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To
Richard Bauckham
and
Larry Hurtado,
partners in dialogue

DID THE FIRST
CHRISTIANS WORSHIP
JESUS?

The New Testament evidence

JAMES D. G. DUNN



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Abbreviations

| | |
|---------|--|
| ABD | D. N. Freedman (ed.), <i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> (6 vols; New York: Doubleday, 1992) |
| ALD | C. T. Lewis, <i>A Latin Dictionary</i> (Oxford: Clarendon, 1879) |
| BDAG | W. Bauer, <i>A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> , ET W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich (eds), 3rd edition revised by F. W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) |
| BCE | Before the Christian Era, or, Before the Common Era |
| BZNW | <i>Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i> |
| CE | Christian Era, or, Common Era |
| EKK | Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament |
| ET | English translation |
| FS | Festschrift, volume written in honour of |
| HNT | Handbuch zum Neuen Testament |
| HUCA | <i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i> |
| ICC | International Critical Commentary |
| JJS | <i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i> |
| JQR | <i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i> |
| JR | <i>Journal of Religion</i> |
| JSJSupp | <i>Journal for the Study of Judaism</i> Supplement Series |
| JSNT | <i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i> |
| JSNTS | JSNT Supplement Series |
| JSOT | Journal for the Study of the Old Testament |
| JTS | <i>Journal of Theological Studies</i> |
| LCL | Loeb Classical Library |
| LXX | Septuagint |

Abbreviations

| | |
|-------------------------|--|
| MT | Masoretic Text |
| NIGTC | New International Greek Testament Commentary |
| NIV | New International Version (1978) |
| NJB | New Jerusalem Bible (1985) |
| <i>NovT</i> | <i>Novum Testamentum</i> |
| NRSV | New Revised Standard Version (1989) |
| NT | New Testament |
| <i>NTS</i> | <i>New Testament Studies</i> |
| <i>OCD</i> ³ | S. Hornblower and A. Spawforth (eds), <i>The Oxford Classical Dictionary</i> (3rd edition; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003) |
| <i>ODCC</i> | F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone (eds), <i>The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church</i> (2nd edition; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983) |
| OT | Old Testament |
| <i>OTP</i> | J. H. Charlesworth (ed.), <i>The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha</i> (2 vols; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1983, 1985) |
| REB | Revised English Bible (1989) |
| SNTSMS | Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series |
| <i>TDNT</i> | G. Kittel and G. Friedrich (eds), <i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> (ET; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76) |
| <i>TDOT</i> | G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren (eds), <i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> (ET; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974–2006) |
| WBC | Word Biblical Commentary |
| WUNT | Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament |

Introduction

The question

The status accorded to or recognized for Jesus is the key distinctive and defining feature of Christianity. It is also the chief stumbling block for inter-faith dialogue between Christians and Jews, and between Christians and Muslims. Jew and Muslim simply cannot accept the divine status of Jesus as the Son of God, which Christians regard as fundamental to their faith. The Christian understanding of God as Trinity baffles them. To regard Jesus as divine, as worthy of worship as God, seems to them an obvious rejection of the oneness of God, more a form of polytheism than a form of monotheism. And truth to tell, many Christians also find the understanding of God as Trinity baffling. The confession of the Trinity in terms of 'essence' (or 'substance') makes too little sense, apart from the Greek philosophical categories that the language presupposes, for it to be very meaningful for most of those who repeat the Nicene Creed. And the classic creedal distinction between different 'persons' of the Godhead, when 'person' is understood in its everyday sense, invites the perception of God in tri-theistic rather than Trinitarian terms, as three and distinct individual 'persons'.¹

In view of this, it may be helpful to look back to the beginning of the process that resulted in the formulation of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, and in doing so to clarify what lay behind the confession of Jesus as the Son of God in Trinitarian terms. The language of 'essence'/'substance' and 'person' was, of course, carefully chosen and the usage of these

¹ The problem was highlighted by both K. Rahner, *The Trinity* (London: Burns & Oates, 1970) 48, and G. W. H. Lampe, *God as Spirit* (Oxford University Press, 1977) 227–8.

terms was finely tuned by the controversies over the precise status of Jesus that racked the first few centuries of Christianity. But most Christians and most inter-faith dialogue would find it hard to recover and to appreciate that fine-tuning without an intensity of immersion in ancient philosophical debates that few could contemplate or have time for. Perhaps, then, a more fruitful way forward would be to inquire behind the process that has given Christianity its creedal confessions, to attempt some closer examination of the beginning of the process – what it was that launched the process, what it was that made Christians want to speak of Jesus in divine terms, what it was that led to the worship of Jesus as God.

The title of this book is of course controversial – intentionally so, because the issue itself is unavoidably controversial – *Did the First Christians Worship Jesus?* The immediate answer that most Christians will want to give is, ‘Of course they did.’ And if they want to cite some evidence by way of proof, they may well turn immediately to one of the closing scenes of John’s Gospel, where Thomas, one of Jesus’ twelve close disciples, addresses the resurrected Jesus as ‘My Lord and my God’ (John 20.28) – that is in terms of confessional worship. Or they could cite Paul’s great poem/hymn in his letter to the Philippians, which climaxes in every knee in heaven and earth bowing and every tongue confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil. 2.10–11). Or they could refer to the book of Revelation, where the seer envisions myriads of myriads singing with full voice, ‘Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing’ (Rev. 5.11–12). Of course the first Christians worshipped Jesus.

At the same time, however, the element of controversy cannot be excluded or ignored. For the New Testament also includes accounts of Jesus himself rebuking the thought that anyone might be worshipped other than God. When, in the story of Jesus’ temptations, Satan invites Jesus to worship him, Jesus replies explicitly, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him’ (Matt. 4.10/Luke 4.8). The question unavoidably arises, ‘Would Jesus have similarly rebuked those who sought to

worship him?' Elsewhere, Jesus is recalled as maintaining the unique otherness that is God's alone. For example, when addressed by one seeking eternal life as 'Good teacher', Jesus replies, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone' (Mark 10.17–18). Again an unavoidable question arises: 'Would Jesus himself have welcomed his being confessed as equal with God?' Or take one other example, this time from Paul: a noticeable feature in his letters is his regular reference to Jesus as Lord, where, as we shall see, the title most obviously avers a divine status for Jesus; yet in several passages Paul also speaks of God as 'the God . . . of our Lord Jesus Christ'.² God is *the God of Jesus*, even of Jesus as *Lord*.

Of course, both aspects of the New Testament evidence need to be examined more closely. And there is much else, even within the first generation or two of Christianity, that calls for attention if we are to answer even such an apparently straightforward question as 'Did the first Christians worship Jesus?' But it is well that we begin with the realization that to answer the question effectively will require more than the citing of a few texts. We should also recognize that the way to the answer may be more difficult or challenging than at first appeared, and that the answer to the question may be less straightforward than we might like.

Those familiar with recent discussion in this area will be well aware of the considerable contribution to that discussion made by two senior scholars in Britain. Larry Hurtado (Edinburgh) has provided a series of studies developing the central claim that cultic devotion to Jesus was practised within a few years of Christianity's beginnings (that is not as a late development in early Christianity), and within an exclusivist commitment to the one God of the Bible.³ During the same period Richard

² Rom. 15.6; 2 Cor. 1.3; 11.31; Col. 1.3; Eph. 1.3, 17; also 1 Pet. 1.3.

³ Particularly L. W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); also *At the Origins of Christian Worship: The Context and Character of Earliest Christian Devotion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); also *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God? Historical Questions about Earliest Devotion to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005). Hurtado's stated aim is 'to

Bauckham (formerly of St Andrews) has been developing an impressive argument that Jesus was worshipped more or less from the beginning of Palestinian Jewish Christianity as one who shared or was included in the unique identity of the one God of Israel ('christological monotheism').⁴ It is the emphasis that both Hurtado and Bauckham place on the worship of (or cultic devotion to) Jesus in earliest Christianity, and the importance they attribute to the actual practice and experience of this worship in shaping and determining the christology of the first Christians, that has suggested to me that a focused study on this central question ('Did the first Christians worship Jesus?') is desirable. I make bold to enter the discussion, not because I particularly disagree with Hurtado and Bauckham – our agreement on the great majority of the texts and issues discussed is substantial – but rather because I am concerned to ensure that the *whole* picture is brought into view, and that texts that indicate a greater complexity, and may even jar with the principal texts that have shaped Hurtado's and Bauckham's views, are not neglected. For if the full range of material points to answers like 'Yes, but to be noted also . . .', rather than a simple 'Yes' to our central question, then it is important that

demonstrate that Christ was given the sorts of devotion that we can properly understand as full cultic worship, and that we can rightly describe Christian worship of the earliest observable decades as genuinely "binitarian". That is, I contend that at this surprisingly early stage Christian worship has two recipients, God and Christ, yet the early Christians understand themselves as monotheists and see their inclusion of Christ in their devotional life as in no way compromising the uniqueness of the one God to whom they had been converted through the gospel' (*Origins* 5; see also 95–7; *Lord Jesus Christ* 50–3, 134–53; *How on Earth* 48–53).

⁴ Particularly R. Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), which includes several essay-length studies on the NT's christology of 'divine identity', and especially his *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998). The thesis is clearly stated in the opening pages of *God Crucified* (vii–viii) and of *Jesus and the God of Israel* (ix–x). He begins his revised article on 'Jesus, Worship of', from *ABD* 3.812–19: 'The prevalence and centrality of the worship of Jesus in early Christianity from an early date has frequently been underestimated, as has its importance for understanding christological development' (*Jesus and the God of Israel* 127).

such material is not sidelined or ignored.⁵ The desire to find an elegant summary or straightforward narrative in dealing with such profundities is natural and understandable. But it may be that the truth of God (including ‘christological monotheism’) eludes such neatness of expression. If so, it is as well that we are open to that possibility. Otherwise we may run the risk of thinking that we have actually succeeded in expressing adequately the inexpressible.⁶

The scope of our inquiry is very limited – limited mainly to the first generation of Christianity (including, unavoidably, Paul in particular), but with the recognition that we cannot hope to exclude the rest of the New Testament. Even that will be challenging enough, particularly as we try to hear how these

⁵ In *Origins* 90–2 Hurtado responds to my earlier attempts to do justice to the full range of relevant material in Paul in *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998) 257–60, where I suggest that Paul showed a degree of ‘reserve’ in relation to worship of Jesus and that we need ‘a more carefully nuanced formulation in speaking about the cultic veneration of Jesus in earliest Christianity’ (260). In contrast Hurtado maintains that ‘there is no indication in Paul’s letters that among the problems he had to deal with was anxiety about devotion to Jesus representing a possible neglect of God or threat to God’s centrality’ (*Origins* 91–2). In fact I do not disagree with that, and ‘reserve’ may not have been the best word to summarize the brief documentation of Pauline language and usage provided in *Theology* at that point. But it still seems to me to be relevant and potentially important to ask whether the first Christians used the full language and practice of worship in their devotion to Jesus, and, if not, to ask what stopped or inhibited them from doing so, and thence to explore the significance of the full range of NT data on the subject.

⁶ The debate on the exegesis and issues involved has become quite intense and I will include others in the discussion, particularly W. Horbury, *Jewish Messianism and the Cult of Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1998); C. C. Newman, J. A. Davila and G. S. Lewis (eds), *The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism* (*JSJSupp* 63; Leiden: Brill, 1999); L. T. Stuckenbruck and W. E. S. North (eds), *Early Jewish and Christian Monotheism* (*JSNTS* 263; London: T&T Clark, 2004); G. D. Fee, *Pauline Christology: An Exegetical–Theological Study* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2007); and J. F. McGrath, *The Only True God: Early Christian Monotheism in its Jewish Context* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2009). I have already responded to P. M. Casey, *From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God: The Origins and Development of New Testament Christology* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1991) in ‘The Making of Christology – Evolution or Unfolding?’, in J. B. Green and M. Turner (eds), *Jesus of Nazareth, Lord and Christ*; I. H. Marshall FS (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 437–52.

texts were heard (and intended to be heard) by their first recipients, without that initial voice being drowned out by the way the same texts often came to be heard in the controversies of the second to fourth centuries.

The way forward will be as follows:

- 1 We need to consider whether ‘worship’ was given only to God (or gods). We must attempt to define what worship is and whether it is the fact that worship is offered to God (or a god) that in effect defines him (or her) as ‘God’/‘god’.
- 2 We need to ask what the worship of the God of Israel involved. What did it mean to ‘worship the Lord God and serve only him’?
- 3 Since worship is the human response to what is perceived as God’s self-revelation, we will look at how that self-revelation was perceived within Israel and in the religion within which Jesus and the first Christians (all Jews) grew up.
- 4 We will address the question of whether Jesus was a monotheist. Did he affirm the oneness of God as his ancestral faith insisted?
- 5 We will examine the conviction that God had exalted Jesus to his right hand, and how that contributed to Christian recognition of the divine status of Jesus. What did that mean for the first Christians? Did it involve a reassessment and restatement of the character of God as well as a re-appreciation of the status of Jesus?

What I hope will become apparent is that the first Christians did not see worship of Jesus as an alternative to worship of God. Rather, it was a way of worshipping God. That is to say, worship of Jesus is only possible or acceptable within what is now understood to be a Trinitarian framework. Worship of Jesus that is not worship of God through Jesus, or, more completely, worship of God through Jesus and in the Spirit, is not Christian worship.

1

The language of worship

What does the word ‘worship’ mean? What does the use of the word say about the one ‘worshipped’? The question arises immediately for us since we are concerned with the worship of Jesus. If the first Christians did ‘worship’ Jesus what does that tell us about the status that they accorded to him? One way of defining ‘worship’ would be to confine its application to deity – worship as religious devotion paid to a god, or in the words of *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, as ‘reverence paid to God or god’. To ‘worship’ someone or some being would be to affirm their deity, to recognize that the someone or some being is God or a god. The problem, however, is that the term ‘worship’ is also used more widely. In the British legal system judges have regularly been addressed as ‘Your Worship’. In the marriage service in the Book of Common Prayer the words are to be used, ‘With my body I thee worship’. Everyday speech uses phrases like ‘hero worship’. In these cases the language of course signals respect for someone regarded as of higher status and/or worthy of such respect. But such language does not indicate the deity of the one being thus ‘worshipped’.

So we must reflect on the language of worship to help clarify what our central question means, or what its use in relation to Jesus expresses of Jesus’ status or of the worshippers’ regard for him. Both Hurtado and Bauckham marshal a good deal of the evidence regarding the language of worship used in relation to Jesus. But a more extensive and detailed study of the range of meaning of the word(s) usually translated as ‘worship’ in the New Testament seems to be called for, and this should help us to define what the first Christians understood by ‘worship’ more accurately and more fully.

We also need to take account of the range of near synonyms or alternatives to ‘worship’ – reverence, venerate, praise, glorify, adore, express devotion to, and so on. Here we run into a similar quandary. For just as a judge may be addressed as ‘Your Worship’, so in the history of Christianity, members of the clergy have often been addressed as ‘Your reverence’. So too in the Church of England archdeacons have the title ‘Venerable’, and in Roman Catholic tradition ‘venerable’ is used of those whose sanctity is thereby recognized but who have still to be canonized, or recognized as ‘saints’. We must also take note of the earlier debates within Christianity as to whether certain of these near synonyms or alternatives to ‘worship’ could be used in reference to the saints or the Virgin Mary. The clarification required to answer our question satisfactorily would seem to be more extensive than was first apparent.

1.1 To worship

The word most often translated as ‘worship’ in the New Testament is the Greek term *proskynein*. In turn, in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament) *proskynein* is the regular translation of the Hebrew *shachah*. *Shachah* in the Hebrew Bible has the basic meaning of ‘bow down, prostrate oneself, make obeisance before’. It denotes the act of homage before a monarch or a superior, or prostration before God in worship. For example, Jacob prostrates himself before his brother Esau (Gen. 33.3); Joseph’s brothers do obeisance to Joseph, governor of Egypt (Gen. 42.6; 43.28); and various individuals make obeisance before King David.¹ In 1 Chronicles 29.20 the whole assembly (*ekklēsia*) ‘worshipped (*prosekynēsan*) the Lord and the king.’² Obeisance is made before

¹ 2 Sam. 14.4, 22; 18.28; 1 Kings 1.23, 31.

² Could one speak properly of something equivalent to a ‘*ruler cult*’ in Judaism? Cf. Horbury, *Jewish Messianism* 68–77, 114, 127–36. M. Barker, ‘The High Priest and Worship of Jesus’, in Newman, et al. (eds), *Jewish Roots* 93–111, presses the significance of 1 Chron. 29: ‘the king was the visible presence of the Lord in the temple ritual and Solomon’s enthronement was his apotheosis . . . this is what they meant by becoming divine’ (94–5).

angelic beings;³ and above all, obeisance is made before God.⁴ Repeatedly, particularly in Deuteronomy and Isaiah, Israel is forbidden to make obeisance to any other gods or idols;⁵ the Lord God alone was to be worshipped (Deut. 10.20).⁶

Similarly in the New Testament, Bauer-Danker defines *proskynein* as ‘to express in attitude or gesture one’s complete dependence on or submission to a high authority figure, so “(fall down and) worship, do obeisance to, prostrate oneself before, do reverence to, welcome respectfully”’.⁷ The Greek term too is used in reference to human beings, the *proskynēsis* (the matching noun) signifying the acknowledgment of the person’s sovereign power in relation to the one making the *proskynēsis*. So in Jesus’ parable of the king settling his accounts with his slaves (Matt. 18.23–34) the slave falls down, prostrating himself before the king (18.26). Notably, two verses later, when the forgiven slave then threatens a fellow slave in his debt, the fellow slave ‘falls down’ but does not offer *proskynēsis* (18.29). In Mark’s account of Jesus’ humiliation by the Roman soldiers, ‘they fell on their knees in homage (*prosekynoun*) to him’, mocking the reverence that could have been his as ‘king of the Jews’ (Mark 15.18–20).⁸ Strikingly, in his account of the conversion of the centurion Cornelius (Acts 10), Luke writes, ‘falling at his [Peter’s] feet, he [Cornelius] worshipped (*proskynēsen*) him’. Peter’s response was to lift Cornelius to his feet and gently rebuke him: ‘Stand up; I am only a human being’ (10.25–26). In the letter to Philadelphia in Revelation 3, the promise is made that their opponents will

³ Gen. 19.1; Num. 22.31; Josh. 5.14; *Joseph and Asenath* 15.11–12.

⁴ Gen. 22.5; 24.26, 48, 52; Exod. 4.31; 12.27; 24.1; 33.10; 34.8; Deut. 10.20; 26.10; 32.43; etc.

⁵ Exod. 20.5; 23.24; 34.14; Lev. 26.1; Deut. 4.19; 5.9; 8.19; 11.16; 17.3; 29.26; 30.17; Isa. 2.8, 20; 44.15, 17, 19; 46.6; Jer. 1.16; 8.2; 25.6; Mic. 5.13.

⁶ Though Bauckham notes that the word ‘is not employed in most Jewish worship’ (*Jesus and the God of Israel* 204).

⁷ BDAG 882.

⁸ Hurtado regards it as ‘mocking worship . . . probably to be taken ironically as unwittingly correct’ (*How on Earth* 158 n. 21); though in reference to ‘king of the Jews’ NRSV is probably correct in regarding the *proskynēsis* in this case as ‘homage’. It may also be relevant that ‘king of the Jews’ was not a title used for Jesus by the first Christians.

prostrate (*proskynēsousin*) themselves before the Philadelphians' feet (Rev. 3.9). The probability is that we should read the accounts of various individuals coming and prostrating themselves before Jesus during his mission in Galilee in the same light: the leper coming to Jesus for his help, prostrating himself (*proskynei*) before Jesus (Matt. 8.2); the ruler of the synagogue (Jairus) similarly bowing down before Jesus (*proskynei*) to ask for his help (Matt. 9.18); the Syrophenician woman making similar appeal on behalf of her daughter (again *proskynei*) (Matt. 15.25); and the mother of the disciples James and John similarly falling before Jesus (*proskynousa*) to petition him on behalf of her sons (Matt. 20.20).⁹

In all these cases *proskynein* clearly implies the appropriate mode for making a petition to one of high authority who could exercise power to benefit the petitioner. That the power could be and probably was thought of as heavenly power in most of the cases cited did not carry with it the implication that the one who exercised the power was divine (note again Peter's gentle rebuke of Cornelius). But the authority and power was due the deepest respect, the petitioners evidently regarded themselves as wholly dependent on the favour of the one petitioned, and the obeisance expressed that depth of respect and sense of complete dependence.

More typically in the New Testament, *proskynein* is used of the worship (prostration) due to God, and to God alone. We should recall once again the rebuke of Jesus to the tempter: '(You shall) worship (*proskynēseis*) the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve' (Matt. 4.10/Luke 4.8).¹⁰ In John's Gospel Jesus looks for a time when people will worship (*proskynēsousin*) God, the Father, in Spirit and in truth (John 4.21–24). In Acts we hear of the Ethiopian eunuch who had come to Jerusalem to worship (*proskynēsōn*) the God of Israel (Acts 8.27). Paul

⁹ Other references in Matt. 14.33 and Mark 5.6 (demonically inspired words), and John 9.38 may have fuller significance for the Evangelists. See particularly Hurtado, *How on Earth* 158 n. 21, 159.

¹⁰ MT/LXX say 'fear', not 'worship'; the scripture is modified or alternatively worded to match more closely to the words of the tempter.

looks for incomers to the assembly of believers to ‘fall on their faces and worship God’ (1 Cor. 14.25). And in the Revelation of John, God is regularly the focus of worship (*proskynein*).¹¹ Moreover, it is not only false worship of the beast that is rebuked,¹² but also any worship of other than God: the interpreting angel explicitly rebukes *proskynēsis* offered to him by the seer, and says emphatically, ‘Worship (*proskynēson*) God’ (Rev. 19.10; 22.8–9).

There are a few other occasions in the New Testament where *proskynein* is used with Jesus as the object. Curiously, though, these seem to move well beyond the sense of someone acknowledging the authority of someone of higher status. Very striking is the way Hebrews takes Moses’ summons, ‘Let all God’s angels worship (*proskynēsatoōsan*) him’ (Deut. 32.43), and refers it to Christ (Heb. 1.6). Otherwise all the New Testament references to worshipping (*proskynein*) Jesus appear in the Gospels, principally Matthew, though only at Jesus’ birth and after Jesus’ resurrection. Matthew, we recall, was the writer who used the term *proskynein* most frequently in reference to several of Jesus’ encounters. But he also uses the term to denote the worship or homage that the wise men brought to the recently born Jesus (Matt. 2.2, 8, 11). And he uses the same term in describing how the women who first encountered the risen Jesus took hold of his feet and worshipped (*proskynēsan*) him (Matt. 28.9). In the closing scene he similarly recounts that the remaining eleven disciples, when they saw Jesus in Galilee, ‘worshipped (*proskynēsan*) him, though some doubted’ (28.17).¹³ Luke had

¹¹ Rev. 4.10; 5.14; 7.11–12; 11.1, 16; 14.7; 15.3–4; 19.4, 10; 22.8–9.

¹² Rev. 13.4, 8, 12, 15; 16.2; 19.20; 20.4.

¹³ Bauckham thinks that whereas in Mark and Luke the gesture of obeisance to Jesus was probably no more than a mark of respect for an honoured teacher, Matthew’s consistent use of the word *proskynein* shows ‘that he intends a kind of reverence which, paid to another human being, he would have regarded as idolatrous’ – referring particularly to Matthew’s unparalleled uses in epiphanic contexts (Matt. 2.2, 8, 11; 14.33; 28.9, 17), usage that ‘must reflect the practice of the worship of Jesus in the church’ (*Jesus and the God of Israel* 130–1). Similarly Hurtado, *How on Earth* 142–51, 158–9; his earlier *Origins* 66–8 does not press the case, bearing in mind the diversity of reverence that *proskynēsis* can express.

terms was finely tuned by the controversies over the precise status of Jesus that racked the first few centuries of Christianity. But most Christians and most inter-faith dialogue would find it hard to recover and to appreciate that fine-tuning without an intensity of immersion in ancient philosophical debates that few could contemplate or have time for. Perhaps, then, a more fruitful way forward would be to inquire behind the process that has given Christianity its creedal confessions, to attempt some closer examination of the beginning of the process – what it was that launched the process, what it was that made Christians want to speak of Jesus in divine terms, what it was that led to the worship of Jesus as God.

The title of this book is of course controversial – intentionally so, because the issue itself is unavoidably controversial – *Did the First Christians Worship Jesus?* The immediate answer that most Christians will want to give is, ‘Of course they did.’ And if they want to cite some evidence by way of proof, they may well turn immediately to one of the closing scenes of John’s Gospel, where Thomas, one of Jesus’ twelve close disciples, addresses the resurrected Jesus as ‘My Lord and my God’ (John 20.28) – that is in terms of confessional worship. Or they could cite Paul’s great poem/hymn in his letter to the Philippians, which climaxes in every knee in heaven and earth bowing and every tongue confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil. 2.10–11). Or they could refer to the book of Revelation, where the seer envisions myriads of myriads singing with full voice, ‘Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing’ (Rev. 5.11–12). Of course the first Christians worshipped Jesus.

At the same time, however, the element of controversy cannot be excluded or ignored. For the New Testament also includes accounts of Jesus himself rebuking the thought that anyone might be worshipped other than God. When, in the story of Jesus’ temptations, Satan invites Jesus to worship him, Jesus replies explicitly, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him’ (Matt. 4.10/Luke 4.8). The question unavoidably arises, ‘Would Jesus have similarly rebuked those who sought to