

Episode 159 Jesus among the Gods with Michael Bird

This transcript has been edited for clarity and space.

Michael Bird

Hi, I'm Dr. Michael Bird. I'm the Deputy Principal at Ridley College in Melbourne, Australia. I am an Anglican priest, a New Testament scholar, and a general lover of the church. I really enjoy tennis, love Jesus, and I absolutely despise coffee with a passion. And I just like doing anything studying the Bible, studying early Christian texts, thinking about what it means to be a follower of Christ in today's world. I love some real epic Bible nerd stuff, getting into the intricacies of Greek, talking about the church fathers, wrestling with modern theologians, struggling with the big topics of our day, like, what does it mean to be a human being, what is this thing we call identity?

How does sexuality affects who we are, why we should listen more to the global church, what should we think about Christian nationalism? And yes, I enjoy all that stuff. I enjoy researching it, talking about it, and figuring it out, in a community with others in my own college, in my own church, what it means to be a follower of Jesus in my own context. And I'm always glad to talk about that and share that with others, including my great host David Capes.

Michael Bird

Dr. Michael Bird, Mike, good to see you. Welcome to The Stone Chapel Podcast.

Michael Bird

David, thank you for having me.

David Capes

What an introduction. That told us a lot of things about you. Right there we have your CV. Not your CV exactly. But we have a lot of what makes you tick, which is great.

Michael Bird

Well, there's a lot that makes me tick. But the main thing that makes me tick is the attempt to have a faith seeking understanding.

David Capes

Well, you've done a great deal about that. You're very active. Let's talk a little bit about some of the work that you've done. You've done lots of books, and we'll put links to them in the show notes. But you're also a very active blogger. So if people want to find out more about Mike Bird, how would they do that on the internet?

Michael Bird

You can find me at michaelfbird.substack.com. That's where I do my blogging these days. And I'm also on Twitter a bit and even started on that thing called Threads, although I can't really figure out how to use it properly.

David Capes

Well, you're very public. And we've talked earlier today about how well versed you are not only in politics in Australia, but also in America. I'm learning things, sometimes listening to your blog and watching you and reading your words about what's going on here in America, because I just don't watch that here.

Michael Bird

Yes, well, I tend to think the politics of America is too important to leave it just to Americans. I know some Americans may not like hearing that! But you have to appreciate that, if you speak English, and if you read CNN, you're on Twitter or Facebook, you are inundated with American news and commentary all the time. I'm hearing news about Donald Trump's indictments, I'm hearing about the bushfires in Hawaii, I'm finding out about fans complaining about Taylor Swift tickets in America. So in my news cycle, besides the local Australian and Melbourne stuff, I'm getting inundated with American stuff. So I feel like I live in the 51st state of America, simply by being in this Anglophone world.

David Capes

Well, we'll welcome you. We'll put a 51st star on the flag welcoming Australia to the family.

Michael Bird

Oh, that'd be great. And I've always wanted to be the governor of an American state. I like North Carolina. I think I'd make a good governor of North Carolina. I can pull that off!

David Capes

Well we're here today to talk about your book. It's an excellent book called *Jesus among the Gods: Early Christology in the Greco-Roman World*, and is published by Baylor University Press. It's been out a little while so I'm a little slow getting to it, I know. You've probably done lots of interviews on it. But I wanted to take my stab at a conversation with you for our audience, because I want them to know you. You've already been to the Lanier Theological Library to lecture back in 2016. And we are looking forward to the day you can come back. But in the meantime, this is a terrific book. I have it right next to my book by Larry Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods*. Because these two books remind me of each other in some ways. That's a pretty good place to be on my shelf.

Michael Bird

Yes! I should say for those who don't know, the book is actually dedicated to David. So I'm thanking him for many years of friendship, and also for his own contribution to the study of Christology in the New Testament. We do have a common interest in talking about the divinity of Christ in the New Testament,

David Capes

And in the early church, and how that manifests itself in the first, second, third centuries. And we actually co-edit a project called *Studies in Early Christology* that we're working on, and we've got several volumes coming out this year. We had one come out last year titled *In the Form of a God* with Andrew Pearman. He did a great job, wonderful guy and enjoyed my conversations with him. When we think about your book, what was the big idea for you, as you wrote this book?

Michael Bird

Well, the idea goes back to a debate I did with Bart Ehrman, several years ago, when his book came out on how Jesus became God. He's got his own particular thesis about how the early church came to the conclusion that Jesus was God. And to his credit, he says, it wasn't a long drawn out process. As in, followers thought he was a human, then at the Council of Nicaea (325 AD), they made him God.

David Capes

So 300 years later, right.

Michael Bird

Yes. This is sort of a Dan Brown view. Ehrman is good that the early church regarded Jesus as God pretty much from the beginning, at least from the moment of belief in his resurrection and exultation. And I think, Ehrman, when I did my critique of him, I probably should have given him a little bit more credit on this side. And the credit is on in what did they mean by 'God'? Because the word God is not universal. It's not a monolithic, quality or entity. There are different ways of being divine in antiquity. In the ancient world, there's this kind of a spectrum of divinity, different definitions of divinity. And on that point, I think he was right, which then begs the question, where in ancient notions of divinity did Jesus fit, in the minds of the early church, the apostles.

And the second thing that matches up with this is when I was spending some time up in the Pacific Northwest, hanging out with my good friends at Logos Bible Software, and I went into a little bookstore and I found an old Loeb copy of Plutarch's *Moralia*. I think I can probably see a copy behind you there,. You've got some back there in your green Loeb collection behind you. And he was talking about, there were two different worships of the god, Apollo. And he says, there's one type of worship where he's an unbegotten God, and another type of worship where he's a begotten God. And all that language about begotten and eternally begotten, I thought that was a technical Christian language they developed in the fourth century AD. Turns out, that's not the case at all.

In the ancient world amongst Greeks, Romans, Jews, and then Christians as well, they could divide deities, gods into almost two categories. There were these unknown unbegotten or absolute divine beings like Zeus or Jupiter, or Dios, as he was called. And then there's these begotten [gods]. They're these people who get promoted or elevated to divinity or they become deified. And that's like, a Heracles, or the healing goddess Asclepius, or Roman emperor or something like that. And it got me thinking, Well, if that is the two categories that people are using, then which one did the early Christians put Jesus into? Now, sometimes they really do use this explicit language, even in the early second century. I mean, Ignatius of Antioch, at one point says, if I read him correctly, that Jesus is unbegotten in his divinity, but begotten in his humanity. So in terms of divinity, he's got an absolute status of divinity, but He's participated also in our humanity. Which is kind of like what the Nicene Creed says,

that he's true God and true man. And you find similar things in somewhere like the Epistle to Diognetus where there's the statement that Jesus is an absolute divine being. He's a king because he's the son of a king. Okay, so the son of a king is a king, like the son of a duck is a duck.

And yet it also says if you are benevolent to the people around you, if you help the poor, you're acting like a god to them. So you've got the two ideas of divinity there, one which is absolute divinity. And then one is what I call it your euergetic divinity. But it means through your patronage, you show god-like benevolence. So you can be relationally a god by doing good things for people, or you can be an absolute deity. And that completely blew my mind and knocked several pairs of socks off. And I thought, I need to go through and do a big study of early Christianity and think, where do people place Jesus on this taxonomy of divinity?

And that led to a big rabbit hole where I was then comparing Jesus to all sorts of intermediary figures? How is Jesus similar or different to a deified emperor? How was he similar or different to ancient Greek ideas of of wisdom? Or the Logos? What's the similarities between Jesus and this mysterious son of man in the parables of Enoch? What's that got to do with Revelation? And then ancient ruler cults and all sorts of fun things? And the resulting product of that investigation was this book, *Jesus among the Gods*.

David Capes

So this is a process that you've been engaged in for a number of years. It sounds like you've been thinking about this for a while.

Michael Bird

Yes. And I've been thinking, when the early Christians called Jesus God, or divine, what did they mean by that? And how was it continuous and discontinuous within the Greco-Roman world? You know, within the Jewish thought, within the wider Hellenistic context.

David Capes

One of the things that has happened is there seemed to be a time when it was all Greco-Roman, and then a time that was all Jewish, and you didn't really need to consider the Greco-Roman. But it seems to me that you brought those things together, and wedded them. I think the analogy is that the church is closer to the synagogue than it is to the Temple of Mithras or something like that. It's closer to the synagogue and yet, it's not discontinuous, in a way with what we find in the ancient world, in Greco-Roman circles.

Michael Bird

Yes, because you've got the problems that some people want to say Judaism and Hellenism or the Greco-Roman world were completely set apart. They were partitioned off from each other, doing their own separate thing. And then you have the other view that says, basically, Hellenistic Judaism is just Hellenism without a foreskin. In other words, they want to put in that kind of bland way, as if Hellenistic Judaism was just Hellenism. But that's not the case. I don't think either view is correct. And I use the example of the book of Hebrews. The book of Hebrews, written in Greek draws on a lot of styles of

Greek rhetoric. There's a bit of an influence of even Platonic philosophy, although I think it may be a little bit overdrawn, but it's clearly part of Hellenistic culture.

But 25% of the book [of Hebrews] is based on quotations from the Old Testament. Okay. 25% of the book. I mean, that's the Greek translation of the Old Testament. But you know, that goes to show that it's not either-or. It's the book of Hebrews participating in Hellenistic culture. But the way it provides its own discourse and description of who Jesus is, is largely using the Old Testament. And that for me is indicative of the point I'm trying to make. We don't have to choose between Greco-Roman or Jewish views. We've got to understand the confluence and the interface between them, and how that applies in different parts of the New Testament. Indeed, even in early Christianity.

David Capes

And one of the things I observe with this book is the fact that you've attempted to give something that was needed, which is a kind of a taxonomy of divinity. What in that taxonomy do you think, really comes from a Greco-Roman environment?

Michael Bird

Well, I think there's a couple of things. First of all, the idea that there is a God who was unbegotten is the absolute daddy. Now I think in the Jewish world, they have the same thing, but they would talk about the uncreated Creator. Or to use the language of Isaiah. I am the Lord your God, there is none like me. Or to whom can we compare you? So there is a sense in Jewish monotheism, in which Yahweh is not the only Divine Being. There's angels, demons, all these sort of lesser gods. I mean, Yahweh is God of gods, right. But Yahweh is species unique. It's like comparing the Atlanta Braves with the Griffin Under Twelves baseball team. That's two teams in the same sport. But they're not in the same leagues. The Atlanta Braves, you know, up against the Griffin Under Twelves. Griffin's a little town outside Atlanta for those who don't know.

David Capes

How do you know that? I'm just mystified by that.

Michael Bird

I had a friend who was from Griffin and I went and visited him and I once met a Presbyterian missionary in Australia. And he said to him where you're from, and he said, I'm from just outside Atlanta. And I said, let me guess, Griffin. And then he looked at me with a sense of shock, that he had met an Australian who'd heard of the city of Griffin. He was dumbfounded.

David Capes

So that is a really interesting analogy for thinking about divinity. There's been a lot of conversation about monotheism and whether the term monotheism ought to be retired. What are your thoughts on it? Paula Fredrickson, I think was one of the first people to talk about that. Is it a useful term?

Michael Bird

I think it is a useful term. It depends what you mean if you think that Yahweh is the only divine being there is, an absolute metaphysical monotheism. Then no, it's not correct. So because again Yahweh is

a God of gods. So there's this heavenly constellation of angels, lesser things. But again, the point of monotheism is not the number of divine beings. It is that Israel provides their worship alone to Yahweh. So it's monolatrous. This is the only God who delivers them. And this is what's emphasized in a lot of places, whether it's the Dead Sea Scrolls, or the Hebrew Bible, or Josephus, Israel's God, Yahweh is species unique. No one is in his status.

And in fact, if you accept that strong enough, you can end up with a situation where you begin talking, like Yahweh is the only god or something along those lines. And even in the Hebrew Bible, you find something a little bit like that. For example, one of my favorite lines in the Old Testament, when Naaman the Syrian gets healed. This is what he says, "Now I know there is no God in all the earth except in Israel, please accept a present from your servant". Now this guy is a pagan, but he's saying things that almost makes it sound like Israel's deity is either the only one there is or in the very least, the only one who really matters. And that's from 2 Kings 5:15.

The other thing that frustrates me is when people find some little archaeology bits like little minarets of little deities. And they find evidence of other deities being worshipped in ancient Israel, and they say, Don't you know that even the ancient Israelites were not monotheistic? To which I reply? You mean, just like the ancient prophets were always complaining about?

David Capes

Yes, this is not news!

Michael Bird

This is not news. You saying some of the Israelites we're not actually monotheists? It's exactly what the biblical prophets were complaining about most of the time. So I still think it is a useful term. If you think you will get the exclusive activity of Israel's worship and how Yahweh is species unique, I think it is a good term. And some people have tried to dispense with it. You know, Matthew Lynch, Benjamin Sommer, and some other people have done the best work recently, trying to maintain the fitness and utility of the term monotheism over and against those who are trying to somewhat dismissively get rid of it.

David Capes

Jesus among the Gods: Early Christology in the Greco-Roman World by Michael F. Bird. It's a fantastic book, and we commend it. We have copies at the Lanier Theological Library, your friendly theological library. And we just bought one today to go to Yarnton in Oxford. So that book is headed over there to be a part of that collection once that library gets established. Dr. Michael Bird, thanks for being with us today on The Stone Chapel Podcast.

Michael Bird

David, thanks for having me. And thank you for listening, to all of your audience.

A Nugget of Wisdom from Dr. Michael Bird

When someone asked me what is a great way to summarize the Christology of the New Testament, I come down to a little refrain which I believe is attributable to Martin Luther. And it goes like this: no other God have I but thee, born in a manger, died on a tree. If someone was to ask me to summarize the Christology of the New Testament that cute little refrain with its rhyme, its brevity, I think is a great way of summing it up. No other God have I but thee, born in a manger died on a tree.