

# Introduction

## *The “Deification” of Jesus Christ*

*“Gods, too, are created by verse.”*

—OVID, *PONT.* 4.8.55

The topic of this study is how early Christians imagined, constructed, and promoted Jesus as a deity in their literature from the first to the third centuries CE. My line of inquiry focuses on how Greco-Roman conceptions of divinity informed this construction. It is my contention that early Christians creatively applied to Jesus traits of divinity that were prevalent and commonly recognized in ancient Mediterranean culture. Historically speaking, I will refer to the Christian application of such traits to Jesus as the “deification” of Jesus Christ.

Although some Christian authors cited Tiberius’s attempt to deify Jesus with a kind of curious approval, it was for them—and is still for many Christians today—a theological scandal to speak of the deification of Jesus.<sup>1</sup> Only a few Christians, it seems, were comfortable with the idea that Jesus became a god. Some disciples of Theodotus of Byzantium, for instance, said that Jesus became god when the Spirit descended on him at the Jordan, while others said that his deification occurred after he rose from the dead.<sup>2</sup> According to both Pauline and Johannine traditions, however, Jesus did not “become god,” or “a god,” but was originally “in the form of God” (Phil. 2:6) and “in the beginning with God” and “(a) god” himself (John 1:1). According to Celsus, an early critic of Christianity, Christians did not view as “gods” figures like Heracles and Dionysus since they had once been men (*Cels.* 3.22). Origen, his opponent, does not disagree. Christ, insofar as he is the Word incarnate, never transitioned from human to god. Although in one of her oracles, Hecate (a popular goddess associated with night and magic) once declared that Jesus’ soul became immortal (i.e., deified) after his death, later Christian theologians pointedly rejected this idea

1. See Tert., *Apol.* 5.1–2; 21.14, 29–30; cf. *Spect.* 30; Eus., *Hist. eccl.* 2.2.2–6.

2. Hippolytus, *Haer.* 7.35.2.

(Aug., *Civ.* 19.22–23; cf. Eus., *Dem. ev.* 3.7).<sup>3</sup> In a sermon attributed to John Chrysostom we explicitly find the declaration that “Christ did not become god from human advancement—perish the thought. . . . [W]e preach not a human made into god (οὐκ ἄνθρωπον ἀποθεωθέντα), but confess a god made human.”<sup>4</sup>

Despite such explicit theological resistance to Jesus’ deification, however, some early Christians had few qualms about assimilating Jesus to popular deified persons. In the words of Justin Martyr,

When we claim also that the Word, which is the first offspring of God, was born without intercourse, Jesus Christ our teacher—and that he was crucified and died and rose again and ascended into heaven—we report nothing at all novel (οὐ . . . καινόν τι) beyond those said by you to be sons of Zeus. For you know how many sons of Zeus your honored poets claim there are: Hermes, the interpreting Word and teacher of all; Asclepius, who—though he was a healer—was struck by a thunderbolt and ascended into heaven; Dionysus who was torn in pieces; Heracles, who in flight from his toils committed himself to the fire; the Dioscuri, the sons of Leda; Perseus, son of Danae; and Bellerophon, who, though from human beings, [rose to heaven] on the horse Pegasus. What do we say of Ariadne, and those who, like her, are said to have become stars? What of your deceased emperors, whom you deem fit to immortalize? (*1 Apol.* 21.1–3, my trans.)

Jesus, Justin continues, is worthy of being called “son of God” on account of his wisdom (δία σοφίαν) (*1 Apol.* 22.1). He is the logos born from God like Hermes the “announcing logos.” The so-called virgin birth is “in common with Perseus,” and Jesus’ healings are “similar to those said to have been done by Asclepius.” Even Jesus’ crucifixion is parallel to the sufferings of Heracles and Asclepius (*1 Apol.* 22.6).

As is natural in an apologetic text, Jesus competitively outperforms his rivals (*1 Apol.* 21, 25). Nevertheless, in Justin’s very attempt “to go one up” on his opponents, he acquiesces to a deeper assimilation: Jesus not only fits the pattern of other deified heroes, he became the model for his daimonically

3. The oracle is reconstructed by Gustav Wolff, *Porphyrii de philosophia ex oraculis haurienda* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1962), 180–83.

4. John Chrysostom, “In illud, Memor fui dei, et delectatus sum (Ps. 76.4),” in *PG* 61.697.38–42. Cf. John Damascene, *Orth. fid.* 46:36–39.

devised competitors.<sup>5</sup> Thus if Justin was *theologically* opposed to the idea of Jesus' deification, he was still prepared to *apply common cultural conceptions* about what exhibited other persons as divine to establish the superior deity of his lord.<sup>6</sup> In arguing this way, Justin was not alone. As I hope to demonstrate in this study, many other Christian writers—including those of the New Testament—consciously or unconsciously re-inscribed divine traits of Mediterranean gods and deified figures into their discourse concerning Jesus. The result was the discursive deification of Jesus Christ.

As the adjective “discursive” indicates, the term “deification” does not mean that Jesus was thought to *become* a god (a theological statement), but that Jesus came to be *depicted* as a god (a historical judgment). Both kinds of deification are “processes” of a sort. One process is “emic” and focuses on Jesus in Christian theology (or christology), the other is “etic” and focuses on the conceptions of historical Christian communities that worshiped Jesus.<sup>7</sup> Although from an emic point of view, early Christians accepted the unique divinity of Jesus, from an etic perspective they also played an active role in constructing that divinity through their literary depictions of him. The poet Ovid once wrote that “gods, too, are created by verse” (*di quoque carminibus . . . fiunt*) (*Pont.* 4.8.55). What was true for other gods was also true for the god Jesus: in their gospels, epistles, apocalypses, poems, and apologetic tractates, Christians constructed what it meant for Jesus to be divine using the language, values, and concepts that were common in Greco-Roman culture.

For the historian of religion, then, the “event” of deification is not when the logos became flesh in Mary's womb, or when Jesus was transfigured, or even when he rose from the grave. Rather, the event is continually actualized in the early Christian narratives that *portray* Jesus' divine conception, transfiguration, and resurrection. The “event” of deification is thus part of church history.

5. Justin views the tales of deified men as daimonic imitations of Christ learned from Hebrew prophecy (*1 Apol.* 54, 64). On this apologetic tactic, see Annette Yoshiko Reed, “The Trickery of the Fallen Angels and the Demonic Mimesis of the Divine: Aetiology, Demonology, and Polemics in the Writings of Justin Martyr,” *J ECS* 12 (2004): 141–71.

6. See further Jean Pépin, “Christian Judgments on the Analogies between Christianity and Pagan Mythology,” in *Mythologies*, eds. Yves Bonnefoy and Wendy Doniger, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 2:655–56.

7. “Emic constructs,” according to J. W. Lett, “are descriptions and analyses conducted in terms of the conceptual schemes and categories considered meaningful by the participants in the event or situation being described and analyzed. Etic constructs are descriptions and analyses conducted in terms of the conceptual schemes and categories considered meaningful by the community of scientific [I would say “scholarly”] observers” (*The Human Enterprise: A Critical Introduction to Anthropological Theory* [Boulder, CO: Westview, 1987], 62).

Moreover, it is repeatable—it can reoccur with every fresh reading of the texts that portray Jesus as a divine being.

These textual “events” will be the focus of my study. In each chapter, I will provide a thick description of important Christian narratives that portray Jesus with the traits of typical Greco-Roman deities and deified men. I will not be offering a diachronic history of how early Christians came to perceive Jesus to be (a) god. Instead, my procedure is synchronic—focused on texts as individual “moments” of Jesus’ deification in early Christian literature. The moments that I will focus on follow the course of Jesus’ own life: his divine conception (ch. 1), his childhood zeal for honor (ch. 2), his miraculous benefactions (ch. 3), his epiphanic transfiguration (ch. 4), his immortalizing resurrection (ch. 5), and his reception of a divine name after his ascension (ch. 6).<sup>8</sup>

## TWO MODES OF EARLY CHRISTIAN DEIFICATION

At least two modes of deification appear in early Christian texts. The first might be called “deification through exaltation” and the second “deification through pre-existence.” It appears that early Christians quickly came to depict Jesus as a preexistent divine being. He was “in the form of God” enjoying a state of equality with God (Phil. 2:6). The Apostle Paul claimed that the world was made through him (1 Cor. 8:6; cf. Col. 1:16; John 1:10). In the Johannine tradition, Jesus came to be identified with the logos who exists “in the beginning with God” (John 1:1-3). Based on such traditions, one might ask whether it is more appropriate to speak of a “*homonification*” rather than of a *deification* of Jesus. Indeed, within the cosmology envisaged by ancient Christians, it probably was less appropriate to ask, “How did a human become a deity?” than it was to ask: *cur deus homo*—“Why did a god become human?”

In a historical study, however, one cannot begin with a Christian theologoumenon (i.e., that there is a divine being called the “logos” or the “son” who has eternally existed alongside God and is able to be incarnated). History deals with events and ideas in a world conditioned by the categories of time and space—our world. At some point in time, a historian may grant, the logos may have become flesh, but until Jesus began manifesting his deity in first-century Galilee, his followers could not proclaim that divinity to the world. To be sure, one could examine the history of the *theological tradition* of Jesus’ preexistent state and subsequent incarnation—but this is not the topic of this study.<sup>9</sup> My

8. The depiction of Jesus as a deity in his baptism has been helpfully explored by Edward Dixon, “Descending Spirit and Descending Gods: A ‘Greek’ Interpretation of the Spirit’s ‘Descent as a Dove’ in Mark 1:10,” *JBL* 128 (2009): 759–80.

approach assumes that at some point(s) in time, early Christians intuited that Jesus was a divine being, and in turn began in their literature to *attribute* a preexistent divinity to Jesus—and in this way to deify him.

In addition to deification by preexistence, early Christians also spoke of deification through exaltation. This is an equally Christian and equally theological way of speaking about Jesus' divinity—but one (it might be argued) more analogous to the kind of historical and literary deification I illustrate in this study. According to Romans 1:4, Jesus was “appointed” (ὀρισθέντος) son of God from (or by, ἐκ) his resurrection from the dead.<sup>10</sup> In another tradition, God “made” (ἐποίησεν) Jesus “lord”—apparently after his resurrection (Acts 2:36). In a third text, God “installed” (ἔθηκεν) Jesus as heir of the universe (Heb. 1:2). After his atoning death and resurrection, Jesus was exalted to God's right hand, and “became” (γενόμενος) superior to the angels by inheriting a preeminent name (vv. 3–4; cf. Phil. 2:10–11). Such appointments to so high a status (i.e., that of cosmic vice-regent who receives worship) literarily represent Jesus' deification in early Christian literature. They represent, in other words, some sort of promotion of Jesus from a lower condition into a higher, divine one.

These two patterns of Christian deification (exaltation and preexistence) are juxtaposed with no hint of tension in what is perhaps our earliest christological hymn, Phil. 2:6–11. Here Jesus, “in God's form” and equal to God, becomes human (or humanoid, ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων) in obedience to God. As a result of his obedience—even unto death—the human Jesus is exalted to heaven, receives “the name above every name” and is worshipped by beings on every tier of existence. In the brief compass of this passage, Jesus is both hominified and deified. He could be *hominified* because, historically speaking, some Christians as early as the 40s ce identified Jesus with a preexistent divine being endowed with God's form and glory (Phil. 2:6).<sup>11</sup> In the hymn, Jesus is also *deified* by being exalted, worshipped, and receiving “the name above every

9. The topic is well researched. See R. G. Hamerton-Kelly, *Pre-existence, Wisdom, and the Son of Man: A Study of the Idea of Pre-existence in the New Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973); Jürgen Habermann, *Präexistenzaussagen im Neuen Testament* (Frankfurt am Main: Bern, 1990); Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Born Before All Time? The Dispute over Christ's Origin* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 177–395; Simon J. Gathercole, *The Pre-existent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006).

10. Similarly, the author of Acts appears to connect the prophecy of Ps. 2:7 (“You are my son”) to the act of resurrection—suggesting that by his resurrection, Jesus becomes God's son (Acts 13:33–4).

11. In the canonical gospels, this preexistent being is sometimes referred to as the “Son of Man.” Although attacked by some (e.g., Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, “Christological Anthropology in Phil 2:6–11,” *Revue Biblique* 83 [1976]: 25–50; James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament*

name”—all of which are honors properly belonging to Yahweh (here called “the Father”). If the drama of the mini-narrative is to be retained, we must assume that Jesus apparently did not enjoy these honors before (vv. 9–11).

It is not my aim to discern which tradition of deification (preexistence or exaltation) is earlier or more original.<sup>12</sup> They are simply two parallel discursive strategies that early Christians used (sometimes simultaneously) in order to deify Jesus in their liturgy and literature.<sup>13</sup> Importantly, each strategy accords with key statements in Jewish scripture (notably Ps. 110:1; Dan. 7:13–14) that were applied and adapted to Jesus. The exegesis of these texts is not my focus in this study.<sup>14</sup> My concern, rather, is how early Christian literature depicts Jesus as a deity in ways intelligible and recognizable in Greco-Roman culture.

### EARLY CHRISTIAN CHRISTOLOGY: RESTORING THE BALANCE

An essential aspect of my thesis is that Christians constructed a divine Jesus with traits specific to deities in *Greco-Roman* culture. It is important to make this point clear because in recent scholarship the emphasis has been placed on understanding Jesus’ divinity from a solely Jewish point of view.

In his oft-cited study, *Judentum und Hellenismus*, Martin Hengel demonstrated with impressive detail that “*All of Judaism* from about the middle of the 3rd century BC must in the strict sense be called ‘*hellenistic Judaism*.’”<sup>15</sup> As he puts it in a later book: “Since after a more than three-hundred-year

*Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989], 114–15), preexistence in Phil. 2:6 remains the consensus view.

12. See, for instance, the developmental scheme in Otto Pfeiderer, *The Early Christian Conception of Christ: Its Significance and Value in the History of Religion* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1905), 16–19.

13. Note the comments of Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos*, trans. John Steely (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), 337–38. Bousset argues that it does not matter whether Christians arrived at the divinity of Christ because they asserted his preexistence or because they viewed Christ as (at some point) promoted to deity, since the deity of Christ was originally a pre-theologized reality realized in the exalted experience of Christian worship (333–334).

14. Such exegesis can be found in any number of works on New Testament christology (a topic with a massive bibliography). For an introduction, see François Bovon, “The First Christologies: From Exaltation to Incarnation, Or From Easter to Christmas,” in *Jesus Christ Today: Studies of Christology in Various Contexts*, ed. Stuart George Hall (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009), 27–43. In the present study, I am not interested in the specific vocabulary proving Jesus’ divinity or various christological titles. Although I will focus on the question of Jesus’ divinity, I do not intend to prove that Jesus was god based on the predication of the word θεός to Jesus. For this project, see Murray J. Harris, *Jesus as God: The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992).

15. “Das gesamte Judentum ab etwa der Mitte des 3.Jh.s. v.Chr. müsste im strengen Sinne als ‘hellenistisches Judentum’ bezeichnet werden” (Hengel, *Judentum und Hellenismus: Studien zu ihrer*

history under the influence of Greek culture Palestinian Judaism can also be described as ‘Hellenistic Judaism’, *the term ‘Hellenistic’ as currently used no longer serves to make any meaningful differentiation in terms of the history of religions within the history of earliest Christianity.*”<sup>16</sup> Naturally Hengel pointed out Jewish distinctives in the early imperial period (e.g., a focus upon Torah and apocalyptic fervor). He convincingly demonstrated, however, that Palestine had long been touched by the “spirit” (*Geist*) of Hellenistic civilization on almost every level: economically, politically, culturally, literarily, philosophically, and theologically.<sup>17</sup>

Given this emphasis, it comes as something of a surprise when in his *Der Sohn Gottes* (second edition, 1977), Hengel presents one of the most curt and candid attempts to cut off early christology from all Greco-Roman influence. He denied the influence of popular deified men (for example, Heracles who died a violent death), deified emperors (Octavian sent into the world as Mercury [Hor., *Od.* 1.2.41–52]), divine men (Pythagoras who incarnated Hyperborean Apollo), preexistent gnostic redeemers, and gods who appear in human disguise—indeed, virtually every Hellenistic analogue he could uncover.<sup>18</sup> The irony of this situation is only appreciated when one realizes that for Hengel, the earliest christology comes out of the *Palestinian* Jewish milieu—exactly the milieu that Hengel argued was *radically pervaded* by Hellenistic modes of thought. We are thus asked to believe that, despite the fact that Palestine (not to mention other centers of early Christianity) was hellenized centuries before the Christian movement, virtually no Hellenistic theological story or idea substantially affected the development of early christology.

*Begegnung unter besonderer Berücksichtigung Palästinas bis zur Mitte des 2.Jh. v.Chr.* WUNT 10; 3d ed. [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988], 193, emphasis his.

16. Hengel, *The ‘Hellenization’ of Judaea in the First Century after Christ* (London: SCM, 1989), 53. His most recent statement about hellenization can be found in “Judaism and Hellenism Revisited,” in *Theologische, historische, und biographische Skizzen. Kleine Schriften VII*, ed. Claus-Jürgen Thornton. (WUNT 253; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 179–216.

17. The early hellenization of Judaism (and thus of Christianity) had already been proposed by Otto Pfeleiderer (*Das Urchristentum: seine Schriften und Lehren, in geschichtlichem Zusammenhang beschrieben* [Berlin: G. Reimer, 1887], iv–v) and Paul Wendland (*Die hellenistische-römische Kultur in ihren Beziehungen zum Judentum und Christentum*, Handbuch zum Neuen Testament I/2, 2nd ed. [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1912]). Wendland suggested two stages of Christian hellenization: an earlier (first-century) hellenization based on common concepts of popular religion (esp. demonology, miracles, and the spirit world), and a later hellenization (beginning in the mid-second century) based on the conscious integration of Greek philosophy, rhetoric, and literary culture (212–40).

18. Hengel, *Der Sohn Gottes: Die Entstehung der Christologie und die jüdisch-hellenistische Religionsgeschichte*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1977), esp. 35–67.

By preserving christology from Hellenistic forms of thought, Hengel reinstated an old apologetic distinction between Jewish-Christian truth and Greek myth. In order to distinguish Jesus' story from Greco-Roman "mythos,"<sup>19</sup> Hengel reconstructed what he called a "firmly conjoined inner Christian-Jewish connection of tradition (*einem festgefügten innerchristlich-jüdischer Traditionszusammenhang*)" centered on the themes of a preexistent demiurgic mediator (notably, the figure of Wisdom) being sent into the world.<sup>20</sup> The direct sources for such a christology, Hengel believed, could only be "Jewish"—a term now implicitly used to exclude what is "Hellenistic" or Greek.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the tensions in Hengel's own thought, *Der Sohn Gottes* (rapidly translated into English) heralded a new trend in the study of early christology, a trend that began to focus its lens decisively—often exclusively—on Judaism. In his 1988 study, *One Lord, One God*, Larry Hurtado examined Jewish traditions of personified divine attributes, exalted patriarchs, and principal angels as (albeit ultimately insufficient) models for understanding Jesus' divinity.<sup>22</sup> With the same aim, Jarl Fossum examined various Jewish mystical traditions of God's image, glory, throne, and name.<sup>23</sup> Major studies of christology in light of Jewish angelology later came from the pens of Loren Stuckenbruck,<sup>24</sup> Crispin Fletcher-Louis,<sup>25</sup> Charles Gieschen,<sup>26</sup> and Darrell Hannah.<sup>27</sup> William Horbury studied traditions of messiahship in relation to the cult of Christ.<sup>28</sup> His focus

19. *Ibid.*, 114 (connected tradition), 119 (distinction from "mythos").

20. In *Judentum und Hellenismus*, Hengel argued that personified, demiurgic Wisdom (who appears in Prov. 8; Sir. 24, etc.) is a product of earlier Semitic and "oriental" influence, as well as later Hellenistic interpretation (275–307).

21. Hengel, *Sohn Gottes*, 67.

22. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1988). A forerunner and apparent model for Hurtado's study was Dunn's *Christology in the Making*.

23. Jarl Fossum, *The Image of the Invisible God: Essays on the Influence of Jewish Mysticism on Early Christology* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995). Compare his earlier study *The Name of God and the Angel of the Lord: Samaritan and Jewish Concepts of Intermediation and the Origin of Gnosticism* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1985).

24. Loren Stuckenbruck, *Angel Veneration and Christology: A Study in Early Judaism and in the Christology of the Apocalypse of John* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995).

25. Crispin Fletcher-Louis, *Luke-Acts: Angels, Christology and Soteriology* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997).

26. Charles Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology: Antecedents and Early Evidence* (Leiden: Brill, 1998).

27. Darrell Hannah, *Michael and Christ: Michael Traditions and Angel Christology in Early Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999).



on messianic figures was followed by Andrew Chester,<sup>29</sup> and more recently in the study *King and Messiah as Son of God* co-authored by Adela Yarbro Collins and John Collins.<sup>30</sup> These important and erudite works represent only the high points of a consistent scholarly tendency to focus primarily (and often solely) on Jewish *comparanda* to understand the nature and origin of Jesus' divinity.<sup>31</sup>

Three scholars—Fossum, Fletcher-Louis, and Hurtado—have even spoken of a new “History of Religions School”<sup>32</sup> that privileges Judaism as the primary (and virtually sole) context for understanding early Christianity and christology in particular.<sup>33</sup> Fossum's 1991 essay, “The New Religionsgeschichtliche Schule” (pregnantly subtitled “The Quest for Jewish Christology”), contrasted the concerns and methods of the “old” and “new” History of Religions Schools. “The basic difference,” Fossum observed, “. . . is that the ‘new’ School looks *elsewhere* than the German [i.e., old] school for the materials of primitive

28. William Horbury, *Jewish Messianism and the Cult of Christ* (London: SCM, 1998), esp. 109–52. See further his essay, “The Cult of Christ and the Cult of the Saints,” in *Messianism Among Jews and Christians: Twelve Biblical and Historical Studies* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 351–80.

29. Andrew Chester, *Messiah and Exaltation: Jewish Messianic and Visionary Traditions and New Testament Christology* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 191–536.

30. Adela Yarbro Collins and John Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God: Divine, Human, and Angelic Messianic Figures in Biblical and Related Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

31. Even Maurice Casey, whose book *From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God* would suggest a thorough engagement with “Gentile” materials appeals almost solely to Jewish sources (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991). Recent textbooks on Christian origins that discuss Jesus' divinity also privilege a Jewish standpoint. Note, for instance, Christopher Rowland, *Christian Origins: An Account of the Setting and Character of the Most Important Messianic Sect of Judaism*, 2nd ed. (London: SPCK, 2002), 247–56. Peter Schäfer's new book, *The Jewish Jesus: How Judaism and Christianity Shaped Each Other* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), proposes that certain figures within rabbinic Judaism (e.g., David, Metatron, the Messiah, the angels, Adam) “have been assigned a place within Judaism similar to the role Jesus played in Christianity” (20). His argument, however, is not that Judaism influenced Jesus' promotion into the divine world, but the reverse: the spirit of Christianity—which deified its hero—was transferred to certain circles of rabbinic Judaism (10).

32. In *Lord Jesus Christ*, Hurtado issues something of a disclaimer when he admits that the new History of Religions school is not as localized and ideologically united as the old School, but he states nevertheless that “there is reason to describe this more recent body of work as constituting a ‘new history-of-religions’ effort” (12). See the remarks of Jörg Frey, “Eine neue religionsgeschichtliche Perspektive: Larry W. Hurtados *Lord Jesus Christ* und die Herausbildung der frühem Christologie,” in *Reflections on the Early Christian History of Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 117–70.

33. Credit for the term “new Religionsgeschichtliche Schule” is attributed to Hengel, who used the phrase in his blurb on the back cover of Hurtado's *One Lord, One God* (see Hurtado's comments in *Lord Jesus Christ*, 11). Hurtado acknowledges his heavy debts to Hengel (*Ibid.*, 12, n. 17), who is something of a grandfather of the “new” History of Religions School.

Christology. The German *Schule* looked to the imperial cult, the mystery religions, and Oriental religion, especially Iranian tradition,” not to mention pre-Christian Gnosticism.<sup>34</sup> The widely acknowledged methodological errors underlying the reconstruction of a pre-Christian “Gnostic redeemer myth” have become a byword among New Testament scholars against genius gone wild.<sup>35</sup> Members of the “new” History of Religions School deliberately rehearse this and other errors of their predecessors to discredit attempts to go too far afield in comparing Christianity with religious movements perceived to be too foreign and “other.”<sup>36</sup> Instead, they turn to the movement that they view as much closer to home—the “prolific mother” (to use Fossum’s phrase) that (he asserts) gave birth to Gnosticism, the rabbinic movements, and Christianity—namely, Judaism.<sup>37</sup> Judaism is thus made the comprehensive—even exclusive—context for christology. As Fletcher-Louis writes, the “defining characteristic of the new history-of-religions school” is “an emphasis on the extent to which the *full breadth* of Christological expression is fashioned from *Jewish* raw materials.”<sup>38</sup> Although Hurtado is more measured in his remarks, the focus and content of his recent work indicate that all the emphasis in early christology (and Jesus’ deity in particular) should be placed on “the Jewish religious matrix of the Christian movement.”<sup>39</sup>

34. Fossum, “The New Religionsgeschichtliche Schule: The Quest for Jewish Christology,” *SBL Seminar Papers 1991*, ed. Eugene H. Lovering (Atlanta: Scholars, 1991), 638–46 [640].

35. See further Carsten Colpe, *Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule: Darstellung und Kritik ihres Bildes vom gnostischen Erlösermythus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961); Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of Proposed Evidences* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973); Karsten Lehmkühler, *Kultus und Theologie: Dogmatik und Exegese in der religionsgeschichtliche Schule* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996).

36. See, for example, Hurtado, “New Testament Christology: Retrospect and Prospect,” *Semeia* 30 (1985): 15–28 (esp. 19–23); *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 75–76.

37. Fossum expresses some reserve about the term “Judaism,” since he does not want to limit it to later Rabbinic forms of Judaism known by the same name (“New Religionsgeschichtliche Schule,” 642–44). On p. 646 of his essay he replaces Judaism with “Late Second Temple Israelite Religion.”

38. Fletcher-Louis, *Luke-Acts*, 2, my emphasis.

39. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 12. In this massive 653-page study of christology, Hurtado devotes four meager pages to Greco-Roman categories (74–77). Such imbalance is woefully inadequate, especially given his aim to “take due account of the historical setting and context of early Christian devotion, both the Jewish matrix . . . and the larger historical and religious environment of the Roman period” (25, emphasis added). His neglect of Greco-Roman *comparanda* is surprising since earlier he noted that christology “will have to be built upon a foundation composed of the best information on the complex cultural background of first-century Palestine and the wider Hellenistic world” (Hurtado, “New Testament Christology: A Critique of Bousset’s Influence,” *Theological Studies* 40 [1979]: 306–17 [317], my

Throughout his massive 2005 book *Lord Jesus Christ*, Hurtado uses “Judaism” and “Jewish” as if they excluded Hellenistic forms of thought (exactly the point that Hengel warned against, but an error foreshadowed by Hengel himself). In effect, Hurtado excludes “pagan” ideas for understanding early christology. He strongly asserts that within three or four years of his death, Jesus was worshiped and seen as “in some sense divine.”<sup>40</sup> He is equally convinced, however, that (*contra* Wilhelm Bousset) early Christians did not deify Jesus as a result of “religious influences” from the Greco-Roman world.<sup>41</sup> To justify this claim, Hurtado leans on his own conservative reconstruction of Jewish monotheism.<sup>42</sup> After proof-texting Philo’s *Embassy to Gaius* 118 (“sooner could a god change into a man than a man into a god”), Hurtado remarks that the idea of deification for a Jew is “ridiculous and blasphemous.” Philo’s quote, Hurtado continues,

makes highly implausible any explanation of the Christ-devotion attested in and affirmed by, Paul as resulting from the prevalence of the notion of apotheosis in the Roman era. Though Jewish writings of the time show that principle angels and revered human figures such as Moses or Enoch could be pictured in a highly exalted status, and described in terms that can be compared with divinization, the refusal to accord any such figure cultic worship shows that we are not dealing here with a genuine apotheosis.<sup>43</sup>

“Devout” Jews, Hurtado continues, had an “allergic sensitivity” to deification.<sup>44</sup> Directing his remarks to Yarbro Collins,<sup>45</sup> Hurtado challenges “any scholar” who sees deification as relevant for explaining early “Christ-devotion” to

emphasis). In his *One Lord, One God*, he states that drawing upon “pagan religions of the Greco-Roman period” is “simply beside the point” because (i) Christ was deified early when Christianity “was thoroughly dominated by Jews and functioned as a sect of ancient Judaism,” and (ii) Greco-Roman religions are not comparable because they did not uphold exclusive monotheism (6). Both points (which will be addressed below) hardly prevent fruitful comparison with Greco-Roman conceptuality, or justify exclusive attention to Jewish sources.

40. Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God? Historical Questions about Earliest Devotion to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 33.

41. *Ibid.*, 37.

42. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 51; cf. 91.

43. *Ibid.*, 92. For a critique of Hurtado’s fixed and inflexible linkage of worship and divinity, see M. David Litwa, *We Are Being Transformed: Deification in Paul’s Soteriology*, BZNW187 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012), 275–81.

44. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 92.

provide “a cogent description of the specific process by which Christian Jews could have adopted this repellent category without realizing it.”<sup>46</sup>

The heated language that Hurtado uses to discuss traditions of deification (“ridiculous and blasphemous”; “allergic sensitivity”; “repellent”) hint at a kind of theological disgust that breathes through his normally placid prose. Such disgust, combined with a spirited attack against “pagan” influence, is consonant with a long history of Christian apologetics.<sup>47</sup> Michael Peppard has recently observed that, “if the old [*religionsgeschichtliche*] *Schule* breathed the air of modern liberalism, the new one is imbued with a spirit of neo-orthodoxy.”<sup>48</sup>

Hurtado’s objection that monotheism excludes deification is often taken as his strongest argument. Since in a previous study I argued at length that ancient Jewish monotheism does not conflict with early Jewish or Christian forms of deification, my comments on this issue will be brief.<sup>49</sup> From a historical perspective, no matter how exclusive Jewish and later Christian monotheism was, it was evidently not exclusive enough to exclude the man Jesus from the Godhead. My argument that Christians applied common Mediterranean understandings of divinity to Jesus does not, at any rate, conflict with early Jewish and Christian monotheism (the idea that all power is centralized in one divine being). It is true that Jesus’ intimate association with an all-powerful, singular deity makes the Christian elevation of Jesus to divine status distinctive. It does not, however, make his deification unique in the discursive arena of the ancient Mediterranean world.<sup>50</sup>

45. Specifically her essay “The Worship of Jesus and the Imperial Cult,” in *The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism*, ed. Carey Newman et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 234–57.

46. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 92–93.

47. See esp. Walther Glawe, *Die Hellenisierung des Christentums in der Geschichte der Theologie von Luther bis auf die Gegenwart* (Berlin: Trowitzsch & Sohn, 1912).

48. Michael Peppard, *The Son of God in the Roman World: Divine Sonship in its Social and Political Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 21. Peppard aptly notes that Hurtado’s focus on the Jewish context “ignores just about everything religious going on in the Roman world” in particular “cultic practices devoted to divine humans and divine sons—heroes, ancestors, rulers, gods” (25). Cf. p. 24: “Hurtado hardly engages the gentile religious environment, which was the environment of most early Christians for whom we have evidence.”

49. Litwa, *We Are Being Transformed*, 229–57; 275–81.

50. Whether or not Jesus’ depiction as an ancient Mediterranean deity is actually faithful to the traditions of ancient Jewish monotheism is a theological question that I bracket in this study. For the purposes of argument, however, I am happy to grant that Christians both formed and remained faithful to their own distinctive understandings of monotheism even as they engaged in the discursive practices of deifying the first-century Jew known as Jesus of Nazareth.

Although other scholars have devoted more attention to deficiencies in Hurtado's understanding of monotheism, divinity, and worship,<sup>51</sup> it seems to me that the main problem with Hurtado's analysis is that his work perpetuates the old and misleading dichotomy commonly dubbed the "Judaism/Hellenism divide."<sup>52</sup> Although Hurtado is aware that this dividing wall has fallen,<sup>53</sup> his language often betrays him. He assumes, for instance, that Jews had to go out and adopt deification traditions (naturally, part of Hellenistic culture) as something external and alien to them. Hurtado fails to note that in the very cases he mentions—Moses and Enoch—deification traditions had long been adapted and integrated into Jewish tradition in a way apparently suitable to Jewish monotheism.<sup>54</sup>

More damagingly, Hurtado's understanding of deification is far too simplistic and constricted. It is not evident to him that his model of early Christian "binitarianism" itself is a discursive practice that names a Jewish form of deification in which a human is identified with a preexistent Prime Mediator figure. Examples of this include Enoch identified with the Son of Man (1 *En.* 70–71), Jacob identified with the firstborn of every living thing (*The Prayer of Joseph*), and Jesus identified with the logos and Wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:30; John 1:1). To be sure, Hurtado is correct that there was a good deal of early Jewish and Christian rhetoric against beliefs and practices (such as deification) that were perceived as "other"—but he often mistakes this

51. See the reviews of *Lord Jesus Christ* by William Horbury (*JTS* 56 [2005]: 537–38) and Paula Fredriksen (*JECs* 12 [2004]: 539–41); as well as Adela Yarbro Collins, "How on Earth did Jesus Become a God?: A Reply," in *Israel's God and Rebecca's Children: Christology and Community in Early Judaism and Christianity*, eds. David B. Capes et al. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 55–66.

52. In 2001, Anders Gerdmar noted that "the dichotomic view of Judaism and Hellenism has assumed an almost axiomatic role in New Testament exegesis" (*Rethinking the Judaism-Hellenism Dichotomy: A Historiographical Case Study of Second Peter and Jude* [Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell], 18, emphasis his). He is right to point out that the opposition between "Judaism" and "Hellenism" is ideological and (ultimately) Hegelian, but wrongly concludes that Hellenism was mere "varnish" for Jews. We simply do not have to decide between "varnish" and "fusion" models (328); there was, as he says, a "continuum" between Jewish and Hellenistic culture (329).

53. Hurtado, "A Critique of Bousset's Influence," 308–9; cf. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 23–24. Like many other scholars, he leans on Hengel's *Judentum und Hellenismus* (*Lord Jesus Christ*, 23, n. 56).

54. See further John J. Collins, "A Throne in the Heavens: Apotheosis in Pre-Christian Judaism," in *Death, Ecstasy, and Other Worldly Journeys*, eds. John J. Collins and Michael Fishbane (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995), 41–56; Philip Alexander, "From Son of Adam to Second God: Transformations of the Biblical Enoch," in *Biblical Figures outside the Bible* (eds. M. E. Stone and T.A. Bergren; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 87–122; Naomi Janowitz, *Magic in the Roman World: Pagans, Jews and Christians* (London: Routledge, 2001), 70–85; Litwa, *We Are Being Transformed*, 86–116.

rhetoric for historical reality.<sup>55</sup> As is known from many religious movements, the rhetoric of difference is especially intense between religious groups that share similar ideas.<sup>56</sup> Hurtado mistakes Jewish and Christian distrust of perceived “other” notions of deification with the historical thesis that christology could not have been tinged by shared understandings of divinity in Mediterranean culture as well as the human potential to become divine.<sup>57</sup>

To be fair, Hurtado’s (effectively sole) focus on Judaism for understanding Jesus’ deity is not outright wrong, but imbalanced. In a recent study, Gregory J. Riley warns against an “Israel-alone” model of scholarship since “both the questions asked and the answers obtained will be Israel-alone questions and answers.”<sup>58</sup> A recent example of “Israel-alone” scholarship is the strong effort to explain a divine Jesus while maintaining a rigorously exclusive form of Jewish monotheism.<sup>59</sup> Fascinated by this question, Hurtado attempts to preserve early Christian monotheism by redescribing it as “binitarian” (in apparent analogy to “trinitarian” monotheism in later Christian orthodoxy).<sup>60</sup> Richard Bauckham, a strident proponent of early Christian monotheism, strongly maintains Jesus’ “unique divine identity” because he shares Yahweh’s ultimate power and demiurgic ability.<sup>61</sup> In the same school of thought, Chris Tilling has recently argued that Jesus is divine for Paul because his relation to believers closely corresponds to the relation of Yahweh to Israel as it is depicted in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>62</sup>

Although these scholars have done much to make Jesus’ divinity comprehensible in terms of ancient Judaism, in the process they have more

55. Hurtado, *How on Earth*, 45.

56. See on this point John G. Gager, *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1975), 82–8; Gerd Theissen, *A Theory of Primitive Christian Religion* (London: SCM, 1999), 44–49.

57. Hurtado, *How on Earth*, 43.

58. Gregory J. Riley, *The River of God: A New History of Christian Origins* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 5; complete discussion on 6–14.

59. Hurtado, for instance, begins his study of early Christian christology with the question, “How did the early Christians accommodate the veneration of the exalted Jesus alongside God while continuing to see themselves as loyal to the fundamental emphasis of their ancestral tradition on one God . . . ?” (*One Lord, One God*, 2). See further Paul Rainbow, “Jewish Monotheism as the Matrix for New Testament Christology” *NovT* 33 (1991): 78–91.

60. Hurtado, *One Lord, One God*, 93–124, esp. 114; Hurtado, “The Binitarian Shape of Early Christian Worship,” in *Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism*, 187–213.

61. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament’s Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 1–59.

62. Chris Tilling, *Paul’s Divine Christology*, WUNT 2/323 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012).

or less neglected Christianity's broader (Greco-Roman) environment and thus larger questions that help us understand (to adapt one of Hurtado's book titles) "how on earth Jesus became a god." To be sure, Hurtado is right to oppose an evolutionary model of Jesus' deification that came about relatively late as a result of increasing Gentile majorities in early Christian communities. He associates this theory with Bousset, an imposing representative of the "old" History of Religions School.<sup>63</sup> Regrettably, Hurtado appears to implicitly follow Bousset in associating a Gentile majority with increased hellenization.<sup>64</sup> It is this view (namely, a gradual hellenization of Christianity through the influx of Gentiles) that in recent years has been shown to be fundamentally wrong.<sup>65</sup> Christianity was born from a Jewish mother who was already hellenized.<sup>66</sup> The socio-cultural phenomenon of hellenization was not something that infiltrated later as a foreign body after Christianity ceased to be a primarily Jewish movement.<sup>67</sup> In

63. Hurtado, *How on Earth*, 14–16. For a description of the (old) History of Religions School, see Gerd Lüdemann and Martin Schröder, *Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule in Göttingen: Eine Dokumentation* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987); Lüdemann, "Die 'Religionsgeschichtliche Schule' und die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft," in *Die "Religionsgeschichtliche Schule": Facetten eines theologischen Umbruchs*, ed. Gerd Lüdemann (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1996), 9–22; Gerald Seelig, *Religionsgeschichtliche Methode in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart: Studien zur Geschichte und Methode des religionsgeschichtlichen Vergleichs in der neutestamentlichen Wissenschaft* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2001); William Baird, *History of New Testament Research*, vol. 2, *From Jonathan Edwards to Rudolf Bultmann* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 238–53.

64. In *One Lord, One God*, for instance, Hurtado felt capable of bypassing Greco-Roman traditions because the earliest Christianity was "dominated by Jews and functioned as a sect of ancient Judaism" (6). He assumes, apparently, that examining Greco-Roman traditions is only appropriate when early churches gradually become Gentile. The same assumptions appear in the preface to the second edition to *One Lord, One God* (ix).

65. Besides Hengel's *Judentum und Hellenismus*, see his shorter study on *The 'Hellenization' of Judaea*. A sampling of significant later studies includes: David L. Balch, Everett Ferguson, and Wayne A. Meeks, eds., *Greeks, Romans, and Christians: Essays in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990); Pieter W. van der Horst, *Hellenism-Judaism-Christianity: Essays on Their Interaction* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1994); Erich S. Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 335; Lee I. Levine, *Judaism and Hellenism in Antiquity: Conflict or Confluence?* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998), 3–32; John J. Collins and Gregory Sterling, *Hellenism in the Land of Israel* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 343; Troels Engberg-Pedersen, ed. *Paul Beyond the Judaism/Hellenism Divide* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001); Tessa Rajak, *The Jewish Dialogue with Greece and Rome: Studies in Cultural and Social Interaction* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), esp. 355–72; 447–62; Gruen, "Hebraism and Hellenism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Hellenic Studies*, eds. George Boys-Stones et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 129–39.

66. Compare Hurtado, who rejects a Judaism "corrupted or paganized" before the Christian era (preface to the second edition of *One Lord, One God*, x).

the time of Jesus himself, Palestinian Jews had thoroughly adopted and adapted Greek ideas (including theological ones) to such an extent that in many cases what appears to be a distinctly “Jewish” notion is in fact a “Greco-Jewish” cultural hybrid.<sup>68</sup>

#### JUDAISM AS BUFFER

In his book, *The ‘Hellenization’ of Judea*, Hengel writes, “We must stop attaching either negative or positive connotations to the question of ‘Hellenistic’ influence . . . Judaism and Christianity, indeed our whole Western world, have become what they are as a result of both the Old Testament *and* the Greek tradition.”<sup>69</sup> Why then, one can ask, did Hengel in *Der Sohn Gottes* seek to cut off Greek and Roman influence from early christology? Why in the general tendency of the “new” *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* are Greco-Roman sources regularly downplayed or ignored? One can only speculate on the potential answers to this question, but Jonathan Z. Smith has given the outlines of what seems in part to be a possible response: Judaism is being used by scholars to insulate Christianity from its so-called “pagan” environment.<sup>70</sup> Hengel put it this way: “no direct pagan influence [on early Christianity] that is not mediated by Judaism . . . can be proved.”<sup>71</sup>

67. Philip Alexander, “Hellenism and Hellenization as Problematic Historiographical Categories,” in *Paul Beyond*, 63–80, esp. 69; Antonio, Piñero, “On the Hellenization of Christianity” in *Flores Florentino: Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Early Jewish Studies*, ed. Anthony Hilhorst et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 667–83, esp. 682–83; Luther H. Martin in “The Hellenisation of Judaeo-Christian Faith” *Religion and Theology* 12 (2005): 1–19, esp. 13.

68. On hellenistic culture and its spread in the ancient Mediterranean, see Momigliano, *Alien Wisdom: The Limits of Hellenization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); Jonathan A. Goldstein, *Semites, Iranians, Greeks, and Romans: Studies in their Interactions* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990); Yaacov Shavit, *Athens in Jerusalem: Classical Antiquity and Hellenism in the Making of the Modern Secular Jew*, trans. Chaya Naor and Niki Werner (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1997); Alain Le Boulluec, “Hellenism and Christianity,” in *Greek Thought: A Guide to Classical Knowledge*, eds. Jacques Brunschwig and Geoffrey E. R. Lloyd (Cambridge: Belknap, 2000), 858–69; Erik Nis Ostenfeld, *Greek Romans and Roman Greeks: Studies on Cultural Interaction* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2002); Jonathan M. Hall, *Hellenicity: Between Ethnicity and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2002), 220–26; Erich Gruen, “Greeks and non Greeks,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Hellenistic World*, ed. Glenn R. Bugh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 295–314; Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, *Rome’s Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 3–28; Susan Stephens, “Hellenistic Culture,” in *Oxford Handbook of Hellenic Studies*, 86–97.

69. Hengel, *The ‘Hellenization’ of Judea*, 53.

70. J. Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990), esp. 54–84.



Although historically both Judaism and “paganism” served as polemical “others” to Christianity, we have already seen Fossum characterizing Judaism as early Christianity’s “mother.” Even before Fossum’s essay, Alan Segal had depicted early Judaism and Christianity as sisters.<sup>72</sup> In fact, the current mainstream position in scholarship seems to be that when Christianity was at its most tender age, it *was* Jewish plain and simple, and therefore Judaism *could not* be other.<sup>73</sup>

The importance of this point becomes clear when we note Hengel’s bold but influential dating for a divine Christ. According to him, Christians were worshipping a divine Jesus within twenty years of his death, at a point in time, he insisted, *when Christianity was almost entirely an intra-Jewish movement.*<sup>74</sup> If this is the case, then the divinity of Jesus could not be a Hellenistic or “pagan” idea, and the old Deist charge that Jesus’ divinity (which ultimately gave rise to a Trinitarian conception of the Godhead) was adopted from “pagan” theological notions, falls to pieces. Jesus’ deity was in fact a *Jewish* idea, and the Jews (like the Deists, exemplars of rational and approved religion) were monotheists. In this formulation, the “pagan” threat to the orthodox understanding of a divine Jesus is neutralized on what seems to be purely historical grounds. What shields early christology is precisely *Judaism*—even if early christology transcended Jewish categories,<sup>75</sup> and Judaism was later finally sloughed off as an “other”

71. Hengel, “Das früheste Christentum als eine jüdische messianische und universalistische Bewegung,” in *Judaica, Hellenistica et Christiana, Kleine Schriften II* WUNT 109; (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 200–18,(216). Hengel immediately adds that “pagan” influences were assumed by Judaism and creatively used to strengthen Jewish identity. The concession is helpful, but Hengel uses it mainly to neutralize “pagan”—which he equates with “foreign”—influence. He portrays Judaism as the great strainer or purifier of pagan culture. The paganism that goes through Judaism is no longer paganism, and thus no longer a threat.

72. Alan Segal, *Rebecca’s Children: Judaism and Christianity in the Roman World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).

73. Hengel stated this position lucidly: “[E]arly Christianity was almost wholly dependent on Jewish thought and tradition. . . . In other words, early Christianity is essentially ‘Jewish,’ a messianic, eschatological, enthusiastic, and universalist form of Judaism” (“A Gentile in the Wilderness,” in *Kleine Schriften VII*, 532–45 (542). In another essay, Hengel states: “das Urchristentum ... ganz aus jüdischem Boden hervorging, d.h. ohne Einschränkung” (“Das früheste Christentum,” 200). Here he makes clear that his thesis directly opposes the Religionsgeschichtliche Schule, which posited “extrem verschiedenen Wurzeln” for early Christianity (*ibid.* 201).

74. Hengel, *Sohn Gottes*, 11; cf. 92. See his earlier essay “Christologie und neutestamentliche Chronologie: Zu einer Aporie in der Geschichte des Urchristentums,” in *Neues Testament und Geschichte: Historisches Geschehen und Deutung im Neuen Testament*, eds. Heinrich Baltensweiler and Bo Reicke (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1972), 43–67.

in the fourth century when Jesus' relation to God received precise creedal definition.<sup>76</sup>

Despite the apparent cogency of this position, it seems to me that Hengel and his heirs in early christology have fused a demographic point—that most early Christians were Jews—with a historical and cultural conclusion—that early Christology must have been developed from solely Jewish ideas (where “Jewish” is again assumed to exclude the “Hellenistic”—or as they commonly say—“pagan” other). As I have already pointed out, Hengel’s own arguments asserting the early hellenization of Judea completely undercut this line of reasoning. The so-called Jewish ideas about divinity were already hellenized when Christianity arose, and thus to mentally isolate an early Jewish from a hellenistic christology is misleading. Add to this the inconsistency of Hengel who used extraordinarily late depictions of Jewish numina (e.g., the figure of Enoch–Metatron in *Sefer Hekhalot* or *3 En.*) to shed light on early christology, while rigorously excluding even late first-century Greco-Roman sources on *chronological* grounds.<sup>77</sup> In light of current trends, one can only strive to make this Hengel agree with the Hengel who elsewhere claimed: “First of all we must be concerned with the historical connections, which are more complicated and more complex than our labels, clichés and pigeon-holes, but at the same time also with a real understanding and an evaluation which does justice to the past and is no longer one-sided and tendentious.”<sup>78</sup>

### THESIS

In an effort to balance the one-sidedness of current scholarship on early christology, this book proposes that early Christians did in fact use and adapt

75. Hurtado, *One Lord, One God*, 93–128. Cf. Hengel: “The fundamental teaching of the church was built on basically Jewish foundations. This does not mean that Christianity and Judaism are the same; certainly not. The differences are at once fundamental and necessary” (“A Gentile in the Wilderness,” 542).

76. The so-called “parting of the ways” between Judaism and Christianity is variously dated by scholars and depends on the geographical area that one studies. James Dunn dated the “clear-cut and final” parting to 135 CE (*The Parting of the Ways Between Christianity and Judaism and their Significance for the Character of Christianity* [London: SCM, 1991], 238, 243). Since then, authors who have explored the interaction of Jews and Christians up until the Middle Ages have questioned any “clear-cut and final” parting. See esp. Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed, *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003).

77. Hengel, *Sohn Gottes*, 73–76 (Metatron), 45, 50, 53–4 (chronological exclusion of Greco-Roman sources). Further instances and rationale in Smith, *Drudgery*, 43–6.

78. Hengel, ‘Hellenization’ of *Judaea*, 53.

widespread Hellenistic conceptions about divinity in order to understand and depict the divine status of Jesus.

The slipperiness of many terms in this thesis require immediate clarification. Throughout, I use the adjective “Hellenistic” in a cultural sense. It is not designed to exclude Judaism, but rather (as often) to characterize the form that Judaism took in the first century. As a synonym of “Hellenistic,” I will use the commonly employed global term “Greco-Roman.” Although “Greco-Roman” (like the more politically charged word “pagan”) is commonly used by scholars to exclude what is “Jewish” and “Christian,” I will argue that certain “Greco-Roman” conceptions of deity were perceived by early Jews and Christians as proper to their own traditions. In order to partially mitigate the polarizing force of the term “Greco-Roman,” however, I will often employ as a synonym the adjective “Mediterranean”—since few would dispute that early Judaism and Christianity were Mediterranean religious phenomena.

To be clear, I consider ancient Judaism to be the primary matrix of early Christianity, but I refuse to play a zero-sum game wherein the triumph of the Greeks means that the Jews lose, and *vice versa*. Scholars of a past era—for their own political reasons—underscored Greco-Roman influence to the detriment of the Jewish thought world.<sup>79</sup> Today, scholars balk at the idea that Christianity was a syncretistic faith (Hermann Gunkel) or a kind of Greek mystery religion (Richard Reitzenstein).<sup>80</sup> History indeed indicates that Christianity grew out of Judaism and from Judaism received its most direct and decisive stamp. Nonetheless, I contend that ancient Judaism(s) (implicitly or explicitly viewed as separate from the Greco-Roman world) should not be treated as the *sole* matrix informing Jesus’ literary promotion to divine status. Ancient Judaism was a living Mediterranean religion engaged in active conversation and negotiation with larger religious currents of its time. If Judaism in the first century was an obviously distinctive religion, many Jews still shared *views of deity* surprisingly

79. Briefly documented by Gerdmar, *Judaism-Hellenism Dichotomy*, 16–17. See also Susannah Heschel “Jewish Studies as Counterhistory,” in *Insider/Outsider: American Jewish & Multiculturalism*, ed. D. Biale et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 101–15 (esp. 105–6; 110–11). She notes that in the twentieth century American academy, “Judaism was presented as an effort not to undermine Christianity but to contribute to its understanding and reinforce its hegemony” (103).

80. Hermann Gunkel, *Zum religionsgeschichtlichen Verständnis des Neuen Testaments* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht 1903). For Gunkel “the influence of foreign religions” came through Judaism (*durch das Judentum*) (1), and Judaism itself was “very strongly syncretistically determined” (*sehr stark synkretistisch gestimmt gewesen*) (69). Necessary definition and correctives for the category of “syncretism” are provided by Henning Paulsen, “Synkretismus im Urchristentum und im Neuen Testament,” in *Zur Literatur und Geschichte des frühem Christentums: Gesammelte Aufsätze*, ed. Ute E. Eisen, WUNT 99 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 301–9.