

M. DAVID LITWA earned his Ph.D. in Religious Studies from the University of Virginia (2013). He has taught in the Classics departments of the University of Virginia and the College of William & Mary. Currently he teaches in the Department of Religion and Culture at Virginia Tech. Previous publications include *Jesus Deus: The Early Christian Depiction of Jesus as a Mediterranean God* (2014).



“From the Garden story of Genesis to the ‘I Am’ declarations of the Gospel of John, the self-deification of human beings has been a major theme in western mythology and religion. In his latest book, David Litwa, the most eloquent and prolific scholar of this suppressed theme in the study of religion, offers us a new double typology of these mythologies (the Rebel and the Hero) and then plays it out in six rich case studies. In the process, we move from the tragic story of Lucifer, the Rebel self-deifier who is stricken down for his hubris, to Allogenes.... We are also treated to numerous sparks of insight and learned reflections on the relationship between self-deification and monotheism, society, ideology, myth and modern secularism. This is a first-rate work of historical and critical scholarship that takes us further down the road to better understanding the deification of the human in the history of religions.”

Jeffrey J. Kripal, J. Newton Rayzor Professor of Religion, Rice University

“Jesus in John’s Gospel is not an arrogant self-deifier, but the arch-heretic Simon Magus is. David Litwa’s engrossing book turns this conventional wisdom on its head. The topic of self-deification in the ancient world has been sorely neglected by scholars, and a monograph on this subject by a burgeoning scholar whose published work has already been quite well received is a major contribution to the fields of biblical studies, early Christian studies, and religion in late antiquity.”

Brent Landau, Lecturer in Religious Studies, University of Texas at Austin

“Litwa successfully establishes that theorization of ancient self-deification is vital considering the contemporary valence of such claims. Through critical analysis of self-deifiers who are grafted positively within existing theological hierarchies and those rejected as transgressive rebels, Litwa identifies with nuance the interconnectedness of such typologies, making clear the ideological import of each myth while grounding them within relevant historiographical contexts. Litwa provides a valuable contribution within biblical and ancient studies.”

Debra Scoggins Ballentine, Assistant Professor, Rutgers University

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Litwa

Desiring Divinity

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M. David Litwa

Desiring Divinity



Self-deification in Early Jewish
and Christian Mythmaking

Perhaps no declaration incites more theological and moral outrage than a human’s claim to be divine. Those who make this claim in ancient Jewish and Christian mythology are typically represented as the most hubristic and dangerous tyrants. Their horrible punishments are predictable and still serve as morality tales in religious communities today.

But not all self-deifiers are saddled with pride and fated to fall. Some who claimed divinity stated a simple and direct truth. Though reviled on earth, misunderstood, and even killed, they received vindication and rose to the stars.

This book tells the stories of six self-deifiers in their historical, social, and ideological contexts. In the history of interpretation, the initial three figures have been demonized as cosmic rebels: the first human Adam, Lucifer (later identified with Satan), and Yaldabaoth in gnostic mythology. By contrast, the final three have served as positive models for deification and divine favor: Jesus in the gospel of John, Simon of Samaria, and Allogenes in the Nag Hammadi library.

In the end, the line separating demonization from deification is dangerously thin, drawn as it is by the unsteady hand of human valuation.