

Is Jesus God Because He Is Lord?

by Servetus the Evangelical

During antiquity, calling a man “Lord” usually was intended as no more than a polite address. On the other hand, kings were often addressed as “Lord” to signify their vested authority. Among Jews, rabbis could be called “Lord” to indicate both.

The early Jewish Christians’ primary creedal statement was that “Jesus is Lord.” The Apostle Peter preached about it in his first sermon on the day of Pentecost following the Christ event. He proclaimed of Jesus, “let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2.36). And the Apostle Paul wrote, “no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12.3).

Jesus had approved of his disciples calling him “Lord.” Right before partaking of the Last Supper, Peter called Jesus “Lord” (John 13.9). Jesus soon affirmed this designation by saying, “You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am” (v. 13). Jesus seems to have used these two titles interchangeably. Calling Jesus “Lord” therefore meant that he was the sole teacher of his disciples.

The synoptic gospels reveal that their writers viewed these and other similar terms interchangeably, and therefore synonymously, when applied to Jesus. For example, when Jesus and his disciples were crossing Lake Galilee in a boat and a storm threatened to swamp them, they awoke Jesus by crying out for help. Matthew says they addressed him as “Lord” (13.25); Mark records it was “Teacher” (4.38); Luke reports they said “Master” (8.24). And at Jesus’ transfiguration, Matthew says Peter addressed Jesus as “Lord” (17.4); Mark records it was “Rabbi” (9.5); Luke reports he said “Master” (9.33).

No writer of the New Testament (NT) reflects this brief confession that Jesus is Lord more than does Paul. In his ten epistles, he applies the word “Lord” to Jesus nearly 230 times, whereas he calls him “the Son (of God)” only 17 times. The Lordship of Jesus Christ is without a doubt the dominant theme in Pauline Christology.

However, Paul, unlike other NT authors, applies the title “Lord” (Greek *kurios*) exclusively to Jesus and thus never to the Father. For him, God is “the Father” and Jesus is “the Lord.” For example, Paul writes that “there is but one God, the Father,... and one Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 8.6).

Paul, as with many other early Christians, sometimes proclaims Jesus’ Lordship in his evangelistic messages. For instance, when the fear-stricken Philippian jailer asked the imprisoned apostles Paul and Silas, “‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ They said, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved’” (Acts 16.31). And Paul wrote to the Christians at Rome, “if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10.9).

But what did Paul and these other early Jewish Christians mean by their proclamation that Jesus is Lord? They meant no more than that Jesus ought to be obeyed regarding his instruction in righteousness. Only if we obey to some extent Jesus’ teachings as a lifestyle can we truthfully say that he is the Lord of our lives.

Many traditionalists (those who believe Jesus is God) contend otherwise. They allege that the NT designation of Jesus as Lord goes farther. They say it indicates that he is God due to the practice of the Septuagint (LXX: 3rd century BCE Greek translation of the Old Testament) translating *kurios* for the Hebrew word “YHWH” (Yahweh), which is God’s

name (Exodus 3.13-16), over 6,000 times. In 1963, Oscar Cullmann asserted, “the name ‘God’ (*theos*) for Jesus” is no “higher dignity than the unsurpassable *Kyrios* designation.”

But authorities now agree that 1st century CE copies of the LXX did not substitute words for God’s name. In 1978, George Howard rightly explained,

Recent discoveries in Egypt and the Judaen desert show that in the pre-Christian Greek Bible the tetragrammaton was never represented by the surrogate *kyrios* and in addition was usually left untranslated. It was reproduced in archaic-Hebrew or square Aramaic letters or in the transliterated form of ΙΑΩ.... The practice of surrogating the divine name in writing with *kyrios*, as we find it in the Christian copies of the Septuagint, is a Christian innovation that in no way reflects the appearance of the Bible which the NT writers used.... the early church was accustomed to seeing the Hebrew word יהוה written in their Greek OT, not the surrogate *kyrios*.

In fact, Jewish copies of the LXX consistently replace *kyrios* with YHWH!

Moreover, Paul does not provide any evidence in his letters that his application of *kyrios* to Jesus is a substitute for YHWH, as if to declare that Jesus is Yahweh. James Dunn says of “Lord” in Paul’s letters, “*kyrios* is not so much a way of identifying Jesus with God, but if anything more a way of *distinguishing* Jesus from God.”

Paul, in one of his letters, quotes a hymn which some traditionalists have cited as major support for their belief that Jesus is God. It says of Jesus, “God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW,... and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2.9-11; cf. Isaiah 45.23). These traditionalists claim that the first occurrence of “name” refers to “Lord” (*kyrios*) and that it identifies Jesus as God due to the Septuagint practice mentioned above.

On the contrary, “Lord” is a title, not a name. Neither is “Lord” God’s name, which is YHWH. And “name,” here, more likely refers to “Jesus.”

In sum, the NT accounts of the early Christians calling Jesus “Lord” indicate no more than their recognition of his God-given authority to rule and their voluntary submission to be ruled by him. And Paul, the premiere proponent of Lordship Christology in the NT, gives no evidence that he equates the words “Lord” and “God.”