The Following Is An Excerpt From:

Reading the Gospel of John's Christology as Jewish Messianism

Royal, Prophetic, and Divine Messiahs

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Excerpt From:
Chapter 14 (pages 335—357) **Titled:**

From Jewish Prophet to Jewish God:
How John Made the Divine Jesus Uncreated
by Gabriele Boccaccini

- https://academic.oup.com/jts/article-abstract/71/1/333/5714627
- https://brill.com/edcollbook/title/38816
- https://brill.com/display/book/edcoll/9789004376045/BP000028.xml
- https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004376045_015

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John's Prologue is a masterpiece of theological synthesis. First of all, it reiterates that the Word (λόγος) is divine and uncreated ("In the beginning was the λόγος, and the λόγος was before God, and divine was the λόγος," 1:1). Then it singles out the λόγος as the divine and uncreated instrument used by God for creation ("He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being

28 Yarbro Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah*, 147.

29 Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God*, 252. Already in 1941 Martin Werner suggested that the earliest Christian speculations on the divinity of the Son should be read in light of Jewish angelology; see his *Die Entstehung des christlichen Dogmas* (Bern: Haupt, 1941).

30 Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God*, 266.

through him, and without him not one thing came into being," 1:2–3). These ideas, which closely associated λόγος to the divine and uncreated σοφία, were not new in the Jewish tradition, as we can read in Psalm 33: "By the Word (λόγος) of the Lord the heavens were made and all their host by the breath of his mouth … He spoke, and [the world] came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm" (33:6–9). What was new, and radically new, was the contamination between the uncreated Wisdom of Proverbs (LXX) and the created Wisdom of Sirach. Suddenly and almost with nonchalance, with an abrupt and unexpected turn, John claims that the uncreated λόγος "became flesh," and by explicitly quoting the same verb ("dwelled") used in Sir. 24:8 in reference to the created Wisdom emphasizes that he meant unambiguously that the "uncreated" λόγος became a created being. With hindsight, it looks like a logical, almost imperceptible move. As building materials, John used "bricks" which had been part of the Jewish tradition for centuries, to form an entirely "Jewish" building. And yet never before the boundary between the "uncreated" and the "created" had been trespassed with the result of identifying a divine exalted creature (the Messiah Jesus) with a divine uncreated manifestation of God (the λόγος). The Christians who could not attribute the term θεός to Jesus as long as he was believed to be the "divine" exalted, yet created Messiah, would not have now any hesitations in attributing it to Jesus the "uncreated" λόγος: "My κύριος and my θεός!" (John 20:28).

John could have used σοφία instead of λόγος, and conceptually the discourse would have worked as well, even more smoothly. He did not, of course, in order to avoid an awkward gender conflict between the male Jesus and the female σοφία. But there was another, perhaps more profound reason. Λόγος had always been unambiguously presented in the Jewish tradition as an uncreated manifestation of God, while, as we have seen, the debate about the created or uncreated status of Wisdom was still open. By using λόγος, John could be sure not to be misunderstood in his claim that the man Jesus was the created embodiment of an uncreated manifestation of God.

For John too, Jesus the Messiah is the forgiver, "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29; cf. 19:36). At this point, however, the theology of the "Son of Man," which was already barely comprehensible outside its original Enochic setting, became in the eyes of most Christians insufficient, ambiguous, and even potentially dangerous—an obstacle to be removed in the way to confess the "uncreated" nature of the Son. The Johannine tradition still maintained the title and numerous son-of-man sayings. Jesus was indeed the Son of Man as Jesus himself revealed in the dialogue with the man born blind: "[Jesus] found him and said, 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?' He answered, 'Who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.' Jesus said to him, 'You

have seen him, the one speaking with you is he.' And he said, 'Lord, I believe.' And he worshiped him. Jesus said, 'I came into this world for judgment …" (John 9:35–39). At a first glance, the passage appears as a restatement of the theology of the Enochic Son of Man. But in the previous chapters John had already taken care to turn the term, which originally defined the nature of the Messiah, into a neutral term that merely expressed one of its functions. Jesus is not the Son of Man by nature; the Son of Man was in fact "created." Jesus therefore is only "said" to be the Son of Man because he serves as the eschatological judge. "The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son … [the Father] has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man" (John 5:22, 27).

With all this, the Gospel of John is still interested in the debate about the Son of Man in the Enochic context and does not fail to make his voice heard in the controversy. Whether the last chapter of the Parables of Enoch was part of the original document or a later gloss,[31] the Enochic tradition had come to identify Enoch with the Son of Man: "You are the Son of Man born for justice, and righteousness has dwelt in you, and the Chief Justice of Days you do not abandon" (1 En. 71:14), and had described the angelic transfiguration of the ancient patriarch, visionary, and hero of Enochic Judaism into the eschatological Judge. John does not hold back from a sharp rebuttal: "No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man" (John 3:13). Against those who claimed that Enoch was the Son of Man who ascended into heaven, John argued the superiority of Jesus, the Son of Man who descended from and ascended into heaven.[32]

The reduction of the Son of Man from concept to function, however, marks the decline and rapid disappearance of the phrase from the early Christian theological debate.[33] In presenting the Son of Man as the eschatological Judge, the book of Revelation not only has the Lamb sit on the throne (like in the Parables of Enoch) but now attributes to him the same features of God the Father:

> I was in the Spirit … and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet … and on turning I saw … one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe

31 Yarbro Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah*, 90–94.

32 Benjamin E. Reynolds, *The Apocalyptic Son of Man in the Gospel of John*, WUNT II/249 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008); J. Harold Ellens, *The Son of Man in the Gospel of John* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2010).

33 Sabino Chialà, "The Son of Man: The Evolution of an Expression," in *Enoch and the Messiah Son of Man*, ed. Gabriele Boccaccini (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 153–78.

> and with a golden sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force.
>
> REV. 1:10–16

The characters of the judge and the judged, which were originally distinct in Daniel's vision, are now confused. Contrary to what was stated in the Parables, God and the Lamb are now part of the uncreated sphere, and are both clearly separated from the "created" angels. The final part of Revelation culminates in the apotheosis of the vision of the throne of God and the Lamb, surrounded by "his servants who worship him" (Rev. 22:3). Twice the seer "prostrated" at the feet of the accompanying angel to worship him, and twice the angel rebuked him: "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers, who hold the testimony of Jesus. Worship God!" (Rev. 19:10; cf. 22:8–9). The angel's words remind us of the readiness with which Peter asked the centurion Cornelius to stand up in front of him when he "fell down at his feet to worship him"—"Rise; I am only a mortal!" (Acts 10:25–26). Now that the Messiah no longer belonged to the created sphere but to the uncreated, the ban to worship humans extended also to angels. As long as the "Son of Man" was created, the worship of angels could not be condemned, but now that the Christian "Messiah" is uncreated, it became a practice to be punished with the utmost severity, especially against the rival Enochians who dared promote Enoch to the rank of an angel.

The transition from the Messiah "Son of Man" to the Messiah-λόγος, or from the heavenly-divine messiah to the uncreated Messiah, did not take place across the spectrum of Christianity in a linear fashion, at the same time, or everywhere. Yet it is striking how quickly even the memory of the original meaning of the term "Son of Man" got lost in the span of one generation. The christological discussion shifted rapidly on the issue of the relationship between the human (created) and the divine (uncreated) nature of the Son; and the trend was to use the terms inherited from the earliest traditions in the light of the new debate. The Christian texts began to interpret the title "Son of God" in reference to the uncreated nature of Christ and the term "Son of Man" in relation to his incarnation as a created being. In Irenaeus' words, "Jesus is the Son of God who became the Son of Man" (Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.16.7, 18.3), or as stated by the anonymous author of the contemporary letter to Regino on resurrection (in the second half of the second century CE): "The Son of God was the Son of Man. He embraced both [natures], possessing humanity and

divinity" (3). Origen brilliantly addressed the apparent contradiction that the Gospels attributed to the Son of Man superhuman features and functions that should have been more logically attributed to the "Son of God." He claimed that the reality of the incarnation justifies the paradox, making the two terms virtually interchangeable: "in all Scripture the divine nature is designated with human titles, and the human nature is given the honor of divine appellations" (*Princ.* 2.6.3). A similar mutation affected the Pauline κύριος, who was given the same uncreated status as the divine λόγος in his relationship with the Father-θεός. In the second century, Ignatius of Antioch took as his model the style and even the vocabulary of Paul, and yet he commonly spoke of Jesus as "our θεός" (*Eph.* 18:2). Something must have radically changed in the Christian understanding of the nature of Christ; John's theology had rapidly won the minds and hearts of faithful Christians.

Angelic messianism was increasingly confined to minority areas of resistance; no alternative was given to left-behind, old-fashioned Christians, except to resign themselves to their marginalization and to the demise of their theology, from the dominant view to "heresy." Justin still felt the need to use the title of "angel" in reference to Jesus, but only to clarify that it was meant to signify that Jesus acted as a messenger "to serve the will of [the Father]" (*Dial.* 127.4). For Epiphanius (in the fourth century CE) angelic messianism was just a bizarre belief: "[The Ebionites] deny that [Christ] was begotten of God the Father, asserting that he was created as one of the archangels, but that he was greater than they, and that he rules over the angels and all things made by the Almighty" (*Pan.* 30.16.4; cf. 3.4–5; Hippolytus, *Ref.* 10.29.2). Significantly, in the language of Epiphanius, the controversy was not about the "divinity" or "veneration" of Jesus, but about his created or uncreated status.

Conclusion

Jesus "became God" not when he was given the attribute of "divinity" (which happened at a very early stage, maybe even during his lifetime) or when he was "venerated" (which also happened at a very early stage after his death, as soon as he was believed to be resurrected and living in heaven). Jesus "became God" not even when progressively a "higher degree of divinity was given to the already divine Messiah" and Jesus began to be understood as a preexistent angelic figure who came to dwell on earth. It did not even happen when his disciples "upgraded" their veneration, worshiping him as God.

The categories of "veneration," suggested by Larry Hurtado, and that of "divinity," explored by Bart Ehrman, fall short of giving a clear answer to the quest for "how Jesus became God," and do not fully recognize the distinctive

and revolutionary contribution given by the Gospel of John. Jesus "became God" only when the Gospel of John ultimately made him "uncreated," and the Messiah was understood to be the uncreated λόγος who became flesh. It was not the transformation of a Jewish prophet into a pagan God, as Maurice Casey argued, but the transformation of a Jewish prophet and messianic claimant into the Jewish God, exploiting the rich variety of previous messianic models and the dynamic nature of Jewish monotheism.

There is no need to look outside to the non-Jewish Hellenistic world for influences that led to the notion of Jesus as God, as generations of scholars have maintained, from Wilhelm Bousset to Maurice Casey. Conceptually, John's λόγος Christology was only a small "variant" in relation to existing Jewish messianic and earlier christological models that described the lowering and exaltation of the preexistent "divine" Messiah, and yet it was a huge, bold step. The crossing of the boundary between the "created" and the "uncreated" distinctively set the Christian Messiah apart and brought Jesus to an unprecedented level of exaltation, from an inferior divine being to the Jewish God.

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