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Bird's "Jesus the eternal son: Answering Adoptionist Christology" (book review)

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Book Reviews



Bird, M. F. (2017). *Jesus the eternal son: Answering Adoptionist Christology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans. 171 pp. \$18.00. ISBN 9780802875068

Michael F. Bird, Lecturer in Theology at Ridley College, Melbourne, Australia, offers an insightful and persuasive consideration of early Christologies in his brief monograph, *Jesus the Eternal Son: Answering Adoptionist Christology*. The way Christ's earliest followers answered his famous question to his disciples about his identity – 'Who do you say that I am?' – has been the subject of intense debate in modern theology. Bird says that a common assumption held by many of the participants in this debate (held by theologians as diverse as Johannes Weiss, Rudolph Bultmann, and James D. G. Dunn) is that the earliest Christology accessible to modern scholars is adoptionist. Adoptionism generally holds that divine sonship was not essential to Christ's nature, but instead was conferred upon the human Jesus at some point during his earthly life, such as at his baptism or resurrection. More recently, Bart Ehrman has espoused a similar view, characterizing the Christology of Jesus's earliest followers as "exaltation Christology," with the Father adopting Jesus as his Son after the resurrection by exalting him to his right hand. Bird's primary objective in his book is to refute this assumption that the first Christology was adoptionist. Instead, he argues that the earliest Christologies were reflections on the practice of worshipping Jesus as a divine figure, which then coalesced into incarnationalism, and that adoptionism (which was rejected as a heresy) did not develop until the late second century.

After an introductory chapter where he places his objective in the context of the scholarly discussion of adoptionism in early Christology, Bird organizes his work around a detailed examination of several of the alleged adoptionist passages from the New Testament. These include an early creedal statement at the beginning of Romans, early apostolic speeches in Acts, and Mark's account of Jesus's baptism. In each case Bird concludes that a careful reading of the passage in its various contexts, literary and social, supports an incarnational rather than an adoptionist Christology. Bird goes into his greatest detail here in his consideration of Mark, convincingly arguing that the Markan account of Christ's baptism must be interpreted in the context of Mark's larger Christology, one that envisions a pre-existent Christ possessing transcendent characteristics. Having demonstrated that these key New Testament passages are not adoptionist, Bird continues by tracing the second-century

development of adoptionism, considering evidence from the Shepherd of Hermas, Ebionism, and finally from the thought of Theodotus of Byzantium, arguing that true adoptionism existed only in the latter. Bird's work in this historical section, especially his examination of Theodotus, lacks the detail of his earlier biblical analysis, and his argument would be strengthened by providing more evidence and greater depth in this area crucial to his central theme.

Bird writes for an academic audience, especially for those in graduate schools and seminaries, although most aspects of his argument will be accessible to undergraduate students as well. He writes from a perspective that is broadly Evangelical, and his respectful treatment of the scholars whose ideas he considers will resonate well with open-minded readers across denominational boundaries and theological perspectives. Bird's thoughtful examination of early Christologies will prove useful to students at institutions with a curriculum that includes theological education. It is a recommended addition to the collections of all libraries that support this area of study.

Reviewer

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