



Ehrman, Bart D.

How Jesus became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee

New York: HarperOne, 2014. Pp. ix + 404. Hardcover. \$27.99.

Nick Norelli

Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

N.B. I have been working on a review essay of Ehrman's book on-and-off for a couple of months now. This (long as it might be) is not that.

Bart Ehrman is like the Howard Stern of biblical studies; he's a shock jock. He's not a trailblazer by any means, but he has a large audience, and his audience is filled with people who haven't heard anything about the stuff he writes about in his popular books. From topics like textual criticism to the problem of evil, Ehrman has been antagonizing Christians and their faith for years—now he's moved to one of its non-negotiable pillars—the deity of Christ.

Ehrman let on about this book in his last one. He told us that he was writing about how Jesus came to be viewed as God by his followers. He's written about this in various works over the years but *How Jesus Became God* is the full treatment; or at least as full as it seems we'll get. Ehrman's argument is pretty straightforward: Jesus didn't claim or believe himself to be God and neither did the earliest followers until after they came to believe that he had been resurrected.

That's pretty much the gist of it. In the beginning was the man, and the man was with God, but the man was not God. Ehrman views Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet; someone who believed he had a unique place in God's government, but not God himself. But somewhere along the line—very early in fact—Jesus' disciples started claiming more of him. How was this possible, you might

wonder. Well, Second Temple Judaism, like its Greco-Roman neighbors, had very different views of divinity than we do; at least that's what Ehrman would have us think.

So just like the "pagans" could accommodate divinity on down the line from Zeus/Jupiter to half-breeds like Heracles/Hercules to great philosophers like Plato or the sons of God like the Roman emperor, so too could Jews. The Jews believed in one Almighty God but they also believed in other gods like angels, hypostatized divine attributes (Wisdom; Logos), and the Davidic king. In other words, divinity existed on a scale, and there were no hard lines of demarcation to be drawn between God and everything else.

So Ehrman argues that Jesus wasn't really unique in the ancient world. There were plenty of divine men and he was one of many. Of course his alleged resurrection made a difference, but Ehrman argues that we have very little reason to believe that Jesus was even buried in the tomb that Christians believe is empty. Nevertheless, this was the impetus for the exaltation and incarnation Christologies that we find in the New Testament.

Ehrman's not dogmatic on this point, because Paul really kind of screws it up, but it seems to be that exaltation Christology came first and was followed by incarnation Christology. In other words, the earliest confessions, creeds, and speeches have Jesus being exalted to divine status. Only after reflecting on this does his divinity get pushed back further in time until eventually it reaches eternity.

But like I said, Paul kind of messes that up, and Ehrman admits as much. Speaking of Paul, Ehrman restricts his exegesis of the NT to Paul alone, and of that we only see Philippians 2:5-11 given any kind of real attention. Did I mention that Ehrman interprets everything Paul says through the lens of Galatians 4:14, a text that Ehrman claims is equating Christ with an angel? Basically, Paul's Christology was an angel Christology, and that helps us to make sense of concepts like preexistence and divinity.

Ehrman also looks to the first few Christian centuries to show that beliefs about Jesus weren't really set in stone. Us modern Christians have inherited, for the most part, a Nicene Christianity. The so-called orthodoxy codified in the Nicene Creed wasn't quite so kosher in the early days though. At one time, the folks who believe like we do were the minority, but since the victors write the history, we've come to know them as heretics since they ultimately lost out.

And so ends my summary of Ehrman's work. Unfortunately, we've heard it all before. I've read a lot of what Ehrman has written—not quite all of it—but most. He's suggested all of this elsewhere and to be honest, other than throwing in the bit about there not being a straightforward

evolutionary process whereby Jesus came to be viewed as divine, I can't say that he's improved upon his previous work. And I mean this in more ways than one.

To start, Ehrman cites himself more than anyone else. Well, Michael Peppard does get quite a few mentions, but I'll reserve comment on that for my forthcoming review essay. My point is that Ehrman doesn't interact with scholars in the field of early Christology and Christian origins. That's a problem since they've preemptively refuted most, if not all, of what he's argued!

But I'd also mention that he's standing on the shoulders of giants and even there he doesn't give them their due. From Charles Talbert, to William Horbury, to Rudolf Bultmann, and Martin Dibelius, Ehrman is simply reiterating old arguments. He does give John Dominic Crossan credit for bits and pieces for what he says about Jesus not being buried in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb. Bully for him!

Hurtado is mentioned twice, and once to misrepresent his views. Bauckham is not mentioned at all, which is a shock since what Ehrman argues is directly relevant to every claim Bauckham has ever made about the topic. No interaction with Fee; Wright; Tilling; and the list could go on and on. So-called exaltation Christology is one of the legs of his argument and he doesn't so much as reference Eskola's work?!! How is that even possible!

But the names of scholars aren't the only thing that's missing; this book is also sorely lacking in exegesis. Like I said above, Ehrman only examines the Carmen Christi in any depth, and we quickly learn that even those waters are quite shallow. How does he manage to gloss over the rest of Paul so easily when he acknowledges that Paul is our earliest source? Where is the attention given to 1 Corinthians or 1 Thessalonians? How does a book that's supposed to inform us about early Christology and Jewish monotheism lack even a single reference to the Shema? You get the point.

Ehrman also neglects evidence from ancient sources that pretty much torpedo his claims about the burial of criminals in Roman Palestine. He's clearly familiar with Josephus and yet he neglects to mention directly relevant material to the topic, namely when Josephus said, "Nay, they proceeded to that degree of impiety, as to cast away their dead bodies without burial, although the Jews used to take so much care of the burial of men, that they took down those that were condemned and crucified, and buried them before the going down of the sun" (J.W. 4.317).

But it's a popular book; we shouldn't expect it do those things, right? Wrong! Ehrman trades on his credentials as a historian and a scholar. He's at pains to repeatedly emphasize his training in conservative institutions of higher learning before shedding his Christian vestiges and becoming an objective reporter of the facts as we can know them. If he wants the respect that the letters

appended to his name are supposed to grant him, then he has to employ the same methods that anyone else wanting a fair hearing would employ.

And speaking of methodology; did I mention that he lets a dubious reading of Galatians 4:14 drive his entire reading of Paul? Well, he does! How nice would it have been for him to interact with those who have written about angel christology and disagreed with his conclusion (e.g., Hannah; Sullivan; Fee). But there's also an issue with the parallelomania going on. He makes some pretty flimsy connections between Greco-Roman and Jewish belief and uses the word "divine" as a catchall to do it.

Ehrman never tells us what divinity is or how it is conceived. We're just supposed to know this intuitively I guess. But that leaves open a number of questions, such as, what makes one divine being greater than another? Or, how about why Jews on the whole didn't so easily accept Jesus as divine and worship him as God? If divinity was such a readymade category, and Jesus wasn't unique, then why so much opposition to Jesus devotion?

And while we're on the subject of readymade categories, can I just note the ad hoc nature of Ehrman's (following Talbert) christological categories? The NT authors know nothing of such tidy categorization. There's no exaltation Christology here and incarnation Christology there. Both are ubiquitous throughout the NT and exhibited by authors that are alleged to have only one or the other. But why pit incarnation against exaltation as if the two are incompatible? Philippians 2 shows just how they fit together hand-in-glove!

I could rattle on and on about a number of particular issues with this book, but I think I've made my point, and besides, I'm writing a review essay to really put some meat on these bones! At the end of the day the only positive features I can note are the same ones I note of all his popular works: he's drawing attention to important topics and his prose is top notch; the guy can write! Of this particular volume I'd also add that it has one of the greatest covers I've ever seen on a book. Fantastic image! Kudos to the artist who drew it.

Would I recommend this to the average reader? Probably not. Or at least not until I recommended Tilling and Bauckham first. At least then they'd have the wherewithal to see just how much is wrong with this book.