

## Chapter 1

# Caesar, Moses and Jesus as “God”, “godlike” or “God’s Son”: Constructions of Divinity in Paganism, Philo and Christianity in the Greco-Roman World

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According to Acts (14:11), the people in Lystra, seeing Paul’s and Barnabas’ miracle working, were ready to venerate the apostles as gods. Luke’s narrative, whether historical or not, realistically captured the fact that ancient people in the Greco-Roman world had no problem assuming that humans were living as gods among them. This marks a deep cultural difference from Western modernity, according to which (apart from Christ) humans can never be gods. They can be stars, even saints, but not gods. Modern thinking is deeply moulded by the Judeo-Christian monotheistic concept that God as creator is separate from the world, counterposed to it. A high barrier between divine and human characterises modern thinking. However, in the Greco-Roman world, this barrier was lower and more permeable. “What is strong is now called god”, Menander joked around 300 BCE (*Carine* frg. 2 com. IV p. 144, in Stobaios 3.32.11). There was some truth to this exaggeration of the comedian. The more power one had over other people, the more likely these dependants considered one a god. Even a powerful patron in a patron-client relationship could be venerated like a god (*ut deo*) or addressed

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as “terrestrial Jupiter”.<sup>2</sup> The powerful rulers, Caesar and Augustus, already in their lifetime were considered divine – also in the West of the Mediterranean world, not just in the East where the deification of a living person had had a longer tradition.<sup>3</sup> As will be shown, any human stronger and more powerful than normal people, anyone appearing to command nature’s forces or being more virtuous, pure or beautiful, was entitled to being venerated in a cult and thus becoming a deity.<sup>4</sup> In other words, in antiquity, Mother Theresa would have been a goddess, not just a saint.

From a historian’s perspective, it is not surprising at all that Jesus of Nazareth was deified by his followers. In the Greco-Roman context, it would have been more astonishing if they had not made a god of him, considering his charismatic exorcisms, his innovative and poetic teachings, and above all, the visionary experiences of his followers after his death, which for them meant that God had raised Jesus from the dead in an unprecedented way. Not ancient, but modern secular-minded people consider it absurd to proclaim a man as god. However, such secular minds of today forget that they are subconsciously moulded by the Judeo-Christian monotheistic concept of divinity. “No other gods beside me” is the monotheistic motto, flanked by the creation theology principle that the divine, as creating power, is counterposed to the creation and not part of it. That

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- 2 Thus already Plautus (255–185 BCE), *Asin.* 712f.; *Persa* 99f.; *Capt.* 863f. Of course, Plautus also was a comedy writer, but Cicero was not when he praised his benefactor Lentulus as “parent and god of my life” (*Post Reditum in Senatu* 8). See further Claus (2001:44f.).
- 3 See the material in Claus (2001:17, 33f., 60, 482 *et al.*). Claus convincingly refutes older literature that tried to uphold a significant difference between the East and the West. Besides the deification of living rulers, many emperors upon their death were granted an apotheosis by the Senate. It raised them into heaven where they were venerated together with the other gods, equal to them. See e.g. Pliny, *paneg.* 35.4; 11.4; 16.4; Herodian 4.2.1; Suetonius, *Aug.* 97.1–3. Domitian consecrated several deceased family members so that Juvenal joked that he augmented the stars in the sky so much that Atlas henceforth had to carry significantly more weight (*Sat.* 13.46–49).
- 4 In the West, the barrier between human and divine was lower than today also because every person was considered having a *genius*, a guardian deity, that is, a divine aspect inherent in every human. In every-day life, the *genius* was considered identical with the person. After death, the *genius* would still be present and therefore could be venerated by relatives. See the material in, e.g. Claus (2001:45, 221–227).

no human can be god is the consequence. This principle is deeply imprinted into secular minds, and ironically fuels scepticism about Christian Christology today.

Historically, the deification of a human prophet, Jesus, was a Christological process “from below”: A human, after his death, gradually became divine.<sup>5</sup> In its first phases, this process seemed to put the principle of monotheism at risk – until in late antiquity, to preserve monotheism, formulas were found according to which the one supreme God integrated Jesus into God’s own divinity, into God’s own divine “essence” – which was different from deifications in the polytheistic Greco-Roman world (see below).

It is true, the emperors since Augustus also associated themselves with the supreme god, Jupiter.<sup>6</sup> Domitian, for example, was named together with Jupiter (*IG* 3.1.1091), sometimes took over his symbols of thunder (Martial, *Epigr.* 6.10) and lightning (Bergmann 1998: Table 19.1) or was even stylised as superior to Jupiter (Martial, *Epigr.* 4.1; 8.39.5f; see also 9.34). But these associations or even identifications of gods were part of the polytheistic game, lacking the depth and the monotheistic concerns that characterised the development of the Trinitarian doctrine.

Pagan deifications did not entail philosophical speculations about a divine “essence” or assumptions about qualities such as *homoousios* or *homoiousios*. They were simpler than that. But they provided the cultural context that furthered the first steps of a deification of Jesus of Nazareth.

5 The process of forming an explicit Christology probably did not start until after the Easter visions of Jesus’ followers. There is no sound evidence that the charismatic personality of the historical prophet Jesus claimed any of the traditional titles that after Easter were attributed to him – not even the title Son of Man in the sense of “future judge of the world”. The historical Jesus in all likelihood only claimed prophetic power of authority, warranted by God, when preaching that the Son of Man will reach a favourable verdict if people accept his, Jesus’, proclamation (Luke 12:8). The historical Jesus in all likelihood talked about the Son of Man only in the third person, not in the first. What these historical findings mean theologically is another question. A faith in Jesus as “God’s Son” is not necessarily tied to the self-consciousness of the historical Jesus. See further e.g. Lampe (2012: especially 120–129) for the implicit Christology of Jesus’ pre-Easter life.

6 For statues that depict the emperors from Augustus to Nerva as Jupiter, see Maderna (1988:156–196).

## 1. Humans as “godlike” and “god”

Already in the first century CE, emperors were praised in prose hymns and encomia (Collins 2003:361-372; Standhartinger 2006:370), which may have influenced the formulation of the Christological hymn in Philippians 2, where a godlikeness is claimed for Jesus. In this pre-Pauline hymn, which is not only to be understood against the backdrop of Jewish concepts such as the Jewish *sophia* myth or Philonic *logos* speculations, the expression “to be like (ἴσα) God” (2:6; see John 5:18) is paralleled by the Greek idea that heroes are to be praised as “godlike”; not only mythological figures such as Perseus, the son of Zeus and of the human virgin princess Danae, were considered godlike heroes (ἰσοθεος φῶς; Aeschylus, *Pers.* 857), but also historical figures such as the king Darius, who ruled without battles (ἰσόθεος Δαρείος; Aeschylus, *Pers.* 857), or even any person of excelling virtue and political skill. Aristotle (*Polit.* 3.1284a) wrote:

If there is any person ... whose virtue is so pre-eminent that the virtues ... of all the rest admit of no comparison with his ..., he can be no longer regarded as part of the state; for justice will not be done to the superior, if he is reckoned only as the *equal* of those who are so far inferior to him in virtue and political skill. Such one may truly be deemed like a God among men (ὥσπερ γὰρ θεὸν ἐν ἀνθρώποις εἰκὸς εἶναι τὸν τοιοῦτον).

Similarly, Cassius Dio, centuries later, lets Maecenas remind Augustus that “virtue renders many godlike” (ἀρετὴ ... ἰσοθέους πολλοὺς ποιεῖ, 52.35.5).

The Greek idea was that the gods work in people who excel<sup>7</sup> and that these persons therefore are godlike. This especially was considered true about emperors. According to Cassius Dio (51.20.1f.), in 29 BCE the Senate ordered that Augustus “equally to the gods (ἐξ ἴσου τοῖς θεοῖς) be inscribed into the hymns”. In the year 19 CE, Germanicus held that his father, Emperor Tiberius, and his grandmother, Livia, were worthy of godlike acclamations (ἰσοθέους ἐκφωνήσεις), as well as divinity (θειότητος).<sup>8</sup> And a papyrus stated that a *basileus* is godlike (ἰσόθεος), as “ruling” means being “god”.<sup>9</sup> The emphasis, in the papyrus, shifts

7 See e.g. Claus (2001:41); a triumphant military leader entering Rome, for example, was a representation of Jupiter Optimus Maximus who, in this human, returned to his temple.

8 *Select Papyri* (LCL) vol. 2, no. 211 (edict by Germanicus).

9 PHeid 1716 (*verso*); edition in *Philologus* 80 (1925) 339f.

to power – away from extraordinary virtue (*ἀρετή*) and political skill as the Aristotelian base for godlikeness. Whoever had power to rule was a candidate for being considered to be godlike.

Jewish authors, however, criticised the claim of rulers to be equal to or like gods.<sup>10</sup> Philo praised Augustus as an ideal ruler in contrast to Caligula and admitted that “all decreed him honours equal to those of the Olympian gods” (*Leg. ad Caium* 149-152). But Jews could not venerate the emperor in this way and they did not have to, according to Philo, because Augustus respected the “laws and customs prevailing in each nation” and in fact “did not approve of anyone addressing him as master or god” (152-154). Philo here uses the motif of a virtuous ruler being reluctant to receive divine honours. Germanicus in the mentioned edict of 19 CE also denied such honours for himself.<sup>11</sup>

Another ideal ruler, for Philo, was Moses (*Vita Mosis* 1.148-162), who even is attributed the titles “king and god” of his people. A remarkable text, worth being read as a whole:

(148) Of all these men [who set off for the exodus], Moses was elected the leader, receiving the authority and sovereignty over them, not having gained it like some men who have forced their way to power ... but having been appointed for the sake of his virtue and excellence and benevolence towards all men ... and also because God, who loves virtue and piety and excellence gave him his authority as a well-deserved reward.

(149) For as he had abandoned the chief authority in Egypt, which he might have had as the grandson of the reigning king ... and by reason of his nobleness of soul and of the greatness of his spirit and the natural detestation of wickedness, scorning and rejecting all the hopes which he might have conceived from those who adopted him, it seemed good to the ruler and governor of the universe to recompense him with the sovereign authority over a more populous and more powerful nation, which he was about to take to himself out of all other nations ... (150) And when he had received this authority, he did not show anxiety ... to increase the power of his own family and

10 2 Macc. 9:12; Sib. 5.33f.; Philo, *Legum Allegoriae* 1.49; see *Decal.* 7; *Virt.* 219; *Vita Mosis* 2.194; *Spec. Leg.* 1.25.

11 For this motif, see further Hillard (2011:219-251).

promote his sons to any great dignity ... he subdued his natural love and affection for his children ... making these feelings subordinate to his own incorruptible reason, (151) for he kept one most invariable object ... namely that of benefiting those who were subjected to his authority and of doing everything ... with a view to their advantage ... (and) prosperity. (152) Therefore ... he neither accumulated treasures ... or property ... (153) ... not indulging in any theatrical affection of pomp and magnificence, but cultivating the simplicity ... of a private individual.

Moses here displayed a *kenosis*, a renunciation of Egyptian power to which he might have been entitled according to Philo, and a renunciation of luxurious prosperity for himself and power for his own family; he did not found a dynasty. This *kenosis* is paralleled by Christ's, who renounced divine glory and "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave ... and being found in human form" (Phil. 2:7). God, therefore, also rewarded both Christ and Moses for their renunciations by giving them even more power in the end (Philo: "sovereign authority over a more populous and more powerful nation"; Phil. 2:10: "so that every knee bends, in heaven and on earth and under the earth"). If Philo wrote the *Vita Moses* during his stay in Rome, at the end of the 30s CE, to again contrast Caligula by drawing the portrait of an ideal ruler, then the question arises whether he had heard about the nascent Christology of the Christians when designing his Moses picture. However, it is more likely that he alluded to pagan traditions when calling up the renunciation motif. Plutarch, for example, pictured Alexander the Great as an ideal ruler who renounced looting Asia, not making a personal profit and not ravaging it as a booty of good luck (*ἄρπαγμα εὐτυχίας*; see Phil. 2:6: *ἄρπαγμός*), but rather being a philosopher who aimed at peace and harmony for all people instead of riches and splendour for himself (Alex. 330DE).

Philo continues in his Moses eulogy by enumerating further virtues, such as "presence of mind", "knowledge", "patience under evil" or "justice" (154). And as Moses

(155) discarded all desire of gain and riches ... God gave him instead the greatest ... wealth, the wealth of all the earth and sea ... and all the other elements ... For having judged him deserving of being made a partaker (*κοινωνός*) in the portion which he had reserved for himself, he gave him the whole world as a possession suitable for his heir: (156) therefore, all elements obeyed him as his master ... submitting to his commands ...

if it is true according to the proverb that “all the property of friends is common” and if the prophet [Moses] was truly called the friend of God (see Ex. 33:11) then it follows that he would naturally partake of God himself (μετέχω αὐτοῦ) and of all his possessions as far as he had need. (157) For God possesses everything ... but the good man has nothing that is properly his own, not even himself, but he has a share (μεταλαγχάνω) granted to him of the treasures of God as far as he is able to partake of them .... (158) What more shall I say? Has he not also enjoyed an even greater fellowship (κοινωνία) with the Father and Creator of the universe (see Arrianus, *Epict.* 2.19.27: ἡ πρὸς τὸν Δία κοινωνία) ...? For he also was called the god (θεός) and king of the whole nation, and he is said to have entered into the darkness where God was (Ex. 20:21; 19:9, 18-20; see 33:9-11); that is to say, into the invisible, and shapeless and incorporeal world, the essence (οὐσία) that serves as the model (παραδειγματικός) of all existing things, where he apprehended (κατανοέω) things invisible to mortal nature. For having brought himself and his own life into the middle, as an excellently wrought drawing (γραφή), he established himself as a most beautiful and godlike (θεοειδής) work, to be a model (παραδειγμα) for all those who were inclined to imitate him. (159) And happy are they who have been able to take ... a faithful copy of his excellence in their own souls. For let the mind ... take the perfect appearance of virtue ... (160) ... men in a lowly condition are imitators of men of high reputation ... (161) If the chief of a people adopts a .... dignified course of life then subjects ... give him an idea that they are devoted to the same pursuits ... (162) But, perhaps, since Moses was also destined to be the lawgiver of his nation, he was (γίγνομαι) himself long previously (πολὺ πρότερον), through the providence of God, a living/spiritual (ψυχικός) and reasonable (λογικός) law (νόμος), since that providence appointed him to the lawgiver, when as yet he knew nothing of his appointment.

The latter appears to allude to the Platonic teaching of a pre-existence of the rational soul, here of Moses’ soul, which Philo seems to consider as having been a pre-existent law. Or should one rather interpret: His pre-existent rational soul had profound knowledge of a pre-existent law that God had in mind as one of his “ideas”? Unfortunately, the text remains enigmatic.<sup>12</sup> According to the

12 Brucker (1997:224) asks whether Philo alluded to a pre-existence of Moses in the world of ideas. However, that Philo considered the human Moses an image of an (pre-existent) ideal Moses seems rather farfetched.

Platonic *anamnesis* theory, Moses later would have remembered this law when he became a lawgiver.

Besides pre-existence, seen against a Platonic backdrop, and besides *kenosis*, the text leaning on Exodus 33:11 presents Moses as a friend of God, with whom God shared part of his power over nature and its elements, so that he was able to perform miracles such as changing a rod into a serpent (see 77-82). He therefore was a fellow and partner (κοινωνός) of God. The most climactic formulations, however, are that Moses himself was a “god” of his people, “partaking of God (himself) and his possessions”. As the context shows, “partaking of God” was not sharing in God’s essence, although Moses stood face to face with God’s essence during the Sinai events (158). In view of the context, partaking of God rather has to be interpreted as an ellipsis, that is, as “partaking of God’s power” over the world – or, to move beyond Philo’s immediate context, Moses was partaking of God’s glory shining on his face like on a mirror (Ex. 34:29f.; see 2 Cor. 3:7, 9). In our text, Philo therefore calls Moses a “godlike” picture of God; God’s essence was a “model of all existing things”, that is, also of Moses. In turn, Moses as picture can become a “model” for other people imitating him, a model of virtue (158-161). The Platonic pyramid of being, together with the categories of archetype and image, stands in the background of such deliberations. Moses is conceived as a godlike mediator (158) between God and the other humans, sharing in God’s supernatural power and displaying a virtue that far exceeds that of other humans (see Aristotle above).

In sum, mirroring the Greco-Roman society’s deification of human individuals who rule and, at the same time, display excellent virtue (including for example Moses’ modesty), incorruptible reason and benevolence towards one’s subjects, Philo’s remarkable eulogy of Moses opens its flanks to the same criticism that Christians had to face when developing a Christology: Is monotheism at risk when further going down this road? Neither Philo nor the early Christians were aware of the later Trinitarian formulae that attempted to uphold monotheism.

Again, what strikes in the Philonic – as well as the pagan – deifications of individual humans, is not any interest in speculations about sharing in a god’s essence. The divine quality of some individual heroes is rather anchored in their power over others and in their virtue that elevates them above normal humans. It is politically and morally based. Even the hot-tempered hero Heracles, who, upon his cruel death was granted an apotheosis, at his famous crossroads, decided to follow Virtue and not Bliss.



## 2. Humans as both “sons of god” and “gods”

Matthew parallels the aspect of virtue when defining Jesus’ title “Son of God” at the beginning of his narrative (2:15; 3:17; 4:1-11). He not only focuses on Jesus being the Messiah from the House of David (1:1 etc.) and a “God with us” (1:23), fathered by the Holy Spirit (1:18, 20), he also especially highlights his obedience

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Theologians have been trained to deduce the Christian Son of God title mainly from the Hebrew Bible and the Mesopotamian and Egyptian prehistory of Hebrew Bible motifs. The kings of Israel, God’s Anointed (Ps. 2:1), were adopted by God as Son of God (Ps. 2:7)<sup>15</sup> at their enthronement without, however, having divine qualities or being venerated in a cult.<sup>16</sup> In fact, if the king fails and sins, God punishes him as any human (see 2 Sam. 7:14). Like Psalm 2, Nathan’s prophecy calls a successor of David “Son of God”, with God promising to be his Father (2 Sam. 7:14; see 1 Chron. 17:13). Interpreted as a messianic prophecy, this Hebrew Bible text, among others, directly fed into early Christian Christology.

As background, Egypt and Mesopotamia have been rightly compared.

In Egypt, the king as a person remained human, without being

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- 13 Matt. 4:1-11 refers to God’s will in Deut. 6:13, 16 LXX; 8:3. Matt. 3:15, 17 considers the obedient fulfilling “of all righteousness” a virtue worth of being crowned with divine sonship. Likewise, the Philippians hymn (Phil. 2:6, 8) combines godlikeness with obedience, although here his godlikeness, interpreted as “being in the form of God” (*ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων*), also characterises his pre-existent, non-human state.
- 14 Also in rabbinic Judaism, (God’s) sons are humans who obey God’s will: mQuiddushin 1.61c.36. However, apart from virtue and morals, the New Testament also calls Christians “sons of God” because of Christ’s salvific work: Those whom God elected and justified are brothers to Jesus, “conformed to the image of His Son”, who is the firstborn among them (Rom. 8:29; see Gal. 3:26; Heb. 2:11f.). They eventually will share in his power (1 Cor. 6:3; Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6; see Luke 20:36). As Christians call God “Father” (e.g. John 20:17; Matt. 6:9), they also are “sons of God” or “children of God” (John 1:12; see Heb. 2:10, 13).
- 15 Applied to Christ in the quotes in Heb. 1:5; 5:5; Acts 13:33; Matt. 3:17; 4:3; Luke 3:22; John 1:49 (God’s Son = King of Israel).
- 16 Only at their funerals special rites could be performed: 2 Chron. 16:14; 21:19; Jer. 34:5; see Deut. 26:14; Ps. 106:28.

venerated cultically. Instead, he himself had a priestly function, and his designation “son of god” pointed both to the quality difference between the divine and the pharaoh and to his being a mediator between gods and humans. Similarly, in Mesopotamia in the first millennium BCE, the king remained a human creature. The deity chose him to be its son and a perfect image of the divine qualities, for example, when being pure or a wise man participating in the deity’s wisdom. If these qualities were not displayed or the king’s duties neglected, the deity could choose another person (See e.g. Schmitt 2006).

However, there is more to the son of god title when looking into the Greco-Roman world in which the ancient readers of the early Christological texts found a plethora of motifs they could associate with the Son-of-God title, when listening to these texts.

In the propaganda of the emperors, when legitimising a new emperor’s rule, the deifying consecration of the predecessor played a significant role (see especially Gesche 1978:374-390). Not only because the consecration made the new emperor a “god’s son”, but also because the consecration entailed that a *god* had chosen the new emperor as heir and son. In this way, the transition of power could not be questioned easily. Who would dare to criticise a god’s judgment? At the beginning of his reign, Antoninus Pius struggled with the Senate about the deification of Hadrian, his legal father. The Senate resisted a consecration, but Antoninus Pius argued that without an apotheosis Hadrian would be branded a bad ruler and his decisions, including his adoption of Antoninus Pius, would be meaningless, with Antoninus not being able to start his new job (Cassius Dio 70.1.2f.; SHA, Hadrian 27.1-4; Antoninus Pius 6.7). Although this rhetorical argumentation was a huge exaggeration, it nevertheless shows the link between a ruler’s legitimisation and the divinity of his father that had been established in the mind-sets over the course of the previous century. Being of divine descent meant to be a “true image” (*imago vera*) of the divine ancestor, with his divinity – and his protection – reflecting onto the descendent (Tacitus, *Ann.* 4.52.2, referring to an incident in the year 26 CE).

Already in Republican times, *Caesar* emphasised that he descended from immortal gods via his father,<sup>17</sup> and after his military victories in the first half of the 40s BCE, he himself was considered a god not only in the East but also in Italian towns (see Claus 2001:46-53). In Rome a statue was dedicated to

17 Suetonius, *Caesar* 6.1: *paternum [genus] cum diis immortalibus coniunctum.*

him as “invincible god” (Cassius Dio 43.45.3). After Caesar’s death, *Augustus* (Octavian) attempted to highlight his being the legal son of the deified Caesar, thus his being son of a god. Especially during the civil war, Augustus minted coins stylising himself a god’s son (*divi filius*; see further Gesche 1978:382-384). Augustus’ opponent, *Antonius*, traced his genealogy to the deified Heracles, so that in the East, he was venerated as a god, as a second Dionysos or Osiris. The third antagonist, *Sextus Pompeius*, claimed to be the son of Neptune. The civil war was a battle of (sons of) gods. For Augustus, his being the legal son of the god Caesar was a stepping stone to being recognised as a god himself already during his lifetime (see the material in Claus 2001:54, 59). Augustus even claimed that in 42 BCE his deceased divine father helped him in the battle near Philippi against Cassius (Valerius Max. 1.8.8). *Tiberius* was *divi Augusti filius* (CIL 11. 3872; AE 1950: 44), son and grandson of gods (Caesar and Augustus), whom Valerius Maximus praised for his “celestial providence”. According to Valerius Maximus, Tiberius promoted the “virtues”, and his “divinity” was equal to that of his father and grandfather who, with their apotheosis, had become stars in the sky.<sup>18</sup> How much Tiberius himself valued his being the son of the divine Augustus can be seen in his efforts to push and develop the cult of Augustus.<sup>19</sup> *Caligula* also, emphasised his descent from deities, via his grandmothers descending from both Augustus and Antonius, and like his predecessors he himself was considered a deity in his lifetime (Claus 2001:89-94). *Nero*, after having been adopted by Claudius in the year 50 CE and before his ascent to the throne, had a cult as a god’s son at Pompeii with its own priest (*flamen Neronis Caesaris Aug[usti] filii*; CIL 4.1185; see 11.1331 at Luna), and when he came to power in 54 CE, he was celebrated as a new deity in Alexandria.<sup>20</sup> *Vespasian*, only being a banker’s son, attempted to legitimise his claim to the throne by seeking authorisation from Egyptian gods. In the name of Serapis, he allegedly worked healing miracles, to

18 Valerius Max. *praef.*; see Claus (2001:89) for further references for Tiberius’ divinity already during his lifetime.

19 E.g. to the priest (*flamen*) of the deified Augustus he added a priestess like in the Jupiter cult, and he punished a town in Asia Minor for not completing an Augustus temple. Cassius Dio 57.24.6; Tac., *Ann.* 4.36; Suetonius, *Tiberius* 37. See further Claus (2001:370).

20 See the material in Claus (2001:98-111) and Lampe (2010:9-12).

which the Gospel of Mark covertly but critically alludes,<sup>21</sup> and claimed to be the fulfilment of the messianic expectations of the Jews.<sup>22</sup> A papyrus from the last quarter of the first century CE<sup>23</sup> called him “Son of Amun” and at the same time “saviour”, “benefactor”, “lord” and “god” (θεός). In the same way Alexander the Great had legitimised his rule over Egypt by having the Amun oracle in Siwa affirm his being the son of Amun, whom he identified with Zeus.<sup>24</sup>

*Titus* consecrated his deceased father, Vespasian, to legitimise his own rule and was deified himself by his brother Domitian. *Domitian*, consequently, could legitimise himself as brother as well as son of a god (Pliny, *Paneg.* 11). At the same time he was hailed as “our Lord”<sup>25</sup> and as god (*deus*),<sup>26</sup> just like Thomas acclaimed Jesus in John 20:28, and already Vespasian had been addressed (see above). Domitian’s own son, who died before his father ascended to power in 81 CE, was consecrated a god (*divus Caesar*) shortly after Domitian had become emperor. A coin depicted him as Jupiter, sitting on a globe as a naked child, surrounded by seven stars.<sup>27</sup> Domitian also consecrated the deceased daughter of a god, Julia, daughter of his deified brother Titus.<sup>28</sup> More examples could easily be added continuing through history. Numerous successors of Nerva<sup>29</sup> traced their divine decent to him, and

21 Tacitus, *Hist.* 4,81f.; Suetonius, *Vesp.* 7; Dio Cassius 66.8.1; reflected in Mark 3:1-6; 8:22-26. See further e.g. Lampe (2015:111-129, especially 119-122).

22 Josephus, *Bell.* 6.312f; Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.13; Suetonius, *Vesp.* 4.5.

23 P. Fouad 8 (See Philostratus, *Vita Apollonii* 5.27-36): Οὐεσπ[α]σιανὸς εἰς σωτῆρ καὶ εὐεργέτης[Ἰ]Ἀμμων[ο]ς υἱὸς ὁ ἀνατέλλων ε[ ] [ ] α φύλαξον ἡμῖν αὐτ[ὸν] [κύρι]ε Σεβαστέ ε...ιενσαρ[ ] [ ] α Ἰμμωνος υἱὸς κ...απλ[ ]...θεὸς Καῖσαρ Οὐεσπασια[ν]ός.

24 Kallisthenes of Olynth, *Fragmente der Griechischen Historiker* 124 Frg. 14; Strabo, *Geographika* 17.1.43; Diodorus, *Bibliotheca Historica* 17.51; Plutarch, *Alexander* 27. See further Bosworth (1988:71-74).

25 CIL 2.4722: D[ominus] n[oster] Imperator Caesar divi Vespasiani Aug[usti] f[ilius]; 10.444: optim[i] principis et domini.

26 E.g. Martial, *Epigr.* 5.8.1; 7.34.8f.; 8.2.6; 9.66.3; Suetonius, *Dom.* 13.2; 4.4; Pliny, *Paneg.* 33.4; 49.1; 78.2; AE 1941: 73. See the same titles for his father in P. Fouad 8, above.

27 Photo and references in Claus (2001:122).

28 CIL 3.13524; 9.1153; Martial, *Epigr.* 9.1.6f. For Trajan, the son of the deified Nerva, and Hadrian, the son of the deified Trajan, see AE 1950:58, as well as Claus (2001:135f., 143). It appears that common people considered Trajan capable of performing healing miracles like Vespasian: Pliny, *Paneg.* 22.3.

29 See the epigraphic material in Claus (2001:371f.).

in 318 CE Constantine minted coins<sup>30</sup> in which he celebrated his deified father Constantius<sup>31</sup> to underpin his own power and dignity.

All of the examples show that a god’s son was not just a human but considered elevated above other humans, in most cases being called “god” himself.<sup>32</sup> It is therefore not surprising that the New Testament, in a seemingly incoherent way, calls Jesus both Son of God and God in the same sentence or passage (Heb. 1:8; John 20:28, 31; 10:33, 36; 19:7; 1:14, 18). In the same way, Christ in a later inscription is entitled “God, the Son of God” (*deus dei filius*).<sup>33</sup> For ancient ears, this was not conceptually blurry or incoherent at all. The same was true for both God and Christ being called “God” (θεός) in the same sentence (e.g. Heb. 1:9; see John 1:1, 18). Only monotheistically trained ears may have been surprised.

A second common denominator of all of these examples, including the Christian ones, is that the category of divine essence (οὐσία) did not play a role (yet) for describing divine sonship. This explains why Arianism succeeded in convincing many people for a long time with its subordination Christology and the notion that “the Logos is in every aspect alien (ἄλλότριος) and non-similar (ἀνόμοιος) to the essence (οὐσία) of the Father” (Schmidt & Schubart 1910:10677). The term οὐσία as Christological or Trinitarian category did not exist in the New Testament.<sup>34</sup>

When the Romans wanted to express the divine aspect of an emperor they used *numen*, denoting his divine effective power, or *genius*, that is, his guardian deity; the *genius* was considered a divine aspect, inherent in every human, not just

30 See Claus (2001:196, 202). For other emperors as sons of gods in the 2nd and 3rd centuries see *ibid.* 147, 152, 160f., 174, 181, etc.

31 “Emperor on earth and god in heaven”: *Paneg. Lat.* 6(7).4.2.

32 See also the pledge of allegiance to Tiberius by the Cyprus people upon his accession to power in 14 CE: They pledged to venerate as divine not only the new emperor-god Tiberius but also his sons Drusus and Germanicus (although the latter explicitly rejected divine honours for himself five years later; see above).

33 *ILCV* 1613a (Moesia superior). See also the text by the church historian Socrates, footnote 37.

34 In Luke’s parable 15:12f., οὐσία simply meant “property/financial assets” that the father gave to the prodigal son. Also Heb. 1:1-4 is far removed from using the “essence” category, contrary to some modern translations that insinuate such a reading. See Lampe (2009:63-71).

the emperor.<sup>35</sup> For Latin Christians *genius* and *numen*, however, were not fit to become Christological categories. *Numina*, for Tertullian, was just another term for “gods”. The pagans themselves make fun of their *numina*, Tertullian laughed (Tertullian, *Nat.* 1.10). And about the *genius* term he wrote,

We make our oaths ... not by the *genius* of the Caesar ... *genius* is a name for *daemon* or in the diminutive *daemonium* ... we are accustomed to exorcise *daemons* or *geniuses* ... not to give them the honour of divinity (*divinitas*) (Tertullian, *Apol.* 32.2f.; see *Nat.* 1.17).

Third, biological fatherhood was irrelevant. What counted was legal sonship, with numerous emperors having been adopted by their predecessor. In the same way, Psalm 2:7, quoted in Hebrews 1:5; 5:5; Acts 13:13, did not mean God’s “begetting” (γεννάω) his son in any literal way; “begetting” denoted the king’s adoption by God at the enthronement (see above).

### 3. Some hermeneutical consequences

- i. As was shown, for quite a while, Christology ran parallel to the ideology of deifications of emperors, putting monotheism at risk, until the church, to preserve monotheism, in late antiquity managed to rein in this process by focussing on the category of divine “essence”, and thus cutting the ties to tendencies to Arianism. However, not until Nicea in 325 CE, the (originally Gnostic) formula of Christ being of the same essence as the Father, of being “one in being” and “consubstantial” (ὁμοούσιος), was made official doctrine.
- ii. The long-term parallelism between Christology and emperor ideology entailed that, at least latently, Christology was an antithesis or antipole to the emperors and their religious claims. In this way, a politically critical aspect was inherent in early Christology, even already in the pre-Pauline hymn of Philippians 2 if more recent anti-imperial exegeses of the Pauline literature<sup>36</sup> can be trusted, considering the convincing evidence they have accumulated.

35 For the emperor’s *numen*, see Claus (2001:229–237); for his *genius*, *ibid.*, 221–229. In addition, see note 4 above.

36 See e.g. Collins (2003:361–372) and Standhartinger (2006:370). For an anti-imperial exegesis of Mark, see Lampe (2015:111–129).

iii. To contextualise the Christian deification of Jesus within the Greco-Roman world and not just within the Jewish tradition (with its titles Son of God, Anointed/Messiah/Christ, Son of David or Son of Man) appears to be legitimate, considering that people in antiquity also deemed the veneration of Jesus as god analogous to the deification of an emperor;<sup>37</sup> both Jesus and an emperor were humans made into gods. On the same line, but much earlier, Luke appeared to have composed his ascension story as an antithetical parallel to apotheoses of emperors.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, from the third century onward the legend was circulated that Pilate told Emperor Tiberius about Christ’s numerous miracles and about the belief of many people in Jesus’ divinity, so that the emperor made a move in the Senate to consecrate and thus deify Christ.<sup>39</sup> This legend confirms that ancient minds were aware of the parallelism between deifications of emperors and the Christian deification of Jesus. Modern scholarship, therefore, might as well explore the parallels.

The parallelism was even more imposing, as not only Jesus’ death and resurrection were considered an enhancement of his divinity (see e.g. Rom. 1:4) but also the divinity of an emperor after his death obtained an even higher quality upon his consecrating apotheosis. The emperor god, depicted as belonging to both the divine and the human sphere and thus mediating both, may have served as one model for the Christological construction process in the first centuries.

However, the parallelism does not support that the emperor ideology contributed to the *origins* of Christology. Christology was first formulated when reading and interpreting Jewish writings. Nonetheless, from the perspective of reader response criticism, the parallelism supports that already first-century readers could associate the omnipresent emperor ideology

37 See Socrates, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.23 (Migne Patrologia Gr. 67, p. 445). Socrates criticises that, while the sophist Libanios “himself deified (*ἀποθεῖω*) (the emperor) Iulianos (Apostata)”, he makes fun of the Christians that they “make a human from Palestine into God and Son of God”. For Socrates both deifications were parallel, and for Libanios this parallelism also existed, but for him it was ridiculous – *not* because a human was deified by the Christians but because some insignificant Jewish preacher from the Palestinian hinterland was deified like an important emperor and thus compared to him.

38 See Lampe (2010:8-9) and Kezber (2007).

39 Tertullian, *Apol.* 5.2; Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 2.2.2; Rufinus, *Hist. Eccl.* 2.2.1-3; Orosius 7.4.5.



when reading Christological texts. In this way, the further unfolding of Christology may have been partly shaped in response to this ideology. Why else, for instance, did Luke, as the only New Testament author, separate Christ's elevation to heaven from Christ's resurrection, with "resurrection" being a genuinely Jewish concept (e.g. Dan 12) while elevation to heaven was comparable to Greco-Roman apotheoses?

- iv. It is not easy to draw consequences from these findings for today's Christology, and the following thoughts are just preliminary, far from doing justice to the hermeneutical problems. First, it might be wise to keep the at least latent socially or politically critical aspect of Christology alive, keeping in mind that God elevated somebody who had innocently died on the "electric chair" of the Roman Empire as a despised criminal, who had preached mercy and love, especially toward down-trodden and the people at the fringes of society, who had not sought worldly honours and, in this way, had turned the ancient concept of hierarchies and honour/shame categories upside down (see e.g. 1 Cor. 1:18-2:5; Mark 10:42-45). If this man from Palestine was worthy of God's honouring him, the powerful rulers of the world and their actions might be called into question if necessary.

Second, it may be wise to move away from the late-antiquity philosophical category of "essence" or "substance", which has little to do with Scripture and can no longer be easily conveyed to people of today. What is "divine essence" as opposed to "human essence"? A contemporary churchgoer might have trouble explaining this even after lengthy dogmatic elaborations by theologians. Even a modern anthropologist might have difficulties expounding what "human essence" is, considering the progress in, for example, the science of animal ethology in recent years.

Third, it might be wise to put less emphasis on the traditional Christological titles – such as Son of God. This title denoted the anointed king of Israel, a human, from whose house a future human messianic king and political saviour was expected to come. At the same time, it was a title of Roman emperors, that is, of human rulers considered to be equipped with extraordinary ("divine") power and maybe even virtue.

As New Testament title, this designation of Jesus is constantly (mis-) understood by Christians today, construing it in the sense of the Nicene creed,

while it originally meant a human who excelled other people in power and/or virtue without making any statements about “divine essence”. One might call the Nicene understanding a misunderstanding of an original meaning or, more positively put, a further semantic development of a traditional title. But people have to obtain clarity about what happened hermeneutically in the past, to avoid blurriness in the present.

According to the early Christian reality construct, in Jesus of Nazareth, God had revealed God’s will and intention in an especially clear way, including God’s intention to “save”. In Jesus of Nazareth, in his words and actions, God therefore had been especially present. This is what the traditional New Testament Christological titles wanted to convey. It makes no difference with which traditional linguistic label this special position of Jesus was verbalised (“Son of God”, “Son of Man”, “Anointed = Messiah, Christ”, etc.). In every case, the new content given by Jesus’ life burst open the old title (a crucified “Son of God”, a weak “Anointed”, a humble “Son of Man”), so that the choice of the individual terms does not matter, but rather their common vanishing point: the special presence of God in the sayings, deeds and sufferings of Jesus of Nazareth (see Lampe 2012:121). Instead of using traditional titles and formulas, theologians of today might be well advised to find their own words for the excelling importance of the Palestinian man from Nazareth, using language that, for example, could focus on functions or on relational ontology. Traditional titles, when applied to Jesus, had been emptied of most of their traditional content already in the first century when they had been refilled with new content moulded by Jesus’ life, his death and his disciples’ Easter visions. It is this content that contemporary theologians need to formulate in the language of today, without having to lose the exclusivity of Jesus in his salvific death and his resurrection. They have a prophetic, creative task and cannot settle for repeating “correct” dogmatic tradition. The traditional formulas and titles have driven many people out of the churches in the increasingly secularised societies of our time.

The result of such prophetic proclamation might perhaps resemble, for example, Arianistic inclinations in late antiquity, but this comparison is anachronistic and useless, as useless and anachronistic as accusing the New Testament of tendencies to Arianism. Old labels and battles, nestled in their specific historical situations, are blind to the needs of the present

time. Each period has to take responsibility for its own formulations of what it means that God worked in Jesus. Present-day theologians thus need to contextualise the gospel as much as the New Testament writings did in the first hundred years of Christianity. It is this hermeneutical method that also was canonised – not just certain Christological formulas or titles.

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