



## God the Revealed: Christology

by Michael Welker, translated by  
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*GOD THE REVEALED: CHRISTOLOGY* is the English translation of Michael Welker's German monograph *Gottes Offenbarung: Christologie* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2012). Welker's book on Christology follows earlier publications on the Holy Spirit and creation and aims to present a systematic examination of the doctrine of Christ.

Welker's starting point is that the classical statement that "God revealed God's self in Jesus Christ" is the *gospel*, the central *teaching*, the *dogma*, and the *confessional* kernel of Christian faith. Yet the statement is conspicuously ambiguous because of the temporal connotations

of the revelatory event. Is revelation merely a past event? How then does it express God's sharing of God's full divinity with us today? Is revelation totally expressive of God's presence in contemporary life in Jesus and the Spirit? If this is the case, how can we still speak about God's presence in Jesus's earthly (human) life? The First Quest for the historical Jesus focused on Jesus of the past. The Second Quest focused on who Jesus is for us today. Welker endeavors to take Christology beyond these historical quests to develop a more coherent and balanced Christology that exceeds an "either-or" dichotomy.

In Part 1, Welker explains why a new investigation is needed in order to reconcile historical inquiry about Jesus (the focus of the First Quest) with attention to faith's discernment of the meaning and relevance of Jesus to human life (the focus of the Second Quest). Such reconciliation is to be achieved, according to Welker, by discerning the "continuities between the pre-Easter Jesus and his post-Easter life despite radical discontinuity" (p. 13). Attention to this continuity in today's multi- and inter-disciplinary world of reasoning requires engagement with the Christology-related challenges. In Part 2, Welker addresses the confusion between "resurrection" and "physical revivification." Part 3 explores the radical nature of the encounter with a God revealed in crucifixion, an experience of profound suffering. Part 4 deals with the dualistic tendency to restrict God's revelation in the Holy Spirit to an inaccessible future that ignores pneumatological disclosure in "polyphonic realities." Part 5 then outlines the necessary distinction between the "second coming of Christ" and any "eternal eschatology" in terms of "eternal stillness" or "existence in mystical mist."

Welker's Christology proposes what he calls a "Fourth Quest" for the historical Jesus—one that will reassess the twentieth century's Third Quest and discern its limitations. The entire first part of the book sets forth this proposal. In Welker's view, the Third Quest led to the realization that we can access aspects of the historical Jesus. We are not limited to the common belief that a man called Jesus of

Nazareth actually lived. The skepticism of pre-Third Quest scholarship was overcome by engagement with archaeological discoveries in Palestine, and by their generation of a parallel “textual archaeology” in historical inquiry about Jesus. However, Welker argues that “archaeologism” is no less reductionist and one-sided than the skepticism of the First and Second Quests, because it “reduces Jesus’s ministry to dietary, healing and community-focused contributions and commensurately organized movement” (p. 63). To avoid such reductionism, Welker’s proposed Fourth Quest introduces “multi-contextuality,” which uses archaeological data (textual and artifactual) to convey the multiplicities of Jesus’s life-setting. Multi-contextuality, rather than “mono-textual images of Jesus,” founds Christology on the awareness that Jesus’s history “remains fragmentary and multifaceted” in nature (p. 88).

Welker applies that same multi-contextuality to the biblical authors and their christological discourse in order to discern their audiences, their writing purposes, the driving contextual forces behind their distinctive arrangements of Jesus’s portrait, and the problems they associate with his life and ministry. Constructing Christology from a Fourth Quest perspective means distinguishing between diverse yet interconnected levels of multi-contextuality (Welker counts four of these). He contends that “consideration of the four levels of multi-contextual complexity” results in a much less reductionist reading of the historical Jesus and “turns a seemingly unresolvable problem into a highly intriguing, promising challenge” (p. 92).

The monograph is best described as an introductory presentation of the various trends of historical Jesus scholarship during the last three decades of the twentieth century. Specialized scholars will find that Welker’s presentation remains on the surface of the issues. It exposes theological trends and proposals without engaging in sufficiently systematic, critical, and analytical conversation with them, and it does not offer an original assessment of the christological options. The book’s title is somewhat misleading as it conveys the impression that the volume is about Christology *per se*, whereas it actually deals with theological hermeneutics in relation to Christology—the *interpretation of belief* in Jesus—rather than with the meaning of revelation in Jesus.

While Welker’s attention to the importance of contextuality is important and inspiring, it cannot be said to constitute a Fourth Quest. It does not take historical Jesus scholarship into new territories. Third Quest scholars, for example, presume multi-contextuality in their attempts to unearth and piece together the historical data of Jesus’s life, though they do not highlight the contextuality factor *per se*. The attention to contextuality, or even to multi-contextuality, in Christian theological and biblical scholarship is not a new development. Christian theologians and historical-critical scholars have always attended to context with their consistent emphasis on the historical nature of Jesus’s life and ministry. Scholars have also attended closely to the historical development of interpretations of faith in Jesus Christ and to the influence of changing intellectual, social, cultural, and political contexts. While Welker’s book provides a useful introduction to the various “quests” for the historical Jesus, his application of multi-contextuality is insufficient for launching a Fourth Quest that provides new areas of understanding.

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