

Review: JAF6373

WHY THE FOLLOWERS OF JESUS RECOGNIZED HIM AS DIVINE

a feature-length summary critique of

How Jesus became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee

by B. D. Ehrman

(HarperOne, 2014)

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SYNOPSIS

Bart Ehrman's recently published *How Jesus Became God* attempts to explain how Jesus of Nazareth, who never spoke of Himself in divine terms and whose disciples never thought of their master as anything other than a mere mortal like themselves, came to be regarded as God. Ehrman concludes that it was primarily belief in the resurrection of Jesus that led to the exaltation of Jesus. However, Ehrman doubts that Jesus was resurrected and doubts the stories of the discovery of the empty tomb. To reach the conclusions that he does, Ehrman omits important evidence and draws a number of unwarranted conclusions. The evidence is compelling that Jesus Himself made a number of statements that implied His divine identity and mission. There is also significant evidence that supports the Gospels' narratives of the discovery of the empty tomb.

Why and how Jesus, who for most of His life would have been viewed as a man and nothing more, came to be viewed by His followers as God in the flesh is a good question. The question is especially pressing because the followers of Jesus were Jewish, and the Jews of late antiquity held to a strict form of monotheism. That is, the Jewish people—in marked contrast to Greeks, Romans, and other non-Jews—believed in one God, not many. Yet the first followers of Jesus, almost all of them Jewish, proclaimed His divinity. Why and how did that happen?

This is the question that Bart Ehrman addresses in his controversial book, *How Jesus Became God*.¹ Given his current worldview, Ehrman rules out the possibility that Jesus actually was divine, “God in the flesh,” as it were. So the recognition of Jesus’ divinity had nothing to do with reality. No, the high Christology of the early church, whereby Jesus was proclaimed Israel’s Messiah and God’s unique Son, must be explained in purely mundane, naturalistic terms.

There are several facets in the case that Ehrman makes. He argues that Jesus never claimed divinity, that His original disciples did not think of Him as divine, that the Synoptic Gospels (i.e., Matthew, Mark, and Luke) do not portray Jesus as divine, that the divine Jesus of John, the fourth Gospel, is unhistorical, that a major impetus for seeing Jesus in divine terms was the (mistaken) belief that He had been resurrected, and that Paul basically understood Jesus as an exalted angel and not really as God.

There are major problems with all of these proposals. Fortunately, they have received the critique they deserve in a book that appeared in print the very day Ehrman’s book made its appearance. Deliberately echoing the title and cover of Ehrman’s book, the critical response is called *How God Became Jesus*.² In this brief essay I will touch on a few of the issues in Ehrman’s book that I regard as the most important.

DID THE HISTORICAL JESUS CLAIM TO BE DIVINE?

According to Ehrman, Jesus made no claims to divine status. Of course, to make this claim, it is necessary to eliminate a number of sayings and to ignore a number of others.³ In the latter category, one passage that immediately comes to mind is Matthew 11:2–6 = Luke 7:18–23, in which the imprisoned John the Baptist inquires if Jesus is the “Coming One.” Jesus responds, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them” (vv. 4–5, all references ESV, except where noted). Most New Testament scholars readily accept this passage as historical.⁴

There are several important features in this passage. First, the question itself implies that Jesus is thought of as the “Coming One,” which carries with it unmistakable messianic and eschatological implications. The “Coming One” is no mere anointed king, who hopes to overthrow the Romans, but rather He is Yahweh’s representative. For in the vision of Israel’s great prophets, it is God Himself who “comes.”⁵ That this was the probable import of John’s question is seen in Jesus’ reply to His imprisoned colleague. In speaking of the blind regaining their sight, the lame walking, and the deaf regaining their hearing, Jesus has alluded to Isaiah 35:4–6, part of which reads, “Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy.”

It is God, the prophet says, who will come and save His people. When God comes, the “eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap,” and so on. In the coming of Jesus, these things have happened. In the coming of Jesus, God has come.⁶

Jesus’ reply to John alludes to other passages, such as Psalm 146:6–8, Isaiah 26:19 (“Thy dead shall live, their bodies shall rise”; KJV) and 61:1–2 (“anointed...to bring good news to the poor”). Psalm 146:5–8 is especially interesting: “Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free; the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous.” Here again we hear of God’s redemptive, saving work. Among other things, He sets prisoners free and He opens the eyes of the blind.

The evangelist Matthew prepares his readers for this exchange between John and Jesus by introducing the passage with these words: “Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Messiah...” (Matt. 11:2). The parallel passage in Luke 7:18 makes no mention of the “Messiah.” Matthew has introduced the passage with reference to the work of the Messiah because he has rightly understood the messianic import of Jesus’ reply. A fragmentary text from Qumran, which dates to the first century BC, makes this clear. According to 4Q521 frag. 2, col. ii, lines 1–12 (with the obvious quotations/allusions to Scripture placed in brackets):

For the heavens and the earth shall obey his [God’s] Messiah and all that is in them shall not turn away from the commandments of the holy ones....For he will honor the pious upon the throne of his eternal kingdom, setting prisoners free, opening the eyes of the blind, raising up

those who are bowed down [Ps. 146:7–8]...and the Lord shall do glorious things which have not been done, just as he said. For he shall heal the critically wounded, he shall revive the dead, he shall proclaim good news to the poor [Isa. 61:1].

Restoring sight to the blind, healing the wounded, raising the dead, and proclaiming the good news to the poor are the things that happen when God's Messiah appears. This is the very proof that Jesus has offered to John's messengers: "Go and tell John what you hear and see" (Matt. 11:4). Jesus was performing the very deeds of the Messiah, the deeds of the "Coming One."

What is especially remarkable about the description of the Messiah in 4Q521 are the allusions to Psalm 146. According to Psalm 146, it is God Himself who opens the eyes of the blind. Indeed, according to 4Q521, the very heavens and earth—which, according to Psalm 146, were made by God—shall obey God's Messiah. The application of these elements to the anticipated Messiah is astonishing. The Messiah envisioned in the fragment from Qumran is no mere mortal, no mere prophet or charismatic preacher. In some sense, He embodies God Himself and acts as God. Jesus' appeal to these scriptural phrases, in response to John's language of the "Coming One," suggests a similar if not identical understanding. The evangelist Matthew evidently understands the significance of Jesus' reply to John and so rightly introduces the passage with reference to the "deeds of the Messiah."

Revelation

Another passage in the Synoptic tradition that should not be overlooked is also found in Matthew 11:25–27, where Jesus utters a remarkable prayer: "I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes; yea, Father, for such was thy gracious will. All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." (RSV)

Here the Synoptic Jesus claims privileged revelation: "All things," Jesus says, "have been delivered to me by my Father." As the "Son" (which surely is short for "Son of God"), Jesus has the authority to reveal God the Father to whom He will. The claim is remarkable. The appearance of the same prayer in Luke 10:21–22 proves that it is not a Matthean creation, but rather a pre-Matthean and pre-Lukan tradition that likely reaches back to Jesus Himself.⁷ What Old Testament prophet ever uttered words like these? No popular messianic contender from the time of Jesus that we know of ever spoke this way.

To this prayer, the evangelist Matthew appends Jesus' famous invitation: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

In this extraordinary utterance, Jesus speaks as God's wisdom. The implications are profound. In Israel's ancient tradition, wisdom was sometimes understood as a personification of God Himself. Acting as God, wisdom invites people to come, listen, learn, and find rest (Prov. 8:1–21, 32–36; Wis. 9:9–11; Sir. 51:23–27: "Draw near to me....Put your neck under the yoke, and let your souls receive instruction....See with your eyes that I have labored little and found myself much rest"). Wisdom has much to offer. After all, wisdom was present with God in the very beginning, even at the moment^[OBJ] of creation (Prov. 8:23, 27; Sir. 1:1; 24:9; Wis. 9:9). Wisdom knows the very mind of God (Wis. 7:21–22, 25; cf. 1 Cor. 2:10). The disciples (lit. "learners") of Jesus would have been familiar with these ideas about God's wisdom; they would have grasped the startling implications of Jesus' words.

Messianic Hopes Fulfilled

I should briefly discuss a fourth passage from the Synoptic Gospels that Ehrman does not mention. This passage, like two of the three passages I have considered, is from the early source that Matthew and Luke drew upon (Matt. 13:16–17 = Luke 10:23–24).

Luke's version reads as follows: "Blessed are the eyes which see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it."

The language of this remarkable beatitude recalls Jewish messianic hopes expressed not long before Christ spoke it: "Blessed are those born in those days to see the good fortune of Israel which God will bring to pass....the Lord himself is our king forevermore" (*Pss. Sol.* 17:44–46; cf. 18:6–8: "Blessed are those born in those days, to see the good things of the Lord which he will do").⁸ It is noteworthy that even in the context of chapters devoted to the Messiah, the author of the *Psalms of Solomon* confesses that it is the Lord Himself who is Israel's king.

The import of Jesus' words is that being in the presence of Jesus, hearing Him and seeing His deeds, privileges the disciples in ways the prophets and kings of old longed to witness. These "prophets and kings" would include Israel's great prophets, such as Isaiah and Jeremiah, and Israel's great kings, such as David and Solomon. What did these prophets and kings long to see? They longed to see God's saving work, even the very presence of God among His people. In the coming of Jesus, these things are now seen.

Behind all of these remarkable utterances is eschatology, the moment in human history when God acts decisively. The implication is that Jesus stands at the center of this moment. In His coming, God's promised coming has been fulfilled.

In a recent and learned study, Dale Allison, Jr., professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary, assembles more than two dozen passages from the Synoptic Gospels in which Jesus speaks as though He Himself is the center of God's redemptive work. In passage after passage, from all layers of the Synoptic tradition (Mark, Matthew, Luke, Q), Jesus speaks of Himself and His mission as though it is of the greatest moment, at the very center of God's redemptive work. After his review of the evidence, Allison comments that Christians said "astounding things about Jesus, and that from the very beginning." In view of these sayings, "We should hold a funeral for the view that Jesus entertained no exalted thoughts about himself."⁹ Allison is entirely correct. To say that Jesus did not speak of Himself or said nothing that implied His divine identity and mission is to sweep aside a great deal of evidence and to engage in special pleading.

WAS JESUS BURIED?

Ehrman rightly underscores the importance of the resurrection of Jesus for His following. Without the resurrection, the movement would not have survived and no one would have spoken of Jesus in exalted terms. But Ehrman doubts very much that the resurrection actually occurred. He entertains the odd and most unlikely explanation that resurrection faith was the result of hallucinations experienced by two or three key people, such as Peter the disciple and Paul the persecutor.¹⁰ Ehrman also doubts that Jesus was buried and, if He was, he doubts the followers of Jesus knew where He was buried. Consequently, Ehrman very much doubts the story of the discovery of the empty tomb, which is recounted in all four Gospels.

Ehrman claims that "as far as we can tell from all the surviving evidence," victims of crucifixion were not buried but were left hanging on the cross to rot in the sun and be eaten by scavenging animals. He then quotes a few Roman writers who make statements to this effect.¹¹

I do not dispute that many victims of crucifixion were left unburied, but Roman law in fact *did not forbid the burial of crucifixion victims*. From the *Digesta*, a compilation of Roman law, we read in the discussion of criminal prosecution and punishment: "The bodies of those who are condemned to death should not be refused their relatives...The bodies of persons who have been punished should be given to whoever requests them for the purpose of burial" (*Digesta* 48.24.1, 3). Ehrman does not cite or discuss Roman law.

Ehrman does discuss Philo's bitter complaint against Flaccus the Roman governor of Egypt, appointed in AD 32. Philo complains of the governor's anti-Semitism, citing a number of examples. One of the examples concerns the governor's refusal to allow the burial of several Jewish men who had been crucified (Philo, *Flaccus* 83). Ehrman thinks this proves his point that the Romans did not permit burial. However, the passage implies precisely the opposite. If the Romans never permitted burial, as Ehrman thinks, then what is Philo complaining about? Philo's complaint is based on the fact that burial was permitted, but out of hatred toward the Jewish people, Flaccus did not permit the burial of these poor men.

Jewish Palestine

More to the point at hand is Roman practice *in Israel*, or at least in and around Jerusalem, the Jewish holy city. Josephus, who was born in AD 37, the year Pilate was recalled to Rome, tells us that the bodies of the crucified were buried. This is what makes the behavior of the rebels, who seized control of Jerusalem in AD 66 and killed a number of ruling priests, so unforgivable: "They [the rebels] actually went so far in their impiety as to cast out their dead bodies without burial, although the Jews are so careful about burial rites, that *even malefactors who have been sentenced to crucifixion are taken down and buried before sunset*" (Josephus, *Jewish Wars* 4.317, emphasis added). Anyone familiar with first-century Jewish Palestine would understand this passage. The Jews always properly buried the dead, including those crucified. And of course, "malefactors who have been sentenced to crucifixion" were crucified by the Romans.

Pilate most certainly permitted Jesus and the men crucified with Him to be buried. Had he not done so, he would have instigated an uprising. During peacetime, the Roman authorities respected Jewish customs, which is how they maintained the peace. This is clearly stated by Josephus (*Against Apion* 2.73, 211; *Jewish Wars* 2.220) and his older contemporary Philo (*Embassy to Gaius* 300). Unfortunately, Ehrman discusses none of these texts.¹²

Much more could be said. Bart Ehrman's book tackles a host of complicated topics, many of them clearly outside his expertise. Unfortunately, many readers for whom his popular book is intended will be misled or will draw questionable conclusions. My hope is that they will seek a second, better-informed opinion.

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NOTES

- 1 B. D. Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (New York: HarperOne, 2014).
- 2 M. F. Bird, ed., *How God Became Jesus: The Real Origins of Belief in Jesus' Divine Nature—A Response to Bart D. Ehrman* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014). The other contributors to this book are C. A. Evans, S. J. Gathercole, C. E. Hill, and C. Tilling. Perhaps it should be noted that Zondervan is owned by HarperCollins, of which HarperOne—the publisher of Ehrman's book—is an imprint. The media found the simultaneous publication of these opposing books intriguing.
- 3 Although I do not agree with Ehrman that the explicit and rather exalted Christology expressed in the Gospel of John cannot be traced to the historical Jesus, I make no appeal to this work in the present study, because its genre and relationship to history as such are much disputed. Therefore, I shall limit my discussion to the Synoptic Gospels.
- 4 The passage is widely regarded as historical because it is difficult to explain why an inauthentic tradition, in which the highly revered John expresses doubts about Jesus' special identity, would gain approval and currency early enough to become part of the dominical tradition that predates both Matthew and Luke (i.e., in the early source that scholars call Q).
- 5 As Isaiah says, "Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him" (Isa. 40:10; cf. Ps. 50:3: "Our God comes, he does not keep silence"). It should also be noted that Isaiah's prophecy of the Lord's coming follows immediately after the announcement of the "good news," or gospel, proclaimed in Isa. 40:9. The good news, which Jesus proclaims (Mark 1:14–15), entails the very presence of God.
- 6 For further discussion of the importance of Isa. 35:4–6 for understanding Jesus' words, see G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 80–83.
- 7 Matthew 11:25–27 = Luke 10:21–22 is another passage from the old collection of Jesus' teachings that scholars call Q.
- 8 Most date the pseudepigraphal Psalms of Solomon to the middle of the first century BC.
- 9 D. C. Allison, Jr., *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 304. For Allison's review of the Synoptic evidence that suggests that Jesus held to a very high self-understanding, see pp. 225–32. Unfortunately, Ehrman does not engage this book.
- 10 Ehrman relies on G. Ludemann, *The Resurrection of Christ: A Historical Inquiry* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2004). The psychological underpinnings for this theory are virtually nonexistent.
- 11 See Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God*, 157–58. I quote from p. 157. Among others, Ehrman cites Horace, *Epistles* 1.16.46–48 and Juvenal, *Satires* 14.77–78.
- 12 For further discussion of these and additional texts, see C. A. Evans, "Getting the Burial Traditions and Evidences Right," in Bird (ed.), *How God Became Jesus*, 71–93, 217–33.