The Deity of Christ from a Greco-Roman Perspective

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Introduction

When early Christian authors called Jesus "god" (or "God") what did they mean?[1] Modern apologists routinely point to pre-Nicene quotations in order to prove that early Christians always believed in the deity of Christ, by which they mean that he is of the same substance (*homoousios*) as the Father. However, most historians agree that Christians before the fourth century simply didn't have the cognitive categories available yet to think of Christ in Nicene or Chalcedonian ways. If this consensus is correct, it behooves us to consider other options for defining what early Christian authors meant. The obvious place to go to get an answer to our initial question is the New Testament. However, as is well known, the handful of instances in which authors unambiguously applied god (θεός) to Christ are fraught with textual uncertainty, grammatical ambiguity, and hermeneutical elasticity.[2] What's more, granting that these contested texts[3] all call Jesus "god" provides little insight into what they might mean by that phrase. Turning to the second century, the earliest handful of texts that say Jesus is god are likewise textually uncertain or terse.[4] We must wait until the second half of the second century and beyond to have more helpful material to examine. We know that in the meanwhile some Christians were saying Jesus was god. What did they mean?

One promising approach is to analyze biblical texts that call others gods. We find helpful parallels with the word god (אֱלֹהִים) applied to Moses (Exod 7.1; 4.16), judges (Exod 21.6; 22.8-9), kings (Is 9.6; Ps 45.6), the divine council (Ps 82.1, 6), and angels (Ps

[1] For the remainder of this paper, I will use the lower case "god" for all references to deity outside of Yahweh, the Father of Christ. I do this because all our ancient texts lack capitalization and our modern capitalization rules imply a theology that is anachronistic and unhelpful for the present inquiry.

[2] Christopher Kaiser wrote, "Explicit references to Jesus as 'God' in the New Testament are very few, and even those few are generally plagued with uncertainties of either text or interpretation." Christopher B. Kaiser, *The Doctrine of God: A Historical Survey* (London: Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1982), 29. Other scholars such as Raymond Brown (*Jesus: God and Man*), Jason David BeDuhn (*Truth in Translation*), and Brian Wright ("Jesus as θεός: A Textual Examination" in *Revisiting the Corruption of the New Testament*) have expressed similar sentiments.

[3] John 20.28; Hebrews 1.8; Titus 2.13; 2 Peter 1.1; Romans 9.5; and 1 John 5.20.

[4] See Polycarp's *Epistle to the Philippians* 12.2 where a manuscript difference determines whether or not Polycarp called Jesus god or lord. Textual corruption is most acute in Igantius' corpus. Although it's been common to dismiss the long recension as an "Arian" corruption, claiming the middle recension to be as pure and uncontaminated as freshly fallen snow upon which a foot has never trodden, such an uncritical view is beginning to give way to more honest analysis. See Paul Gilliam III's *Ignatius of Antioch and the Arian Controversy* (Leiden: Brill, 2017) for a recent treatment of Christological corruption in the middle recension.

8.6). These are texts in which God imbues his agents with his authority to represent him in some way. This rare though significant way of calling a representative "god," continues in the NT with Jesus' clever defense to his accusers in John 10.34-36. Lexicons[5] have long recognized this "Hebraistic" usage and recent study tools such as the *New English Translation* (NET)[6] and the *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Background Commentary*[7] also note this phenomenon. But, even if this agency perspective is the most natural reading of texts like Heb 1.8, later Christians, apart from one or two exceptions appear to be ignorant of this usage.[8] This interpretation was likely a casualty of the so-called parting of the ways whereby Christianity transitioned from a second-temple-Jewish movement to a Gentile-majority religion. As such, to grasp what early postapostolic Christians believed, we must turn our attention elsewhere.

Michael Bird is right when he says, "Christian discourses about deity belong incontrovertibly in the Greco-Roman context because it provided the cultural encyclopedia that, in diverse ways, shaped the early church's Christological conceptuality and vocabulary."[9] Learning Greco-Roman theology is not only important because that was the context in which early Christians wrote, but also because from the late first century onward, most of our Christian authors converted from that worldview.

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[5] See the entries for אֱלֹהִים and θεός in the Hebrew Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (HALOT), the Brown Driver Briggs Lexicon (BDB), Eerdmans Dictionary, Kohlenberger/Mounce Concise Hebrew-Aramaic Dictionary of the Old Testament, the Bauer Danker Arndt Gingrich Lexicon (BDAG), Friberg Greek Lexicon, and Thayer's Greek Lexicon.

[6] See notes on Is 9.6 and Ps 45.6.

[7] ZIBBC: "In what sense can the king be called "god"? By virtue of his divine appointment, the king in the ancient Near East stood before his subjects as a representative of the divine realm. …In fact, the term "gods" (*ʾelōhîm*) is used of priests who functioned as judges in the Israelite temple judicial system (Ex. 21:6; 22:8-9; see comments on 58:1; 82:6-7)." John W. Hilber, "Psalms," in *The Minor Prophets, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, vol. 5 of *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Old Testament*. ed. John H. Walton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 358.

[8] Around a.d. 340, Aphrahat of Persia advised his fellow Christians to reply to Jewish critics who questioned why "You call a human being 'God'" (*Demonstrations* 17.1). He said, "For the honored name of the divinity is granted event ot rightoues human beings, when they are worthy of being called by it…[W]hen he chose Moses, his friend and his beloved…he called him "god." …We call him God, just as he named Moses with his own name…The name of the divinity was granted for great honor in the world. To whom he wishes, God appoints it" (17.3, 4, 5). Aphrahat, *The Demonstrations*, trans., Ellen Muehlberger, vol. 3, *The Cambridge Edition of Early Christian Writings* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge, 2022), 213-15. In the Clementine *Recognitions* we find a brief mention of the concept: "Therefore the name God is applied in three ways: either because he to whom it is given is truly God, or because he is the servant of him who is truly; and for the honour of the sender, that his authority may be full, he that is sent is called by the name of him who sends, as is often done in respect of angels: for when they appear to a man, if he is a wise and intelligent man, he asks the name of him who appears to him, that he may acknowledge at once the honour of the sent, and the authority of the sender" (2.42). Pseudo-Clement, *Recognitions*, trans., Thomas Smith, vol. 8, *Ante Nicene Fathers* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003).

[9] Michael F. Bird, *Jesus among the Gods* (Waco, TX: Baylor, 2022), 13.

Rather than talking about the Hellenization of Christianity, we should begin by asking how Hellenists experienced Christianization. In other words, Greco-Roman beliefs about the gods were the default lens through which converts first saw Christ.

In order to explore how Greco-Roman theology shaped what people believed about Jesus as god, we do well to begin by asking how they defined a god. Andrew Perriman offers a helpful starting point. "The gods," he writes, "are mostly understood as corporeal beings, blessed with immortality, larger, more beautiful, and more powerful than their mortal analogues."[10] Furthermore, there were lots of them! The sublunar realm was, in the words of Paula Fredriksen, "a god-congested place."[11] What's more, "[S]harp lines and clearly demarcated boundaries between divinity and humanity were lacking."[12] Gods could appear as people and people could ascend to become gods.

Comprehending what Greco-Roman people believed about gods coming down and humans going up will occupy the first part of this paper. Only once we've adjusted our thinking to their culture, will we walk through key moments in the life of Jesus of Nazareth to hear the story with ancient Mediterranean ears. Lastly, we'll consider the evidence from sources that think of Jesus in Greco-Roman categories. Bringing this all together we'll enumerate the primary ways to interpret the phrase "Jesus is god" available to Christians in the pre-Nicene period.

Gods Coming Down and Humans Going Up

The idea that a god would visit someone is not as unusual as it first sounds. We find plenty of examples of Yahweh himself or non-human representatives visiting people in the Hebrew Bible.[13] One psalmist even referred to angels or "heavenly beings" (ESV) as אֱלֹהִים (gods).[14] The Greco-Roman world too told stories about divine entities coming down to interact with people. Euripides tells about the time Zeus forced the god Apollo to become a human servant in the house of Admetus, performing menial labor as punishment for killing the Cyclopes (*Alcestis* 1). Baucis and Philemon offered hospitality to Jupiter and Mercury when they appeared in human form (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 8.26-34). In Homer's Odyssey onlookers warn Antinous for flinging a stool against a stranger

[10] Andrew Perriman, *In the Form of a God*, *Studies in Early Christology*, ed. David Capes Michael Bird, and Scott Harrower (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2022), 130.
[11] Paula Fredriksen, "How High Can Early High Christology Be?," in *Monotheism and Christology in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, ed. Matthew V. Novenson, vol. 180 (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 296, 99.
[12] ibid.
[13] See Gen 18.1; Ex 3.2; 24.11; Is 6.1; Ezk 1.28.
[14] Compare the Masoretic Text of Psalm 8.6 to the Septuagint and Hebrews 2.7.

since "the gods do take on the look of strangers dropping in from abroad"[15] (17.534-9). Because they believed the boundary between the divine realm and the Earth was so permeable, Mediterranean people were always on guard for an encounter with a god in disguise.

In addition to gods coming down, in special circumstances, humans could ascend and become gods too. Diodorus of Sicily demarcated two types of gods: those who are "eternal and imperishable, such as the sun and the moon" and "the other gods…terrestrial beings who attained to immortal honour"[16] (*The Historical Library of Diodorus the Sicilian* 6.1). By some accounts, even the Olympian gods, including Kronos and Uranus were once mortal men.[17] Among humans who could become divine, we find several distinguishable categories, including heroes, miracle workers, and rulers. We'll look at each briefly before considering how the story of Jesus would resonate with those holding a Greco-Roman worldview.

Deified Heroes

Cornutus the Stoic said, "[T]he ancients called heroes those who were so strong in body and soul that they seemed to be part of a divine race." (*Greek Theology* 31)[18] At first this statement appears to be a mere simile, but he goes on to say of Heracles (Hercules), the Greek hero *par excellence*, "his services had earned him apotheosis" (ibid.). Apotheosis (or deification) is the process by which a human ascends into the divine realm.

Beyond Heracles and his feats of strength, other exceptional individuals became deified for various reasons. Amphiarus was a seer who died in the battle at Thebes. After opening a chasm in the earth to swallow him in battle, "Zeus made him immortal"[19] (Apollodorus, *Library of Greek Mythology* 3.6). Pausanias says the custom of the inhabitants of Oropos was to drop coins into Amphiarus' spring "because this is where they say Amphiarus rose up as a god"[20] (*Guide to Greece* 1.34). Likewise, Strabo speaks about a shrine for Calchas, a deceased diviner from the Trojan war (Homer, *Illiad* 1.79-

[15] Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans., Robert Fagles (New York, NY: Penguin, 1997), 370.
[16] Diodorus Siculus, *The Historical Library*, trans., Charles Henry Oldfather, vol. 1 (Sophron Editor, 2017), 340.
[17] Uranus met death at the brutal hands of his own son, Kronos who emasculated him and let bleed out, resulting in his deification (Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel* 1.10). Later on, after suffering a fatal disease, Kronos himself experienced deification, becoming the planet Saturn (ibid.). Zeus married Hera and they produced Osiris (Dionysus), Isis (Demeter), Typhon, Apollo, and Aphrodite (ibid. 2.1).
[18] Lucius Annaeus Cornutus, *Greek Theology*, trans., George Boys-Stones, *Greek Theology, Fragments, and Testimonia* (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2018), 123.
[19] Apollodorus, *The Library of Greek Mythology*, trans., Robin Hard (Oxford, UK: Oxford, 1998), 111.
[20] Pausanias, *Guide to Greece*, trans., Peter Levi (London, UK: Penguin, 1979), 98.

84), "where those consulting the oracle sacrifice a black ram to the dead and sleep in its hide"[21] (Strabo, *Geography* 6.3.9). Though the great majority of the dead were locked away in the lower world of Hades, leading a shadowy pitiful existence, the exceptional few could visit or speak from beyond the grave.

Lastly, there was Zoroaster the Persian prophet who, according to Dio Chrysostom, was enveloped by fire while he meditated upon a mountain. He was unharmed and gave advice on how to properly make offerings to the gods (Dio Chrysostom, *Discourses* 36.40). The Psuedo-Clementine Homilies include a story about a lightning bolt striking and killing Zoroaster. After his devotees buried his body, they built a temple on the site, thinking that "his soul had been sent for by lightning" and they "worshipped him as a god"[22] (Homily 9.5.2). Thus, a hero could have extraordinary strength, foresight, or closeness to the gods resulting in apotheosis and ongoing worship and communication.

Deified Miracle Workers

Beyond heroes, Greco-Roman people loved to tell stories about deified miracle workers. Twice Orpheus rescued a ship from a storm by praying to the gods (Diodorus of Sicily 4.43.1f; 48.5f). After his death, surviving inscriptions indicate that he both received worship and was regarded as a god in several cities.[23] Epimenides "fell asleep in a cave for fifty-seven years"[24] (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 1.109). He also predicted a ten-year period of reprieve from Persian attack in Athens (Plato *Laws* 1.642D-E). Plato called him a divine man (θεῖος ἀνήρ) (ibid.) and Diogenes talked of Cretans sacrificing to him as a god (Diogenes, *Lives* 1.114).

Iamblichus said Pythagoras was the son of Apollo and a mortal woman (*Life of Pythagoras* 2). Nonetheless, the soul of Pythagoras enjoyed multiple lives, having originally been "sent to mankind from the empire of Apollo"[25] (*Life* 2). Diogenes and Lucian enumerate the lives the pre-existent Pythagoras led, including Aethalides, Euphorbus, Hermotimus, and Pyrrhus (Diogenes, *Life of Pythagoras* 4; Lucian, *The Cock* 16-20). Hermes had granted Pythagoras the gift of "perpetual transmigration of his

[21] Strabo, *The Geography*, trans., Duane W. Roller (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge, 2020), 281.
[22] Psuedo-Clement, *Homilies*, trans., Peter Peterson, vol. 8, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1897). Greek: "αὐτὸν δὲ ὡς θεὸν ἐθρήσκευσαν" from Jacques Paul Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, taken from Accordance (PSCLEMH-T), OakTree Software, Inc., 2018, Version 1.1.
[23] See Barry Blackburn, *Theios Aner and the Markan Miracle Traditions* (Tübingen, Germany: J. C. B. Mohr, 1991), 32.
[24] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, trans., Pamela Mensch (New York, NY: Oxford, 2020), 39.
[25] Iamblichus, *Life of Pythagoras*, trans., Thomas Taylor, *Iamblichus' Life of Pythagoras* (Delhi, IN: Zinc Read, 2023), 2.

soul"[26] so he could remember his lives while living or dead (Diogenes, *Life* 4). Ancient sources are replete with Pythagorean miracle stories.[27] Porphyry mentions several, including taming a bear, persuading an ox to stop eating beans, and accurately predicting a catch of fish (*Life of Pythagoras* 23-25). Porphyry said Pythagoras accurately predicted earthquakes and "chased away a pestilence, suppressed violent winds and hail, [and] calmed storms on rivers and on seas" (*Life* 29).[28] Such miracles, argued the Pythagoreans made Pythagoras "a being superior to man, and not to a mere man" (Iamblichus, *Life* 28).[29] Iamblichus lays out the views of Pythagoras' followers, including that he was a god, a philanthropic daemon, the Pythian, the Hyperborean Apollo, a Paeon, a daemon inhabiting the moon, or an Olympian god (*Life* 6).

Another pre-Socratic philosopher was Empedocles who studied under Pythagoras. To him sources attribute several miracles, including stopping a damaging wind, restoring the wind, bringing dry weather, causing it to rain, and even bringing someone back from Hades (Diogenes, *Lives* 8.59).[30] Diogenes records an incident in which Empedocles put a woman into a trance for thirty days before sending her away alive (8.61). He also includes a poem in which Empedocles says, "I am a deathless god, no longer mortal, I go among you honored by all, as is right"[31] (8.62).

Asclepius was a son of the god Apollo and a human woman (Cornutus, *Greek Theology* 33). He was known for healing people from diseases and injuries (Pindar, *Pythian* 3.47-50). "[H]e invented any medicine he wished for the sick, and raised up the dead"[32] (Pausanias, *Guide to Greece* 2.26.4). However, as Diodorus relates, Hades complained to Zeus on account of Asclepius' diminishing his realm, which resulted in Zeus zapping Asclepius with a thunderbolt, killing him (4.71.2-3). Nevertheless, Asclepius later

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[26] Diogenes Laertius, *Life of Pythagoras*, trans., Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie, *The Pythagorean Sourcebook and Library* (Grand Rapids, MI: Phanes Press, 1988), 142.

[27] See the list in Blackburn, 39. He corroborates miracle stories from Diogenus Laertius, Iamblichus, Apollonius, Nicomachus, and Philostratus.

[28] Porphyry, *Life of Pythagoras*, trans., Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie, *The Pythagorean Sourcebook and Library* (Grand Rapids, MI: Phanes Press, 1988), 128-9.

[29] Iamblichus, 68.

[30] What I call "resurrection" refers to the phrase, "Thou shalt bring back from Hades a dead man's strength." Diogenes Laertius 8.2.59, trans. R. D. Hicks.

[31] Laertius, "Lives of the Eminent Philosophers," 306. Two stories of his deification survive: in one Empedocles disappears in the middle of the night after hearing an extremely loud voice calling his name. After this the people concluded that they should sacrifice to him since he had become a god (8.68). In the other account, Empedocles climbs Etna and leaps into the fiery volcanic crater "to strengthen the rumor that he had become a god" (8.69).

[32] Pausanias, 192. Sextus Empiricus says Asclepius raised up people who had died at Thebes as well as raising up the dead body of Tyndaros (*Against the Professors* 1.261).

ascended into heaven to become a god (Hyginus, *Fables* 224; Cicero, *Nature of the Gods* 2.62).[33]

Apollonius of Tyana was a famous first century miracle worker. According to Philostratus' account, the locals of Tyana regard Apollonius to be the son of Zeus (*Life* 1.6). Apollonius predicted many events, interpreted dreams, and knew private facts about people. He rebuked and ridiculed a demon, causing it to flee, shrieking as it went (*Life* 2.4).[34] He even once stopped a funeral procession and raised the deceased to life (*Life* 4.45). What's more he knew every human language (*Life* 1.19) and could understand what sparrows chirped to each other (*Life* 4.3). Once he instantaneously transported himself from Smyrna to Ephesus (*Life* 4.10). He claimed knowledge of his previous incarnation as the captain of an Egyptian ship (*Life* 3.23) and, in the end, Apollonius entered the temple of Athena and vanished, ascending from earth into heaven to the sound of a choir singing (*Life* 8.30). We have plenty of literary evidence that contemporaries and those who lived later regarded him as a divine man (*Letters* 48.3)[35] or godlike (ἰσόθεος) (*Letters* 44.1) or even just a god (θεός) (*Life* 5.24).

Deified Rulers

Our last category of deified humans to consider before seeing how this all relates to Jesus is rulers. Egyptians, as indicated from the hieroglyphs left in the pyramids, believed their deceased kings to enjoy afterlives as gods. They could become star gods or even hunt and consume other gods to absorb their powers.[36] The famous Macedonian conqueror, Alexander the Great, carried himself as a god towards the Persians though Plutarch opines, "[he] was not at all vain or deluded but rather used belief in his divinity to enslave others"[37] (*Life of Alexander* 28). This worship continued after his death, especially in Alexandria where Ptolemy built a tomb and established a priesthood to conduct religious honors to the deified ruler. Even the emperor Trajan offered a sacrifice to the spirit of Alexander (Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 68.30). Another interesting example is Antiochus I of Comagene who called himself "Antiochus the just

[33] Cicero adds that the Arcadians worship Asclepius (*Nature* 3.57).

[34] In another instance, he confronted and cast out a demon from a licentious young man (*Life* 4.20).

[35] The phrase is "περὶ ἐμοῦ καὶ θεοῖς εἴρηται ὡς περὶ θείου ἀνδρὸς." Philostratus, *Letters of Apollonius*, vol. 458, *Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2006). <<need to add p. 43>>

[36] See George Hart, *The Routledge Dictionary of Egyptian Gods and Goddesses*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, UK: Routledge, 2005), 3.

[37] Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*, trans., Ian Scott-Kilvert and Timothy E. Duff, *The Age of Alexander* (London, UK: Penguin, 2011), 311. Arrian includes a story about Anaxarchus advocating paying divine honors to Alexander through prostration. The Macedonians refused but the Persian members of his entourage "rose from their seats and one by one grovelled on the floor before the King." Arrian, *The Campaigns of Alexander*, trans., Aubrey De Sélincourt (London, UK: Penguin, 1971), 222.

[and] manifest god, friend of the Romans [and] friend of the Greeks."[38] His tomb boasted four colossal figures seated on thrones: Zeus, Heracles, Apollo, and himself. The message was clear: Antiochus I wanted his subjects to recognize his place among the gods after death.

Of course, the most relevant rulers for the Christian era were the Roman emperors. The first official Roman emperor Augustus deified his predecessor, Julius Caesar, celebrating his apotheosis with games (Suetonius, *Life of Julius Caesar* 88). Only five years after Augustus died, eastern inhabitants of the Roman Empire at Priene happily declared "the birthday of the god Augustus" (ἡ γενέθλιος ἡμέρα τοῦ θεοῦ)[39] to be the start of their provincial year. By the time of Tacitus, a century after Augustus died, the wealthy in Rome had statues of the first emperor in their gardens for worship (*Annals* 1.73). The Roman historian Appian explained that the Romans regularly deify emperors at death "provided he has not been a despot or a disgrace"[40] (*The Civil Wars* 2.148). In other words, deification was the default setting for deceased emperors. Pliny the Younger lays it on pretty thick when he describes the process. He says Nero deified Claudius to expose him; Titus deified Vespasian and Domitian so he could be the son and brother of gods. However, Trajan deified Nerva because he genuinely believed him to be more than a human (*Panegyric* 11).

In our little survey, we've seen three main categories of deified humans: heroes, miracle workers, and good rulers. These "conceptions of deity," writes David Litwa, "were part of the "preunderstanding" of Hellenistic culture."[41] He continues:

> If actual cases of deification were rare, traditions of deification were not. They were the stuff of heroic epic, lyric song, ancient mythology, cultic hymns, Hellenistic novels, and popular plays all over the first-century Mediterranean world. Such discourses were part of mainstream, urban culture to which most early Christians belonged. If Christians were socialized in predominantly Greco-Roman environments, it is no surprise that they employed and adapted common traits of deities and deified men to exalt their lord to divine status.[42]

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[38] Translation my own from "Ἀντίοχος ὁ Θεὸς Δίκαιος Ἐπιφανὴς Φιλορωμαῖος Φιλέλλην." Inscription at Nemrut Dağ, accessible at https://www.tertullian.org/rpearse/mithras/display.php?page=cimrm32. See also https://zeugma.packhum.org/pdfs/v1ch09.pdf.

[39] Greek taken from W. Dittenberger, *Orientis Graecae Inscriptiones Selectae*, vol. 2 (Hildesheim: Olms, 1960), 48-60. Of particular note is the definite article before θεός. They didn't celebrate the birthday of a god, but the birthday of the god.

[40] Appian, *The Civil Wars*, trans., John Carter (London, UK: Penguin, 1996), 149.

[41] M. David Litwa, *Iesus Deus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 20.

[42] ibid.

Now that we've attuned our thinking to Mediterranean sensibilities about gods coming down in the shape of humans and humans experiencing apotheosis to permanently dwell as gods in the divine realm, our ears are attuned to hear the story of Jesus with Greco-Roman ears.

Hearing the Story of Jesus with Greco-Roman Ears

How would second or third century inhabitants of the Roman empire have categorized Jesus? Taking my cue from Litwa's treatment in *Iesus Deus*, I'll briefly work through Jesus' conception, transfiguration, miracles, resurrection, and ascension.

Miraculous Conception

Although set within the context of Jewish messianism, Christ's miraculous birth would have resonated differently with Greco-Roman people. Stories of gods coming down and having intercourse with women are common in classical literature. That these stories made sense of why certain individuals were so exceptional is obvious. For example, Origen related a story about Apollo impregnating Amphictione who then gave birth to Plato (*Against Celsus* 1.37). Though Mary's conception did not come about through intercourse with a divine visitor, the fact that Jesus had no human father would call to mind divine sonship like Pythagoras or Asclepius. Celsus pointed out that the ancients "attributed a divine origin to Perseus, and Amphion, and Aeacus, and Minos" (Origen, *Against Celsus* 1.67). Philostratus records a story of the Egyptian god Proteus saying to Apollonius' mother that she would give birth to himself (*Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 1.4). Since people were primed to connect miraculous origins with divinity, typical hearers of the birth narratives of Matthew or Luke would likely think that this baby might be either be a descended god or a man destined to ascend to become a god.

Miracles and Healing

As we've seen, Jesus' miracles would not have sounded unbelievable or even unprecedent to Mediterranean people. Like Jesus, Orpheus and Empedocles calmed storms, rescuing ships. Though Jesus provided miraculous guidance on how to catch fish, Pythagoras foretold the number of fish in a great catch. After the fishermen painstakingly counted them all, they were astounded that when they threw them back in, they were still alive (Porphyry, *Life* 23-25). Jesus' ability to foretell the future, know people's thoughts, and cast out demons all find parallels in Apollonius of Tyana. As for resurrecting the dead, we have the stories of Empedocles, Asclepius, and Apollonius. The last of which even stopped a funeral procession to raise the dead, calling to mind

Jesus' deeds in Luke 7.11-17. When Lycaonians witnessed Paul's healing of a man crippled from birth, they cried out, "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men" (Acts 14.11). Another time when no harm befell Paul after a poisonous snake bit him on Malta, Gentile onlookers concluded "he was a god" (Acts 28.6). Barry Blackburn makes the following observation:

> [I]n view of the tendency, most clearly seen in the Epimenidean, Pythagorean, and Apollonian traditions, to correlate impressive miracle-working with divine status, one may justifiably conclude that the evangelical miracle traditions would have helped numerous gentile Christians to arrive at and maintain belief in Jesus' divine status.[43]

Transfiguration

Ancient Mediterranean inhabitants believed that the gods occasionally came down disguised as people. Only when gods revealed their inner brilliant natures could people know that they weren't mere humans. After his ship grounded on the sands of Krisa, Apollo leaped from the ship emitting flashes of fire "like a star in the middle of day…his radiance shot to heaven"[44] (Homeric Hymns, *Hymn to Apollo* 440). Likewise, Aphrodite appeared in shining garments, brighter than a fire and shimmering like the moon (*Hymn to Aphrodite* 85-89). When Demeter appeared to Metaneira, she initially looked like an old woman, but she transformed herself before her. "Casting old age away…a delightful perfume spread…a radiance shone out far from the goddess' immortal flesh…and the solid-made house was filled with a light like the lightning-flash"[45] (*Hymn to Demeter* 275-280). Homer wrote about Odysseus' transformation at the golden wand of Athena in which his clothes became clean, he became taller, and his skin looked younger. His son, Telemachus cried out, "Surely you are some god who rules the vaulting skies"[46] (*Odyssey* 16.206). Each time the observers conclude the transfigured person is a god.

Resurrection & Ascension

In defending the resurrection of Jesus, Theophilus of Antioch said, "[Y]ou believe that Hercules, who burned himself, lives; and that Aesculapius [Asclepius], who was struck with lightning, was raised"[47] (*Autolycus* 1.13). Although Hercules' physical body burnt,

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[43] Blackburn, 92-3.

[44] *The Homeric Hymns*, trans., Michael Crudden (New York, NY: Oxford, 2008), 38.

[45] "The Homeric Hymns," 14.

[46] Homer, 344.

[47] Theophilus of Antioch, *To Autolycus*, trans., Marcus Dods, vol. 2, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

his transformed pneumatic body continued on as the poet Callimachus said, "under a Phrygian oak his limbs had been deified"[48] (Callimachus, *Hymn to Artemis* 159). Others thought Hercules ascended to heaven in his burnt body, which Asclepius subsequently healed (Lucian, *Dialogue of the Gods* 13). After his ascent, Diodorus relates how the people first sacrificed to him "as to a hero" then in Athens they began to honor him "with sacrifices like as to a god"[49] (*The Historical Library* 4.39). As for Asclepius, his ascension resulted in his deification as Cyprian said, "Aesculapius is struck by lightning, that he may rise into a god"[50] (*On the Vanity of Idols* 2). Romulus too "was torn to pieces by the hands of a hundred senators"[51] and after death ascended into heaven and received worship (Arnobius, *Against the Heathen* 1.41). Livy tells of how Romulus was "carried up on high by a whirlwind" and that immediately afterward "every man present hailed him as a god and son of a god"[52] (*The Early History of Rome* 1.16). As we can see from these three cases—Hercules, Asclepius, and Romulus—ascent into heaven was a common way of talking about deification. For Cicero, this was an obvious fact. People "who conferred outstanding benefits were translated to heaven through their fame and our gratitude"[53] (*Nature* 2.62). Consequently, Jesus' own resurrection and ascension would have triggered Gentiles to intuit his divinity. Commenting on the appearance of the immortalized Christ to the eleven in Galilee, Wendy Cotter said, "It is fair to say that the scene found in [Mat] 28:16-20 would be understood by a Greco-Roman audience, Jew or Gentile, as an *apotheosis* of Jesus."[54] Although I beg to differ with Cotter's whole cloth inclusion of Jews here, it's hard to see how else non-Jews would have regarded the risen Christ. Litwa adds Rev 1.13-16 "[W]here he [Jesus] appears with all the accoutrements of the divine: a shining face, an overwhelming voice, luminescent clothing, and so on."[55]

In this brief survey we've seen that several key events in the story of Jesus told in the Gospels would have caused Greco-Roman hearers to intuit deity, including his divine

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[48] Callimachus, *Hymn to Artemis*, trans., Susan A. Stephens, *Callimachus: The Hymns* (New York, NY: Oxford, 2015), 119.
[49] Siculus, 234.
[50] Cyprian, *Treatise 6: On the Vanity of Idols*, trans., Ernest Wallis, vol. 5, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995).
[51] Arnobius, *Against the Heathen*, trans., Hamilton Bryce and Hugh Campbell, vol. 6, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995).
[52] Livy, *The Early History of Rome*, trans., Aubrey De Sélincourt (London, UK: Penguin, 2002), 49.
[53] Cicero, *The Nature of the Gods*, trans., Patrick Gerard Walsh (Oxford, UK: Oxford, 2008), 69.
[54] Wendy Cotter, "Greco-Roman Apotheosis Traditions and the Resurrection Appearances in Matthew," in *The Gospel of Matthew in Current Study*, ed. David E. Aune (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 149.
[55] Litwa, 170.

conception, miracles, healing ministry, transfiguration, resurrection, and ascension. In their original context of second temple Judaism, these very same incidents would have resonated quite differently. His divine conception authenticated Jesus as the second Adam (Luke 3.38; Rom 5.14; 1 Cor 15.45) and God's Davidic son (2 Sam 7.14; Ps 2.7; Lk 1.32, 35). If Matthew or Luke wanted readers to understand that Jesus was divine based on his conception and birth, they failed to make such intentions explicit in the text. Rather, the birth narratives appear to have a much more modest aim—to persuade readers that Jesus had a credible claim to be Israel's messiah.

His miracles show that "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power…for God was with him" (Acts 10.38; cf. Jn 3.2; 10.32, 38). Rather than concluding Jesus to be a god, Jewish witnesses to his healing of a paralyzed man "glorified God, who had given such authority to men" (Mat 9.8). Over and over, especially in the Gospel of John, Jesus directs people's attention to his Father who was doing the works in and through him (Jn 5.19, 30; 8.28; 12.49; 14.10). Seeing Jesus raise someone from the dead suggested to his original Jewish audience that "a great prophet has arisen among us" (Lk 7.16).

The transfiguration, in its original setting, is an eschatological vision not a divine epiphany. Placement in the synoptic Gospels just after Jesus' promise that some there would not die before seeing the kingdom come sets the hermeneutical frame. "The transfiguration," says William Lane, "was a momentary, but real (and witnessed) manifestation of Jesus' sovereign power which pointed beyond itself to the Parousia, when he will come 'with power and glory.'"[56] If eschatology is the foreground, the background for the transfiguration was Moses' ascent of Sinai when he also encountered God and became radiant.[57] Viewed from the lenses of Moses' ascent and the eschaton, the transfiguration of Jesus is about his identity as God's definitive chosen ruler, not about any kind of innate divinity.

Lastly, the resurrection and ascension validated Jesus' messianic claims to be the ruler of the age to come (Acts 17.31; Rom 1.4). Rather than concluding Jesus was deity, early Jewish Christians concluded these events showed that "God has made him both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2.36). The interpretative backgrounds for Jesus' ascension were not

[56] William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, *Nicnt*, ed. F. F. Bruce Ned B. Stonehouse, and Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974).

[57] "Recent commentators have stressed that the best background for understanding the Markan transfiguration is the story of Moses' ascent up Mount Sinai (Exod. 24 and 34)." Litwa, 123.

stories about Heracles, Asclepius, or Romulus. No, the key oracle that framed the Israelite understanding was the messianic psalm in which Yahweh told David's Lord to "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool" (Psalm 110.1). The idea is of a temporary sojourn in heaven until exercising the authority of his scepter to rule over earth from Zion. Once again, the biblical texts remain completely silent about deification.

But even if the original meanings of Jesus' birth, ministry, transfiguration, resurrection, and ascension have messianic overtones when interpreted within the Jewish milieu, these same stories began to communicate various ideas of deity to Gentile converts in the generations that followed. We find little snippets from historical sources beginning in the second century and growing with time.

Evidence of Belief in Jesus' as a Greco-Roman Deity

To begin with, we have two non-Christian instances where Romans regarded Jesus as a deity within typical Greco-Roman categories. The first comes to us from Tertullian and Eusebius who mention an intriguing story about Tiberius' request to the Roman senate to deify Christ. Convinced by "intelligence from Palestine of events which had clearly shown the truth of Christ's divinity"[58] Tiberius proposed the matter to the senate (*Apology* 5). Eusebius adds that Tiberius learned that "many believed him to be a god in rising from the dead"[59] (*Church History* 2.2). As expected, the senate rejected the proposal. I mention this story, not because I can establish its historicity, but because it portrays how Tiberius would have thought about Jesus if he had heard about his miracles and resurrection.

Another important incident is from one of the governor Pliny the Younger's letters to the emperor Trajan. Having investigated some people accused of Christianity, he found "they had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately amongst themselves in honour of Christ as if to a god"[60] (*Letter* 96). To an outside imperial observer like Pliny, the Christians believed in a man who had performed miracles, defeated death, and now lived in heaven. Calling him a god was just the natural way of talking about such a person. Pliny would not have thought Jesus was superior to the deified Roman emperors much less Zeus or the Olympic gods. If he believed in Jesus at

[58] Tertullian, *Apology*, trans. S. Thelwall, vol. 3, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003).
[59] Eusebius, *The Church History*, trans. Paul L. Maier (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 54.
[60] Pliny the Younger, *The Letters of the Younger Pliny*, trans., Betty Radice (London: Penguin, 1969), 294.

all, he would have regarded him as another Mediterranean prophet who escaped Hades to enjoy apotheosis.

Another interesting text to consider is the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas.* This apocryphal text tells the story of Jesus' childhood between the ages of five and twelve. Jesus is impetuous, powerful, and brilliant. Unsure to conclude that Jesus was "either god or angel,"[61] his teacher remands him to Joseph's custody (7). Later, a crowd of onlookers ponders whether the child is a god or a heavenly messenger after he raises an infant from the dead (17). A year later Jesus raised a construction man who had fallen to his death back to life (18). Once again, the crowd asked if the child was from heaven. Although some historians are quick to assume the lofty conceptions of Justin and his successors about the *logos* were commonplace in the early Christianity, Litwa points out, "The spell of the Logos could only bewitch a very small circle of Christian elites… In IGT, we find a Jesus who is divine according to different canons, the canons of popular Mediterranean theology."[62]

Another important though often overlooked scholarly group of Christians in the second century was led by a certain Theodotus of Byzantium.[63] Typically referred to by their heresiological label "Theodotians," these dynamic monarchians lived in Rome and claimed that they held to the original Christology before it had been corrupted under Bishop Zephyrinus (Eusebius, *Church History* 5.28). Theodotus believed in the virgin birth, but not in his pre-existence or that he was god/God (Pseudo-Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 7.35.1-2; 10.23.1-2). He thought that Jesus was not able to perform any miracles until his baptism when he received the Christ/Spirit. Pseudo-Hippolytus goes on to say, "But they do not want him to have become a god when the Spirit descended. Others say that he became a god after he rose from the dead."[64] This last tantalizing remark implies that the Theodotians could affirm Jesus as a god after his resurrection though they denied his pre-existence. Although strict unitarians, they could regard Jesus as a god in that he was an ascended immortalized being who lived in heaven—not equal to the Father, but far superior to all humans on earth.

[61] Pseudo-Thomas, *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, trans., James Orr (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1903), 25.
[62] Litwa, 83.
[63] For sources on Theodotus, see Pseduo-Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 7.35.1-2; 10.23.1-2; Pseudo-Tertullian, *Against All Heresies* 8.2; Eusebius, *Church History* 5.28.
[64] Pseudo-Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies*, trans., David Litwa (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2016), 571.

Justin Martyr presents another interesting case to consider. Thoroughly acquainted with Greco-Roman literature and especially the philosophy of Plato, Justin sees Christ as a god whom the Father begot before all other creatures. He calls him "son, or wisdom, or angel, or god, or lord, or word"[65] (*Dialogue with Trypho* 61). For Justin Christ is "at the same time angel and god and lord and man"[66] (59). Jesus was "of old the Word, appearing at one time in the form of fire, at another under the guise of incorporeal beings, but now, at the will of God, after becoming man for mankind"[67] (*First Apology* 63). In fact, Justin is quite comfortable to compare Christ to deified heroes and emperors. He says, "[W]e propose nothing new or different from that which you say about the so-called sons of Jupiter [Zeus] by your respected writers… And what about the emperors who die among you, whom you think worthy to be deified?"[68] (21). He readily accepts the parallels with Mercury, Perseus, Asclepius, Bacchus, and Hercules, but argues that Jesus is superior to them (22).[69] Nevertheless, he considered Jesus to be in "a place second to the unchanging and eternal God"[70] (13). The Father is "the Most True God" whereas the Son is he "who came forth from Him"[71] (6).

Even as lates as Origen, Greco-Roman concepts of deity persist. In responding to Celsus' claim that no god or son of God has ever come down, Origen responds by stating such a statement would overthrow the stories of Pythian Apollo, Asclepius, and the other gods who descended (*Against Celsus* 5.2). My point here is not to say Origen believed in all the old myths, but to show how Origen reached for these stories as analogies to explain the incarnation of the *logos*. When Celsus argued that he would rather believe in the deity of Asclepius, Dionysus, and Hercules than Christ, Origen responded with a moral rather than ontological argument (3.42). He asks how these gods have improved the characters of anyone. Origen admits Celsus' argument "which places the forenamed individuals upon an equality with Jesus" might have force, however in light of the disreputable behavior of these gods, "how could you any longer

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[65] I took the liberty to decapitalize these appellatives. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, trans. Thomas B. Falls (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 244.

[66] Justin Martyr, 241. (Altered, see previous footnote.)

[67] Justin Martyr, 102.

[68] Justin Martyr, 56-7.

[69] Arnobius makes a similar argument in *Against the Heathen* 1.38-39 "Is he not worthy to be called a god by us and felt to be a god on account of the favor or such great benefits? For if you have enrolled Liber among the gods because he discovered the use of wine, and Ceres the use of bread, Aesculapius the use of medicines, Minerva the use of oil, Triptolemus plowing, and Hercules because he conquered and restrained beasts, thieves, and the many-headed hydra…So then, ought we not to consider Christ a god, and to bestow upon him all the worship due to his divinity?" Translation from Litwa, 105.

[70] Justin Martyr, 46.

[71] Justin Martyr, 39.

say, with any show of reason, that these men, on putting aside their mortal body, became gods rather than Jesus?"[72] (3.42). Origen's Christology is far too broad and complicated to cover here. Undoubtedly, his work on eternal generation laid the foundation on which fourth century Christians could build *homoousion* Christology. Nevertheless, he retained some of the earlier subordinationist impulses of his forebearers. In his book *On Prayer*, he rebukes praying to Jesus as a crude error, instead advocating prayer to God alone (10). In his *Commentary on John* he repeatedly asserts that the Father is greater than his *logos* (1.40; 2.6; 6.23). Thus, Origen is a theologian on the seam of the times. He's both a subordinationist and a believer in the Son's eternal and divine ontology.

Now, I want to be careful here. I'm not saying that all early Christians believed Jesus was a deified man like Asclepius or a descended god like Apollo or a reincarnated soul like Pythagoras. More often than not, thinking Christians whose works survive until today tended to eschew the parallels, simultaneously elevating Christ as high as possible while demoting the gods to mere demons. Still, Litwa is inciteful when he writes:

> It seems likely that early Christians shared the widespread cultural assumption that a resurrected, immortalized being was worthy of worship and thus divine. …Nonetheless there is a difference…Jesus, it appears, was never honored as an independent deity. Rather, he was always worshiped as Yahweh's subordinate. Naturally Heracles and Asclepius were Zeus' subordinates, but they were also members of a larger divine family. Jesus does not enter a pantheon but assumes a distinctive status as God's chief agent and plenipotentiary. It is this status that, to Christian insiders, placed Jesus in a category far above the likes of Heracles, Romulus, and Asclepius who were in turn demoted to the rank of δαίμονες [*daimons*].[73]

Conclusion

I began by asking the question, "What did early Christians mean by saying Jesus is god?" We noted that the ancient idea of agency (Jesus is God/god because he represents Yahweh), though present in Hebrew and Christian scripture, didn't play much of a role in how Gentile Christians thought about Jesus. Or if it did, those texts did not survive. By the time we enter the postapostolic era, a majority of Christianity was Gentile and

[72] Origen, *Against Celsus*, trans. Frederick Crombie, vol. 4, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003).
[73] Litwa, 173.

little communication occurred with the Jewish Christians that survived in the East. As such, we turned our attention to Greco-Roman theology to tune our ears to hear the story of Jesus the way they would have. We learned about their multifaceted array of divinities. We saw that gods can come down and take the form of humans and humans can go up and take the form of gods. We found evidence for this kind of thinking in both non-Christian and Christian sources in the second and third centuries.

Now it is time to return to the question I began with: "When early Christian authors called Jesus "god" what did they mean?" We saw that the idea of a deified man was present in the non-Christian witnesses of Tiberius and Pliny but made scant appearance in our Christian literature except for the Theodotians. As for the idea that a god came down to become a man, we found evidence in *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, Justin, and Origen.[74] Of course, we find a spectrum within this view, from Justin's designation of Jesus as a second god to Origen's more philosophically nuanced understanding. Still, it's worth noting as R. P. C. Hanson observed that, "With the exception of Athanasius virtually every theologian, East and West, accepted some form of subordinationism at least up to the year 355."[75] Whether any Christians before Alexander and Athanasius of Alexandria held to the sophisticated idea of consubstantiality depends on showing evidence of the belief that the Son was coequal, coeternal, and coessential with the Father prior to Nicea. (Readers interested in the case for this view should consult Michael Bird's *Jesus among the Gods* in which he attempted the extraordinary feat of finding proto-Nicene Christology in the first two centuries, a task typically associated with maverick apologists not peer-reviewed historians.)

In conclusion, the answer to our driving question about the meaning of "Jesus as god" is that the answer depends on whom we ask. If we ask the Theodotians, Jesus is a god because that's just what one calls an immortalized man who lives in heaven.[76] If we ask those holding a docetic Christology, the answer is that a god came down in appearance as a man. If we ask a *logos* subordinationist, they'll tell us that Jesus existed as the god through whom the supreme God created the universe before he became a human being. If we ask Tertullian, Jesus is god because he derives his substance from the Father,

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[74] I could easily multiply examples of this by looking at Irenaeus, Tertullian, Hippolytus, and many others.

[75] The obvious exception to Hanson's statement were thinkers like Sabellius and Praxeas who believed that the Father himself came down as a human being. R. P. C. Hanson, *Search for a Christian Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), xix.

[76] Interestingly, even some of the biblical unitarians of the period were comfortable with calling Jesus god, though they limited his divinity to his post-resurrection life.

though he has a lesser portion of divinity.[77] If we ask Athanasius, he'll wax eloquent about how Jesus is of the same substance as the Father equal in status and eternality. The bottom line is that there was not one answer to this question prior to the fourth century. Answers depend on whom we ask and when they lived.

Still, we can't help but wonder about the more tantalizing question of development. Which Christology was first and which ones evolved under social, intellectual, and political pressures? In the quest to specify the various stages of development in the Christologies of the ante-Nicene period, this Greco-Roman perspective may just provide the missing link between the reserved and limited way that the NT applies *theos* to Jesus in the first century and the *homoousian* view that eventually garnered imperial support in the fourth century. How easy would it have been for fresh converts from the Greco-Roman world to unintentionally mishear the story of Jesus? How easy would it have been for them to fit Jesus into their own categories of descended gods and ascended humans? With the unmooring of Gentile Christianity from its Jewish heritage, is it any wonder that Christologies began to drift out to sea? Now I'm not suggesting that all Christians went through a steady development from a human Jesus to a pre-existent Christ, to an eternal God the Son, to the Chalcedonian hypostatic union. As I mentioned above, plenty of other options were around and every church had its conservatives in addition to its innovators. The story is messy and uneven with competing views spread across huge geographic distances. Furthermore, many Christians probably were content to leave such theological nuances fuzzy, rather than seeking doctrinal precision on Christ's relation to his God and Father. Whatever the case may be, we dare not ignore the influence of Greco-Roman theology in our accounts of Christological development in the Mediterranean world of the first three centuries.

[77] Tertullian writes, "[T]he Father is not the same as the Son, since they differ one from the other in the mode of their being. For the Father is the entire substance, but the Son is a derivation and portion of the whole, as He Himself acknowledges: "My Father is greater than I." In the Psalm His inferiority is described as being "a little lower than the angels." Thus the Father is distinct from the Son, being greater than the Son" (*Against Praxeas* 9). Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, trans., Holmes, vol. 3, *Ante Nice Fathers* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003).

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