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## Divinity of Christ in the Early Church

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LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

JOHN W. RAWLINGS SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

**Research Paper- Divinity of Christ in the Early Church**

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Research and Scholarly Capstone

by

Joshua T. Crews

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## Introduction

There has been a move over the last hundred years to analyze Jesus' life, ministry, and the beginning of the early church through a strictly historical approach devoid of theological concepts. What has resulted from this type of research is a picture of Jesus as a man but not as divine. Scholars such as Bart Ehrman argue that the early church did not believe in the divinity of Jesus as Christians do today. They claim that the modern conception of Jesus' divinity is the result of later developments because of the inclusion of the Gentiles who came from various pagan religions where it was commonplace to assign divinity to great men. Ehrman writes that "I would argue that Jesus has always been recontextualized by people living in different times and places. The first followers of Jesus did this after they came to believe that he had been raised from the dead and exalted to heaven; they made him into something he had not been before and understood him in light of their new situation."<sup>1</sup> Ehrman and others interpret the use of *Kyrios*, translated as Lord from Greek, in the Apostle Paul's letters to the belief that Paul meant something far different from what the later church would interpret. Stated simply, some critical scholars believe that the divinity of Jesus was slowly developed over time through the inclusion of pagan gentiles into the church as opposed to a foundational belief of the early Church. The purpose of my research paper will be twofold. The first purpose is to exegete two verses of Paul's letters, Romans 10:9 and Philippians 2:11, and examine Paul's usage of *Kyrios* in these passages. The second purpose of my research will be to examine the passages of Romans 10:13 and 1 Corinthians 8:6 to demonstrate how Paul uses the name of Jesus interchangeably with the Old Testament name of YHWH. The early church believed and affirmed that Jesus was divine. This can be demonstrated from a proper understanding of the use of the title *Kyrios* in early

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<sup>1</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2014), 5259.

church confessions and by how the Apostle Paul similarly used Jesus' name to the Old Testaments' use of YHWH.

### **Jesus as *Kyrios*: Romans 10:9**

#### The use of *Kyrios*

In Romans, Paul wrote, “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom. 10:9).<sup>2</sup> The Greek word that is used for the title Lord is *kyrios*, which can be translated as either lord, master, or sir.<sup>3</sup> *Kyrios* can be a title given “...to the Messiah; and... to Jesus as the Messiah, since by his death he acquired a special ownership in mankind, and after his resurrection was exalted to a partnership in the divine administration.”<sup>4</sup> The title appears over 700 times in the New Testament alone and is used even more frequently in the Old Testament.<sup>5</sup> The title “lord” is used mainly in two different ways in the English Bible. The first is a title for a respected person or someone with authority. The other instance is when the title is used in reference to God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit.<sup>6</sup> To determine if Paul is using the title *kyrios* in Romans 10:9 as a way of showing respect for Jesus or if he is claiming that Jesus is God, one must look at the context surrounding the verse.

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<sup>2</sup> All Scriptural references are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible unless otherwise noted.

<sup>3</sup> James Strong, *Strong's Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009), s.v. “G2962”.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Thayer, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon* (Wordsearch Corp., 2005), s.v. “*Kyrios*”.

<sup>5</sup> Eugene E. Carpenter and Philip W. Comfort, *Holman Treasury of Key Bible Words* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishers, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> David B. Capes, *The Divine Christ: Paul, the Lord Jesus, and the Scriptures of Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 2.

### Historical Context of Romans

In 49 A.D., Emperor Claudius issued a decree that all the Jews, even the Christian-Jews, must leave the city of Rome, which resulted in a completely Gentile church. By the time Paul wrote the Epistle to the Romans, the Jews were allowed back into Rome but the Church they came back too was different from when they left.<sup>7</sup> Paul wrote this letter to the Romans in part to help reconcile a community that was becoming fractured by cultural differences. Paul also wrote this letter as a form of introduction because Paul planned to visit the Roman church and use them as a springboard to take his ministry west of Rome (Rom. 15:22-24). It is important to remember that these letters Paul wrote to churches were intended to be read to the congregation. Paul was, in a way, introducing himself to the Roman church that he had never visited.

### Literary Context of Romans 10:9

In chapter 9, Paul is discussing how God has dealt with Israel in the past, mainly God's choosing of Israel and blessing of them, their rejection of Christ, and God's mercy towards the Gentiles. In Chapter 10, there is "...a shift in Paul's emphasis from God's dealings with Israel in the past, specifically, before Christ's death, to His dealings with them in the present."<sup>8</sup> In Chapter 10:1-7, Paul is discussing the reasons why God has set Israel aside. In Romans 10:1, Paul laments his countrymen's rejection and he goes on in verse 2 to say that they have "...zeal for God...", but that zeal lacks correct knowledge. The Israelites sought their righteousness through the Law as opposed to God's righteousness (Rom. 10:3). In verse 4, Paul writes that Jesus is the end, or *telos*, of the law of righteousness for everyone who believes and goes on to

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<sup>7</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *NIVAC: Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 18.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas L. Constable, "Notes on Romans," Plano Bible Chapel (Sonic Light), accessed July 2, 2020, <https://www.planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/html/nt/romans/romans.htm>.

point out in verses 5-13 that “These verses contrast righteousness that comes through the law and that which is based on faith.”<sup>9</sup> Paul is establishing the difference between the two types of righteousness to get the reader to understand the uselessness of obtaining righteousness apart from faith in Christ. Paul uses verses 9 and 10 to conclude the law of righteousness obtained by faith in Jesus.<sup>10</sup> The declaration of the phrase “Jesus is Lord” is coupled with the belief in His resurrection in verse 9. Dr. Constable writes, “The fact that ‘Jesus’ is ‘Lord’ (God and Savior) became clear when He arose from the dead... Jesus’ resurrection was the proof that He really was the divine Messiah, God’s Holy One.”<sup>11</sup> In the very next verse, Paul explains, “One believes with the heart, resulting in righteousness, and one confesses with the mouth, resulting in salvation” (Rom. 10:10). Paul is associating confessing with one’s mouth that Jesus is Lord and believing with one’s heart that Jesus was raised from the dead with one’s eternal salvation. The Greek word Paul uses for confessing is *homologeō*, which is a combination of the words *homou* and *logos*, which means “...to assent, *i.e.* covenant, acknowledge.”<sup>12</sup> The Greek word for believe is *pisteuō*, which means to have faith in or to believe.<sup>13</sup> If one acknowledges that Jesus is *kyrios*, or Lord, and has faith that God has raised Him from the dead, then according to Paul and early Christianity, that person will be saved. When Paul writes saved, he uses the word *sōzō*, which can translate as “...to save a suffering one (from perishing), *e.g.* one suffering from disease, to

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<sup>9</sup> Constable, “Notes on Romans,” <https://www.planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/html/nt/romans/romans.htm>

<sup>10</sup> Moo, *Romans*, p. 332.

<sup>11</sup> Constable, “Notes on Romans,” <https://www.planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/html/nt/romans/romans.htm>

<sup>12</sup> Strong, *Strong's Concordance of the Bible*, “G3670”.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, “G4100”.

make well, heal, restore to health.”<sup>14</sup> The disease is sin and Paul is saying that belief in the resurrection combined with confession that Jesus is Lord is essential to eternal salvation.

Larry Hurtado writes that “...Paul in Rom. 10:9–13 makes confessing ‘Jesus is Lord’ the verbal mark of Christian faith, in a context which as we have already noted seems to refer to Christian initiation.”<sup>15</sup> When one places the verse in context, it is clear that Paul is discussing salvation and righteousness by faith that can be obtained by believing in Jesus. The title of *Kyrios* is applied to Jesus by Paul in Romans 10:9 to refer to Jesus’ divine nature and status, not simply as a sign of respect.

### **Jesus as *Kyrios*: Philippians 2:11**

#### Historical Context of Philippians

Similar to the letter to the Romans, it is important to understand the historical context of Paul’s letter to the Philippians to understand the literary context of Philippians 2:11. Paul founded the church in Philippi in the early 50’s A.D. (Acts 16) and wrote the epistle to the Philippians in the early 60’s from prison in Rome.<sup>16</sup> According to the letter, Paul had just received a substantial monetary gift from the church of Philippi through their messenger Epaphroditus (Phil. 4:18). The church in Philippi was struggling, there was quarreling among the members and even the leadership, and the church was hoping that Paul would send Timothy back to them.<sup>17</sup> Paul could not send them Timothy because he was needed by Paul in Rome (Phil. 2:19-30), but Paul sent back Epaphroditus with a letter of full of “...comfort and joy,

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<sup>14</sup> Thayer, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon*, “*sōzō*”.

<sup>15</sup> Larry W Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism*. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 152.

<sup>16</sup> Moisés Silva, *Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1993), 25.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*



rebuke and encouragement, doctrine and exhortation.”<sup>18</sup> The part of the Epistle that will be under focus in this paper is where Paul is discussing the attitude of humility needed in the Church to put an end to the dissension that was growing in the Philippians church.

#### Literary Context of Philippians 2:6-11

It is widely believed by scholars that Paul recorded a hymn in Philippians 2:6-11. Silva writes, “Even the label ‘elevated prose’ does not do justice to the rhythm, parallelisms, lexical links, and other features that characterize these verses.”<sup>19</sup> Paul exhorts his readers to take on the attitude or mind of Christ (v. 5), that even though he was existed with God and in the form of God (v. 6), He showed the ultimate humility by giving this up to become a man, and not only a man but as a servant (v.7). As if this act was not humble enough, Jesus was obedient to God’s will to such an extent that He was willingly put to death on a cross (v. 8). Silva writes that “...the apparent meaning of these striking lines is that the divine and preexistent Christ did not regard the advantage of his deity as grounds to avoid the incarnation; on the contrary, he was willing to regard himself as nothing by taking on human form. Then he further lowered himself in servanthood by obeying God to the point of ignominious death.”<sup>20</sup> The first three verses of this hymn vividly display what true humility looks like, and in the last three verses the result of this obedience is proclaimed in the exaltation of Jesus.

In verse 9, Paul writes that “For this reason God highly exalted Him...”. The word used for highly exalted is the Greek word *hyperypsoō*, which is translated as raised to the highest position.<sup>21</sup> The “Him” in verse 9 is Jesus, who Paul has been discussing since verse 5. Paul has

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<sup>18</sup> Silva, *Philippian*, 25.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

discussed the descension of Christ into the form of a man in verses 6-8, now he is proclaiming Christ's ascension back to His rightful place with God. Paul writes in verse 10 that every knee will bow at the name of Jesus and in verse 11 that "...every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil. 2:10-11). Once again, the title of *Kyrios* is applied to Jesus by Paul and this time in striking reference to Isaiah 45:23. In the book of Isaiah, God declares His uniqueness and says, "By Myself I have sworn; Truth has gone from My mouth, a word that will not be revoked: Every knee will bow to Me, every tongue will swear allegiance" (Isa. 45:23). This same imagery that God uses in Isaiah is applied to Jesus by this early hymn and by Paul: that every knee will bow to Jesus and every tongue should confess that Jesus is *Kyrios*, or Lord. The Greek word to confess is *exomologeō*, which is a verb that means to acknowledge, accept fully, or to promise.<sup>22</sup> Paul is stating that everyone should acknowledge that Jesus is Lord.

#### Importance of Philippians 2:6-11

The importance of what is said in Philippians 2:6-11 cannot be overstated. In just five verses the hymn recorded by Paul has expressed Jesus' preexistent, divine nature (v. 6), His incarnation (v. 7), His obedient life and death (v. 8), and His resurrection, exaltation, and ultimate status (v.10-11). Larry Hurtado writes that in "...Phil. 2:9– 11, where we have the conclusion of the early hymn that Paul is believed to have quoted, all spheres of creation are pictured in a scene of eschatological triumph making the same sort of acclamation that characterized early Christian groups."<sup>23</sup> Paul is not using the title *kyrios* solely in a respectful

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<sup>21</sup> Strong, *Strong's Concordance of the Bible*, "G5251".

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., "G1843".

<sup>23</sup> Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*, 152.

manner, as if Jesus was simply a great man and teacher who deserved respect. Paul is declaring the early Christian church creed that Jesus is Lord of all Creation.

### **Early Christian Creeds and Hymns**

Romans 10:9 and Philippians 2:11 were chosen as examples of the early churches Christology not only because of the direct manner in which they proclaim Jesus is Lord, but also because they are unique in that it is widely believed that Paul was recording confessions of the early Christian church. J.P. Moreland writes about these early creeds:

“...they are pre-Pauline and very early. They use language which is not characteristically Pauline, they often translate easily back into Aramaic, and they show features of Hebrew poetry and thought-forms. This means that they came into existence while the church was heavily Jewish and that they became standard, recognized creeds and hymns well before their incorporation into Paul’s letters.”<sup>24</sup>

Paul is recording or reminding his readers of a declaration that was already in circulation and would be known to Christians by the time of Paul’s writing of his epistles. Gary Habermas writes that creeds were significant because “...the oral tradition had to exist prior to the New Testament writings in order for the New Testament authors to include them. This takes us back to some of the earliest teachings of the Christian church...”<sup>25</sup> These early creeds found in Paul’s epistles make it clear that Paul and the early Christian church believed and declared that Jesus was Lord, and that they meant it in the divine sense. Critical scholars will accept this conclusion but argue that Paul and the early Christian church, which was influenced heavily by its Jewish roots, did not mean that Jesus is Lord as modern Christians understand the phrase. To establish

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<sup>24</sup> J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1987), 106.

<sup>25</sup> Gary R. Habermas and Mike Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2004), 656.

what Paul meant by assigning the title of Lord to Jesus, two more verses from his epistles will need to be examined in light of the Old Testament.

### **Paul's use of the Old Testament and Jesus**

#### Romans 10:13 and Joel 2:32

Paul used Scripture, the Old Testament, throughout his epistles to ground his theology in the truth of God's Word that he had studied since he was a little boy. Having been a Pharisee instructed in the Torah, Paul knew his Scripture by heart. To understand what Paul meant when he ascribed the title of *kyrios* to Jesus, one can look at his use of Old Testament verses that were exclusively reserved for YHWH and how he applied those texts to Jesus. One such text is found in Joel 2:32, which says, "Then everyone who calls on the name of Yahweh will be saved...". Yahweh is the name of God that was given in the book of Exodus to Moses (Ex. 3:13-15); it is the covenantal name of God that Jews held to be so holy they would not even write the entire name out. In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Greek word for Yahweh is *kyrios*. In the book of Joel "...the promise of deliverance regards a remnant of Israel prior to the day of the Lord."<sup>26</sup> To call upon the name of the Lord refers to "...cultic activity such as altar building and sacrifice, prayer and petitions, worship and praise."<sup>27</sup> In essence, Joel 2:32 says that those who worship, praise, lift prayers, and build altars to God will be the ones saved as the remnant of Israel. In Romans 10:13, Paul uses the quotation of Joel 2:32 and applies this verse to Jesus. Alexander and Rosner write that "...the quotation of Joel 2:32 in Romans 10:13, where Paul applies a passage about God to Jesus. What this title implies, Romans 9:5 appears to state explicitly, for the probably correct punctuation of the verse has Paul calling

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<sup>26</sup> Capes, *The Divine Christ*, 114.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

Jesus 'God'.<sup>28</sup> Paul did not make a mistake and accidentally apply this text to Jesus; he was cognizant of what he was proclaiming and implications of such claims. Paul was using Old Testament texts that referred to Yahweh and applying the passage to Jesus. If Paul were to have only done this one time, it could be explained away, but there are other Yahweh texts that Paul applies to Jesus.

#### 1 Corinthians 8:6 and Deuteronomy 6:4-5

The Shema is a prayer that was taught in Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and recited by Israelites daily as a pledge of allegiance and hymn of praise to God.<sup>29</sup> The prayer started with reciting the verses, “Listen, Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength” (Deut. 6:4-5). This prayer is foundational to the Jewish faith and their stringent monotheism, that God is one and they must love Him with all their heart and soul. When the Israelites were surrounded by polytheistic civilizations, their belief in their singular God was paramount. Paul, who had some of the best theological instruction an Israelite could receive (Phil. 3:5-6), would be intimately aware of the Shema prayer and the truths that it proclaimed.

In 1 Corinthians 8:6, Paul writes “...yet for us there is one God, the Father. All things are from Him, and we exist for Him. And there is one Lord, Jesus Christ. All things are through Him, and we exist through Him.” Leading up to this passage, Paul is discussing eating food that has been offered to idols in 1 Corinthians 8:1-5. The congregation of the Corinthian Church had members who were disturbed by this, but Paul is reminding them that they know these idols are

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<sup>28</sup> T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, eds., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 139.

<sup>29</sup> Chad Brand, Charles Draper, and Archie England, eds., *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 1998).

“...nothing in the world” (1 Cor. 8:4). The Gentile members of the Church have grown accustomed to such practices from their previous religious experiences and their conscience is troubled by eating this food (v. 7). Paul reminds the Church in Corinth that “Food will not make us acceptable to God. We are not inferior if we don’t eat, and we are not better if we do eat” (1 Cor. 8:8).

To bolster his argument, Paul appeals to the Shema, that many of his Jewish Christians in Corinth will be familiar with, but Paul does so in a most unique way. Paul not only invokes the Shema, but he also applies it to Jesus in the same manner as it is applied to God. In the same way that there is one God through whom all things exist, Paul is claiming that there is one Lord, Jesus, through whom all things exist. Capes writes that “The close association of God with Jesus in both texts provides a remarkable window into Paul’s thought about the significance of Christ and his relationship to God.”<sup>30</sup> If Paul or the early Christian Church only saw Jesus as a respected man who was owed devotion, or even a man who was elevated by God after his death to a position of authority, then Paul would not dare to associate Jesus with God the Father in such a manner. Paul would not write out texts such as 1 Corinthians 8:6, which point towards Jesus’ preexistence as well as his divine authority.

Furthermore, if these ideas were controversial in the Christian community and not widely accepted, there would be evidence of major pushback from the Christian community and Paul would have had to defend his claims. The main evidence of disagreement in the early Christian Church found in the book of Acts and Pauline epistles is the disagreement as to whether or not Gentiles should abide by Jewish laws to become Christian. Paul’s use of Jesus’ name in

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<sup>30</sup> Capes, *The Divine Christ*, 120.

association with Old Testament verses that describe God in Romans 10:13 and 1 Corinthians 8:6 both reflect the high Christology of the early Christian Church.

### **Conclusion**

The notion that the early Christian churches' high Christology developed over time into what it is at present is not supported by the earliest Christian writings that are available, the Pauline Epistles. Examining Romans 10:9 in context demonstrates that the early church not only attached the title of Lord to Jesus but also the hope of their future salvation to confessing His name. In Philippians 2:5-11, Paul includes in his epistle an early church hymn that not only discusses Jesus' eternality and preexistence, but also his incarnation and exaltation. The verses alone offer enough proof for one to conclude that the early Christian church believed in Jesus' divine nature, but even if one remained skeptical, examining how Paul used Jesus' name in association with Old Testament quotations sheds further light on the matter. Capes writes that "Paul's use of YHWH texts for Jesus and religious devotion to him indicate that he considered the Lord Jesus to be equal with God, or to put it in Johannine language, to be one with him."<sup>31</sup> Given the fact that most of the Epistles were written within twenty years of Jesus' crucifixion, the belief in Jesus' divinity developed incredibly early in the Christian tradition. When one combines the high Christology found in the early creeds in Romans 10:9 and Philippians 2:5-11 with the way that Paul used Old Testament YHWH texts for Jesus, it becomes clear that the earliest Christian Churches believed in the divinity of Jesus.

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<sup>31</sup> Capes, *The Divine Christ*, 157.

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