, *Hermeneutics and the Authority of Scripture*. I presented the paper, 'Attitudes to Judaism and the Law and Synoptic Relations' (2011) at a conference in Oxford in 2008. Both the Canberra and Oxford papers take discussion of Mark's radical approach as a starting point for exploring their different themes. I presented the paper, 'The Mosaic Law in Paul and Mark – Continuity', at a conference on Moses in Pretoria in 2012. There has been delay in publishing the conference papers, so that its appearance in this collection is its first publication. The paper, 'Worthy Worship', applies some these findings more broadly to issues of theology and liturgy.

I have a continuing interest in the development and diversity of first century Christian movements, including their healthy and unhealthy tendencies. The penultimate paper, 'Forgiveness Monopoly?', gives attention to the trend in some of those movements to claim exclusivity in relation to forgiveness in contrast to others which affirmed forgiveness as always having been part of faith's tradition, reaching back through Jesus to John the Baptist and to ancient Israel. The concluding chapter, written to honour Professor Anatoly Alexeev's eightieth birthday, addresses Mark's Gospel from a cross-cultural perspective.

This collection includes finally one paper on what for some is a vexed issue, 'Paul on Same-Sex relations in Romans 1'. My work on early Jewish writings and on attitudes to Law/scripture equipped me to engage in extensive research on attitudes towards sexuality (in the broad sense) in Jewish literature from the late fourth century BCE

to the end of the first century CE and in early Christian writings from the first century CE, which I undertook with a five year full time Professorial Fellowship from the Australian Research Council, 2005–10. It produced five major volumes, as well as a number of other books and articles. A selection of these articles has appeared in a separate collection entitled *Sexuality and Gender. Collected Essays* (WUNT 458; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021). Similarly, the other major area of my research, Johannine literature, has produced books and many articles which do not appear here, but will also appear in a separate collection with the same publisher: *Christology, Soteriology, and Ethics in John and Hebrews* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck).

None of this would have been possible without encouragement and support. This goes back to Jack Lewis, my Old Testament lecturer in Trinity Methodist Theological College, who assured this boy from humble origins, from whose family no one had studied at university, that I had the capacity to pursue doctoral studies. My New Testament Lecturer, John Ziesler, gave me a sound beginning. Colleagues, Michael Owen and Chris Mackaay, in the Perth Theological Hall affirmed the value of my work academically and pastorally. Murdoch University gave infrastructure support and helped me benefit from the stimulus of the wider world of academic research at national level, through which I then became a fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 1996, and my election to membership of the Society for New Testament Studies in 1992, where I now serve in an honorary capacity, leading their International Initiatives Program, ensured I could engage regularly with scholars from across the world.

I acknowledge the publishers who have given permission for me to reproduce these pieces in this collection and the initiative of Hilary Regan to make it possible. A list of their first publication comes at the conclusion of the book. I thank publishers for their permission to include them here. Biblical citations are from the NRSV and for the Septuagint from the NETS translation, unless otherwise indicated (by an asterisk where I offer my own).

I owe so much to the personal support and encouragement of many friends over the years, but I make special mention of Gisela, my life partner, who accompanied my first tentative steps into her homeland, and who has supported me in so many ways, from being the breadwinner in Mainz, to our sharing the joys of parenting and now grandparenting.

Chapter 1
New Testament Christology and Evangelical Responsibility

What do the traditions of the New Testament tell us about Jesus? This is the task which faces the historian. What does Jesus Christ mean to me? This goes beyond the historical question and becomes a matter of personal commitment. And if I experience God confronting me in Jesus, how do I make this known in such a way that others too may come to him?

It would he absurd to imagine that all these questions can be adequately handled within the limited scope of this paper. In order to grasp something of the development of thought about Jesus we shall focus attention on the ideas associated with the word Messiah, Christ, Anointed One—to give it in its anglicised Hebrew, Greek, and in English translation. Directly linked with it in the earlier stages of christological development is the designation 'Son of God'. In the second half of the paper, we shall ask certain questions on the basis of what has been said and go on to draw out a few of the practical implications.

Jewish Expectations

In the second Psalm there is recorded the decree given to the king, very probably at his coronation: 'You are my son, today I have begotten you'. It is God who is speaking, perhaps through the mouth of a court prophet. The king is addressed as a son of God. There was nothing unusual about this in the world of Old Testament times. In similar vein the kings of Egypt and Mesopotamia were addressed. Indeed the custom is reflected again in Ps 89:21 where it is promised to the Davidic king that he should be the head of all the kings, the

firstborn of all the sons: '1 will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth'.

None of this in any sense meant that the king was thought of as being physically a son of God. Rather the appropriate term would perhaps be 'adoption'. God adopts the king as his vice-regent on earth, hence as his son. The king, the Anointed (Hebrew: 'Messiah'), is son of God.

There is no question that when we speak of kingship in Israel we are not dealing merely with details of constitution. The Israelite people had set their hope on the Davidic dynasty. Their hope was fed from their awareness that God, Yahweh, loved them and wanted them. Thus, they were convinced that life had a meaning and many of then looked to the king as the one through whom Yahweh would bring meaning and fulfilment to their lives.

It is not necessary for us to go into the details of how this hope was shattered. The dynasty was a disappointment. But the subsequent history of Israel shows that the hope continued to stretch out confidently towards the future despite disappointment after disappointment. God is real. Yahweh will act. He will bring an answer to the yearning of humankind.

One of the ways in which this determined hope expressed itself was in the messianic movement, the belief that one day God would raise up a man to be king, a man of Davidic descent. He would set up his rule, overcome the oppressors, and bring peace and prosperity. Thus, many Jews at the time of Jesus longed for the Messiah, the Christ, who is also called son or God, because of course he will be king: the anointed one, the son of God, the king. There was no more any idea or physical sonship present here than there was when earlier kings were called sons of God.

We know that the messianic was only one stream of thought in Judaism. There were others who expressed their hope in different terms. Some spoke of angelic interventions, some of a judge from the heavenly court—a Son of Man figure—some of a prophet like Moses. There was a flood of literature, picking up Old Testament ideas, adding in others from adjacent cultures, and generally a bubbling of creativity. When we read it, it often seems rather peculiar. But we must remember that this was all a way of expressing confidence that God would act soon and make some sense of life.

Jesus

Jesus belongs here. The earliest traditions of his sayings show that he was not prone to elaborate speculation but expressed his hopes primarily in terms of the kingdom of God, meaning that God was about to set up his reign in the world. But he went further than John the Baptist, who also spoke of the kingdom of God. For Jesus claimed that already in his ministry, as demons were being cast out and people made whole, the reign of God was breaking in and was soon to be fully realised. To use an illustration: it was already spitting; the storm was about to break.

The revolutionary thing about Jesus was that he revealed God as one to whom people matter more than standards, relationships more than rights. Through what he said and did and was people felt confronted with the challenge of God, a challenge which knew no social barriers, a challenge calling to involvement and bringing the creativity of love.

I have already mentioned that Jesus spoke of the final act of God in terms of the kingdom of God. It is very probable that he also shared the view that, at the judgment, the Son of Man figure would feature. Many think that he used this title of himself. I personally think this unlikely. What about 'Messiah - Son of God - Christ - Anointed One' that is, what about the messianic stream? Did Jesus consider himself a political saviour, a ruler, a leader in the sense that messiahship was understood in his day? Certainly, he was falsely accused of being a king of the Jews; but Jesus does not seem to have posed as Messiah. In fact there is much to suggest that he rejected quite emphatically the temptation to move in the political direction that this would imply.

The Early Church

To his death Jesus did not relent in his belief that the kingdom of God was breaking in. That he died and it did not come was a shattering experience for his disciples. There is strong evidence that they fled Jerusalem in the direction of their Galilean homes. Then something happened which we call Easter. Peter and the disciples came rushing back to Jerusalem, where traditionally the end events were expected to take place. They had seen Jesus alive. God had vindicated him. Jesus was right. The kingdom of God is coming.

Those must have been exciting days. Jesus' resurrection meant the beginning of the final resurrections. The power of the Spirit of God was felt, vibrant in the community of the end time, a phenomenon expected in the last days. God's reign is breaking in, and with it, Jesus is to return, appointed by God as the world's judge, the Son of Man. He will come and be God's Messiah, the king, the son of God, the Anointed One — at the final hour. There is quite strong evidence that at a fairly early stage Jesus was looked forward to as the promised Messiah.

But what of Jesus before he comes? The more the delay in his coming, and the more new life was experienced in the present, the more the focus was turned to the present role of Jesus. At the resurrection, some of the early traditions tell us, Jesus was installed as Messiah to come. Thus in Acts 2:36: 'God has made him Lord and Christ, this Jesus who: you crucified'. As to be expected, statements referring to the king as son of God were also used: 'You are my son; today I have begotten you' (Ps 2:7), in the early traditions spoken to Jesus by God at his resurrection (Acts 13:33; Heb 1:5; 5:5). Paul too uses a tradition which spoke of Jesus as having been designated Son of God at the resurrection (Rom 1:3–4).

Thus, through the resurrection the early church came to believe that Jesus was not only vindicated but also installed, enthroned at God's right hand to be the Messiah to come. And many traditions show that a spiritualisation of the messianic ideas led to the assertion that somehow already he is exercising his royal ministry—at least over the church.

In a backward-looking way the existence of traditions affirming that Jesus became Messiah at his resurrection confirms the earlier conclusion that Jesus himself did not claim messiahship, did not claim to be the Christ. If he had, these traditions would never have developed. This means that those passages which portray Jesus as accepting the designation 'Christ' reflect the later thinking of the church.

How did this come about? It is an understatement to say that the church was evangelical and missionary. As it moved out into cultural areas more influenced by Hellenistic and Hellenistic-Jewish ways of thinking it didn't fizzle out. These men were convinced that God had vindicated Jesus. More and more they came to experience that this not only meant something about the future. It also meant something about the present. Already they were experiencing the life of the age

to come. Already their lives were finding a sense of meaning and purpose. Under the impact of Jesus and through the power of the Spirit they had found in him the answer to the yearning question of humankind. Life was beginning to make sense. And just as there was variety and creativity in the formulation of hope in Judaism, so too there was variety and creativity in the formulation of the fact that through the man Jesus the hope was being fulfilled.

Variety of Emphasis

If we take the word Messiah or Christ as a designation of Jesus something very interesting happens, as we see the church moving into areas where messianic hope had never had a strong foothold. The designation 'Anointed' 'Christ' 'Messiah' becomes in some instances associated with traditions which speak of Jesus in prophetic terms. Jesus is the 'anointed one' because he has been anointed with the Spirit, and so the term 'Anointed One' 'Messiah' 'Christ' finds its way into stories of the earthly life of Jesus, which spoke of him in prophetic terms.

Perhaps the best example of this is with the term 'Son of God'. Where 'Son of God' was the designation of a man possessed by the spirit of a god or of God it was to be expected that it was introduced by the church to passages where Jesus is presented as being possessed with the Spirit. The example is the baptism of Jesus. In the earlier form of the tradition Jesus was addressed as 'Servant'. Now in its present form he is addressed already at the beginning of his ministry as Son of God. 'You are my Son . . .'

The more we move into the Hellenistic world, the more irrelevant the original term 'Messiah' 'Christ' becomes. The result is that it ends up becoming more or less a surname: Jesus Christ. It is the title 'Son of God' which undergoes the more interesting developments. It was inevitable that, detached from its origins, the term 'Son of God' comes to be understood more and more in a substantial or physical sense. He is the Spirit-pervaded man. One interesting development or the birth stories of Jesus is that they come to be understood as suggesting that Jesus was born of a virgin with God as his Father—thus in some literal sense a Son of God. What became the orthodox position was that Jesus was indeed in some physical sense God's Son, existed with God from the beginning, became man, revealed God,

and returned to God again: Incarnation Christology. On the basis of this christological scheme the creeds and controversies of the later centuries arose. Within this framework of thought the church preserved the gospel by the doctrine of the Trinity and the paradox of Chalcedon: truly God, truly man.

Looking back on what we have said, what have we got? Let's just say some of the obvious things. A development took place in the thinking of the earliest church about Jesus. Within this development there is considerable variety. At one stage Jesus is pictured as a human being, vindicated by God as his messenger. At another he is literally Son of God come down from heaven. He himself did not claim messiahship nor claim to be the Son of God, which amounts, as we have seen, to the same thing. Later traditions picture him as though he was claiming to be the Christ, and others portray him as openly declaring that he is Son of God and came down from the Father and is going back. It is especially in the last decade or so through both Protestant and Catholic research that these developments have been recognised.

Contradictions?

Now the sceptic may look at all this and say: are these not contradictions? Does this not invalidate Christian faith? And too often church people when confronted with all this run for miles uttering grunts or disapproval, obviously convinced of the same thing. But these fail to see that such variety, even divergence, is only to be expected given the circumstances, and far from underlining faith can give it a boost. Investigation of the traditions of the New Testament brings to light the evangelical creativity, the missionary enterprise, of the early church.

For all the variety there is one unifying fact. In their various ways they are all saying that in Jesus God has spoken and acted. This was not theory. It was experience. In Jesus God has revealed himself. People's deepest yearnings can be fulfilled. How they gave expression to their experience varied. Take for instance the Virgin Birth theory. God spoke in Christ; he was somehow present. How? Well Jesus must have been not only human but also divine. God was his father, Mary his mother. He was a hybrid: divine and human. This may seem a funny way of thinking to us, and some will scoff. But are they not saying in their way exactly what we want to say in ours? In Jesus God has revealed himself.

Our Own Response

But the fact of the variety should make us face another serious question: how do we think of Jesus? Is he the human being through whom God spoke, through whom God revealed himself, and who lives? Or is he a literally divine being who became incarnate and returned? Let's keep just to these two of the many alternatives. You cannot have both: either earlier NT traditions or later ones! Here there are many options open. We can say the more developed christology, for instance that of John, is the correct one. On this basis one would have to say that the earlier forms were the result of the earliest Christians not understanding Jesus fully. What one would say of Jesus himself is a bit difficult, because the picture the historian gets of Jesus' understanding of himself does not fit the developed christology at all. Or one may cast all the traditions aside—all mythology!—extending one's scoffing from the Virgin Birth to the lot. Apart from its intolerance, this position turns out to be pretty barren. Or one may be selective—choosing sons and rejecting others—but which?

Personally, I want to try to embrace them all, though in such the same way as I would identify myself with the Virgin Birth. 1 do not believe in the Virgin Birth theory, but I identify myself with its intention—very definitely. Similarly, I understand ideas about Jesus' physical divinity and pre-existence as culturally determined expressions of what I too want to say. We have seen how these arose as the expressions of particular cultural settings. I do not share their world view. But I do believe with them that in Jesus God has revealed himself.

This brings us on to a further point. How I think about Jesus is not in the category of such questions as how I think about green peas. My experience of God in Jesus compels me to preach in the widest sense of the term. People still yearn. The answer is still in Jesus. This I believe. This is my life. But that means I must give serious thought to communicating this gospel. Here I am not thinking of new translations or new gimmicky ways or saying things, but of content. The same question arises. How do I make known to my fellow human being in a meaningful way that in Jesus God has revealed himself, with all that that means? Do I speak of a divine being, the Son of God, coming down to earth, using one particular tradition? Do I use Johannine christology? This way of explaining that God was in Christ arose in a particular cultural setting. Do I preach this in Papua-New Guinea? Do I preach it in New Zealand?

For me personally to do this would be irresponsible. Why? First, I ought to have learned from my NT research that the early Church was creative, and secondly that there is not just one but a variety of biblical responses to Jesus as the church moved into new cultural settings. While this did not happen in theoretical discussion, cultures were taken seriously. By preaching this sort of thing—one particular response of the late stage of development—am I not putting a stumbling block in the way or those to whom I preach? They do not, and do not need to, accept its cultural presuppositions. My answer is yes! If I take my evangelical task seriously, if I really believe people need the God revealed in Jesus, then I'll act a little more consistently with the patterns of the earliest church, which as it spread out infused its message out of one culture into another, creatively relevant to its world.

Finally, a word about terminology. Many people pray to Jesus. The presupposition for this is that particular tradition according to which Jesus is either enthroned beside God or is literally God himself. In the light of what we have discussed it will be clear that I am no more committed to that particular tradition than I am to the tradition of the Virgin Birth. This means, as an historian I sympathise with Sunday School children who ask: how come we pray to Jesus and to God? or more pertinently, if Jesus was God, why did he pray to himself while he was on earth? In fact, when people use the term Jesus, they mostly mean God anyway. For this reason, I suggest a good deal of continuing confusion would be avoided if we spoke of God at work in the world and not of Jesus, of God answering prayer and not of Jesus. I'm quite sure Jesus would have been horrified. had he foreseen his divinisation in this way.

Let me conclude on a summary note. We need to take what the NT says about the divinity of Jesus more seriously. I mean 'divinity' in the comprehensive sense in which Jesus himself would also have felt free to use it, not in the restricted physical, literal sense of later traditions. Through what Jesus said, did and was God has spoken. God has addressed the yearnings of the human heart. God has revealed himself as one who challenges us with his love, and calls us to share his purpose and become his action in the world. We cannot afford to be anything other than evangelical. And it is our evangelical responsibility that demands that we take the energy and creativity of the earliest church in its mission seriously. We dare not

continue to place stumbling-blocks in the way of men and women by perpetuating particular christologies which belong neither to our age nor to the age of Jesus. Men and women hunger for the grace of God made known through Jesus. This paper is dedicated to the task we share in making this known.

Chapter 2
Luke's Historical Docetism
The 'Golden Age' Approach to Christian Origins

What would have happened if Luke had not written Luke-Acts, and we would not have had it in our Christian traditions? Without Luke-Acts we would speak of the giving of the Holy Spirit as happening not on the day of Pentecost, fifty days after Easter, but on Easter day itself, and nothing else in the New Testament suggests otherwise. But we do have the Book of Acts and Pentecost in the traditional church year and its derivative 'Pentecostal', all because of Luke-Acts!

The same goes for Ascension forty days after Easter. According to Luke the risen Jesus appeared to his disciples and others throughout a forty-day period and was then taken up from earth. Without Luke-Acts we would not celebrate nor even know of such an ascension whereby the risen Jesus was removed from earth and thus appeared no longer (exception: the late ending of Mark's gospel).

Luke's Distinctive Reconstruction of History

According to Paul, the risen Jesus appeared to him as he had to Peter at the beginning (1 Cor 15:5–8). Paul saw his resurrection appearance as the last. But try to reconcile that with what we have in Acts and we are in difficulties. For Paul's resurrection appearance is there described as taking place on the road to Damascus long after the risen Jesus had completed his appearances and returned to heaven. Either Paul is right or Luke is right. Added to that, the appearance to Paul is a kind of vision according to Luke-Acts. That does accord well with what we have in Paul's own statements. He talks of a revelation as well as of an appearance. But Luke-Acts suggests that the kind of experience which Paul had was of a very different kind from that which the witnesses

to the risen Lord had, whereas Paul sees his experience as being of the same character as theirs, at least enough to add his to the list and not make any distinction. This has implications for the much-vexed debate about the nature of the resurrection of Jesus, the nature of the resurrection body.

Very probably Luke-Acts is wrong about where it places in time Paul's seeing the risen Lord. I do not mean it should have been dated earlier, that is before the ascension on the fortieth day. I mean: the idea of a final ascension on the fortieth day must be wrong if Paul is right, and that is hardly to be doubted. He speaks firsthand. Either the author of Luke-Acts or one of his traditions has periodised the history of the early church in the immediate post-Easter weeks, and has used the familiar figure forty as a means of doing so. Typological considerations have shaped the account at this point.

The Lukan resurrection accounts have two elements: a thoroughgoing physical resurrection. Jesus can be handled and eats food. But as well as this there is a capacity to vanish and re-appear fully physical entity. I suspect that the objectifying of the risen Jesus so that he is about and materialises (not appears, for he is real) here and there is Luke's own development of the resurrection tradition, or at least a way of looking at resurrection within the later church of which he is a part. For this reason, an ascension after forty days is a necessity for Luke! John gives evidence of traditions which also picture the resurrection body of Jesus as directly physical. He has Thomas finger Jesus' wounds. Interestingly enough, John also mentions an ascension when he has Jesus say that Mary should not touch him until he has ascended to the Father. But the Thomas episode must accordingly take place after such an ascension! Clearly ascension is being conceived differently from in Luke-Acts. John 21 also recounts a story of an appearance in which a very substantial resurrection body that presumably eats is presupposed.

On the basis of the evidence there is no clear-cut case for saying that such physical materialisations of Jesus are peculiarly Lukan. One can only point out that such occur in later traditions and that Paul's presuppositions, which are undoubtedly earlier, are different. Otherwise we would hardly have Luke excluding Paul from being a witness of the resurrection and creating the final ascension narrative. Paul's understanding of resurrection bodies as spiritual, as he explains in 1 Corinthians 15, where Jesus' resurrection is assumed as the basis and model of ours, is hardly the same as Luke's.

ln Luke Acts we have a systematising of the earliest church into periods: his materialised risen Jesus has first to disappear from earth after forty days at the ascension. New Testament references to the exaltation of Jesus are mostly closely associated with Ps 110:1, and in no case outside Luke-Acts do we have any suggestion of a lengthy delay between resurrection and exaltation. At most in John there is apparently some few hours delay when Jesus' comment to Mary assumes that his ascension is still to occur and that by late afternoon it has. Most other traditions indeed assume that the exaltation is contemporaneous with the resurrection, a view impossible for Luke with his materialised view of both the resurrection body and the ascension. It is not to be presupposed that when John speaks of Jesus' return to glory, his glorification, that he has the Lukan forty-day time scheme in mind and means: crucifixion, resurrection, ascension (and Pentecost). At most he has in mind events covering the space of three days, and certainly not in any sense that the ascent ended resurrection appearances. For John the ascent obviously preceded appearances to the disciples. Certainly Matthew's only appearance story assumes this, when it has Jesus declare: 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me . . . And remember I am with you always, to the end of the age' (28:18, 20).

Even at the points where Luke is in all probability using older traditions this earlier view seems to shine through. Thus Acts 5:30–1 simply recounts the killing of Jesus and his exaltation to God's right hand. Not even the resurrection as a separate event is mentioned (cf. Hebrews). Ps 2:7, referring to God's enthroning act at the exaltation, is used in direct association with the resurrection in Acts 13:33. The whole tradition of the New Testament, apart from Luke-Acts, and even some of the traditions Luke himself has used, suggest that what we have in Luke-Acts in its present form is a systematising reconstruction of early church history.

Luke's Predilection for the Miraculous

The manifestation of the Spirit in Acts 2 is linked with language phenomena. Undoubtedly, we are dealing here with the phenomenon of glossalalia, to which we have reference in 1 Corinthians. But what has Luke done with it? He has changed its character so that what we have is a stupendous miracle, according to which the

glossolalia is depicted as sudden ability to preach the gospel in a number of languages so that it can be understood by outsiders. This is nothing like glossolalia in 1 Corinthians, where glossalalia is understood as a means of talking to God, which is not understood without an interpreter, and sounds nonsense to the outsider without interpretation. But even within the passage in Acts there are tensions which suggest that Luke may be drawing on a report of such an event. For why would the hearers accuse the disciples of being full of new wine, if as Luke would have us believe what in fact took place was a clear translation into many languages of the gospel?

Are there signs of objectifying elsewhere in Luke-Acts? As far as healing miracles are concerned there is a marked tendency to heighten the miraculous element, either by increasing the severity of the illness or the number of those healed or the effect of the miracle itself. Let some examples suffice. In Luke 6:6–11, a passage clearly dependent on Mark 3:1–6 the withered hand becomes a withered righthand – all the more serious. In Luke 5:12–16, clearly dependent on Mark 1:40–5 the man is not just a leper. He is full of leprosy. Similarly, in Luke 4:38–9, clearly dependent on Mark 1:29–31, Peter's mother in law does not just have a fever, she has a great fever. One could go on. In each case there is no evidence that Luke has any source other than the Markan passage.

On numbers, according to Luke 4:40–1, dependent on Mark 1:32–4, not just some, but all are healed. The same happens in Luke 6:l7–19 which is dependent on Mark 3:7–12. A very common addition in Luke is the amazement of the crowd and their subsequent glorifying of God. There seems little doubt that it was in the objectively miraculous that Luke saw the biggest impact being made for God in the world.

A glance at certain central stories of the tradition confirms this. In the account of the baptism of Jesus, Mark's words, 'he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove', become in Luke: 'the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form as a dove'. Luke has turned the event into much more than an experience of Jesus—what Jesus saw! lt becomes an objective event. 'ln bodily form' is without doubt Luke's deliberate insertion. By using these words he wants to make it quite clear how he understood the event.

The transfiguration account loses some of its symbolic character in Luke. The 'six days' of Mark which recall the Sinai episode become

eight days, a round figure for a week. No 'metamorphosis', to use the Greek of Mark and Matthew, takes place, only a change of countenance and the glistening of the garments. There is no appearance as in Matthew and Mark, where the whole narrative suggests a vision of some kind. The two men talking with Jesus are simply there—there on the stage of real history – and, what is more, Luke goes on to add that there was a discussion about Jesus' departure from the earth at Jerusalem. All very normal. The result is that the focus moves from the vision about Jesus, which associates him with Moses and Elijah, to the content of their discussion and the fact of their shared glory. The whole event is described in a way that moves away from the visionary and symbolic (though this is retained to some degree) towards being an objective event of history.

Detecting trends in Acts is not so easy, because we do not know the shape of his traditions as we do, at least in part, in the gospel. But look at the kinds of stories Luke thought it significant to tell, and his predilection for the miraculous and the objective is striking. Leaving aside for a moment the Pentecost narrative in Acts 2, we have the healing of the lame man at the gate beautiful; the death of Ananias and Sapphira, an extraordinary reversal of the gospel of grace; healings through touching garments and handkerchiefs or getting into Peter's shadow (magical ideas abound here); the angel of the Lord opening prison doors; Philip's being 'caught up' and so on. But even when we move further into Acts and the later stages, we find a similar emphasis: the Gentile mission is the result of a supernatural vision; and the stories of Paul's missionary work are dominated by accounts of exorcisms, healings, miraculous releases from prison.

It is not the question of whether such things happened or not that concerns us here. Rather it is the predominance of such stories and their role in the story of the church according to Luke, which follow a consistent pattern. They are the primary evidence for the action of God in the church. This is exactly what appears when we have Luke summarise the gospel message in the speeches of Acts. In all probability he has incorporated earlier traditions into these speeches, but as a whole they reflect the work of one hand, the hand of Luke. What is the Lukan gospel?

Look at the Pentecost narrative and speech of Peter: Acts 2:22–38. What is the import of the message? Jesus did mighty things and that is what commends him. You killed him. God raised him, a wondrous

act confirming him as God's chosen one. He sent the Holy Spirit which shows itself in this mighty miracle. lf you repent you will be forgiven and this mighty experience will be yours.

A similar picture presents itself in Acts 3, in Acts 5:30–2, and in Acts 10:36–43. In Acts l3 Paul is portrayed as giving this kind of message too. What is this gospel really offering? Forgiveness of sins and freedom from judgment; and, in addition, the promise of the Holy Spirit, which manifests itself in extraordinary objective phenomena on the plane of history. To be fair, one must add that the first volume, the gospel of Luke, contains a good deal more content than this, and that there is much stress on how such a believing community should live. But, basically, Luke's gospel or kerygma is consistently represented in these terms.

The effect of this gospel is to raise the expectation that the kind of thing experienced in the earliest church and in the ministry of Jesus is the norm for Christianity. There can be little doubt that Luke's view of Christianity has strongly influenced Christian self-understanding ever since, both at the superficial level of the church year which depends on Luke's fiction and at the level of building into Christianity an openness to that view of religion and life which sees the extraordinary and the fantastic as the main clues to the activity of God.

Luke among the New Testament Authors

Contrast this gospel with what you have in Paul and his tradition. Christ died for our sins. Christ died for us to bring us into right relationship with God. For Luke the cross is no more than the killing of Jesus which is reversed in the resurrection. For Paul it is the central act of salvation and the model for the Christian life as an act of love. For Luke the Holy Spirit is identified as active where the fantastic and extraordinary occur. For Paul these elements are not denied, but greater than all these is love! Luke comes nowhere near the Pauline conception of the gospel and the dynamic of justification as opposed to salvation by the law. He does stress love for the outcast and the poor and in this way highlights these elements in the tradition of Jesus, but there is no evidence that he understands these as anything other than the good works which Jesus performed. This emphasis on good works is scarce in Acts. But it is not just that. Luke has not

understood what Paul is concerned about in his opposition to the law, even if he knows enough to have Paul contrast the gospel with law in his Pisidian speech. Just look at the way Paul behaves in Acts in conformity with the law at so many points and you can see that Luke does not get it. Paul in reality did not conform to the apostolic decree as Luke suggests. But then the errors both in chronology and content of Luke's portrayal of Paul have long been known to scholars.

We have contrasted Luke and Paul. How does Luke stand in relationship to other New Testament writings and traditions? Let us take as our starting point the fact that the death of Jesus as for sin or for sins has no place in his kerygma. He is not alone in this. This is also the case in 'Q', the source common to Matthew and Luke. There the community sees itself called to continue preaching the message of Jesus, only with a stronger christological content. For Jesus is the Son of Man who is soon to come as judge. There is however nothing like the strong objectifying miraculous tendency we have in Luke and the resultant picture of Christian life. ln the same breath we may mention the Son of Man sayings. ln all but one of them reference to the death of Jesus as for sin or the like is absent. The same goes for the earliest form of the passion narrative. In all probability the interpretation of the death of Jesus as vicarious is a secondary development, though nevertheless a very early one as the presence of it in 1 Cor 15:3b–5 indicates.

What does this mean for Luke? Certainly, Luke is not early—not as early as that. But he does represent a strand of early Christianity which knew of this tradition, but never made it a core statement of the gospel. But Luke combines this absence of the cross as vicarious with a strong emphasis on the miraculous. Are there any New Testament parallels? In recent research there has been much talk about aretalogies—accounts of the wonders of great men. lt seems probable that such collections lie behind Mark's gospel in parts and one such may be suspected to lie behind John's gospel: the signs source. In these we have an approach consistent with that of Luke. Miracles and signs form the central focus of these collections. The cross apparently plays no role. lt was such tendencies within the synoptic tradition with their attendant dangers that led to the collection of the synoptic traditions into a gospel format, where they would be put into perspective by being set beside the cross. Hence Mark's gospel: a passion narrative with an extended introduction. This would indicate that there were forces in early Christianity which saw dangers in the wonder

approach so typical of Luke, Direct evidence of such an encounter is documented for us in Paul's correspondence with the Corinthians, where he sets the cross as God's strength in weakness over against those seeking signs and miracles and those seeking wisdom, and in chapter 13 sets love above miraculous charismatic phenomena.

More clearly in John than in Mark we can see christological correctives. Neither Mark nor John denies the miracle. That would have been hardly likely, especially since the fact of Jesus' performing miracles is an undeniably authentic tradition. The question remains whether some of the nature miracles like the feeding of the 5000 were not originally more ordinary events given a symbolic toning (thus the twelve baskets, eucharistic overtones etc.) and then given something like the Lukan treatment, heightening them into the fantastic magical stories they are now. There can be no question that the evangelists afforded them full credibility. Yet in doing so they were aware of the dangers. Hence John's gospel abounds with warnings not to follow Jesus because of the wonders, but because of the truths to which they symbolically point, a classic example being the feeding of the 5000. Don't follow Jesus because of that miracle; follow him because he is the bread of life. Similarly, miracles of healing the blind and raising the dead are converted into signs of Jesus as the light of the world and the resurrection and the life. In 2:23–3:3, in response to those who indeed 'believed in his name' because of the miracles, Jesus did not believe in them, and Nicodemus, the model of such believers, is told he must be reborn if he really wants to see.

Paul, too, of course, never denies miracles and knows full well traditions which see these as the marks of an apostle. But to base one's commendation on these is to him sheer folly, as he is at pains to point out in those very human chapters at the end of 2 Corinthians.

Matthew faces similar problems in his community. There are those who do signs and wonders and are manifesting charismatic phenomena, but Matthew has the word of Jesus for them: 'On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name and do many mighty works in your name?" And then I will declare to them, "l never knew you"' (7:22–3). ln fact the whole sermon on the mount is oriented towards Christians of this kind who have lost the ethical thrust of Christianity and have become carried away with extraordinary and fantastic experiences. All the way through Matthew shapes his material to highlight the way of love as the way of the Christian life.

Luke's Agenda

What can we say of Luke? We are hardly talking of Paul's companion doctor or if so of one who knew him but briefly. We are talking of a man who probably stands within a tradition which has developed from that primitive approach that did not focus on the cross as the salvific act. In addition, his Christianity has come under strong influence from those who would stress the miraculous and fantastic as the manifestation of God in the world. This is not to say that he plays down the suffering of Jesus or the disciples and early Christians. Quite the contrary. But he interprets this solely as expression of rejection foreseen by God and countered or compensated for by God through the fantastic, be it the resurrection, the opening of prisons, or the heavenly reward.

lt is at this point that the obvious flaw in the Lukan approach becomes apparent: the fantastic is not always guaranteed. Escape is not always possible. This means in effect: look back at the wonders of the time of Jesus and the apostolic age, but don't necessarily expect that now. This raises the question of Luke's intention. Why has Luke heightened the miraculous and materialised and in that sense historicised the traditions he received? Can it be because it was just such happenings which were continuing to happen around him at the time of writing, and that he painted the picture of the early church accordingly? That would be to suggest that what in fact did not happen at the beginning happened in Luke's community.

Much more likely is that Luke wants to commend the gospel and Christianity by citing the kinds of proofs that count for him. In all probability the effect intended is a strengthening of the confidence of Christians. How does he do this? By heightening the miraculous and by materialising the spiritual so as to show that God was active in Jesus and the early church in such a way as to provide irrefutable evidence that Christianity is according to God's will. There are a number of elements in this. The God of the Old Testament gives clues to the divine purposes being fulfilled here by acting according to Old Testament patterns: ascension after 40 days and Pentecost; the killing of Jesus happens in fulfilment of scripture; the miracles and interventions of God are made into striking objectively observable material events and heightened in their impact by embellishment—from healing miracles to the resurrection and Pentecost.

Luke the Historian

Luke 'the historian' deserves the title 'historian' not because he is seeking out what happened, but because he is historicising early Christian tradition and 'pegging' it to concrete historical data in the material plane. Hence his elaborate dating of the birth of Jesus, for instance.

It is difficult to imagine the kinds of sources he would have at his disposal. Out of them he has reconstructed a picture. He has ordered the material at the beginning. For instance, the holding over of the Gentile mission till Acts 10 is artificial. Already traditions within the earlier chapters suggest otherwise (cf. Acts 6 and 9:15!). Here, too, however Luke has retained for us the doubtless historically authentic memory, that the Gentile mission was by no means assumed right from the beginning as Matt 28:19 and Ps-Mark 16:15 would have us believe. His general outline here is almost certainly wrong. Yet, within this framework he has retained for us some very old traditions which shine through. One such is the expulsion of the Hellenistic Jewish Christians and before that the appointment of Hellenistic Jewish Christian leaders as a result of a dispute within the Jerusalem church (Acts 6). True, he makes it merely a matter of neglect of widows and the appointees are portrayed as stewards or social welfare workers. But glossing over the divisions within the Jerusalem church like this does not mean that we cannot see that in fact a good deal more was involved: these men, Stephen among them, are preachers and leaders! However it started, it was a major split which affected the church for decades if not centuries.

Luke and the Church

Luke has painted a picture of a relatively harmonious church which abounded in charismatic miraculous phenomena. Many have highlighted the way in which Luke imposes an order onto the relationships within the early church as being related to his own situation. Even Paul is subordinated. But we mention this only summarily.

What are the implications of Luke's theological reconstruction for his community? First of all, they are being asked to look back to the action of God in a series of fantastic feats in the past and to believe