

Paul's Christology and Jewish Monotheism

The examination, in the first set of Unit notes, of Paul's use of key christological titles raised the question of the relationship between Paul's acclamation of Jesus as 'Lord' (*kyrios*) and his commitment to the Jewish belief in one God. Attention was drawn to the use of *mar* (lord/master) as a reverential designation for God in first-century Jewish traditions, and to its implications for understanding Paul's application of *marana tha*, that is, an already existing liturgical petition in Jewish-Christian circles. Similar questions are raised by Paul's appropriation of a series of scriptural quotations in which *kyrios*, applied in the original context to Israel's God, Yahweh, is now transferred to Christ as its referent. A passage like the well-known hymn in Philippians 2, in which one of the most unequivocal declarations of monotheism in the Jewish scriptures (Isa. 45:23) is subjected to christological interpretation (the bowing of every knee and the confession of every tongue that Jesus is Lord), demonstrates that Paul can associate Christ directly, and quite boldly, with God. Acknowledging Jesus as *kyrios* in this context indicates that he bears the equivalent of God's name in the Jewish Scriptures.

What, therefore, are the implications of such features for understanding Paul's monotheistic beliefs? Two aspects merit particular comment, namely the nature of first-century Jewish monotheism and the distinctive way in which Paul can accommodate Christ as divine 'Lord' while continuing to work within a monotheistic framework.

First, there is evidence in first-century Judaism that belief in the one God of Israel was able to accommodate other exalted beings. In a number of Jewish texts, both from Palestine and the Diaspora, God is depicted as appointing a particular figure to act as his chief agent. This category of divine agency, as Larry Hurtado has demonstrated, can manifest itself in various forms: a chief agent can be a divine attribute (such as Wisdom or the Logos), an exalted patriarch taken up to heaven (Moses, Enoch, or Elijah), or even a principal angel like Michael (Dan. 10:13-21), Yahoel (Apocalypse of Abraham 10-11) or Melchizedek (in a fragmentary Qumran text known as 11QMelchizedek). The nature of the role exercised by God's principal agent in these texts also varies. Wisdom is depicted as participating in creation (Wisdom of Solomon 7:22), Melchizedek is active in eschatological redemption, while the principal angels Michael and Yahoel exercise power in their

role as the grand vizier of God. The chief agent is therefore portrayed in these Jewish texts as having a highly exalted and unique status, second only to God in terms of authority and significance. In some cases the chief agent possesses special divine attributes and powers, as in the depiction of Yahoel as the one who bears the Divine Name (cf. Exod. 23:21: 'for my name is in him') and whose appearance is described in language reminiscent of theophanies (Apocalypse of Abraham 10:3, 8; 11:2-3).

None of these chief agent traditions, however, compromises Jewish monotheism. Wisdom and the Logos amount to descriptions of God's active involvement in the world, while depictions of the exalted status of patriarchs like Moses are intended to validate Jewish religious tradition and to foreshadow the reward of the elect ones. Even principal angels remain distinct from, and subordinate to, God, since their authority and status are derived from the one God whose majesty they serve to magnify. The category of divine agency in first-century Judaism may therefore provide an important conceptual framework enabling Jewish Christians like Paul to explain the exaltation of Jesus to God's right hand without compromising their commitment to the one God.

Secondly, a distinctive feature of Paul's christology is that he speaks of God as Father and of Jesus as Lord. Even in the opening greetings of his letters, he includes Jesus alongside God by stating: 'Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ' (I Cor. 1:3). Whatever other devout Jews may have thought of Paul's beliefs after his conversion, there is significant evidence to demonstrate that Paul thought of himself as faithful to the God of his ancestors and that he revered Jesus as an integral part of his obedience to the one God of Israel.

The inclusion of Christ in expressions of commitment to the one God is clearly illustrated in 1 Corinthians 8:4-6 where Paul deals with the issue of what kind of religious activities his Gentile converts can continue to engage in as Christ-believers. He refers in derisive terms to polytheistic religious practices as the worship of 'idols': 'Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "no idol in the world really exists", and that "there is no God but one". Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth - as in fact there are many gods and many lords'. Paul then makes a two-part confession which is most appropriately interpreted as an adaptation of the *Shema*, the traditional

monotheistic formula recited daily by the Jews (Deut. 6:4: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord' [*kyrios heis estin*]): 'Yet for us there is one God (*heis theos*), the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord (*heis kyrios*), Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist'. Paul's emphasis on 'one God, the Father' is combined here with a confession of the uniqueness of Christ's lordship, for there is 'one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist' (1 Cor. 8:6). To describe Jesus here as 'one Lord' is not viewed by Paul as impinging on his monotheistic beliefs, and his earlier negative attitude towards pagan religion strongly indicates that he does not view the veneration of Christ as 'Lord' as belonging to the pagan pattern of worshipping many figures. His christological convictions, in fact, did not involve an abandonment of the monotheism he inherited from Jewish tradition, but rather fitted within his faithful commitment to one God. He therefore emphasizes that all things are *from*, that is originating in the Father, but that this occurs *through* the Son, that is by his agency. For this reason Paul speaks of Jesus as 'the one Lord' because of his belief in the uniqueness of Christ, and also as a corollary of Jewish monotheism. In other words, Jesus is the *one* Lord just as, and indeed because, God is the *one* God.

Thus, while Paul undoubtedly speaks of Christ in highly exalted terms - as the Son of God and as the living Lord - he never depicts Christ as an independent divine figure. This is clearly expressed in the sequence established in Philippians 2:9-11 which culminates with a focus on the sovereignty of God. The bestowal of the 'name above every name' certainly indicates a unique status conferred upon the exalted Christ by God himself (2:9), but those who confess Jesus as 'Lord' do so in order to enhance the glory of the Father (2:11). Paul does not seek to state that the lordship of Jesus replaces that of God, or even that Jesus is to be identified with Yahweh, for it is God who is glorified by means of the universal acknowledgement of Jesus as Lord. Paul therefore often stresses the dependence of the Son on the Father and expresses his subordination to God: 'When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all' (I Cor. 15:28). In the end he will deliver the kingdom to God the Father (I Cor. 15:24; cf. II Cor. 11:3). Paul understands Christ's lordship in terms of sharing in God's sovereignty.

Assessing the relevant evidence demonstrates that Paul was presenting a distinctively Christ-orientated expression of belief in one God, not in the sense that it breaches Jewish monotheism (which could already accommodate exalted figures alongside God), but by presenting both Jesus and God as the recipients of veneration and worship. Thus, while honour was accorded to figures like the exalted patriarchs and principal angels in first-century Judaism, there is no convincing evidence that any of these chief agents became the object of formal corporate worship in a Jewish cultic context. They did not pose a threat to Jewish monotheism because they were never worshipped. The early Christian innovation lies, in this respect, in the inclusion of Christ as the object of cultic devotion alongside God, in what Larry Hurtado in *One God, One Lord* calls a 'mutation' or redefinition of Jewish monotheistic piety in order to accommodate a binitarian devotion to Jesus alongside God (worship as a criterion for divine status). This is demonstrated by such devotional practices as the singing of hymns in honour and celebration of Christ (I Cor. 14:26), baptizing in the name of or 'into Christ Jesus' (Rom. 6:3) and confessing 'Jesus is Lord' through hymns and acclamations (Rom. 10:9-13; I Cor. 12:3). In other words, Paul viewed himself as loyal to the Jewish monotheistic faith in the worship of 'one God', but his conviction that the crucified Christ had been exalted to heavenly glory also led to the worship of Christ as 'one Lord'.

Christ's Pre-existence

If Paul can speak of Jesus in such exalted terms, even as the mediator of creation (I Cor. 8:4-6), does Paul envisage that Jesus existed before his earthly manifestation? There is vigorous debate over this issue, particularly as the statements about God having *sent* his Son are notoriously ambiguous (Gal. 4:4; Rom. 8:3). This language of sending could imply belief in Jesus' pre-existence, in the sense that God sent Jesus to earth from another mode of existence (Gal. 4:4: God sent forth his Son in order to be born of a woman; Rom. 8:3: God sent his Son in the likeness of sinful flesh). However, these statements could be interpreted as denoting a commissioning reminiscent of the sending of the prophets in the Jewish Scriptures, without no ideas of pre-existence implied (Judges 6:8; Jer. 7:25). Since both of these Pauline passages (Gal. 4:4; Rom. 8:3) could point to a possible parallel between Jesus and Wisdom (Wisdom 9:10: 'Send her forth from the holy heavens, and from the throne of your glory send her'), it is necessary at this point to consider whether the identification of Jesus as Wisdom in Paul's letters can cast

some light on the issue of whether Paul expresses belief in the personal pre-existence of Jesus.

Jesus as the Wisdom of God In I Corinthians 1:24 Paul states that Christ is 'the power of God and the wisdom of God', while in 1:30 he speaks of Jesus 'who became wisdom for us from God, and righteousness, and sanctification and redemption'. These statements belong to a cluster of passages in which epithets and functions traditionally associated in Jewish Scripture and tradition with divine Wisdom are now applied to Christ and form a Wisdom christology:

- Christ is distinctively described by Paul in II Corinthians 4:4 as 'the image of God' (*eikōn tou theou*): the glory of God that is revealed 'in the face of Jesus Christ'. Furthermore, in Colossians 1:15, which is the opening line of a hymn cited by the author (possibly Paul), Christ is described as 'the image of the invisible God'. This phraseology is certainly reminiscent of traditional Wisdom speculation, for according to the Wisdom of Solomon 7:26 the figure of *sophia* is described as 'the image (*eikōn*) of God's goodness'.
- Furthermore, in I Corinthians 8:6, as already noted, Jesus is said to be the mediator of creation: 'one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things (here with reference to the whole of creation) and we through him'. Similarly in Colossians 1:16 Jesus is described as the 'firstborn of all creation for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created'. Again, as in I Corinthians 8:6, 'all things' are said to come into existence 'through him'. The closest parallels to the christological theme of Jesus as the agent of creation are again to be found in Jewish Wisdom literature; not only is Wisdom described as dwelling with God before creation (Prov. 8:22-23: 'The Lord created me (*sophia*) at the beginning of his ways, the first of his acts of long ago. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth'), but God is said to make all things by wisdom (Prov. 3:19: 'The Lord by wisdom founded the foundations of the earth'; Wisdom 7:22: 'For wisdom, the fashioner of all things, taught me'; 9:1-2: 'O God of my ancestors and Lord of mercy, who has made all things by your *word*, and by your *wisdom* have formed humankind').

What are the christological implications of such associations? What does it mean, for Paul, when he depicts Jesus as the fulfilment of Wisdom as portrayed in scriptural and Jewish Hellenistic texts? Does it imply that the divine and pre-

existent Wisdom, who was active in creation, became incarnate in the historical Jesus?

James Dunn has forcefully argued in his writings against the view that the identification of Jesus with Wisdom points to his pre-existence. He proposes in fact that there is no idea of Christ's personal pre-existence and incarnation in Paul's letters. He argues that the passages which speak of Jesus as the mediator of creation and as 'the image of God' point to a Pauline conception of pre-existence in ideal rather than personal terms. In other words, the aim of Jewish Wisdom traditions is to use vivid metaphorical language to describe God's wise actions and to bridge the gap between his transcendence and immanent activity in the world. Wisdom is therefore not something other than God, but a circumlocution to describe one of his attributes. Dunn draws attention, in this respect, to the close connection in Jewish texts between divine Wisdom and the Torah (cf. Wisdom of Ben Sira 24:23; Baruch 3:38-4:1: 'Afterward she appeared upon the earth and lived among humans. She is the book of the commandments of God, the law which endures for ever'). The central message of these texts is that God's hidden wisdom has been made manifest to Israel through the Law. It was not so much the Torah that was pre-existent, as that Wisdom is now revealed in the Torah. And when early Christ-believers replaced the Torah with Christ, it did not so much mean that he, as Jesus of Nazareth, had pre-existed but that pre-existent Wisdom was now recognized and revealed in Christ (as Christ). With regard to those two Pauline passages in which the role of divine Wisdom as the mediator of creation is echoed, they signify, according to Dunn, that God's creative plan and power (his Wisdom) are realized or exemplified in the person of Jesus. He is the human embodiment of God's attribute of wisdom.

Does Dunn's assessment of Paul's appropriation of Wisdom traditions do justice to Paul's language? Even if Jewish traditions do present Wisdom as a personification of God's activity rather than as a personal figure, it does not necessarily follow that Paul's attribution of the functions and epithets of Wisdom to Christ amounts to an unmodified transference of a fixed or ready-made model. Indeed, even within Jewish traditions the language about Wisdom was used in ways that left open the possibility that a separate being was thought of as existing alongside God. It is also made clear in the relevant passages that Paul has gone further and offered an innovative adaptation of the Jewish language about

Wisdom. The subject is not now a divine attribute or function (or even an entity such as Torah), but the concrete historical figure whose personal relationship with God is highlighted by his naming as 'Lord, Jesus Christ' (1 Cor. 8:6) and, in connection with the hymn in Colossians 1, the 'Son' (Col. 1:13).

Furthermore, attention can be drawn to I Corinthians 10:4 where Paul claims that the rock in the story of the wilderness wanderings of the Israelites is to be identified with Christ. Paul is clearly drawing on Jewish exegetical traditions in which the rock of the exodus story is said to move and follow the Israelites, whereas Philo (*Leg All* 2:86) identifies the rock which gives water to the Israelites as Wisdom. However, Paul is not using typological interpretation here to claim that the rock in the wilderness corresponds to Christ in the present, for what he actually states is that the rock *was* Christ (using the past rather than the present tense). Whether Paul has or has not been influenced here by Wisdom traditions, I Corinthians 10:4 provides clear evidence that he was capable of interpreting scriptural passages as pointing to Jesus' existence prior to his birth.

Philippians 2:6-11 Perhaps the most crucial text, and potentially the most explicit attestation of pre-existence in Paul's letters, is the hymn incorporated into his letter to the Philippians (2:6-11). We can be fairly certain that we are dealing here with a poetic, christological passage, even perhaps an independent liturgical hymn stemming from the Early Church. As a unified passage it naturally divides into two parts: the description of Jesus' humiliation by his own voluntary act (vv. 6-8) and his subsequent exaltation by the act of God (vv. 9-11). In the opening statement of the hymn Paul speaks of Christ existing 'in the form of God' (*morphē theou*). The most widely held opinion is that this declaration expresses Christ's divine and sovereign status before his earthly existence, a fully divine pre-existent being alongside God in heaven prior to his earthly existence. Thus, the first line of the hymn states that Jesus in his pre-existent state was 'in the form of God' and did not count his equality with God as something he could use to his own advantage (*harpagmos*). Rather, by becoming human and assuming the status of a slave, he humbled himself and was obedient unto death (vv. 6-8). In other words, Christ could have used his power to strive towards independent lordship, but he emptied himself (possibly in the metaphorical sense of abasing himself, rather than the later kenotic christological notion of his self-emptying of divinity) taking the form of a servant.

Once again James Dunn has sought to demonstrate that the notion of real pre-existence is not reflected in the first half of this passage, but that it alludes to the Genesis accounts of the creation and disobedience of Adam, thus establishing an implicit contrast between Christ and Adam. Like Adam, Jesus bore the image of God (paralleled in the phrase 'the form of God') and was like God (Gen. 1:26-27). However, different from Adam, he was obedient and did not seek to snatch equality with God (Gen. 3:5); this points to a different interpretation of the Greek word *harpagmos*, interpreted in the light of the reference to Adam's temptation to eat the fruit of the tree in order to be 'like God'. The earthly Adam failed in his quest to be like God, but the earthly Jesus embraced the fate of humankind by choosing the path of obedience and accepting death, which is the consequence of Adam's disobedience. As a result of his obedience he was highly exalted (cf. Ps. 8:6). Although this contrast does not necessarily imply that the figure described in the first lines of the passage is a human figure, this is how it is interpreted by Dunn (*Christology in the Making*, 114-21). Hence, he proposes that, as in the case of Wisdom, one cannot speak here of a pre-existent Jesus, but, in Dunn's words, 'Christ in the role of the pre-historical Adam', the Adam originally intended by God.

Dunn's reading is presented by him as another piece of evidence from Paul's letters that his presentation of the identity and role of Jesus is heavily influenced by an 'Adam christology'. Nevertheless, questions do remain as to whether Dunn's interpretation of this hymn (as a two-stage contrast of Jesus' earthly life and death with Adam's state before and after his choice in the garden) is more convincing than the traditional reading of the first half of the hymn: one of movement in narrative sequence from Christ's pre-incarnate state to his human existence and death (2:6-8). There are, moreover, some problems with Dunn's position:

- i) If Christ in verse 6 is described as the first/primal or heavenly Man, it should be borne in mind that in those passages where Paul explicitly contrasts Adam and Christ (Rom. 5; I Cor. 15) he speaks of Christ as the *second* Adam.
- ii) Even more problematic for Dunn's interpretation is the lack of clear Adamic parallels in Philippians 2:6-11. Thus, for example, how valid is the proposal that the phrase 'in the form of God' is simply a variation on 'in the image of God', based on the partial overlap of their lexical range of meanings (*morphē* - form, outward appearance, shape; *eikōn* - image, likeness, appearance). It is striking that, when later writers wanted to echo the Genesis description of the status and significance

of the human being, it is the phrase *eikōn theou* (as in the LXX) not *morphē theou* that is used, even by Paul himself (I Cor. 11:7; cf. Wisdom 2:23; Sir. 17:3). Indeed, if the phrase were meant to be recognized as an echo of the Genesis account, one would expect some verbatim reproduction of key words.

iii) The main weakness of the theory which equates 'form' with 'image' is that it fails to take into account the use of the same word in verse 7 ('taking the form of a servant') where it cannot refer to image or glory. The actual meaning of 'form' in verses 6-7 must be one that will apply equally well to both phrases in view of the clearly intended juxtaposition.

Such statements as the first half of the Philippians hymn seem to be the product of extended christological reflection, and, if Paul is quoting an already existing hymn, it bears witness to the rapid christological development among Christ-believers in the early decades after Jesus' death. As the belief in the exaltation of the risen Christ to the right hand of his Father developed in the early Christian communities, it was inevitable that believers began to speculate as to whether Jesus possessed this status before he became a human being. The question is whether this development is already to be traced back to Paul. As already noted, a major difference in interpretation among contemporary scholars is whether Paul, by including such statements, believed in Christ's *personal* pre-existence or perceived an *eschatological* pre-existence as attested in many Jewish traditions (e.g., I Enoch 48:1-3 suggests that the Elect One/Son of Man was 'named' before the world was created; IV Ezra 13:25-26: the messianic figure from the sea is 'he whom the Most High has been keeping for many ages'). The concept of eschatological pre-existence would indicate that God, from the beginning, did intend to send a human being to earth as his representative, but it was the concept rather than the figure that pre-existed. What is certainly striking is that such exalted language occurs in confessional statements and hymnic fragments, although it must be acknowledged that Paul never seeks to explain or discuss at any length the nature of Christ's pre-existent state. Indeed, to enquire about the precise nature of Christ's role as the one 'through whom are all things' (1 Cor. 8:6) or his ontological status 'in the form of God' (Phil. 2:6) and as 'Son' (Gal. 4:4) is to seek answers from Paul to questions that dominated the christological controversies of later centuries.

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