

Was Jesus divine? Publisher hedges bets with Bart Ehrman's new book

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(RNS) Set side by side, the book jackets look almost like matching woodblock prints of a bearded, haloed figure. The titles mirror each other, too, featuring the same trio of names: Jesus, God, Bart Ehrman.

On one of the volumes, *How Jesus Became God*, Ehrman is clearly the author; but in the reversed *How God Became Jesus*, Ehrman is the nemesis of a concerted rebuttal.

So what gives?

The two books are an unusual publishing experiment, in which HarperCollins arranged to have a team of evangelical scholars write a counterargument to its hot-selling superstar writer. Ehrman and the evangelical team exchanged manuscripts and signed nondisclosure agreements so as not to pre-empt each other, but otherwise worked independently for their own HarperCollins subsidiaries, HarperOne and Zondervan.

"I've never heard of anything quite like this," said one of the evangelical authors, Craig Evans, a New Testament scholar at Acadia Divinity College in Nova Scotia. "The usual scenario is that a dubious or extreme book comes out, then a 'correction' appears one to two years later."

The collaboration speaks to Ehrman's marquee attraction—his last five books for HarperOne have sold a combined 750,000 copies—and to the expectation that his newest title will receive widespread attention. Ehrman is a former Christian fundamentalist who spurned his faith and has devoted his academic career to debunking long-held assumptions of traditional Christian belief, making him a

persona non grata for some Christians and an object of fascination for others.

“His standing is such that, whether you agree with him or not, you have to come to terms with his scholarship,” said Roger Freet, executive editor of HarperOne. “This book in particular goes to the most fundamental question of the Christian faith.”

Ehrman makes the provocative assertion that Jesus did not consider himself divine but was deified by his followers, and that early believers scattered clues about their all-too-human mythmaking throughout the New Testament.

Ehrman sets out to pinpoint when the process of deification took place in different Christian communities. He contends that early Christians had conflicting views of Jesus’ divinity, none of which would pass the exacting salvation standard of the Middle Ages.

“I’ve never, ever written a book that, in my opinion, is as important as this one, since the historical issues are of immense, almost incalculable importance,” Ehrman said. “The assertion that Jesus is God is arguably the single most important development in Western civilization.”

Word of the book’s imminent publication has already mobilized evangelical bloggers and commentators. Even before Ehrman’s book was issued Tuesday (March 25), Texas minister Mike Robinson rushed out his own, unauthorized counterattack: *How Jesus Became God in the Flesh: The Proper Exaltation of a Jewish Prophet from Nazareth; Bart Ehrman Refuted*.

Ehrman, a New Testament professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, said *How Jesus Became God* is unlike any other book he’s written for a lay audience. In his other nonscholarly books, Ehrman repackaged the academic research of other scholars in an accessible format.

But while working on this book, Ehrman arrived at a dramatic about-face on fundamental issues relating to the Christian religion. Ehrman had previously assumed that the deification of Jesus did not take place until some six decades after his crucifixion, around the years 90 or 95.

Ehrman now acknowledges that Jesus’ followers—the inner circle who knew him personally—came to believe he was divine almost immediately after they became convinced of his resurrection, a historical revision that moves up the timeline by

several generations.

“This wasn’t just a kind of mind game, trying to figure out ideas of theology—it had much broader implications,” Ehrman said. “Among other things, it affected not only their worship but also their civic lives, since they were insisting that it was Jesus, not the Roman emperor, who was the Son of God. This did not put them in good stead with their pagan friends, families and neighbors, not to mention the ruling authorities.”

Consequently, Ehrman had to reassess his understanding of the Gospel authors and now acknowledges they, too, considered Jesus to be divine. He now thinks the writer of Mark’s Gospel believed God glorified Jesus at his baptism. Meanwhile, the Gospel writers of Matthew and Luke thought Jesus was born divine.

Ehrman sees the Gospel of John, which traces the divine origins of Jesus all the way back to the beginning of creation, as belonging to a category unto itself. In this Gospel, Jesus makes overt and explicit statements about his own divinity.

When it comes to John’s Gospel, Ehrman and some of his evangelical critics agree: The fourth Gospel should be understood as a theological treatise and an imaginative re-enactment, not an eyewitness account containing verbatim quotes.

Perhaps the biggest surprise for Ehrman was that Paul, the earliest New Testament author, had a very exalted view of Jesus, believing that Jesus existed in divine form before he was incarnate as a human being. Ehrman concludes that Paul must have believed Jesus was an angel who became human and afterward was exalted to godhood. “Before that,” Ehrman said, “I couldn’t figure Paul out.”

The evangelical scholars say Ehrman still hasn’t figured Paul out, but they are pleased to know that the professor is making progress.

Ehrman laughs off the suggestion that his views are surreptitiously aligning with the beliefs of his evangelical adversaries. He lauds his five sparring partners as first-rate scholars but points out an unbridgeable chasm: As an agnostic and a scholar, Ehrman remains convinced that Jesus never taught that he was divine, only that he was a messiah; the object of worship for Jesus was always God the Father, not Jesus the Son.

To the quintet of evangelicals, Ehrman is prone to profound confusion, botched readings, and scholarly fictions.

They insist that Jesus' divinity was no mere afterthought but the essence of his message. His divine nature was signaled through miracles, forgiveness of sins, and biblical allusions that point to Jesus exercising the prerogatives of Israel's God and meriting worship, they say.

"Bart clearly fudged the evidence, omitting several relevant pieces of evidence and then misinterpreting other pieces," Evans said. "In short, (we) had the opportunity to set the record straight—at the same time that Bart's book makes its appearance."