

Preface

The modern quest for the historical Jesus (in all its phases) is the quest for the human Christ. We are enchanted by the human Jesus in an effort, it seems, to understand our own humanness. Yet our quest demands that in many ways we read the ancient Christian sources—in which the divinity of Jesus was of supreme importance—against the grain.

If a divine Jesus is now “other” to “we historians,” we must still learn to look full in the face of this other. We must learn to ask why in the very places we espy a human Jesus, early Christians witnessed the light of divinity. Admittedly, understanding the logic of Jesus’ deification is no less a (post-Enlightenment) project of history—written for our purposes and governed by our interests. Nevertheless such a project seeks to understand the human through a different lens; a lens that does not make humanness dissolve as a drop of wine in an ocean of deity, but one that illumines more fully—even if through a mirror, darkly—the mystery of its nature, its needs, and its potential.

This book explores how—and by extension why—some humans in history imagined and depicted a fellow human being as divine. The “why” is perhaps more fully addressed in a companion study (*We are Being Transformed: Deification in Paul’s Soteriology*). Both books explore the same basic issue: how early Christians came to assimilate and adapt larger Mediterranean discourses of deification to suit their own revelatory experiences and theological traditions. In *We are Being Transformed*, I showed how early Christians (specifically, Paul) used aspects of the discourse of deification to formulate a vision of their own eschatological destiny. In this book, I seek to describe how early Christians employed the discourse of deification to describe the divine identity of he who would become both ἀρχηγός and archetype of Christian deification: Jesus of Nazareth. For both Christians and Christ, the logic of deification is akin. Indeed, the discourse of deification in particular shows how christology can sometimes appear as soteriology writ large.

Deification is the product of the human imagination as it works itself out in speech and, in this case, the rhetorically wrought language of early Christian literature. By using the language of “deification,” I cast no aspersion on the (eternal) reality of Jesus’ divinity confessed by faith. Indeed, this book can be read as illustrating something of the logic of that faith in its ancient context: *Fides exhibens intellectum*.

Throughout this book I adhere to certain practices of capitalization (and de-capitalization) that require explanation. Since this book is about how Jesus was depicted as a deity up until the mid-third century, I prefer “christology” over “Christology” to avoid any post-Nicene metaphysical freight that may cling to the capital “C.” A second practice requires more background. In *We Are Being Transformed*, I attempted to level the playing field between the Christian “God” and the other Mediterranean “gods” (where capital “G” suggests “true God” and lower-case “g” still carries the overtones of “false deity” or “idol”) by capitalizing the word “God” throughout. It seems to me now that this practice could cause confusion, indicating that a deified individual could somehow become equal with the high God (whether Jewish or otherwise). Another way to level the playing field is, of course, to let every instance of θεός be represented by “god” with a lowercase “g.” But this option too leads to misconceptions. All gods are not in fact equal. Some are high gods with universal power; others are mere daimones with local haunts and traditions. Accordingly, in this book it is my practice to refer to deities who function as supreme, singular gods as “God” (for example, Zeus, Yahweh, Philo’s “Existent”), while reserving the lower-case “g” for what I call “mediate deities,” or lesser members of the divine (extended) family. When the “Gods” are referred to in the plural—implicating both high Gods and minor deities—I also capitalize the “G.” These spelling practices involve a judgment call on my part—a judgment for which I take full responsibility. Their purpose, at any rate, should be clear: to allow, as much as possible unbiased comparison between Christian and non-Christian sources that refer to Gods and mediate gods perceived to be equally true, present and, real.

Here I joyfully acknowledge the help of those who cared for this book while in its four-year period of gestation. Harry Gamble, a model of patient scholarship and hospitality, molded many of my premature ideas. He and other members of the faculty at the University of Virginia—including Judith Kovacs, Karl Shuve, and Jon Mikalson—provided balanced and thoughtful comments that helped these chapters take form. My faithful (and undeserved) friend Blaire French combed twice through the manuscript, healing many grammatical defects. Andy Guffey, a true companion and colleague, offered a theological and historical final checkup. Neil Elliott’s thoughtful suggestions and efficient labor as editor at Fortress Press helped the book finally be born. Nevertheless, this volume could never even have been conceived without my lovely wife who for seven years of marriage has nourished me with her fellowship and financial support. Her gentle spirit of love I will treasure always.