

Is Jesus God in Romans 9.5?

by Servetus the Evangelical

Traditionalist Bible scholars cite Romans 9.5b as a prime New Testament (NT) text that calls Jesus “God.” But this is debatable because this passage involves a grammatical problem in the koine Greek text. F.C. Burkitt says of this passage that its “punctuation has probably been more discussed than that of any other sentence in literature.”

We can see this difference by comparing two editions of the same English Bible. The Revised Standard Version (RSV) translates Romans 9.5, “to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ. God who is over all be blessed for ever. Amen.” This edition distinguishes Christ and God as two individuals, called the Two Person view, so that it does not call Christ “God.” But the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) has, “to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.” This edition presents the One Person view, in which Messiah Jesus is called “God.”

The problem is the Greek language. When Paul wrote his letters, in the 1st century, Greek had no punctuation, no spaces between letters, and all letters were in capitals, called “uncials.” Punctuation, spacing, and upper and lower case were not incorporated in Greek until the 3rd and 4th centuries. So, NT grammarians admit that the correct translation of this clause cannot depend on Greek grammar that did not exist back then.

The question about how to punctuate Romans 9.5b in the Greek text and translate it into English can be stated as follows: in accordance with later, punctuated Greek, should a colon (a raised period) or a full stop (a period) be inserted after the word *sarka* (“flesh”) in the unpunctuated Greek text? If either should be, then an independent clause begins after it, as a doxology to God the Father, and the clause does not call Christ “God.” Since Romans 9.5b mentions both God and Christ, God presumably being the Father, this rendering is called the Two Persons view. But if another form of punctuation is placed after *sarka*, such as a comma, or the sentence is punctuated in some other place, the verse continues with Christ in view. In this case it becomes a doxology to Christ, thus calling Him “God,” which is called the One Person view.

A subordinate question about Romans 9.5b is whether the ascription commonly translated, “who is over all,” should be applied to “Christ” or “God.”

The reasons that scholars put forth for the One Person view are as follows:

1. Nearly all church fathers regarded Romans 9.5b as calling Christ “God.”
2. A doxology of praise to God in Romans 9.5b would be out of place with Paul’s expressed sorrow and regret recorded previously, in vv. 1-3.
3. The normal word order in Old Testament (OT) doxologies, which refer to God the Father, is not used, in which the word “blessed” precedes “LORD/God.”
4. In other Pauline doxologies the word “God” is never mentioned first.
5. Pauline doxologies are never asyndetic (without a conjunction), as here, which would be unnatural and render the articular participle *ho on* (“who is”) as superfluous.

The reasons that scholars put forth for the Two Person view are as follows:

1. Paul, a former Pharisee, could not have called Christ “God” since strict monotheism still remained a dominant feature of his theology.

2. Paul could not have called Jesus Christ “God” because he constantly distinguishes God and Jesus Christ throughout this letter as well as all of his NT letters.
3. Paul never directly calls Christ “God” in any of his ten NT letters. Yet he uses the word *theos* (God) for the Father over 500 times.
4. Paul would not call Christ “God” without explanation. Much less would he do so in this brief clause that begins a treatise on a different subject, especially it being Israel.
5. Six out of the total of seven other doxologies in Paul’s corpus are clearly addressed to God the Father, which suggests the same here in Romans 9.5b.
6. Paul never applies the Greek expression *epi panton* (“over all”), or its corollary, *pantokrator* (“Almighty”), to Christ, nor does any other NT author. It would contradict his saying Christ is subordinate to God (1 Corinthians 3.23; 11.3; Ephesians 4.6).
7. Taking the words as “God over all” alludes to OT parallels, such as in Psalm 104.19-20 and 1 Chronicles 29.11, which suggest a doxology to God here.
8. Paul never applies the Greek word *eulogetos* (“blessed”) to Christ, nor does any other NT author. And all seven other instances of it in the NT are applied to God the Father.
9. Paul elsewhere writes that God is the “only Sovereign” (1 Timothy 6.15), which seems incompatible with Christ being “over all.”
10. Including Christ in a list of eight advantages that God gave Israel is incompatible with describing this particular advantage as “God over all.”

The majority of the committee for the *United Bible Societies’ Greek New Testament* regarded none of the reasons for the One Person view as “decisive” and considered it “tantamount to impossible” that Paul would call Christ “God blessed forever.”

It must be concluded that Romans 9.5b is ambiguous because the earliest and thus the most reliable NT Greek manuscripts were written in uncials without punctuation. Paul’s clear statements elsewhere, such as 1 Corinthians 8.6 and Ephesians 4.5-6, on the same subject should indicate his intent in Romans 9.5b. Plus, his constant practices of affirming strict monotheism, distinguishing Christ and God, subordinating Christ to God, and identifying God as the Father indicate that he could not have intended to call Christ “God” here in Romans 9.5b. Regardless, this grammatically ambiguous verse should not be used as a proof text to support the traditional belief that Jesus Christ is God.