

Examining Christian Doctrine

Lesson 11: The Doctrine of Christ: The Names and Titles of Christ

In this lesson, we shall explore the main Christological titles found in the New Testament, and their implications for our understanding of the identity of Christ. Why are these titles so important? For biblical writers, names convey insights about identity. The terms used to designate Jesus are the outcome of reflection on what he said, what he did, and what was done to him.

The Main New Testament Christological Names and Titles

Jesus

The name "Jesus" originates from the Greek "Iēsous," which is a transliteration of the Hebrew name "Yeshua" or "Yehoshua," meaning "Yahweh saves." This name underscores Jesus' role as the Savior, in accordance with the angel's proclamation to Mary in Luke 1:31.

Christ (Messiah)

The title "Christ" is derived from the Greek word "Christos," which translates the Hebrew word "Messiah," both meaning "anointed one." In Jewish tradition, the Messiah was anticipated as a figure anointed by God to fulfill various roles, including the deliverance of God's people, the establishment of God's kingdom, and the restoration of justice and righteousness. Early Christians identified Jesus as the fulfillment of this Messianic expectation.

For example, in Matthew 16:16, Peter confesses, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus also affirms his Messianic identity in Luke 4:16-21, where he applies the prophecy of Isaiah 61 to himself.

Calling Jesus "Christ" acknowledges his unique role as the promised Savior and King, anointed by God to bring salvation, redemption, and restoration to humanity. It affirms Jesus' fulfillment of God's plan of salvation and his authority as the Messiah-King over God's kingdom.

Lord

The title "Lord" denotes someone who has authority, power, and sovereignty. In the context of Jesus Christ, calling him "Lord" acknowledges his divine authority and kingship over all creation. Throughout the New Testament, Jesus is frequently addressed as "Lord" by his disciples and followers, signifying their recognition of his divine authority and lordship. For example, in Acts 2:36, Peter declares, "Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified."

By acknowledging Jesus as Lord, Christians affirm his rightful place as the supreme ruler and master of their lives. It implies submission to his authority, obedience to his teachings, and allegiance to his kingdom. Furthermore, confessing Jesus as Lord is often regarded as a central aspect of Christian faith (Romans 10:9-10).

Furthermore, declaring "Jesus is Lord" (also Savior and Son of God) in the Roman world, was a way of rejecting the power of the Roman Empire who emphatically declared that "Caesar is Lord". When you say Jesus is Lord in the ancient world you mean that Caesar is not. Christian's allegiance was not to an earthly empire, but a heavenly one.

Savior

The title "Savior" conveys the idea of deliverance, rescue, and salvation from danger or destruction. In the context of Jesus Christ, calling him "Savior" highlights his role as the one who offers redemption and salvation to humanity.

The New Testament frequently refers to Jesus as the Savior who came to save humanity from sin and its consequences. For instance, in Luke 2:11, the angel announces the birth of Jesus, saying, "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

Recognizing Jesus as Savior acknowledges the central message of Christianity, which is the gospel of salvation through faith in Christ. It underscores humanity's need for redemption and restoration, and Jesus' unique capacity to provide salvation through his sacrificial death and resurrection. As Savior, Jesus offers forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with God, and the hope of eternal life to all who believe in him (John 3:16; Acts 4:12)

Son of God

The title "Son of God" emphasizes Jesus' divine nature. It also reflects Jesus' unique relationship with God the Father, and unique status as the second person of the Trinity. It signifies Jesus' divine sonship, not in a biological sense, but in terms of his eternal and ontological relationship with God.

Throughout the New Testament, Jesus is referred to as the Son of God by various characters, including God himself, John the Baptist (John 1:34), angels (Luke 1:35), disciples, (Matt. 16:16) and even a Roman centurion (Mark 15:39). John concludes his Gospel saying "these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God."

Recognizing Jesus as the Son of God affirms his deity, equality with the Father, and participation in the divine nature. It highlights Jesus' unique role in revealing God's character, executing God's will, and serving as the mediator between God and humanity. Additionally, it underscores the intimacy of Jesus' relationship with the Father and his authority to forgive sins and grant eternal life.

Son of Man

The title "Son of Man" reflects Jesus' humanity, humility, and identification with humanity. While its precise meaning is debated, it likely draws from Daniel 7:13-14, where the prophet Daniel sees a divine figure called the "Son of Man" who receives authority, glory, and an everlasting kingdom from the Ancient of Days.

The prophet Ezekiel is also addressed as "son of man" numerous times throughout his book, often by God when giving him instructions or revelations. For example, in Ezekiel 2:1, God says to Ezekiel, "Son of man, stand up on your feet, and I will speak to you." The title is used to refer to a human figure, particularly a prophet, who is called by God to receive divine messages and fulfill a specific mission. Jesus' use of the title "Son of Man" suggests his humanity, humility, identification with humanity, his role as a prophet, and his authority as the eschatological figure described in Daniel's vision.

In the Gospels, Jesus frequently refers to himself as the Son of Man, often in the context of his mission, suffering, and exaltation. For example, in Mark 10:45, Jesus says, "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Calling Jesus the Son of Man underscores his identification with humanity, his solidarity with human suffering and weakness, and his mission to seek and save the lost. It also points to his exaltation and authority as the divine figure depicted in Daniel's vision, who was to come in glory and establish God's eternal kingdom.

Other New Testament Names and Titles

Son of David

The title "Son of David" highlights Jesus' genealogical connection to King David, who was one of Israel's most revered and prominent kings. By identifying Jesus as the "Son of David," it emphasizes his royal descent and legitimate claim to the throne of Israel.

In Jewish tradition, there was a widespread expectation of a coming Messiah who would be a descendant of David and would fulfill the promises made to David regarding the establishment of an everlasting kingdom (2 Samuel 7:12-16; Psalm 89:3-4).

Beyond merely indicating Jesus' earthly lineage, the title "Son of David" also carries spiritual connotations, suggesting Jesus' divine appointment and authority as the promised Messiah-King.

Lamb of God

In John's Gospel, John the Baptist identifies Jesus as the "Lamb of God" (John 1:29), alluding to the sacrificial lamb of Jewish tradition and symbolizing Jesus' role as the atoning sacrifice for humanity's sins. This title highlights Jesus' redemptive mission and his willingness to offer himself as a ransom for many. See also Rev. 5:6, 13:8

Emmanuel

Meaning "God with us," this title underscores the Incarnation, affirming Jesus' divine nature and his presence among humanity as the embodiment of God's love and grace (Matthew 1:23).

The Word (The Word of God)

In the Gospel of John, Jesus is described as the "Word" (Greek: Logos) who was with God in the beginning and through whom all things were created. This title emphasizes Jesus' role in divine revelation and as the embodiment of God's communication to humanity (John 1:1-3). See also Revelation 19:12-13

Rabbi

This Hebrew title means "teacher" or "master" and highlights Jesus' role as a revered teacher and spiritual guide, imparting wisdom and instruction to his disciples and followers (John 1:38; Matthew 23:8).

The Last Adam

Though not a formal title, the concept of the last Adam is found in 1 Corinthians 15:45, Paul writes, "So it is written: 'The first man Adam became a living being'; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit." Here, Paul contrasts the first Adam, who brought sin and death, with Jesus Christ, the last Adam, who brings life and redemption. The designation "Last Adam" highlights Jesus' finality and superiority over the first Adam. While the first Adam brought sin and death, the Last Adam brings righteousness and life, offering a complete solution to humanity's predicament.

The Seven 'I AM' Statements

1. **The Bread of Life** John 6:35
2. **The Light of the World** John 8:12
3. **The Door of the Sheep** John 10:7
4. **Good Shepherd** John 10:11)
5. **The Resurrection and the Life** John 11:25
6. **The Way, the Truth, and the Life** John 14:6
7. **The True Vine** John 15:1

The Offices of Christ

There were three major offices among the people of Israel in the Old Testament: the prophet (such as Nathan, 2 Sam. 7:2), the priest (such as Abiathar, 1 Sam. 30:7), and the king (such as King David, 2 Sam. 5:3). These three offices were distinct. The prophet spoke God's words to the people; the priest offered sacrifices, prayers, and praises to God on behalf of the people; and the king ruled over the people as God's representative.

These three offices foreshadowed Christ's own work:

- as prophet he reveals God to us and speaks God's words to us;
- as priest he both offers a sacrifice to God on our behalf and is himself the sacrifice that is offered;
- and as king he rules over the church and over the universe as well

Christ As Prophet

The Old Testament prophets spoke God's words to the people. Moses was the first major prophet, and he is credited with writing the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch. After Moses there was a succession of other prophets who spoke and wrote God's words. But Moses predicted that sometime another prophet like himself would come.

The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brethren—him you shall heed—just as you desired of the LORD your God. . . . And the LORD said to me . . . "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brethren; and I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him." (Deut. 18:15–18)

Peter affirms that Jesus is this prophet which had been spoken of in Deuteronomy when he spoke to the people on Solomon's Porch in Acts 3:

"and that he may send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus. ²¹Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets. ²²For Moses said, 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you.'²³ Anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off from their people.'²⁴ 'Indeed, beginning with Samuel, all the prophets who have spoken have foretold these days.'" (Acts 3:20-24)

Along with this direct quote, we see many people in the Gospels calling Jesus a prophet, however many of them knew only little about him.

- There were various opinions of Jesus that were circulating: “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets” (Matt. 16:14).
- When Jesus raised the son of the widow of Nain from the dead, the people were afraid and said, “A great prophet has arisen among us!” (Luke 7:16).
- When Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well something of her past life, she immediately responded, “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet” (John 4:19).
- The reaction of the man born blind who was healed in the temple was similar: “He is a prophet” (John 9:17)
- After Jesus had multiplied the loaves and fish, some people exclaimed, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world!” (John 6:14)

So during his ministry, Jesus was certainly recognized as a prophet and even performed the role to Israel like an Old Testament prophet would, however, “prophet” is not a primary designation of Jesus or one used frequently by him or about him. In fact, it’s significant that the Epistles never refer to Jesus as prophet or a prophet. Thus while Jesus fulfills this prophecy of being a prophet like unto Moses, ‘prophet’ is not one of Jesus’ main titles.

We can assume that the New Testament Epistle writers do not refer to Jesus as prophet for a few reasons:

1. Jesus is far greater than any of the Old Testament Prophets
2. He is the one about whom the prophecies in the Old Testament were made
3. Jesus was not merely a messenger of revelation from God but was HIMSELF the revelation of God.

Christ as Priest

In the Old Testament, the priests were appointed by God to offer sacrifices. They also offered prayers and praise to God on behalf of the people. In so doing they “sanctified” the people or made them acceptable to come into God’s presence, albeit in a limited way during the Old Testament period. In the New Testament Jesus becomes our great high priest. This theme is developed extensively in the letter to the Hebrews, where we find that Jesus functions as priest in several ways.

1. Jesus Offered a Perfect Sacrifice for Sin. Heb. 10:4, Heb. 9:26
2. Jesus Continually Brings Us Near to God. Heb. 6:19–20
3. Jesus as Priest Continually Prays for Us. Heb. 7:25, Rom. 8:34

Christ as King

In the Old Testament the king has authority to rule over the nation of Israel. In the New Testament, Jesus was born to be King of the Jews (Matt. 2:2), but he refused any attempt by people to try to make him an earthly king with earthly military and political power (John 6:15). He told Pilate, “My kingship is not of this world (John 18:36).

Nonetheless, Jesus did have a kingdom whose arrival he announced in his preaching (Matt. 4:17, 23; 12:28). He is in fact the true king of the new people of God. Thus, Jesus refused to rebuke his disciples who cried out at his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!” (Luke 19:38)

After his resurrection, God raised him up and “made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come; and he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church” (Eph. 1:20–22; Matt. 28:18; 1 Cor. 15:25).

In the book of Revelation we see Jesus acknowledged as “King of kings and Lord of lords” (Rev. 19:16) and in Philippians we are told that every knee shall bow to him (Phil. 2:10).