

## The Deity of Yeshua

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“But I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? Then the stumbling block of the cross has been abolished” (Gal 5:11).

Paul recognized that the preaching of the “cross” constituted a stumbling block, particularly to his Jewish brothers and sisters. He says this in 1Cor 1:23, “but we preach Messiah crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness.” Paul knew of only one way for a sinner to be reckoned as righteous before God: by faith in Yeshua as the only effectual, eternal atonement for sin. Paul’s reasoning in Gal 5:11 is clear: if he was still preaching that righteousness could be obtained through having a Jewish status (circumcision), then the cross was not essential. And it was the preaching of the cross as essential, as the only way for salvation, that constituted the stumbling block for the Jews.

This was made clear to us again as we attended the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Washington DC. As we spoke with a Jewish professor there, he reminded us that His primary difficulty with us as followers of Yeshua was “that man on the stick,” by which he meant the whole matter of Yeshua’s crucifixion and the central place He holds as the suffering Messiah for His people.

It is clear, however, that if Yeshua were presented as simply a well respected Sage of the 1st Century who died for His convictions, no such difficulty would exist. Many Jewish Sages were put to death by Rome and are venerated as being heroes of the Jewish faith. What makes Yeshua different from these in the eyes of modern Judaism, however, is that the followers of Yeshua claim He was more than a man; more than even the greatest of men. Wrapped up in the mystery of the Messiah Yeshua is the clear biblical fact that He is divine. In short, it is the fact that we believe Yeshua to be Immanuel, “God with us,” that marks the ultimate dividing line between us and rabbinic Judaism. We believe Yeshua is worthy to be worshipped; rabbinic Judaism considers such worship to be idolatry.

It is no wonder, then, that in the emerging Torah communities of our day, the issue of Yeshua’s deity is once again being debated. Since rabbinic Judaism constitutes the only long-standing tradition that has maintained the viability of the Torah, and since we are seeking to recover the Torah as a way of life, we have come to a deep appreciation for much of rabbinic Judaism. “But how,” we wonder, “could the traditional synagogue have so many beautiful and helpful Torah traditions and be so wrong about Yeshua?” Unfortunately, some have answered this question by suggesting that the traditional synagogue is only partially wrong about Yeshua. They error in failing to receive Him as Messiah, but they are right when they say that the Messiah is only a man, not God. In this way, Yeshua is put forward as the greatest of Sages to have ever lived, a truly righteous man, but in no way divine. Such a perspective appears to solve two difficulties. First, it takes away one of the major contentions that rabbinic Judaism has with the followers of Yeshua, and secondly, it seems to solve one of the greatest problems posed by the belief in Yeshua’s deity, namely, how one can maintain a vital monotheism (only one God) and believe that Yeshua is divine. For some, the belief in the deity of Yeshua suggests that there is more than one God.

But giving way on the deity of Yeshua brings grave problems rather than solving difficulties. Primarily, a non-divine Yeshua is not the Yeshua of the Scriptures and is not therefore the Messiah Who saves sinners. It is no wonder that those who have denied the deity of Yeshua very often also teach that there are more ways to obtain eternal salvation than through Yeshua’s death, resurrection, ascension and intercession. Once Yeshua is considered no more than a venerable Sage, His death for sinners is also downgraded. While it may be viewed as a very important example of self-sacrifice and love, it is no longer seen as essential for God’s plan of salvation. It is not uncommon to hear those who have taken such a position teaching that a righteous standing before God can be obtained through genuine repentance and the doing of the *mitzvot*.

But the Scriptures speak differently on this matter. John, in the opening of his Gospel, writes that “In the beginning was Word, the Word was with God and the Word was God” (John 1:1). John is clearly mimicking the words of Gen 1:1, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” He intends us to know that

in the same way that Moses begins the Torah with God but without any suggestion that God Himself had a beginning, so he begins his Gospel with “In the beginning was the Word,” teaching us that the Word also had no beginning. Moreover, the Greek literally says “and the Word was *to* God,” meaning that the Word had an intimate, face-to-face relationship with God, a relationship that bespeaks equality as well as eternity. Then John writes “and the Word was God.” After expressing relationship in the phrase “the Word was *to* God,” John makes the inexplicable statement that “the Word was God.” In these two statements John expresses both the Word’s distinctive individuality and His absolute oneness with the Father. Moreover, John leaves us no doubts as to Whom he refers as the Word. In v. 14 he gives a clear explanation: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.” Much, of course, has been written on John’s Prologue to his Gospel, and many have tried to find other ways of explaining John’s words. Some have felt that his statement regarding Yeshua’s divine nature is far too bold to have been even thinkable in 1st Century Judaism. But a study of other early Jewish literature, such as the Melchizedek text from Qumran (11Q13), shows that ascribing divine attributes to an exalted human figure is clearly not outside of the scope of early Judaism.

Another controversial verse in John’s Prologue is v. 18. Here, textual variants have given rise to various translations. For instance, the *KJV* has: “No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.” However, the weight of the earliest Greek manuscripts show the text to be “only begotten God” rather than “only begotten Son.” Indeed, the word translated “only begotten” does not speak so much to being *born* as to being *unique*. Thus, the same Greek word *monogenes* is used of Isaac in Gen 22:2, “take now your son, your *only (monogenes)* son....” Thus, the *NASB* rightly translates the phrase: “No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him.” The *ESV* has a similar translation: “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.” The reason these translators opted for the reading “only begotten God” or “the only God,” rather than “only begotten Son” or “only Son” is because the weight of manuscript evidence clearly proves that these were the original words written by John. Here, as in the opening verse of the Prologue (and thus forming a literary *inclusio*) John, without further explanation, explicitly refers to Yeshua as God existing “in the bosom of the Father” or, as the *NIV* has it, “at the Father’s side.” The point of this phrase (ὁ ὢν εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς) in John’s wording presents the inexplicable yet eternally true reality: The Father and the Son are one. Moreover, John also declares that God is *the* Spirit: “God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” (Jn 4:24). The truth of the Trinity is clearly emphasized by John’s inspired words.

Of course, John is not the only one to record such explicit statements about Yeshua’s divine nature. Paul also incorporates into his epistles two hymns that were apparently well known among the congregations of The Way: 1Tim 3:16 and Phil 2:6–11. The hymn in 1Tim 3:16 speaks of Yeshua as “revealed in the flesh,” meaning “revealed as a human being.” The fact that he speaks of Yeshua being “revealed” emphasizes the fact that Yeshua existed before He was born as a babe in Bethlehem. This corresponds to Yeshua’s own words when He said, “Before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58). He did not say “Before Abraham was, I *was*” but “*I am*.” The reaction of the people who took up stones to kill Yeshua at this point, makes it clear that His words “I am” were well understood as an assertion of being eternal. He is יהוה in the flesh.

This is one of the clear points made in the second hymn Paul uses in his epistle to the Philippians. This hymn speaks of Yeshua pouring Himself out as a sacrifice. After establishing the fact that Yeshua existed in the “very nature of God” (Phil 2:6), the hymn goes on to speak of His incarnation as a true human being (not some super-human or some façade of humanity) Who became “obedient to death.” While truly human, Yeshua had a unique status in the sense that He could “become obedient to death.” No one who has inherited a fallen nature from Adam has the option of whether or not to submit to death. Death is inevitable for us all (Heb 9:27). But not so in the case of Yeshua. Death had no power over Him. For Him to die, therefore, was an act of His own sovereign and voluntary choice. Moreover, because He willingly submitted to death, even the worst sort of death by excruciating execution as a criminal punished by crucifixion, Yeshua was highly exalted and the “name above all names” was bestowed upon Him (Phil 2:9). Paul is careful in the choice of his words, for he does not write that a name was “given” to Yeshua, but “bestowed” (*charizomai*) upon Him,

suggesting more the idea that the glory He had with the Father before the world began (cf. Jn 17:5) was restored. While Yeshua existed from all eternity, without a beginning, He was not fully known as He is now, having died, raised from the dead, and ascended to the right hand of the Father on high. It was through His humiliation that He would forever be known as the One possessing a “name above every name.” And what is that name? Phil 2:11 tells us: “every tongue will confess that Yeshua Messiah is Lord (*kurios*).” While the name *kurios* may be understood simply as “Master” or “Lord,” Jewish believers of the 1st Century could not have missed the fact that in the Lxx of the Tanach, *kurios* is the Greek word used most often used to translate the ineffable Name, the Tetragram (Y-H-V-H). Is this not the highest of all names? And it is this Name by which the risen, exalted Messiah is now known. For this reason, Paul tells us that “at the name of Yeshua every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth” (Phil. 2:10). Yes, indeed! Yeshua is worthy to be worshipped and as such, He is one with the Father, bearing the Name, by which we understand and confess that He fully participates in all the divine attributes revealed in the Name.

This core belief of the Apostles is found in other contexts as well. Paul writes to Titus regarding the hope of Yeshua’s return: looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Messiah Yeshua, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds” (Tit 2:13–14). The Greek construction of this amazing statement emphasizes that fact that both “God” and “Savior” refer to “Messiah Yeshua” in the opening phrase of v. 13. Similarly, in Acts 20:28, in the oldest Greek manuscripts, Paul admonishes the elders of Ephesus to “shepherd the *ekklesia* of God which He purchased with His own blood.” Such language tells us that for Paul, the divine nature of Yeshua was a well established fact in his own understanding and theology. Likewise, in Rom 9:5, the grammar of the Greek favors understanding Paul’s use of “God” (*theos*) to refer to Yeshua: “whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Messiah according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.”

Simply put, if we accept the Apostolic Scriptures as God’s inspired word, then we also accept without reservation the full and complete deity of the Messiah, Yeshua. This does not mean we can explain how this is possible, or describe the ontological realities that such a confession entails. We do not seek to answer the mystery of how God could take on the form of a human being, or how, in pouring Himself out as a sacrifice, the unchangeable God could suffer at the hands of mutable, sinful, and mortal mankind. From a Hebraic perspective, we hold this mystery and the tension it creates as an inexplicable truth. What we cannot fully explain, yet we, by faith, fully confess to be true.

In the midst of the Christological controversies that have arisen within the Torah movement, we must fully affirm the deity of Yeshua as well as His complete humanity. The Scriptures clearly teach that He existed from all eternity, without beginning and without end, and that He is not the product of creation but is Himself the Creator (Jn 1:3; Col 1:16-17). The word of God also makes clear that at the time determined by the Father, Yeshua was conceived by the miraculous power of the Spirit within Miriam (Mary), a virgin betrothed to Joseph. That He was born as the Gospels record and that He lived, suffered, and died as the divine Son of man, as the Gospel writers tell us. We believe that, just as He said, He arose on the third day, and that having shown Himself to many people during the time of counting the omer, He ascended into heaven where He now resides at the right hand of the Father, interceding for all who are His. As the exalted Son of God, He is that Son of Man spoken of by Daniel (7:13f) Who reigns in glory, and Who is therefore worthy of our worship and adoration, and that as we render our worship to Him, in doing so we give glory to the Father (Phil 2:11) through the work of the Spirit. We also believe that Yeshua will return to this earth according to the sovereign providence of God, and that He will gather all who are truly His and will reign in Jerusalem as the Davidic King in accordance with the words of the Prophets and Apostles. As such, we believe that Yeshua is the only way of salvation for any who would be saved (Acts 4:12), and that apart from Him, no eternal salvation or place in the world to come is possible.