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MAKING SENSE OF JESUS

Experiences, interpretations and identities

D.F. TOLMIE
R. VENTER
EDITORS

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SUN PRESS

Making sense of Jesus: Experiences, interpretations and identities

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EDITORIAL BOARD

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Prof. R. Venter

LIST OF CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

Pieter J.J. Botha is a professor in New Testament studies at Unisa, and also the unit leader of New Testament and Early Christian Studies in the Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies. He specialises in New Testament studies, Early Christian studies, disability studies and orality studies.

Pieter G.R. de Villiers is an extraordinary professor at the University of the Free State. His research focus is spiritual hermeneutics, Biblical spirituality and the Book of Revelation.

Dustin W. Ellington is a lecturer in New Testament and Greek at Justo Mwale University in Lusaka, Zambia, and research fellow of the Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of the Free State. His research focuses on 1-2 Corinthians and Christian life, ministry, and mission in the New Testament.

Peter G. Kirchschlaeger is a professor of theological ethics and Director of the Institute of Social Ethics ISE at the Faculty of Theology at the University of Lucerne, Switzerland. He is also a research fellow of the Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of the Free State. His research interest includes the relation between the Bible and theological ethics, human rights ethics, business and finance-ethics.

Peter Nagel is a post-doctorate fellow at the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of the Free State, and chairperson of the Scriptorium Research and Storytelling Centre. His research focus is the theology of the Septuagint and the New Testament.

Peter Lampe is a chaired professor at the University of Heidelberg in Germany and honorary professor at the University of the Free State. His research includes Early Christian studies, especially within the New Testament, as well as early Christian archaeology.

Francois Tolmie is a professor in New Testament studies at the Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of the Free State. His research focuses on the Gospel of John and the Pauline Literature, in particularly the Letters to the Galatians and to Philemon.

Jakub Urbaniak teaches theology at St Augustine College, Johannesburg. He is also a research fellow of the Faculty of Theology and Religion, at the University of the Free State. He is passionate about black theology; in particular its prophetic potential to speak truth to power and articulate voices from the margins, is of particular interest to him.

Jan-Albert van den Berg is a member of the Department of Practical and Missional Theology, at the Faculty of Theology and Religion, at the University of the Free State. Initially, he specialised and published in the field of narrative pastoral care. He is currently busy with further research on the role of social media in articulating the Christian faith.

Henco van der Westhuizen is a lecturer in historical theology at the Faculty of Theology and Religion, at the University of the Free State. His research interests includes the theologies of John Calvin, Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Michael Welker.

Rian Venter teaches systematic theology at the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of the Free State and his research focus is Trinitarian theology, and the transformation discourse for theological education in South Africa.

INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

The ***UFS Theological Explorations*** **Series** is an initiative of the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of the Free State (UFS), situated in Bloemfontein, South Africa. History, both in South Africa and worldwide, has shown that solid academic research is vital for stimulating new insights and new developments, not only in order to achieve academic progress, but also to advance human flourishing. Through this academic series, the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the UFS hopes to make a contribution to worthy causes such as these.

The university wishes the research conducted by its staff to be relevant and innovative within the South African context. In addition, the research should have international impact and visibility and should encourage national and international collaboration. The type of research published in this series is focused on achieving these goals. Accordingly, *UFS Theological Explorations* publishes only research that is of a high academic standard, has been thoroughly peer-reviewed and makes an important academic contribution to fundamental theological issues on both national and international levels. Furthermore, we maintain that good research should not only be aimed at creating significant new academic knowledge but should also be a deliberate attempt to include various and even opposing perspectives. Finally, we believe that it is especially important that research takes into account the social context within which we generate new knowledge.

This series contains both monographs and collected works. In the case of the monographs, one or more researchers work on a particular topic and cover the subject matter extensively. In this way, the monographs make a significant contribution to original research. In the case of the collected works, a group of researchers from various theological disciplines work together on a particular topic. The collected works contribute new insights on the research question from different perspectives and thus advance scholarship collectively.

The Editorial Board trusts that *UFS Theological Explorations* will have a positive and lasting impact on theological agendas all over the world!

Francois Tolmie

Series editor: UFS Theological Explorations, University of the Free State

INTRODUCTION TO VOLUME 2

From Jesus' own question – "Who do people say I am?" – till Bonhoeffer's quest – "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?" – numerous attempts have been made to make sense of the Man from Galilee. The contributions in this volume form part of this never-ending theological journey, and were all generated as part of a joint research project focusing on Christology. This research project, undertaken by researchers, most of whom are affiliated with the University of the Free State, was not aimed at continuing conventional Christology, but rather at examining the interplay between event and interpretation closer. It was based on the conviction that the myriad originating experiences and the resulting effects of this hermeneutical act require continued scrutiny. The guiding notion addressed by all the contributions is that interpretative encounters with Jesus emerge from specific historical conditions and have specific performative consequences. As we all know, making sense of anything or anybody is never a neutral or innocent process; it is always a complex epistemological, rhetorical and ethical event. Against this background, the specific objective of the research offered in this volume is the generation of new knowledge by intentionally relating epistemologies, research paradigms, theories of the present and the self with the historical study of the figure of Jesus.

This volume consists of two parts. In Part One, the focus falls on *New Testament and historical perspectives.*

The first chapter is titled "Caesar, Moses and Jesus as 'God', 'godlike' or 'God's Son': Constructions of divinity in Paganism, Philo and Christianity in the Greco-Roman world". In this contribution Peter Lampe shows how the deification of Jesus in Early Christianity occurred and was influenced by the cultural context within which believers found themselves. Lampe points out that our current thinking of God is dominated by the Judeo-Christian notion that God is separate from the world, but that this was not the case in the Greco-Roman world; in those times people had no problem accepting that humans could also be gods. Accordingly, Lampe argues that it is not strange that Jesus was deified by his followers. He then goes on to discuss numerous examples illustrating how humans could be considered as "godlike" and "gods", as well as being both "sons of god" and "gods". He then works out some of the

consequences in this regard, for example that, in Christianity, Christology developed parallel to the notion of the deification of the emperors, but that this process came to an end when the notion of "divine essence" was introduced at a later stage. He concludes the chapter with some suggestions on what all of this imply for our current interpretations of Jesus.

In the second chapter Peter Nagel shifts our attention to the Gospel of Matthew, and to a particular part of it, namely the temptation narrative. Nagel calls his study "Overburdening Jesus with divinity causes theological limitations: Matthew 4:1-11 as test case". Like Lampe, he shows that it is vital to keep the historical conditions, within which New Testament writings originated, in mind when interpreting their Christologies. In this instance, he argues that the notion of the divinity of Jesus easily becomes a burden if it is perceived and understood separately from its Jewish context. Nagel maintains that the Gospel of Matthew introduces Jesus as Emmanuel, the "Son of God" and "the Christ", but that this should be understood within a Jewish context. By taking the temptation narrative in this Gospel as a test case, he shows that interpreting Jesus as the "Son of God" in supernatural or metaphysical terms actually overburdens Jesus with a skewed perception of his divinity and that this easily leads to theological limitations, exactly because such an interpretative effort happens outside of the Jewish tradition.

The next chapter is titled "Paul's way of imparting Jesus Christ crucified: Self-portrayal, identity, and vocation in 1 Corinthians". In this contribution Dustin W. Ellington begins by noting that, in his context in Zambia, Christians seldom speak of Christ's death and rather focus on the Christian faith as a route towards success. The obvious differences between such an approach and that of Paul prompts him to pose the question: "What does it mean for us, in Southern Africa today, to know what Paul knew of Christ crucified, and to give this knowledge and experience to others?" In order to answer this question he investigates 1 Corinthians, in particular 1 Corinthians 15 as well as 1:1-4:21 and 8:1-11:1. He then shows how Paul made sense of Jesus' death for the situation that he addresses in Corinth, by interpreting Christ's death as a way of life to be followed by believers; they should conform themselves to the pattern set by the gospel: to be joined to Christ's power, through weakness. Christ's death thus shapes the identity and vocation of believers. He also discusses the performative consequences for African Christians.

In his contribution, "'A beloved brother in the Lord.' On the reception of Christology and ethics in Philemon 15-16", D.F. (Francois) Tolmie draws attention to the reception of these two verses through the centuries. He notes that, currently, scholars tend to focus on three issues, namely the theological underpinnings of Paul's statements, the transformed relationship between Philemon and Onesimus that Paul had in mind, and the question whether Paul wanted Philemon to be manumitted or not. This differs from the way in which these two verses had been interpreted by earlier commentators, primarily because of the difference between their historical contexts and ours. Tolmie illustrates this by discussing the way in which these two verses had been interpreted by Jerome, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Thomas Aquinas, Desiderius Erasmus and Martin Luther. This overview of part of the reception history of Philemon 15-16 thus illustrates how interpretative encounters with Christ are influenced by historical conditions.

As the title of Pieter de Villiers' contribution – "Interpretative encounters with Christ in Revelation and its reception history" – indicates, he also calls our attention to the reception history of a New Testament writing, in this instance to the way in which the Christology of Revelation has been interpreted through history. He begins by an overview of the way in which its author appropriated his sacred traditions in the light of oral traditions about the Historical Jesus in order to construct a picture of an exalted Christ who is powerfully present in the church's ongoing spiritual journey. After this De Villiers moves on to various eschatological receptions of the Christology of Revelation as a prediction or anticipation of future events until the return of Christ, especially towards the end of the first and second millennia. A third part investigates the trajectory in the reception history of Revelation that spiritualises the book. In this trajectory Jesus is portrayed as the exalted Christ who transforms human existence. In this section De Villiers pays special attention to Dürer's careful, but mystical reading of Revelation's Christology from an aesthetical point of view.

The last contribution in the first part of the book is that of Pieter Botha, "The Lamb and the Servant as constructions of divinity: The worship of Jesus in Early Christianity from a disability studies perspective". In this chapter Botha shows how making sense of Jesus in the context of Early Christianity can be enriched when a fresh set of questions is raised, in particular when academic discourses which had been artificially separated in the past are brought into

dialogue with one another. Accordingly, he uses insights from medical discourses, social activist discourses, anthropology, the philosophy and rhetoric of the body, disability studies and feminist critiques to look again at the worship of Jesus in its earliest context. Furthermore, he also shows how infusing current discussions about Jesus with new insights about the body not only helps us to make sense of Jesus in a better way for our own contexts but that, in some instances, the beginnings of such ideas can even be detected in the canonical Jesus traditions.

The second part of the book is devoted to *contemporary and constructive perspectives*. In the first chapter in this part, titled "The plurality of contemporary Christological discourses: Some perspectives", Rian Venter investigates the phenomenon of a plurality of interpretations of the Jesus figure, and of the seemingly surplus which stimulates ever new encounters. On the one hand, his interest is one of stock-taking for academic purposes and for mapping the terrain of contemporary Christology undertaken by systematic theology; on the other hand it is also one of a more fundamental concern, namely to theorise the nature of image-construction, and to raise the question of the implications of the diversity. He discusses seven crucial discourses: Global and post-modern Christologies, and dialogues between Christology and natural science, the arts, queer-theory, post-colonialism and world-religions. The seven Christologies raise questions about the status of cultural identity and agency, about alternative conceptualities and the presence of the impossible, about the very nature of materiality, bodiliness and sexuality, about power, about transcendence and about truth. Reflecting on the seven discourses and plurality in contemporary Christology, Venter points out several implications: An obvious broadening of Christology is taking place, and the meaningfulness of the Jesus-symbol for current concerns and interests is reconfirmed. The plurality obviously has ramifications for an understanding of soteriology, and for the quest of de-colonisation of theology. The question of validity cannot be ignored, and the author emphasises the indispensability of the continued quest for the historical Jesus.

The next chapter is titled "Christ in pluralism? Michael Welker's pneumatological Christology". In this chapter Henco van der Westhuizen draws attention to the fact that Welker takes Christological pluralism seriously. Van der Westhuizen traces the different options that Welker proposes for theologians wishing to make sense of Christ, namely a focus on the Historical Jesus, Jesus' resurrection,

his cross, the exalted Christ and his reign, and the eschatological Christ. For Welker it is through these pluralisms that a clearer picture of Christ comes to the fore; yet, as Van der Westhuizen argues, this does not mean that Welker succumbs to relativism, and, accordingly, such an approach can assist us to make sense of Christ in our times and within our contexts.

In the following chapter Deborah van den Bosch takes us to a specific pastoral situation: how to help a contemporary believer prepare for the end of life in a secularised context. Her contribution thus has to do with the art of dying (*ars moriendi*). The title of her contribution summarises her insights in this regard aptly: "The dying Christ: Revisiting the *ars moriendi* in a pneumatological perspective". After an overview of the development of the notion of *ars moriendi* and a discussion of the thanatologies of contemporary theologians, she suggests that the presence of the Holy Spirit during Jesus' death could be regarded as meaningful in the preparation of believers' death, in the contexts within which we find ourselves nowadays, since this emphasises that they are included in the identity of God in the face of death. In this way she points out how one could make sense of the dying Christ in a secularised context in our times.

In his contribution, titled "The moral-theological dimension of Jesus' way of life", Peter G. Kirchschlaeger focuses on ethics, and illustrates how one can make sense of the ethics of Jesus within our contemporary context. He argues that Jesus' way of life had a moral-theological dimension that was an integral part of his life, suffering, death and resurrection, and that all of this serves as a challenge to his followers. However, what is asked of them is not a mere fulfilling of commandments; they are called upon to do much more: speech, decisions, actions as well as an attitude based on a reflection on the identity of Jesus. Kirchschlaeger then highlights the main elements in this regard in terms of the concept of "neighbourly love", which, for him, concretely implies limitless love, serving others, solidarity, and merciful justice without any indifference.

In the next chapter, Jakub Urbaniak investigates how a specific contemporary embodied African Christology makes sense of Jesus. His contribution is titled "What has Tswane to do with Copenhagen? Groping for an embodied Christology with Tiniyiko Maluleke". Urbaniak facilitates a dialogue between Maluleke's African Jesus and the Christ of deep incarnation theologians, in the belief that the two approaches can bring to the table even more when in dialogue. After a brief introduction of the two Christological approaches

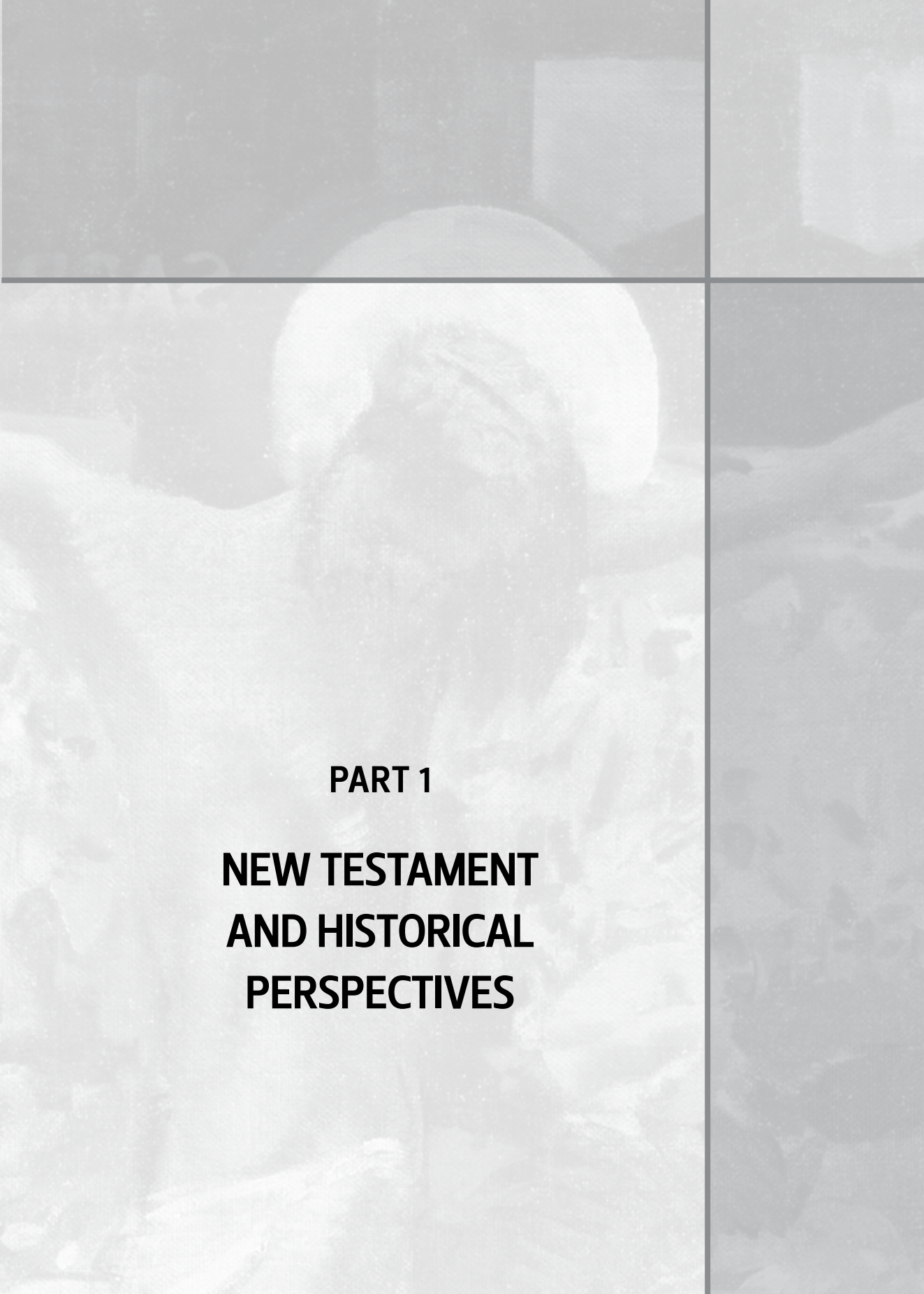
represented by Maluleke and deep incarnation theologians, Urbaniak discusses constructive Christologising at the intersection of the global and the local, before concluding with an investigation of the particular historical conditions, from which these two interpretative encounters emerged. In this way, he shows how the Western Christological tradition can benefit from an engagement with what he calls "African battle Christologies", like that of Maluleke.

The last chapter is devoted to the digital Jesus. In a contribution titled "@jesus – A practical theological following of Jesus-expressions on Twitter", Jan-Albert van den Berg explores the way in which interpretative encounters of Jesus occur on Twitter. For this purpose, he investigates two Twitter data sets deriving from distinctive celebrations on the Christian calendar, namely Christmas 2013 and Easter 2014. By using scientific approaches specifically developed for interpreting massive amounts of empirical digital data, he provides perspectives on tendencies that one can identify in these two instances. One of the important findings in this regard is the close relationship between popular culture and theology, particularly the way in which popular culture has an impact on the Christian faith, and helps us to understand the way in which "the language of the street" gives us a glimpse of people experiencing God and finding religious meaning in everyday life.

The articles in this volume evidence the myriad and vibrant attempts to make sense of the Jesus-figure and of contemporary life and its challenges in mutual engagement. A number of leitmotifs are found in the various contributions: context, that of the first century Mediterranean world and of our horizon, is crucial in interpretation; plurality is a given in the doing of theology and should be embraced; theoretical perspectives (such as disability studies, faith/science dialogue, digitalisation) are indispensable in generating new knowledge; and existential questions like death and ethics continue to stimulate Christological thinking. In the interaction between Jesus and the present horizon, a space is found where meaning is created for human flourishing and for appreciating the Jesus event ever anew.

We trust that this volume will add value to contemporary discussions of Christology, that it will go some way to answer some of the questions theologians are grappling with in this regard, and that it may also raise new questions.

Francois Tolmie & Rian Venter (Eds.)
September 2017



PART 1

NEW TESTAMENT AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

Chapter 1

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

Peter Lampe[1]

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

1 Prof. Peter Lampe, Professor of New Testament Studies, University of Heidelberg, Germany; and Honorary Professor of New Testament, Department of Old and New Testament Studies, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa.

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

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

2 Thus already Plautus (255-185 BCE), *Asin*. 712f.; *Persa* 99f.; *Capt*. 863f. Of course, Plautus also was a comedy writer, but Cicero was not when he praised his benefactor Lentulus as "parent and god of my life" (*Post Reditum in Senatu* 8). See further Claus (2001:44f.).

3 See the material in Claus (2001:17, 33f., 60, 482 *et al.*). Claus convincingly refutes older literature that tried to uphold a significant difference between the East and the West. Besides the deification of living rulers, many emperors upon their death were granted an apotheosis by the Senate. It raised them into heaven where they were venerated together with the other gods, equal to them. See e.g. Pliny, *paneg*. 35.4; 11.4; 16.4; Herodian 4.2.1; Suetonius, *Aug*. 97.1-3. Domitian consecrated several deceased family members so that Juvenal joked that he augmented the stars in the sky so much that Atlas henceforth had to carry significantly more weight (*Sat*. 13.46-49).

4 In the West, the barrier between human and divine was lower than today also because every person was considered having a *genius*, a guardian deity, that is, a divine aspect inherent in every human. In every-day life, the *genius* was considered identical with the person. After death, the *genius* would still be present and therefore could be venerated by relatives. See the material in, e.g. Claus (2001:45, 221-227).

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Making sense of Jesus is comprised of twelve chapters of a Christological nature, which are the result of a multidisciplinary theological research project. The aim of this book is to ascertain how, in the current cultural situation, an encounter with Jesus is determined by specific historical and personal conditions, and what the consequences of such an encounter may be. The book is divided into two parts, the first of which contains research that deals with encounters, mediated by New Testament and historical studies, while the second is dedicated to contemporary and constructive issues of a cultural, technological, moral and existential nature. The basic approach of the research, and that of this publication, is not to continue conventional Christology, but to generate new knowledge therein. In this approach, issues are raised and questions are asked which, while both inspiring and unsettling, no serious academic can afford to ignore.

Prof. C.J. Wethmar
University of the Pretoria

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