

Divine Fathers, Divine Sons: Christian Theology and Family Politics in the Roman Empire

Abstract

If awarded, a Faculty Research Grant would enable me to hire two long-term graduate student research assistants to facilitate my completion of a work of interdisciplinary scholarship: *Divine Fathers, Divine Sons*. During the Roman imperial era, two famous figures received public acclamation as both “god” and “son of god”: the Roman emperor and Jesus Christ. My project investigates the ramifications stemming from the two most influential people in the Roman Empire having been considered divine sons of divine fathers. Specifically, how did the theological concept “son of god” resonate in the social and political contexts of the Roman world?

Through engagement with recent scholarship in Roman history—especially studies of family relationships, imperial ideology, and emperor worship—my research will produce the first monograph addressing this question. The book will be a fresh and provocative history of theology, politics, and family relations in early Christianity. The manuscript is in the final stage of review at Oxford University Press, from which I have recently received two positive readers’ reports. One of the readers predicted that the project “will help significantly to change the whole field,” and “the market for the book is potentially huge.” However, if the delegates from Oxford University Press decide not to move the project forward, I have received other interest from Yale University Press and Mohr Siebeck (Germany). I am also considering the “Transformation of the Classical Heritage” series at University of California Press because of its list of innovative monographs in Roman history and early Christianity.

The lion's share of the research and writing for *Divine Fathers, Divine Sons* has already been accomplished, including a completed draft of the manuscript. With research assistance from able graduate students in theology and classical philology, I will be able to capitalize on the interest this work has generated by going to press with one of the aforementioned scholarly publishers within the next twenty-four months.

Background

Divine Fathers, Divine Sons is a big-picture, thematic contribution to the study of early Christianity. Its chief objectives are (a) to critique the conceptual framework within which the term "son of God" has usually been construed in biblical scholarship, particularly in the work of Larry Hurtado, Martin Hengel, and James Dunn; and (b) to re-interpret divine sonship in the socio-political context of early Christianity, specifically that of Roman family politics and imperial ideology, by building upon the recent work of such historians as Simon Price, Clifford Ando, Christiane Kunst, and Ittai Gradel. Some major presuppositions of scholarship on the New Testament and early Christian theology will be challenged, but from a firm foundation rooted in rational argument from primary and secondary sources. The book will be controversial without appearing confrontational or strident.

Other experts have vetted these historical and theological arguments and lent their support to my project. *Divine Fathers, Divine Sons* originated out of my doctoral work at Yale in Religious Studies and Classics, which was supported by an external merit fellowship (\$20,000) from the Catholic Biblical Association. A portion of chapter 3 of my planned text won the annual prize (\$2,300) from the Yale Classics department, and part of chapter 4 received the "Best Paper" award at a Society of Biblical Literature conference. I look forward to fulfilling the

promise these institutions and scholars saw in my early work by soon being able to present the full text of *Divine Fathers, Divine Sons* and its innovative arguments.

Contribution

Divine Fathers, Divine Sons' historical narrative proceeds in the following way. It begins by showing how the theological doctrines forged at the Council of Nicea have hindered our ability to interpret the "son of God" language in the New Testament (ch. 1). It then emphasizes two historical contexts that can help us interpret that language anew: the figure of the Roman emperor as "son of god" (ch. 2) and the unique importance of adoption in Roman society and imperial ideology (ch. 3). In short, when we focus on the fact that the most powerful "son of god" in the Empire gained his sonship by adoption, we are able to read several early Christian texts in unexpected ways. I treat the Gospel of Mark at length, as the first narrative Christology and one that has long been connected with Rome (ch. 4). I then bring the reader forward from the first century to Nicea, showing how the resonance of "son of God" changed over time (ch. 5).

As an interdisciplinary, thematic, and occasionally iconoclastic project, *Divine Fathers, Divine Sons* will have a broad audience. I see the market for the book as several intersecting circles. The center is undoubtedly New Testament studies because my argument engages a core concept for several New Testament authors. I have also received great interest from elsewhere in religious studies, especially from scholars of early Christianity and systematic theologians. For example, my final chapter offers a new take on the development of early Christology through the fourth century—by charting the shifting relationship between begotten and adoptive metaphors—that will be of interest to scholars of the Nicene era. Furthermore, my argument has

implications for Trinitarian theology, because it offers both a new way of discussing the human/divine relationship and an alternative to progenitorial / begotten language. Roman historians will also be interested, especially in the book's synthetic presentation of the *status quaestionis* on Roman divinity and emperor worship and its original analysis of the competing family ideologies concerning natural and adopted sons in the Roman Empire. Finally, I have received inquiries from political theorists because of their recent and intense interest in the intersection of religious power and political power. I am fortunate to find my research at the core of this nexus and to be one of a growing set of scholars examining the relationship between the Roman emperor and Jesus Christ—the two famous “sons of god”—with nuanced theories of power and cultural interaction.

Cost

Divine Fathers, Divine Sons covers the first four centuries of Christianity, replete with primary material from Greek, Roman, and Christian sources of the period. Therefore, a doctoral student versed in early Christian theology would provide critical research assistance with the voluminous secondary literature on Christology in the third and fourth centuries. Readers of my manuscript have unanimously recommended that I expand and deepen my research on those centuries—the book's final chapter—during the revision process. A second doctoral student (or students) with impeccable knowledge of Greek and Latin would prove crucial in proofreading, cross-checking, and formatting the hundreds of original-language translations and citations throughout the book. These two assistants would save me hundreds of hours of labor over the coming year, help to speed this manuscript toward publication, and ensure its accuracy and thoroughness.

To gain research assistants with the prerequisite competence in scholarly theological research and classical philology will require a competitive wage of \$20/hour. The volume of work would require a commitment of approximately four hours/week to complete the text within the academic year. Therefore I have calculated my budget for completing *Divine Fathers*, *Divine Sons* as follows: I have budgeted for two assistants, each for an average of 4 hours per week for two semesters (or one semester plus one summer, depending on their availability).

- 4 hrs per week x 25 weeks = 100 hrs per assistant
- 100 hrs x \$20/hr = \$2000 per assistant
- 2 assistants = \$4000 total

Conclusion

Divine Fathers, *Divine Sons* will be the first monograph to provide an interdisciplinary, thematic, and occasionally iconoclastic examination of how the theological concept “son of god” resonated in the social and political contexts of the Roman world—a potentially field-altering contribution.

Funding for two graduate research assistants will expedite my completing this promising project in order to capitalize on the hearty encouragement it has received from senior scholars in the fields of early Christianity and Roman history—at Yale, Fordham, and beyond—and publish *Divine Fathers*, *Divine Sons* with a major scholarly press within the next two years.