

The divinity of Jesus in early Christian thought: A historiographical approach

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Abstract

Did the early Christians regard Jesus as divine? Against those who would claim that early Christian did not have a divine picture of Jesus, such as James D.G. Dunn, the evidence from the earliest sources of Christianity warrant the claim that they believed that Jesus was divine by placing him within the identity of the one God of Israel. Jewish monotheism is explained and shown to be exclusive. Paul of Tarsus, being the earliest Christian writer, was a Jew who held to this form of monotheism. The paper then examines specific passages from Paul's undisputed letters; Philippians 2:6-11, 1 Corinthians 8:6, Romans 10:9-13, 1 Corinthians 15:24-28. It is argued that Paul addressed Jesus as *Kyrios* (Lord) when alluding to Old Testament monotheistic passages that refer to YHWH God by the same title (*Kyrios*), cementing the claim that Paul identified Jesus with the God of Israel. It is also noted that Paul is neither binitarian (there are only two persons in the Godhead) nor modalist (Jesus as a mode of God or just another manifestation of the God of Israel) in his view of God. The last move in the argument claims that Paul and other Christians were in agreement on this matter. Of course, this argument will probably be of more interest to religious students, or students of religion, or both. However, one should remember how this religion, Christianity, has radically shaped the world around them, and still impacts the lives of numerous people around the world. Despite secularism, this religious idea is still significant to intellectual history.

Keywords: Jesus, divine, theology, New Testament studies, early Christianity

1. Introduction and methodology

Did the early Christians regard Jesus as divine? The letters of Paul are some of the earliest primary sources for information about early Christianity. Thus, Paul is central in much of the debate regarding whether or not early Christians viewed Jesus as divine. Many New Testament (NT) historians such as James D.G. Dunn¹ and Maurice Casey² have argued that Paul did not regard the figure of Jesus as divine, and Christians did not regard Jesus so until the time of the Gospel of John or the Apostolic Fathers. If this is the case, what one has is a progressive and evolving view of the divinity of Jesus, having him being raised higher and higher until he reaches the status of God himself. If this view is correct, historians have to take into account why this view changed within such a short time. However, if this view is mistaken, historians are doing an injustice to the rituals and beliefs of this ancient religious sect. This is a mistake that historians need to avoid. An example of this happening in NT studies

is when a majority of NT scholars viewed 1st century Judaism as a religion of work-righteousness (a view that one can "earn" their righteousness). Thankfully however, the NT scholar E.P. Sanders in his study called *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (1977), dispelled this view and caused a revolution in the way NT scholarship looked at ancient Judaism. Thanks to Sanders, the consensus no longer views Judaism as a simple salvation by works view. The work of E.P. Sanders has made NT historians appreciate the Jewishness of the NT writers, especially Paul. In this essay, I argue that Dunn and others have misread Paul and thus do not capture one great aspect of his thought: the divine view of Jesus of Nazareth as a revelation of the God³ of the Jews.

In this essay, I refer to Pauline passages from his undisputed letters⁴ to see if one can find references to Jesus in relation to divinity in Paul's letters, and to see if one is justified in believing that the early Christians worshiped Jesus. However, this must be qualified and nuanced at several points. For example, Paul believed in Jewish

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¹James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006).

²Maurice Casey, "Lord Jesus Christ: A Response to Professor Hurtado," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 27, no. 1 (September 2004): 83-96. Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost. Accessed March 14, 2016.

³I will capitalize "God" only when it correlates with monotheistic beliefs that require it.

⁴John W. Drane, "Paul," In *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, edited by Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 578.

monotheism, so when one reads his letters, one should not believe that Paul thinks of the divinity of Jesus in the terms of placing another god alongside the God of Israel. So first, I will examine nature of Jewish monotheism, then briefly establish the fact that Paul was a Jewish thinker⁵. After that, I will proceed to examine Pauline passages concerning the identity of Jesus for Paul and then ask if Paul differed in this respect from other early Christians. The evidence from the earliest sources of Christianity warrant the claim that they believed that Jesus was divine by placing him within the identity of the one God of Israel⁶

2. Jewish monotheism

Hundreds of years before the time of Paul, the Jewish people distinguished their god, Yahweh (YHWH), from all other reality and other gods⁷. This left no room for their theologians (such as Paul or other writers) to worship other gods, not even angelic mediators or exalted prophets could be worshiped. Paul could view Jesus as divine, but not another god. That is to say, it is thoroughly inconceivable that Paul would have thought that there was any other divinity beside the God of Israel, so this monotheism will shape the way one will talk about Jesus (see Section 4). By the first century, exclusive monotheism was one of the defining hallmarks of the Jewish people. Even the Roman historian Tacitus wrote that, “the Jews acknowledge one God only, and conceive of Him by the mind alone” no doubt commenting on the Jewish belief of worshipping one god and not creating idols of him (see Exodus 20:1-6)⁸. Jews themselves used two themes in the rhetoric of Jewish monotheism; God’s universal sovereignty and his uniqueness⁹. What is meant by “God’s universal sovereignty” was that everything in creation, including “pagan” nations and evil in all its forms, were ultimately subject to God, that, “the one God created everything and rules over all[.]”¹⁰ “God’s uniqueness,” has several implications that need to be unpacked. Much of the rhetoric of foreign gods in this time made them out to be nothing but material idols (see Isaiah 40:18-20; *Testament of Abraham*) and even from

the angels, which are his servants. Jews were very aware of their unique devotion to YHWH, Larry Hurtado pointed out the fact that devout Jews probably used the Decalogue (the Ten Commandments) and the *Shema* (a prayer found in Deuteronomy 6:4-5) in instructions and daily prayers, so, “[o]bservant Jews, therefore, were daily aware of their allegiance to the one God alone.”¹¹

It has been argued that Judaism was originally henotheistic, then after the time of the Babylonian exile, it became thoroughly monotheistic¹². However, by the first-century, the evidence shows that exclusive monotheism was the dominant worldview of the Jews. This often set them apart from their “pagan” neighbors, who charged atheism against Jews for refusing to acknowledge the reality of others’ gods¹³. First Century Judaism spoke of their God as the only true one, who made everything other than himself, and who had chosen the nation of Israel, through whom he would work to restore his creation which had been spoiled by evil¹⁴.

3. Paul the Jew¹⁵

Paul is widely accepted among scholars of the New Testament studies as a Jewish thinker. One scholar wrote that, “[d]espite the objection of a small but vocal minority, it seems certain that Paul was not only Jewish but also a Pharisee, just he as himself claims [in Philippians 3:4b-11.]”¹⁶ In his letters, Paul states that he used to persecute the early Christian church (see Galatians 1:13). Paul also had a revolutionary religious experience, which converted him to the movement he had once violently opposed¹⁷. Paul had once persecuted the Christian movement (see Galatians 1:13, 1 Corinthians 15:9, Philippians 3:6 and in the Evangelists record in Acts 8:3-4). However, he himself became a Christian when on the road to Damascus he thought he encountered Jesus himself (see 1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:8-11, Galatians 1:15-16 and the Evangelists record in Acts 9:3-9; 22:6-11; 26:12-19). This radically changed his mission, and it clearly impacted the way that he interpreted Jewish Scripture. However, it is clearly evident that he was devoted to the God of Israel

⁵ Alan F. Segal, “Paul’s Jewish presuppositions” In *The Cambridge Companion to St. Paul*, edited by James D. G. Dunn (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 159.

⁶ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament’s Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 216.

⁷ Baruch Halpern, “Monotheism,” In *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, edited by Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 526.

⁸ Larry W. Hurtado, “First-Century Jewish Monotheism.” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 71 (September 1998): 3-26, p. 10, Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost. Accessed March 14, 2016.

⁹ Hurtado, “First-Century Jewish Monotheism,” 12-3.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 13.

¹¹ Bauckham, 5

¹² Baruch Halpern, “Monotheism,” In *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, edited by Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 526-7.

¹³ Dunn, 34.

¹⁴ N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 248-52.

¹⁵ See Alan F. Segal, *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 3-114, for a fuller discussion on Paul’s experiences as a Jew and a convert within his social and religious context.

¹⁶ Alan F. Segal, “Paul’s Jewish presuppositions” In *The Cambridge Companion to St. Paul*, edited by James D. G. Dunn (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 159.

¹⁷ Klaus Haacker, “Paul’s life” In *The Cambridge Companion to St. Paul*, edited by James D. G. Dunn (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 22-24.

and the holy writings of the Jews¹⁸. This means that, despite his radical conversion experience, Paul did not leave Jewish monotheism, and works with a Jewish framework when he conducts his theology, and not a pagan polytheistic (or even pagan monotheistic) background. He used the Jewish Scriptures and shaped them around the person of Jesus. If Paul talks about Jesus' divinity, one should expect that he will use the Old Testament in his theology of Jesus. So what did Paul have to say concerning the identity of Jesus?

4. Pauline passages on the divine Jesus

Some scholars have frequently stated that, regardless of what earlier Christianity taught, by the time the Gospel of John and the book of Hebrews were written, Christians had begun to view Jesus as fully divine (see John 1:1-5; Hebrews 1:1-14)¹⁹. Victor Rhee stated that the early passages of Hebrews expound upon, "three aspects of Christ's existence (preexistence, incarnation and exaltation)."²⁰ These aspects can be found in Paul's writings. To limit the scope (and length) of this paper, I shall focus on four Pauline passages, all taken from his undisputed letters: Philippians 2:6-11, 1 Corinthians 8:6, Romans 10:9-13 and 1 Corinthians 15:24-28. Paul often alludes to Old Testament texts, which were considered Sacred Scripture by the Jews.

4a. Philippians 2:6-11

One of the most critical and controversial passages where Paul does this is Philippians 2:6-11:

[Christ Jesus], who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name that at the name of

Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."²¹

Some say that this passage implied Jesus' preexistence, incarnation and divinity, while others see it as portraying Jesus as highly exalted, yet not quite divine²². In "The Theology of Paul the Apostle," J.D.G. Dunn argued that Paul in this Philippian passage alludes to, "the Genesis accounts of creation and disobedience of Adam, and [...] the Philippians passage simply contrasts the self-sacrifice of the human Jesus with the hubris of Adam in reaching for divinity[see Genesis 3:5.]"²³ The NT scholar Casey agrees with Dunn's ideas and says that Jesus' exaltation made him a judge of the world at the end of time, but this does not make him divine in Paul's mind²⁴.

However, there are problems with these interpretations. Some have argued that "equality with God" is not something that is possible for Jesus to try and reach for, but rather something that he already possesses, but does not exploit for his own gain²⁵. For example, Richard Bauckham has argued that a better translation of the passage is, "[Christ Jesus], though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be used for his own advantage[.]"²⁶ Also, other scholars have proposed better, more direct Old Testament allusions used by Paul. Simon Gathercole has pointed out (inspired by the work of Richard Bauckham) that this Philippians passage correlates with various texts in Isaiah, "for I am God, and there is no other. [...] Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will confess. They will say of me, 'In the Lord alone are righteousness and strength.'" [Isaiah 45:22-24]²⁷ We have here an Old Testament passage that is fiercely monotheistic which Paul is quoting directly in his letter, yet placing the figure of Jesus in the center of it. Some may retort that it is "the Father" that is getting the glory, yet one cannot help but note that Paul gives Jesus the title, "Lord" despite the fact that he is alluding to an Old Testament passage, which uses the word (*Kyrios* [Greek]) to refer to the Jewish God YHWH, the only God. Thus "Lord" in this context cannot mean anything other

¹⁸ Alan F. Segal, "Paul's Jewish presuppositions" In *The Cambridge Companion to St. Paul*, edited by James D. G. Dunn (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 164-7.

¹⁹ Thomas Kazen, "The Christology of Early Christian Practice," *Journal Of Biblical Literature* 127, no. 3 (2008): 591-614. Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost. Accessed February 15, 2016.

²⁰ Victor Rhee, "The Role of Chiasm for Understanding Christology in Hebrews 1:1-14," *Journal Of Biblical Literature* 131, no. 2 (2012): 341-62. Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost. Accessed February 15, 2016; see also Bauckham, 233-53.

²¹ Segal, *Paul the Convert*, 62. Segal's translation.

²² Larry Hurtado, "Paul's christology" In *The Cambridge Companion to St. Paul*, edited by James D. G. Dunn, (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 196.

²³ Dunn, 282.

²⁴ Maurice Casey, "Lord Jesus Christ: A Response to Professor Hurtado," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 27, no. 1 (September 2004): 83-96. Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost. Accessed March 14, 2016.

²⁵ Gerald F. Hawthorne, "Philippians, The Letter of Paul to the," In *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, edited by Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 590-1.

²⁶ Bauckham, 43.

²⁷ Simon J. Gathercole, "Paul's Christology," In *The Blackwell Companion to Paul*, edited by Stephen Westerholm, 172-87, (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 180.

than *Kyrios* being used as a substitute for name of YHWH²⁸

With this in mind, I agree with Gathercole when he stated that, “Paul assigns to Jesus a remarkably exalted status, even seeing him as sharing with the Father in the divine identity. He describes Jesus in these terms not in ways that set out to challenge traditional Jewish monotheism, but precisely using Old Testament passages that emphasize it.”²⁹ James F. McGrath has objected to this conclusion, saying that hearers of the passage would not have picked up on the allusion to the Isaiah passage because it was not often alluded to in Second Temple Jewish texts and that to include Jesus within the divine identity would be inconsistent with Paul’s monotheism³⁰.

One has seen that a divine portrait of Jesus in Paul is a better interpretation than that of Dunn and Casey and McGrath’s arguments are not strong enough to challenge that conclusion. For one thing, McGrath assumes that to be a monotheist, one must be a unitarian, Casey has the same point of view and states that, “[t]he deity of Jesus is however inherently unJewish. The witness of Jewish texts is unvarying: belief that a second being is God involves departure from the Jewish community.”³¹ Hurtado has challenged this by pointing out that in Second Temple Jewish literature one can see example divine attributes (i.e. Wisdom) being personified³². Bauckham has claimed that, while Jewish monotheism did not have analogous precedents, it was open for such development³³. Secondly, even if the listeners of Paul’s letter did not catch the allusion to Isaiah, it is difficult to believe Paul did not.

4b. 1 Corinthians 8:6

A second passage that arguably places Jesus Christ within the “divine identity,” is 1 Corinthians 8:6, which follows as: “but for us [there is] one God, the Father, from whom [are] all things and we for him, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom [are] all things and we through

him.”³⁴ Many scholars believe this passage to be Paul’s reworking of the *Shema*, “Hear, O Israel: The *Lord our God, the Lord is one.* (Deut. 6:4)[.]”³⁵ McGrath correctly notes that N.T. Wright and Richard Bauckham have argued that Paul has “split the Shema” and included Jesus within the identity of God³⁶. Francis Watson and J.D.G. Dunn however argue that this passage does not at face value make the figure of Jesus participate in the creation of the world (the “through” rather implies mediation, but see also Romans 11:34-36)³⁷. McGrath and others have also shied away from the idea that Paul regards Jesus as divine, saying that for Paul to have such a radical innovation as to put Jesus on the divine level is simply too bold to believe, and since he does not clarify his meaning, one is not warranted to make that claim³⁸. However, the fact that Paul adapted his theology around Jesus Christ while calling him *Kyrios* (“Lord”) when alluding to Old Testament monotheistic passages that refer to YHWH God by the same title (*Kyrios*), one has the evidence they need to warrant the claim that Paul considered Jesus divine.

4c. Romans 10:9-13

Another example of this can be shown in the passage in Romans. Paul states in Romans 10:9 that, “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved[.]” Using the Greek word *kyrios* for Lord, then in Romans 10:13 he quotes the Old Testament text of Joel, “all who call upon the name of the Lord [*kyrios*] will be saved.”³⁹ This verse positively places Jesus within the identity of God: *Kyrios*. While that word itself need not have connotations to divine meaning, Wright correctly noted, “Paul takes the *kyrios* of the Septuagint, in passages where he is very well aware that in context it referred to YHWH himself, and understands it as a reference to Jesus.”⁴⁰ So as strange as it may seem, Paul

²⁸ Bauckham, 190; Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 21; “It is clear that *Kyrios* was used by Greek-speaking Jews for the Hebrew tetragrammaton (*Yahweh*) when reading aloud the biblical texts, and so it had long been indigenized as part of the religious vocabulary available to Greek-speaking Christian Jews.”

²⁹ Gathercole, 180.

³⁰ James F. McGrath, “On Hearing (Rather Than Reading) Intertextual Echoes: Christology and Monotheistic Scriptures in an Oral Context,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 43, no. 2 (April 30, 2013): 74-80. Accessed March 15, 2016.

³¹ Maurice Casey, “Lord Jesus Christ: A Response to Professor Hurtado,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 27, no. 1 (September 2004): 83-96. Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost. Accessed March 14, 2016.

³² Larry W. Hurtado, “First-Century Jewish Monotheism,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 71 (September 1998): 3-26, p. 10, Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost. Accessed March 14, 2016.

³³ Bauckham, 174-6.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 27. Bauckham’s translation

³⁵ Simon J. Gathercole, “Paul’s Christology,” In *The Blackwell Companion to Paul*, edited by Stephen Westerholm, 172-87, (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 179.

³⁶ James F. McGrath, “On Hearing (Rather Than Reading) Intertextual Echoes: Christology and Monotheistic Scriptures in an Oral Context,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 43, no. 2 (April 30, 2013): 74-80. Accessed March 15, 2016. For their arguments see their non-academic books in N.T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 91-4; see also Bauckham, 182-232.

³⁷ Francis Watson, “The Triune Divine Identity: Reflections On Pauline God-Language, in Disagreement With J.D.G. Dunn,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 23, no. 80 (April 2002): 99-124. Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost. Accessed March 14, 2016.

³⁸ James F. McGrath, “On Hearing (Rather Than Reading) Intertextual Echoes: Christology and Monotheistic Scriptures in an Oral Context,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 43, no. 2 (April 30, 2013): 74-80. Accessed March 15, 2016.

³⁹ .T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 91.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 91-4; see also Bauckham, 92.

called Jesus *Kyrios* when discussing the God of Israel, placing Jesus on the level of God, thus “Jesus is *Kyrios*” implies that Jesus is divine. Dunn, McGrath and Casey think that later Christians believed in a divine Jesus, but it is possible that they got this idea from Paul or other early Christians.

4d. 1 Corinthians 15:24-28

The great New Testament scholar Raymond Brown claimed that 1 Corinthians 15:24-28 was the only passage in the New Testament that would cause difficulty for a fully divine portrait of Jesus⁴¹. It is as follows:

‘Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For “God has put all things in subjection under his feet.” But when it says, “all things are put in subjection,” it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.’

However, the associations of “subordination” loss weight when it is noted that Paul is likely alluding to Psalm 110:1b, “The Lord said to my lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet.”” and Psalm 8:6b, “You [the LORD] have put all things under his feet[.]” It is important to state that, “Pauline theology uniformly attributes the destruction of God’s enemies to God alone.”⁴² So there is a subtle and complex mutual symmetry, the Son subjects all under him, a God act, “after which he surrenders that sovereignty back to God. There is an *identity* between God and Christ *and* an irreducible *distinction*.”⁴³ Thus this Pauline passage does not contradict conclusion of the above passages, but rather makes one note the relationship within the identity of the one God of Israel. The evidence warrants my hypothesis that the earliest sources of Christianity claimed that Jesus was divine by placing him within the identity of the one true God of Israel. McGrath wanted more emphasis

and clarification from Paul on this point,⁴⁴ but if this point is universally agreed upon in the early church, why does Paul need to explain it in full?

5. Paul and other early Christians.

This brings me to the final consideration of the argument that Christians considered Jesus divine. A similar argument was given by Larry Hurtado in his book, *Lord Jesus Christ*, but the researcher of this paper thought of it was well (though hardly as long as Hurtado). Although Paul believed in a divine Jesus, is it possible that his theology of the “Lord Jesus” was an anomaly within early Christianity? It seems that despite some outliers, many scholars think that Paul was well acquainted with Judean Christianity. He claimed to have unanimous agreement with Peter and James on the facts that he had ‘received’ (see 1 Corinthians 15:3-11) and, “his autobiographical account in Galatians 1-2 indicates that he was particularly concerned to keep good relations with Jerusalem Christian leaders (2:2), and he names here the key figures of that day; Cephas (Peter), James [“the Lord’s brother,” 1:19], and John[.]”⁴⁵ Dunn has noted that often Paul mentions the Jerusalem church as “the saints who are in Jerusalem [see Romans 15:26]”⁴⁶ while Hurtado has noted that Paul devoted a lot of energy to get a large financial donation to the Jerusalem church during a time of famine⁴⁷.

Despite this, there were differences between “Pauline Christianity” and some forms of “Jewish Christianity.” Many Jewish Christians, for example, believed that Gentile converts needed to be circumcised according to the custom of Moses, as well as follow other observances of the Torah, in order to truly participate as one of God’s covenant people (see Acts 15:1).⁴⁸ Paul reacted to this with anger, and the conflict got to be so serious that a “summit meeting” was called by the leaders of the Jerusalem church to settle the dispute, ruling in favor of Paul, that circumcision was not required for Gentile proselytes (see Acts 15). Hurtado (and myself) have argued that matters on Jesus were not disputed⁴⁹. Indeed, although divisions from other theological disputes arise in early Christianity, none of them concern Jesus-worship. If Jewish Christians from Jerusalem were concerned about Paul’s Gentile converts dietary habits and Torah observance, would they not have been

⁴¹ Wesley Hill, *Paul and the Trinity: Persons, Relations, and the Pauline Letters* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 121.

⁴² *Ibid*, 125.

⁴³ Hill, 134.

⁴⁴ James F. McGrath, “On Hearing (Rather Than Reading) Intertextual Echoes: Christology and Monotheistic Scriptures in an Oral Context,”

Biblical Theology Bulletin 43, no. 2 (April 30, 2013): 74-80. Accessed March 15, 2016.

⁴⁵ Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 157.

⁴⁶ Dunn, 708.

⁴⁷ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 159.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 161.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 165.

exasperated with their devotional practices had they not already been in agreement?⁵⁰ Again, although there were differences within early

Christianity, “we have no basis in Paul’s letters for thinking that these differences extended to major points about Christ-devotion”⁵¹ and it can also be argued that other Christian literature contains evidence of Christ-devotion in earliest Christianity (see Acts 2:14-39; Mark 1:3)⁵². The early church seems to be unified in their regard of Jesus of Nazareth as divine within their monotheistic faith.

6. Against Praxeas⁵³ (and Hurtado)

While the purpose of this paper is to argue that the early Christians viewed Jesus as divine, at this point it is pertinent to dispel two misunderstandings about the conclusion. The first is that Jesus was considered divine by the early Christians only as one manifestation of the one person within God, like one mask put on by the same person. But by reflecting just on the passages above, it is clear that there is a relationship between persons with the one God of Israel, simply by considering the interaction between Jesus and God the Father (especially in Philippians 2:6-11 and 1 Corinthians 15:24-28). The second misunderstanding is that the number of persons within the divine identity is limited to just Jesus and God the Father. Hurtado is fond of using the word “binitarian” to describe the early Christian view of God.⁵⁴ But as Wesley Hill pointed out, “The “binitarian descriptor implies (or overtly asserts) that the Spirit is not essential to the story of God and Jesus’ identities.”⁵⁵ Indeed, work from Francis Watson⁵⁶ and Matthew Bates⁵⁷ has argued that Christian documents when discussing God contain a matrix of a tri-personal being.

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⁵⁰ Ibid, 167. “The lack of any such response [from Paul] can only mean that there were no challenges to the exalted status of Jesus asserted in Paul’s gospel or to the devotional practices by which Jesus was revered in Paul’s churches.”

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² For more examples, see Bauckham, 219-21.

⁵³ In reference to the work by Tertullian (c.160-220).

7. Significance and conclusion

The hope is that this study showed that the idea of the divinity of Jesus was presented in a uniquely Jewish way. This conclusion could not have been reached if the cultural and ideological context of Paul was not examined and established. Therefore the project of this essay to properly portray Paul’s thought was successful. Comprehending the context of a person is not just a lesson to be learned and utilized by historians, it is a practical way to better understand others who do not share that same culture or ideological background as ourselves. Especially in a country with growing plurality, we would do well to try and learn the contexts of those we encounter.

It was shown that the earliest evidence from Christian documents give a divine picture of Jesus within the framework of Jewish monotheism. Paul is the prime example of this, and while there is a significant debate about this, there is an increasing number of scholars that are agreeing with the thesis of this paper. Paul, who seems to have no opposition in his view of Jesus from other Christians, presents Jesus as “Lord” while referring to the God of Israel, maintaining his monotheism, yet proclaiming something radically different from the beliefs of non-Christian Jews. What Paul and other early Christians believed concerning Jesus’ divinity has an answer, but the next step in research brings about another question: why did they believe this? The why question seems to be a more perplexing question. Did the idea come from Jesus of Nazareth himself, were the religious experiences of the early Christians enough to spur on this belief? Answering this “why” question could be part of the solution to the problem of the origins of Christianity.

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⁵⁴ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 50, 64

⁵⁵ Hill, 165.

⁵⁶ Watson, 119-123.

⁵⁷ Matthew W. Bates, *The Birth of the Trinity: Jesus, God, and Spirit in New Testament and Early Christian Interpretations of the Old Testament*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

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GLOSSARY

- Apostolic Fathers- A category used to designate the earliest extant Christian writings outside the New Testament.
- Decalogue- A Greek phrase for the Ten Commandments, found in Exodus 20:2-17.
- Henotheism- The belief that worships one god while allowing for the existence of other gods.
- Monotheism- There are several kinds of monotheisms. During the first century, pagan monotheism was prevalent; the belief in one head god who made everything while allowing for lower gods to exist (or that god manifested himself differently to other people). Jewish monotheism during this time was exclusive, it believed in one creator God and no other, who chose the nation of Israel for his purposes.
- Pauline Christianity- For the purposes of this paper, it will mean the sect of early Christianity that followed the teachings of Paul, namely, that Gentile converts did not need to observe dietary or ceremonial rules of the Torah to obtain salvation.
- Pharisees- A sect of Judaism that believed oral and written teaching alongside the "five books of Moses" (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) and the resurrection of the dead, opposed to the Sadducees, a group who rejected both of these beliefs.
- Second Temple period- A period in Jewish history from about 530 BC to 70 AD.
- Septuagint (LXX)- A Greek translation of the Old Testament.
- Shema- A prayer recited daily by devout Jews, found within Deuteronomy 6:4-9.
- Torah- "Law," for the purposes of section 5, the instructions found in the "five books of Moses."
- Undisputed Pauline letters- Letters by Paul recognized by most, if not all, scholars as authentic.
- Unitarian- A term for the belief that god is one entity (there are no other persons in one being).