



PAUL COPAN *and* MICHAEL
M. C. REARDON, *eds.*

TRANSFORMED

into the

SAME
IMAGE

CONSTRUCTIVE
INVESTIGATIONS
into the DOCTRINE
of DEIFICATION



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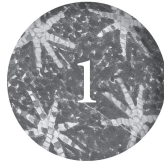
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CONFORMITY *to* DIVINE MESSIAH *in* PAUL

L. ANN JERVIS

INHERENT TO THE CONVERSATION about deification is the question: Into whom are the being-deified being deified? David Litwa rightly notes that *deification* etymologically means something like “God-making.”¹ This raises the question of the character and identity of the deity into whom humans are made. This essay offers a perspective on deification in Paul by focusing on to whom it is that Paul thinks believers are transformed.

It is plain to me that Paul thinks that the faithful are in the process of being changed into the likeness of Christ. Paul says as much in Romans 8:29. Moreover, I regard Paul’s prevalent union-with-Christ theme as chief among the ways Paul indicates his conviction that the faithful take on the life of Christ. As the apostle says in Galatians, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20 ESV). Though connecting deification with Paul’s union-with-Christ emphasis is certainly not a consensus view among Pauline scholars, I will not here argue for it.² Rather,

¹David Litwa, *We Are Being Transformed: Deification in Paul’s Soteriology* (Boston: de Gruyter, 2012), 6. Litwa summarizes well the evidence for treating Paul’s soteriology as a form of deification (11-13).

²Recently, Teresa Morgan in particular has challenged the idea that Paul’s “in Christ” theme has anything to do with participation in the person of Christ, let alone with deification. See Morgan, *Being “in Christ” in the Letters of Paul: Saved Through Christ and in His Hands* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020). On the other hand, see Albert Schweitzer and those influenced by him. Though not using the terminology of *deification*, Schweitzer speaks of those in union with Christ as “those who by transformation have taken on the resurrection mode of existence, which is thought of as eternal.” See Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, trans. William Montgomery (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 94.

my starting point is that Paul conceived of union with Christ as allowing for transformation into Christ, whom Paul understood to be the divine Son of God. To clarify: I take it that Paul regards Christ as divine, that the faithful are in the process of transformation from one degree of glory to another (that is, transformation into Christ's image [2 Cor 3:18]), and so it is appropriate to speak of conformity to Christ under the category of deification.

To talk about deification in Paul is, then, to raise the question of the identity of Christ. This question quickly becomes: To what aspect of Christ's life are believers conformed? Is conformity exclusively to Christ's incarnate life, or does it include conformity to his life prior to and subsequent to his incarnation? I suggest that since the apostle's understanding of Christ's life with God and so his divinity defines Paul's understanding of Christ's human life, we must take this into consideration when thinking about deification. It is Christ's divine, nonhuman existence that shapes the apostle's understanding of Christ's human life.³ The obvious fact that Paul talks much less about the human Christ than about the risen and exalted Christ (and also about Christ prior to incarnation) underscores this. When we talk about deification in Paul—that is, becoming like Christ—we need to include, if not focus on, the Christ that Paul focuses on: the one who was in the form of God (Phil 2:6), who lives at God's right hand (Rom 8:34), and who is highly exalted (Phil 2:9).⁴ That is, since Christ in Paul is primarily the being who lives with God, our understanding of who it is who believers are transformed into must take this into account. There has to my knowledge been little investigation of Christ's nonincarnate life in regard to deification. This is the focus of my essay.

I begin with the observation that, curious though it may be, Pauline interpreters regularly speak of deification in the same breath as assimilation to

³I work in this essay with only the undisputed letters. Consequently, I do not take into account a passage such as Col 2:9. (Gordon Fee's claim that Paul thinks Christ is divine in his incarnated life relies heavily on the disputed letters. See Fee, *Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007], esp. 500-512.) It remains a matter of controversy what Paul means in the undisputed letters when he writes that Christ came in the likeness of human flesh or in the form of a servant. A passage such as Gal 4:4 demonstrates Paul's opacity: the apostle does not in any way make explicit that when God's Son is born of a woman the Son maintains his divinity, though that God's Son is able to redeem those under the law might imply that he does.

⁴Below I make observations on Phil 3:10-11.

Christ. This oddity rightly assumes that Paul thinks of Christ as divine but wrongly conveys the idea that Paul does not make a distinction between Christ and God.⁵ We should, however, maintain clarity about the fact that for Paul the faithful are being deified into the likeness not of God the Father but of Jesus Christ, God's Son. The ancient world (both Jews and non-Jews) conceived there to be many deities inhabiting the cosmos.⁶ I suggest that Paul thought of Jesus Christ as a divinity superior to all others, apart from God the Father.

As just mentioned, I contend that union with Christ, which allows for conformity to Christ, is for Paul much more expansive than conformity with Christ's earthly life. It involves, and essentially so, conformity to Christ's exalted life, life which includes all of Christ's time—Christ's time prior to his incarnation, the time of his incarnated life, and the time of his life post-resurrection.⁷ To be noted is that when Paul describes conformity to aspects of Christ's earthly life, Christ's exalted life literarily and conceptually surrounds Christ's incarnated life. The curious order in Philippians 3:10 perhaps demonstrates this most clearly. After Paul declares that he seeks to know Christ, the apostle states his longing to know the power of Christ's resurrection before describing his desire to share Christ's sufferings and to be conformed to Christ's death. Paul continues by expressing hope to attain resurrection from the dead.⁸ Here we see that Paul wraps reference to conforming to aspects of Christ's incarnated life with references to Christ's exalted life.

Paul marries baptism with Christ's death to the possibility of walking in newness of life/resurrection life (Rom 6:3-4). The apostle describes the consequence of being crucified with Christ as Christ living in him (Gal 2:21). He then goes on to describe Christ (the Son of God) as the one who gave himself, that is, died (Gal 2:21). Since the one who died lives in Paul, again, crucifixion

⁵For instance, Michael Gorman's contribution to recognizing theosis (the term Gorman chooses for deification) in Paul focuses on conformity to Christ while claiming that for Paul "God has the same shape as Jesus." See Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 34.

⁶See Paula Fredricksen, "How High Can Early High Christology Be?," in *Monotheism and Christology in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, ed. Matthew V. Novenson (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 292-319.

⁷See L. Ann Jarvis, *Paul and Time: Life in the Temporality of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2023).

⁸Does the curious εἰς τὴν ἐξανάστασιν (Phil 3:11) signal Paul's understanding that his resurrection will be derivative of Christ's?

is enveloped by life; conformity is not to Christ's earthly life except as that life is defined by Christ's resurrected and exalted (divine) life. Such is the dynamic also in Galatians 5:24-25: belonging to Christ means not only crucifying the flesh but living by the Spirit. Boasting in the cross of Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world is crucified to Paul and vice versa, means new creation (Gal 6:14-15). The cross—an event in Christ's earthly life—only means something in light of its power to introduce new creation. Conformity to Christ is more expansive than conformity to his earthly life.

In search of greater clarity about the character of Pauline deification, I will discuss two features of Christ's identity. These are features that, as far as I can tell, have not had much play in the conversation. I summarize these features here and expand on them shortly.

The first is that Paul understands the term *Christ* to mean "Messiah." While the apostle understood Messiah in light of Jesus crucified, risen, and exalted rather than within the boundaries of Jewish expectations, the fact of Paul's abundant use of the word Χριστός indicates that he, along with his fellow Jews, conceives of Messiah as God's saving agent.⁹ Paul's choice to emphasize heavily that Jesus is Messiah, that is, God's redeemer, must be a significant factor in our understanding of the being into whom the faithful are transformed. As far as I can tell, this understanding is very rarely brought into conversation with the topic of deification in Paul.

The other feature of Christ's identity to which I draw attention is that, for the apostle, Jesus is a *divine* Messiah.¹⁰ Paul conceived that though for a few decades Jesus Messiah had an earthly sojourn, Jesus Messiah lives with the eternal God. I propose that, for Paul, Jesus is Messiah not only when he is on

⁹As Peter Schäfer writes: "Messianism' denotes the belief in a salvation figure (savior, redeemer) who terminates the present order and ushers in a new order of justice and blessing. Very often, but not always, the establishment of the new order is connected with the notion of the eschaton." See Schäfer, "Diversity and Interactions: Messiahs in Early Judaism," in *Toward the Millennium: Messianic Expectations from the Bible to Waco*, ed. Peter Schäfer and Mark R. Cohen (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 15. Matthew Novenson comments on the relatively rare occurrence of Χριστός in the literature of early Judaism compared with the extensive occurrence of Χριστός in Paul. See Novenson, *Christ Among the Messiahs: Christ Language in Paul and Messiah Language in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 2.

¹⁰See also Matthew Thiessen, who intriguingly writes that "believers in Jesus participate in [Messiah's] divinity even as they await the resurrection." Thiessen, *A Jewish Paul: The Messiah's Herald to the Gentiles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2023), 126.

earth but always. That is, both Christ's life prior to his incarnation and his exalted life are as Messiah. It is, then, not that Jesus is Messiah only during his human life and/or as an eschatological Messiah. Jesus is divine Messiah.

THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN GOD AND CHRIST IN PAUL

My contention that Paul thinks that Christ is divine is not to say that the apostle thinks of Christ and God as one and the same. Rather, it seems abundantly clear that Paul thinks that though both are divine, there is a clear distinction between God and Christ. Paul's differentiation between God and Christ is clear, for instance, in 1 Corinthians 8:5-8, where, in the context of acknowledging that there are many so-called gods, Paul says that for "us" there is one God the Father and one Lord Jesus Christ. Clearly, Paul identifies both God and Jesus Christ as divine, in distinction from the so-called gods. However, while God and Christ share divinity, they are distinct from each other. God is the one from whom all things are and for whom "we" exist, whereas, though Christ also is the one through whom are all things, unlike God, it is through Christ that "we" are. Both are divine, and they are cocreators, but God is the divine being *unto* whom we are, whereas Christ is the one *through* whom we are. God is the one to whom we are to look exclusively, and so, in the patriarchal framework of Paul's day, he is designated Father. Christ, on the other hand, is the conduit allowing us to be what we should be/can be for God. Also to be noted is that Paul envisions Christ at the eschaton subjecting himself to God. This clarifies that there is a distinction between God and Christ (1 Cor 15:28). First Corinthians 3:23 summarizes it this way: "you are Christ's, and Christ is God's" (ESV).

Whether or not the customary term *deification* is the best label for Paul's conformity-to-Christ theme, for the sake of intellectual clarity it is important to recognize that Paul does not collapse the identities of God and Christ. It is to conformity with Christ (not God) that Paul beckons his hearers.¹¹

To Paul's understanding of Christ we now turn more fully.

¹¹This is one of the factors that distinguish the disputed from the undisputed letters; see Eph 5:1. Ben Blackwell's important contribution helpfully names this Pauline theme *Christosis*. See Blackwell, *Christosis: Engaging Paul's Soteriology with His Patristic Interpreters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011).

CHRIST AS MESSIAH

I, along with some others, propose that the word Χριστός has messianic meaning for Paul.¹² This is not the standard understanding. Most Pauline scholars follow Wilhelm Bousset and many others who claim that Paul understands Χριστός simply to be Jesus' other name.¹³ Andrew Chester is of this ilk, and his words may serve to summarize this viewpoint: "Paul uses Χριστός . . . almost entirely as a proper name . . . , not as a title as such."¹⁴ This dismissal of messianic meaning for Christ extends, of course, to Paul's union-with-Christ theme.¹⁵

I concur with Matthew Novenson and Thomas Hewitt that Paul uses Χριστός messianically and does so in conversation with Scripture.¹⁶ As Hewitt writes, "Paul was a participant in ancient Jewish messiah discourse."¹⁷ Jews who took part in messianic discourse spoke about a savior who acted in obedience to God and for the sake of God's saving purposes. Likewise, Novenson considers that Paul means something messianic when using Χριστός. While Novenson's contribution does not extend to defining exactly what Messiah means for Paul, his claim, based on a wide survey of ancient texts, that Messiah means something honorific and refers to someone "who is and who should be in charge" is immensely helpful.¹⁸

I take it, then, that the word *Christ* signifies for Paul something important and essential about Jesus' identity: Jesus as Messiah is one who acts on God's behalf and has done something victorious, worthy of honor. He is the one who should reign. A significant factor in how Paul makes sense of Jesus is as the obedient Savior from God—the one who does God's saving will.

¹²See also Adela Yarbro Collins, who notes that *Christ* means "Messiah" for Paul. Adela Yarbro Collins and John J. Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God: Divine, Human, and Angelic Messianic Figures in Biblical and Related Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 122.

¹³Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos: A History of the Belief in Christ from the Beginnings of Christianity to Irenaeus*, trans. John E. Steely (New York: Abingdon, 1970), 121.

¹⁴Andrew Chester, "Messianism, Mediators, and Pauline Christology," in *Messiah and Exaltation*, WUNT 207 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 382.

¹⁵J. Thomas Hewitt writes: "Modern interpreters of Paul have almost universally ignored the category 'messiah' when describing Paul's use of the phrase ἐν Χριστῷ even though Χριστός means 'messiah.'" Hewitt, *Messiah and Scripture: Paul's "In Christ" Idiom in Its Ancient Jewish Context*, WUNT 522 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 2.

¹⁶Novenson, *Christ Among the Messiahs*; Hewitt, *Messiah and Scripture*.

¹⁷Hewitt, *Messiah and Scripture*, 58.

¹⁸Matthew Novenson, *The Grammar of Messianism: An Ancient Jewish Political Idiom and Its Users* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 272.

Paul, however, filled out the contours and content of *Christ* not with previous conceptions of Messiah but with his conceptions of Jesus himself. Consequently, in addition to agreeing with Novenson and Hewitt, I find myself sharing strange scholarly company with Nils Dahl, who is famous for his statement, “Paul’s letters represent a strikingly advanced stage in the evolution that transformed *Christos* from a messianic designation to Jesus’ second proper name.” It is when Dahl states that “the messiahship of Jesus is essential to the inner coherence of [Paul’s] Christology” that I am in hearty agreement. Dahl writes: “The messiahship of Jesus had for Paul himself a greater significance than emerges directly from the usage of the name ‘Christ’ in his epistles.” Moreover, Dahl thinks that the apostle’s convictions about the identity of Jesus are shaped primarily by the life of the earthly Jesus, which was one of “humiliation, obedience, and suffering.”¹⁹ As Dahl writes, “The title received its content from the person to whom it referred, more than from a preconceived notion of what the Messiah would be like.”²⁰ With this also I agree, though, as I will emphasize, the person Paul understands Christ to be is not only the crucified but also the divine Messiah.

Before proceeding, it is important to take time to distinguish my understanding from that of another voice—N. T. Wright. To say that Wright’s work emphasizes that for Paul Χριστός means Messiah would be a major understatement. Ever since his Oxford DPhil thesis, “The Messiah and the People of God” (1980), Wright’s claim that *Christ* means “Messiah” for Paul has been an essential foundation of his voluminous output. Impressively, Wright takes into account the fact that Paul regularly uses the word *Christ* in prepositional phrases. According to Wright, the meaning of phrases that combine Christ with the prepositions ἐν, εἰς, σύν, and διά is that the Messiah is by definition incorporative: “The ‘incorporative’ thought . . . is best explained in terms of his belief that Jesus was Israel’s Messiah.”²¹ Wright argues that Paul, on the basis of ideas about kingship in ancient Israel, understands the

¹⁹Nils Dahl, “The Messiahship of Jesus in Paul,” in *Jesus the Christ: The Historical Origins of Christological Doctrine*, ed. Donald H. Juel (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 18, 21, 19, italics original.

²⁰Nils Dahl, “The Crucified Messiah and the Endangered Promises,” in Dahl, *Jesus the Christ*, 65.

²¹N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 4 (London: SPCK, 2013), 825. See N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 44.

meaning of *Messiah* as the representative of the whole people of God.²² Wright claims that for Paul “*Jesus, as Messiah, has drawn together the identity and vocation of Israel upon himself.*”²³ Wright is to be commended not only for offering a reading of Χριστός that was (and is) very much against the scholarly grain but for recognizing that his reading had to make sense of the theme of union with Christ.

I agree with Wright that Paul understood Χριστός to mean “Messiah” and with his recognition that this opinion must make sense of the propositional Christ phrases and with Paul’s union-with-Christ theme in general. However, I do not agree that, for Paul, Jesus Messiah is the representative of Israel.²⁴ Apart from the problem that this leads inescapably to supersessionism (the church replaces Israel), this view rests on understanding messiahship as tied entirely to Jesus’ earthly life (including his resurrection). Wright’s Messiah is a historical person linked inextricably to the historical life of Israel and Israel’s expectations. What Wright misses in my view is that, for Paul, Jesus’ messiahship is not confined to his earthly and resurrected life. Only if this is missed can Wright make his famous claims that what Israel expected from God is what God did for Messiah as the representative of Israel, and that Messiah and election are of a piece so that the church is Messiah’s, the people of the Messiah.²⁵ However, when we see that Paul thought that Jesus was the divine Messiah, Wright’s claims no longer hold. To that we now turn.

MESSIAH AS DIVINE IN PAUL

There is a deep and widespread assumption that for Paul *Messiah* meant exclusively the human Jesus. As just mentioned, Wright assumes this. He describes Χριστός as “the same human being” as Jesus, “the man from

²²It is to be noted that in *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Wright changes his mind, acknowledging about his use of texts from 2 Samuel that “I do not now think (as I once did) that these interesting biblical passages themselves constitute the explanation for [Paul’s] usage” (830). Matthew Novenson and J. Thomas Hewitt rightly criticize Wright’s understanding of the origin of Paul’s “in Christ” theme. See Novenson and Hewitt, “Participationism and Messiah Christology in Paul,” in *God and the Faithfulness of Paul: A Critical Examination of the Pauline Theology of N. T. Wright*, ed. Cristoph Heilig, J. Thomas Hewitt, and Michael F. Bird (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 393–416, here 395–401.

²³Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 825, italics original.

²⁴Wright, *Climax of the Covenant*, 46.

²⁵Wright, *Climax of the Covenant*, 47; *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 815, 833.

Nazareth, who died on the cross and rose again as a human being, and through whose human work, Paul believed Israel's God had achieved his long purposes.²⁶ Interestingly, in service of Dahl's apt claim that Paul does not conceive of Jesus as Messiah in light of a "previously fixed conception," Dahl assumes that Paul understands Messiah "from the person and work of Jesus Christ" and that "for Paul the earthly Jesus is the Christ."²⁷ That is, Dahl, unlike Wright, proposes that *Christ* for Paul was on the way to becoming a second name, yet he nevertheless shares with Wright the opinion that Paul identified Messiah with Jesus' human life.

I offer the view that Paul's understanding of Jesus Messiah included not only his human life but also his life as a divinity with God. That is, for Paul, Jesus' incarnation is the human manifestation of the divine Messiah.²⁸ There is not space to argue for this view in depth. However, there are two features of Paul's thought that I think validate it.

The first is that perhaps Paul's most explicit description of the nature of conformity to the incarnate Christ (Phil 3:10-11) is based on a claim that Jesus Christ was *ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ* (Phil 2:6). Being in the form of God is not to be God. I hear this phrase aligning with what I noted earlier—Paul distinguishes between God and Jesus Christ. However, being in the form of God does indicate divinity.²⁹ April Deconick hears Paul well in this passage: Jesus comes from heaven as God's manifestation.³⁰ Jörg Frey's suggestion that Philippians 2:6-11 echoes "Greco-Roman concepts of the epiphany of gods who simply appear in human shape or undergo a metamorphosis which implies a mere temporal, and not real, change" hits the mark in terms of Philippians 2:6a.³¹ There is, of course, a conversation to be had about whether this view accords with what Paul goes on to say about Christ emptying himself and taking the form of a servant. Since our focus is on what

²⁶Wright, *Climax of the Covenant*, 46.

²⁷Dahl, "Messiahship of Jesus in Paul," 17, 19.

²⁸As noted above, it is unclear whether this entails for Paul that the incarnate Christ is at once both divine and human.

²⁹So also Wright, "Jesus Christ Is Lord: Philippians 2:5-11," in Wright, *Climax of the Covenant*.

³⁰April Deconick, "The One God Is No Simple Matter," in Novenson, *Monotheism and Christology*, 266.

³¹Jörg Frey, "Between Jewish Monotheism and Proto-trinitarian Relations: The Making and Character of Johannine Christology," in Novenson, *Monotheism and Christology*, 210.

Paul thought of Christ's life in addition to that of his human sojourn, I will not discuss whether Paul thought that when Christ poured himself out, he changed from being divine to being only and entirely human. I do, however, note that Romans 1:3 and Galatians 4:4 indicate that Paul thought that during his incarnated life, Jesus Christ was truly a human being.

While it is several paragraphs after the reference to ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ (Phil 2:6) that Paul details aspects of conforming to aspects of the incarnate life of Christ (Phil 3:8-11), this latter passage should be understood in light of what Paul has declared: that the one to whom he would conform is in the form of God. It is further to be noted that Paul names that one as Christ Jesus (Phil 2:5). Wright, interestingly, ignores this fact, stating instead that Paul talks about “the one who was eternally ‘equal with God,’” and the “pre-existent one.”³² Wright's stance here is most likely linked to his assumption that Paul understood Messiah to refer to the human Jesus. I suggest, however, that we take Paul's words straight up: it is “Christ Jesus” who is in the form of God.³³ Furthermore, Jesus Christ is highly exalted. Messiah, in other words, lives life both as a divinity with God and as a human. He is not only Messiah when living a human life.

The second feature of Paul's thought indicating that he considers the Messiah to be divine is that Messiah and Son of God are for the apostle the same being.³⁴ This is seen clearly in Romans 1:3-4, where the descendant of David (an obvious reference to a messiah) is God's Son. We might further note that the project of God's Son is to redeem (Gal 4:4)—a messianic task. Since Paul demonstrates that he thinks the Son of God is divine when he writes that God sent his Son (Gal 4:4; Rom 8:3), this is corroborative evidence that for the apostle Messiah (the same being as the Son) is divine.³⁵

³²Wright, *Climax of the Covenant*, 90.

³³Thiessen comes close to this view (though not on the basis of Philippians; Thiessen uses 1 Cor 10 and Gal 4:4), stating, “the Messiah for Paul is a divine being of some sort even before his enfleshment as a human” (*Jewish Paul*, 114).

³⁴Adela Yarbro Collins rightly states that for Paul “son of God” is equivalent to “messiah” (Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 106).

³⁵Fee opines that in Gal 4:4 Paul is speaking of “the eternal Son of God . . . and that Christ is himself divine,” and that Rom 8:3 refers to “God's sending the eternal Son” (*Pauline Christology*, 213, 245). J. L. Martyn is more reticent. Gal 4:4 refers both to the Son's this-worldly and other-worldly character. However, Martyn seems to undercut this reticence when he speaks of the Son's sending as “an invasion of cosmic scope, reflecting the apocalyptic certainty that

It is, then, not only that Jesus Messiah, Son of God, is exalted after his work on earth is done. Rather, the human sojourn of Jesus Messiah was the earthly manifestation of the divine Jesus Messiah. This is a larger claim than that Paul thought of Jesus as existing with God prior to his incarnation.³⁶ Though Paul states only that God is eternal (Rom 1:20), I propose that Paul understands Jesus Messiah to be divine, which by implication means that he too is eternal.³⁷

Wright wrote a fine and important article on Philippians 2:5-11, by which he convinced me that the rare word ἀρπαγμός in Philippians 2:6 indicates the attitude of taking advantage of a status. Wright contends that in this verse Paul is saying that Christ Jesus “did not regard his equality with God *as something to be used for his own advantage*.” In other words, Christ Jesus was equal to God prior to his kenotic journey. I puzzle, however, over Wright’s resistance to accepting Paul’s own designation of the person who is equal to God prior to his kenosis. Wright speaks of “the pre-existent one . . . eternally ‘equal with God.’” Yet, Paul says plainly that it is Christ Jesus who emptied himself. It is not an unidentified person who emptied himself and then, as Wright says, “*became* Jesus.” Wright’s resistance here may stem from his assumption that being the Messiah equals being a human. This is strongly indicated by Wright’s declaration that “[Philippians 2] has nothing to do with the idea of a pre-existent *man* (hence, *a fortiori*, it does not refer either to a pre-existent *Messiah*).”³⁸

However, in Philippians 2, Paul seems quite plainly to consider Messiah as living a divine life not only after his obedient death and exaltation but also prior to his incarnation, and living that pre-incarnation life not as an unidentified eternal being but as Messiah Jesus. We see something similar in 1 Corinthians 10:4, where Paul claims that Christ was the rock from which “our fathers” drank when they were with Moses in the wilderness.³⁹ At the

redemption has come from outside, changing the very world in which human beings live . . . in this sense the Son is a distinctly other-worldly figure who has his origin in God.” Martyn, *Galatians* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 408. Martyn’s view that the Son’s origin is in God would seem to accord with understanding the Son of God as divine.

³⁶Thiessen hears Paul well: “God’s son preexisted his birth” (*Jewish Paul*, 72). I am saying this and more.

³⁷Chris Tilling rightly distinguishes between being preexistent and being eternal. See Tilling, *Paul’s Divine Christology* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 37. My suggestion is that since Paul thinks Messiah is divine, it is not only that the Messiah preexisted but that he always exists.

³⁸Wright, “Jesus Christ Is Lord: Philippians 2:5-11,” 79, 90, 94, 96, italics original.

³⁹Matthew Thiessen writes, “Paul’s claim that the wilderness rock was Christ contains within it a surprisingly high christological implication: by claiming that the rock was Christ, Paul identifies

least this passage conveys that Paul understood Christ as present to and sustaining of Israel long before the human Jesus. Paul's description of the Messiah offering life-saving sustenance during Israel's wilderness wandering indicates that he thinks of Messiah as a divine being who existed at least as far back as the time of Moses.

Second Corinthians 8:9 names "our Lord Jesus Christ" as the one who, though he was rich, for our sake became poor. There may be a few assumptions on the part of readers that obstruct hearing what Paul says: that it was our Lord Jesus Messiah who though he was rich became poor. I have named one assumption in connection with Wright: that Messiah refers only to a human person. There are also the assumptions that the name *Jesus* refers to a human person and that for Jesus, "Lord" is a status that occurs only after exaltation. Though controversial, I hear Paul saying that it is Lord Jesus Christ who was rich, that is, lived with God, yet for our sakes became poor, that is, became incarnate.

Likewise, when Paul in Romans 1:3-4 identifies Jesus Christ our Lord as God's Son, I hear the apostle signifying that the divine Son of God is Jesus Christ our Lord. This strongly implies that there always is Jesus Christ our Lord. When the apostle says in 1 Corinthians 8:6 that there is one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist, I take Paul to be naming the Lord Jesus Christ as the eternal being who partnered with God in creation.

Paul, I propose, understood Jesus as the divine Messiah who, at a particular historical moment, was revealed in the flesh of a human person.⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

I offer here the idea that to affirm that Paul's thought of conformity to Christ as a form of deification is at once to explore who Paul thought Christ to be. I suggest that unless we think the apostle thought of Christ as divine, we cannot talk about deification in Paul, since the apostle only talks about

Christ with Israel's God. Just as ancient Israelites could envisage God becoming embodied in numerous objects (even at the same time), Paul envisages Christ becoming embodied in a rock." Thiessen, "'The Rock Was Christ': The Fluidity of Christ's Body in 1 Cor. 10.4," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 36 (2013): 121.

⁴⁰As mentioned, I do not engage here with conversation about what Paul thought concerning the nature of the incarnate Christ—whether the human Christ was both fully human and divine to one degree or another. I do find it interesting that Paul does not allude to Jesus' miracles.

conformity to Christ, not to God. My exploration of Paul's identification of Jesus as Messiah and my contention that the apostle understood Messiah as divine (and almost certainly as eternal) invites further reflection. If this is correct, does it say that obedience to God's saving will is not only the fundamental and eternal character of Christ/Messiah but is also to be the fundamental shape of those joined to him? Even, perhaps, that the shape of eternal life is obedience to God?

Is Paul's stress on faith (understood as obedience [Rom 1:5]) the result of his conviction that Jesus is Messiah, the obedient one who does the will of God?⁴¹ That is, does Paul understand faith itself as an enactment of conformity to Jesus Messiah? (Gal 3:26 might be read this way.) Does Paul think that those joined to Christ take on messianic roles? Is there a distinction between Christ's work when he was human Messiah and what is possible and/or expected of believers?⁴² Perhaps the most difficult question is: When Paul speaks about believers' transformation from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor 3:18), is he talking about ontological transformation? If so, does this lead finally to there being no distinction between God and those joined to Christ?⁴³ (Does 1 Cor 15:28 imply that this is the case?) As always, deep study of Paul raises from the depths not only treasures but opportunities for new adventures for our minds and hearts.

With the lens of deification, asking what deity Paul thinks the faithful are made into puts our gaze right where Paul's is: on the divine Messiah Jesus, whose focus in turn is solely, completely, unalterably, and eternally on doing God's saving will.

⁴¹Paul's understanding of the faithfulness/obedience of Christ includes Christ's faithfulness in his life with God beyond his incarnate life. This will be incontrovertibly demonstrated at the eschaton, when Christ hands over the kingdom to God the Father and subjects himself to God (1 Cor 15:24-28). See Jervis, *Paul and Time*, 84-85.

⁴²See my reflections on this in *Paul and Time*. In that book I also reflect on how the human experiences of suffering and physical death are transformed by living in Christ.

⁴³There is important conversation about the degree or kind of ontological transformation Paul might be talking about. Litwa reviews various understandings, from metaphorical deification to becoming divine (*We Are Being Transformed*, 6-10). See also the unpublished dissertation by Michael Reardon, "So Also Is the Christ?: Ecclesial Deification in Pauline Soteriology" (PhD diss., Toronto School of Theology, 2023).

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