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How Jesus Became God: One Scholar's View

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While Bart Ehrman's book snatched up the memorable title *How Jesus Became God* (and, in a marketing tour de force, was published simultaneously with a response book cleverly titled *How God Became Jesus*), his was by no means the first book on this subject, or even with a title of this sort. Larry Hurtado published a collection of essays with a question for a title: *How On Earth Did Jesus Become a God?* Before that, Maurice Casey described the process as being *From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God*. And James D. G. Dunn wrote before that about *Christology in the Making*.

With these four books, one encounters some of the major issues and options in the domain of New Testament Christology. Let me enumerate some of them:

- Was "high Christology" present from the beginning or a late development?
- Was an incarnational Christology present as early as Paul, or does it first emerge in John? Is it an early development or a late one?
- Was the exalted view of Jesus developed by Jewish Christians, or does it reflect Gentile perspectives?
- Was the exalted view of Jesus compatible with, a variation within, or a departure from Jewish monotheism – assuming one thinks that first-century Jewish monotheism was a thing?

Scholars have offered a wide array of answers to these questions, in part because of disagreements about what key texts mean, in part because of disagreements about what the earliest Christians assumed, and in part because our interest in processes which occurred *behind* the New Testament texts, and which are therefore no longer accessible to us, except by way of deduction from the texts themselves.

For the purpose of a seminar, there is no way to do justice to all of the key debates. If I were to dive into Philippians 2:6-11 alone, we would barely scratch the surface. And so, instead of seeking to cover every detail, in this seminar paper I will offer a brief overview of my understanding of the processes that take us from the historical Jesus to the Council of Nicaea – focusing almost entirely on the snapshots of this unfolding Christological development that we have in the New Testament, but recognizing that there is both a before and an after, bookends of the New Testament which in turn provide important clues about what happened in that early period - and also about what had not yet happened.

The Historical Jesus, Paul, and the Synoptic Gospels

Paul is our earliest source and we cannot simply step past him, in either direction, even if we feel that the Synoptic Gospels may represent a more conservative view of Jesus than we find in Paul's letters. The difference between Paul and the Gospels may be accounted for in a number of different ways – for instance, in terms of the Synoptics reflecting more directly the impact of and recollections and traditions about the historical figure of Jesus, while Paul's Christology reflects convictions about Jesus' exaltation. Since there is no way to disentangle them or settle such matters in the abstract in advance, I recommend considering these three – Paul, the Synoptics, and the historical Jesus – in conjunction with one another.

Paul may not be as far removed from the Synoptics as is sometimes thought (and we shall consider in a moment whether the Gospel of John is as far from either as is sometimes assumed.) If one reads Paul's letters while trying to avoid reading back into them later creeds and dogmas, we can see that he depicts Jesus as one who has been exalted to heaven to a status which, on the one hand, is greater than any which Jesus previously had, and on the other hand, is second to God. The two clearest presentations of this are in the hymn or encomium in Philippians 2:6-11, and in 1 Corinthians 15:23-28.

The Philippians passage has been the focus of extensive debate, much of which has focused on the question of whether Jesus is depicted as pre-existent. Unfortunately, many interpreters have conflated pre-existence with divinity in their treatment of the passage. Yet there is strong evidence that the depiction of the Messiah as pre-existent found in the Parables (or Similitudes) of Enoch pre-dates Paul, and that Paul was influenced by those ideas (see James A. Waddell, *The Messiah: A Comparative Study of the Enochic Son of Man and the Pauline Kyrios*, T&T Clark, 2011). And so the Philippians passage may regard Jesus as pre-existent as the Messiah, rather than as a divine hypostasis (or whatever other term one might prefer).

The Gospel of Matthew shows evidence of the influence of the Enochic tradition as well, and yet does not depict Jesus as pre-existent, perhaps indicating that such language conveyed first and foremost foreordination by God and was not taken literally by everyone, or at the very least, that the implications of taking such language literally were not yet explored, as they would be by the author of the Gospel of John.

In the Gospels, we encounter another major strand in Christology: the idea that Jesus had been indwelt (one might even say "possessed") by the Spirit of God. The Gospels mention the view that Jesus was a prophet, and provide hints that Jesus may have understood himself in such terms. Prophets were often thought of as serving as vessels through which the Spirit of God would speak, at times in the first person. Some of the utterances attributed to Jesus in the Gospels may fit this model – for instance, the saying about destroying and rebuilding the temple, or that about gathering the inhabitants of Jerusalem as a hen gathers her chicks.

Within at most a couple of decades of the death of Jesus, we find Christians thinking of him both as a pre-existent human being (if the consensus understanding of Paul's Christology is

correct), and as a human being who was indwelt by the pre-existent Spirit of God. I would suggest that it is the intertwining of those two strands, more than anything else, which is responsible for the directions that later Christology would take.

The Gospel of John

The Gospel of John, however much it may reflect developments beyond other New Testament texts, is still closer to them in time – and, I would argue, in viewpoint – than to the creed of Nicaea (see James D. G. Dunn’s famous essay, “Let John Be John,” on the need to hear the Gospel of John’s voice on its own terms).

In the Gospel of John, we see precisely the two threads mentioned above coming to prominence, and we see a number of specific features from earlier texts taken up and carried further or utilized in creative ways. The Fourth Gospel presents:

- Jesus as the one whom “the only true God” sent.
- Jesus as the Son of Man who pre-existed.
- Jesus as one who does not receive the divine name when exalted after his resurrection, but had been given it previously, so that his exaltation is a “return to where he was before.”
- Jesus as the embodiment of God’s Word and/or Spirit.

The last point is particularly important. Even in later authors like Justin Martyr, a clear distinction between various personified divine attributes had not yet been drawn. And so there is reason to think that, if the author of the Gospel of John had asked *when* “the Word became flesh,” he might have responded, “when John the Baptist saw the Spirit descend and remain on him.” (On this see further the discussions by Charles Talbert, Francis Watson, and Reginald Fuller.)

John has made some creative developments, and we must set aside for the moment the question of what may have motivated the author to use traditional motifs and ideas in these creative ways (see further *John’s Apologetic Christology* for a treatment of this topic). For our purposes, we need only see that the author presents Jesus as simultaneously the pre-existent Messiah who came into the world, and the embodiment of the Word and/or Spirit of God. This raises the question of how the two are related. Is the pre-existent Messiah born in the same manner as everyone else? If so, is what pre-exists the “soul” of the Messiah? How does the person of the Messiah relate to the person(ification) of God’s Word? Was the pre-existent Messiah already one with God’s Word/Wisdom/Spirit? Did both come to dwell in/as the human being Jesus simultaneously?

It seems likely to me that it is the connection of the two so that they become inseparable that leads to some Christians coming to view the Word as the Son, a second divine person. To some extent, that language already existed. But it was never taken very literally, and so ultimately the personified divine attributes were merely extensions of the one God active in creation. Philo could thus talk of the Logos as “neither uncreated like God, nor created like you, but between

the two extremes” (*Who is the Heir of Divine Things?* 206), language that is quite close to John’s talk of the Word as simultaneously “with God” and “God.”

The need to move away from such ambiguous both/and language, and draw a firm dividing line that placed the Word/Son either on the side of God or the side of creation, did not emerge with the Gospel of John, in which such language is offered with confidence that the paradox is acceptable. It emerges rather in debates about Gnosticism and emanations and the correlated question of whether creation took place out of nothing. It is the development of the doctrine of *creation ex nihilo* which forces the issue that leads to the Council of Nicaea.

Before then, but subsequent to John, we find a great variety of Christologies being tried out. We know them by labels such as Adoptionism, Monarchianism, Sabellianism, and so on. What it is easy to forget is that the Christians of the second and third centuries were seeking to find ways of resolving the issues that resulted both from the presentation of Jesus in individual writings that later became part of the canon, and the need to correlate and make sense of the different things said in those writings in relation to one another. By the time we get to the Gospel of John, we still appear to be dealing with ideas that could each separately have been uncontroversial in a Jewish context: the pre-existence of the Messiah, the bestowal of the divine name on a principle agent, and the activity of one or more of God’s personified attributes in a prophet. It is the combination of them, considered in the context of debates about creation and the felt need for a clearer dividing line between the Creator and everything else, that ultimately leads to Trinitarianism.

But we must remind ourselves that, when the Gospel of John was composed, that had not yet happened. What was controversial in that time was not the ideas themselves, but their application to Jesus. No one at that time felt the need to draw a sharp *ontological* dividing line between God and the Logos, or between the Logos and creation. To the extent that there was a strict dividing line that differentiated Jewish monotheism from the beliefs of others in the ancient world, it was a line not of theoretical essence but of allegiance and devotion. Jews expressed their “monotheism” by refusing to offer sacrifices to any but the one God. Since we find no evidence of sacrifice *to* Jesus in early Christian literature, we find nothing that unambiguously represents a redefinition of this distinctive Jewish expression of exclusive allegiance. If anything, Jesus is depicted as the sacrifice offered *to* God, not as recipient of sacrifice himself.

We started with the question of “how Jesus became God.” I would suggest that we find brought together in early Christian literature the two main kinds of exalted mediator figures that were known in Judaism: exalted agents clearly separate from God, and personified divine attributes that were extensions of God (on this see Larry Hurtado’s famous treatment of the evidence in *One God, One Lord*). Brought together in connection with the person of Jesus, the two begin to blend and blur together. We have snapshots of that process in the early Christian literature. But I am not sure that any of them captures precisely the moment when they first become indistinguishable. And so the evidence provides clearer evidence of *how* Jesus became God, than precisely *when*.

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