

Did the First Christians Worship Jesus? The New Testament Evidence

by James D.G. Dunn

A Book Review by Barbara Buzzard

British New Testament scholar James D.G. Dunn has written a scorching book (2010). And he does it nicely — so nicely in fact that parts of it are reminiscent of the British phrase “Tom is helping the police with their inquiries,” when the real meaning is that Tom is about to be charged with theft, arson, murder, etc! Nevertheless I am very grateful for the book even though I may sound ungrateful. I feel as if I am left in the classroom with my hand raised with more questions. We who have felt the “sting” (British understatement!) of not adhering to the “system” look for fellow workers to achieve the tipping point. May the truth revolution be upon us!

A Baffling Problem

Chapter 1, The problem: “The status accorded to or recognized for Jesus is the key distinctive and defining feature of Christianity. It is also the chief stumbling block for inter-faith dialogue between Christians and Jews, and between Christians and Muslims...The Christian understanding of God as Trinity baffles them. To regard Jesus as divine, as worthy of worship as God, seems to them an obvious rejection of the oneness of God, more a form of polytheism than a form of monotheism.” The word “baffling” comes up frequently from both camps in any discussion of the Trinity, both Trinitarian and non-Trinitarian. Surely we ought to proceed on a need-to-know basis. I do not believe understanding is denied us. “Secrets” were to do with pagan and mystery religions. God, however, does not withhold understanding from anyone who seeks. “The mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to His saints...Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:26-27).

After a very necessary examination of the language of worship, Dunn refers to Jesus as “the chief means and agent of God’s purpose to restore his creation to glory.” He concludes his first chapter (out of only 4!) with this: “The first answer to our question, ‘Did the first Christians worship Jesus?’ would therefore seem to be, ‘Generally no,’ or ‘Only occasionally,’ or ‘Only with some reserve.’”

In chapter 2 he summarizes his findings by stating that prayer is always directed to God; indeed Jesus prayed to his Father (and not the reverse!). He says of Jesus: “It was his name they invoked; they appealed to him in times of personal crisis...He alone was the priest through whom they could now come to God. His sacrificial death had dealt with their sins and opened the way to God.”

What Is Monotheism?

Chapter 3 (“Monotheism, Heavenly Mediators and Divine Agents”) opens by revealing this answer to his title question: “Most of the evidence so far considered discourages an unequivocal ‘Yes,’ and points at best to a qualified ‘No!’” He rightly wants us not to miss this: “Not only was he the theme and content of their worship...but also Jesus was understood and bound up with their worship, as its locus and mediator. They worshipped *in* him and *through* him. Their entry into the very presence of God was possible not simply *because of* Jesus...but *by means of* Jesus.” Professor Dunn asks what the “oneness” of the creed of Israel, the Shema found in Deuteronomy 6:4, means, and what “only” means. He then asks: “Given that Israel restricted its worship to God, the one God, did the first Christians include Jesus within this restricted worship...or did they regard the restrictions as excluding Jesus and as in effect forbidding the worship of Jesus?” Please note that Dunn’s colleague Bauckham insists on the impossible — that Jesus be included in the “identity” of God, adding one to another but still achieving one as the sum!

Dunn clarifies what is meant by Jewish monotheism, i.e. that “Israel regarded its God as the supreme God, unique in relation to other beings designated as god, in a class of his own, as alone Creator, alone final Judge” (i.e. impossible to be 2 or more). Isaiah 45:21-22: “There is no other God besides Me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is no one beside Me. Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.”

“Certainly the oneness of God, or the conviction that only Yahweh was worthy to be designated God and worshipped as God, is well established by the first century CE. As the Alexandrian Jewish philosopher Philo puts it early in the first century when commenting on the first commandment: ‘Let us, then, engrave deep in our hearts this as the first and most sacred of commandments, to acknowledge and honour one God who is above all, and let the idea that gods are many never even reach the ears of the man whose rule of life is to seek for truth in purity and guilelessness’ (Decalogo 65).”

Jesus is not the God of Israel

In chapter 4, Dunn echoes the clarity of 1 Corinthians 8:6, “yet for us there is one God, the Father” when he says “What matters is that only one was worthy to be worshipped as God, the God of Israel” and he states that “Jesus is not the God of Israel”!

Dunn is also remarkably clear and decisive regarding the Spirit of God. You will not find statements of this caliber in most popular theological works: “Notably, *what we do not find is any hint that worship was offered to the Spirit of God*. Neither in the language of worship nor in the practice of worship do we find it thought to be appropriate that the Spirit should be seen as the one worshipped or to be worshipped.”

He's a Radical

You will have noted by now that Dunn’s conclusions are radical and they stand outside orthodoxy. The frustrating characteristic of his writing is that immediately after saying something like “Only the God of Israel is to be worshipped,” he will follow it by saying “but here again the answer is not straightforward.” As one blogger perceives, Dunn “hedges everything he says with caveats.” It is with nothing short of wonderment that I read some of Dunn’s statements such as, “The data itself poses as many questions as it resolves.” I believe that if God has posed a problem to us, He has also made available a solution. Dunn points out that God is the God of Jesus but then he goes on to say that John affirmed the Deity of Jesus, undermining the very truth he has found. I fear that Dunn is saying on the one hand that Jesus is not Yahweh; on the other hand all of orthodoxy compels one to state that Jesus is Yahweh. And Dunn refuses to then draw a conclusion. (I think he wants a third hand to say it is not that simple, but as we know from *Fiddler on the Roof*— there is no other hand!)

Dunn asks the question, what was Jesus’ own theology? His answer: “For Jesus the Shema is evidently fundamentally determinative of the whole orientation of life...The implication is clear that for Jesus God alone is worthy of worship and of such devotion, because God alone is the source and definition of all goodness...The conviction that God was one continued to be axiomatic for Jesus, a core principle from which he drew his inspiration and instruction. In short, it is hardly possible to avoid giving an affirmative answer to the question that heads this section, *Yes, Jesus was a monotheist*” (emphasis added). Well said! Then he adds: “Yet here too more is to be said.” He also feels that the Old Testament is not as monotheistic as modern Jews want it to be. Since God identifies Himself as one Person over 20,000 times with singular personal pronouns, that seems pretty heavy evidence. I think the fault is not in the stating of this precept. It is in the refusing to hear. If God wanted to say He was one Person — how would He say it? (Dunn couldn’t possibly be giving with one hand and taking away with another, could he?)

Mutation

Dunn is worried when Christians speak of “the crucified God.” (Perhaps they also should speak of “the forgotten Father.”) He is obviously concerned with the use of the word *mutation* as used by Trinitarian colleagues in describing devotion to Jesus. Dunn states that Jews and Muslims have a much more straightforward monotheism than Christians. Does this not imply that the so-called monotheism that Christianity claims is somewhat crooked or devious?

Dunn obviously has a brilliant mind. He did not achieve his world-class reputation without merit. He explains that Jesus is a *means* of worship and a focus, but not the object of that worship, the thanks being given to God for what Jesus has done and Jesus being the one by whom believers come to God, but also by whom God has come to believers. He warns us of what he sees in the church — “Jesus-olatry” — substituting Jesus for the Father. Brilliant point!

Heresy

Then why do I feel such a disconnect? Because Dunn has said things considered heretical by today’s churches. How and why does he “get away with it”? By equivocation? To say “Jesus is not God” makes one a heretic. Dunn has just challenged the very linchpin holding the Church together. He has, in fact, stated that the very foundation of accepted and acceptable theology is not correct. Wait a minute. Where is my product recall? It strikes me that I get more “protection” from the makers of my favorite brand of peanut butter who will work to inform me if there is poison in my peanut butter, apologize profusely and do anything and everything to make it right. This is far from the case with theology or church-going where getting it wrong would be far more serious. When may I expect an acknowledgement that our previous understanding of who Jesus is is wrong? Is not God’s Truth supposed to be sacred? Does truth even matter? If Dunn is correct, then orthodoxy’s creeds are a departure from the faith and — dare I say it — the creeds are in error, which is to say false!

What does this say about the thousands throughout history who have lost their lives for these beliefs — those who saw these things before Dunn? What would Dunn say about the untold suffering, the violent persecutions, the martyrs who gave their lives for truth? And what does it say about the “system” who took those lives?

I would like to say to Professor Dunn: You have stated that for Jesus the Shema was a core principle. Can that be said of the established Church? The creeds violate the Shema, don’t they?

I wanted another 4 chapters in which Professor Dunn would elaborate on these questions, questions about the inhuman cruelty to dissenters. (Perhaps their only crime was to get there before him!) What will be the consequences of the “new” information in this book? Godly sorrow and repentance by all of the clergy who had it wrong? Teaching error (falsehood) is very serious with God. Dunn’s thesis that the quest for the historical Jesus was/is seriously flawed is a good place to start. Paul Williams, a reader of Dunn’s book, sums it up beautifully:

“The earliest Christians were monotheist Jews who would never worship a man. If later Gentile Christians decided mistakenly to start worshipping the Messiah, that was their error (and sin)...The conclusion I draw is that ‘orthodox’ Christians have been committing the serious sin of idolatry for the past 2000 years. Time for the church to repent, I think.”