

The Divinity of Jesus in Early Christian Thought



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1. Introduction and Thesis

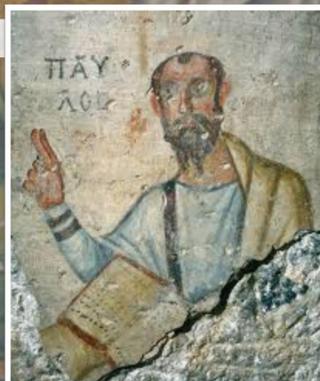
- Did the early Christians consider Jesus of Nazareth divine?
- It is agreed upon by scholars that the letters of Paul were some of the earliest sources scholars have for early Christianity.
- Thesis: The evidence from the earliest sources of Christianity warrant the claim that they believed that Jesus was divine by placing him within the identity of the one God of Israel.

2. Jewish Monotheism

- The Roman historian Tacitus wrote that, “the Jews acknowledge one God only[.]”
- 1st century Jews were very aware of their unique devotion to YHWH, the God of Israel.
- 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 evil.

3. Paul the Jew

- “[I]t seems certain that Paul was not only Jewish but also a Pharisee, just he as himself claims [in Philippians 3:4b-11.]”
- It is clearly evident that Paul was devoted to the God of Israel and the holy writings of the Jews.

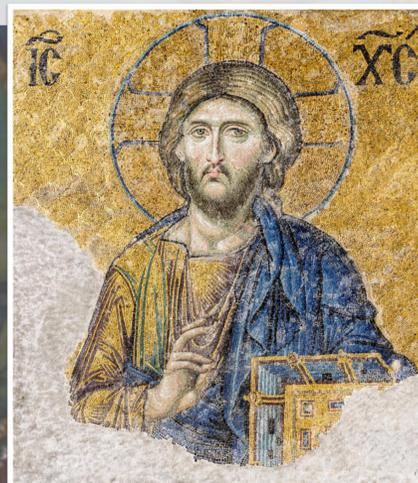


6th century painting of Paul.

Background image: 6th century depiction of “Christ the Redeemer.”

4. Pauline Texts on the Divine Jesus

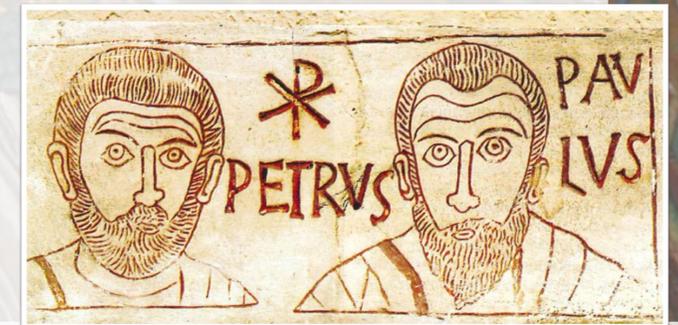
- I focused on three Pauline passages, all taken from his undisputed letters: Romans 10:9-13, 1 Corinthians 8:6 and Philippians 2:6-11.
- Some scholars say Paul portrayed Jesus as highly exalted but not divine, while other scholars, and myself, disagree.
- Paul adapted his theology around Jesus Christ while calling him *Kyrios* (“Lord”) when alluding to Old Testament monotheistic passages that refer to YHWH God by the same title (*Kyrios*), so one has the evidence they need to warrant the claim that Paul considered Jesus divine.



12th century mosaic of Jesus.

5. Paul and Other Early Christians

- Paul argued with other Christians about circumcision and food laws (cf. Acts 15 and Galatians 1-2).
- Although divisions from other theological disputes arise in early Christianity, none of them concern Jesus-worship.



4th century etching of Peter (left) and Paul (right).

6. Significance and Conclusion

- The earliest evidence from Christian documents give a divine picture of Jesus within the framework of Jewish monotheism.
- This conclusion could not have been reached if the cultural and ideological context of Paul was not examined and established, we would do well to try and learn the contexts of those we encounter.

Selected Bibliography:

- Bauckham, Richard. *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.
- Dunn, James D. G. *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006.
- Hurtado, Larry W. “First-Century Jewish Monotheism.” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 71 (September 1998): 3-26. Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost. Accessed March 14, 2016.
- Segal, Alan F. “Paul’s Jewish presuppositions” In *The Cambridge Companion to St. Paul*, edited by James D. G. Dunn, Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2003.