

Is Jesus God in Other Pauline Texts?

by Servetus the Evangelical

Most traditionalist New Testament (NT) scholars cite only the following texts in the Apostle Paul's letters to support their belief that Jesus is God: Romans 9.5, Philippians 2.6-11, 1 Timothy 2.5, and Titus 2.13. But some include other minor Pauline texts.

Many Christians have thought that 2 Corinthians 8.9 implies an incarnation. It reads, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich."

The common interpretation of 2 Corinthians 8.9 is that "rich" means Jesus preexisted in heaven as God the Father's equal, and "poor" and "poverty" signify his abandoning this position at his incarnation. Karl-Josef Kuschel observes, "Traditional exegesis has always interpreted this passage in terms of pre-existence Christology and incarnation, as have present-day exegetes right across all confessional camps."

James Dunn and Maurice Casey insist that this text only concerns Adam Christology. Dunn says of 2 Corinthians 8.9 and Philippians 2.6-8, "Though he could have enjoyed the riches of an uninterrupted communion with God, Jesus freely chose to embrace the poverty of Adam's distance from God, in his ministry as a whole, but particularly in his death, in order that we might enter into the full inheritance intended for Adam in the first place." John Macquarrie responds, "Dunn's interpretation allows us to see Paul's general Christology as much more coherent than it would otherwise appear."

Only scholars know of the poorly-attested manuscript (MS) variant in Galatians 2.20. In it, most English Bible versions read "the Son of God." The variant would be translated "(the) God and Christ," as if Christ is God. But the consensus among textual critics is that this variant was due to a scribe merely making a simple mistake in copying.

Ephesians 5.5 reads, "the kingdom of Christ and God." A few 19th century scholars thought its Greek text could be translated, "the kingdom of Christ who is God." But the modern consensus is against it, so that no modern English versions have it. The meaning of this phrase is that the kingdom belongs to both God the Father and Christ.

Traditionalists generally contend that "the fulness" dwelling in Christ means that he is God. Paul writes, "For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fulness to dwell in Him" (Colossians 1.19). And he further states, "For in Him all the fulness of Deity dwells in bodily form" (2.9). These traditionalists assert that the fullness refers to all of God's divine attributes, so that Paul effectively identifies Jesus as being fully God.

On the contrary, this fullness refers to God's total self-revelation to humankind. So, Paul means that Jesus fully reveals God, not that he *is* God. The author of the Gospel of John indicates the same by explaining that Jesus was "full of grace and truth" and that "of His fulness we have all received" (John 1.14, 16).

Both of these authors were eager to tell of this fullness in Christ because they were combating proto-Gnosticism. It asserted that due to God's transcendence the *pleroma* (Greek for "fulness") consisted of a multitude of *aeons*, especially angels or spirits, who served as intermediaries between God and humankind. Thus, Christ was merely one of those *aeons* who possessed a small portion of God's fullness. Paul and John opposed this by proclaiming that all of God's fullness dwells in Christ. And Paul writes of him "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Colossians 2.3).

Paul was opposing a syncretistic religion that was prominent at Colossae, thus infiltrating the church. It represented a fusing of Judaic rituals, ascetic practices due to Platonic dualism, the worship of astral powers, and some other incipient Gnostic beliefs that had to do with Jesus' identity. In doing so, Paul only meant that "God was in Christ" in a total completeness (2 Corinthians 5.17), not that Christ was God.

Many traditionalist NT scholars cite 2 Thessalonians 1.12, Titus 2.13, and 2 Peter 1.1 as grammatically similar texts that identify Jesus as God. All three have a syntax (word order) problem which results in some ambiguity. Yet many of these scholars cite Titus 2.13 to support that Jesus is God and deny the same for the other two.

Nearly all modern Bible versions translate the critical phrase in 2 Thessalonians 1.12, "the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ," thus having two Persons in view—God the Father and Jesus. But the New American Bible, the most popular version for Roman Catholics has, "the grace of our God and Lord Jesus Christ," which identifies Jesus as God. But Paul likely meant what he says twice in his salutation, "God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (vv. 1-2). Furthermore, Raymond E. Brown, the preeminent Catholic NT scholar of the 2nd half of the 20th century, says of this phrase, "Most commentators accept this distinction [between the Father and Jesus], and the latest and most comprehensive Catholic commentary says that it must be accepted. So, this text cannot be used as an example of the use of the title 'God' for Jesus."

Scholars claim that the six poetic strophes (lines) in 1 Timothy 3.16 are from a pre-Pauline hymn and that they refer to major events in Jesus' life arranged in chronological order. Past traditionalists insisted that in the Greek text the first strophe calls Jesus God. The King James Version renders it, "God was manifest in the flesh." But the MS evidence is weak for *theos* ("God") and strong for *hos* ("who") or *ho* ("he" or "the one"). Thus, the four, modern, foremost, Greek NT's have *hos*, so that nearly all modern English versions read "He" or "Who." Paul surely could not have written "God" since he also wrote in this letter that God is invisible (1 Timothy 1.17; 6.16). Traditionalist and textual critic Bruce Metzger explains that *theos* could be an innocent scribal error, an interpretation of the six strophes, or a gloss to support the doctrine of the Trinity.