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Research Notes

Misquoting Gieschen

It can be encouraging when one's own research is used and cited by other scholars. Since the publication of *Angelomorphic Christology*¹ twenty years ago, I have seen my book cited in the works of several scholars. Often my research is used as positive support for another scholar's work,² but occasionally it has been cited with criticism due to honest and real disagreements with a position that I have taken.³

Sometimes, however, scholars cite one's research as the basis for their own conclusions, that are far different from one's own. Bart Ehrman, a well-known and prolific writer,⁴ does precisely this in his 2014 book, *How Jesus Became God*.⁵ A glance through the author index in that volume shows that he cites my *Angelomorphic Christology* three times,⁶ one of which claims my research as the basis for his own conclusion. Ehrman cites my discussion of Galatians 4:14 in the following manner:

I had always read the verse to say that the Galatians has received Paul in his infirm state the way they would have received an angelic visitor, or even Christ himself. In fact, however, the grammar of the Greek suggests something quite different. As Charles Gieschen has argued, and now has been affirmed in a book on Christ as an angel by New Testament specialist Susan Garrett, the verse is not saying that the Galatians received Paul as an angel *or* as Christ; it is

¹ Charles A. Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology: Antecedents and Early Evidence*, *Arbeiten zur Geschichte des Antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums* 42 (Leiden: Brill, 1998). This volume was recently reprinted in softcover as *Angelomorphic Christology: Antecedents and Early Evidence*, Library of Early Christology (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017).

² E.g., see Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

³ E.g., see Kevin Sullivan, *Wrestling with Angels: A Study of the Relationship between Angels and Humans in Ancient Jewish Literature and the New Testament*, *Arbeiten zur Geschichte des Antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums* 55 (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

⁴ Bart Ehrman has written textbooks used in many universities of the United States, such as *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford, 2004). He is especially known for his books with provocative titles written for the general public, such as *Forged: Writing in the Name of God—Why the Bible's Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are* (New York: HarperOne, 2011).

⁵ Bart Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (New York: HarperOne, 2014).

⁶ Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God*, 395; citations of my book appear on pages 57, 250, and 252.

saying that they received him as they would an angel, such as Christ. By clear implication, then, Christ is an angel.⁷

This implication, “Christ is *an* angel” (emphasis mine), is quite different from the conclusion of the discussion of this text in my book, which reads as follows: “Paul understood Christ Jesus as God’s Angel (i.e., the Angel of YHWH).”⁸ My translation of Paul’s description of how he was received by the Galatians is “but as God’s Angel you received me, namely Christ Jesus.”⁹ I even attempted to be very careful in emphasizing that Paul did not understand Christ as a *created* angel among the myriad of created angels, as can be read in my own words:

It has been demonstrated that there is firm literary ground for the conclusion that the Apostle Paul could have been regarded and could have regarded himself as “an angel.” A closer reading of 4.14b, however, indicates that Paul is being more specific about the angel of God with whom he was identified. As discussed above, in Gal 1.8 Paul contrasts the authority of his original proclamation of the gospel with that of an angel from heaven: “But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed, let that one be accursed.” This assertion follows Paul’s statement about the origin of his apostleship as direct from Jesus Christ and God the Father (1.1) and precedes his discussion of the origin of the gospel he preached as a direct revelation from Jesus Christ (1.11–12). Therefore, Paul places the authority of his office as an apostle and the authority of his original proclamation above that of “an angel from heaven.” Based upon 1.8 and its context, Paul does not assert in 4.14b that the Galatians received him as “an” angel from among the myriads in God’s service in heaven and on earth; rather, they received Paul as the most authoritative angel who not only sent him (Gal 1.1), but also lives in him (Gal 2.20) and speaks in him (2 Cor 13.3): God’s Angel, Christ Jesus.¹⁰

Anyone who has read my chapter on Paul, much less the rest of my book, knows that I strongly support the understanding that Paul identifies Christ within the mystery of the one God of Israel, including in this possible claim by Paul that Christ is God’s Angel. I have an extensive discussion early in the book that demonstrates that the title “Angel/Messenger” is used frequently in the Old Testament for God’s theophanies, or visible appearances, which is the probable basis for Paul’s use of the title here.¹¹

⁷ Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God*, 252–253.

⁸ Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology*, 325.

⁹ Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology*, 325.

¹⁰ Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology*, 323–324.

¹¹ Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology*, 51–69.

What does Ehrman mean when he claims that, for Paul, “Christ is an angel”?¹² Some of what Ehrman asserts about Paul’s teaching sounds close to later confessions of the divine nature of Jesus: “As the Angel of the Lord, Christ is a preexistent being who is divine; he can be called God; and he is God’s manifestation on earth in human flesh.”¹³ He, however, means something much different, and certainly something quite contrary to my understanding. Ehrman argues that Paul understood Christ to be one of the created angels—albeit the chief of these angels—and somehow “divine.” Here is his own explanation:

Jesus was thought of as an angel, or an angel-like being, or even the Angel of the Lord—in any event, a superhuman divine being who existed before his birth and became human for the salvation of the human race. This, in a nutshell, is the incarnation Christology of several New Testament authors. Later authors went even further and maintained that Jesus was not merely an angel—even the chief angel—but was a superior being: he was God himself come to earth.¹⁴

I have attempted to quote and represent Ehrman’s understanding of Paul’s Christology accurately. He should have done the same with my understanding of Paul’s Christology, which is radically different from his. After all, I would hope that a renowned textual critic who wrote the book *Misquoting Jesus* would be more careful when using quotations from other scholars.¹⁵

Charles A. Gieschen

¹² Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God*, 253.

¹³ Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God*, 253.

¹⁴ Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God*, 251. The implication is clear: Ehrman is not convinced that Paul believed Jesus was “God himself come to earth.” My response is, “How, then, could Paul, a Jewish Christian, have worshiped Jesus without committing idolatry?” The historical fact that Paul and other Jewish Christians worshiped Jesus as the Lord in the earliest years of Christianity demonstrates that Jesus was identified as being within the mystery of YHWH, the one God of Israel. See Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

¹⁵ Bart Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005); see also Bart Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford, 1993). For a thorough rebuttal of the position that Ehrman takes in these books, see Daniel B. Wallace, “Lost in Transmission: How Badly Did the Scribes Corrupt the New Testament Text?” in *Revisiting the Corruption of the New Testament: Manuscript, Patristic, and Apocryphal Evidence*, ed. Daniel B. Wallace (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011), 19–55.