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HOW JESUS BECAME GOD: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee By Bart Ehrman

John Genter

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, ir_GenterJ@csl.edu

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HOW JESUS BECAME GOD: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee. By Bart D. Ehrman. New York: HarperOne, 2014. 404 pages. Hardcover. \$27.99.

Bart Ehrman's scholarly program is well known. His popular books rarely lack a provocative title. Over the previous decades he has championed a view of the historical Jesus as a "pure and simple human," an apocalyptic preacher and would-be messiah. Jesus's life and sayings were passed on through an unruly game of telephone until anonymous evangelists finally put the thoroughly embellished tales into writings, the manuscript copies of which were themselves further embellished and corrupted by willful and stupid scribes. In this highly skeptical context, the real surprise in his latest book, *How Jesus Became God*, is not what Ehrman denies but what he is compelled to affirm.

In the earliest years, perhaps the earliest months, some followers of Jesus believed he had not only been raised from the dead but exalted to a place of unprecedented authority and power. More compelling still, already in these earliest circles Jesus was included in the worship of the God of Israel by first-century Jewish monotheists.

Unfortunately, the full force of these findings does not come through. In the midst of the myriad of Jewish professions that there is one Creator and Sovereign who is worthy of worship, the early extension of cultic devotion to Jesus is downright shocking. However, set in the context of Ehrman's opening

religion the impression is quite different.

The Creator-Creature distinction receives mention, is scrutinized, and finally connects earthen feet and God's throne in one great continuum.

The issue here is not that Ehrman was wrong to catalog Jewish parallels with apotheosis and the exaltation of great men in the Greco-Roman world. These are well-known aspects of the ongoing debate about how properly to characterize first-century Jewish monotheism. The key is to avoid letting the analogies steamroll the critical differences. This is what goes wrong in the opening chapters of *How Jesus Became God*. More attention is due to the actual religious life of the relevant practitioners in everyday life. The Greco-Roman world of this period was littered with altars, rites, prayers and invocations to many or most of the pagan examples offered by Ehrman. However, we would be hard pressed to find a single uncontroversial example of a religious cult being offered

to anyone but YHWH in Jewish space by Jewish people who still claimed to be Jews. This says something, or at least it ought to.

Ehrman argues that we see two basic Christologies operative in the earliest years: *incarnation* and *exaltation*. Though these complement one another and appear together (Phil 2:6–11), in our earliest texts (Paul) and in our latest texts (John), Ehrman argues that they began as distinct models and that exaltation Christology in an adoptionist mode came first.

Four texts are put forward to make this case: Romans 1:3–4 (taken as an early creed to which Paul added the words “in power”), Acts 2:36; 5:31; and 13:32–33. His treatment bumps into three important issues: First, finding hypothetical evidence for exaltation Christology is not the same thing as finding evidence for *mere* exaltation Christology. Second, Ehrman’s interpretation of these nuggets of early tradition implies that Paul and Luke used christological confessions which, by his own assessment, they did not believe to be true. Third, all three Acts passages come from speeches, which Ehrman has asserted were freely composed by Luke. How do we account for a sudden switch from free composition to stunning scrupulousness in preserving early tradition with which Luke disagreed?

Of course, Paul is our earliest documented witness and for Paul exaltation and incarnation Christologies do not merely fit together, they *belong* together. Ehrman recognizes this and seeks a way to fit Paul into his overarching thesis as a deviation from the “earliest” Christology. It works like this: From exaltation and glorification it was a small step to think-

ing the earthly Jesus had become an angel. From there it would have been natural for some to conclude: Once an angel, always an angel.

He is on unstable ground here. First, the case for the actual angelification of human figures in the non-canonical literature is still debated. Furthermore, when it comes to explicit evidence, Ehrman’s case hangs very tenuously from his interpretation of the single verse where Paul purportedly refers to Jesus as an angel: “Though my condition was a trial to you, you . . . received me as an *angel* of God, as Christ Jesus” (Gal 4:14). Beyond the exegetical issues involved, Paul’s theology speaks against Ehrman’s reading. The worship of created things (exalted angels included) is dehumanizing—the very essence of idolatry (Rom 1:25). When Paul does explicitly relate Jesus to God, he does so by leaning heavily on biblical texts that affirm the absolute uniqueness of God (1 Cor 8:6; Dt 6:4) and on characteristically Jewish ways of talking about distinctions *within* the unity of the one, sovereign, Creator God; that is, on God’s Wisdom and God’s Word.

These considerations should have factored more prominently when Ehrman turned for supporting evidence to the Christ poem of Philippians 2:6–11. On his reading Jesus began as an angel who refused to grasp for something that was not his (equality with God) and who, having humbled himself to incarnation and death, was exalted by God to an equal status. One mind-boggling difficulty here is that this passage is intentionally modeled on Isaiah 45:22–23, one of those most stridently monotheistic professions of the book of Isaiah and exactly the wrong text to use to exult

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in the deification of a created being who receives God's eschatological due. Ehrman acknowledges this problem but sees the contradiction as residing in the mind of the composer rather than where it is actually lodged, at the heart of his own interpretation.

There are certainly other issues with *How Jesus Became God*, beginning with the title. Does it get us to a fully adequate answer to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" No. But maybe the silver lining here is that Christological questions—perhaps even the paramount one just mentioned—will be stirred up in popular consciousness. And as much as there is to disagree with in Bart Ehrman's latest publication, we can at least treat it as a starting point when the skeptic or seeker comes, book in hand. When it comes to Christology, on this we can agree: very high, very early.

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