

The Nature of Jesus in the Book of Acts

Presented to the One God Conference
Morrow, Georgia, May 20, 2006

The Book of Acts contains most of what we know about the public preaching of the Apostles.

What did that preaching suggest about how they thought about God and Jesus in that time? What impression of the Apostles' theology would their audiences have gained from these sermons and speeches?

2:22-24, 32, 33, 36—Peter's Pentecost sermon

3:12-15; 17-23—Peter preaching in the temple

"author" here, RSV, NIV. "Prince" in KJV, NKJV, NASB

Gk. *archegos*, appears 4 times in the NT and several times in the LXX. Vine, "one who takes a lead in, or provides the first occasion of anything."

In Num, 13:2,3 and 14:4 *archegos* is used for the heads of Israelite tribes

Ac. 5:31: "Then God put him in the place of honor at his right hand as *Prince* and Savior."

He. 2:10: "And it was only right that he should make Jesus, through his suffering, a perfect *leader*..."

He. 12:2: "We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the *champion* who initiates and perfects our faith."

Clearly Peter did not mean to suggest here that Jesus was the creator of life, rather, the one through whom eternal life is attained and perfected.

Ac. 4:23-30: The believers' prayer

5:26-29, 41, 42—Peter's address to the Sanhedrin

7:54-59: Stephen's address to the Sanhedrin

"Son of Man" — Dan. 7:13

"Lord Jesus receive my spirit" Does this mean that Stephen thought Jesus was God? No, because he already said that God was there next to Jesus and Jesus was standing at God's right hand. He identified Jesus as the glorified Son of Man from Dan. 7, who "approached" the "Ancient One," or God himself. Stephen was not confused and neither should we be. In every case Daniel, Luke and Stephen agree that God was in heaven and Jesus was with God. But they never confuse Jesus with God, they never call Jesus God, and they never imply that Jesus had been somehow reabsorbed into a Godhead.

So why does Stephen request that Jesus receive his spirit? Because he understood that the glorified Son of Man had been given "all authority in heaven and on earth" (Mt. 28:18). Daniel's vision in Dan. 7 confirms this: "He (the Son of Man) was given authority, honor and sovereignty over all the nations of the world..." Stephen's vision and Daniel's vision are essentially one and the same. But there is no confusion in either vision as to the creator God's unique identity and Jesus' unique identity as God's Prince and First Assistant.

13:23, 29, 30: Paul's address to the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia

Did Paul obscure his understanding of the Trinity simply because he was speaking to Jews?

17:22-25, 31—His teaching concerning the nature of Jesus to the polytheistic gentiles of Athens is completely consistent with his teaching to the arch-monotheists of the Jewish synagogue

23:6; 26:4, 5 + 24:14—Paul before Governor Felix

Paul, the self-described Pharisee, worshipped the “God of our ancestors” as described in the law of Moses. Is a Trinitarian or bitheistic God described in the law of Moses? Was the God of the Hebrews understood to be anything other than a one-person, singular and unique Supreme Being? Could someone rightly call himself a Pharisee in that time and place and not be a unitary monotheist? The answer to all of these questions is no.

Not one time do Paul’s Jewish enemies, who followed him everywhere he went and knew well his life and doctrine, ever lay the charge of polytheism upon him. Not once during these several hearings and trials do they accuse him of departing from the pure monotheism of the Hebrews. Not once do they lay upon Paul the charge that he has made Jesus a “second God,” which is what they surely would have had he begun to teach what defenders of orthodoxy suggest he did.

How could Paul’s determined enemies have possibly failed to seize their best opportunity to discredit Paul by laying upon him the devastating charge of polytheism? Knowing what we know about Pharisaic fanaticism in confronting paganism, and their singular desire to protect Israel from the polytheism of the occupying Romans, their refusal to even hint that Paul was sliding into polytheism speaks volumes about how Paul’s audiences understood his teaching about Jesus, and about God.

We can be sure Paul’s Jewish enemies would have had little patience with intricate expositions concerning multipersonal unity within a multidimensional monotheism. The Pharisaic mind would surely would have dismissed this as transparent double-talk before running headlong at Paul with charges of polytheism, in the hope of justifying his stoning and finally ridding the earth of the man.

28:17-23—Paul before the Jewish leaders of Rome

Jesus taught the Jewish leaders about Jesus through the law of Moses and the prophets, where unitary monotheism is taught throughout

During this period of Roman imprisonment, Paul writes his letters to Philippians and Colossians, which contain the three Pauline texts most often cited by defenders of the orthodox position. Yet Paul said his source of understanding concerning Jesus was the law of Moses and the prophets, as he explained

throughout his ministry. This fact must be taken into account if any fair exegesis of Phil. 2:5, Col. 1:15 and Col. 2:9 can result.

In sum, we do not see in the book of Acts any evidence of a gradual understanding on Paul's part of a multipersonal God, or of Jesus as a deity or part of a deity.

Rather, we see a Jew—a self-proclaimed Pharisee in fact—basing his understanding of Jesus upon the law of Moses and the OT prophets, where unitary monotheism is emphasized.

Paul the Pharisee insists to the end of his life that his conversion to this new Way, this curious devotion to a resurrected Nazarene carpenter, was nothing more or less than a fulfillment of the spiritual and eschatological tradition handed down to him by his ancestors.

Paul insisted, right to the end of his life, that the answer to the meaning of Jesus is found the law of Moses and the prophets. And he set an example for all Christians to understand Jesus and his relationship to God and his role in redemptive history, in and through the Hebrew Scriptures.

Had later generations of Christian thinkers followed Paul's example, Christian theology would certainly have developed along very different lines than those set out by the Council of Nicea and later Trinitarian creeds.