

בוה ישראל



Fully God?

Paul's Christology and the
Divine Identity of Jesus

An Essay by

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According to Paul, is Jesus Christ “fully God”, or does this kind of Christology only emerge later?

1. Introduction.

The question of whether Paul saw Jesus as “fully God”—that is, ontologically divine in the same way that later Christian theology would articulate at Nicaea—lies at the core of modern New Testament scholarship. On one side of the debate, scholars such as Richard Bauckham, Larry Hurtado, and Chris Tilling argue that Paul’s writings already display a divine Christology deeply rooted in Jewish monotheism, positioning Jesus within the very identity of the divine. Conversely, scholars such as J.D.G. Dunn, Bart Ehrman, and Maurice Casey contend that Paul’s understanding of Christology is primarily “functional” or exalted, suggesting that while Jesus acts on behalf of God, He is not considered to be God Himself.

This essay contends that although Paul does not explicitly articulate Nicene metaphysical concepts, his letters demonstrate that Jesus fully (if mysteriously) shares in the divine identity from the very early stages of Christian belief. This notion of divinity is framed within deeply Jewish contexts, including themes of worship, unity with God, cosmic roles, and elevated confessional language. While the philosophical clarity associated with these ideas may not fully emerge until later, all the foundational elements can be found in Paul’s writings.

2. Jewish Monotheism and the Milieu of Early Christology

Paul’s theology emerges from a robust Jewish monotheistic foundation, rooted in the Shema (Deut. 6:4) and a strictly exclusive understanding of YHWH. Yet, Second Temple Judaism acknowledged a variety of divine agents — including Wisdom, Logos, and angels — who acted on God’s behalf. Richard Bauckham introduces a vital distinction here: between divine nature (the mode of being) and divine identity (who God is). The latter is not modular. If Jesus participates in the identity of Yahweh, he may be worshipped as divine without compromising monotheism. This stands at the centre of Bauckham’s *God Crucified*, and similarly in James McGrath’s *The Only True God*.

Those who support a developmental model, such as Dunn, Casey, and Ehrman, acknowledge that early Christology is indeed high. However, they argue that Paul's statements focus more on function—highlighting Jesus's exalted role as a cosmic agent—rather than on substance. They suggest that the more elaborate expressions of Christology can be found in post-Pauline texts like the Gospel of John or in subsequent theological reflections.

Nonetheless, this essay contends that Paul is already significantly reshaping monotheism to encompass Jesus's divine identity through his cosmic roles, cultic worship, and the creedal confessions of faith. This suggests that at least the high trinitarian statements are not later retrojections but rather genuine extensions of Pauline theology.

3. Key Pauline Texts: Portals to Divine Christology

3.1 Philippians 2:6–11 (Carmen Christi)

The “Christ-hymn” in Philippians is perhaps Paul's most celebrated Christological text. Paul writes that Jesus, “in the form (*morphē*) of God,” did not regard equality with God as something to be seized, but emptied Himself, took on human form, and was ultimately exalted so that every knee bows. The term *morphē* (Greek: μορφή) is often interpreted as “essence” or “innate mode of being,” equating Jesus with God in status. Scholars such as F.F. Bruce, Leon Morris, Gordon Fee, and Dennis Jowers affirm that this directly affirms Christ's divinity.¹ The opening verse, describing pre-existent equality with God, implies ontological parity (though temporarily hidden). Alternative interpretations — that Jesus “crouched” in a divine role but was not himself God — strain Plausibility and underplay the radical force of the hymn. The repeated phrases “form of God” and “form of a servant” juxtapose essence-to-essence exchange, suggesting both divine and human status in the one person. Thus, Paul assumes pre-existing, divine status—strong support for his divine Christology.

3.2 1 Corinthians 8:6 and the Shema

1 Corinthians 8:6 is Paul's creative reconfiguration of the Shema at the heart of Jewish monotheism: “Yet for us there is one God, the Father... and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and we live.” Bauckham and Fee argue that Paul divides the Shema's unity between Father and Son, thus subsuming Jesus within the divine identity.² Bauckham notes that Paul's rhetorical design creates a single confession with two persons, reflecting unity in diversity.

¹ Dennis W. Jowers, “*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*”- THE MEANING OF MORPH IN PHILIPPIANS 2:6–7 (JETS 49 December 2006) 739–766. [\[PDF\]](#)

² Perriman, Andrew. “*Changing my mind about 1Cor8:6 and the Shema.*” (POST, May 2025). [\[PDF\]](#)

Critics like Andrew Perriman challenge the Shema framework, leaning towards a narrative or functional interpretation that views Jesus primarily as an agent rather than ontologically divine. In contrast, several scholars, including Bauckham and McGrath, argue that Paul blurs this distinction; Jesus is portrayed not merely as a created functional agent, but as the one Lord standing alongside the one God. Both Colossians 1 and Romans affirm Jesus' roles as the agent of creation and salvation—functions that are traditionally reserved for the divine. When we consider the patterns of language, worship practices, and cosmic theology, the evidence strongly supports the notion of Jesus' divine inclusion, rather than reducing Him to a role defined solely by function.

3.3 Romans 9:5

In Romans 9:5, the Apostle Paul makes a powerful statement about Christ, declaring Him to be “who is God over all, eternally blessed.” While there are several translations of this passage, the most direct interpretation reveals that Paul clearly attributes the title “God” (theos) to Christ and uses language typically reserved for eternal worship. This assertion carries substantial theological significance, especially within the context of early Christian beliefs regarding the nature of Christ and His relationship with God the Father. When Paul refers to God as “Father” in different parts of his writings, it emphasises the unique divinity of Christ, suggesting that the term theos is not just a metaphor but a true declaration of Christ's divine status. This understanding bolsters the foundational Christian belief in the Trinity, where Christ is acknowledged as fully God, co-equal with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and worthy of divine reverence and worship.³

3.4 Colossians 1:15–20 (if Pauline)

The authorship of Colossians may be a topic of debate, but Colossians 1 offers a profound theological depiction of Christ as the “image of the invisible God.” This passage highlights that “in Him all things were created,” underscoring Christ's essential role in the universe: “through Him and for Him” all things came into being. Additionally, the text states, “He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together,” which not only points to Christ's preeminence in time and existence but also emphasises His sustaining power over creation. The declaration that “the fullness of God dwells in him” further illustrates the completeness of the divine nature in Christ, reinforcing His divinity beyond just a functional elevation.

Although scholars debate the authorship of this epistle, those who support Pauline authorship see these assertions as strong evidence of a high view of Christ

³ Carraway, George Warrington. “*Christ Is God Over All: Romans 9:5 in the Context of Romans 9–11*.” (London/New York: T&T Clark, Library of New Testament Studies, 2013) 25–60.

that aligns with Paul's theological stance. This passage serves as a focal point within a typically Pauline framework, shedding light on the complexities of Christ's divine nature and His role in both the cosmic order and the faith of believers. Thus, regardless of one's position on Paul's authorship, the implications of this text significantly enhance our understanding of Christ's divine identity in the early Christian context.⁴

3.5 Baptism, Invocation, and Worship

Paul's churches practice baptism "into Christ" (Galatians 3:27), invoke the name of Jesus (1 Corinthians 1:2; Romans 10:13), pray to Jesus (e.g., 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13; Philippians 4:6), and gather under "the name of the Lord Jesus." These are cultic acts reserved for the deity. Hurtado's *Lord Jesus Christ* compiles vast early evidence showing that worship of Jesus is "extraordinarily early."⁵ Paul's letters reflect binitarian devotion long before formal theological articulation of the Trinity.

4. Devotion and Worship: Practice Precedes Doctrine

Larry Hurtado emphasises that worship practices emerged much earlier than formal doctrines. Paul consistently links Jesus with divine authority and attributes, such as cosmic involvement, worship, and spiritual power. This indicates that believers perceived Jesus as divine. In the baptismal formula "in Christ" and in blessing prayers (2 Corinthians 13:14), Jesus is presented with divine efficacy. These practices aren't just peripheral or optional; they are fundamental to community life. Only divine figures were typically addressed in worship, and Paul confidently and repeatedly refers to Jesus in this manner. Before any philosophical reflection takes place, the experiences of the community affirm Jesus as fully part of the divine identity.⁶

5. Counterarguments and Alternative Models Functional "Exaltation" Christology.

Dunn posits that Paul's understanding of Christology is mainly functional: Jesus is depicted as God's agent, designated as Lord following his resurrection and exaltation, rather than as a pre-existent God incarnate.⁷ In contrast, Ehrman outlines a gradual shift in perception, moving from viewing Jesus as an exalted

⁴ Dunn, James D. G. "The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon." New International Greek Testament Commentary. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans) 1996, 86–98.

⁵ Hurtado, Larry W. *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*. (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans) 2003, 143–152.

⁶ Hurtado, Larry W. "One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism". (2nd ed. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999) 101–114.

⁷ Dunn, James D. G. "Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation." (2nd ed. London: SCM Press, 1989) Foreword: xxi–xxxii.

human to recognising him as a divine figure in later texts. Similarly, Casey argues that affection for Jesus evolves, especially with the integration of Gentiles.⁸

However, these perspectives often overlook the compelling textual evidence found in passages like Philippians 2 or 1 Corinthians 8. The language used—terms like “equality with God,” “one Lord,” and “creative agency”—strongly indicates a sense of identity rather than merely a functional role.

Ontological vs. Relational Models

Bauckham emphasises the idea of “divine identity,” pointing out that God’s relational nature allows for Jesus to be seen as essential to our understanding of what it means to be God, without requiring a shared metaphysical essence. This viewpoint highlights that the relationship among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit defines their unity instead of a shared substance. Tilling reinterprets Paul’s theology as “relational trinitarianism,” suggesting that the divine persons engage in a dynamic interaction rather than being based on philosophical concepts of being. This interpretation is vital as it bridges the gap between strict Jewish monotheism and the elevated divine status Paul ascribes to Jesus, thus providing a coherent framework for understanding early Christological beliefs within a Jewish context.⁹

Did Paul Invent Divinity?

Some scholars propose that later forms of Christian worship developed independently from the influence of the Apostle Paul or earlier traditions of the faith. However, this perspective often overlooks the significance of Philippians 2:6-11, which is widely regarded as containing a pre-Pauline hymn. This hymn not only predates Paul’s letters but also highlights the existence of a rich and established worship tradition among early Christian communities.

Moreover, Paul’s epistles, such as Romans, Corinthians, and Ephesians, frequently reflect various elements of worship that were deeply embedded within the early Church. These elements include the Lord’s Supper, prayer, and communal singing, suggesting that Paul did not invent these practices. Instead, he acted as a witness and a guide to an already thriving devotional life among believers.

By understanding Paul’s writings in this light, we can see them as a testament to the dynamic and diverse tapestry of worship that flourished in the early Church,

⁸ Ehrman, Bart D. *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee*. (New York: HarperOne, 2014) 120–125.

⁹ Bauckham, Richard. *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament’s Christology of Divine Identity*. (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008) 18–19, 106, 127–151.

illustrating how these practices were essential to the identity and cohesion of the Christian community long before the formalisation of church structures.¹⁰

6. Divine Identity

A Jewish-Compatible High Christology

Richard Bauckham's distinctive insight emphasises that "divine identity" does not necessarily equate to shared nature or substance; rather, it encompasses inclusion within the unique identity of the one God who is the Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer, and who alone is worthy of worship. In the writings of Paul, a cohesive narrative emerges that integrates cultic forms, titles, and worship practices related to Jesus. Paul portrays Jesus as one who not only receives prayer but also experiences genuine human suffering, endures death, is resurrected, and is granted authority that enables him to fulfil God's redemptive purposes. This portrayal suggests that Jesus is not merely exalted in a functional sense, but rather included in the divine identity in a way that reflects a deep relational understanding of God.

Moreover, Paul's theological framework honours a continuity with the Jewish tradition, emphasising strict monotheism while simultaneously recognising the transformative nature of worship directed toward Yahweh. He engages with the identity of God as understood in Judaism, asserting that there exists no inherent contradiction between the high Christological understanding of Jesus and the foundational tenets of Jewish monotheism. Instead, there is a creative continuity that allows for a high Christology that respects and upholds the rich legacy of Jewish belief, ultimately revealing how a faith in Jesus does not depart from, but rather fulfils, the Jewish understanding of God's singularity and sovereignty. This perspective offers a robust framework for understanding how early Christian thought evolved a Christological vision that remains deeply rooted in Jewish faith.

In Weber's estimation, "this name is not "Yahweh," which name belongs to the old covenant, as is evidenced by the fact that it does not occur in the New Testament. Instead, the "new and eternal conchun" set forth in the New Testament is accompanied by the New Name." Weber avers, and this name is "Jesus," the one in whom God has fulfilled what remained unfulfilled until the coming of the Son of God. For this reason, Weber concludes, "If the Church still wanted to say "Yahweh" (or perhaps "Jehovah"), then it would be denying what God has done."¹¹

¹⁰ Martin, Ralph P. *"Carmen Christi: Philippians 2:5–11 in Recent Interpretation and in the Setting of Early Christian Worship."* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967) 1–15.

¹¹ Stanley J. Grenz, *"The Named God and the Question of Being a Trinitarian Theo-Ontology."* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005) 258.

7. Conclusion

Paul's epistles lay out the key elements of a Christology that views Jesus as "fully God," framed within the context of Jewish identity and worship. While he doesn't dive deeply into philosophical or metaphysical arguments, Paul places Jesus in the realm of divine worship and cosmic authority, aligning him with the fundamental principle of monotheism—the Shema. Assertions that this exaltation of Jesus is merely functional overlook the strong and unequivocal language Paul employs. What emerges from his writings is a rich divine Christology that was already evident in the first generation of Christian proclamation. Although the Nicene definition comes later, Paul lays the essential groundwork: Jesus is rightfully addressed, prayed to, honoured, and recognised as the one Lord, the divine Son, eternally blessed alongside the Father. The fulfilment of Yahweh, the Father, finds its expression in Jesus, a realisation that resonates deeply with me.

This understanding also aligns with the Scripture that speaks of the name above all names (Philippians 2:9). Perhaps Paul didn't feel the need to prove Jesus' divinity because it was a lived reality among the early believers—something far too obvious to debate. Just as we take for granted the internet, electricity, or clean water today, future generations may find these concepts unthinkable. What is evident in one era can become obscure in another. Therefore, Paul's silence may not indicate uncertainty but rather an assumed conviction. As we work to reconstruct what was once clear, we are reminded of Alexander J.D. Irving's words in his book "God, Freedom and the Body of Christ: Toward a Theology of the Church":

"History repeats itself; it has to; nobody listens."¹²



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¹² Alexander J. D. Irving, "God, Freedom and the Body of Christ: Towards a Theology of the Church." (Cascade Books, 2020, U.S.A) ix.

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