In a famous passage found in our earliest Gospels, Jesus is said to have asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” We are familiar with the response of the disciples. But what if the question were asked of modern scholars? There would in fact be a bewildering array of responses:

Some say you’re a political revolutionary urging others to take up arms against the state; some say you’re a social radical urging a countercultural revolution; some say that you’re a Cynic Philosopher, with no real concern for the Jewish Scripture or the history of the Jewish people; some say you’re a proto-marxist; some say you’re a proto-feminist; some say you’re a gay magician; some say you’re a celibate holy man.

And who do you say that I am? In much of America and Germany, the scholarly reply comes: you are an apocalyptic prophet who expects God to intervene in the course of history to overthrow the forces of evil and set up his good kingdom on earth.

Suppose now that we move the clock back eighteen centuries or so, to the end of the second century. How were Christians then answering the question of who Jesus was?

As it turns out, we are well informed about some of these views. What is striking is that just like today, the answers were very much at odds with one another, even though the Christological issues dominating people’s thinking were quite different.

In the second century there were some Christians who claimed that Jesus was a “mere man”—a PSILOS ANTHROPOS, to use the Greek phrase, whose death brought about the salvation of the world. That may not be a surprising view, given the Synoptic portrayals of Jesus, as there too he does not appear to be anything other than a man, even though he is at the same time the man chosen by God to be his son, the messiah. But by the end of the second century...

---

1 The Shaffer Lectures; Yale University, October 2004.
century, the notion that he was a mere man, and not himself divine, had become a dangerous heresy to be rooted out of the church. Some of the groups proclaiming that Jesus was only and completely human were Gentiles who repudiated for themselves all forms of Jewish worship. But there were others who were Jews, who saw Jesus specifically as the Jewish messiah. In their view, Jesus was the natural son of Joseph and Mary, who on account of his righteousness before the Jewish Law was adopted to be the Son of God and given the mission of dying for the sins of the world. Those who accepted his sacrifice for their sins would, like him, be faithful followers of the Jewish Law.

Standing over against such views of Jesus were the majority of Christians, who saw Jesus as in some sense divine, himself, personally. Jesus was God. For some, he was so much God, he was not human; for them, God cannot be human any more than a human can be a rock. But why then did Jesus appear to be human? It was because in fact it really was all an appearance. Jesus came in the “likeness” of human flesh, but he was not really human. He only seemed to be.

Some Christians who maintained this view understood Jesus’ bodily appearance to be a phantasm. Their opponents called such views “docetic”—from the Greek word DOKEO, “to seem,” “to appear.” Far from being a PSILOS ANTHROPOS, Jesus wasn’t an ANTHROPOS at all. Other Christians—probably far more—understood that Jesus himself was an ANTHROPOS, but that he was not identical with Christ. The Christ was a divine being who came into Jesus at his baptism, empowering him for his ministry, and then departing from him prior to his death. That’s why, on the cross, he cried out, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” Because it was at that point that the divine Christ left Jesus to face his agonizing death alone. Why? Because the divine can’t suffer.

Others insisted that the divine could suffer. In fact, for them, what was significant about Jesus was precisely that in him the divine had suffered. Since Jesus is God, and since there is and can be only one God, it is Jesus himself who is that God, become a human. Jesus is none other than God the Father become flesh, to die for the people he created. At one time in the second century, this appears to have been the favored view among church leaders, especially in the major center of Christendom, Rome. But opponents of the view mocked it claiming that it was nonsense to think that the father