Bart Ehrman may be one of the most widely-recognized New Testament scholars in the world today. As a former evangelical Christian turned agnostic, Ehrman has authored several best-selling books presenting challenges to the textual reliability of the New Testament and to the validity of the Christian faith as a whole.

Though at least some of his arguments against the reliability of the NT are flawed (as several NT scholars have shown¹), as a historian of early Christianity, Ehrman has shown balance and integrity. For example in 2012 Ehrman published a book in which he refutes the so-called “mythicist” claim—and popular “new atheist” notion—that the man Jesus of Nazareth never existed.²

In his most recent work, How Jesus Became God, Ehrman argues that the long-held “orthodox” belief that Jesus is God himself was not the original teaching of Jesus or the belief of his earliest followers. Unusually, the book was simultaneously released with a corresponding response book, How God Became Jesus, by a team of evangelical Bible scholars. In How God Became Jesus five authors (M. Bird, C. Evans, S. Gathercole, C. Hill, and C. Tilling) respond to Ehrman’s thesis and defend the traditional belief that Jesus is presented as God by the NT writers.

Unlike the evangelicals, however, Ehrman sees contradictory teachings, or mixed messages, in the NT writings regarding Jesus’ exact identity. He thinks that the Gospel of John’s portrait of Jesus particularly represents a later theological development not original to Jesus or his first followers. Ehrman contends, for example, “the early Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke—in which Jesus never makes explicit divine claims about himself—portray Jesus as a human but not as God, whereas the Gospel of John—in which Jesus does make such divine claims—does indeed portray him as God.” Ehrman also claims: “When it comes to the nature of Christ—the question of Christology—one can point to clear passages in scripture [Jn. 8:58; 10:30; 14:9; 20:28] that say he is God.”

However, with the exception of Jn. 20:28, none of the Johannine passages Ehrman cites actually apply the term “God” to Jesus or identify him as God in any kind of straightforward or matter-of-fact way. Ehrman’s critic, Michael Bird, makes a similar assertion regarding a series of Johannine texts: “...the gospel of John claims that Jesus is equal with God (John 8:58; 10:30; 14:9; 17:24).” Later Bird goes as far as to say, “the Johannine Jesus makes explicit claims to be equal with God...”

Similar to the case with Ehrman, not only do none of the texts Bird cites make the claim that Jesus is “equal with God” (certainly no ‘explicit’ claim appears), the Gospel of John emphasizes, rather straightforwardly, the point that Jesus is God’s obedient emissary who was entirely dependent upon God for his own life and doctrine (Jn. 5:26; 6:57; 7:28-29; 8:29, 55; 12:49; 14:10; 17:25). In a well known text, for example, Jesus even tells his disciples that “the Father”—whom Jesus later calls “the only true God”—“is greater than I,” without theological qualification (Jn. 14:28; Compare Jn. 10:29; 13:16; 17:3). In one encounter with a group of hostile religious leaders, Jesus contended for the legitimacy of his messianic mission, emphasizing the point that—unlike the all-powerful God who sent him—he can do “nothing” on his own: “Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing of himself but only what he sees the Father doing...” (Jn. 5:19). In the same account Jesus again said: “By myself I can do nothing” (Jn. 5:30).

**John 8:58: “Truly I tell you, before Abraham was born, I am...”**

To support the contention that the Gospel of John portrays Jesus as God, both Ehrman and Bird appeal to Jesus’ famous statement to his...
Jewish persecutors in Jn. 8:58: “Before Abraham was, I am” (NASB). Consistent with popular evangelical commentators, Ehrman says that here Jesus is “invoking the name of God from Exod. 3.”

Ehrman, however, demonstrates no awareness of several lines of evidence that contradict, or at least bring into serious question, the soundness of this popular and oft-repeated “evangelical” interpretation.

First, the Hebrew words that appear in Ex. 3 evidently do not mean “I-am-that-I-am” exactly (the traditional English translation) but something more along the lines of “I-will-be-what-I-will-be.” According to the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia:

I will be who/what I will be… is preferable because the verb hayah [to be] has a more dynamic sense of being—not pure existence, but becoming, happening, being present—and because the historical and theological context of these early chapters of Exodus shows that God is revealing to Moses, and subsequently to the whole people, not the inner nature of His being [or existence], but his active, redemptive intentions on their behalf. He ‘will be’ to them what His deeds will show Him ‘to be.’ …the imperfect ‘ehyeh’ is more accurately translated ‘I will be what I will be,’ a Semitic idiom meaning, ‘I will be all that is necessary as the occasion will arise,’ a familiar OT idea. (cf Is 7:4.9; Ps 23)

Though unfamiliar to many English Bible readers, the rendering (‘I will be what I will be’) occurs in the footnotes of many English translations. Several include “I will be” or the like in the main text. The accuracy of the translation is supported by the fact that English Bibles normally render verse 12 where the very same term is used as: “And He said, ‘Certainly I will be [ehyeh] with you” (NASB). That such a translation more accurately represents the nuance of the Hebrew text is reflected in the OT Greek revisions of Aquila and Theodotion which likewise read esomai hos esomai (‘I will be what I will be’) instead of the Septuagint’s more familiar ego eimi ho on (‘I am the being’).

In Jn. 8:58 Jesus did not repeat the pertinent words of God as they appear in the Septuagint translation of Ex. 3:14 either. A close look at the context reveals that God did not simply say ego eimi (‘I am’)—as if the words ego eimi constituted a “name” or “title” for God, or as if the words, in and of themselves, functioned as an answer to Moses’ question—but ego eimi ho on (‘I am the being/existing one’). Jesus, of course, did not say to

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7 Ehrman, How Jesus Became God, pgs. 124, 279, 327.
9 See: ESV, RSV, NRSV, NIV, NEB, REB, AB, TEV, CEV, TLB, NLT.
10 See: A New Translation by James Moffatt; Rotherham’s Emphasized Bible; The Shocken Bible, Volume I, Translated by Everett Fox; The Bible in Living English.
the Jews: “before Abraham was born, I am the being (ego eimi ho on).” If Jesus had said something to that effect, then the traditional interpretation Ehrman derives from the text might make sense. As F.F. Bruce observed in his commentary: “If a direct reference had been intended to Ex. 3:14 in the present passage, one might have expected ho on rather than ego eimi.\(^\text{11}\)

Bruce was right for calling attention to this point because, in the Septuagint rendition, the actual “name” God reveals to Moses (or meaning associated with the name), and the actual reference point (or identity in question) is not found in the words ego eimi but in the words ho on. We know this is the case because, in the Septuagint, God goes on to instruct Moses to tell the children of Israel, “ho on (the being/the existing one) has sent me to you” not “ego eimi (I am) has sent me to you.”

In this instance ego eimi is merely the linking verbal pair of words (copula) and has the same function as the words “I am” have in a statement like, “I am the professor,” or, to use a biblical example, when Jesus said, “I am the light of the world” (Jn. 8:12). The point of Jesus’ statement in Jn. 8:12 is, of course, that he is “the light of the world” not that he is the so-called “I am.” In the same way, in the Septuagint translation of Ex. 3:14, God is not identifying himself as “I am” (ego eimi) but as “the being/existing one” (ho on)—a seemingly rather obvious point.

Since Jesus does not in fact use the language of Ex. 3:14 (either the Hebrew ‘I-will-be-what-I-will-be’ or the Greek ‘I-am-the-being’) and apply it to himself in Jn. 8:58, there is no reason to think that his words qualify as some kind of allusion to Ex. 3:14, or as an “invocation” of the divine name, as so often claimed.

In reference to Jn. 8:58 specifically, there are good reasons to think that the traditional “Before-Abraham-was-born-I-am” does not fully or accurately convey the intended nuance of the original language. Why not? Because the common translation, “Before Abraham was born, I am” (itself an awkwardly ungrammatical English sentence) overlooks, or arguably overlooks, its connection to the adverbial reference to past time: “before Abraham came to be…” That is, unlike the other “I am” statements in John’s Gospel, 8:58 is not a straightforward present-tense expression, but includes an expression of past time that grammatically modifies the meaning of the present-tense “I am” statement (or at least, very plausibly modifies it). That is to say, Jesus’ existence (‘I am’) is taking place “before” Abraham “came to be” and continues right up to the present time when

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Jesus was speaking to the Jews—past and present combined, grammatically.

This means that the phrase “I am/exist” (ego eimi) embraces the entire period from “before-Abraham-came-to-be” to the present, i.e., the present moment that Jesus was standing before the Jews. In English this is probably best conveyed by the phrase “I have been” or “I have been in existence,” where the action/state (’I am/exist’) encompasses the past but does not exclude the present. Some Greek grammars call this “extension-from-the-past” or “present-of-past-action-still-in-progress.” Jn. 14:9 (’Have I been with you so long…?’) and 15:27 (’you have been with me from the beginning’) are similar examples where the Greek verbs (eimi/este) are technically in the present yet, contextually, they are clearly references to both past and present.

The point is well supported by a wide range of English translations. The NASB 1963 and 1971 editions for Jn. 8:58 give “I have been” as an alternative to “I am” in the marginal notes. Other English translations give a similar sense:

- Truly, truly I tell you…I have existed before Abraham was born.
  —A New Translation by James Moffatt

- Truly, truly I tell you, before Abraham was born, I have already been.
  —The Unvarnished New Testament by Andy Gaus

- …truly I tell you, ’From before Abraham was, I have been.

- The absolute truth is that I was in existence before Abraham was ever born! —The Living Bible

- The truth is, I existed before Abraham was ever born!
  —New Living Translation

- I tell you for a positive fact, I existed before Abraham was born.
  —The Original New Testament, Schonfield

- I tell you, I existed before Abraham was born!
  —Goodspeed, An American Translation

- I solemnly say to you, I existed before Abraham was born.
  —The New Testament by C.B. Williams

The translation (’I have been’) makes good contextual sense given that the issue of Jesus’ age and relation to Abraham is precisely what is in view (’You are not yet fifty years old and you have seen Abraham?’). Jesus’ outspoken condemnation of his Jewish persecutors (’You are of your father the devil’ [vs. 44]; ‘you are not of God’ [vs. 47]; ‘you have not known [God]’
‘a liar like you’ [vs. 57]) and subsequent, climactic claim to superhuman longevity, over against their highly-honored ancestral father Abraham, is more than sufficient to account for the hostile reaction that followed (‘they picked up stones to throw at him’ [vs. 59]).

Though it is often thought that a blasphemous claim on the part of Jesus to be God is the only interpretation that explains why the Jews reacted the way they did, distinguished NT professor Craig Blomberg helpfully points out the following:

The fact that the Jews immediately tried to stone him does not mean they understood his statement as a direct equation of himself with God. Claiming that Abraham had seen his day (verse 56) itself bordered on blasphemy, and the Jews had already tried to kill him for much lesser ‘crimes’ such as healing on the Sabbath (Mk. 3:6) and speaking of God’s love for the gentiles (Lk. 4:29).12

Whether one concludes Jesus meant that he existed in a “literal-personal” sense (i.e., as the Son of God) before the birth of Abraham, or that he existed in an “ideal-prophetic” sense (i.e., in the mind and purpose of God), may revolve largely around how one interprets the prologue of the Gospel and the author’s presentation of “the word (ho logos) that was “with God” (pros ton theon) in the beginning—the “word” that “became flesh” in the man Jesus (Jn. 1:1-14).

John 10:30: “I and the Father are one”

At the risk of stating the obvious, Jesus’ statement, “I and the Father are one” is hardly equivalent to declaring, unqualifiedly, “I am God,” as Ehrman seems to suggest by his wording.

Contextually, Jesus’ scandalous, violence-provoking claim regarding his “oneness” with the Father is best understood as a oneness of mind and purpose with God, not a claim to actually being God himself, or a claim of “absolute-ontological-equality” with the Father. If Jesus’ Jewish persecutors took his statement to mean that he was making himself out to be, literally, God himself, they were as usual mistaken, since Jesus responded in such a way as to show that their accusation of blasphemy was in error and then proceeded to clarify who he claimed to be.

It may be more likely, however, that the Jews accused Jesus of claiming not to be “God” but “a god” (‘We are not going to stone you for any good deed, but for blasphemy. You, a mere man, claim to be a god…’ New English Bible). This point appears to be confirmed based on the way Jesus

answers the accusation. Jesus reasons, essentially, that since in their own law God said, “you [evidently the unjust judges of ancient Israel] are gods” (Ps. 82:6) and “scripture cannot be broken,” the Jews were therefore wrong for accusing Jesus—in reality, the very one whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world—of blasphemy for saying that he was not “God” but the “Son of God.” In other words, if the judges of Israel (portrayed in the Psalm as those who judged ‘unjustly’ and showed ‘partiality to the wicked’) were called “gods” by God, then it was clearly not blasphemous for Jesus (the ‘sanctified’ one ‘sent’ by God) to have said that he was God’s Son (Jn. 10:36).

Even many “orthodox” NT commentators now tend to concede the point that there is no contextual evidence that the oneness Jesus speaks of in this case had to do with either Jesus claiming to be God, to be equal with God, or claiming to be of the same “metaphysical substance” as the Father, as some evangelicals have claimed. Centuries ago even John Calvin contradicted the historic “of-one-being” argument in his commentary:

[Christ] testifies that his affairs are so closely united to those of the Father, that the Father’s assistance will never be withheld from himself and his sheep. The ancients made a wrong use of this passage to prove that Christ is (homoousios) of the same essence with the Father. For Christ does not argue about the unity of substance, but about the agreement which he has with the Father, so that whatever is done by Christ will be confirmed by the power of his Father.

It is not that Calvin is denying his Trinitarian orthodoxy at this point. It is simply that, in this particular instance, Calvin was fair enough to recognize that, contextually, no such implication was present. Calvin recognized this in spite of the fact that “the ancients” (certain ‘church fathers’ or the defenders of ‘Nicene christology’ in the fourth and fifth centuries) made “wrong use of this passage” to defend the notion that Jesus was “of the same being” as the Father. It was similarly observed in the modern conservative Tyndale Commentaries:

One translates the Greek neuter hen. This verse was much quoted in the Arian controversy by the orthodox in support of the doctrine that Christ was of one substance with the Father. The expression seems however mainly to imply that the Father and the Son are united in will and purpose.

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13 Professor Marianne Thompson points out: “the most famous of all the Johannine assertions regarding the unity of the Father and Son, namely, ‘I and the Father are one’ (10:30), actually refers in context to Jesus’ promise that the Father and Son are one in the work of preserving the sheep of the fold from loss or harm.” — The God of the Gospel of John (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 78.


15 Calvin’s Commentaries (Delaware: Associated Publishers and Authors, n.d.), p. 780.
Jesus prays [in John 17:11] that His followers may all be one (hen), i.e. united in purpose, as He and His Father are united.16

The observation in the Tyndale Commentaries is sound and biblically based. Jesus’ prayer for his disciples in Jn. 17 does help to clarify the sense in which Jesus meant that he and his Father are “one (Gk. hen).” In reference to his followers, Jesus prayed:

Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name...so that they may be one (hen) as we are one...I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity ['that they may be made perfect in one (hen)'] KJV...

When Jesus prayed for his disciples to be “one,” he did not mean that he wanted them to constitute “one metaphysical substance” or “one being,” or the like, but that they would be united as one—fully unified—just as he and his Father are. Thus it seems reasonably clear that when Jesus spoke to his Jewish opponents about his “oneness” with the Father in Jn. 10, he was placing primary emphasis on the perfect unity of spirit (complete agreement and harmony) he had with his Father, particularly with regard to the one purpose they shared in protecting the said “sheep” from being “snatched” away. The conclusion is supported by the sequence of statements: “...no one will snatch them out of my hand,” then, “no one will snatch them out of the Father’s hand,” followed by, “I and the Father are one.” As F.F. Bruce commented:

So responsive is the Son to the Father that he is one in mind, one in purpose, one in action with him. Where the eternal wellbeing of true believers is concerned, the Son’s determination and pledge to guard them from harm is endorsed by the Father’s word and confirmed by the Father’s all-powerful act.17

The apostle Paul used a similar expression regarding oneness in his first letter to the Corinthians:

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are one (Gk. hen), and each will receive

his wages according to his labor. For we are God's fellow workers (1Cor. 3:6-8).

In this instance the one who plants and the one who waters are not metaphysically “one” (‘one’ in terms of their ‘very being’) but functionally “one” (united) in their cooperation, agreement, or aim to cause the plant—evidently, the believer—to grow. As the NIV paraphrases: “The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose…” In all likelihood Jesus was making a similar point in Jn. 10 with respect to the “oneness” he had with his Father in preventing the sheep from being snatched out of the safety of their hands. There is no evidence that such was to be taken as an “ontological” or “metaphysical” statement, as some apologists have claimed, or a claim to be “God,” as Ehrman, Bird, and many evangelicals evidently think.

John 14:9: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father”

There is no biblical reason to think that Jesus’ statement to Philip in Jn. 14:9 is a claim to be Almighty God (‘Trinitarianism’ or ‘Binitarianism’) or a claim to be God the Father himself (‘Modalism’). The point Jesus made to the disciple Philip is entirely harmonious with how the NT documents elsewhere describe Jesus as “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15) and as the “exact representation of [God’s] very being” (Heb. 1:3).

In Col. 1:15 Jesus is not depicted as “the invisible God” himself but the invisible God’s “image” or “visible representation.” Likewise, in Heb. 1:3, Jesus is not portrayed as the God of the Israelite fathers himself but as the “exact representation” or “reproduction” of that God’s being.

When the author of Hebrews described the Son as an “exact representation” or “copy” (Gk. charakter) of God’s “very being” (Gk. hyposteseos), he was making use of a vivid metaphor.

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18 Weymouth, New Testament in Modern Speech
19 A. T. Robertson pointed out in his Word Pictures in the New Testament: “Charakter is an old word from charasso, to cut, to scratch, to mark. It first was the agent (note ending = ter) or tool that did the marking, then the mark or impress made, the exact reproduction, a meaning clearly expressed by charagma (Acts 17:29; Rev. 13:16f.)...The word occurs in the inscriptions for ‘person’ as well as for ‘exact reproduction’ of a person.” —Word Pictures in the New Testament, Volume V, p. 336 (emphasis added). Another commentary similarly observes that charakter “is the exact reproduction,” as a statue of a person; literally, the stamp or clear-cut impression made by a seal, the very facsimile of the original...The idea of character as a replica is further illustrated by the Bereschith rabba, 52. 3 (on Gn 21:2); hence we learn that he (Isaac) was the splendour of his (father’s) face, as like as possible to him.” —The International Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews, James Moffatt D.D., (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975) pgs. 6-7 (emphasis added).
In the ancient world (sometimes still in the modern world), to make a document official, often melted wax would be placed on the paper and stamped by an emblematic stamp or signet ring which would serve as a seal or signature of authentication from the author or sender of the document. Consequently the stamp or signet ring would leave an impression in the wax that would be an “exact representation” (Gk. charakter) of the original emblem (stamps like this were similarly impressed on coins and on clay tablets). Just as the image on the wax (or clay) is not the original, not the ring or emblem itself, yet is an exact representation of the emblem, so, God’s Son, is likewise portrayed by the author of Hebrews as an exact representation of God’s being—not literally, or numerically identical to, God himself.

In other words, in this metaphor, the signet ring would represent the “very being” of God. The image left on the wax would represent the Son, who is, consequently, portrayed as a “copy,” or “representation,” or “exact likeness” of the original, not the original. To insist—with the classical creeds—that the Son is the “same being” as the Father is unnecessary, and is to confuse the original with the copy, the emblem on the signet ring with the image impressed on the wax.

Though he clearly thought of himself as the Father’s Son and not as the Father himself, Jesus could say, nevertheless, that those who had “seen” him had indeed “seen the Father” (Jn. 14:9), because he knew that—in word and in deed—he was the “exact representation” of the Father who had sent him into the world (Compare Jn. 8:19; 12:45). Because the NT portrays him as the chosen, sinless representation of the Father who in fact dwells “in him” (Jn. 14:10), to “honor” Jesus, to “believe in” Jesus, to “receive” Jesus, to “know” Jesus, and to “see” Jesus is to, in effect, honor, believe in, receive, know, and see the God in whose name Jesus’ speaks and acts (Jn. 5:23; 12:44-45; 13:20; 14:7, 9; Compare Jn. 5:43; 10:25).

How is it, though, that someone who is not Almighty God—a “mere creature”—can say that to “see” him is equivalent to seeing God? Part of the answer lies in the fact that, biblically, and logically, one does not have to “be” that one in order to “represent” that one. The other part of the
answer lies in the fact that Jesus is nowhere portrayed in the NT as a “mere creature” but as God’s very own Son whom God loves, who speaks the words of God, in whom the Spirit of God dwells “without measure,” and upon whom God the Father has “set his seal” of approval (Matt. 3:17; Jn. 3:33-35; 6:27). Though no man has ever “seen” God directly (God’s ‘face’, Ex. 33:20), his presence is seen or perceived in the unique “Son” who has “seen the Father” and who is uniquely qualified to have “made him known” (Jn. 1:18, NIV; Compare Jn. 6:46; 1 Jn. 4:12; Col. 1:15).

This principle of representation (one person or group representing another) may be one of the more outstanding and reoccurring themes in biblical literature. Jesus spoke in this way frequently:

Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me (Mk. 9:37; Compare Lk. 9:48; Matt. 18:5).

Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me (Jn. 13:20; Compare Matt. 10:40)

The one who hears you [i.e., the disciples commissioned by Jesus] hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me (Lk. 10:16; Compare Jesus’ statement: ‘Whoever sees me sees the one who sent me’ Jn. 12:45).

In the above texts, the treatment given to the sent one is equivalent to the treatment given to the sender. In Mark 9 to “receive” a child in Jesus’ name is to “receive” Jesus, without, obviously, meaning that the child and Jesus are equal or identical. In turn, to “receive” Jesus is to, in effect, “receive” the one who sent him, namely, God, without having to mean that “Jesus” and “God” are either equal or identical. Likewise, he who “hears” the disciples who faithfully pass on the word taught by Jesus “hear” Jesus who sent them. This is so not because the disciples are Jesus, “ontologically equal” to him, or because they somehow share his “unique identity” or the like. To reject the ones sent by Jesus is to reject Jesus, and to reject Jesus (who speaks the word God commanded him) is to reject the God who commanded him what to speak. Clearly, a matter of identity or equality is not what is in view but a matter of faithful representation on the part of the one sent.

In a similar way, in the book of Acts, the risen Christ could speak of Saul as persecuting him (‘Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ Acts 9:4). In this case Saul was not persecuting Jesus literally, or directly (since he was neither visible nor physically present on earth at that point), but the
community who represented him, without of course making Christ and the Christian community equal or identical.

Matt. 25:31-46 is another example that illustrates the same basic theme. With the final judgment in view, Jesus teaches that the way a person treats the afflicted (the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the prisoner) is indicative of how one regards Jesus himself. When the righteous are granted entrance into the Father’s kingdom, Jesus says it was based on the fact that they fed him, gave him drink, welcomed him, clothed him, took care of him and visited him in prison. When the righteous ask, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? Jesus answers: “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.” To the wicked, however, he will say: “Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.”

Biblically, to “see” Jesus is to “see” the God who sent him. To “hear” Jesus’ apostles is to “hear” Jesus who commissioned them. To “receive” a child in Jesus’ name is to “receive” Jesus. To “persecute” Christ’s followers is to “persecute” Christ himself. To feed the hungry and clothe the naked is to feed and clothe Jesus. To “honor” the Son is to “honor” the Father (‘Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him’ Jn. 5:23), and so forth—all based on a matter of faithful representation on the part of the sent one, not “ontological identicalness” or “metaphysical equality,” or the like.

Michael Bird is right for pointing out: “It is by looking at Jesus that we see the face of God.” But this is so from the NT perspective not because Jesus is numerically or “ontologically” identical to the “one God,” but because, as God’s sinless Son, Jesus is—in all that he said and did—the “express image” of that God’s very being. In another place Bird says:

In response to Ehrman, my objective is to show that Jesus identified himself as a divine agent with a unique authority and a unique relationship with Israel’s God. In addition, he spoke as one who spoke for God in an immediate sense and believed himself to be embodying the very person of God in his mission to renew and restore Israel...

Bird is right that in the NT Jesus identifies himself as a divine agent ['the divine agent par excellence’] with a unique authority and a unique relationship with Israel’s God. Precisely the point. If Jesus is the divine agent of Israel’s God with a unique relationship to Israel’s God, then there

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21 Bird, How God Became Jesus, p. 46.
22 Bird, How God Became Jesus, p. 68.
is no reason to conclude that he thought of himself as the God of Israel himself but one who had a unique relationship with him. As God’s unique Son (Gk. monogenes huios), and promised Messiah of Israel, Jesus did indeed speak the words of the God of Israel, not because he believed himself to be the God of Israel, but because he believed himself to be the one anointed by that God and fully authorized to speak and teach in his name. Precisely the self-understanding of Jesus in John’s Gospel:

The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority (Jn. 14:10).

The word you hear is not mine but the Father’s who sent me (Jn. 14:24).

I did not speak on my own, but the Father who sent me commanded me to say all that I have spoken (Jn. 12:49).

The way Jesus spoke of himself in these instances is consistent with the identity of the Moses-like “prophet” foretold by God in Deuteronomy:

I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him (Deut. 18:18; Compare Acts 3:22; 7:37).

These points are likewise consistent with the introductory statement in the book of Hebrews regarding how, in the last days, God has spoken “in a Son” (Heb. 1:1). Neither of these biblical revelations, of course, presents Jesus as the God of Israel himself but as the “prophet” and “son” the God of Israel spoke through.

In Jn. 7, when Jesus was teaching in the temple, the Jews marveled, wondering how he could have been so knowledgeable without having studied. Jesus answered them:

My teaching is not mine, but belongs to him who sent me. If anyone’s will is to do his will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority. The one who speaks on his own authority seeks his own glory; but the one who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and in him there is no falsehood (Jn. 7:14-18).

Here Jesus makes an explicit distinction between himself and God upon which the very legitimacy of his teaching is contingent. The implication is that Jesus’ doctrine is either (1) “from God,” that he seeks the glory of the God who sent him, and is therefore true, or (2) that Jesus is speaking “on his own,” and therefore seeking his “own glory,” and potentially uttering doctrine that did not have its source in God.

In a review of both books “staunch evangelical Christian” Robert Bowman commented on Bird’s presentation in the following way:
Bird also helpfully shows that in the Old Testament the coming of the Messiah was described also as the coming of God, finding this theme notably in Isaiah 40:3 and mentioning John the Baptist’s use of that text (54-57). If only Bird had closed the circuit of the argument and explained why the citation of Isaiah 40:3 in the context of the Synoptics indicates that Jesus is himself the Lord coming to his people.

John the Baptist’s citation of Isaiah 40:3 in the Synoptic Gospels, however, does not identify Jesus himself as “the Lord [YHWH],” as Bowman suggests. Matthew, Mark, Luke (and John more explicitly) identify John the Baptist as the one prophesied by Isaiah; namely, as “the voice of one crying in the wilderness,” the “voice” that cries “prepare the way of the Lord [Heb. YHWH]”—a “cry” that was fulfilled in John’s proclamation of repentance to the people of Israel (Matt. 3:1-3; Mk. 1:3; Lk. 3:4; Jn. 1:23). John the Baptist refers to the Isaiah text and to himself as the one calling for the preparation of the way of YHWH, or for the path of YHWH to be made straight. This is no surprise. Contextually, the long-awaited Messiah of Israel, Jesus, is about to begin his public ministry, initiated by John’s baptism and God’s corresponding public proclamation that Jesus is his “beloved Son” with whom he is “well pleased,” attested not only by the heavenly voice but by the descent of the Spirit that vividly affirms Jesus to be God’s anointed one (Matt. 3:16-17).

If the Baptist or Gospel writer intended to equate the preparing of “the way of the Lord [YHWH]” with the arrival or public manifestation of the Messiah, this is entirely harmonious with the principle of Jesus’ function as the “divine agent” of YHWH “par excellence.” Biblically, the official representative or agent of one figure can be treated as if the official agent were that figure himself, though he is not literally so (Jesus is clearly portrayed this way in relation to God the Father throughout the NT: Jn. 13:20; 14:7-9; 12:44; Heb. 1:3). Blomberg made an observation that helps to illustrate the principle using other biblical examples:

Every language and culture has many conventional expressions which do not mean what they literally seem to say. One of these common to modern Western and Eastern cultures is the habit of speaking about someone acting for himself even when he uses an intermediary. A news reporter may state flatly, ‘the President of the United States today said…’ when in fact it was his press secretary who spoke on his behalf, yet no one accuses the commentator of inaccurate reporting. Similarly, Matthew and Mark can speak of Pilate scourging Jesus (Mk. 15:15; Mat. 27:26) even though no governor himself would ever have lifted the whip but would

have left that task to his soldiers. This type of linguistic convention undoubtedly explains the differences between Matthew’s and Luke’s narratives of the Capernaum centurion (Mt. 8:5-13; Lk. 7:1-10); in the former the centurion himself comes to Jesus, while in the latter he sends emissaries to summon the Lord. Luke’s account is more literally accurate, but Matthew’s way of phrasing it would have been considered no less acceptable.24

Thus, if and whenever the biblical writers equate the “coming of God” with the “coming of the Messiah,” it would be thoroughly consistent with the NT portrayal of Jesus as God’s supreme emissary (Jn. 7:29; Heb. 3:1), or “divine agent par excellence.”

But Gathercole also attempts to support the contention that Jesus is identical to the God of Israel in the following way:

One of the best known facts about Jesus is that he chose the twelve disciples, and scholars usually take this as Jesus forming the nucleus of a renewed people of God, with the twelve disciples representing the twelve tribes of Israel (Mark 3:13; Luke 6:13). This looks, therefore, as if Jesus is occupying the position of God in the Old Testament and this is echoed in the fact that Jesus has the power of electing people to be saved elsewhere in the Gospels.25

The point about the twelve disciples really works against his case. It is true that the twelve disciples were likely “representing the twelve tribes of Israel,” as Gathercole points out. That is exactly the point. The disciples were representing the twelve tribes of Israel; they were not actually or literally the tribes of Israel themselves. In like manner Jesus the Messiah who according to Gathercole formed “the nucleus of a renewed people of God” was representing God in bringing about this purpose. Gathercole goes on to argue:

The people of God in Mark can even be called ‘his [i.e., Jesus’] elect (Mark 13:27/Matt 24:31): the people of God belong to Jesus…what an extraordinary thing it is that Jesus refers to angels belonging to him as well (see also Matt 13:41 25:31).26

It is true that the people of God in Mark (and elsewhere in the NT) are said to belong to Jesus. Does this mean that Jesus is the supreme God of the OT as Gathercole and other defenders of evangelical orthodoxy have implied? In the late 19th century a similar argument was advanced in regard to the disputed translation of Titus 2:13 (some translations call Jesus ‘God’

25 Gathercole, How God Became Jesus, p. 100.
26 Gathercole, How God Became Jesus, p. 100.
while others do not). According to the line of reasoning presented, since God’s people were spoken of in this context as Christ’s possession, this proves that Jesus is “God” and supports the translation “our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.” To which Ezra Abbot responded:

The case seems to me to present no difficulty, and to afford no ground for such an inference. The relation of Christians to God and Christ is such that, from its very nature, the servants of Christ are and are called the servants of God, the church of Christ the church of God, the kingdom of Christ the kingdom of God. So Christians are and are represented as the peculiar people and possession of Christ, and at the same time the peculiar people and possession of God (1 Pet. 2: 9, 10). If Christians belong to Christ, they must belong also to God, the Father, to whom Christ himself belongs (1 Cor. 3:23, ‘ye are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s’). To infer, then, that because in ver. 14 Christians are spoken of as Christ’s peculiar people, the title ‘great God’ must necessarily be understood as applied to him in ver. 13, is a very extraordinary kind of reasoning.27

It is not biblically necessary, as Gathercole implies, to equate Jesus with the God of Israel because the people of God are also portrayed as his people. In the Gospel of John’s portrait of Jesus, the people of God belong to Jesus because God gave them to him. Jesus prayed in Jn. 17:

Father…I revealed your name to those whom you gave me out of the world. They belonged to you, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you gave me is from you, because the words you gave to me I have given to them, and they accepted them and truly understood that I came from you, and they have believed that you sent me. I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for the ones you have given me, because they are yours, and everything of mine is yours and everything of yours is mine, and I have been glorified in them.28

Gathercole points out how extraordinary it is that even the angels are said to belong to the Messiah. Gathercole is right. But the NT does not present this extraordinary truth as a proof that Jesus is the God of Israel himself. Instead all the NT writers who spoke to this issue portray it as the result of the all-encompassing authority that God lovingly bestowed upon him: “The Father loves the Son and has entrusted everything to His hands” (Jn. 3:35, Weymouth).

At the end of Matthew’s account, following the resurrection, Jesus told his disciples that he had been given not just a measure of authority but “all authority in heaven and on earth” (Matt. 28:28). In addition to earthly

28 John 17:6-10, NAB (emphasis added).
authority, the authority “in heaven” Jesus came to possess as a result of God conferring it upon him would include authority over the angelic hosts that dwell therein. The NT is explicit, and emphatic, on all of these points.

All things have been handed over to me by my Father ['My Father has entrusted everything to me,' *NLT*] (Matt. 11:27; Lk. 10:22),

Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands (John 13:3).

...you [Father] have given him [Jesus] authority over all flesh (Jn. 17:2).

For ‘God has put all things in subjection under his feet’ (1Cor. 15:27).

...[God’s] Son, whom [God] appointed heir of all things (Heb. 1:2).

...the God of our Lord Jesus Christ...seated [Jesus] at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the congregation (Eph. 1:17-22).

Jesus Christ who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him (1Pet. 3:21-22).

According to the author of Hebrews, God has in fact not left anything outside the Messiah’s ruling authority: “you [God] have crowned [Jesus] with glory and honor, putting everything in subjection under his feet. Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control.”

Paul likewise clearly affirms the universal authority of Jesus the exalted Messiah. Yet he labors to make the point clear that although “all things” are in subjection to the Messiah, this would not include the God who gave the Messiah the authority he came to posses:

Of course, when it says ‘all things are under his authority,’ that does not include God himself, who gave Christ his authority (1 Cor. 15:27, *NLT*).

In contrast, nowhere does the NT teach that the Messiah’s possession of, or authority over, human and angelic beings, was due to him being the God of Israel himself, or because of his status or nature as “the second person of the Trinity.”

**John 20:28: “My Lord and My God…”**

Jn. 20:28 is the one text in Ehrman’s list that does ascribe the term “God” to Jesus. In this case, the doubting disciple Thomas—upon seeing

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29 Heb. 2:7-8 (emphasis added).
and feeling the wounds on Jesus’ body, now convinced that he had risen from the dead—said to Jesus, “My Lord and my God.” Jesus responded: “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (Jn. 20:29).

There appears to be no question that Thomas addressed Jesus as his “Lord” and his “God.”30 The question is—as Ehrman repeatedly emphasizes in his book—in what sense did Thomas mean that?31 Chris Tilling agrees: “Ehrman is absolutely right that a key question to answer is: ‘In what sense did Christians think of Jesus as God?’”32

Upon careful reflection, the legitimacy of the question and the need for clarification becomes evident. By calling Jesus “Lord” and “God” did Thomas, for example, think that Jesus was the “one God, the Father” (‘Modalism’)? Not according to evangelical orthodoxy. Did Thomas mean that Jesus was “God” in the absolute sense of the term—as in “the Most High God,” the “God of Israel”? Did Thomas mean that Jesus was “God” in the sense ascribed to him by the fourth and fifth-century creeds, namely, that he was “of-one-being-with-the-Father,” or that he was the “Second Person” of a “Triune God”? This is where the points brought out by Ehrman and Bird themselves prove to be illuminating. Both writers helpfully point out that the term “God” is used at times in biblical and extra-biblical (‘monotheistic’) Jewish literature of figures who are not “God” in the highest possible sense. In this way the term “God” functions much like the terms “Father,” “Lord,” “King,” and other descriptive words. That is to say, the Scriptures portray YHWH as “God,” “Father,” “Lord,” and “King” in the highest sense. Yet others can still appropriately bear the same descriptive terms without compromising or calling into question the unique dignity of God, or the unique sense in which God merits these exalted ascriptions.

Though God is “Father” in a supreme and exclusive sense (Deut. 32:6; Is. 63:16; Mal. 1:6; 2:10; Matt. 6:9; 1Cor. 8:6), Abraham is still, biblically, “the Father of many nations” (Gen. 17:5), the patriarchal Father of the Jewish people (Jn. 8:37-39), and “the Father of all who have faith” (Rom. 4:11,16; Gal. 3:7). The figure in Isaiah 9:6 (for Christians, fulfilled ultimately in Jesus) is even called “everlasting Father” but is clearly not “God the Father.” The apostle Paul said he had become a “Father” to the

30 Unless, as some interpreters have suggested, that instead of directly calling Jesus himself “God,” Thomas was actually expressing the fact that he finally recognized the truth that God was present in Jesus. In this way Thomas’ declaration of faith would be understood in light of the account in Jn. 14:5-11 where the disciples are shown to have not comprehended the point that to see and know Jesus was to see and know the Father who dwelled in him.


32 Tilling, How God Became Jesus, p. 118.
Corinthian Christians “in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (1 Cor. 4:15). The NT even describes the devil as a “Father.” He is, according to Jesus, “the Father of lies” (Jn. 8:44).

In like manner, though YHWH is “Lord [Gk. kurios]” in the supreme sense of the word (‘Lord of heaven and earth,’ Acts 17:24; Matt. 11:25; Rev. 11:17), others are still called “Lord” in biblical and extra-biblical literature. “Lord”—which sometimes carries the connation of ‘master,’ ‘owner,’ even ‘sir’—is, generally speaking, a reference to one who has authority (lordship) over others. It is, essentially, a title of dignity used as a form of respectful address or as a way of acknowledging the superior authority of another. Sarah called Abraham “lord [Gk. kyrie]” (1 Pet. 3:6). John addressed a heavenly figure—“one of the elders”—in the apocalypse as “lord [Gk. kyrion]” (Rev. 7:13-14). Angels and human dignitaries were likewise called “lord” in the Scriptures.” None of these ascriptions of lordship, however, conflict with the supreme and unique Lordship of Almighty God.

Biblically, the same proves to be true with the term “God.” The biblical God, YHWH, is described frequently throughout the Scriptures as the “Most High” God (Ps. 91:1; 97:9; Lk. 1:32). However, Ehrman correctly points out that “within Judaism there was understood to be a continuum of divine beings and divine power...God was the ultimate source of all that was divine. But there were lower divinities as well. Even within monotheistic Judaism.”

Ehrman is right for making this observation. The OT conceives of the angels as “gods (Heb. elohim),” i.e., as powerful, divine, celestial beings (Ps. 8:5; 97:7; possibly 138:1). Literature from the Dead Sea Scrolls similarly refers to angels as gods:

And exalt his exaltation to the heights, gods of the august divinities, and the divinity of his glory above all the august heights. For he is the God of the gods...Sing with joy those of you enjoying his knowledge, with rejoicing among the wonderful gods...Praise him, divine spirits, praising forever and ever the main vault of the heights...The spirits of the holy of the holy ones, the living gods, the spirits of everlasting holiness.

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33 Gen. 19:1-2; 23:26; 42:30; 2 Sam 1:10; Dan. 12:8; Acts 16:30; 25:26; Matt. 27:63; Jn. 12:21; 20:15.
34 The same principle applies to the term “king.” God is “King” in the highest sense. Others can still be, and be called, “king,” or “kings.” For example, the prophet Daniel called Nebuchadnezzar “king of kings” because according to Daniel the God of heaven had given him a kingdom (Dan. 2:37). There is also king David, king Solomon, and the rest of the kings of Israel, etc. (1Kgs. 15:24).
35 Ehrman, How Jesus Became God, p. 55.
Chris Tilling quotes Richard Bauckham who likewise acknowledges the point that “Jewish monotheism,” with its exclusive devotion to one God, does not negate the existence of other “gods.” Biblically speaking, other “gods” can and do exist. But YHWH is “God” in a unique and unrivaled sense:

The essential element in what I have called Jewish monotheism, the element that makes it a kind of monotheism, is not the denial of the existence of other ‘gods,’ but an understanding of the uniqueness of YHWH that puts him in a class of his own, a wholly different class from any other heavenly or supernatural beings, even if they are called ‘gods.’ I call this YHWH’s transcendent uniqueness.\(^{37}\)

Craig Blomberg makes the same basic point: “The Hebrew for ‘gods’ (\textit{elohim}) could refer to various exalted beings besides Yahweh, without implying any challenge to monotheism.”\(^{38}\)

Angels are called “gods” in the Bible and in extra-biblical Jewish literature likely because of their exalted status as powerful heavenly beings who serve and who often represent the Almighty. This is not surprising given that the term for God in Hebrew (\textit{el} or \textit{elohim}) essentially means “mighty” or “powerful” one. Paul even called Satan “the god of this age,” likely, because “the whole world lies in the power of the wicked one,” as John says (2Cor. 4:4; 1Jn. 5:19)—demonstrating the link between the term “God” and the concept of having power or authority over others (Compare Jn. 16:11).

Even divinely-empowered human rulers or dignitaries were called “gods” in biblical and other Jewish writings. Bird points out that Moses was called “God [Heb. \textit{elohim}]” in Exodus in Ex. 7:1 where YHWH tells Moses, “See, I have made you God [I have made thee a god’ \textit{ERV} to Pharaoh” (Compare Ex. 4:16). According to Bird this “means that Moses will have absolute divine power over Pharaoh and the Egyptian gods.”\(^{39}\) Ehrman similarly points out: “Moreover, even though he was not God Almighty himself, Moses, according to Philo, ‘was called the god and king of the whole nation’ (\textit{Life of Moses} 1.158).”\(^{40}\)

Later in the history of Israel the judges of Israel were called “gods” (Ps. 82:6), a point that Jesus himself affirms in Jn. 10:34 (Compare Ps. 58:1); and in Ps. 45:6 the king of Israel was also called “God” (‘Your throne,

\(^{37}\) How God Became Jesus, p. 120.
\(^{38}\) Blomberg, The Historical Reliability of the Gospel of John, p. 163.
\(^{39}\) Bird, How God Became Jesus, p. 44.
\(^{40}\) Ehrman, How Jesus Became God, p. 82.
O God, is forever and ever…’) though he was clearly not “God” in the unqualified sense.

Thus in several instances biblical and extra-biblical Jewish writers applied the term “God” or “gods” to exalted celestial figures (angels) and divinely-empowered humans (judges, kings, leaders) without contradicting the biblical doctrine of the “one God,” and without meaning that these figures were “God” in the absolute sense, or “members” of the so-called “unique divine identity” of Israel’s God.

With these biblical precedents in mind, it should come as no surprise that the Messiah is called “God” in Scripture (Jn. 20:28; Heb. 1:8; possibly Rom. 9:5, Tit. 2:13 and 2Pet. 1:1). If Moses can biblically be “God” to Pharaoh, then surely the resurrected (and ultimately ‘super-exalted’) Messiah who is “worthy of greater honor than Moses” can be “God” to Thomas and to the entire community of believers (Heb. 3:3; Rom. 9:5). Likewise since angels were, biblically, “gods,” then it would have been surprising and inconsistent for the biblical writers not to have called the Lord Jesus Christ “God.” If Scripture calls angels “gods,” how much more deserving is the one who is “far superior to the angels, as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs” (Heb. 1:4)?

When Thomas called Jesus “God” he did so within a context—the Gospel of John—that portrays Jesus as “God” in a sense distinct from the sense in which the Father is unqualifiedly God. In this Gospel, Jesus portrays himself, rather clearly, as a distinct figure from “the only true God” (Jn. 17:3; 8:42; 14:1), as one who was sent by that same God (Jn. 8:29), as part of the community of those who worship God (Jn. 4:22), and portrays the God whom the Jews professed to worship as his God and Father (Jn. 8:54; 20:17).

Though Jesus is called “God” by Thomas, the Gospel of John does not conceive of his “Godship” in the post-biblical Trinitarian sense (i.e., as ‘God the Son, the second person of the Trinity’), but in the biblical sense (i.e., the Godship/divine authority Jesus possesses as the Messiah is the kind that allows him to have one who is God to or above him, whereas the Father’s absolute Godship does not). Though rightly honored as “God” in the NT, the Messiah always remains subject to the unqualified Godship of his God and Father (Jn. 20:17; Compare Heb. 1:8-9; Rev. 3:2, 12).

**John 1:1: “In the beginning was the word…”**

In the chapter titled *Paradox Pushers and Persecutors?* Charles Hill claims:
The writer of the Gospel of John clearly teaches that Jesus Christ is preexistent God, even from the very first verse: ‘and the Word was God’ (John 1:1).\textsuperscript{41}

Hill’s claim, however, is probably not as nuanced as it should be at this point, for John does not really say “Jesus Christ was preexistent God” but “the word was God,”—which is, of course, the same “word” that “became flesh” in the man Jesus (Jn. 1:14). That is, John does not quite say so simplistically (as many evangelical interpreters seem to take John to mean), “In the beginning was Jesus Christ” or “In the beginning was the Son,” or the like.

There are better reasons for believing that John’s opening statement about the “the word [Gk. \textit{logos}]” that was “with God” in “the beginning” is a reference to God’s powerful utterance—the creative, life-giving word that God speaks (‘the word of life’ 1Jn. 1:1). Ehrman is helpful at this point:

When we speak a word, in some sense that word has an existence independent of us (as we discover when someone misunderstands a word we have spoken); on the other hand, the word we utter owes its existence entirely to us, since we are the ones who utter the word. The Logos of God is like that: it comes forth from God, and so belongs entirely to God, but it takes on its own kind of existence once it comes forth.\textsuperscript{42}

As most Bible expositors agree, John’s reference to “the word” being “in the beginning” with God was likely intended to call to mind the opening statements in the book of Genesis. Nothing about John’s opening statement (‘in the beginning was the word’), in and of itself, brings to mind the concept of a second “person” but, rather, the declarative word of Genesis by which God calls creation into existence. Ehrman also points out: “In the Hebrew Bible, God creates all things by speaking a ‘word’: ‘And God \textit{said}, Let there be light. And there was light.’ Creation happened by means of God uttering his Logos. The Logos comes from God, and since it is God’s Logos, in a sense it is God.”\textsuperscript{43}

Ehrman’s remarks seem to account for the following statement that the word “was God” (which is, notably, \textit{theos} without the definite article). This was, perhaps, John’s way of poetically personifying the word (God’s self-expression or self-communication) through which God creates and by which he is revealed to the world. In this way “the word” is God \textit{speaking}, God \textit{revealed}, God’s \textit{promise uttered}—the rational expression of God’s

\textsuperscript{41} Hill, \textit{How God Became Jesus}, p. 178.
\textsuperscript{42} Ehrman, \textit{How Jesus Became God}, p. 333.
\textsuperscript{43} Ehrman, \textit{How Jesus Became God}, 74.
mind and purpose.\textsuperscript{44} As Ehrman observes: “since this Word was the Word of ‘God,’ it perfectly manifested the divine being of the Father and for that reason was itself rightly called ‘God.’”\textsuperscript{45} Ehrman also says: “since it is God’s word, his own outward expression of himself, it fully represents who he is, and does nothing else, and in this sense it is itself God. So John tells us that the Word was both ‘with God’ and ‘was God.’”\textsuperscript{46}

Another possibility is that John meant to say that “the word” was not “God” (\textit{ho theos}) but “a god” (\textit{theos}). In spite of popular arguments to the contrary, Jn. 1:1 could very well mean and be legitimately translated “the word was a god.” Other texts with the same or similar grammatical construction include Jn. 8:34: ‘Everyone who does sin is \textit{a} slave of sin’; Jn. 8:48: ‘You are a Samaritan’; Jn. 9:24: ‘This man is a sinner’; Jn: 9:28: ‘You are \textit{a} disciple of that man’; Jn. 10:1: ‘This one is \textit{a} thief’; Jn. 12:6: ‘He was \textit{a} thief’; Acts 28:4: ‘this man is a murderer.’

In addition, the \textit{logos} of Jn. 1:1 as “a god” is consistent with Philo’s reference to the \textit{logos} as a “second god [Gk. \textit{deuteros theos}],”\textsuperscript{47} with Justin Martyr’s description of Christ as “another God” who is “subject to the maker of all things,”\textsuperscript{48} is supported by the 2\textsuperscript{nd}/3\textsuperscript{rd} century Coptic translation (\textit{auw neunoute pe pshaje}; literally ‘and \textit{a} god was the word’),\textsuperscript{49} and is congruent with the most ancient manuscript reading of Jn. 1:18 which describes the Son as “a unique/only-begotten god” who dwells “in the bosom of the Father.” The “a god” translation is likewise consistent with what we know overall about the flexibility of the term “God (or ‘god’)” and its application in biblical and Jewish literature to exalted figures without representing a threat to the Bible’s “one God” doctrine.

If this is the correct sense, then it seems reasonable to conclude that John did in fact mean that the \textit{logos} was a divine being (a distinct person or

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{44} As one evangelical writer observed in a recent publication: “Given the allusion to the creative speech of Genesis 1:3, 6, 9, etc., the meaning of Logos seems to be close to ‘rational creative agent or principle.’” —Peter Grice, \textit{True Reason, Confronting the Irrationality of the New Atheism} (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2013), p. 133.
  \item \textsuperscript{45} Ehrman, \textit{How Jesus Became God}, p. 273.
  \item \textsuperscript{46} Ehrman, \textit{How Jesus Became God}, p. 275.
  \item \textsuperscript{47} James Dunn observed: “Philo demonstrates that a distinction between \textit{ho theos} and \textit{theos} such as we find in John 1.1b-c, would be deliberate by the author and significant for the Greek reader. Not only so, Philo shows that he could happily call the Logos ‘God/god’ without infringing his monotheism (or even ‘the second God’ – \textit{Qu.Gen}. II.62). Bearing in mind our findings with regard to the Logos in Philo, this cannot but be significant: the Logos for Philo is ‘God’ not as a being independent of ‘the God’ but as ‘the God’ in his knowability – the Logos standing for that limited apprehension of the one God which is all that the rational man, even the mystic may attain to.” —\textit{Christology in the Making, A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation}, Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 241.
  \item \textsuperscript{48} In Chapter 56 of Justin Martyr’s \textit{Dialogue with Trypho}, Justin says: “I shall attempt to persuade you, since you have understood the Scriptures, [of the truth] of what I say, that there is, and that there is said to be, another God and Lord subject to the Maker of all things: who is also called an Angel, because He announces to men whatsoever the Maker of all things—above whom there is no other God—wishes to announce to them.”
  \item \textsuperscript{49} Unlike Koine Greek, which does not have an indefinite article (as in ‘a’ or ‘an’), Coptic does have an indefinite article which was used by the Coptic translators at John 1:1c.
\end{itemize}
entity that was with God in the beginning), unless this was John’s way of poetically personifying the word as “a god,” in a similar way that the book of Proverbs appears to poetically liken God’s wisdom to “a master workman” that was with God “before the beginning of the earth” (Prov. 8:22-30). Moreover, the link between “word” (logos) and “wisdom” (sophia) has always been recognized: “If wisdom is something that people have within themselves, then Logos is the outward manifestation of the wisdom when the person speaks.”

It is not that “the word” as “a god” translation can be proven incontrovertibly correct, or that it is strictly necessary. It is only that, contrary to popular belief, the “a god” translation cannot be dogmatically ruled out on either grammatical or theological grounds. Grammatically, the translation is certainly possible and, theologically, represents no conflict with “biblical monotheism” since the biblical writers did not, and did not have to, deny the existence of other “gods” in order to affirm the unique and supreme Godship of YHWH and their exclusive devotion to him as God.

**Hebrews 1:8: “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever...”**

In the first chapter of Hebrews the author quotes and applies an OT text to Jesus:

But about the Son he says, ‘Your throne, O God, will last forever and ever; a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy.

The quotation is from Ps. 45:6-7 in which the original referent (the king of Israel) was called “God.” One Bible commentary points out: “since in Hebrew thought the occupant of the throne of David was regarded as God’s representative, it is in this sense that the king could be addressed as God.” The footnote in the New English Translation makes the same point: “Ps 45:6 addresses the Davidic king as ‘God’ because he ruled and fought as God’s representative on earth.” Professor Marianne Thompson gives added insight:

> In some instances theos or elohim predicates a God-given privilege or function of an individual, with the exact nature of that privilege or function...

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50 Ehrman, How Jesus Became God, p. 75.
determined from context. In Psalm 45:7, elohim certainly refers to the king.\(^{52}\)

In reference to the original Psalm, Ehrman helpfully points out the following:

It is clear that the person addressed as ‘O God’ (Elohim) is not God Almighty but the king, because of what is said later: God Almighty is the king’s own God and has ‘anointed’ him with oil—the standard act of the king’s coronation ceremony in ancient Israel. And so God has both anointed and exalted the king above all others, even to a level of deity. The king is in the some sense God. Not equal with God Almighty, obviously (since the differentiation is made clearly, even here), but God nonetheless.\(^{53}\)

Murray Harris in *Jesus as God* similarly remarks that “the king himself, however elevated his person or office, must never forget that Yahweh is his elohim [God]” and that the writer of the original Psalm “forestalls misunderstanding by indicating that the king is not elohim without qualification. Yahweh is the king’s God.”\(^{54}\)

According to both Ehrman and Harris, though the Davidic king was called “God,” it is clear he was not portrayed as so in the absolute or unqualified sense because the next verse indicates that God is his God (‘Therefore, God, your God has anointed you…’). The point is critical because all the elements present in Ps. 45:6, including the reference to the king’s qualified Godship, are present in their application to Jesus. This means that what Harris and Ehrman say regarding the original Psalm applies to Jesus as well. Heb. 1:8 likewise “forestalls misunderstanding” the Son’s Godship by indicating he is not “God” without qualification; since YHWH is Jesus’ God. Bird similarly points out:

The psalmist notes that the king still has his own God (i.e., ‘your God’), upon whom he is reliant for the reception of his reign. Since ruling and judging were principally prerogatives of God, the king had to be Godlike in the just execution of his regal responsibilities.\(^{55}\)

If Bird’s observation is likewise correct, then, again, the same point applies to God’s Son Jesus. Though called “God” (Heb. 1:8), Jesus still has

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52 Thompson also says: “Other passages seem to refer to the gods (elohim) of the heavenly council (Ps. 82:1, 6 [MT]) or to various sorts of human judgment (Exod. 21:6; 22:7-9). In these passages in Exodus, the Targums [Aramaic paraphrases of the Scriptures] read ‘judges’ for elohim, and later midrashim [Jewish commentaries on the OT compiled between A.D. 400 and 1200] offer variations such as ‘the judgment seat of God.’ When elohim refers to heavenly beings, the LXX typically renders it as ‘angels’ (angeloi, Ps. 96:7; Job 1:6) or ‘sons of God’ (huioi theou, Deut. 32:43).”


his own God (i.e., ‘your God’) upon whom he is reliant for the reception of his reign (Heb. 1:9).

The fact that Jesus has his own God, even in his “God” status, is at odds with evangelical tradition. The traditional rationale for the claim that Jesus is God in the supreme sense, in spite of the fact that the Father is his God, hinges on the notion that Jesus is “fully God and fully man” at the same time—the so-called “hypostatic union” or “dual nature” of Christ. That is to say, from this perspective, only as a “man,” or “by virtue of his human nature,” can the Father be the God of Jesus. Heb. 1:8-9, however, clearly demonstrates that, even as “God,” the Father is his God, revealing the traditional claim to be contrived, not biblical.

Thus, in Heb. 1:8, Jesus is indeed “God” (as was the Davidic king in Ps. 45:6) but, scripturally, Jesus’ Godhood is dependent upon God and is the kind of Godhood that allows for him to have a supreme God above him, “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 15:6).

Mark 2:7: “He is blaspheming; who can forgive sins but God alone?”

Simon Gathercole says that in the Synoptic Gospels it looks like Jesus has “the privileges of YHWH, God himself,” with the implication that Jesus therefore is YHWH, or that he “shares in the identity” of YHWH, the God of Israel:

Strikingly, Jesus says and does things that not only overlap with what God in the Old Testament says and does. Jesus says and does things that are privileges uniquely of the God of Israel...One of the most remarkable statements is Jesus’ authority to forgive sins, seen once in Matthew and Mark and twice in Luke (2:1-10 and parallels; also Luke 7:49). It is difficult to see this as merely something Jesus can do as a god low down in the divine pecking order because it is something—as the scribes in Mark 2 recognize—that is a prerogative uniquely of the one true God.56

It may be true that, biblically, the authority to forgive sins is “a prerogative uniquely of the one true God,” as Gathercole says. But would not the “one true God” have the prerogative to bestow that authority on whomever he chooses to bestow it? From the viewpoint of the NT writers that is exactly what God has chosen to do in reference to Jesus, the Son of Man. This is not entirely without biblical precedent or parallel either. In the book of Exodus God evidently grants Israel’s guardian angel a similar authority regarding the forgiveness of sins. In this account YHWH warns the people of Israel:

Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not forgive your transgression, for my name is in him” (Ex. 23:21).

In Jn. 20:23 Jesus even tells his own disciples:

If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven (Jn. 20:23, NIV).

Since the authority to forgive sins was, according to Gathercole, the “prerogative uniquely of the one true God,” must we conclude that the disciples therefore “share in the identity of the one God of Israel”? Or is the authority to forgive sins (or to declare the forgiveness of sins) based on the authority Christ confers upon them, who, in turn, derived his authority from God?

It is not that Jesus is “a god low down in the divine pecking order” (Gathercole) but that he is the Messiah (‘divine agent par excellence’) whom God invested with divine authority. In this case we are not dealing with speculation or theological inference but with Scripture’s own explanation. Bird alludes to this when he says:

The offense that Jesus’ words provoke is by his presumption to speak with a divine prerogative. Clearly Jesus’ declaration of forgiveness in such a context was tantamount to assuming the authority to forgive on God’s behalf. When Jesus explains why he is able to do so, declaring that ‘the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins,’ he makes that claim explicit.57

Bird is right that Jesus declares the forgiveness of sins on “God’s behalf.” None of the Gospel writers say Jesus declared the forgiveness of sins because he was “God” or because he “shares in the identity of the one God of Israel” (whatever that means exactly) but because he was divinely-authorized as the “Son of Man,” the Messiah. As Ehrman puts it: “he could forgive sins as God’s representative on earth…”58 But Bird surprisingly claims:

Jesus claims for himself an unmediated divine authority, to those steeped in Jewish monotheism, looks absolutely blasphemous.59

Bird’s claim is surprising because Jesus does not in fact claim for himself an “unmediated” divine authority in the NT but a mediated one. The Gospels clearly present Jesus’ authority to forgive sins as an authority God gave (or ‘mediated’) to him. In Matthew’s account, Jesus emphasizes the

57 Bird, How God Became Jesus, p.58.
58 Ehrman, How Jesus Became God, p. 237 (emphasis added).
59 Bird, How God Became Jesus, p. 58.
point that, as the “Son of Man” (not as ‘the God of Israel’) he had authority on earth to forgive sins. Matthew reflects on the event by saying: “When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men” (Matt. 9:8, emphasis added). Later Gathercole observes:

To be sure, Jesus is portrayed in the Gospels as having extraordinary authority—to repeat examples noted already, he has authority on earth to forgive sins and authority over the Sabbath (Mark 2:10, 28). Matthew and Luke record saying in which Jesus states that all things have been committed to him by his Father (Matt 11:27/Luke 10:22).60

Exactly. As Gathercole points out, Jesus said that all things had been committed to him by his Father. Therefore, the extraordinary authority Jesus demonstrated in the NT as the “Son of Man” was not “unmediated” but mediated to him by God.

**Jesus as the Prophet Daniel’s “Son of Man”**

Michael Bird observes that the “overwhelming testimony of the Jesus tradition is that the Son of Man is an apocalyptically encoded way of Jesus self-describing his role as the one who embodies God’s authority on earth, achieves God’s salvation by his death and resurrection, and shares God’s glory in his enthronement…Jesus really outs himself not only as the Messiah, but as a Messiah enthroned with God.”61 In the chapter Did Jesus Think He Was God? Bird also says:

…at Jesus’ trial, he most likely spoke to the effect that he believed that he was the figure of Dan 7:13-14 and that he was rightfully enthroned beside God.62

Bird is right about Jesus speaking to the effect that he believed he was the figure enthroned beside God in Dan. 7. But Bird does not take his own correct observation to its logical conclusion. If Jesus really is the “Son of Man” figure of the book of Daniel, and the Messiah “enthroned beside God,” then how does it follow that the Son of Man is “God” himself if he is “the Messiah enthroned with God”?

These kinds of lapses in logic are not uncommon among evangelicals in their efforts to defend orthodoxy. In a popular 1992 handbook on “Bible Difficulties,” authors Norman Geilser and Thomas Howe say:

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60 Gathercole, How God Became Jesus, p. 113.
61 Bird, How God Became Jesus, p. 70.
62 Bird, How God Became Jesus, p. 70.
In this passage [Matt. 26:63-64], Jesus is citing Daniel 7:13 where the Messiah is described as the 'Ancient of Days,' a phrase used to indicate His deity (cf. Dan. 7:9).63

This is a strange and surprising misrepresentation what is written in Daniel. In Dan. 7:9 the “Ancient of Days” (i.e., God) takes his seat on his throne. Four verses later, in Dan. 7:13, a figure, “one like a son of man” approached “the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence.” Clearly, the “son of man” is a figure who approached, or gained access to, the Ancient of Days (God), not the Ancient of Days (God) himself. To say that the Messiah, or Son of Man, is described as the “Ancient of Days” is to simply confuse one figure for another figure, though nothing in the book of Daniel lends itself to such confusion.

In the prophetic vision of Daniel Jesus alludes to, the “son of man” is not portrayed as God himself (‘the Ancient of Days’) but as an exalted human or human-like figure who came to “the Ancient of Days” and was presented before him. That the son of man in Daniel’s vision was given authority, glory and power, such that all peoples of the earth should serve him, is consistent with the NT portrayal of Jesus as the one who was given authority, “made Lord,” and exalted to the right hand of the one God.

Bird also says: “The charge of blasphemy does not come from Jesus pronouncing the divine name, the Tetragrammaton ‘YHWH,” when he says, ‘I am.’ More probably it comes from his conflation of Ps. 110:1 and Dan 7:13 with the implication that he was going to be—or was already being—enthroned with God.”64 Bird is right. Bird also says:

Jesus was clearly identifying himself with the enthroned messianic figure of Dan 7…the whole point of Daniel 7 is that when God acted in history to deliver his people, the agent through whom he acted would be vindicated, honored, enthroned, and exalted in an unprecedented manner. Jesus’ claim is not that he’s going to sit on his own little throne next to God; rather, he will sit at God’s right hand on God’s throne. If Jesus thinks that Dan 7:13-14 is about him, then he is placing himself within the orbit of divine sovereignty and claiming a place within the divine regency of God Almighty. If he’s wrong it isn’t just bad theology; it is blasphemy and an affront to Jewish monotheism.65

Again, precisely. Jesus is the enthroned messianic figure of Dan. 7 where he is portrayed as God’s agent, not as God himself. Jesus will sit at God’s right hand on God’s throne and is therefore not depicted as that “God.” Since Jesus is the “son of man” of Daniel’s prophecy, then he is

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64 Bird, How God Became Jesus, p. 65.
65 Bird, How God Became Jesus, p. 66.
exactly what Bird describes him as, namely, a figure “who would be enthroned beside God on God’s throne.”

But Bird asks the rhetorical question: “Does YHWH share his throne with anybody”?—as if to imply that since YHWH does not share his throne with anybody, according to Bird, we must conclude that therefore Jesus is YHWH, or that he “shares in the identity” of YHWH.

Bird’s rhetorical question overlooks the biblical pattern and imposes an anachronistic interpretation onto the biblical text. In the OT king Solomon is said to have sat on YHWH’s throne in Jerusalem not because he was YHWH himself, of course, but because he was YHWH’s appointed king and representative:

Then Solomon sat on the throne of YHWH as king in place of David his father. And he prospered, and all Israel obeyed him (1 Chron. 29:23).

In the book of Revelation Jesus reveals that just as he had sat down on his Father’s throne (i.e., the throne of YHWH) so too would his faithful followers sit with him on his throne:

The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne (Rev. 3:21).

Are the ones who conquer in this text Jesus himself, or YHWH himself, because they sit with Jesus on his throne? Are they members of the Godhead? Are they those who “share” in the “unique identity” of Jesus Christ or the God of Israel? Or are they, rather, those who have been similarly exalted and granted an extraordinary honor by one who is greater than themselves, as Jesus was?

Dan. 7:13 does not portray the son of man figure as YHWH himself. It presents, instead, a heavenly vision of an exalted human or human-like figure (‘one like a son of man’) who approaches “the Ancient of Days,” not one who is “the Ancient of Days” (i.e., God) himself. Ps. 110:1 likewise presents the same messianic figure, David’s “Lord,” as the figure whom YHWH speaks to and tells to sit at his right hand. David’s Lord is not portrayed as YHWH himself. Why would one think so if David’s “Lord” is not identified as YHWH but as the figure YHWH speaks to?

**Philippians 2: “Therefore, God has so highly exalted him...”**

It is remarkable that defenders of orthodoxy remain so absolute in their appeal to Phil. 2 as a “proof-text” for the “deity of Christ,” or for the “incarnation” of “God the Son,” or for the “hypostatic union (two natures)” of

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Christ. Ehrman points out that among scholars, “it is one of the most discussed, argued over, and commented upon passages in the New Testament.”67 Richard Bauckham similarly observes: “Philippians 2:6-11 is the subject of one of the most complex exegetical debates in New Testament scholarship.”68

Due to several uncertainties in terms of the original language, nearly every aspect of this text has been subjected to diverse and conflicting interpretations. Does Paul have in mind, at the start, a “pre-existent” Christ? Or is he speaking about the human Jesus from the beginning? What did Paul mean by the “form” of God exactly? Was Jesus “equal” to God and did he not try to “exploit” or “take advantage” of his equality with him? If so, what did Paul mean by “equality” (or ‘likeness’)? Or, was Jesus not equal to God and did not even think to “seize” or “grasp after” equality with him? What did Paul mean when he said that Jesus “emptied” himself? Emptied himself of what? Is this literal or figurative language? Even conservative NT interpreters do not fully agree on these issues.

In spite of the relative uncertainties that exist, however, much remains clear. The first is that Paul’s point was to induce the Christians to imitate the same attitude of mind that was in Christ Jesus—an attitude of humility and selfless service (Phil. 2:3-5). Secondly, nowhere in this passage is Jesus directly called “God,” or portrayed as God himself. He is described, rather, as an obedient human being who “died” on a cross (Phil. 2:7-8), and he is clearly depicted as a distinguishable figure from God, since he had (or did not have) a certain kind of relationship to God (‘equality/likeness’). Furthermore, it was “God” who so “highly exalted him” and God who graciously “gave” him the name that is above all others (Phil. 2:9). Charles Hill, however, makes the following claim:

...this [pre-Pauline] author too did not see the preexistence of Christ as God as contradicted by his exaltation to heavenly status after the resurrection.69

In fact the text (v. 5) nowhere explicitly speaks of the “preexistence of Christ as God” but says, only, that Christ was “existing” in God’s “form.” The word “form” is a translation of the Greek _morphe_ which generally refers to an “outward shape” or “external appearance,” similar to—and at times used interchangeably with—the word _eikon_ (‘image’) and even _doxa_.

67 Ehrman, _When Jesus Became God_, p. 262.
69 _How God Became Jesus_, p. 182.
('glory'). To say that Jesus was in God’s “form” is hardly equivalent to saying that Jesus is unqualifiedly “God.” Many evangelical interpreters recognize this, though some have wrongly translated the expression “being in nature God” (NIV).

On page 263 Ehrman comments on the much-debated word harpagmos in v. 6:

...Christ did not regard being equal with God ‘something to be grasped after.’ Interpreters of this passage have long debated the precise nuance of these words. Do they mean that he already had equality with God and that he did not clutch on to this equality as something to retain, but instead became human? Or do they mean that he did not already have equality with God and chose not to grasp for that kind of equality, but instead became human? It makes a big difference.71

Chris Tilling also comments on harpagmos:

They [Hoover, Wright, Gorman, Fee, and others] translate the word not as ‘grasped after’ (i.e., that which Christ would have tried to seize but didn’t), but as an idiom meaning ‘taking advantage of.’ In this case, Christ was ‘equal with God’ and didn’t ‘take advantage of this,’ but poured himself out.72

Tilling is right that harpagmos could be an idiomatic way of expressing the idea of “taking advantage of.” This is reflected in the NRSV translation: “did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited.” The translation is conceptually and linguistically possible but uncertain. That is why Tilling qualifies his preferred interpretation: “my internal jury is still out on this translation issue.”73

However, for Paul to even speak of “equality with God” shows, in and of itself, that Paul did not think of Jesus as “God.” To speak of “equality with God” is not to speak of Christ as “God” but to speak of a relationship he has to “God.” If the translation preferred by Tilling and others is accurate, Paul’s reference to “equality with God,” and to Christ’s not “taking advantage” of it, likely represents an equality of “form” or “external likeness” with God, based on Paul’s description of Christ in the preceding statement (‘though he was existing in God’s form’ v. 5).

But Ehrman points out the following regarding the meaning of the term in question:

71 Ehrman, How Jesus Became God, p. 263.
72 Tilling, How God Became Jesus, p. 146.
73 Tilling, How God Became Jesus, p. 146.
in reality, the word (and words related to it in Greek) is almost always used to refer to something a person doesn’t have but grasps for—like a thief who snatches someone’s purse. The German scholar Vollenweider has shown that the word is used this way widely in a range of Jewish authors; moreover, it is the word used of human rulers who become arrogant and so try to make themselves more high and mighty (divine) than they really are. This seems to be, then what is meant in the Philippians poem.\footnote{Ehrman, \textit{How Jesus Became God}, p. 263.}

Ehrman makes an important point. The same word from which \textit{harpagmos} derives (\textit{harpazo}) appears elsewhere in the NT. All usages carry the sense of \textit{seizing} or \textit{snatching} something not previously possessed:

…how can anyone enter the strong man’s house and \textit{carry off} [\textit{harpasai}] his property, unless he first binds the strong man? —Matt. 12:29, NASB.

When any one hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and \textit{snatches away} [\textit{harpazei}] what is sown in his heart… —Matt. 13:19, RSV

I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall \textit{snatch} [\textit{harpasei}] them out of my hand. —Jn. 10:28, RSV

Then we who are alive and remain will be \textit{caught up} (‘\textit{snatched up}, \textit{Unvarnished New Testament}) [\textit{harpagesometha}] together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air… —1 Thess. 4:17, NASB

Jn. 6:15 uses the same term: “Jesus therefore perceived that [those who ‘had seen the miracle that Jesus did’] would come and take him by force [\textit{harpazein}], to make him a king” (KJV).

The Greek \textit{harpazein auton} indicates that the people tried to “seize him” in order to make Jesus king. That is why some translations have: “they meant to come and seize him” (NEB), “come and snatch Him” (Concordant), “seize him by force” (NET), “carry Him off by force” (Williams). This helps to explain the \textit{Today’s English Version}’s choice of words for Phil. 2:6:

…he did not think \textit{that by force he should try} to become equal with God.

\textit{The Interpreter’s Bible} observes:

Since [the Son] had this affinity with God, he might have aspired to ‘equality’ with him; he might have claimed an equal share in all the powers which God exercises and in all the honors which are rendered to him by his creatures. Standing so near to God, he might have resented his inferior place and thrown off his obedience…Yet he never attempted the
robery which might have raised him higher...[in] the Greek, and in English, the word *[harpagmos]* involved the idea of violent seizure, and what Christ resisted was not merely the prize but the means of obtaining it. He refused to seize for his own the glory which belonged to God.⁷⁵

R. P. Martin pointed out in the conservative *Tyndale Commentaries*:

It is questionable, however, whether the sense of the verb can glide from its real meaning of ‘to seize’, ‘to snatch violently’ to that of ‘to hold fast'; and the second interpretation hardly does justice to the structure of the whole sentence as well as to the force of ‘exalted to the highest place’ in verse 9...’So the old contention about *harpagmos* is over: equality with God is not a *res rapta*...a position which the pre-existent Christ had and gave up, but it is a *res rapienda*, a possibility of advancement which he declined.’⁷⁶

The remarks in the *Interpreter’s Bible* and *Tyndale Commentaries* are harmonious with the spirit of Paul’s message of humility and selfless service, and with Paul’s reference to Christ Jesus as the true exemplar of this attitude and way of life. Several English translations express the meaning of v. 6 in the following ways:

- he did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at. — *New American Bible* (1970)
- he did not think to snatch at equality with God — *New English Bible*
- he laid no claim to equality with God. — *Revised English Bible*
- did not think [it] a thing to be snatched at — *Westminster Version of the New Testament*
- [he did not consider] equality with God a thing to be seized. — *The Interpreter’ Bible* translation

In this interpretation, although Jesus was in God’s form or likeness, he gave no thought to trying to seize equality with God. Instead, he “emptied himself” and took on the form of a slave and humbly lived a life of complete obedience to God, even to the point of death on a cross. According to Paul, *that is why* God exalted him so highly (v. 9). (Compare the principle in Jesus’ parable: ‘Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.’ Lk. 18:14).

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⁷⁷ The commentary in the *Westminster Version of the New Testament* says that the expression is literally translated.
In reference to vs. 10 Tilling points out that Paul’s subsequent “universal-submission-to-Jesus” language was derived from Isa. 45:

In the Christ hymn of Philippians 2...the words of YHWH about his sovereignty found in Isa 45:23 (‘Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear’) are nonchalantly applied to Jesus with these words: ‘at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth’ (Phil 2:10).78

Paul does appear to derive the language of ‘bowing’ and ‘confessing’ from Is. 45:23. In this text all will bow before YHWH as God (‘For I am God and there is no other, v. 22, emphasis added). In Phil. 2:10 all bow to Christ Jesus and confess him as “Lord,” a confession that resounds “to the glory of God the Father” (v. 11). Thus the borrowing of the Isaianic language of bowing and confessing that applied to God originally and applying it to God’s Son was appropriate. From the NT perspective it is because creation’s ultimate recognition of God’s sovereignty is expressed and fulfilled when all submit to the authority of his Christ, the Christ he has “exceedingly exalted,” who will sit at God’s right hand until God makes his “enemies a footstool for [his] feet” (Ps. 110:1). The apostle John had the same or similar vision of God’s Christ in the book of Revelation:

And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, Now has come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God (Rev. 12:10).

Tilling, however, quotes N.T. Wright who said: “The God who refused to share his glory with another has shared it with Jesus”79—as if to suggest that the glorification the NT attributes to Jesus requires, biblically or logically, that Jesus be literally YHWH himself or that he “share in the identity” of God. The conclusion is misguided. That the Messiah is glorified, or worshiped in Phil. 2:10-11 and in other NT texts does not require that Jesus “shares God’s unique identity” (i.e., that Jesus is the ‘one God’), nor does it conflict with the principle of God refusing to share his glory with another (Isa. 42:8). Examples of “glory” given to other figures in the NT help to make this clear. In Jn. 17, for instance, Jesus prayed to God on behalf of his disciples:

The glory that you have given me I have given to them (Jn. 17:22).

In this instance, the disciples are “given” the “glory” that God had “given” to the Son. This does not, however, conflict with Isa. 42:8 (where God declares that he would not give his glory to another); nor does this

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79 Tilling, How God Became Jesus, p. 146.
make the disciples God themselves or part of the so-called “divine identity.” In the context of Isaiah, God’s refusal to share his glory with others speaks to the unwillingness on his part to share glory with an undeserving rival or competing god, particularly a man-made idol. Biblically, however, God gladly confers “glory” upon those who serve him and carry out his will and purpose. That is why Peter could say to his fellow Israelites:

The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus (Acts 3:13, emphasis added).

Peter’s apostolic proclamation (and first epistle attributed to him) verifies that, from the NT perspective, God willingly glorifies those who serve him, as in the case of his “beloved Son” Jesus and all of God’s faithful “children” (Compare Is. 52:13, LXX; Ps. 8:5; Lk. 2:32; Rom. 8:17, 21, 30; 9:4; Heb. 2:10; 1 Pet. 5:1, 4, 10). The glory attributed to God’s Son in the NT is not portrayed as the glory of “God the Son, the second person of the Trinity” (the status attributed to Jesus in the classical creeds) but “glory as the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn. 1:14, NASB).

On the matter of revering Christ with worship and glory, Larry Hurtado says that the “earliest believers seem to have come quickly to the conviction that Jesus had been exalted to a unique heavenly status, had been given to share in the divine name and glory, and must now be reverenced in obedience to God.” Hurtado concludes:

My own proposal has been that earliest believers treated the risen/exalted Jesus as they did only because they felt required to do so by God. Note that the typical way that reverence of Jesus is justified in various NT texts is to invoke God’s action of exalting him and requiring that he be reverenced: E.g., Philippians 2:9-11; 1 Cor 15:20-28; Hebrews 1:1-4; Acts 2:36; John 5:22-23, et alia).

Hurtado is right that God required the early believers to reverence Jesus as the exalted Lord and Christ. Even the angels are said to revere Christ with worship based on God’s command. In Heb. 1:6 God said “let” all of God’s angels worship the Son, showing that the worship (glorification) received by the Messiah is, in the biblical viewpoint, an authorized worship, approved and even commanded by the sovereign God who exalted him.

80 The entire verse from Isaiah reads: “I am Jehovah, that is my name; and my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise unto graven images.” —Isaiah 42:8, ASV. This shows from the context that Jehovah was excluding the gods of the nations in the form of “carved idols” (ESV) at the time of the prophet; certainly not his “only-begotten Son” whom he would later glorify and exalt, the beloved one with whom God is “well-pleased.” Compare Is. 52:13; Matt. 3:17; Phil. 2:8-11.

In Phil. 2 Paul speaks of the Son as one who was obedient (i.e., obedient to God) to the point of death on a cross, and it was “for this reason” (NASB), “in consequence of this” (Weymouth), that God has “super-exalted” Jesus and given him the highest name so that all bow to him and confess his Lordship. All this is “to the glory of God the Father.” Thus, the worship the Lord Jesus receives in the NT is based on God’s will and own exaltation of him. It is in no way a threat or compromise to the glory of God but, in fact, enhances God’s glory.

Chris Tilling rightly observes that the Philippians poem is “all about the graciousness of true divinity.” Jesus honors God through his obedience, even to the point of dying the agonizing death of crucifixion. God, in turn, gives Jesus an unprecedented exalted status right next to him as Lord and “kindly gives” to him the name that is above every name—which is, ultimately, a testimony to the goodness, generosity, graciousness, and glory of the one God. The Tyndale Commentaries point out:

The honor which [Christ] refused to arrogate to himself is now conferred upon him by the Father’s good pleasure: gave him (echarisato) bears the sense of ‘granted by the exercise of a favor’ (charis).

This is why careful translators have rendered the verse not simply “given him” but “graces him” (Concordant), “favoured him” (Rotherham), “freely granted him” (Diaglott) “the name above all other names.”

Thus—setting aside the more controversial points of interpretation—the entire context of Phil. 2 plainly presents Jesus not as “God” but as a distinct figure from God who was obedient to him, who died, and who was subsequently super-exalted by God and kindly given the name that is above every name by that same God—resulting in the magnification of the glory of the God who decreed it to be so.

Ehrman points out correctly: “God had taken Jesus up to himself in the heavenly realm, to be with him. God had exalted him to a position of virtually unheard-of status and authority.”

Jesus’ exalted status and authority was indeed extraordinary and, as Ehrman says, “virtually unheard of,” but not entirely so from the biblical perspective. What Ehrman calls the “virtually unheard-of status and authority” of Jesus in the NT was echoed in the prophetic oracle of David centuries earlier. The famous Psalm of David (110:1) spoke of a messianic figure (David’s ‘Lord’) who would be exalted to the right hand of God, showing that the position of authority Jesus would assume in the NT era

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82 How God Became Jesus, p. 147.
83 Ehrman, How Jesus Became God, p. 207.
was anticipated by the Hebrew prophets of old. Isaiah 52:13 in the Septuagint similarly said that God’s “servant” would be “exalted and glorified exceedingly” (‘raised and lifted up and highly exalted’ MT) just as the obedient Christ is “exceedingly exalted (Gk. hyperypsosen)” by God in Phil. 2:9.

Simon Gathercole points out how in the book of Acts Cornelius tries to bow down to (or ‘worship’, Gk. prosekynesen) the apostle Peter. But Peter stops Cornelius by saying: “Stand up, for I too am a man” (Acts 10:25-26). Gathercole reasons that the “worship” (proskynesis) given to Jesus at the end of the Gospel of Luke, which is not prevented by Jesus, is worship due to God alone:

...when the disciples offer proskynesis to Jesus at the end of Luke’s gospel, it is clearly worship due uniquely to God that is in view (Luke 24:52).\(^{84}\)

No evidence, however, appears in Lk. 24 that the “worship” Jesus received in v. 52 was “worship due uniquely to God.”

In the beginning of the account he is portrayed as “the Lord Jesus” who died yet was “risen” (24:3, 6), not as the immortal God himself (Rom. 1:23; 1 Tim. 6:16). Nowhere in the account do the disciples indicate that they thought Jesus was God. Instead they spoke of Jesus explicitly as “a man who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people” (24:19). The account says that he was “condemned to death” but was seen by the women in the company of the disciples in “a vision of angels who said that he was alive” (24:23). Jesus refers to himself twice as “the Christ” in the account (24:26, 46). His disciples call him “the Lord” who “has risen indeed” (24:34). It is further said that everything written about the Messiah “in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled” (24:44), namely, that the Messiah suffer, die, and rise from the dead (24:46); and that “repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations” (24:47). The account closes with Jesus being “carried up into heaven” (24:51), and his followers, consequently, “worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy” (24:52).

Contrary to Gathercole, no contextual evidence supports the argument that the disciples gave Jesus the “worship due uniquely to God,” nor that they worshiped him as the “one God” in Lk. 24:52. Instead they joyfully and appropriately gave Jesus the “worship” due uniquely to the recently *risen* and *ascended* Lord and Christ.

Jesus as “the Son of God” in the New Testament

Evangelical Christians in general believe that, in reference to the NT Jesus, “Son of God” is “a title of deity.” The same viewpoint appears in How God Became Jesus. Michael Bird says:

Whether Jesus of Nazareth really is God, as Christians of all varieties have historically claimed, can only be answered as a matter of faith. It comes down to whether one believes the early church’s testimony to Jesus attested by Holy Scripture that he is the Son of God.85

Apparently Bird thinks that Jesus as “God” and Jesus as “Son of God” are equivalent or interchangeable propositions. Aside from the point that, logically, and linguistically, “God” and “Son of God” are two distinct concepts, do the Hebrew Scriptures give any reason to think that they are equivalent? Moreover, do the Christian Scriptures ever define “Son of God” as “one-who-is-God-himself” or “one-who-is-of-identical-being-with-God” or the like?

In fact the language “son-of-God” (and the concept of God having a ‘son’) already had an established history of usage in the OT and in apocryphal Jewish literature. The nation of Israel, for example, was called God’s “firstborn son” (Ex. 4:22; Hos. 11:1). On this point Ehrman observes:

Here again, Israel is God’s Son because it stands in a uniquely close relationship with God and as such is the object of his love and special favor; moreover it is through Israel that God mediates his will on earth.86

In the book of Jeremiah God is described again as “Father” to Israel and the tribe of Ephraim is called God’s “firstborn” (Jer. 31:9).

The king of Israel was called God’s son (Ps. 2:7). The promised offspring of king David was similarly called God’s son (2 Sam. 7:14); and king Solomon, the son of David, was called God’s son (1 Chron. 17:13; 28:6). Ehrman also points out:

There is nothing controversial in the claim that the king of Israel was thought of as standing in a uniquely close relationship to God and was in that sense considered the Son of God.87

The judges or ancient rulers of Israel were “sons of the Most High” (Ps. 82:6). The Jewish Apocryphal Book of Wisdom similarly portrays an unidentified righteous man as God’s son (2:12-20); and in at least two

85 Bird, How God Became Jesus, p. 12.
86 Ehrman, How Jesus Became God, p. 77.
87 Ehrman, How Jesus Became God, p. 76.
biblical instances the angels were, likewise, portrayed as God's sons (Gen. 6:4; Job 1:6).

The "son-of-God" language appears in the NT as well. Adam, the first man, is called “son of God” (Lk. 3:38). Jesus said that “peacemakers” would be called “sons of God” (Matt. 5:9). Believers are described as God’s sons (Lk. 20:36; Rom. 8:14; 9:26; Gal. 3:26; 4:6) and, even, “sons of the living God” (Rom. 9:26). Jesus the “only-begotten/unique” Son of God is, harmoniously, “the firstborn among many brothers” (Rom. 8:29).

There is no biblical instance where the language/concept “son-of-God” means “one-who-is-himself-God” or “one-who-is-equal-to-God,” or “one-who-shares-the-unique-identity-of-God,” etc. In all instances a “son of God” referred to individuals (angels, kings) or a nation (Israel) that had a special relationship to God, and, often, one who was specially blessed by, favored by, and beloved of God.

In what sense, then, does the NT portray Jesus as “Son of God”? Biblically, Jesus appears to be Son of God not just for one reason but for an accumulation of good reasons.

The opening of the Gospel of Luke, for example, appears to portray Jesus as the Son of God in the sense that he had no human father. God was his true Father (Lk. 1:35). As Ehrman observes:

He will be called the Son of God because he will in fact be the Son of God. It is God, not Joseph, who will make Mary pregnant, so the child she bears will be God’s offspring.  

In the beginning of John’s Gospel, Jesus as “Son of God” appears to be nearly synonymous with “King of Israel.”

Nathanael answered him, ‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!’ (Jn.1:49).

This makes good biblical sense from Nathanael’s perspective as an Israelite, given that the Davidic kings of Israel were formerly ascribed with the same honorary and familial description. Craig Blomberg agrees: “Once again, ‘Son of God’ is immediately rephrased as ‘King of Israel’; in its original context it probably meant nothing more than a triumphant, nationalist Messiah.” Blomberg also observes: “In light of the discovery of 4Q246 at Qumran, ‘Son of God’ has now clearly been shown to be a messianic title in pre-Christian Judaism with no necessary overtones of divinity.”

89 Blomberg, The Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel, p. 83.
Blomberg is right. The terms “Son of God” and “Christ” (Messiah) appear to be used synonymously (or to carry a similar or overlapping implication) in the NT as well. The purpose statement in John’s Gospel supports this point:

...these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you might have life in his name” (Jn. 20:31; Compare Matt. 16:16).

Jesus is not only called God’s Son but repeatedly speaks of knowing God, personally, as his own Father (‘my Father’ Matt. 11:27; Lk. 10:22; Jn. 5:17; 7:29; 20:17). This confirms the reciprocal nature of the Father-Son relationship and the authenticity of Jesus’ sonship before God. Of the Gospel of Mark, Blomberg observes: “Calling God his own Father’ in a uniquely intimate sense corresponds to Mark’s portrayal of Jesus addressing God as Abba (Mark 14:36). But if God is Jesus’ Father, then Jesus is God’s Son, a title that could be used in Judaism simply as a synonym for Messiah.”

Speaking as a conservative evangelical, Blomberg even concedes the following point:

[Jesus’] repeated contrasts between himself as Son and God as Father amount to the same thing. And we must again remember that ‘Son of God’ could be a virtual synonym for Messiah in first-century Judaism (above, p. 80); it certainly did not yet mean everything implied by ‘the second person of the Trinity’ as formulated by later creeds and councils.

One wonders, then, when exactly did “Son of God” come to mean “everything implied by ‘the second person of the Trinity’”? Certainly the NT writers did not use this language. What evidence is there that such language accurately represents the viewpoint they consciously held?

Ehrman correctly points out that in the context of first-century Palestinian Judaism the word “anointed” or Christ “always means something like ‘chosen and specially honored by God.’ It usually carries with it the connotation ‘in order to fulfill God’s purposes and mediate his will on earth.’

Ehrman’s observation is confirmed by Peter’s proclamation, where the messianic concept did not involve the Messiah being God himself but one who was anointed by God and empowered to fulfill God’s good purpose:

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93 Ehrman, How Jesus Became God, p. 113.
God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him (Acts 10:38).

There is no evidence at this point that Peter conceived of Jesus as God but as the figure whom God anointed; and Peter does not say that the good works Jesus performed were done because he was God but because God was with him. Logically, one might even think, in order to be the Messiah it is necessary for one not to be “God” since the Messiah, by definition, is the one who is anointed by God.

The authors of the NT also appear to conceive of Jesus as “God’s Son” in the sense that he imitates or follows the example of God in doing works of righteousness (‘YHWH our God is righteous in all the works that he has done’ Dan. 9:14; ‘I tell you the truth, the Son...does only what he sees the Father doing. Whatever the Father does, the Son also does.’ Jn. 5:19 NLT). Jesus’ authentic sonship likewise seems to be intimately tied to his full faithfulness to God’s commandments (Believers are likewise commanded to be ‘imitators of God’ Eph. 5:1).

The confrontation between Jesus and his Jewish persecutors in Jn. 8 clearly demonstrates the principle that “sonship” often carries the connotation of, essentially, “one-who-follows-the-example-of-one-who-preceded-them.”

During this dispute, when the hostile Jews proudly claimed Abraham as their Father, Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham’s children [Gk. tekna], you would be doing the works Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do this” (Jn. 8:39-40, emphasis added). Then Jesus told them: “You are doing the works your father did.” They said to him, “We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father, God.” And Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and am here. I did not come on my own, but he sent me...You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires...” (Jn. 8:39-44).

In other words, this particular group of Jews proved themselves to be the children of the devil rather than Abraham because they followed the example of the former rather than the latter. According to Jesus they could not be the true children of God because they did not love the one who came from God. Unlike the children of the devil who do not practice love or righteousness, Jesus is truly God’s unique Son in the sense that he obeys and loves God completely (‘he committed no sin’ 1Pet. 2:22; Heb. 4:15; 7:26; 2Cor. 5:21; 1Jn. 3:5; 1Pet. 2:22), and God’s blessing and seal of approval are therefore upon him.
...and behold a voice from heaven said, ‘this is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased’ (Matt. 3:17).

The one who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him (Jn. 8:29).

...just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love (Jn. 15:10).

If you know that [God] is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him (1Jn 2:29).

By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother (1Jn. 3:10).

In Jn. 8 Jesus also describes the devil as “the father of lies.” Clearly, the devil is the “father of lies” because he is the originator, or begetter, of the lie, i.e., the one who first brought the lie into existence. The NT calls God “the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,” and Jesus Christ is fittingly described as one “who was born of God” (1Jn. 5:18) and as God’s “firstborn” (Heb. 1:6; Col. 1:15). In the absence of any articulation to the contrary,—either on the part of Jesus or his apostles—what reason would those in the first century who heard Jesus proclaimed as God’s Son have had to interpret any of this language to mean that Jesus was, somehow, a “son” who was as old as his eternal (beginningless) Father?

That Jesus is portrayed in the NT as having derived the life he has from the Father who begat him seems to be integral to the authenticity of his sonship before God as well. Do not the very terms “Father” and “Son” in connection with God and Jesus imply that the Father is senior to, and life-giver of, the Son who was “born of him”? As God’s genuine “Son,” Jesus himself revealed that the life he had within himself was “given” or “granted” to him by his Father and that he lives “because” of the Father (Jn. 5:26; 6:57). On the other hand, nowhere in the NT accounts did Jesus teach that the life he possessed as God’s Son was without beginning or that he was “self-existent” as the biblical God, “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,” presumably is.

The authentic nature of Jesus’ sonship also appears to be closely connected to the resurrection. In Rom. 1:3-4 Paul says of God’s Son:

He was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead…

It is not that this was the first or only time Jesus was identified as Son of God, since he was identified as God’s Son prior to the resurrection.
While Jesus was a descendant of David physically, and therefore David’s son (Mk. 12:37), according to the “spirit of holiness,” the resurrection itself gave powerful confirmation (‘declared Son of God in power’) of the truth that Jesus was who he and the NT writers purported him to be from the beginning. It was by means of the glorious resurrection that Jesus was “appointed” (NIV) “declared” (ESV) “distinguished” (Rotherham), “shown to be” (NLT) “distinctly set forth” (Diaglott), “patently marked out” (PME) as God’s Son. In other words, it is not simply that Jesus was declared/appointed Son of God in the resurrection, but declared/appointed Son of God in power by means of the resurrection. Evidently this means that the resurrection—on top of all else—powerfully vindicated him before the world as God’s true Son.

John 5:18: “he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God…”

The defenders of evangelical orthodoxy have often treated Jn. 5:18 as if it were the preeminent NT text that defines “Son of God” as “one-who-is-equal-to-God.” In this account the religious leaders began to persecute Jesus because he had healed a sick man on the Sabbath day:

But Jesus answered them, ‘My Father is working until now, and I am working.’ This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God. So Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise (Jn. 5:16-19).

The oft-repeated evangelical claim that “Son of God” is defined by this account as “one-who-is-equal-with-God” is problematic for several reasons. First, it is not entirely clear if the statement “making-himself-equal-with-God” represents John’s viewpoint (i.e., that it was true that Jesus was making himself ‘equal with God’), or if it represented the erroneous viewpoint of the Jews who were falsely accusing Jesus. In favor of the latter view is the point that Jesus was in fact, from the NT perspective, not violating the Sabbath, since, according to Jesus elsewhere, “the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath,” and that it was, in fact, “lawful to do good on the Sabbath (Matt. 12:10-12).

In other words, in this interpretation, if the Jewish accusation of Sabbath breaking was in error, then the Jews were likewise in error to think that “calling God his own Father” was some kind of claim to equality with God; and Jesus’ response “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing
...on his own...” was, essentially, Jesus’ way of countering the accusation and disavowing any claim to equality. Catholic John L. McKenzie made the same basic point:

Much of the discourse seems to be a refutation of the charge that Jesus claimed to be equal with God (v. 18). This is met by affirming that the Son can do nothing independently of the Father. Later theology found it necessary to refine this statement by distinction between person and nature which John did not know.94

Catholic Bible scholar J.C. Fenton made a similar observation in his commentary: “...making himself equal with God: this is what the Jews wrongly supposed, not what John believes, as the speech follows shows. ‘Truly, truly: …the Son can do nothing of his own accord: i.e., the Son is not ‘equal with God’ in the sense that he can act independently; all initiative is with the Father, and the Son is wholly his imitator.’”95

John chapter 5 has Jesus repeatedly emphasizing the point that he could do “nothing” of himself (Jn. 5:19, 30). This does not sound consistent with a claim on Jesus’ part to be equal with God but more like an affirmation of his dependence on one who is greater than he is.96 Thus, the traditional evangelical claim is at odds with Jesus’ own explicit statement that the Father is greater than himself (Jn. 14:28), as it gives more weight to a debatable reference regarding “equality with God” than to Jesus’ own direct teaching that one person (the Father) is “greater” than the other person (the Son).

Another possible way of interpreting the text is that in fact Jesus was putting himself on a level of equality with God. By calling God his “own Father” in such an unprecedented and seemingly exclusive sense, he seemed to the Jews to be putting himself on such a level of intimacy and familiarity with God that they found such language scandalous to the point that they sought to kill him (in other words, the implication seems to have been that God was *his* Father and not *theirs*97). And Jesus’ emphasis that the Son can do “nothing on his own” makes the point that the equality he did have with God as God’s Son was derived from, or based on, his

95 *The New Clarendon Bible (New Testament), The Gospel According to John, With Introduction and Commentary* (Durham: Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 71. Marriane Thompson makes the same basic point: “the charge that Jesus makes himself ‘equal to God’ is countered by showing that the Son does all that he does through his dependence on the Father (5:19). Hence, the Son is not independent of, but rather dependent on, the Father in all things. The Father has *authorized* the Son precisely to exercise divine activities and prerogatives, including the giving of life, passing judgment, and working on the Sabbath.” — *The God of the Gospel of John*, p. 234 (emphasis added).
96 In either interpretation, there is still a difference between making oneself “equal with God” and making oneself God. Logically, if one is “equal with God,” one is not “God” but one who is “equal with God,” however “equality” is interpreted. Equality with someone or something is not the same as identity with someone or something.
97 Compare Jn. 8:42-56.
imitation of God in continuing to perform good works, or on the authority God gave to him. Craig Blomberg’s comments are also helpful:

With Darrell Brock (1998: 25), we may need to add that it was not merely because Jesus ‘dared to make a messianic claim,’ when he needed to be silent, but because his messianic claim was perceived for clear reasons to be false and risky (cf. Sanh. 11.5). But this is still a kind of equality with God that stops well short of the later Christian reflection about the second person of the Trinity, which did clearly transcend the boundaries of Jewish monotheism...The overall emphasis in the text [John 5:19-30] is on Christ’s subordination to his Father (see esp. Keener 1999), rather than on the equality with God that became the preoccupation of early Christianity in general and of patristic exegesis of this passage in particular... 98

On the back cover of How Jesus Became God Ehrman says:

At the heart of the Christian faith is a spectacular claim: Jesus of Nazareth was, and is, God. But this is not what the original disciples believed during Jesus’s lifetime—and it is not what Jesus claimed about himself.

If Ehrman is correct that the claim that Jesus of Nazareth is God was not the original belief of Jesus’ disciples, then the statement should be re-worded:

At the heart of the Christian faith is the spectacular claim: Jesus of Nazareth was, and is, ‘the Christ, the Son of the living God’ (Matt. 16:13).

Ehrman was entirely correct in his summation of the Christian faith when he said: “Christianity, a newcomer on the religious scene” was a faith that “insisted that there was only one God and that Jesus was his Son.” 99 Ehrman also rightly says: “Jesus was THE Son of God. This was not a low, inferior understanding of Christ it was an amazing, breathtaking view.” 100 And he also points out:

...as the Son of God he was the heir to all that was God’s. He was also the Son of Man, the one whom God had entrusted to be the future judge of the entire world. He was the heavenly messiah who was ruling—now—over the kingdom of his Father, the King of kings. And in that capacity as the heavenly ruler, he was the Lord, the master and sovereign over all the earth. 101

This is precisely how Jesus is depicted by the writers of the NT. Jesus is called God’s Son in Scripture because he “stands in a uniquely close relationship with God and as such is the object of his love and special

100 Ehrman, How Jesus Became God, p. 232 (emphasis added).
101 Ehrman, How Jesus Became God, p. 234.
favor,” and it is through the Messiah “that God mediates his will on earth.” Only, unlike Israel as a whole, the Messiah was entirely faithful as a Son before God. Bird similarly says:

The Johannine Evangelist interprets the Jesus tradition in a specific theological trajectory, but he shares with the other Evangelists a conception of Jesus as the Messiah and one-of-kind Son of God, in whom God is definitively revealed.102

As far as the NT language is concerned, this is exactly right. But Bird goes on to say:

Christians spent the best part of four hundred years trying to find the best language, imagery, categories, and scriptural texts to answer Jesus’ question to his disciples: ‘Who do you say that I am?’ When the dust finally settled, the church’s final verdict was that Jesus was ‘God from God, Light from Light, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father,’ as stated in the Nicene Creed.103

This may be one of the most remarkable statements made in How God Became Jesus. The “Christians” spent centuries trying to find the best language, imagery and categories to answer Jesus’ question? Unfortunately the Christians Bird has in mind evidently overlooked the point that the NT already answered the question with clarity: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” followed by Jesus’ approval: “Blessed are you Simon, son of Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven” (Matt. 16:13-17; Compare Jn. 20:31; 3:16; 1Jn. 4:15; 5:1-5).

Here, Peter—based on the Father’s own revelation to him—identified Jesus as “the Christ” (the one who was anointed by God) and as the “Son of the living God.” What else would Peter’s confession mean but that there is a “living God” and that Jesus is “the Son of” that “living God”? What is unclear or ambiguous about such language? If Jesus was already presented as “the Christ” and “Son of God” in the NT, why was there a need for “the church” to go beyond Peter’s confession? Why did “the church” reach a “verdict” not present in the Father’s own revelation?

1 Corinthians 8:6, Richard Bauckham and “Divine Identity”

The authors of How God Became Jesus have adopted Richard Bauckham’s influential characterization of Jesus being “included” in the so-called “unique divine identity” of God. The widespread endorsement of this

102 How God Became Jesus, p. 70.
103 How God Became Jesus, p. 46.
language appears to be based, at least in part, on the distinct realization that the traditional creedal concepts of Jesus as “of-one-substance” (Gk. *homousios*) with the Father, or of Jesus being a member of a Triune being, etc., were not consciously held by the NT authors or articulated in their writings. In doing so many NT interpreters have distanced themselves to a degree from the notion that the *homousios* concept is actually present in the NT while nevertheless affirming—in a kind of ‘round about’ way—the traditional creeds that teach it. In their view, since the NT includes Jesus within “the divine identity,” the so-called “high christology” of “orthodox Christianity” stands vindicated while, simultaneously, giving themselves and others the impression that they are not superimposing post-biblical concepts onto the NT text. In the book *God Crucified*, Bauckham says:

> When we think in terms of divine identity, rather than divine essence or nature, which are not the primary categories for Jewish theology, we can see that the so-called divine functions which Jesus exercises are intrinsic to who God is.\(^\text{104}\)

Chris Tilling endorses the argument also made popular by Bauckham regarding the creed (statement of faith) presented by Paul in 1Cor. 8:6.

Regarding the question of whether or not it was permissible for a Christian to eat food sacrificed to an idol, Paul said, “we know that ‘an idol has no real existence,’ and that ‘there is no God but one’”—followed by:

> For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords’—for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

Echoing the interpretation proposed by Bauckham, Chris Tilling says:

> …in 1 Cor 8:6, the Deuteronomic ‘Lord’ (*kyrios*) is, for Paul, the risen Lord. For many, this verse is a clincher, showcasing a ‘christological monotheism,’ *including* Christ in the *Shema*. All the Greek words of the *Shema* in the Greek translation of the Bible used by the earliest Christians are repeated by Paul in 8:6. The ‘God’ and ‘Lord’ of the Shema, which both identify the one God of Israel, are now split between ‘God’ the Father and the ‘Lord’ Jesus Christ.\(^\text{105}\)

> Unfortunately, the claims that (1) Paul included Christ in the *shema* (Deut. 6:4), that (2) all the words of the *shema* in the Greek are repeated in 1Cor. 8:6, and that (3) “God” and “Lord” are “split” between the Father and Jesus are, demonstrably, wrong and ill conceived.

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First, in 1Cor. 8:6, Paul did not quote the *shema* (‘Hear O Israel, the Lord [Heb. YHWH] our God, the Lord [Heb. YHWH] is one’) or make any clear reference to it; so, exegetically, it is not clear why Tilling, or Bauckham, would claim with such certainty that Paul “included” Christ within it. Perhaps it is possible that Paul alluded to the *shema* when he said “there is no God but one” in vs. 4 since both Deut. 6:4 and 1Cor. 8:4 use the word “one” and obviously refer to the same “God.” They are still, nevertheless, two distinct statements (‘the Lord [YHWH] is one’ vs ‘there is no God but one’).

Contrary to Tilling, “all the Greek words” in the Greek version of the *shema* are not repeated in 1Cor. 8:6. Paul neither prefaces his statement about God with “Hear O Israel,” nor does Paul repeat the key expression, “the Lord is one.” Three key words (‘Lord [kurios],’ ‘God [theos],’ and ‘one [heis]’) do appear in both texts (Deut. 6:4 and 1Cor. 8:6), but the word order, syntactical structure, and resulting meanings are distinct.

This is not difficult to see. The *shema* says, “the Lord [YHWH] our God, the Lord is one.” Paul says, “there is one God, the Father...and one Lord, Jesus Christ.” Moreover, the word “Lord” (Gk. *kurios*) in the Greek version is representative of the divine name (YHWH) that appears in the Hebrew text, which does not appear and is not represented by any term in 1Cor. 8:6.

The claim that Paul somehow “splits” the *shema* between ‘God’ the Father and the ‘Lord’ Jesus Christ is equally strange and erroneous. Paul identifies the “one God” (i.e., the God of the *shema*) as “the Father” (not as ‘the Father and Jesus’). Somehow Bauckham, Tilling and those who have endorsed this view fail to recognize that when Paul goes on to speak about the “one Lord, Jesus Christ,” he is not longer talking about the “one God,” but a figure distinct from the “one God.”

We know that, in fact, Paul’s creed was based on a contrast between the numerous gods and lords of the surrounding world and the faith of the Christian community. Though the world may have “many gods” and “many lords,” Christians recognize only “one” from each category. For Paul, and for the Christian community, the “one God” was “the Father” (Paul did not identify the one God as ‘Father and Son’). If we assume Paul agreed with his fellow apostles, then he recognized Jesus Christ as his “one Lord” based on the fact that the same “one God” of 1Cor. 8:6 exalted Jesus and endowed him with the Lordship he came to exercise over Paul and the community of believers. In the words of Peter, Jesus is “Lord” because the same one God “has made him both Lord and Messiah” (Acts 2:36).
contrast, the “Deuteronomic Lord” of the shema was not made “Lord,” or
granted his exalted status by another, as Jesus was.

Clearly, Paul’s creandal statement in 1Cor. 8:6 presents the same
basic picture as—even the fulfillment of—Ps. 110:1, where “YHWH” (i.e.,
Paul’s ‘one God’) tells David’s “Lord” (i.e., Paul’s ‘one Lord’) to sit at his
“right hand.” David’s Psalm portrays David’s “Lord” explicitly as a distinct
figure from “YHWH,” just as clearly as Paul’s creed portrays the “one Lord,
Jesus Christ” as a distinct figure from the “one God” he is paired with. In
reference to Ps. 110:1, Ehrman was right for pointing out what is really
basic:

There is not a question of identity or absolute parity here—the king, sitting
at God’s right hand—is not God Almighty himself. That is clear from what
is said next: God will conquer the king’s enemies for him and put them
under his feet. But he is doing to so for one whom he has exalted up to the
level of his own throne.106

In another place Bauckham makes the following claim in reference to
1Cor. 8:6:

The addition of a unique Lord to the unique God of the Shema would flatly
contradict the uniqueness of the latter.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Biblically, God is uniquely
“Lord” in the supreme sense of the word. For another figure to possess
“Lordship,” even unique Lordship (‘one Lord, Jesus Christ’), neither
threatens nor contradicts God’s uniqueness or supremacy, particularly
when it was God himself who—in his sovereignty as God—willingly and
gladly gave Jesus the Lordship he came to possess. Though the Father is
unqualifiedly Lord (Heb. adonai), he is in fact not the “one Lord” of 1Cor.
8:6 because, again, the Father is not “Lord” in the sense that he was “made
Lord,” or given authority to rule, by a figure who is “greater” than himself, as
Jesus clearly was (Acts 2:36; Matt. 11:27; 28:18; Jn. 3:35; 14:28).

In another place Bauckham implies a distinction between angelic
intermediaries and Christ to support his “divine identity” argument:

...angels are invariably portrayed as servants whose role is simply to carry
out the will of God in total obedience. They do not share his rule; they
serve. While God sits on his throne, the angels, even the greatest, stand,
in the posture of servants, awaiting his command to serve.107

But even Jesus himself takes the posture of a servant, as Bauckham
must surely realize. He is specifically described as a “servant” of God in

106 Ehrman, How Jesus Became God, p. 78.
107 Bauckham, God Crucified, p. 12.
Scripture, as one who took the form of a “slave” (even washed his disciples’ feet) and as one who “came not to serve but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many.” Jesus is also portrayed, emphatically, as one whose role was to “carry out the will of God in total obedience” (‘I have come down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me’; ‘obedient to the point of death,’ etc.). Büscher Scripturally it is because of his servanthood and obedience to God that Jesus attains his authority and glorified status as a fitting gift from the God who “greatly exalted him.” On Jesus’ Lordship in 1Cor. 8:6, Andrew Perriman perceptively pointed out:

when Paul says that ‘for us there is… one Lord, Jesus Christ’, he is not saying that Jesus is the ‘LORD’ in the Shema, that Jesus is YHWH. He is saying that Jesus has been given an authority—or a name—above that of all the other ‘lords’ that hold sway in the Greek-Roman world. He does not have this authority as YHWH. He has received it from YHWH.

But Bauckham also says:

I shall argue that high Christology was possible within a Jewish monotheistic context, not by applying to Jesus a Jewish category of semi-divine intermediary status, but by identifying Jesus directly with the one God of Israel, including Jesus in the unique identity of this one God.

Remarkably, this is precisely what Paul does not do in 1Cor. 8:6. Bauckham argues as if Paul had actually said something like:

“…to us there is one God, the Father and Jesus Christ”

Paul said nothing like this, of course. The only person Paul “includes” in the “unique identity of this one God” is, of course, “the Father.” Bauckham also claims:

Paul has rearranged the words in such a way as to produce an affirmation of both one God, the Father, and one Lord, Jesus Christ. It should be quite clear that Paul is including the Lord Jesus Christ in the unique divine identity. He is redefining monotheism as Christological monotheism. If he were understood as adding the one Lord to the one God of whom the Shema speaks, then, from the perspective of Jewish monotheism, he would certainly be producing not Christological monotheism but outright ditheism.

If by “unique divine identity” Bauckham means the “unique divine identity” of the “one God,” he is wrong, for Paul does not include Jesus in

108 Compare Acts 2:36; Is. 52:13; Jn. 6:38; 13:5; Mk. 10:45; Phil. 2:6-8; Rom. 5:19; Phil. 2:8-10.
109 Perriman, Is the Shema really so important for understanding “one God…one Lord” in 1 Corinthians 8:6? http://www.postost.net/
110 Bauckham, God Crucified, p. 4.
111 Bauckham, God Crucified, p. 38.
the “identity” or category of the “one God.” Instead Paul calls the “one God” the “Father” and portrays the “one Lord, Jesus” as a distinct figure from the one God. Paul is neither producing “Christological monotheism” (whatever that means) nor “ditheism” (belief in two Gods) because Paul nowhere speaks of the Lord Jesus as the one God nor does he speak of two Gods but one, the Father.

In the preface to *God Crucified* where he claims that the early Christians unambiguously included Jesus in the “unique identity of the one God of Israel,” Bauckham says:

> They did so by including Jesus in the unique, defining characteristics by which Jewish monotheism identified God as unique.\(^{112}\)

But did not one of the characteristics which “Jewish monotheism identified God as unique” involve the point that there was no God above him (Ps. 83:18) and, likewise, that “God is not a man…nor a son of man” (Num. 23:19)? Jesus, on the other hand, is depicted by the NT writers as both “a man” and one that obeys and worships the Most High as *his* God. In Bauckham’s view, does “Jewish Monotheism” allow the God of the *shema* to have a God above him whom he worships as his God, as the Lord Jesus does?

Strangely, Bauckham and those who agree with him think that Paul’s references to “one God” and “one Lord” are essentially synonymous or equivalent yet they are demonstrably not.\(^{113}\) That they are not is demonstrated decisively by the fact that the Father is elsewhere described by Paul as “the God of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The “Lord” of 1Cor. 8:6 is not part of the “divine identity” of the “one God” in the strict sense because the one God is unambiguously the God of Paul’s “one Lord” (Eph. 1:17; Compare Eph. 1:3; Rom. 15:6; 2 Cor. 1:3; 11:31; 1 Pet. 1:3). As James Dunn observed:

> Equally striking is the repeated formula in the Pauline letters in which God is spoken of as ‘the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.’ The striking feature is that Paul speaks of God not simply as the God of Christ, but as ‘the God…of our Lord Jesus Christ.’ Even as Lord, Jesus acknowledges his Father as his God. Here it becomes plain that *kyrios* [‘Lord’] is not so much a way of identifying Jesus with God, but if anything more a way of distinguishing Jesus from God.\(^{114}\)

Yet Bauckham dogmatically claims:

\(^{112}\) Bauckham, *God Crucified*, p. viii  
The only possible way to understand Paul as maintaining monotheism is to understand him to be including Jesus in the unique identity of the one God affirmed in the Shema... (emphasis added)

Perplexingly, Bauckham and those who follow his lead have tried to merge the Father and Jesus into the same category or identity as the “one God”—exactly what Paul does not do! To simply read the text is to expose the claim as baseless. Bauckham even goes as far as to claim:

Paul is not adding to the one God of the Shema a ‘Lord’ the Shema does not mention. He is identifying Jesus as the ‘Lord’ whom the Shema affirms to be one. Thus, in Paul’s quite unprecedented reformulation of the Shema, the unique identity of the one god consists of the one God, the Father, and the one Lord, his Messiah.115

In order for Paul to have “reformulated” the shema he would have had to quote at least part of it or make some clear reference to it. Paul’s teaching here is certainly like the shema in that it is a definitive creedal statement for God’s people. But instead of Paul’s creed identifying the one God as the Father and Son, it reminds believers to recognize one God, who is “the Father,” and to recognize Jesus the Messiah as the “one Lord” whom we know from Paul elsewhere is the one who has been exalted by the one God and granted Lordship over all, with the sole and obvious exception of God himself (Acts. 2:36; 10:36; 1Cor. 15:27).

Even if it is agreed or established that Paul had indeed invoked the shema at this point, he still did not identify Jesus as the God of the shema but as the very same “Lord” who sits at the right hand of the one God, YHWH, in Ps. 110:1, the same Lord who was “made Lord and Messiah” by that same God. But Bauckham says:

When New Testament Christology is read with this Jewish theological context in mind, it becomes clear that, from the earliest post-Easter beginnings of Christology onwards, early Christians included Jesus, precisely and unambiguously, within the unique identity of the one God of Israel.116

Unfortunately, for Bauckham’s view, “from the very beginning” that is exactly what the early Christians consistently did not do. Paul’s precise and unambiguous distinction between the “one God, the Father” and the “one Lord, Jesus Christ” in 1Cor. 8:6 is not the only instance where the distinction of identity is apparent. The precise, unambiguous distinction

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116 Bauckham, God Crucified, Preface.
between Jesus and God, even Jesus and the “one/only true God,” is apparent all throughout the NT writings:

This is eternal life, their knowing you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent (Jn. 17:3).

…to us there is one God, the Father…and one Lord, Jesus Christ...

(1Cor. 8:6).

I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God (1Cor. 11:13).

…you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus (1Thess. 1:9-10; Tilling observes that our ‘earliest surviving writing is probably 1 Thessalonians’, How God Became Jesus, p. 130).

For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus (1Tim. 2:5).

The God who made the world and everything in it…has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:22-31).

In light of the traditional “orthodox” claims regarding the nature of God, one wonders, why do all the relevant texts present the one God as the Father exclusively and never as the so-called “triune God”? And if Jesus is in fact “God” (as in the Most High God), why do the most solemn and central-to-the-faith biblical creeds (or creed-like statements) consistently portray the man Jesus as a distinct figure from the “one God”?

For example, in the Pauline creed of 1 Tim. 2:5—where the “one mediator” Jesus is distinguished from the “one God”—Paul even emphasizes the point in connection with the creed that God “desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” He further calls this creed “the testimony given at the proper time” and says that it was for this very reason he “was appointed a preacher and apostle.” Paul even goes further to assure his readers: “I am telling the truth, I am not lying,” i.e., he is not lying about his teaching that there is “one God” (clearly ‘the Father’ in this case) and “one mediator between” the “one God” and men, “the man Christ Jesus.”

In speaking so purposefully regarding “the knowledge of the truth” in association with God’s desire for men “to be saved,” why does Paul neglect to depict Jesus as “God” (or the ‘God-man’) or portray the “one God” as the “Triune” one of the classical creeds? Why does Paul instead call Jesus “a man” and speak of the “one God” as a distinct figure from him? Why does
Jesus (and the biblical writers in general) so consistently portray “God” as someone other than himself? The authors of the NT not only do so explicitly but, to use Bauckham’s words, they do so “carefully, deliberately, consistently and comprehensively.” Multitudes of examples could be cited. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says to the murderous religious leaders:

…now you are seeking to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God (Jn. 8:40).

What about Jesus’ words to the Jews would have given them or anyone else the impression that Jesus was claiming to be “God”? Here Jesus portrays himself not only as “a man” but as a man who spoke the truth that he “heard from God,” not as God himself. In the same account:

Jesus said to them, ‘If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and am here; I did not come on my own, but he sent me (Jn. 8:40-42).

In this instance, Jesus did not say to the Jews, “If God were your Father, you would love me, because I am God,” or the like. Jesus indicated, rather, that the children of God would love him because he “came from God,” and even emphasizes the point that he did not come on his own but was “sent” by God. Immediately after Jesus asks his hostile audience: “Why do you not understand what I say?” Perhaps the same question could be posed to the modern defenders of orthodoxy. As the NIV puts it: “Why is my language not clear to you?” (Jn. 8:43). In the same account:

Jesus answered, ‘If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, ‘He is our God’ (Jn. 8:54).

Here Jesus does not identify himself as the God the Jews professed to worship. He indicates, rather, that the one they claimed as their God (i.e., YHWH, the God of Israel) was his Father. Later, in Jn. 14, Jesus tells his disciples:

Believe in God; believe also in me (Jn. 14:10).

If Jesus wanted his disciples to believe that he was “God,” why does he always portray “God” as someone other than himself? Why does Jesus portray himself as an object of faith in addition to “God”?

The proclamations of the apostles in the book of Acts are no different. In a speech delivered to a crowd of fellow Israelites, Peter said:

Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through

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117 Bauckham, God Crucified, p. 45.
him in your midst, as you yourselves know—this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. But God raised him up again… (Acts 2:22-24).

What would Peter’s original Israelite audience have understood Peter to have meant? That Jesus was God? Or, that Jesus was “a man attested” to them “by God” with works that “God did through him,” and as the one whom “God” had “raised up”? In the same account Peter when on to say:

God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit… (Acts 2:32-33)

Again, addressing a crowd of fellow Israelites, Peter similarly proclaimed:

The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus…and you killed the prince of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses (Acts 3:13-15).

What about Peter’s words would have led the Jews to believe that Jesus was the God of their fathers? How would portraying Jesus as the “servant” of the God of their fathers whom God raised from the dead have served to convince them that he was that very same God? Peter similarly declared to the Sanhedrin (the Jewish Supreme Court):

The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. He is the one God exalted to his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins (Acts 5:30).

Why is the articulation of the point that Jesus was the God of the Jewish forefathers absent from Peter’s proclamation, if that is what Peter allegedly believed? Likewise, in Acts 10, Peter said to Cornelius:

God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him [Gk. ho theos en met autou] (Acts 10:38).

How could Peter have hoped to convince his Gentile audience that Jesus was God by speaking of Jesus as a figure whom God anointed and as a man who did good based on God being “with him”? The disciple Steven used the same kind of language of Joseph: “And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him [Gk. ho theos met autou]” (Acts 7:9, emphasis added).

To the uninitiated it might seem puzzling that so many would conclude that Jesus is “God” when Scripture so clearly and consistently portrays “God” (even the ‘the only true God’) and “Jesus” as distinct figures.
The rationale is essentially as follows: Whenever the NT writers portray “God” and “Jesus” as two distinct figures, the word “God” becomes, for the defenders of orthodoxy, a kind of theological code word for “Father, the first person of the Godhead” or “first member of the Trinity.”

Because Trinitarian theology accepts—in fact requires—a distinction between the “Father” and “Son” as “persons” (though they are numerically thought to be the same ‘God’), the biblical distinction between “God” and “Jesus” is not perceived as problematic as long as “God” and “Jesus” are defined or interpreted in a “Trinitarian” (or ‘Binitarian’) sense. In other words, for Trinitarians, “God” no longer means “God” (or the ‘one God’) in a way that one would ordinarily think, but, in effect, “God the first person of the Trinity.” The problem of course is that there is, utterly, no reason to believe that Jesus or his apostles had any such concept in mind when they spoke of “God” as a distinct figure from “Jesus” or vice-versa. Nor is there any reason to believe that their primarily Jewish listeners, or the first century readers of the NT documents, would have understood them to mean anything like that. On the other hand, there is overwhelming evidence that “God” would have been understood as a reference to the being they knew as the “one God” of Israel, not one “person” who “shares” the “being” of the “one God” with other “persons”—a concept that emerged centuries later.

When Peter, for example, told his fellow Israelites that “the God” of their fathers glorified his servant Jesus, they would have had no cause for thinking that “God” in this case was a reference to a “person of the Godhead” or that the Jesus Peter preached was a “person” of that God or a figure who somehow “shared the identity” of God. Such concepts would have simply been absent, utterly foreign, to their thinking, and nothing Peter said would have moved them to think otherwise. There is no evidence that “the God of our fathers” would have meant anything other than “the God of our fathers,” and that “Jesus” was none other than the “servant” of that same God whom God had “glorified.”

Many evangelical apologists have wrongly thought that calling attention to the reoccurring biblical distinction between “God” and “Jesus” constitutes some kind of futile attempt to demonstrate that Jesus is not the Father (a point that Trinitarianism itself requires). Nothing, again, could be further from the truth. The calling of attention to this particular point is not based on a misunderstanding of Trinitarian theology but, rather, on the understanding that, historically and exegetically, “God” in these instances is nothing but a reference to the “one God” of Israel—a figure Jesus is clearly united with yet plainly distinguished from throughout the biblical writings.
Thus such a basic point as this is based on nothing more than a recognition of what the terms would have meant to those who first uttered them and how those same terms would have been understood by their original, first-century audience.

What reason, then, is there for not allowing the NT distinction between “God” and “Jesus” to carry its original and most natural force (what it would have meant or implied to those who first heard it)? In this respect it seems to come down to a matter of how one defines the term “God”—either biblically, or post-biblically.

The “divine identity” language made popular by Bauckham is really ambiguous anyway. In the NT Jesus is certainly “bound up”\textsuperscript{118} with the identity of the one God but who thought otherwise? As God’s Son Jesus belongs to God and is the exact representation of God, so much that to “see” him is to “see” the God who sent him (1Cor. 3:23; Heb. 1:3; Jn. 14:9). The one God, from the NT perspective, is none other than “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” That is how, in the minds of the apostles, God was to be known and identified, i.e., always in association with the Son he sent forth as the “way” to him (Jn. 14:6); and in these ways it seems entirely appropriate to associate Jesus with God’s “identity.” But Jesus is clearly not part of the “unique divine identity” of God if by that we mean that he is the “one God” literally. In the NT that status belongs to “the God of our Lord Jesus Christ,” exclusively.

Biblically it might even be said that God’s servants are “bound up” with God’s identity as well:

Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads (Rev. 14:1).

They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads (Rev. 22:4).

According to the symbolic picture presented in John’s Apocalypse, God’s servants (the blameless ones who had been redeemed from the earth) bear the very name of God on their foreheads. Are they therefore part of the “divine identity”? Having God’s name (the very symbol or signature of God’s person/identity) on their foreheads appears to function as a sign of God’s ownership of, and protection over, them. Being “bound up” or connected with the “divine identity” in this way, however, does not

\textsuperscript{118} Bird claims: “the early church developed a uniquely cast Christological monotheism whereby the person of Jesus was \textit{bound up} with the identity of the God of Israel.” —How God Became Jesus, p. 202 (emphasis added).
make them literally God. God even says of Israel’s guardian angel: “my name is in him” without making the angel God himself.

If Jesus himself bears the signature of God’s identity, the very name of God (one viable way of interpreting Phil. 2:9), he does so from the NT perspective not “ontologically” as “the second person of the Trinity” but by inheritance as God’s faithful and beloved Son (Compare Jn. 5:43; 17:11; Heb. 1:4).

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