

Does Paul Call Jesus “God”?

by Servetus the Evangelical

Saul of Tarsus was a Jewish religious zealot who opposed the new Jesus Movement. He was going about trying to get Jewish Christians arrested and thrown into prison. On his way from Jerusalem to Damascus, Syria, to do just that, he had a vision in which he was dramatically converted to faith in Jesus (Acts 9.1-19; 22.3-21; 26.4-18). After that, as the Apostle Paul, this indefatigable worker had a most significant impact on Christianity. He traveled as a missionary, spreading the gospel in much of the Roman world.

As a former Pharisee, Paul used his knowledge of Scripture (Old Testament= OT) to become an astute Christian theologian. The OT was a very important source of teaching for him and the other early Jewish Christians. His doctrines of the one God and his Messiah were firmly rooted in the OT. That is partly why Paul is never accused in the New Testament (NT) book of Acts of abandoning his monotheistic, ancestral tradition. Vincent Taylor states, “First, we note the dominating place of monotheism in St. Paul’s Christology.... Always in his Christological statements the emphasis is upon God.” Thus, Hans Kung concludes, “Paul can only be understood from his origin in Judaism.”

Paul clearly affirms the Shema in some of his NT epistles. It is still the Jews’ sole religious creed. The Shema declares, “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!” (Deuteronomy 6.4). Traditionalist Christians often argue that “one” allows for their Trinitarian belief. But it seems pretty obvious that it means numerically one. That is what made Jews of antiquity who they were. Worshipping one God distinguished them from the polytheistic Gentiles round about, who worshipped many gods.

Thus, Paul wrote to the saints at Rome that “God ... is one” (Romans 3.30). And he completed this epistle with the doxology, “to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever” (16.27). Notice herein how Paul distinguishes between the only God and Jesus Christ. Paul also wrote to the Galatians that “God is only one” (Galatians 3.20). And in his first epistle to Timothy, Paul describes the Father as “the only God,” and more explicitly, “for there is one God” (1 Timothy 1.17; 2.5).

The following Pauline statements clearly reflect the Shema and establish that (1) there is one God, the God of the OT, (2) this one God is the Father only, and (3) this one God and Jesus Christ are to be distinguished as two separate beings, so that Jesus is not God:

- “We know that ... there is no God but one.... there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him” (1 Corinthians 8.4, 6).
- “There is ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all” (Ephesians 4.4-6)

Some scholars think these two passages may be pre-Pauline confessional statements. Frances Young rightly concludes from them concerning Paul and his converts, “their God was the God of the Old Testament and their Lord, Jesus, was ‘God’s Vicegerent [*sic*].”

So, all of the above allusions to the Shema are clear evidence that the Apostle Paul never recoiled from his strict monotheistic background—that there is numerically only one God. As Vincent Taylor rather cleverly says of this dedicated apostle of Christ, “He will not compromise his belief that God is One God, not even for Christ’s sake.”

Paul repeatedly states that Jesus has a God—the Father (Romans 15.6; 2 Corinthians 1.3; 11.31; Ephesians 1.3, 17; Colossians 1.3). And in every salutation of his ten letters, Paul juxtaposes “God the Father” and “Jesus Christ,” yet no Holy Spirit.

Thus, Paul’s teaching on the unity or oneness of God does not allow for the later church doctrines of Binitarianism or Trinitarianism. Preeminent Jewish scholar Joseph Klausner states correctly, “Paul the Jew did not go so far as to call Jesus ‘God.’”

But what about those Pauline texts that traditionalists cite to the contrary? Foremost among them is Romans 9.5. Since the early Greek manuscripts of the NT, in which earlier is considered best, are uncials (all capitals with no punctuation or spaces between words) the question is how to punctuate the last portion in Romans 9.5. Some English versions have “Christ ... who is over all, God blessed forever,” or words to that affect, which calls Jesus “God;” others have “Christ. God who is over all be blessed forever,” or similarly, which does not call Jesus “God.” Surveying modern NT scholars shows they are evenly divided even though the large majority believes the NT elsewhere calls Jesus “God.”

Traditionalists cite other Pauline passages to support their view that Jesus is God. But a survey of Bible versions, New Testament grammarians, and commentators usually shows that they, too, are divided as to whether these texts portray only Jesus, called “the one Person view,” in which case Jesus is called “God,” or that they mention both God the Father and Jesus, called “the two Person view,” in which case Jesus is not called “God.”

For example, traditionalists claim that Paul calls Jesus “our God” in 2 Thessalonians 1.12. But most modern English Bibles translate it “our God and the Lord Jesus Christ,” thus the two Persons view, so that it does not call Jesus “God.

The notorious and complex hymn in Philippians 2.6-11 should be treated separately.

Another formidable text is Titus 2.13. Most Bible versions have “our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ,” calling Jesus “God.” Most scholars agree. But some Bible versions have “the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ,” which does not call Jesus “God.”

But such grammatically problematic passages should not overrule Paul’s many texts in which he reveals the following: (1) he was always a strict monotheist, believing God is numerically one, (2) he never provides a discussion as to whether Jesus preexisted or was God, (3) he constantly distinguishes God and Christ, (4) he often interchanges “God” and “the Father,” (5) he says Jesus has a God, and (6) he declares that only the Father is God.