

This, I believe, will be my final post on an issue that changed my mind about while doing the research for How Jesus Became God. This last one is a big one - for me, at least. And it's not one that I develop at length in the book in any one place, since it covers a span of material. Here's the deal:

Until a year ago I would have said - and frequently did say, in the classroom, in public lectures, and in my writings - that Jesus is portrayed as God in the Gospel of John but not, definitely not, in the other Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. I would point out that only in John did Jesus say such things as "Before Abraham, I am" (8:58; taking upon himself the name of God, as given to Moses in Exodus 3); his Jewish opponents knew full well what he was saying: they take up stones to stone him. Later he says "I and the Father are one" (10:30) Again, the Jews break out the stones. Later he tells his disciples, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father" (14:9). And in a later prayer to God he asks him to "glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world was created" (17:5).

None of these sayings, or anything like them, can be found in the other canonical Gospels. John is clearly portrayed as a divine being in John, but only in John (I would have argued).

Sometimes students, audience members, or readers would object, that even if the other Gospels do not flat-out \*call\* Jesus God, his divinity is implied in other ways. For example, he does amazing miracles that surely only a divine figure could do; and he forgives people's sins, which surely is a prerogative of God alone; and he receives worship as people bow down before him, which surely indicates that he welcomes divine honors.

I would typically respond to these comments by arguing that all of these things are completely compatible with human, not just divine, authority. (I still hold to this view, even though I have a different conclusion now about the Christology of Matthew, Mark, and Luke).

With respect to Jesus' ability to do miracles: in the Hebrew Bible the prophets Elijah and Elisha did fantastic miracles through the power of God - including healing the sick and raising the dead - and in the New Testament so did the apostles Peter and Paul; but that did not make any of them divine. They were humans.

With respect to the forgiveness of sins: when Jesus forgives sins, he never says "I forgive you," as God might say, but "your sins are forgiven," which means that God has forgiven your sins. This prerogative for pronouncing sins forgiven was otherwise reserved for Jewish priests in honor of sacrifices worshipers made at the temple. Jesus may be claiming a priestly, not a divine prerogative.

With respect to people bowing down to him in worship: kings were worshiped - even in the Bible (Matt. 18:26) - by veneration and obeisance, just as God was. Here Jesus may be accepting the worship due to him as the future king.

As a result, none of these things, in and of itself, indicates clearly that Jesus is divine. One could argue that the three things taken together as a group makes a stronger case for Jesus' divinity: Jesus has the role of prophet, priest, and king - not just one thing or the other. And together these things suggest he is something more than human.

But more than that, in doing my research and thinking harder and harder about the issue, when I (a) came to realize that the Gospels not only attributed these things to him, but also

understood him to be adopted as the Son of God at his baptism (Mark 1:9-11), or to have been made the son of God by virtue of the fact that God was literally his father, in that it was the Spirit of God that made the virgin Mary pregnant (Luke 1:35), and (b) realized what “adoption” meant to people in the Roman world (as indicated in a previous post), I finally yielded. These Gospels do indeed think of Jesus as divine. Being made the very Son of God who can heal, cast out demons, raise the dead, pronounce divine forgiveness, receive worship together suggests that even for these Gospels Jesus was a divine being, not merely a human.

But in a different sense from John. (And in a different sense from one another.)

In some ways, much of my book is predicated on the idea that when someone says that Jesus is God, you always have to ask “in what sense?” John’s sense is different from Mark’s and Mark’s is different from Luke’s and Luke’s is different from Paul’s and so on.

For Mark, Jesus was adopted to be God’s son at his baptism. Before that, he was a mere mortal. For Luke, Jesus was conceived by God and so was literally God’s son, from the point of his conception. (In Luke Jesus did not exist \*prior\* to that conception to the virgin – his conception is when he came into existence). For John, Jesus was a pre-existent divine being – the Word of God who was both with God and was God at the beginning of all things – who became a human. Here he is not born of a virgin and he is not adopted by God at the baptism (neither event is narrated in John – and could not be, given, John’s Christology).

So yes, now I agree that Jesus is portrayed as a divine being, a God-man, in all the Gospels. But in very different ways, depending on which Gospel you read.



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