My publisher, HarperOne, asked me to write a 1000-word response to the book that was written in response to How Jesus Became God. As you probably know, the book is called, somewhat expectedly, How God Became Jesus. I have toyed with the idea of giving a chapter-by-chapter response here on the blog. I’ve grown a bit cold to the idea, though, since I’m not sure every chapter of their book really needs a response. I may respond to a couple of the chapters. In the meantime, here’s one response you can read that is, interestingly, written by Daniel Kirk, a professor of NT at the evangelical Fuller Theological Seminary, about one of the better chapters in their book: 

What I give below is the overall response to the book that I wrote for my publisher. We had thought about publishing it somewhere, but I’ve decided to give it here instead.

It is always exciting to publish a book that is considered controversial; it is more exciting when it is thought to be controversial before anyone has read it. But the height of authorial excitement (and intrigue) comes when someone decides to produce a lengthy response to a book without even knowing what is in it.

I can understand why there was a flurry of oppositional activity afoot before How Jesus Became God saw the light of published day. This is a book that deals with an inordinately important issue – important not only for Christian believers but for all of us who are interested in the history of our form of civilization. If Jesus had never been considered to be God, we never would have had Christianity. That in itself is enormous. But consider the other consequences.

If Jesus had remained, in the eyes of his disciples, simply a Jewish preacher who ended up on the wrong side of the law and was crucified for his efforts, his followers would have continued on as a sect within Judaism. There would not have been large scale Gentile conversions to this form of Judaism, any more than there were to other forms of Judaism. If large numbers of Gentiles had not converted to faith in the God-man Jesus, the religion of Jesus would never have grown to be a very sizeable minority within the Roman empire by the beginning of the fourth century – when Christians numbered something like three million persons. If they had not been this significant presence in the Empire, the emperor Constantine would almost certainly not have converted. If the emperor Constantine had not converted, there would not have been the monumental conversions of the fourth century. Without these conversions, Christianity could not have become the state religion of Rome. And as a result, it would never have become the dominant religious, social, cultural, political, and economic force of the West. We would not have had the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Reformation, or Modernity as we know it.

A lot rides on the question of How Jesus Became God.

Evangelical Christian scholars who knew that my book was coming were reasonably certain that they would not like what I had to say, whatever that might be. And so, sight unseen, they agreed to write a response book. I then provided them with copies of my manuscript and they set out to uncover its flaws.

I imagine that to some extent they were disappointed that I didn’t come up with some outlandish claim that, for example, Jesus was not considered God until the Council of Nicea
in 325 CE. Instead, I attempt to provide a clear, coherent, and historically cautious story, step by step, of how the divinity of Jesus developed in early Christianity. Of course fundamentalists and hard-core evangelicals will not be comfortable with this kind of historical approach. Among other things, I insist that Jesus did not declare himself to be God or even think that he was God. Just the contrary. Belief in the divinity of Jesus arose only after his death, because some of his disciples came to believe he had been raised from the dead.

But according to standard Christian belief, Jesus knew he was God and said he was God. That belief may be commonsensical to anyone who holds certain theological views affirming the infallibility, or even the complete inerrancy of the Bible, but it does not fare well in light of our historical evidence, as I explain in my book.

Still, the scholars who have produced How God Became Jesus are not fundamentalists, even if they are conservative Christian scholars who toe the theological line. Yet even they would agree that during his lifetime Jesus did not go around declaring that he was the second member of the Trinity. On the other hand, by the fourth century, virtually all Christians of record believed he was the second member of the Trinity. So how does one get from Point A (Jesus’ life and teachings) to Point B (the Trinitarian theology of the later church)? There needs to be a narrative of how it happens, and my conservative evangelical detractors need a narrative as much as anyone else.

What surprises me most about their response to my book is that they never provide a coherent narrative – or indeed, any narrative at all. Their objective is much simpler: to poke holes, if possible, in this or that detail of my exposition. I am heartily in favor of a rigorous and reasoned scholarly contretemps about each and every key issue: public debate has long been my modus operandi. But what is the alternative to my narrative? The title of their response book is hopeful, suggesting that Jesus did not become God but that God became Jesus. But where is the historical – or even theological – argument that this is what happened? Possibly it exists somewhere, but not within the confines of their book. It may be that these five authors didn’t have time to put forward a coherent counter-proposal – they were under quite a rush to have the response appear! Possibly they don’t agree among themselves about how it all happened.

But I suspect there is a deeper reason as to why they provide no alternative vision. On one hand, they want to attack my views on historical grounds. But on the other hand, their own view – that Jesus actually was God in the flesh – is not based on historical evidence but on religious beliefs and theological assumptions. It cannot be established by historical methods of inquiry. And so they have resorted to something other than proposing a historical reconstruction. They have decided to deconstruct rather than construct. I think in the long run that’s a pity, because if they had provided a sustained statement about what they really think, readers would have a very easy time indeed recognizing which of the two books is a historical treatment of what happened in the rise of early Christianity and which is simply a restatement of traditional Christian dogma.