"Who Do You Say That I Am?"

by John Pester and Mitchell Kennard

Two books of popular and scholarly interest have recently been published that are pertinent to the focus of this issue of *Affirmation & Critique*, on the first Epistle of John. The two books, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* by Bart D. Ehrman and *How God Became Jesus: The Real Origins of Belief in Jesus' Divine Nature* by Michael F. Bird, Craig A. Evans, Simon J. Gathercole, Charles E. Hill, and Chris Tilling, focus on the historical record related to the church's understanding of the divinity of Jesus. The former book claims that Jesus, as a mere man, was elevated to His current status as God largely through the fabricated writings of overzealous followers in the first three centuries following Jesus' death. The latter book is an extended response to Ehrman's arguments. The former book is written in the spirit of antichrist, as spoken of by the apostle John, because it denies, and even glories in the denial, that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh (1 John 4:2-3). In contrast, the latter book is a faithful response to Ehrman's biased biblical exegesis and historical analysis that disguise a pernicious effort to spread his agnosticism. Both books are relevant because of their capacity to influence the minds of genuine believers, who must have an answer to the question asked by Christ: "Who do men say that the Son of Man is?" (Matt. 16:13). The following essay-length reviews speak of the concern on the part of the editors that these answers not be influenced by the wisdom of speech according to the wisdom of the world (1 Cor. 1:17, 20-21) but be rooted in the Scriptures and in our experience of faith.

Interpreting History in the Spirit of Antichrist

How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee, by Bart D. Ehrman. New York: HarperOne, 2014. Print.

Embedded within Bart D. Ehrman's *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (hereafter *How*), which purports to be a historical analysis of the development of the Christian claim that Jesus is God manifested in the flesh, there is a thinly disguised theological attack on the person of Christ in the spirit of antichrist. While Ehrman's analysis purports to conform to "rigorous historical methods" (93), *How*'s historical conclusions are rooted in theological presuppositions that are intended to cast doubt on the church's confession that God became a man in the person of Jesus Christ. Ehrman poses his challenge to the church's confession by sifting historical "facts" from historical "embellishments" (93, 127) and subsequently declaring, based on his determination that certain sayings are more "authentic" than others, that Jesus was a mere man (107, 119), an itinerant Jewish preacher from Galilee, who preached only an apocalyptic message concerning the imminent appearance of the kingdom of God. Ehrman's sustained effort throughout *How* to promulgate this limited characterization of the life of Jesus is equally matched by his efforts to demonstrate that overzealous followers of Jesus elevated the man Jesus to the status of God through their

inclusion of fabricated sayings and stories in the synoptic Gospels. Ruing the success of Jesus' followers in their historic makeover of the person of Christ and being an overzealous adherent of his own agnosticism, Ehrman finds facts where they do not exist and then posits twisted interpretations of them. In most cases, however, he begins with a twisted interpretation and then discovers historical facts to substantiate it. Ehrman implies that his historical analysis has informed his agnosticism because after nearly three decades of historical investigation he is no longer a believer. Nonetheless, he is still a "believer," and his belief in his unbelief ironically informs his ongoing historical analysis.

Since Ehrman claims that he is no longer a believer (2), any arguments in response to *How*'s thesis that appeal to faith will fall on deaf ears, and those who accept Ehrman's conclusions could simply dismiss a faith-based response as the further ravings of yet another overzealous and deluded follower. Consequently, the following review does not rely upon or advance the common response of many believers to theological challenges: "I believe because the Bible tells me so." This is not to say that such a response is not a laudable and safe response for a believer, because in the end all "belief" is impacted by faith. Believing that Jesus is God manifested in the flesh is a faith response to spiritual experiences, and believing that Jesus was only an itinerant Jewish preacher from Galilee is a faith response to human logic that can be twisted and often is twisted when considered through only a prism of variable human wisdom. Even though the Bible is not needed to rebut the arguments presented in *How,* the text of the Bible will be referenced in this review, especially when there is a credible alternative textual interpretation of a passage cited by Ehrman. The presentation of these alternative interpretations, however, will be relegated to various footnotes and are made available for the sake of believers who may be troubled by his arguments. In contrast, those who accept *How*'s thesis can simply skip these footnotes, as they are not necessary to show that the wisdom of the world is not all that wise. These footnotes are included because *How* was written to influence a popular Christian audience, not a scholarly audience. It was written with the intention of re-creating the doubt that is in his mind within the minds of simple believers, undermining their faith with words that have an effect akin to gangrene, poisoning the believing heart and shutting the confessing mouth. Lengthy citations from *How* also are included in this review in order to be as fair as possible in presenting Ehrman's arguments, but this hopefully will also provide a clearer picture of Ehrman's rhetorical skills in his efforts to undermine faith.

Believing that Jesus is God manifested in the flesh is a faith response to spiritual experiences, and believing that Jesus was only an itinerant Jewish preacher from Galilee is a faith response to human logic.

Throughout *How,* Ehrman asserts that his efforts to chronicle the efforts that elevated an itinerant preacher to the status of God are based solely on the use of rigorous historical methods, and he even incredulously states that he is not taking "a stand on the theological question of Jesus's divine status" (3). Thus, even though he thinks that he has theologically distanced himself from the question of whether Jesus is God, he nevertheless endeavors to discredit the theological answer to this question by focusing on the historicity of the claim. Ehrman's claim that he is only employing a rigorous historical methodology and that his theology does not inform his historical conclusions reveals a simplistic faith in human methods and a simplistic denial of the theological motivations that imbue his mind.

In order to discredit the historical claim that Jesus is God, Ehrman engages in textual criticism in order to scrutinize passages that must be invalidated as being historically accurate sayings of Jesus, because they would not fit into his narrative of apostolic fabrication if they were acknowledged as authentic sayings of Jesus. He also selectively employs techniques associated with textual criticism to validate passages that he thinks support his argument that Jesus was, even in His own eyes, less than His followers claimed Him to be when they put words on His lips after His death (109). The historical methods that Ehrman relies on are not epistemologically rigorous, and his selective application of them to the biblical text is based on his biases. Thus, throughout the nine

chapters of *How* in general, but in the first five in particular, Ehrman weaves a speculative argument based on faulty historical analysis that is then used to buttress predetermined conclusions based on his agnostic belief that Jesus is not God. He errs in his analysis, and he errs in his conclusions because he naively believes that his selective validation of a historical saying of Jesus equally validates his selective interpretation of the saying.

In his introduction Ehrman presents his thesis, describes his motivation, and details his methodological perspective. Chapters 1 and 2 present accounts from Greco-Roman and Jewish history in which divine beings became humans and in which human were elevated to some form of divine status. Chapter 3 examines the question of whether Jesus ever viewed Himself as God or even asserted that He was God. The conclusions drawn from this examination are derived from Ehrman's reliance upon his application of methods associated with textual criticism. Chapters 4 and 5 present arguments against the historical feasibility of some of the details contained in the resurrection narratives in the Gospels, because Ehrman recognizes the impact that the resurrection had on the views of the early disciples that Jesus was, in fact, God. Chapters 6 through 9 contain a brief overview of the Christological controversies that were present in the early church, including views that questioned the divine status of Jesus in some fashion or another but which were ultimately swept aside at the Council of Nicaea.

EHRMAN ERRS IN HIS CONCLUSIONS BECAUSE HE NAIVELY BELIEVES THAT HIS SELECTIVE VALIDATION OF A HISTORICAL SAYING OF JESUS EQUALLY VALIDATES HIS SELECTIVE INTERPRETATION OF THE SAYING.

The Introduction

The general focus of *How* is forthrightly and summarily stated at the very beginning of the Introduction:

> Jesus was a lower-class Jewish preacher from the backwaters of rural Galilee who was condemned for illegal activities and crucified for crimes against the state. Yet not long after his death, his followers were claiming that he was a divine being. Eventually they went even further, declaring that he was none other than God, Lord of heaven and earth. And so the question: How did a crucified peasant come to be thought of as the Lord who created all things? How did Jesus become God? (1)

In this statement there is no denial that Jesus was a genuine historical figure, but there is an assertion that He was nothing more than a preacher who was ultimately crucified like any common criminal. There is also an assertion that this "lower-class Jewish preacher" somehow gained a higher status in the minds of His followers, even to the point of eventually being confessed as God. Within this implied trajectory of belief—from lower-class Jew to God—two thoughts are planted in the minds of readers. First, there is an implication that among His early followers there was little thought that Jesus was anything more than an itinerant preacher. Second, there is an implication that this crucified peasant came to be God in the thoughts of early Christians only with the passage of time and through a rewriting of history on the part of His early followers. While these points are only implied at first, *How* becomes bolder and more explicit in its advancement of this thesis (93, 96, 109, 118, 154, 192).

After presenting the book's thesis, Ehrman describes his motivation. He states, "In middle age I am no longer a believer. Instead, I am a historian of early Christianity, who for nearly three decades has studied the New Testament and the rise of the Christian religion from a historical perspective" (2). Ehrman's confession of his current state of mind seems like a humble, even forthright, admission; it is an admission that draws empathetic responses from believers (171). Throughout *How,* Ehrman recounts experiences from when he was a believer (85-87, 323), and although he declares that he is no longer a believer, it is unclear whether he has any belief in a God, that is, whether he now regards himself as an atheist or just an agnostic.

I assume the latter because there are no explicit statements in *How* in which he denies the existence of God. Ehrman's humble confession, however, is coupled with a boastful declaration of his status as a "historian" who has studied the New Testament for nearly three decades. These two claims cannot be separated in the minds of his readers. By implication, Ehrman has uncovered in his three decades of study historical facts that have convinced him that Jesus is not God. And also by implication, he will present these facts in order to show readers that their beliefs are as equally misplaced as his once were. He also puts forth an obstacle for those who would challenge his conclusions—nearly three decades of experience as a historian. Thus, unless another's credentials match his own, there is little ground in his mind as to whose views should be privileged.

Even though Ehrman takes a strong stance as a historian, he fails to recognize the bane of all historical analysis—an obliviousness to personal bias. He assumes that as an unbeliever, he has been freed from the biased fetters of faith to be an honest adjudicator of theological controversies, but he fails to recognize that he has only substituted the biases of an unbeliever for the biases of a believer. If Ehrman truly no longer believes, then he is epistemologically incapable of arriving at any historical conclusion that would undermine the advancement of his "historical" belief that Jesus was only a man, who was reified as God through the deification narratives of His followers. Ehrman's stance as a nonbeliever undermines his stance as an "unbiased" historian because he is incapable of conceding the possibility that there are theological explanations that could contradict his historical analysis. Thus, his historical conclusions are predetermined because he can no longer accept any explanations that could challenge his bias against the claim that God has been manifested in the flesh.

EHRMAN'S STANCE AS A NONBELIEVER UNDERMINES HIS STANCE AS AN "UNBIASED" HISTORIAN BECAUSE HE IS INCAPABLE OF CONCEDING THE POSSIBILITY THAT THERE ARE THEOLOGICAL EXPLANATIONS THAT COULD CONTRADICT HIS HISTORICAL ANALYSIS.

Consequently, Ehrman attempts to deflect the epistemological certainty of his perspectival bias by suggesting that he is not taking a stand on the theological claim of Jesus' divine status and, instead, that he is only interested in the historical development of the question of how people came to view Him as God. In the end, however, he desires to convert readers to his theological views, based on his historical analysis.

> I do not take a stand on the theological question of Jesus's divine status. I am instead interested in the historical development that led to the affirmation that he is God. This historical development certainly transpired in one way or another, and what people personally believe about Christ should not, in theory, affect the conclusions they draw historically. (3)

In the above statement there is a subtle shift from the first-person perspective, *I*, to a third-person plural referent, *people*. The use of the first-person pronoun enables Ehrman to project a posture of analytical neutrality for himself, but his use of the plural referent enables him to distance himself from the epistemological reality that both belief and unbelief equally inform one's thoughts and conclusions. He would have been more honest to have continued to use the first-person pronoun: "and what *I* personally believe about Christ should not, in theory, affect the conclusions *I* draw historically." But he cannot say this, because he knows that a lack of bias can exist only in theory, and he cannot acknowledge that his biases are embedded in his work. And so he ascribes the historiographical tendency toward bias to nameless "people." As a historian, Ehrman should know and acknowledge this, but as a theologian who is, in fact, taking a stand on Jesus' divine status, he cannot. As a historian, he thinks that he has the capacity to suppress his unbelieving biases to engage in unbiased historical research. As a human being, he does not have this capacity. *How* purports to be a book based purely on historical analysis, but it is impossible to distance the historical analysis of a historian from the history of the historian—the analysis of a historian is influenced by and emerges from the history of the historian, including the historian's responses to his/her broader cultural context and his/her responses to personal experiences.

Because Ehrman fails to acknowledge the inherent presence of a subjective bias, he erroneously assumes that his validation of a historical fact also validates the interpretation of the fact that he subsequently attaches to the fact. This tendency is seen throughout *How*. Ehrman "proves" a fact to the satisfaction of his own mind, attaches an interpretation to this fact, and then advances both as being equally factual. For example, even though his most basic statement concerning Jesus' ministry, that is, that He spoke an apocalyptic message involving the coming of the kingdom, is supported by sayings that Ehrman regards as authentic, this does not mean that Jesus was alluding to the restoration of the kingdom to Israel to replace the oppressiveness of the Roman regime.[1] Ehrman's tendency to think that he has validated his interpretations of facts simply because they are based on facts is a significant blind spot for a historian who has been at his craft for nearly three decades, but it is displayed throughout *How*. Readers will fall into a trap if they unwittingly accept the notion that facts validate interpretations, when facts only open the door to interpretations; that is, readers may fall into a trap of disagreeing with a fact if they disagree with Ehrman's interpretation of that fact. It is possible, however, to affirm a fact but disagree with an interpretation of a fact.[2] Ironically, many of the historical facts that Ehrman thinks are new and dispositive in advancing his thesis are acknowledged in the New Testament, but different conclusions can be drawn from them. This is seen in Ehrman's treatment of deification accounts in Greco-Roman culture and ancient Judaism.

EHRMAN'S TENDENCY TO THINK THAT HE HAS VALIDATED HIS INTERPRETATIONS OF FACTS SIMPLY BECAUSE THEY ARE BASED ON FACTS IS A SIGNIFICANT BLIND SPOT FOR A HISTORIAN WHO HAS BEEN AT HIS CRAFT FOR NEARLY THREE DECADES.

Chapters 1 and 2

Ehrman lays the foundation for his historical analysis of Jesus' life and ministry in chapters 1 and 2, "Divine Humans in Ancient Greece and Rome" and "Divine Humans in Ancient Judaism," by presenting a historical account of a "highly unusual man who was born in the first century in a remote part of the Roman empire, whose life was described by his later followers as altogether miraculous" (11), whose birth was heralded to his mother by an angel from heaven, which was "accompanied by unusual divine signs in the heavens," who engaged in an "itinerant preaching ministry," who "did miracles," who was "put on trial," and who "ascended to heaven and continues to live there till this day" (12). After listing these obvious connections to the life of Jesus, Ehrman reveals that he is really talking about "a man named Apollonius," whose life was documented in this manner by "his later devotee Philostratus" (12). Ehrman begins chapter 1 in this way in order to show that there are many accounts in antiquity of human beings who were elevated to some form of divine status. By implication, there is also a suggestion that the account of Jesus is not particularly significant or unique. Although the account of Apollonius may have some probative value in understanding the religious ideas that were then in vogue in Greco-Roman culture, it says nothing about the historicity of the life and ministry of Jesus. At the most, it shows that an account similar to the account of the life of Jesus arose in a different cultural context.[3] The specific account of Apollonius is included in *How* in order to begin to cast a shadow of doubt upon the uniqueness of the details of Jesus' life. Ehrman says,

> Even though Jesus may be the only miracle-working Son of God that people know about today, there were lots of people like this in the ancient world. We should not think of Jesus as "unique," if by that term we mean that he was the only one "like that"—that is, a human who was far above and very different from the rest of us mere mortals, a man who was also in some sense divine. There were numerous divine humans in antiquity. (17)

How apparently assumes that the similarities of these accounts should spur a reader to question the veracity of the details included in the accounts of Jesus, but there is nothing troubling about this historical similarity. In fact, it would be foolish to think that throughout human history there would not be many accounts of

people who were regarded by their followers as divine, because this is a natural human tendency.[4] In regard to the specific account of Apollonius, it is even easier to see how Philostratus's account could mirror the accounts written by the followers of Jesus, given the fact that the Gospels preceded Philostratus's account by more than a century and a half (220 or 230 C.E.) (12), and were certainly in circulation in the Mediterranean world at the time of Philostratus's writing. Given the historical timeline related to the writing of these two divine-human accounts, an easy argument could be made that there was a plagiarism of ideas on the part of Philostratus, not the chronicling of an independently observed life. And would not some form of plagiarism be necessary in order to create an account that would at least equal the account of Jesus in terms of its divine portents? Rather than considering this simple possibility, Ehrman, however, sees only a pattern of embellishment in the writing of both accounts:

> Scholars have had to investigate the Gospels of the New Testament with a critical eye to determine which stories, and which parts of stories, are historically accurate with respect to the historical Jesus, and which represent later embellishments by his devoted followers. In a similar way, scholars of ancient Roman religion have had to analyze the writings of Philostratus with a keen sense of skepticism in order to weed through the later legendary accretions to uncover what we can say about the historical Apollonius. (13)

EHRMAN ASSUMES THAT A GRECO-ROMAN ACCOUNT OF A HUMAN WHO CAME TO BE VIEWED AS DIVINE THROUGH THE EMBELLISHMENTS OF A DEVOTEE IS PROOF THAT EVERY SUCH ACCOUNT MUST INVOLVE A SIMILAR PROCESS OF EMBELLISHMENT.

How uses the existence of these apparently similar accounts to suggest that similar processes of embellishment must have been operative in the writings of both the disciples and Philostratus so that it can subsequently scrutinize the New Testament text in great detail for "embellishments." Ehrman assumes that a Greco-Roman account of a human who came to be viewed as divine through the embellishments of a devotee is proof that every such account must involve a similar process of embellishment. Given his self-proclaimed status as an unbeliever, this is the only argument that he can advance. As an unbeliever, he can never argue that one account is implausible due to embellishment, while another account may be true. It is an analytical shortcoming to assume that there must be a similar tendency for embellishment simply because there is a similarity of accounts.

"A keen sense of skepticism" on the part of "scholars" in regard to the authenticity of ancient sources, when combined with unbelief, can produce historical conclusions that are based only on unbelief rather than on the honest application of a distanced skepticism. This is not to say that unbelief cannot be a consequence of honestly evaluated skepticism, but that skepticism is always a consequence of honestly acknowledged unbelief. Thus, even though "we can," as Ehrman argues, "see a variety of ways in the ancient world that divine beings could be thought to be human and that humans could be thought to be divine" (38), this does not mean that his confident appeal to "a keen sense of skepticism" is anything more than a scholarly conceit used to mask the bias inherent in an epistemological stance grounded in unbelief.

According to *How,* in the Greek and Roman world, "there were lots of gods, and they were on graded levels of divinity" (39). Granted. And "in this ancient way of thinking, both humanity and divinity are on a vertical continuum, and these two continuums sometimes meet at the high end of one and the low end of the other" (39). Granted. Ehrman's purpose for introducing the fact that there were levels of divinity in ancient cultures, however, is to lay the predicate for placing the initial accounts of Jesus' divinity at the lower levels of a New Testament continuum so that he can subsequently argue that Jesus was progressively elevated to the loftiest level, the level of God Almighty Himself, through fabrication and embellishment:

> When we talk about earliest Christianity and we ask the question, "Did Christians think of Jesus as God?," we need to rephrase the question slightly, so that we ask, "In what *sense*

did Christians think of Jesus as God?" If the divine realm is a continuum rather than an absolute, a graduated pyramid rather than a single point, then it is the *sense* in which Jesus is God that is the main issue at the outset.

It will become clear in the following chapters that Jesus was not originally considered to be God in any sense at all, and that he eventually became divine for his followers in some sense before he came to the thought of as equal with God Almighty in an absolute sense. But the point I stress is that this was, in fact, a development. (44)

The prominence that *How* gives to the argument that there was a development in the Christian perception of how Jesus was viewed suggests that Ehrman regards this as a groundbreaking argument; it is not.[5] The only thing that is novel related to the fact that there was an unfolding understanding of the person of Christ among His followers is Ehrman's interpretation that this development was the product of willful embellishment over time. Although this interpretation is novel, it is not surprising, because this is the only kind of explanation that could be advanced by an unbeliever.

Having demonstrated that there was a continuum of divinity in the Greco-Roman culture, *How* proceeds in chapter 2 to attempt to show that there was a similar continuum of divinity within ancient Judaism:

> But even as they believed that there was only one God Almighty, it was widely believed that there were other divine beings—angels, cherubim, seraphim, principalities, powers, hypostases. Moreover, there was some sense of continuity—not only discontinuity—between the divine and human realms. And there was a kind of spectrum of divinity: the Angel of the Lord, already in scripture, could be both an angel and God. Angels were divine, and could be worshiped, but they could also come in human guise. Humans could become angels. Humans could be called the Son of God or even God. This did not mean that they were the One God who created heaven and earth; but it did mean that they could share some of the authority, status, and power of that One God. (83)

How embarks on this task in order to show that in Jewish thought and Scriptures there was not an "unbridgeable chasm" between God and man, a view that he ascribes to most Christians today (3-4).[6] Ehrman thinks that by demonstrating the presence of such a continuum in Jewish thought, Jesus' followers must have initially attributed some sort of divine status to Christ while not actually regarding Him as the one God referenced in Deuteronomy 6:4.

> It seems strange to many people today that Christ could be a divine being yet not be fully equal with God. But it is important to remember what we found in Chapter 1. Our notion that there is an inseparable chasm between the divine and human realms, and that the divine realm has only one level or layer to it, is not the view held among Greeks, Romans, and Jews in the ancient world—or by Christians. (264)

At the starting point of the continuum that begins with divinity, Ehrman finds God; the angel of the Lord as God and human (55-57); other angelic beings who are called gods in Psalm 82 (57-59); humans who became angels according to the Jewish pseudepigraphic texts of 2 Baruch and 2 Enoch (59-61); the Nephilim in Genesis 6, who begot semi-divine beings (62-64); other nonhuman divine figures, such as the Son of Man in Daniel 7:13 (64-67); and even other divine powers and hypostases, such as wisdom and the word (67-75). At the starting point of the continuum that begins with humanity, Ehrman also finds humans who became in some sense divine, including the king of Israel as in 2 Samuel 7 and Isaiah 9:6-7 (76-80), and Moses in Exodus 4:16 (80-82). Most Christians know that besides God and man there are other heavenly beings, notably angels, who are higher than man but lower than God, and in this sense alone there is a continuum. But even granting this, Ehrman never

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shows that Christ was elevated by His followers according to the trajectory of this continuum. He merely assumes that it must have occurred this way because there were notions in both the Greco-Roman world and Jewish culture that a person could be elevated in such a way.

Ehrman finds himself on shaky analytical ground in this chapter, however, because he needs to show the existence of such a continuum by referencing the Old Testament in general and some specific verses in particular. In each of these instances, the verses become a "proof" of his continuum model only because of his interpretation of them. But for every one of his interpretations, there is an equally plausible, and often more balanced, interpretation. One example should suffice to show that his interpretations are limited and even biased by his professed standing as an unbeliever—the example of the king of Israel becoming divine: "Just as within pagan circles the emperor was thought to be both the son of God and, in some sense, himself god, so too in ancient Judaism the king of Israel was considered both the Son of God and—astonishingly enough—even God" (76).

If Ehrman can persuade his readers that Jesus Himself did not think that He was God, then the claims presented by His followers in the Gospels or even in the entire New Testament would be vitiated.

Ehrman supports his view that there was a thought in ancient Judaism that the king of Israel could become divine by quoting Psalm 45:6-7 from the New Revised Standard Version: "Your throne, O God, endures forever and ever. / Your royal scepter is a scepter of equity; / You love righteousness and hate wickedness. / Therefore God, your God, has anointed you / With the oil of gladness beyond your companions," and by quoting Isaiah 9:6: "For a child has been born for us, / A son given to us; / Authority rests upon his shoulders; / And he is named / Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, / Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (79). Rather than saying that these verses support his contention, it would be more accurate to say that his interpretations of these verses support his contention.

While both of these portions have been widely read by Christians throughout church history as references to Christ, Ehrman's interpretation associates these utterances only with the king of Israel in order to prove that the king of Israel was somehow regarded as divine. Ehrman may be able to justify his omission of any consideration of Christ in his interpretation of Isaiah 9:6, because there is no direct New Testament reference to this verse, but he cannot justify his failure to consider Christ in his interpretation of Psalm 45:6-7, because these verses are directly cited in relation to Christ being the exalted King in Hebrews 1:8-9.[7]

The ultimate aim of Ehrman's argument that it was not uncommon in ancient Judaism for mere humans to be thought of as becoming divine in "some sense," but not as God Himself, is to show that the disciples, as culturally bound Jews, must have had a similar view about Jesus. Going even further, Ehrman then engages the issue of whether or not Jesus, also as a culturally bound Jew, had a similar view concerning Himself. This engagement occurs in chapter 3.

Chapter 3

In many respects, chapter 3, "Did Jesus Think He Was God?" is the most critical chapter in *How* because if Ehrman can persuade his readers that Jesus Himself did not think that He was God, then the claims presented by His followers in the Gospels or even in the entire New Testament would be vitiated. After all, if the One who was proclaimed as God actually made no such claims about Himself, then whose word should be given more credence in the mind of a reader—the words of Jesus or the words of His devotees? Consequently, in order to show that there is a tension between the words of the disciples and the words of Jesus, Ehrman has to construct his own "red-letter" edition of the sayings of Jesus, categorizing some as authentic and others as being of doubtful historical veracity. While it should come as no surprise that an unbeliever would

conclude that the only authentic sayings of Jesus would be those that appear to support his position that Jesus did not think He was God, Ehrman still attempts to disguise his predilections in this regard under the thin veneer of textual criticism. Consequently, he presents three criteria for evaluating biblical texts in order to determine a higher or lower level of probability that Jesus actually said the words attributed to Him. Even though Ehrman regards these three criteria—the criterion of independent attestation, the criterion of dissimilarity, and the criterion of contextual credibility—as standards for rigorous historical investigation, he fails to see the epistemological weaknesses in each and in his selective application of these criteria to selected verses in order to support his predetermined conclusions. In the introduction Ehrman summarizes his aim in chapter 3:

> My focus is on the question of whether Jesus talked about himself as God. It is a difficult question to answer, in no small measure because of the sources of information at our disposal for knowing anything at all about the life and teachings of Jesus. And so I begin the chapter by discussing the problems that our surviving sources—especially the Gospels of the New Testament—pose for us when we want to know historically what happened during Jesus's ministry. (6)

In order to know what happened historically during Jesus' ministry, *How* begins by touting the importance of ancient sources: "If we want to know about any figure from the past, we need to have sources of information…What we want, if we want historically reliable accounts, are sources that can be traced back to Jesus's own time. We want ancient sources" (88-89). By "ancient sources," Ehrman means written texts, and *How* even acknowledges that some of the "earliest sources of information about the historical Jesus are the Gospels of the New Testament" and that "these are our best sources" (89-90). Nevertheless, Ehrman argues that the existence of written texts is not enough to assume a prima facie case for the authenticity of the content, because these texts were derived from oral accounts, which are historically unreliable:

> Oral cultures historically have seen no problem with altering accounts as they were told and retold.

> So of course there are discrepancies, embellishments, made-up stories, and historical problems in the Gospels. And this means that they cannot be taken at face value as giving us historically accurate accounts of what really happened. Does this mean that the Gospels are useless as historical sources? No, it means that we need to have rigorous historical methods to help us examine books that were written for *one* purpose—to proclaim the "good news" of Jesus—to achieve a *different* purpose: to know what Jesus really said and did. (93)

Since there are embellishments associated with the oral transmission of words, not all texts can be assumed to be accurate, and so Ehrman introduces his readers to the scholarly realm of textual criticism, a realm so seemingly rarified that he "can give only a brief summary of the methods that New Testament scholars have devised for dealing with sources of this kind" (94). This works to Ehrman's advantage because he can use the brevity of his comments to laud the ability of textual criticism, as a rigorous historical method, to discern the true sayings of Jesus but also use his brief comments to gloss over the fact that there are ongoing scholarly discussions and disagreements concerning the limitations inherent in this method. Apparently, there is no space in a work that exceeds four hundred pages for even a brief and passing statement in this regard.

The historical methods employed in textual criticism are predicated upon the presumed existence of even more ancient sources—compilations of true sayings of Jesus—that were in circulation prior to the writing of the Gospels. The existence of

THE HISTORICAL METHODS EMPLOYED IN TEXTUAL CRITICISM ARE PREDICATED UPON THE PRESUMED EXISTENCE OF EVEN MORE ANCIENT COMPILATIONS OF TRUE SAYINGS OF JESUS THAT WERE IN CIRCULATION PRIOR TO THE WRITING OF THE GOSPELS.

these earlier sources is postulated by New Testament scholars, given both the similarity of content in the synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke and the presence of "stories not found in any of the other Gospels" (95).

> The word *synoptic* means "seen together": these three can be placed in parallel columns on the same page and be seen together, because they tell so many of the same stories, usually in the same sequence and often in the same words. This is certainly because the authors were copying each other, or rather—as scholars are almost universally convinced—because two of them, Matthew and Luke, copied the earlier Mark. That is where Matthew and Luke got a lot of their stories. But they share other passages not found in Mark. Most of these other passages are sayings of Jesus. Since the nineteenth century, scholars have mounted formidable arguments that this is because Matthew and Luke had another source available to them that provided them with these non-Markan passages. Since this other source was mainly made up of sayings, these (German) scholars called it the *Sayings Source*. The word for *source* in German is *Quelle*, and so scholars today speak about "Q"—the lost source that provided Matthew and Luke with much of their sayings material. (94-95)

In addition to Q, textual critics of the New Testament also speak of M and L, that is, compilations of sayings unique to Matthew and Luke: "And so among our Gospels we have not only Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John (and, say, the Gospels of Thomas and Peter); we also can isolate Q, M, and L. These three were probably independent of each other and independent of Mark, and John was independent of all of them" (95).

IT WOULD HAVE BEEN ACADEMICALLY HONEST OF EHRMAN TO AT LEAST HAVE MENTIONED THAT THERE IS NO EXTANT COPY OF Q, M, OR L. THERE IS ONLY A SUPPOSITION THAT THESE TEXTS WERE IN EXISTENCE AT SOME TIME IN THE PERIOD BEFORE THE WRITING OF THE GOSPELS.

In Ehrman's "brief summary," it would have been academically honest of him to at least have mentioned that there is actually no extant copy of Q, M, or L. There is only a supposition that these texts were in existence at some time in the period before the writing of the Gospels. Given that there is no extant copy to review, there is not even uniformity of agreement among New Testament scholars as to what verses in the Gospels were originally part of these sources. But Ehrman, throughout the remainder of the chapter, speaks of Q, M, and L as if they are actual texts that can be viewed and studied in a museum of biblical antiquities. He even uses shorthand bibliographic references for verses that he thinks were derived from Q, M, and L, labeling them as "From Q," "From M," and "From L" (104). And when he states that "we have not only Matthew, Mark, and Luke" but that we also can "isolate Q, M, and L," Ehrman fails to mention that the isolation of Q, M, and L involves merely the selection of verses from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And so, in fact, the best written ancient sources that we have are just the Gospels themselves. What is ironic is the willingness of scholars to privilege a selected portion of the Gospels in order to prejudice other selected portions of the Gospels.

What is even more ironic is that one of the assumed raisons d'etre for the need to find additional confirmations of authenticity—the imprecision of the oral traditions that informed the writing of the Gospels—would equally apply to Q, M, and L, if only we could find them. In *Whoever Hears You Hears Me: Prophets, Performance, and Tradition in* Q, Richard A. Horsley writes,

> That Q may have been an oral-derived text has apparently not been considered. This should hardly be surprising. After all, it is difficult enough to demonstrate that Q was ever a text, since it is known only indirectly through the parallel non-Markan material in Matthew and Luke…And if it ever existed as a document it disappeared from history as a separate entity once it was incorporated into and overwritten by Matthew and Luke…
>
> Nevertheless, once we recognize the predominantly oral communication environment in the Roman Empire in general and in Palestine in particular, we are forced to seriously consider that Q, even if known as a written text by Matthew and Luke, was an oral-derived text whose function and hermeneutic remained oral. (150)

Since Q, M, and L could only be orally derived texts, the same rigorous historical methods would also have to be applied to them once they were found, involving a further examination of the content of Q, M, and L in order to find the most authentic sayings of Jesus among the "authentic" sayings of Jesus. Such an examination would be necessary because it would be impolitic to assume prima facie that every verse found in Q, M, and L would be authentic.

An examination of the Gospels through the means of textual criticism in search of authentic sayings involves nothing more than sifting through the whole of a specific text in order to privilege selected verses that can be construed as confirming the biases that a scholar brings to his/her investigation. But rather than acknowledging this fact, Ehrman proceeds to delineate the rigorous historical criteria that he thinks have freed him from the fetters of his youthful belief but which, in reality, keep him in the fetters of his unbelief. The first method is described as the criterion of independent attestation.

The Criterion of Independent Attestation

> We have numerous streams of tradition that independently all go back, ultimately, to the life of Jesus. In light of this fact—taken as a fact by almost all critical scholars—we are in a position to evaluate which of the Gospel stories are more likely to be authentic than others. If a story is found in several of these independent traditions, then it is far more likely that this story goes back to the ultimate source of the tradition, the life of Jesus itself. This is called the *criterion of independent attestation.* (95)

Ehrman uses the criterion of independent attestation to privilege the sayings of Jesus that he thinks prove that Jesus did not think that He was God, that is, that Jesus viewed Himself only as an itinerant "apocalypticist anticipating the imminent end of the age and the arrival of God's good kingdom" (102), and he uses this criterion to question the authenticity of those passages that indicate otherwise. Independent attestation, however, does not prove, either way, that a passage goes back to the ultimate source of the tradition—the life of Jesus; it is only an assumption. From a perspective of critical scholarship, independent attestation better suggests that the text of one writer of a Gospel subsequently influenced the writing of the next Gospel. And, indeed, the synoptic Gospels were produced sequentially rather than concurrently. Independent attestation, furthermore, does not prove the authenticity of any saying through any actual, additional, independent historical evidence linking them to the life of Jesus.

More importantly, the existence of four Gospels, none of which have a strict one-to-one correspondence to the others, even among the Synoptics, suggests that independent attestation was not an intended purpose in the writing of the Gospels. If consistency, the valued essence of independent attestation, was the intent of the followers of Jesus, in all likelihood only one Gospel would have been produced, and only one Gospel would have been canonized. There are four Gospels because each is structured to present a unique perspective about Jesus, but still a perspective that reveals a life that was both human and divine in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke and both divine and human in the Gospel of John.[8] If independent attestation was not a preeminent priority of the writers of the Gospels, efforts to utilize this method will be misdirected in the service of scholarship and will produce misleading conclusions in the service of one's inherent biases. Thus, in a way, Ehrman's selection of verses through the methodology of independent attestation, verses that he thinks buttress his notion that Jesus did not think of Himself as God, tells us more about the authentic mindset of Ehrman than it does about the authentic sayings of Jesus.

If consistency, the valued essence of independent attestation, was the intent of the followers of Jesus, in all likelihood only one Gospel would have been produced, and only one Gospel would have been canonized.

The Criterion of Dissimilarity

> A second criterion is predicated on the fact that the accounts found in all these independent

> sources came down to their authors through the oral tradition, in which the stories were changed in the interests of the storytellers—as they were trying to convert others or to instruct those who were converted in the "true" view of things. But if that's the case, then any stories in the Gospels that do not coincide with what we know the early Christians would have wanted to say about Jesus, or indeed, any stories that seem to run directly counter to the Christians' self-interests in telling them, can stake a high claim to being historically accurate. The logic should be obvious. Christians would not have made up stories that work against their views or interests. If they told stories like that, it was simply because that's just the way something actually happened. This methodological principle is sometimes called the *criterion of dissimilarity*. It states that if a tradition about Jesus is dissimilar to what early Christians would have wanted to say about him, then it more likely is historically accurate. (96-97)

The logic behind this method is inherently absurd, and even contradictory. If one accepts the premise that the writers of the Gospels were pursuing misleading and self-interested motives in preparing texts that would advance a fabricated message, then dissimilar accounts would not have been included at all, because this would have undermined their views and interests. So if there are accounts that appear to be dissimilar on the surface but which are still included in the text, it is more plausible to assume that they were included because the writers were being honest in their presentation of their account of the life of Jesus, even if an outward sense of incongruity could be perceived. Their willingness to faithfully include "dissimilar" accounts tells us as much about the integrity of the writers as it does about whether these accounts should be privileged above "similar" accounts. The writers[9] included dissimilar accounts of Christ because of the multifaceted person and work of Christ. As an unbeliever, however, Ehrman cannot countenance this possibility.

IF ONE ACCEPTS THE PREMISE THAT THE WRITERS OF THE GOSPELS WERE PURSUING MISLEADING AND SELF-INTERESTED MOTIVES IN PREPARING TEXTS THAT WOULD ADVANCE A FABRICATED MESSAGE, THEN DISSIMILAR ACCOUNTS WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN INCLUDED.

Saying that dissimilar accounts have higher credible claim to historical accuracy also challenges, at an epistemological level, the previous criterion of independent attestation. With the former criterion, similarity, as an epistemic expression, is lauded while dissimilarity, as an epistemic expression, is discounted. With the second criterion, dissimilarity is lauded while similarity is ignored. Thus, for example, even though there are independent attestations of Jesus speaking to His disciples of His impending death and resurrection in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, a speaking that is repeated three times in each Gospel, Ehrman selectively applies the criterion of dissimilarity to question the authenticity of these independently attested statements:

> In Mark, Jesus three times predicts that he has to go to Jerusalem, be rejected, be crucified, and then be raised from the dead. Can you imagine a reason that a Christian storyteller might claim that Jesus said such things in advance of his passion? Of course you can. Later Christians would not have wanted anyone to think Jesus was caught off guard when he ended up being arrested and sent to the cross; they may well have wanted him to predict just what was going to happen to him. These predictions show both that he was raised—as Christians believed—and that he knew he was going to be raised—as they also believed. Since this is precisely the kind of story a Christian would want to make up, we cannot establish that Jesus really made these kinds of predictions. (97)

Just as Mark records Jesus speaking of His death and resurrection three times (8:27—9:1, 30-32; 10:32-34), Matthew and Luke repeat these same three speakings (Matt. 16:21-27; 17:22-23; 20:17-19; Luke 9:22-26, 43-45; 18:31-34). As such, these speakings certainly seem to bear the imprint of independent attestation, and if independent attestation is valued in and of itself, then the accounts in Matthew, Mark, and Luke should carry some weight as being credible recollections of Jesus' sayings. Nevertheless, Ehrman dismisses them in the section discussing the criterion of dissimilarity and concludes that Jesus could not have said them, because such a conclusion would be tantamount to saying that Jesus viewed Himself as God while He was on the earth.

Instead, he concludes through the selective application of the criterion of dissimilarity that Mark's account is the product of later propaganda. This conclusion, however, is not based on any dissimilarity in the Gospel accounts, but only with their dissimilarity to his view that Jesus did not view Himself as God during His earthly ministry. When Ehrman thinks that a verse may promote or support the claim that Jesus was God or that He viewed Himself as God, he dismisses it peremptorily as being the product of zealous followers. Such a blanket dismissal—"This is precisely the kind of story a Christian would want to make up"—strains the credulity of Ehrman's impartiality related to the conclusions that he advances through the application of textual criticism. The source is not dissimilar texts but a dissimilar mindset. When the starting point of Ehrman's application of textual criticism is an a priori stance that Jesus could not have risen from the grave through resurrection and thus could not have spoken of His death and resurrection in His earthly ministry, his use of the methods of textual criticism is reduced to an after-the-fact justification for advancing his ahistorical conclusions.

Ehrman seeks to demonstrate the view that Jesus was only an apocalypticist by pointing to what he regards as a passage that fits the criterion of dissimilarity, when in fact only his interpretation of the passage is dissimilar:

> In a saying preserved for us in Q, Jesus tells his twelve disciples that in the "age to come, when the Son of Man is seated upon his glorious throne, you also will sit upon twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matt. 19:28; see Luke 22:30). It doesn't take much reflection to see why this is something that Jesus is likely to have said—that it was not put on his lips by his later followers after his death. After Jesus died, everyone knew that he had been betrayed by one of his own followers, Judas Iscariot. (That really did happen: it is independently attested all over the map, and it passes the criterion of dissimilarity. Who would make up a story that Jesus had such little influence over his own followers?) But to whom is Jesus speaking in this saying? To all the Twelve (meaning the twelve disciples). Including Judas Iscariot. He is telling them that they all, Judas included, will be rulers in the future kingdom of God. No Christian would make up a saying that indicated that the betrayer of Jesus, Judas Iscariot himself, would be enthroned as a ruler in the future kingdom. Since a Christian would not have made the saying up, it almost certainly goes back to the historical Jesus. (109)

When Ehrman thinks that a verse may promote or support the claim that Jesus was God or that He viewed Himself as God, he dismisses it peremptorily as being the product of zealous followers.

It should be noted that Ehrman prefaces his specious interpretation involving Judas by saying that the verse is "preserved for us in Q," which, at least rhetorically, implies that there is a preserved text of Q somewhere that contains this verse. But Ehrman cannot produce a preserved text, because, as Horsley admits, "It is difficult enough to demonstrate that Q was ever a text" (150). In his subsequent interpretation of Matthew 19:28, Ehrman sees dissimilarity and, hence, authenticity, because Jesus has apparently preserved a place for Judas Iscariot in the coming kingdom. The only dissimilarity that exists, however, is in Ehrman's interpretation, an interpretation that causes one to wonder about his ability to simply consider Jesus' utterance objectively. It is possible that his objectivity has been hampered by his own truncated translation of the verse, which in its entirety, actually says, "Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you *who have followed me* will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (NRSV, emphasis added). On the copyright page of *How* Ehrman states, "Throughout this book I quote the Bible with some frequency. These quotations are either my own translations or drawn from the New Revised Standard Version." Since the quoted portion of Matthew 19:28 on page 109 does not correspond with the NRSV, it is probably Ehrman's own translation, a translation that ignores the Greek text in order to favor his interpretation and to enable him to read more into the text than is actually there. There is no direct indication that Jesus was speaking to just the "Twelve"; rather, Jesus' words were addressed to those who had followed Him.

Ehrman assumes that this refers to the original twelve disciples, but it is only his assumption.[10]

When considering Ehrman's translation and interpretation of this verse, it is hard to determine how it supports his argument that Jesus was merely an apocalypticist advocating the immediate establishment of the kingdom of God. There is no evidence in Jesus' words of an imminent judgment. There is only an indication that when the kingdom comes, there will be an authoritative role to be carried out by twelve who sit on twelve thrones in the judgment of the twelve tribes of Israel. In some respects, Ehrman's elevation of Judas, in contradistinction to the biblical record, appears to be included in *How* primarily for its shock value. The tendency to be purposely shocking is repeatedly demonstrated in *How,* and it is buttressed by Ehrman's use of his rhetorical skills to present arguments that he thinks support his argument that Jesus is not Christ come in the flesh. For example, when presenting arguments that Jesus did not speak of Himself as the Son of Man, he writes, "Even better, what if you have sayings in which it appears that Jesus is talking about someone other than *himself* as the Son of Man" (106). The use of *even better* not only advances the notion that there are very strong arguments that he will yet proffer, but it also belies a glee in being able to present shocking assertions to the simple in order to create doubt. A few pages later, when discussing the apocalyptic content of Jesus' ministry, Ehrman writes, "The final argument that I give now is, in my judgment, the most convincing of them all. *It is so good that I wish I had come up with it myself*" (110, emphasis added). The apparent gleefulness—"it is so good"—in his setting of the stage for his argument is striking, but even more revealing is the envious disappointment that is evidenced by his acknowledgment that he cannot claim credit for what he perceives to be a devastating argument—"I wish I had come up with it myself." Ehrman comes up with many things that are specious and biased, but the gleeful deliverance of them is still disconcerting.

THE TENDENCY TO BE PURPOSELY SHOCKING IS REPEATEDLY DEMONSTRATED, AND IT IS BUTTRESSED BY EHRMAN'S RHETORICAL SKILLS TO PRESENT ARGUMENTS THAT HE THINKS SUPPORT HIS ARGUMENT THAT JESUS IS NOT CHRIST COME IN THE FLESH.

The Criterion of Contextual Credibility

> Finally, scholars are especially keen to consider whether traditions about Jesus can actually fit in a first-century Palestinian Jewish context. Some of the later Gospels from outside the New Testament portray Jesus teaching views that are starkly different from what we can plausibly situate in Jesus's own historical and cultural milieu. Such teaching cannot obviously be accepted as one that a first-century Palestinian Jew would have spoken. This is called the *criterion of contextual credibility.* (98)

The contextual environment in which Christ lived and ministered was certainly one rife with apocalyptic fervor, and Ehrman portrays Christ and His disciples as cultural representatives of this fervor and its message of a coming judgment through the imminent inauguration of the kingdom of God through the messiah:

> Jewish apocalypticists believed that the world had gotten just about as bad as it could get. The powers of evil were out in full force making life a cesspool of misery for the righteous who sided with God. But they were very near the end. People needed to hold on for just a little while longer and keep the faith. God would soon intervene and set up his good kingdom. But when? How long did they need to wait? "Truly I tell you, some of you standing here will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come in power." Those are the words of Jesus, Mark 9:1. He thought the apocalyptic end would arrive very soon, before all his disciples had all died…[11]

> Recall: we need to apply our rigorous methodological principles to the Gospels to see what is historically accurate in them. When we do so, it becomes clear that Jesus held very strongly to an apocalyptic view, that in fact at the very core of his earthly proclamation was an apocalyptic message. (102)

In Jewish thought the coming kingdom was intimately related to the appearance of God's anointed, the Christ, the messiah, who was not God but who would proclaim and usher in God's kingdom. In contrast, the message of the Gospels is that Jesus Christ was not just an anointed man but the very anointing God, who came in the flesh of a Jewish man to be the source of salvation, because salvation is of the Jews, according to the promises and covenants of God (John 4:22; Rom 9:4). Thus, while apocalyptic Jews were looking for a man of political and possibly military prowess, a man distinct from God, the Gospels speak of Jesus as both the Messiah and God. In this fundamental regard, the core of the gospel message proclaimed by Jesus did not conform to prevailing cultural concepts and expectations, and so any verses that indicate a conflating of these two views of Jesus, with Jesus being both the Messiah, an anointed man, and God, the anointed God, are soundly rejected by Ehrman: "What can we say about how Jesus most likely understood himself? Did he call himself the messiah? If so, what did he mean by it? And did he call himself God? Here I want to stake out a clear position: messiah, yes; God, no" (118).

Drawing upon the criterion of contextual credibility, Ehrman accepts as authentic only verses that can be construed as supporting an apocalyptic-messianic narrative within the cultural context at the time of Jesus. Ehrman argues for an understanding of Jesus that fits the prevailing distinction in the cultural understanding of Jesus as a man, the messiah of Jewish tradition, but not as God, and then locates this same distinction in the mind of Jesus simply because Jesus, as a culturally bound Jew, was living and preaching in the midst of a tumultuous period in Jewish history, one that seemed prepared for a coming messiah. Any verses, such as John 8:58; 10:30; and 14:9, that indicate or that could be construed to indicate that Jesus had a deeper awareness of His dual status as both God and man are either dismissed as lacking historical credibility or ignored altogether (124-125).[12]

Drawing upon the criterion of contextual credibility, Ehrman accepts as authentic only verses that can be construed as supporting the apocalyptic-messianic narrative in existence at the time of Jesus.

If Christ was just a first-century Jewish man who preached an apocalyptic message of the imminent establishment of the kingdom, then as a culturally bound Jew, His view of the kingdom should have conformed to the prevailing cultural views and predilections of His disciples, His other followers, and even the Jewish leaders who opposed Him, but it did not. Instead, He proclaimed that the kingdom was already present, as seen in His word in Matthew 12:28. He proclaimed that the kingdom was resident in His person and work, as seen in His word in Luke 11:20. And He proclaimed that the kingdom was not visible through human observation, as seen in His word in 17:20. Even though the disciples were first-century Palestinian Jews, living in a region of apocalyptic fervor, having an earnest expectation of the imminent establishment of the kingdom, they are portrayed in the synoptic Gospels as not understanding the content and significance of much of Jesus' ministry prior to His death. This is because Jesus' words did not conform to their cultural understandings.

In spite of a lack of understanding on the part of the disciples, the writers of the Gospel did not adjust their accounts to include only ones that reflected their prevailing understandings of the kingdom. Instead, the writers included words of Jesus that mystified many because they pointed to a spiritual rather than material kingdom, indicating that Jesus' ministry clearly went against the cultural trends of the time.

If the words of Jesus that run counter to the prevailing cultural views are evaluated according to the criterion of contextual credibility, the authenticity of these verses as genuine saying of Jesus should be dismissed, but then, unless Ehrman is willing to argue that Jesus was speaking of two different kingdoms, Jesus' other speakings concerning the kingdom should be dismissed as well by virtue of their association with His non-contextually credible concept of the kingdom. But Ehrman cannot dismiss every saying of Jesus concerning the kingdom, because he needs some to fit into his narrative of Jesus as being only an itinerant apocalyptic preacher. Clearly, his application of the criterion

of contextual credibility to all verses related to the kingdom would produce contradictory appraisals of authenticity. Consequently, Ehrman's subsequent selective use of specific passages in the Gospels to favor one interpretation over another shows more about his bias as a historian rather than the historicity or lack of historicity of the passages.

To be fair to Ehrman, one could argue that when the kingdom did not come according to their cultural expectations following the death of Jesus, the writers of the Gospels, in order to maintain the relevancy of their message, inserted references to the disciples' misunderstanding, but such an assertion cannot be independently grounded on other historical evidence. It would be speculation after the fact in search of a plausible argument to sustain a preexisting bias.

Even if rigorous historical methods can determine the historical accuracy of a particular utterance of Jesus related to the kingdom, the historical validation of a true saying would not, in and of itself, imply that there was only one exclusive interpretation of what was spoken. There would only be "proof" that the words were spoken. This is especially true when evaluating the sayings of Jesus related to the kingdom, because His utterances related to the mysteries and the mystery of the kingdom were often spoken in parables (Matt. 13:10-11; Luke 8:9-10; Mark 4:10-11). His utterances were intentionally ambiguous so that only those who were hungry and thirsty in their pursuit of the kingdom could perceive them. Given the intentional presence of ambiguity in many of Jesus' statements concerning the kingdom, Ehrman's certainty in his singular interpretation of these verses is hubristically misplaced.[13]

GIVEN THE INTENTIONAL PRESENCE OF AMBIGUITY IN MANY OF JESUS' STATEMENTS CONCERNING THE KINGDOM, EHRMAN'S CERTAINTY IN HIS SINGULAR INTERPRETATION OF THESE VERSES IS HUBRISTICALLY MISPLACED.

One final point should be noted concerning Ehrman's "rigorous" application of the criteria associated with textual criticism: While he applies these criteria to selected verses in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, he applies them to the text of the Gospel of John as a whole. This is because there are too many verses in the Gospel of John showing that Jesus was self-aware of His divine status. Ehrman even points to some crucial verses in this regard, including John 8:58; 10:30; 14:9; and 17:24. But in looking at these verses, Ehrman states,

> They simply cannot be ascribed to the historical Jesus. They don't pass any of our criteria. They are not multiply attested in our sources; they appear only in John, our latest and most theologically oriented Gospel. They certainly do not pass the criterion of dissimilarity since they express the very view of Jesus that the author of the Gospel of John happens to hold. And they are not at all contextually credible. We have no record of any Palestinian Jew ever saying any such things about himself. These divine self-claims in John are part of John's distinctive theology; they are not part of the historical record of what Jesus actually said…Almost certainly the divine self-claims in John are not historical. (125)

Since Ehrman cannot pick and choose from among the many verses in John that indicate Jesus' self-awareness of His divine status,[14] he has to dismiss the entirety of the Gospel through a cursory application of the criteria associated with textual criticism, i.e., that Jesus' self-claims to be God are unique to the Gospel of John and hence cannot be independently attested, that there is a consistent and expected message that Jesus is God in the Gospel of John and, hence, there are not instances of dissimilarity, and that no one spoke as He spoke in the Gospel of John and hence, His words are not contextually credible. Ehrman does not deny the presence of self-aware claims; he asserts that they all lack historical credibility. This appraisal, however, is based less on the text of John than it is on the need to discount the distinctive expressions of Jesus' claims to be God that are present throughout the Gospel of John. Rather than considering why John's Gospel is so distinctively different from the synoptic Gospels, Ehrman uses this distinctiveness to dismiss the Gospel, precluding not only any serious historical consideration of its content but also any serious theological consideration.[15]

In the end, the interpretations drawn from Ehrman's application of the three criteria of textual criticism, ironically, are quite indicative of the actions of an overzealous follower of textual criticism, a devotee who is willing to use these methods in order to fabricate a narrative that conforms to the theological interpretations that he hopes to promulgate.

Chapters 4 and 5

Assuming that he has proven a thesis that Jesus was only an itinerant apocalyptic preacher from the backwater region of Galilee, Ehrman, in chapters 4 and 5, "The Resurrection of Jesus: What We Cannot Know" and "The Resurrection of Jesus: What We Can Know," begins to consider how the disciples' understanding of Jesus as God developed. In Ehrman's mind, this change was a consequence of the disciples' belief in the resurrection:

> Jesus did not declare himself to be God. He believed and taught that he was the future king of the coming kingdom of God, the messiah of God yet to be revealed. This was the message he delivered to his disciples, and in the end, it was a message that got him crucified. It was only afterward, once the disciples believed that their crucified master had been raised from the dead, that they began to think that he must, in some sense, be God. (128)

Therefore, according to Ehrman, "Without the belief in the resurrection, Jesus would have been a mere footnote in the annals of Jewish history. With the belief in the resurrection, we have the beginnings of the movement to promote Jesus to a superhuman plane" (131-132). Before Ehrman begins his examination of the resurrection narratives in the Gospels, he makes a careful distinction between the resurrection as an actual event and the disciples' belief in the resurrection as an actual event: "I have not said that the *resurrection* is what made Jesus God. I have said that it was the *belief* in the resurrection that led some of his followers to *claim* he was God" (132). This frees Ehrman from the need to respond to what he regards as misplaced demands to prove that the resurrection did not occur, a demand that is common among apologetic defenders of the resurrection. He views such a demand as being misplaced because it can only be met by appeals to faith. And since appeals to history are disadvantaged by appeals to faith, it is futile in his mind to deal with the question of whether or not the resurrection event actually occurred. This is not an unreasonable stance for an unbelieving historian, but it does not, in practice, distance him from making value judgments on the event itself through his subsequent interpretations, even if these judgments are advanced in the context of examining details reported in the resurrection narratives. Although Ehrman has no desire to engage in a debate over whether or not the resurrection of Jesus actually occurred, he does not discount the need for a historian to examine elements within the resurrection narratives that may be better suited for historical validation: "In some cases in which a past miracle is narrated, *elements* of the episode may be subject to historical inquiry even if the overarching claim that God has done something miraculous cannot possibly be accepted on the basis of historical evidence" (147-148). He feels safe on this ground because

> historians are able to talk about events that are not miraculous and that do not require faith in order to know about them, including the fact that some of the followers of Jesus…came to *believe* that Jesus was physically raised from the dead. That belief is a historical fact. But other aspects of the accounts of Jesus's death are historically problematic. (132-133)

These other "elements," these "other aspects," are the focus of Ehrman's historical consideration of the resurrection narratives. They are his focus because he thinks that some of the elements can be shown to be historically implausible, which would, in

EHRMAN'S APPLICATION OF TEXTUAL CRITICISM IS INDICATIVE OF AN OVERZEALOUS FOLLOWER OF TEXTUAL CRITICISM WHO IS WILLING TO FABRICATE A NARRATIVE THAT CONFORMS TO THE INTERPRETATIONS THAT HE HOPES TO PROMULGATE.

turn, supports his view that fabrications and propaganda were the driving force behind the belief in the resurrection. As he begins his historical analysis, he states, just prior to perhaps the most revealing section in chapter 4 and even the entire book, "The Resurrection and the Historian,"

> The view I stake out here is that if historians, or anyone else, do believe this [the resurrection event], it is because of their faith, not because of their historical inquiry. I should stress that unbelievers (like me) cannot *disprove* the resurrection either, on historical grounds. This is because belief or unbelief in Jesus's resurrection is a matter of faith, not of historical knowledge. (143)

This is revealing because it presents two possible epistemological quandaries, both of which cannot be resolved favorably for Ehrman. First, if Ehrman is admitting that unbelief in the form of generalized skepticism is a matter of faith, this would existentially undermine the validity of any subsequent statement that certain elements within the resurrection narratives are more historically probable or more historically improbable, because such a statement would be the inherent product of a hidden appeal to a belief in one's unbelief. Second, if Ehrman is suggesting that faith, as an epistemic phenomenon, is operative only in regard to questions concerning the acceptance or rejection of the resurrection event, he displays either a remarkable naiveté or a remarkable confidence in his ability to limit the influence that his belief in his unbelief has on the interpretations that he posits in response to his historical analysis. Based on a subsequent discussion related to what presuppositions are proper and improper for a historian, it appears that he thinks it is possible, at least for him, to set aside the privileging of the biases that are rooted in his faith in his unbelief:

EHRMAN DISPLAYS EITHER A REMARKABLE NAIVETÉ OR A REMARKABLE CONFIDENCE IN HIS ABILITY TO LIMIT THE INFLUENCE THAT HIS BELIEF IN HIS UNBELIEF HAS ON THE INTERPRETATIONS THAT HE POSITS.

> The first thing to stress is that everyone has presuppositions, and it is impossible to live life, think deep thoughts, have religious experiences, or engage in historical inquiry without having presuppositions. The life of the mind cannot proceed *without* having presuppositions. The question, though, is always this: What are the appropriate presuppositions for the task at hand? (144)

The presuppositions that Ehrman acknowledges as valid are neutral and should be self-evident, including that "the past did happen," that "it is possible for us to establish, with some degree of probability, what has happened in the past," and that "'evidence' for past events exists" (144-145). On the other hand, it is not appropriate for a historian to "presuppose her conclusions and to try to locate only the evidence that supports those presupposed conclusions" or to "presuppose a perspective or worldview that is not generally held" (146). Of the two improper presuppositions, the former is neutral and should be self-evident, even though Ehrman does not adhere to it. The latter presupposition, however, is not as well grounded. For example, when the world was believed to be flat, the flatness of the earth would not have been considered an invalid presupposition, but today it would be considered as such. But back then, everything that was "built" upon a foundational concept of a flat earth was inaccurate, even though the concept was presumed to be true because it was based on generally held views. The shape of the earth did not change from flat to round; only the historical understanding of the shape of the earth changed. Ehrman thinks that a person who holds presuppositions that are not generally held "has to silence them, sit on them or otherwise squelch them when engaging in their historical investigations" (147). He then applies this to the need to squelch religious and theological beliefs because "these beliefs cannot determine the outcome of a historical investigation, because they are not generally shared" (147). These presuppositions are forwarded more to suppress the influence that a belief in the resurrection would have upon a reader's reaction to Ehrman's historical appraisals and theological interpretations of the elements in the resurrection narratives.

Any sustained response in this review to these elements, which include Ehrman's doubt

that Jesus received a burial in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea (151-156), the possibility that Jesus was not even buried (156-164), and the possibility that there was not an empty tomb (long understood to be a sign of His resurrection) (164-169), would be futile largely because they ultimately rest on appeals to Ehrman's faith in his unbelief. One quick response should suffice. It is a historical fact that the bodies of crucified criminals were "left to decompose and serve as food for scavenging animals" (157). The determination that this was a common practice is not outside the realm of proper historical analysis, but to suggest that this must have happened to the body of Jesus crosses into the realm of speculation. Apart from the resurrection narratives in the Gospels there is no other historical evidence concerning the resurrection event that has some standing as countervailing evidence, and so to just assume that the treatment of Jesus' body after His death had to happen according to the general practice of leaving bodies to decompose and be devoured by dogs is a leap of faith in the service of Ehrman's unbelief.

Although the possibility that Jesus was not even buried is presented in a chapter entitled "The Resurrection of Jesus: What We Cannot Know," the conclusions drawn from this suggestion are presented as if they are known to apply to the resurrection event. And in chapter 5, "The Resurrection of Jesus: What We Can Know," many of its conclusions are based on a discussion of the nature of the visions, the appearings of Jesus, that the writers of the synoptic Gospels reported that the disciples experienced after the resurrection event. But the nature of these visions is something that cannot be known, as even Ehrman unwittingly admits when he acknowledges his unwillingness to take a stand on the "issue of whether Jesus really appeared to people or whether their visions were hallucinations" (187). He states at the beginning of the chapter,

> We can know three very important things: (1) some of Jesus's followers believed that he had been raised from the dead; (2) they believed this because some of them had visions of him after his crucifixion; and (3) this belief led them to reevaluate who Jesus was, so that the Jewish apocalyptic preacher from rural Galilee came to be considered, in some sense, God. (174)

Of these three "knowns," only the first is essentially void of bias. It is true that the disciples believed that Jesus had been raised from the dead. But there is bias in the second point. The use of the words *after his crucifixion,* as opposed to *after his resurrection* or even *after his reported resurrection,* which would accommodate Ehrman's doubt, leaves open the possibility that Ehrman is predisposed to accept an explanation that these visions could have been the product of mass hallucinations (202). The wording of the second point suggests that Jesus died in the same way that every human dies and that Jesus did not resurrect in the same way that every human does not resurrect, but that the disciples still could have had some hallucinatory experiences after His normal death. The most bias is shown in the third point because it places Ehrman's thesis into the minds of the disciples and presents it as a known fact. There is no evidence that the disciples reevaluated their understanding of Jesus as God after the resurrection and began to think of Him as something more than an itinerant preacher after hallucinatory experiences. This is Ehrman's reevaluation. Jesus was known to some as God before the resurrection, and for these blessed ones the resurrection would have only confirmed that He was God.

THERE IS NO EVIDENCE THAT THE DISCIPLES REEVALUATED THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF JESUS AS GOD AFTER THE RESURRECTION AND BEGAN TO THINK OF HIM AS SOMETHING MORE THAN AN ITINERANT PREACHER AFTER HALLUCINATORY EXPERIENCES.

Chapters 6 through 9

Chapters 6 through 9, "The Beginning of Christology: Christ as Exalted to Heaven," "Jesus as God on Earth: Early Incarnation Christologies," "After the New Testament: Christological Dead Ends of the Second and Third Centuries," and "Ortho-Paradoxes on the Road to Nicea," are essentially Ehrman's summary of the "reevaluation" process

that occurred in the time from Jesus' death to the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325, at which time there was a definitive and broad understanding that Jesus was God, consubstantial with the Father. In order to find traces of this progression, Ehrman searches through the preliterary passages within the New Testament, other passages in the New Testament, and writings from the post-apostolic era. In many respects his commentary is uninteresting because it seems more like a search, informed by presupposed conclusions, for evidence that seemingly supports his presupposed conclusions. Furthermore, his discussion of these texts is primarily a selected presentation of verses to which he can apply his theological interpretations.

When Ehrman examines preliterary passages in the New Testament, for example, he ignores a passage that is widely regarded as a preliterary text—1 Timothy 3:16, which speaks of "He who was manifested in the flesh, / Justified in the Spirit, / Seen by angels, / Preached among the nations, / Believed on in the world, / Taken up in glory." This preliterary hymn is not considered in the section devoted to passages that are part of the preliterary tradition (216-230). In fact, it is not considered in the book at all. This is odd, given that Ehrman grants considerable weight to preliterary passages because "they give us access to what Christians were believing and how they were extolling God and Christ *before* our earliest surviving writings. Some of these preliterary traditions can plausibly be located to a time within a decade or less after Jesus's followers first came to believe he had been raised from the dead" (216).

IN THE END, EHRMAN IS EXACTLY WHAT HE RAILS AGAINST THROUGHOUT *HOW*—AN OVERZEALOUS FOLLOWER OF HIS OWN AGNOSTICISM WHO HAS A CAPACITY THROUGH HIS WRITING SKILLS TO EMBELLISH A FALSE ACCOUNT OF HISTORY.

The two preliterary passages that Ehrman examines in detail are Romans 1:3-4 (218-225) and Philippians 2:6-11 (254-266), and what is most striking about these "earliest surviving writings" and also 1 Timothy 3:16 is how much the plain texts support a view that Jesus was considered to be God even at this early point in church history. In order to find the opposite, Ehrman resorts to twisting the text that he is interpreting or to a willful avoidance of a particular text altogether.[16] His twisting is understandable for an unbeliever; his avoidance of additional evidence that may be contrary to his view is inexcusable for a historian.

The final two chapters are essentially a summary of the Christological controversies in the second and third centuries. Ehrman assumes that the presence of controversy implies that nothing was considered true concerning Jesus' humanity or divinity until the controversies were "settled." This belies a misplaced understanding of the development of Christian thought concerning Christ. The issues settled at Nicaea were being debated from the time of the writing of the New Testament until Nicaea; that is, there were genuine believers who acknowledged the essence of the Nicene confession from the beginning, even if they did not have the Nicene terminology that ultimately summarized their confession. If this was not a historical fact, how could there have even been a debate over various competing Christologies?

Conclusion

In the end, Ehrman is exactly what he rails against throughout *How*—an overzealous follower of his own agnosticism who has a capacity through his writing skills to embellish a false account of history. And his book is little more than a "gospel," the by-product of the spirit of antichrist, a gospel that he hopes will overturn Christian faith in the same way that the life contained in the message of the Word who became flesh overturns the darkness within those who receive Him. Thankfully, the impact of *How,* the gospel of Bart, will wane because light will shine and overcome the darkness that comes from his flawed and selective application of "rigorous historical methods," and because of the light that shines in every genuine believer. Nothing of eternal value will be gained by reading this book.

by John Pester

Notes

[1]The Lord's characterization that the kingdom of God was coming is certainly present in the Gospels (Matt. 4:17; Mark 1:14-15; Luke 4:43). But the Lord consistently downplayed a political or observable aspect of the kingdom (17:20; John 18:36), which would have been a prominent feature of His teaching if He had only been an itinerant preacher mirroring through His words the prevailing cultural understandings regarding the kingdom (Acts 1:6-7). Instead, He presented a view of the kingdom entirely contradictory to these cultural expectations by showing that the kingdom is a matter that comes out of the receiving of and submission to the divine life that He came to impart into the believers through regeneration (John 3:3, 6). As such, the kingdom in miniature is a person (Matt. 16:28; Luke 11:20), His very person, and the kingdom in its enlargement is the church as the Body of Christ (Matt. 16:18-19).

[2]A renewed mind ought to be able to see and interpret things from multiple perspectives, because it not only knows the things of man but also the things of God (1 Cor. 2:11-12).

[3]The Lord said that "many will come in My name, saying, I am the Christ" (Matt. 24:5) and that "false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders so as to lead astray, if possible, even the chosen" (v. 24). See also Mark 13:21-22. It is reasonable to assume that contemporaneous accounts were written of these false Christs and false prophets and of their miracles. So rather than challenging the uniqueness of the biblical narrative by associating the account of Apollonius with that of the Lord, the writings of Philostratus should be viewed as a confirmation of the prophetic nature of the Lord's warning.

[4]The apostle Paul forthrightly acknowledges that in human culture, people "changed the glory of the incorruptible God into the likeness of an image of corruptible man," exchanging "the truth of God for the lie, and worshipped and served the creation rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen" (Rom. 1:23, 25). The account of Apollonius is only a record of one particular exchanging of the truth for a lie. There is also a recorded instance in Acts in which the performance of a miracle prompted those who witnessed it to ascribe divine status to both Barnabas and Paul (14:11-18), confirming the willingness of fallen men to worship men.

[5]In a very real sense, the New Testament provides evidence that there was indeed such a development in Christian thought, but it was a historical development based on an unfolding spiritual reality. Historically speaking, it is clear that the disciples and many of the Lord's followers had only a limited understanding of His person. Some considered Him to be an enlightened teacher from God (John 3:2); others considered Him to be a prophet of God, even one of the historical prophets (Matt. 16:14). It required revelation from the Father, however, in order for Peter to declare that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God (v. 16). Such an understanding was simply beyond the ken of unregenerated humanity; it required revelation. With the regeneration of the believers unto a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Pet. 1:3), a regeneration involving the human spirit (John 3:6), it became possible for redeemed humanity to receive the same revelation that Peter received (Eph. 1:17). It was generally possible to know what was hidden in God concerning the person of Christ only after His resurrection, because the human spirit was deadened through offenses and sins prior to His redeeming death and life-imparting resurrection (2:1). And even though it became possible for redeemed humanity to receive revelation, there is still a process of coming to the full knowledge of the truth, the full knowledge of Him (1:17; Col. 2:2; 1 Tim. 2:4). This was an ongoing process for the disciples, and it is a continuing process for every genuine Christian because we now see only as if in a mirror obscurely, knowing only in part (1 Cor. 13:12). Many Christians, for example, do not have a revelation that the last Adam, Christ, became a life-giving Spirit, but this is what 1 Corinthians 15:45 declares. When one receives and declares such a revelation, it does not mean that there has been an embellishment of understanding through "later legendary accretions" (13), but only a fuller understanding of the truth. There is a hymn written by George Rawson that expresses the stance of a Christian who desires a greater and fuller understanding of the truth: "We limit not the truth of God / To our poor reach of mind, /…The Lord hath yet more light and truth / To break forth from His Word" (*Hymns*, #817).

[6]Even if, as Ehrman states, most Christians have a concept that there is an unbridgeable

THE LORD CONSISTENTLY DOWNPLAYED A POLITICAL OR OBSERVABLE ASPECT OF THE KINGDOM, WHICH WOULD HAVE BEEN A PROMINENT FEATURE OF HIS TEACHING IF HE HAD ONLY BEEN AN ITINERANT PREACHER.

chasm between God and man, a concept that he challenges in order to introduce his notion that a continuum of divinity is somehow present in the elevation of the Lord from human to divine, the concept of an unbridgeable chasm is not supported by Scripture, either in the Old or the New Testament. The Bible reveals just the opposite; it reveals the Triune God's desire to have an intimate organic union with redeemed and regenerated humanity, to the point of the believers being joined to the Lord as one spirit (1 Cor. 6:17). The Triune God's desire to impart Himself as life to man was the impetus for His creation of humanity in His image and according to His likeness and for His placement of created humanity in front of the tree of life in order that humanity receive Him as life (Gen. 1:26; 2:8-9). After humanity was barred from the tree of life due to sin, God became a man through incarnation to make the divine life available to humanity once again (John 1:14; 10:10). In incarnation divinity was joined to humanity (Matt. 1:23), and in resurrection humanity was joined to divinity (Rom 1:3-4). There is now a man in the glory, and as such, there is now one Mediator of God and men, the man Christ Jesus (1 Tim. 2:5). As such a Mediator, He joins earth to heaven and heaven to earth, a reality seen in type in Jacob's dream of a heavenly ladder with the angels of God ascending and descending on it (Gen. 28:12), a type that the Lord confirmed was fulfilled in Himself (John 1:51). The Bible does not speak of an unbridgeable chasm between God and man, and it would be a mistake to argue against this point simply because Ehrman uses it to support his untenable interpretation that Christ was elevated along the trajectory of a human-divine continuum. Any attempt to defend the concept of an unbridgeable chasm will negate the precious revelation that God joined Himself to humanity in order for humanity to be joined to Him. Christ, as the heavenly ladder, is not at either end of a divine-human continuum; He is the continuum, the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End (Rev. 22:13), by virtue of His status as both God and man.

THE BIBLE DOES NOT SPEAK OF AN UNBRIDGEABLE CHASM BETWEEN GOD AND MAN, AND IT WOULD BE A MISTAKE TO ARGUE AGAINST THIS POINT SIMPLY BECAUSE EHRMAN USES IT TO SUPPORT HIS UNTENABLE INTERPRETATION.

[7]In his treatment of Psalm 45:6-7, Ehrman interprets O *God* in verse 6 as a reference to the king of Israel, not to the God of Israel:

> It is clear that the person addressed as "O God" (Elohim) is not God Almighty but the king, because of what is said later: God Almighty is the king's own God and has "anointed" him with oil—the standard act of the king's coronation ceremony in ancient Israel. And so God has both anointed and exalted the king above all others, even to the level of deity. The king is in some sense God. (79)

The king in Psalm 45:6-7 does not need to be viewed in "some sense" as God if Christ is understood to be the prophetic referent to the king in these verses. This is certainly Paul's view in Hebrews 1:8-9. Witness Lee's interpretation of O *God* and *Your God* in these verses is much more balanced and consistent with the New Testament revelation that God was manifested in the flesh and that this man in the flesh was exalted and anointed as God in His humanity, following His death and resurrection, an exaltation that occurred through the actions of a propitiated God (v. 3), not through the actions of overzealous followers. Lee states, "O *God* here [v. 8] and *Your God* in v. 9 refer to the Son. Since the Son is God Himself, He is God; therefore, here it says, 'O God.' Since the Son is also man, God is His God; therefore, in v. 9 it says, 'Your God'" (Recovery Version, v. 8, note 1).

[8]One of the most satisfying answers to the question of why there are four Gospel accounts of the life of the Lord is contained in a footnote by Witness Lee in the Recovery Version of the Bible:

> Christ, as the wonderful center of the entire Bible, is all-inclusive, having many aspects. The New Testament at its beginning presents four biographies to portray the four main aspects of this all-inclusive Christ. The Gospel of Matthew testifies that He is the King, the Christ of God prophesied in the Old Testament, who brings the kingdom of the heavens to the earth. The Gospel of Mark tells us that He is the Servant of God, laboring for God faithfully. Mark's account is most simple, for a servant does not warrant a detailed record. The Gospel of Luke presents a full picture of Him as the only proper and normal man who ever lived on this earth; as such a man, He is the Savior of mankind. The Gospel of John unveils Him as the Son of God, the very God Himself, who is life to God's people. Among the four Gospels, Matthew and Luke have a record of genealogy;

> Mark and John do not. To testify that Jesus is the King, the Christ of God prophesied in the Old Testament, Matthew needs to show us the antecedents and status of this King, to prove that He is the proper successor to the throne of David. To prove that Jesus is a proper and normal man, Luke needs to show the generations of this man, to attest that He is qualified to be the Savior of mankind. For the record of a servant, Mark does not need to tell us His origin. To unveil that Jesus is the very God, neither does John need to give us His human genealogy; rather, he declares that, as the Word of God, He is the very God in the beginning. (Matt. 1:1, note 1)

[9]The writing of the Scriptures in both the Old and the New Testament was a joint venture involving both God and man, as Peter indicates in 2 Peter 1:21, which says, "No prophecy was ever borne by the will of man, but men spoke from God while being borne by the Holy Spirit." The Bible is not just the product of men. Thus, the inclusion of anything that some might construe as departing from the intrinsic revelation given by the Spirit should not be a cause for doubt but should be a motivation for prayerful consideration in order to receive a deeper sense of the Spirit's purpose in inspiring the writing of such words.

For example, concerning the Gospel of Mark, Ehrman states that in it "there is no word of Jesus's preexistence or of his birth to a virgin. Surely if this author believed in either view, he would have mentioned it; they are after all, rather important ideas" (238). Thus, Ehrman interprets the lack of these accounts in Mark to a lack of belief in them on the part of Mark. But there is a simpler conclusion: The Gospel of Mark portrays Christ as a man with genuine humanity serving both God and man as a Slave of God and as a Slave to man (10:45). Since slaves have less-than-ordinary antecedents and less-than-ordinary circumstances at the time of their birth, Mark's "omissions" maintain the Spirit's emphasis on the lowly humanity but elevated service of Jesus, who, as a Slave of God, came to give His life as a ransom for many.

[10]In fact, there is greater evidence in the New Testament that the Lord was speaking to the twelve, as recomposed after the resurrection. In the account in Acts 1:21-26, involving the choosing of Matthias to replace Judas, both Joseph and Matthias were described by Peter as "men who accompanied us all the time in which the Lord Jesus went in and went out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day on which He was taken up from us" (vv. 21-22). This statement closely corresponds to the Lord's word in Matthew 19:28 that He addressed to those who had followed Him. It is not unreasonable to assume that both Joseph and Matthias were in the audience when the Lord spoke this word. Consequently, when Acts 2:14 speaks of Peter "standing with the eleven," Matthias is implicitly identified as one of the twelve disciples, because Judas was already dead by his own hand and could not have been included in the accounting of the "Twelve" in Acts (Matt. 27:5).

[11]In every Gospel account in which the Lord speaks of some of His disciples seeing the kingdom of God coming in power (Matt. 16:28—17:2; Mark 9:1-2; Luke 9:27-29), the writer immediately follows these words with an account of the Lord's transfiguration on the mount, in which the inner glory of the kingdom, resident within the Lord's earthly body, was momentarily revealed. When Peter and John witnessed the Lord's transfiguration, they received a glimpse of how the kingdom would come in power, that is, through the outward manifestation of the inner divine glory hidden within the shell of Christ's humanity, a manifestation that was not imminent within the lifetime of the disciples but rather at the end of the age with the second coming of Christ. Thus, the Lord was not speaking in Mark 9:1, as Ehrman assumes, of an imminent broad ushering in of an apocalyptical consummation of the age, but rather of the intimate revelation of His divinity to three of His disciples. This is a more contextually plausible interpretation of the coming of the kingdom of God in power in Mark 9:1, and when a plausible alternative interpretation can be offered, the certainty of what Ehrman assumes has been proven is diminished. In his interpretation of Mark 9:1, Ehrman sees proof of Jesus' apocalypticism, of His culturally bound Jewish humanity. In verse 2 others can see proof of the Lord's eternal divinity and the relationship between this divinity and the reality of the coming kingdom.

In Mark 9:1, Ehrman sees proof of Jesus' apocalypticism, of His culturally bound Jewish humanity. In verse 2 others can see proof of the relationship between His divinity and the reality of the coming kingdom.

[12]In a chapter devoted to the question of whether or not Jesus thought of Himself as God, it is remarkable that there is no discussion of Matthew 16:16. But for that matter, there is no

discussion of this verse in the entire book. This verse, which says, "Simon Peter answered and said, You are the Christ [an acknowledgment of Jesus' humanity as the Messiah], the Son of the living God [an acknowledgment of Jesus' divinity]," is wonderful in its concise affirmation that Christ, even as a man, is also God Himself. The Lord's response is equally wonderful, especially when it is considered in the context of Ehrman's question about Jesus' self-awareness of His divine status. The Lord said, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in the heavens" (v. 17). When Jesus responded, He did not reject Peter's characterization of Him as the Son of the living God. This would have been the proper response of one who was merely a devout and culturally conditioned Jew, who, at most, would have viewed himself as the messiah of Jewish traditional thought. Instead, the Lord joyously affirmed the reality of His identification as the Son of the living God. There is also a deeper sense of celebration in the Lord's affirmation because Peter's statement confirmed that the Father's work in His divine economy to bring all humanity into Jesus' self-aware understanding of His divine person was both operational and effectual.

PETER'S STATEMENT CONFIRMED THAT THE FATHER'S WORK IN HIS DIVINE ECONOMY TO BRING ALL HUMANITY INTO JESUS' SELF-AWARE UNDERSTANDING OF HIS DIVINE PERSON WAS BOTH OPERATIONAL AND EFFECTUAL.

13The kingdom that was coming and that the Lord spoke of was not one of observation (Luke 17:20), and it did not conform to the prevailing cultural expectations of the disciples (19:11; Acts 1:3, 6). Rather than being principally material, it was in the mind of the Lord, first and foremost, spiritual; it was rooted in the life of God resident within His humanity; that is, the kingdom was an expression of the life of God, of the authority that is immanent within His Triune Being. Only by receiving the life of God through regeneration can one both see and then enter into the kingdom (John 3:3, 5). After the disciples were regenerated by the Spirit unto a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Pet. 1:3), they had the capacity through faith to understand, because the Spirit of reality was guiding them into an understanding of the reality that is in Jesus (John 16:13; Eph. 4:21). Thus, they understood the true spiritual nature of the kingdom and subsequently wrote about it, without attempting to hide the cultural misunderstandings that they harbored during Jesus' earthly ministry. When the Lord spoke in His earthly ministry of the kingdom, He did not speak as a culturally bound Jew, but as the embodiment of God, as the kingdom of God in the man Jesus (Col. 1:19), and when the disciples became God-men through faith, possessing the life of God by receiving the life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45), they were able to see and enter into the kingdom because the kingdom had entered into them.

14From chapter 3 through chapter 18 of the Gospel of John, the word *sent* is used repeatedly. This sending should not be understood as the Father sending Jesus out for the initiation of His earthly ministry but rather as the Father sending His Son through incarnation, as spoken of in Romans 8:3. Each of these instances in the Gospel of John involve self-aware assertions by Jesus of His divine status because His sending was not only *from* the Father but *from with* the Father. When the Lord spoke of being sent by the Father in John 3:34; 4:34; 5:23-24, 30, 36-38; 6:29, 38-39, 44, 57; 7:16, 18, 28-29, 33; 8:16, 18, 26, 29, 42; 9:4; 10:36; 11:42; 12:44-45, 49; 13:20; 14:24; 15:21; 16:5; 17:3, 8, 18, 21, 23, 25; and 20:21, His sending was not only from the Father but also with the Father. This can be seen more clearly in the Greek word for *from* in 1:14, which says, "The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us (and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only Begotten from the Father), full of grace and reality." In a footnote to the word *from* in this verse, Witness Lee writes, "Gk. *para*, which means *by the side of*, implying *with;* hence, it is literally, *from with*. The Son not only is from God but also is with God. On the one hand, He is from God, and on the other hand, He is still with God (8:16b, 29; 16:32b)" (Recovery Version, note 5). The Lord's repeated references to being sent from with the Father indicate that He was fully aware of His divine status.

15The synoptic Gospels stress the humanity of Jesus; the Gospel of John stresses the divinity of Jesus. That the Synoptics stress His humanity could be an indication that in the decades immediately following His death and resurrection the question of His humanity was a much larger issue than the question of His divinity. This is not to suggest that the disciples did not think of Him as God at the time of the writing of the Synoptics but just that there were fewer questions about His divine status. Paul's response to various Gnostic heresies, which questioned the humanity of Jesus, not the divinity of Jesus, in his Epistle to the Colossians, would seem to support this view (1:19). In essence, in the early church the divinity of Jesus, in contrast to the

humanity of Jesus, was not a point in need of a multifaceted defense, such as the defense of His humanity as presented by the synoptic Gospels. In Matthew there is a defense of Jesus' humanity as a genuine king, a descendent of David, who would establish the kingdom of God on earth. In Mark there is a defense of Jesus' humanity as a genuine slave, who lived in the lowliest state of human existence and who served humanity to the point of giving His life as a ransom. And in Luke there is a defense of Jesus' humanity as a genuine man, a descendant of Adam, who was qualified as a perfect man, a spotless Lamb, to be a sacrifice for the sins of humanity. Even as the synoptic Gospels were addressing controversies concerning the humanity of Jesus, other heresies related to His divinity began to arise, and thus in the Gospel of John there is a definitive, yet independent, account, a unique, yet dissimilar, account, and a consistent, yet contextually varied, account related to the divinity of Jesus. There is only one God, and there is only one account that is focused on the divinity of Jesus; nevertheless, this one account has been sufficient throughout the history of the church to establish within the heart of every genuine believer a realization of the reality that this one God, who became flesh and tabernacled among us (1:14), is Jesus.

[16]In his interpretation of Romans 1:3-4, Ehrman focuses on the phrase *who was appointed the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness out of the resurrection of the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord* to suggest that this means that the early proclaimers of this "pre-Pauline creed" began to extol Christ as having a divine status (218), making Him equal with God, only after the resurrection. But this interpretation fails to take into account the dual status of Christ as both God and man, and specifically His status as God manifested in the flesh. This creed extols the divinization of Christ's humanity, a process that required humanity to come out of the seed of David through incarnation and the designation of this humanity as the Son of God in resurrection. Witness Lee's understanding upholds this process, accounting for both His divinity and His humanity:

> Before His incarnation Christ, the divine One, already was the Son of God (John 1:18; Rom. 8:3). By incarnation He put on an element, the human flesh, which had nothing to do with divinity; that part of Him needed to be sanctified and uplifted by passing through death and resurrection. By resurrection His human nature was sanctified, uplifted, and transformed. Hence, by resurrection He was designated the Son of God with His humanity (Acts 13:33; Heb. 1:5). His resurrection was His designation. Now, as the Son of God, He possesses humanity as well as divinity. By incarnation He brought God into man; by resurrection He brought man into God, that is, He brought His humanity into the divine sonship. In this way the only begotten Son of God was made the firstborn Son of God, possessing both divinity and humanity. (Recovery Version, Rom. 1:4, note 1)

In his interpretation of Philippians 2:6, Ehrman acknowledges that the phrase *who, existing in the form of God* "presents an incarnational understanding of Christ—that he was a preexistent divine being, an angel of God, who came to earth out of humble obedience and whom God rewarded by exalting him to an even higher level of divinity as a result" (258). This is an interpretation strained to avoid the obvious—that in His preexistence Christ was viewed by the church as divine in the fullest sense of God, not as something less than God yet somehow still divine. *Existing* "denotes existing from the beginning, implying the Lord's eternal preexistence," and *form* denotes "The expression, not the fashion, of God's being (Heb. 1:3), identified with the essence and nature of God's person and, hence, expressing them. This refers to Christ's deity" (Lee, Recovery Version, Phil. 2:6, notes 1 and 2).

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN STRESSES THE DIVINITY OF JESUS. IN THE EARLY CHURCH THE DIVINITY OF JESUS, IN CONTRAST TO THE HUMANITY OF JESUS, WAS NOT A POINT IN NEED OF A MULTIFACETED DEFENSE, SUCH AS PRESENTED BY THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS.

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A Faithful Response to an Ungodly Proposal

How God Became Jesus: The Real Origins of Belief in Jesus' Divine Nature—a Response to Bart Ehrman, by Michael F. Bird, Craig A. Evans, Simon J. Gathercole, Charles E. Hill, and Chris Tilling. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014. Print.

Bart D. Ehrman has made a name for himself by using his scholarly expertise and intellectual prowess to challenge the historicity of the New Testament and the authenticity of the Christian faith in the popular as well as academic arena. His latest book, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee*, argues that Jesus believed Himself to be no more than a human prophet of the coming "Son of Man" and that the early church, over the course of three centuries, gradually elevated Jesus from a deified man to "God Almighty" (Ehrman's designation for the monotheistic God, in contrast to the plethora of divine and semi-divine figures that frequented late-antiquity beliefs). Because Ehrman is a decorated academic and a gifted writer, his erudition often eclipses the problematic arguments that lurk at the foundation of his skeptical project. In *How God Became Jesus: The Real Origins of Belief in Jesus' Divine Nature—a Response to Bart Ehrman* (hereafter *Response*), a group of scholars offers a response to Ehrman, challenging some of his basic assumptions, pointing out the preponderance of evidence that stands against his basic thesis, and unmasking some of the hidden motives behind Ehrman's proposal. The articles in *Response* address a wide array of issues, and rather than considering them one by one, this review will follow Ehrman's historical narrative stage by stage, drawing on *Response* where appropriate. While minor quibbles could be raised, *Response* is a faithful and necessary challenge to Ehrman's book, narrowing the knowledge gap between Ehrman and his reader and placing them on more equal footing.

EHRMAN'S BASIC THESIS IS THAT CHRISTIAN BELIEF CONCERNING THE IDENTITY OF JESUS DEVELOPED GRADUALLY, WITH THIS IDENTITY BECOMING MORE AND MORE LOFTY WITH THE PASSAGE OF TIME.

Ehrman's Thesis

Ehrman's basic thesis is that Christian belief concerning the identity of Jesus developed gradually, with this identity becoming more and more lofty with the passage of time. Ehrman argues that Jesus believed Himself to be no more than a human prophet of the coming "Son of Man" and that early Christians gradually elevated His status to the divine in two ways, which might be called Ehrman's "time" thesis and "degree" thesis. According to the "time" thesis, Christians gradually understood Jesus to have been or have become God at an ever earlier point in time—at the beginning, it was thought that He was simply a man who became divine by virtue of His resurrection; not until later was it thought that He was a preexistent divine being who had become human. But Ehrman further argues that even to confess Jesus as a preexistent divine being is not to say that He is God Almighty. According to the "degree" thesis, the Christian understanding of the divine status of Jesus also gradually developed—at the beginning, it simply meant that He was a deified man, as pagan emperors were thought to have become upon their deaths; over time, however, the Christian confession concerning Jesus gradually elevated Him to a higher and higher status until He was confessed to be consubstantial with the Father at the fourth-century Council of Nicaea.

Before examining the details of Ehrman's narrative, it should be noted that Ehrman's title is a little misleading. Ehrman is not mainly interested in the question as to whether or not Jesus is in fact God. His answer to that question has long been an emphatic and resounding no. As Bird makes clear in his introductory chapter, Ehrman's question is a historical one: How did the church come to confess the divinity of Jesus, and how did it understand this divine status? (12). The question is a legitimate one, whether one believes or denies that Jesus is in fact divine, and the answer to this question has to be built not on the confession of faith but on the historical evidence. The evidence

accessible to us are primarily literary (including Christian and non-Christian, biblical and extra-biblical sources) and archeological—whatever archeology is available to confirm or to challenge the literary evidence. The confrontation between Ehrman and the authors of *Response* is not over the matter of faith but over the interpretation of historical evidence, and thus, the authors of *Response* challenge Ehrman from within his own world. *Response* does not simply declare that Jesus is Lord, as any Christian should be able to do; it also demonstrates that Ehrman's project has failed even from the perspective of a secular and critical study of the Bible and early Christian history.

Ehrman's thesis is easily discerned and elegant, and were it novel, he might be excused for its many weaknesses. But as Bird and Tilling point out, Ehrman's arguments are not new, nor do they represent scholarly consensus, having long been dismantled by other scholars in the field (13, 127). Ehrman simply neglects to cite or address the challenges that have long been raised to this thesis of gradual development, and the authors of *Response* often have to do little more than repeat these standard critiques. As an expert in the field, Ehrman can hardly be excused for not being familiar with these long-standing criticisms (in fact, he quotes from them when it suits his argument), and it is thus difficult to read his book as little more than an attempt to use his academic credentials and erudition to dissuade a potential seeker of the truth or to shake a young believer not yet firmly established in the faith.

THE AUTHORS OF *RESPONSE* CHALLENGE EHRMAN FROM WITHIN HIS OWN WORLD, DEMONSTRATING THAT EHRMAN'S PROJECT HAS FAILED EVEN FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A SECULAR AND CRITICAL STUDY OF THE BIBLE AND EARLY CHRISTIAN HISTORY.

The Biblical Evidence

It goes without saying that Ehrman does not read the New Testament as divine revelation but as an accidental collection of diverse ancient Near Eastern religious texts. In his view, these texts do not form a cohesive whole but, rather, contain differing and often contradictory positions. Careful attention to the various temporal strata in these texts, Ehrman believes, discloses a gradual progression in early Christian understandings of Jesus. Of course, Ehrman's book presents his preferred historical narrative as the conclusion of his long study of these texts, but given the evidence, this can hardly be the case. Ehrman's preferred historical narrative is his starting place, and having it in mind will help us understand some of the exegetical and historical moves that he makes throughout the book.

As is clear from the subtitle of his book, Ehrman believes that Jesus was no more than a "Jewish preacher from Galilee." Again, he is not arguing about who Jesus in fact was; he is arguing about who Jesus thought He was. Because Ehrman has spent a large portion of his career attacking the historicity of the Gospels, he cannot take the Gospels at face value in order to determine what Jesus thought concerning Himself. Instead, Ehrman attempts to reconstruct the "historical Jesus" behind the Gospel accounts using several criteria to identify "authentic" sayings of Jesus. As Bird points out, this project and Ehrman's chosen criteria have long been subjected to intense scrutiny and have been largely discarded even by the academic community because we have nothing outside the texts with which we can make such judgments (49-51). One must either accept or reject the Gospel texts, but Ehrman wants to do both. First, he arbitrarily applies his historical criteria to attack the authenticity of some of the accounts in the texts, but then he arbitrarily selects passages of his choosing, justifying them as authentic according to his arbitrary application of historical criteria, in order to construct the "historical Jesus" that he is looking for, as Albert Schweitzer long ago understood historical Jesus scholars to be doing (49). As an illustration of how this works, Ehrman argues as follows: In the Gospel of John, Jesus seems to teach that He is a preexistent divine being who is equal to the Father and who had in time become flesh. We know, according to Ehrman, that this view did not develop until much later. Therefore, the sayings in John cannot be historically accurate (46). It is clear, however, that a historical narrative that is supposed to be created by the texts is being imposed on those very texts themselves. It is certainly understandable

for Ehrman, as a non-Christian historian, to argue that John is not accurate because of its late writing, but not that it is inaccurate because it claims too much concerning Jesus. But, as Bird suggests, there is no "methodological consistency" in Ehrman's selection of his "authentic" sayings of Jesus (48). After throwing out the entire Gospel of John, Ehrman uses his "objective" criteria to select sayings from the synoptic Gospels that seem to suggest that Jesus was merely a human prophet, thus "proving" that Jesus did not think that He was divine.

In particular, Ehrman argues that the "Son of Man" spoken of by Jesus in various passages in the Gospels is not a self-designation but refers to another person altogether (61). Ehrman contends that Jesus was not Himself the "Son of Man" but a human prophet proclaiming and preparing the way for the coming "Son of Man." Bird rightfully counters that while this might work in some of the "Son of Man" passages, there are several such passages (many of them recognized as "authentic" passages even by skeptical scholars) that can hardly be read as anything other than being self-referential (63). Thus, even Ehrman's selection of selected "authentic" texts does not allow him to construct the Jesus that he needs in order to make his thesis work. Ehrman's methodology is already problematic, and even if granted, his argument still does not work. Even the passages selected according to his historic criteria demonstrate that Jesus understood Himself to be much more than Ehrman would have us believe. According to Bird, "the overwhelming testimony of the Jesus tradition is that Son of Man is an apocalyptically encoded way of Jesus self-describing his role as the one who embodies God's authority on earth, achieves God's salvation by his death and resurrection, and shares God's glory in his enthronement" (64-65).

THE TRUTH OF THE MATTER IS THAT THE TEXTS THAT SCHOLARS HAVE TYPICALLY IDENTIFIED AS CREED-LIKE OR HYMN-LIKE IN THE PAULINE CORPUS CONTAIN SOME OF THE HIGHEST CHRISTOLOGY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT.

The next earliest historical stratum after the "authentic" sayings of Jesus would be the understanding of the earliest Christians living and teaching before the writing of the New Testament. The problem is, there are no earlier sources than the New Testament. Ehrman argues that in the same way that we can reconstruct the "historical Jesus" behind the Gospels, so we can reconstruct the views of the earliest Christians behind the Pauline corpus by examining what biblical scholars have long suggested is creed-like or hymn-like material in Paul's Epistles. Though there is still considerable scholarly debate as to whether Paul is quoting this material or authoring it himself in his letters, Ehrman apparently holds the former view and thinks that if we gather all this material together, we can get a view of what the earliest Christians believed about Jesus. Again, Ehrman has criteria for identifying such material, and after examining it, he concludes that the earliest Christians believed that Jesus was simply a human who became divine by virtue of His resurrection from the dead (95).

Unfortunately for Ehrman, this thesis does not square with the evidence. As was the case with the "authentic" Jesus sayings, Ehrman has also selected pre-Pauline material that he thinks suits his thesis. It would have been much more appropriate to present all such passages from the whole of the Pauline corpus and then attempt to construct the earliest confession of the church concerning the divinity of Christ. Ehrman unsurprisingly spends most of his time with passages that he thinks align with his preconceived thesis. The truth of the matter is that the texts that scholars have typically identified as creed-like or hymn-like in the Pauline corpus contain some of the highest Christology in the New Testament. Ehrman, of course, knows of these passages, and he avoids them by suggesting that the pre-Pauline material is itself also layered. Thus, according to Ehrman, pre-Pauline texts that suggest that Jesus was "adopted" as God's Son at His resurrection must have come earlier than those that suggest He was a preexistent divine being. But Hill rightly objects that there are no grounds for this position. Ehrman's use of form to identify pre-Pauline material is justifiable, but he uses content alone for his further stratification of this pre-Pauline material, ordering it according to his own developmental theory (181). Further, Ehrman is convinced that several of these passages have been modified by Paul, and Ehrman is

even more convinced that he himself is able to detect the modifications and unmask the true nature of early adoptionist Christology (104-105). The circularity of his approach should once again be obvious to anyone who takes a moment to consider what Ehrman is doing.

The next historical stratum in the New Testament after the "authentic" Jesus sayings and the pre-Pauline material is Paul himself, whose Epistles are some of the earliest writings in the New Testament. But because Paul does not fit well into Ehrman's time thesis, the next phase of the development is seen by returning once again to the Gospels, this time not as a resource for reconstructing the "historical Jesus" but as a resource for understanding what the authors of the Gospels themselves believed and taught concerning Jesus. Even if some of the stories about Jesus in the Gospels fail to meet Ehrman's standards of historicity, they still serve as evidence of what the early Christians confessed concerning Jesus. Ehrman argues that while the earliest Christians believed Jesus to have been made divine at His resurrection, the Gospel of Mark, which Ehrman holds to be the earliest of the Gospels, presents a Jesus made divine at His baptism, and the Gospels of Matthew and Luke assert that He was made divine at His conception (96). Not until the Gospel of John, Ehrman argues, do we get a preexistent divine being.

Ehrman bases his argument for a baptism adoption in Mark on the fact that this Gospel does not speak of the virgin birth (as do Matthew and Luke) and, in his view, does not indicate the divine status of Jesus until the baptismal declaration, "You are My Son, the Beloved" in Mark 1:11 (98). But as Gathercole rightly protests, this is an absurd suggestion, particularly because in the Gospel of Mark itself, this same declaration is made once again at Jesus' transfiguration in 9:7 (98-99). Ehrman might argue that this second declaration is merely an affirmation of the first, but it would be hard to maintain that while the second declaration merely recognized an already existing reality, the first actually brought it into being. Furthermore, his argument concerning the absence of a reference to the virgin birth is a weak argument from silence. Mark is the tersest of the Gospels and is generally uninterested in the origin of Jesus. Using Ehrman's logic, a similar equally silly argument could then be made that Matthew and John did not believe that the Lord ascended, simply because their Gospels do not mention the ascension. The Gospels each have their particular emphasis, and these emphases govern what is included in their narratives.

Gathercole further argues that Mark believed Jesus to be divine not only from His conception but from all eternity using the "I have come" statements that appear prominently in both Mark and Matthew. Of course, since these statements were made directly by Jesus, the argument would also apply to Jesus' own self-understanding, provided that Ehrman would acknowledge them as "authentic" sayings. These passages, Gathercole argues, cannot be reduced to statements about His coming to this or that place or city. Several of them undeniably speak of Jesus' understanding of His whole life and ministry, and as Gathercole points out, no prophet in the whole of the Old Testament ever spoke in this way. The only ones to do so were the angelic messengers of God (97-98). Against this background, it is clear that Jesus was divine not only before His baptism but even before His birth, and because these "I have come" statements figure prominently in the Gospel of Matthew as well, the same argument holds for it. This is a helpful argument, although there is a certain irony in it. Though the argument challenges Ehrman's time thesis, it does not address his degree thesis, and Ehrman would likely be very happy to hear that the "I have come" statements of Jesus are best understood in the context of angelic missions in the Old Testament. Ehrman thinks that even if parts of the New Testament confess Jesus as a preexistent divine being, this is still a far stretch from the confession at Nicaea. For Ehrman, the preexistent Christ in the New Testament is more like an angel than like God Almighty.

EHRMAN THINKS THAT EVEN IF PARTS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CONFESS JESUS AS A PREEXISTENT DIVINE BEING, THIS IS FAR FROM THE CONFESSION AT NICAEA. FOR EHRMAN, THE PREEXISTENT CHRIST IS MORE LIKE AN ANGEL THAN LIKE GOD ALMIGHTY.

We see this most clearly in the way that Ehrman reads Paul. According to Ehrman, Paul thought that Jesus was divine before becoming human but that He was little more than an angel. Because of this, Ehrman has to admit that belief in a preexistent Christ was already established by A.D. 50 (119). But as suggested above, this presents a major difficulty to Ehrman's thesis concerning the synoptic Gospels. Ehrman makes it sound as if a clear development took place from the concept of the earliest Christians (who thought Christ to be divine after His resurrection) to Mark (who thought Him to be divine after His baptism) to Matthew and Luke (who thought Him to be divine after His conception) to John (who thought Him to be divine before His conception). Thus, Ehrman's development is more like a retrogressed redevelopment. Perhaps he could make the argument that these texts represent differing expressions of early Christian belief in Jesus, but he cannot make the claim that they evidence the sequential development that he posits. He bases his argument for Paul's Christology on two of Paul's texts and hardly examines anything else in the Pauline corpus. The first text is Galatians 4:14: "You received me as an angel of God, indeed as Christ Jesus." Ehrman makes this verse the core of Paul's Christology and argues that because the two phrases are in apposition, C*hrist Jesus* is synonymous with *an angel of God* (121-122). The second text that Ehrman uses is Philippians 2:6, arguing that we should translate the Greek as "grasped after" and understand it to mean that equality with God was not even something that Christ attempted to lay hold of, much less had in His possession (146). In effect, Ehrman's argument is that over the course of the writing of the New Testament, the view of Jesus gradually developed from a deified man (in the pre-Pauline material) to a pre-existent angel, neither of which would have startled anyone in late antiquity.

According to Ehrman, Jesus was little more than an angel. But the apostles strictly forbade the worship of angels, and Jesus is portrayed as having authority over the angels and receiving the worship forbidden to them.

Ehrman claims that strict monotheism was a late invention and that it is applied to late antiquity anachronistically. Late antiquity was full of "divine" beings, and to make his point Ehrman quotes several passages from contemporary sources of both the Greco-Roman world and second-temple Judaism in an attempt to negate the singularity of Jesus. It is a common tactic among biblical scholars who intend to undermine the particularity of the Scriptures. In an attempt to suggest that the Christian Scriptures are little more than recycled ancient myths, a number of extra-biblical parallels to biblical themes or ideas are presented without adequate attention to their differences. Several articles in *Response* rightly point out that Ehrman's contention that strict monotheism is anachronistically applied to late antiquity is simply historically inaccurate. Bird and Tilling make it clear that not only were the Jews strict monotheists despite the fact that they believed in angels, demons, and other intermediary figures, but even philosophically minded pagans were strict monotheists despite the fact that some of them were willing to give a place to the pantheon of the gods (28-29, 126). The writers of the New Testament were far more familiar with this context than modern scholars are, but that did not in any way lessen their appreciation for who Jesus was. In the New Testament, Jesus is constantly worshipped or blasphemed for the claims that He makes regarding Himself (99). In like manner, the apostles were persecuted by both pagans and Jews for the novelty of their teaching. The apostles strictly forbade the worship of angels, and in various New Testament books Jesus is portrayed as having authority over the angels and receiving the worship forbidden to them (27, 33-34, 37).

To return to Paul, Tilling's two articles in *Response* highlight the absurdity of Ehrman's reading. Both Galatians 4:14 and Philippians 2:6 are open to other more natural readings, and even if Ehrman's readings do stand, these two verses have to be squared with the rest of Paul's writings. Tilling emphasizes again and again that Philippians 2:6-11 is the only extended treatment of a Pauline text in Ehrman's book (147). Even by considering these texts within the context of the books in which we find them, these readings simply cannot stand. Looking at the Pauline corpus as a whole, Tilling argues that the Christ-Church relationship is so easily mapped onto the God-Israel relationship

that it is hardly possible to argue that Paul understood Jesus to be anything less than God Himself: "This correspondence between God and Christ relational language is found not just in one passage in Paul's letters. We can find it in almost every chapter of every Pauline letter in the canon!" (142).

Bird makes a similar case for the degree of Christ's divinity in the Gospels, arguing that rather than looking for single verses that prove that Jesus is God, verses that can easily be dismissed as inauthentic by skeptics, it is more profitable to look at the portrait conveyed in the Gospels as a whole. While the supposed political dimensions of Jesus' messiahship are often used to argue against His divinity, Bird points out that the longing for the kingdom of God that pervaded second-temple Judaism was not a longing for a merely political kingdom with a political king but for the restoration of the kingdom of God, in which God Himself reigns (56-57). Jesus, by locating Himself within this expectation, by reconfiguring divine commands, by daring to exercise the divine prerogative to forgive sins, was, Bird argues, "conscious that in [Himself] the God of Israel was finally returning to Zion…to renew the covenant and to fulfill the promises God had made to the nation about a new exodus" (52, 59). Bird thus rightly concludes that the Gospel of John, though certainly more direct in its identification of Jesus as the God of Israel, did not introduce a later development but the clear articulation of what was already present in the synoptic Gospels themselves (68).

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN, THOUGH CERTAINLY MORE DIRECT IN ITS IDENTIFICATION OF JESUS AS THE GOD OF ISRAEL, DID NOT INTRODUCE A LATER DEVELOPMENT BUT THE CLEAR ARTICULATION OF WHAT WAS ALREADY PRESENT IN THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS.

The Historical Evidence

Ehrman turns from the biblical text to early Christian history to continue the trajectory of his grand narrative from the close of the canon to the Council of Nicaea. As with the biblical text, intentional selectivity is again necessary to support his thesis, and here in particular the authors of *Response* are helpful because the knowledge gap between author and reader is likely much greater than it is when dealing with the biblical text. Anyone well versed in the New Testament should be able to push against Ehrman's thesis regarding the internal development of the Scriptures, but this is much less likely when it comes to early Christian history.

Ehrman characterizes early Christian history as a vicious cycle in which previously acceptable claims about Jesus (e.g., that He was an angel) are later ruled heretical as Christology climbs higher and higher and as Christianity constantly rejects and persecutes earlier versions of itself (152). In order to make this history work, Ehrman makes several historically inaccurate claims. He claims, for example, that the Ebionites taught something they never in fact did (at least according to extant sources), claims that the first form of Christianity was modalistic, and isolates various statements from the church fathers to skew their teaching in whatever way best suits his thesis (161, 164, 166). Hill devotes considerable time in his chapters to righting some of these wrongs and to presenting a more nuanced account of the early church fathers. But his strongest challenge is to Ehrman's basic characterization of early Christian history as an embarrassed attempt to deal with what Ehrman calls "ortho-paradoxes" (such as the declaration that Jesus is both God and man or the affirmation that God is one and three), which the church canonized when, according to Ehrman, it recognized a diverse set of texts without a consistent position on the status of Jesus (189). But as Hill rightly points out, the Christological "problem" does not arise simply because one book claims that He was a man, and one that He was God. The "paradoxes" are not the result of the juxtaposition of different and differing books. They appear within particular books (perhaps all of them), many times in the very same passage (178-181). The church thus did not create these "paradoxes" by constructing the canon; they lie at the very heart of the Christian faith. Ehrman's account of early Christian history is able to stand only if his thesis about christological development in the New Testament is valid (i.e., that various books convey sequentially differing portraits of who Jesus was). But as has been shown, his account of such a christological development in the New Testament simply

is not valid. There can be little doubt that the church's understanding and teaching concerning Christ developed over time, but this development did not go beyond what is contained in the New Testament. Rather than the revelation of the Scriptures changing with time, it is the church's understanding of the revelation of the Scriptures that develops with time. The history of the early Christian church is thus better seen as the gradual development and hard-won defense of an account able to embrace the whole of the canon of the New Testament, including its seeming paradoxes. What gave the various heretical teachings such potency was that they were founded on notions in the Scriptures. They were ultimately rejected because they were based on selected portions of the New Testament without giving credence to its entirety, much like Ehrman's methodology. These "paradoxes" were not an embarrassment to the early Christians, and no attempt was made to hide them or to quickly "resolve" them; these mysterious paradoxes are at the very core of the Christian faith, and the church fathers endeavored diligently to explain them and fought vigorously to defend them (185).

Finally, Hill addresses Ehrman's epilogue, which makes the odd claim that the confession of Jesus' divinity resulted in the persecution of the Jews (190). As Hill points out, the argument is not historically accurate. Numerous scholars have demonstrated that the ascendancy of Christianity in the Roman Empire had little impact on the treatment of the Jews, and Hill suggests that even if it did, it is hard to believe that Christian Rome would have done any less had it believed the Jews to have simply killed a human Messiah rather than God in the flesh (192, 195). Even if the divinity of Christ was the pretext for the persecution of the Jews, what bearing does such historical consequence have on the truth of the proposition that Jesus was God? As Hill contends, the church's historical attitude toward God's old-covenant people is deserving of attention but not in a book on early Christology (190). Ehrman's epilogue is little more than an attempt to add a moral layering to his biblical and historical case for disregarding the Christian faith and following him in his journey of "enlightened" de-conversion not only for our own sakes but for the good of all mankind. Ehrman's case fails on all fronts, and this final attempt makes his project look desperate.

THERE CAN BE LITTLE DOUBT THAT THE CHURCH'S UNDERSTANDING AND TEACHING CONCERNING CHRIST DEVELOPED OVER TIME, BUT THIS DEVELOPMENT DID NOT GO BEYOND WHAT IS CONTAINED IN THE NEW TESTAMENT.

Conclusion

In the end Hill's conclusion is sound: although Ehrman does not disclose his developmental theory until the end of his book (181),

> this presupposed theory of christological development determines all of Ehrman's historical/theological judgments throughout the book. And so, the problem of a rigidly applied but unproven chronology of belief about Jesus forms a crack that extends throughout his historical reconstruction of early developments in Christology. (184)

Ehrman has strategically selected biblical texts and historical evidence to construct a historical narrative that few scholars would accept (besides those in his camp).

The scholarly guild rarely writes something that is accessible and interesting enough to appeal to a more popular audience. Consequently, when the likes of Ehrman are the ones doing so, their particular agenda becomes a driving force for popular opinion, strengthening the resolve of those who put down the truth in unrighteousness, damaging believers still weak in the faith, and, as Bird points out in his introduction, giving fuel to anti-Christian factions in places like the Middle East, where it is a dangerous thing to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (7). More biblical scholars and historians of Christianity need to set aside the excuse that popular literature is beneath them and follow the example of the authors of *Response* to give adequate answers to works such as Ehrman's.

by Mitchell Kennard