

THE DIVINE GOODNESS OF JESUS

In this book, Paul K. Moser explores Jesus's role as God's filial inquirer of those who inquire of him. He also clarifies a method of inquiry regarding Jesus – one that offers a compelling explanation regarding his experiential impact and his audience's response. Moser's method values the roles of history and moral/religious experience in inquiry about him, and it saves inquirers from distorting biases in their inquiry. His study illuminates Jesus's puzzling features, including his challenging question for inquirers of him (Who do you say I am?), his distinctive experience of God as father, his reference to himself as "the Son of man," his attitude toward his suffering and death, his unique role in the Kingdom of God, and his understanding of his allegedly miraculous signs and of his parables and Good News. The book also enables inquirers of Jesus to make sense of evidence for the reality and the main purpose of Jesus, and thereby to avoid prejudice in their inquiry.

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The Divine Goodness of Jesus

Impact and Response

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-01364-2 — The Divine Goodness of Jesus
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Frontmatter
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www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009013642

DOI: 10.1017/9781009031707

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First published 2021
First paperback edition 2023

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-316-51602-7 Hardback
ISBN 978-1-009-01364-2 Paperback

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Who then is this man?

Mark 4:41

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page ix</i>
1 Inquiry about and from Jesus	1
1.1 A Reason to Inquire	2
1.2 History and Theology	9
1.3 Inquiry from Jesus	18
1.4 Purpose Disclosed	32
2 God through Divine Goodness	40
2.1 Accountable Knowing	40
2.2 Some Biblical Data	44
2.3 Moral Responses	52
2.4 Jesus in Reconciliation	55
2.5 God Self-Authenticated	62
3 Divine Goodness from <i>Abba</i>	66
3.1 Jesus, <i>Agapē</i> , and Gethsemane	66
3.2 <i>Abba</i> and Filial Responsiveness	76
3.3 Motive and Being Led	80
3.4 Gethsemane beyond Jesus	84
4 Good News of Divine Goodness	94
4.1 Gospel Power	95
4.2 Royal Power Reconceived	104
4.3 Signs for Reconciliation	108
4.4 Secret Kingdom, Hidden Gospel	120

4.5	Expanded Gospel	126
4.6	Gethsemane Goodness	136
5	Stories for Divine Goodness	144
5.1	Receiving Divine Goodness	144
5.2	Storytelling for God	149
5.3	Stories for Decisions	152
5.4	Attracting Conviction	160
6	Suffering for Divine Goodness	167
6.1	Daniel's Vision	167
6.2	Jesus and Daniel	172
6.3	Shared Redemptive Destiny	175
6.4	Vindication through Suffering	186
7	Kingdom of Divine Goodness	193
7.1	Kingdom Arrival	194
7.2	Shared Kingship	200
7.3	Conflict and Impact	206
7.4	A Royal Moral	217
8	God's Gambit for Divine Goodness	220
8.1	Redemptive Duress	220
8.2	Redemptive Companionship	230
8.3	Explaining Good and Evil	236
8.4	Redeeming Evil with Good	240
	<i>Index</i>	246

Preface

Jesus attracts controversy on many fronts, and our understanding why he does can be profoundly illuminating regarding us as inquirers and perhaps regarding God too. We need, however, an illuminating and focusing perspective for understanding Jesus, and his own perspective on *divine goodness* will serve our purpose well. Divine goodness was his focus and his motivation, and we shall examine how it clarifies who he was and is. Neglect of that perspective has often blocked making good and accurate sense of Jesus.

This book uses an impact–response model of interpreting Jesus to highlight who he was in his self-understanding and his redemptive mission in relation to God. Two questions focus the model: What was and is Jesus’s intended impact on his audience, now including *me* as part of that audience? What should *my* response to him be in relation to the divine goodness he portrayed as *the divine worthiness of being valued* above all else, with full commitment?

The model enables us to identify the distinctive kind of evidence bearing on Jesus’s status in relation to God. It also directs us to the significance of moral experience and conscience for such evidence. The impact–response model applies not only to Jesus and his audience, including current inquirers of him, but also to God and Jesus in their

interpersonal relationship. In addition, it explains how the intentional impact of Jesus includes *his* morally challenging inquiry of people inquiring of him. This relatively neglected feature merits careful attention from inquirers about Jesus, including scholarly investigators.

The key redemptive impact of Jesus includes his moral power not to control or coerce people but to *attract* receptive people to sympathetic and cooperative reconciliation with God. If perfectly good, God would seek goodness in interpersonal relationships for the sake of building a good human society, and that would call for human reconciliation with God in divine goodness. The intended power to attract people to such reconciliation comes by the manifestation of divine goodness, and it reveals what its audience values, by way of its response to divine goodness. Interpreters of Jesus have failed to give such distinctive power due attention as central to his self-understanding and redemptive mission. This book corrects that omission, by portraying Jesus through divine goodness and its impact on and from him. It explains how he engaged in moral-theological conflict without interpersonal violence for the sake of promoting such goodness.

If we understand persons ultimately by what they value, we can understand Jesus by what he primarily valued: (a) God's perfect responsive and guiding goodness from *Abba*, as the divine worthiness of being valued above all else, with full commitment; (b) being attracted and led by that goodness to cooperate with it, in his life and the lives of others; and (c) encouraging humans to guide their lives for a due cooperative response to God's goodness. Interpretations of Jesus often omit the central role of (a)–(c), and they thereby miss out on the heart of who Jesus was and is. This book fills that omission with a new impact–response focus on Jesus in relation to divine goodness, with special attention to its role in Gethsemane. It explains how such goodness is attractive, responsive, and guiding in its stemming from a redemptive purposive agent Jesus called

“*Abba*.” How Jesus understood his purposes in relation to God bears significantly on how he intended to relate to his audience, given God’s normative role in his life.

This book gives special attention to the joint relevance of history, theology, and ethics in understanding who Jesus was and is. It also explains how the moral power he offered can serve as distinctive evidence of the reality and the presence of Jesus and of God, even if some people fail to recognize it. The book explores the significance of the variation among humans in their recognition and reception of the evidence in question. In doing so, it makes sense of Jesus’s important view of divine hiding at times for redemptive purposes. It also explains the decisive role of human valuation and cooperation in apprehending the distinctive evidence in its intended fruition in agreeable cooperation with God.

Chapter 1, “Inquiry about and from Jesus,” identifies the kind of inquiry suited to a reliable understanding of Jesus in relation to his understanding of divine goodness. It acknowledges the intentional impact of Jesus on his audience as a source of relevant evidence that calls for a morally relevant response from inquirers. Chapter 2, “God through Divine Goodness,” explains what kind of evidence in experience we should expect from a God devoted to the moral redemption of humans in the kind of interpersonal reconciliation suggested by Jesus. It characterizes the kind of moral impact God would have on human moral experience and the kind of cooperative response God would expect.

Chapter 3, “Divine Goodness from *Abba*,” clarifies the center of Jesus’s response to God in relation to God’s impact on his moral experience. It uses the Gethsemane experience of Jesus to illustrate this center in his filial responsiveness to God as *Abba*, and it presents this experience as normative for his disciples. Chapter 4, “Good News of Divine Goodness,” identifies the Good News of God from Jesus in terms of the arrival, in his ministry, of

a kingdom of divine goodness. It characterizes this kingdom in terms of a unique moral power aimed at human redemption in divine–human reconciliation, and it explains how such cooperative reconciliation guided the mission of Jesus, including in relation to divine hiding at times.

Chapter 5, “Stories for Divine Goodness,” examines the aim of Jesus when he used parables expressive of God’s goodness. It locates this aim in Jesus’s desire to attract people to divine goodness in a volitionally engaging way. This way not only shows their valuing or devaluing it but also invites them to decide, voluntarily, whether to cooperate with it. Chapter 6, “Suffering for Divine Goodness,” explains the role of Jesus as the suffering “Son of man” foreshadowed in the Book of Daniel. It identifies how Jesus aimed to self-identify with the suffering people of God in a manner that shared their destiny for God, and it finds a ground for this aim in divine goodness – particularly God’s moral character and purpose directed toward reconciliation with humans.

Chapter 7, “Kingdom of Divine Goodness,” examines the role of Jesus in the Kingdom of God, with a distinction between the two phases of the kingdom. The first phase, postponing divine judgment, seeks the current redemption of humans in divine–human reconciliation, and the second phase realizes the future full society of the people of God accompanied by final divine judgment. Chapter 8, “God’s Gambit for Divine Goodness,” explains God’s gambit as a strategy of risk for the sake of sharing divine goodness with humans in building, with their voluntary cooperation, a society fully reconciled with God. It identifies the central role of Jesus in this gambit, while highlighting his focus on redeeming the evil in conflict with divine–human reconciliation, even when we cannot fully explain such evil relative to God’s purposes. The book concludes with a return to Jesus’s signature question in

search of cooperative reconciliation in divine goodness for his inquirers: Who do you say that I am?

This book has benefited from comments and suggestions from many people. For constructive help, I thank Jacob Andrews, Simon Babbs, David Bukenhofer, Tom Carson, Aeva Munro, Benjamin Nasmith, Clinton Neptune, students in my classes at Loyola University Chicago, and various anonymous referees. I also thank Abigail Neale for her careful copy editing of the manuscript. For excellent help at Cambridge University Press, I thank Beatrice Rehl, Publisher.

Parts of the book make use of revised materials from some of my recent essays: “Jesus and Abba in Gethsemane,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 15 (2021), “Jesus as Moral-Kingmaker,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 50 (2020), “Having ‘Ears to Hear’: Jesus, Gethsemane, and Epistemology,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 91 (2020), and “God, Redemptive Friendship, and Self-Reflective Decision,” *The Routledge Companion to the Philosophy of Friendship*, ed. Diane Jeske (London: Routledge, 2021).