

Did the First Christians Worship Jesus? A Review Essay

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The very readable and engaging study by Professor Dunn from which this essay takes its name is prompted by the continuing recent scholarly debate about the earliest forms of devotion to Jesus and by Dunn's practical concern about Christian worship today.¹ In what follows, I first give brief summaries of each chapter, with occasional comments, and then offer some more general observations about the book. As well as a presentation of his own views on this key matter, this is a commendable effort at scholarly dialogue, particularly with the two scholars to whom he generously dedicates the book.²

The Introduction lays out the question posed in the title, and Dunn also offers a set of collateral questions, which successively form the foci of the following chapters. In the final sentences of the Introduction, Dunn gives the two theses of his book: For the first Christians worship of Jesus "was a way of worshipping God", and "worship of Jesus [today] is only possible or acceptable within what is now understood to be a Trinitarian framework" (6). We see in this statement the combination of historical judgement and theological/practical concerns that are woven through the book.

In Chapter 1, "The Language of Worship", Dunn surveys the use of various Greek words that make up the key vocabulary of "worship" in the NT, including *proskynein*, *latreuein*, *leitourgein*, *epikaleisthai*, *sebein*, *eusebein*, *phobein*, *ainein/epainein*, and *eucharistein*, and also NT doxologies and benedictions. He judges that overwhelmingly in sentences using these words the actions are directed to God, with a fewer cases where Jesus is recipient. The latter, however, especially references to "calling upon" Jesus reflect phenomena "very striking", "entirely unusual and without precedent in the Judaism of the time" (28). Dunn judges that in NT texts Jesus is not only referred to as the agent or embodiment of God's glory but as sharing God's glory. Dunn admits here that in the NT Jesus is "in at least some

¹ James D. G. Dunn, *Did the First Christians Worship Jesus? The New Testament Evidence* (London: SPCK, 2010).

² It is a touching indication of Dunn's combination of critical debate and *bonhomie*, and a great honour for me to be linked with Richard Bauckham as a dedicatee.

degree the object of worship” (with God), as well as “the enabler or medium of effective worship” (28). But, already in this first chapter, we sense also a concern by Dunn to circumscribe any Jesus-devotion, and particularly to distinguish it from the worship of God. This anxiety comes out in the (somewhat bizarre?) invocation of the distinctions made in Catholic tradition between the levels of reverence properly given to God, to Mary, and to the saints (18-19), as if these debates from several centuries later help us in understanding Jesus-devotion in the context of first-century Jewish religion. (Fish and fishing are venerable features in Christian tradition, but red-herrings are unsuitable in scholarly discourse!)

Chapter 2 focuses on “The Practice of Worship”, with discussions of prayer, hymns, sacred space/times/meals/people, and sacrifice. There is at some points in the discussion a curious ambivalence. For example, at one point Dunn urges that prayers “as such” (i.e., sentences using *proseuchesthai*, *proseuchē*) are “always made to God” (33). But then (34-37) he surveys indications of what seem to be prayers to Jesus, esp. 2 Cor. 12:8-9; 1 Cor. 16:22 (*maranatha*); “above all” uses of *epikaleisthai* (e.g., Rom. 10:13; 1 Cor. 1:2; Acts 7:59); and still other instances in 1 Thess. 3:11-13; 2 Thess. 1:16-17; 3:5, 16). As another example of his ambivalence, having judged that “To call upon Jesus (in prayer) was evidently a defining and distinguishing feature of earliest Christian worship” (36, esp. with reference to 1 Cor. 1:2), on the next page, after asking whether invocation of Jesus should be seen as “a typical expression of earliest Christian worship”, he states, “The answer is not quite so obvious or clear cut as we would like” (37).

What appears to be this anxiety about Jesus being a recipient of worship is also evident in his puzzling proposal that the corporate ritual invocation and confession of Jesus reflected in NT texts might be understood in light of the Gospel reference to bystanders misunderstanding Jesus’ dying cry as an appeal to Elijah (35). But surely there is a major distinction between the social import of what appears to be the invocation of Jesus as the identifying ritual practice that constitutes the early Christian corporate worship circle, in comparison with such more ad hoc phenomena of impromptu appeals to, holy men or angels, or magical invocations (the latter typically private, even secretive). One might see some legitimate comparison of ad hoc appeals to holy men or angels in the dying cry of Stephen (Acts 7:59), “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” But 1 Cor. 1:2 and Rom. 10:9-13 reflect ritual practices of invoking of and appeals to Jesus much more obviously functioning as constitutive of

gathered worship in Pauline churches, and the *maranatha* in 1 Cor. 16:22 probably stems from similar practices among Aramaic-speaking sister churches.

Moreover, after insisting (cogently) that the putative hymns in Paul's epistles (e.g., Philip. 2:6-11; Col. 1:15-20) were *about* Christ but were likely sung *to* God (41), thereafter at various points Dunn seems concerned about indications that hymns were sung to Christ as well. Though granting that the singing of praise *about* the exalted Jesus might logically have entailed praise *to* him as well, Dunn opines that it is not clear when "this step was taken" (which implies that it was a secondary development). He contends that praise directed to Jesus is not explicit in Paul, but only in Revelation (42), which might mean it first emerged in the later first century CE. It seems that for Dunn this exegetical/historical judgement also has theological import. One might even wonder whether Dunn's implicit hermeneutical principle is that what Paul explicitly affirms is primary for theology and Christian practice.³

It is also a bit curious that Dunn characterizes the rather sonorous and extended doxological expressions placed on the lips of the heavenly elders, angels, and the whole of creation in Rev. 4—5 as "shouts of praise" (which might imply brief, ecstatic cries such as one associates with Pentecostal meetings). Surely, however, the author of Revelation intended these rather carefully composed scenes and these Psalm-like statements in particular to signify formal and explicit worship in heaven (directed to God and to Jesus "the lamb"), thus serving to inspire and in some sense shape (and/or validate) similar worship on earth.⁴ Dunn expresses uncertainty whether even in these passages we have "hymns", failing to note 5:9, where the heavenly elders "sing a new song [*adousin ödēn kainēn*]" and explicitly to "the lamb".

Dunn grants that Paul's various references to the Christian common meal, "the Lord's dinner" (*kyriakon deipnon*), in 1 Corinthians imply that "the Lord Christ was himself the host", but then allows only "the inference *among onlookers* that the Lord Christ was a god . . . and the one to whom the Christians offered their devotion" (50, emphasis mine). Dunn concedes, however, "envisaged here [in Pauline descriptions of the meal] is a devotion to Christ that at least is not far from worship" (51).

³ In responding to an earlier draft of this essay, Dunn objected to this suggestion, insisting that he was simply making a historical observation. Taking note of his objection, I still suspect that there is more than historical judgement involved, and that for him it is particularly important theologically what is or is not supported from Pauline texts.

⁴ Of course, I do not suggest that the author wished Christian worship to involve the corporate prostration, golden crowns, or white robes of these scenes.

Chapter 3 deals with “Monotheism, Heavenly Mediators and Divine Agents”, where Dunn treads now well-mapped territory involving the readiness of ancient Jewish tradition to accommodate within its commitment to the one God various entities portrayed as agents of God: principal angels, Spirit/Wisdom/Word, and exalted humans. Dunn joins other recent scholars in judging that none of these entities is treated as a rightful recipient of worship, however, and so second-temple Jewish tradition “provided no precedent to which the first Christians could appeal” for the way that Jesus functioned in their devotional practice (90).

Chapter 4, “The Lord Jesus Christ” is clearly the crucial chapter (comprising fifty-five pages). It begins with a discussion of whether Jesus was a “monotheist”, Dunn contending that whether “Jesus himself would have approved of the worship subsequently given to him” is a question that “should not be ignored” (93). Unsurprisingly, Dunn easily shows that the Gospel tradition represents Jesus as affirming the monotheist piety of his Jewish tradition, and finds no indication that Jesus urged that he be made a recipient of worship. Yet Dunn also observes that Jesus “is remembered as teaching with a surprising degree of self-asserted authority”, and may have spoken of himself “in terms of the Danielic ‘one like a son of man’” (98).

I confess, however, that the basis for the anxiety reflected in this discussion of the piety of the Galilean Jesus here is neither clear nor theologically compelling. Of course, it is worth noting that the Gospels portray Jesus as a devout Jew, and also that the devotional practices that erupted so early in Christian circles are not read back into their accounts of Jesus’ ministry. It appears that Dunn sees this as indicating (and so justifying today) some reserve about Jesus as recipient of worship. But the NT texts explicitly make the cultic veneration of Jesus as based on, and the response to, God’s resurrection and exaltation of him to heavenly glory (e.g., Philip. 2:9-11; Acts 2:36; Rom 1:1-2). So how could one expect NT authors to depict the “pre-Easter” Jesus demanding that he be worshipped? Even in the Gospel of John, which explicitly portrays Jesus with the hindsight of the post-Easter revelation of “the Paraclete”, the author distinguishes between what was perceived and practiced before and after Jesus’ resurrection.⁵ In any case, the rationale given in the NT for cultic veneration of Jesus is God’s exaltation of him, not that the Galilean Jesus commanded it. That is,

⁵ See my discussion in L. W. Hurtado, *How on Earth did Jesus Become a God?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 134-51. This chapter is a lightly revised version of my article, “Homage to the Historical Jesus and Early Christian Devotion,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 1 (2003): 131-46.

devotion to Jesus is presented in the NT as the obedient response to *God*, and is as much or more a *theo*-logically laden practice as a christological one.

Chapter 4 also includes a discussion of OT “Yahweh texts” applied to Jesus, Philip. 2:9-11 “the most striking example”, which “at the very least . . . asserts that the confession of Jesus as Lord is the way in which obeisance to the one God will be expressed” (106). Dunn also examines 1 Cor. 8:6, “mind-blowing” in its attribution of “divine agency” to Jesus (110), and 1 Cor. 15:24-28, which he judges as justifying Jesus receiving “honour and glory due to God alongside God, though as an expression of the ultimate honour and glory due only to God” (112).

Dunn then devotes a section of this chapter to my proposal that Paul’s persecution of Jewish believers had been prompted (at least in part) by what he regarded as their outrageous, perhaps blasphemous, christological claims and devotional practices.⁶ The reason for his engagement with the issue here seems to be that it goes against his own preferred view that there was nothing particularly controversial about the sort of Jesus-devotion that characterized Christian circles in the first decades. My proposal is that Jesus-devotion was already such as to be objectionable to devout Jews such as Saul of Tarsus within the earliest years.

He finds my argument “surprisingly weak” and “well beyond the evidence”, and he accuses me of ignoring “the chief reason Paul himself gives”, citing Philip. 3:6 (113-14), in particular Paul’s reference to his “zeal” exhibited in his persecution of “the church”. Dunn takes this statement to indicate that Paul persecuted Jewish believers “because he saw them as some sort of threat to his (fundamentalist) understanding of what being ‘in Judaism’ demanded . . . loyalty to the law and adherence to the Pharisaic halakoth” (114).⁷

I permit myself a few comments in response, to illustrate the occasional problems in Dunn’s discussion, and also because the question involved (when Jesus-devotion may have become seen as a cause of offence to fellow Jews) is important. Indeed, Dunn has repeatedly claimed a lack of Jewish objection to Jesus-devotion in the first decades, and posits as inference that in this period there was nothing much controversial involved. I.e., whatever the nature of Jesus-devotion in these early

⁶ Hurtado, *How on Earth did Jesus Become a God?*, 152-78, esp. 168-73. This chapter originally appeared as “Pre-70 C.E. Jewish Opposition to Christ-Devotion,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 50 (1999): 35-58.

⁷ ‘Halakha/halakoth’ are, respectively, the singular and plural forms of a Hebrew noun from the verb meaning ‘to walk’, and used as a technical term for judgements about how precisely to observe Torah.

decades, it could not have amounted to anything that might be deemed blasphemous or even seriously outrageous.⁸ I have laid out my own view in previous publications, and so I confine myself here to a few problems in Dunn's handling of the matter in this book.

Let us begin by noting that in his discussion here he asks us to believe that Pharisees were free to roam widely and take violent actions against fellow Jews simply for failing to live by Pharisaic teaching, that the High Priest was ready to endorse this sort of trans-local enforcement of Pharisaic teaching in places as far as Damascus, and that "Hellenist" believers were particularly offensive in their disregard for Torah and their "openness to Gentiles" (114). As anyone acquainted with the matters will know, the first two claims are quite simply implausible, and surprising from a scholar of Dunn's learning, and the claim that Jewish "Hellenist" believers were much more lax in Torah-observance than Aramaic-speaking believers is unsubstantiated speculation.⁹

There is no engagement here with C. C. Hill's important study on the Jerusalem church, *Hellenists and Hebrews*, which I regard as making Dunn's portrait untenable.¹⁰ For example, contra Dunn, Acts does not present the Jerusalem apostles as enjoying a fairly untroubled life, contrasted with Hellenist believers suffering persecution (e.g., the arrests and interrogations in 4:1-22 and 5:17-42, the latter account including a flogging, and the execution of James Zebedee and imprisonment of Peter in 12:1-5).

More directly to the question about why Paul opposed Jewish believers, nowhere in Paul's letters or Acts do we find a statement that Paul's persecution of them was on account of their supposedly lax (or non-Pharisaic) Torah-observance, their association with Gentiles, or their critique of the Temple. Instead, Acts depicts Paul as proceeding against "all who call upon [Jesus'] name" (9:14), as "opposing the

⁸ See, e.g., J.D.G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (2nd ed.; London: SCM, 1989), xxviii-xxx, xxxviii-xxxix; *The Partings of the Ways: Between Judaism and Christianity and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (London: SCM, 1991), 183-229; "How Controversial Was Paul's Christology?" in *From Jesus to John: Essays on Jesus and New Testament Christology in Honor of Marinus de Jonge*, ed. M.C. DeBoer (JSNTSup 84; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 148-67, esp. 162-65.

⁹ These proposals also seem somewhat different from those he lays out more extensively in his massive study, *Beginning from Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), esp. 274-78, 335-46, where, e.g., he alleges is that it was Hellenist believers' criticism of the Temple that drew Paul's ire.

¹⁰ Craig C. Hill, *Hellenists and Hebrews: Reappraising Division Within the Earliest Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

name of Jesus” (26:9), and as seeking “to make them blaspheme” (i.e., probably pronouncing a curse upon Jesus, 26:11).

Moreover, nowhere does Paul say that his conversion was basically a capitulation to accepting a more relaxed Torah-observance, a more negative attitude toward the Temple, or more relaxed associations with Gentiles.¹¹ Instead, he refers to the cognitive effect as a “revelation of God’s Son” (Gal. 1:15-16), and in Philip. 3:1-11 he contrasts his former Torah-centric life with his present fervent devotion to Jesus. The Damascus Road experience did not convince Paul primarily to approve a relaxed *halakha*, but to change his view of Jesus. In my view, that also suggests a lot about what he had previously found objectionable in Jewish believers.

Dunn seems to think that Paul’s reference to his “zeal” in Philip. 3:6 must somehow mean that his ire was directed against lax Torah-observance, or a readiness to socialize with Gentiles, but I fail to see why he thinks this. As Torrey Seland has shown, in Jewish tradition of the time, “zeal” (which features in Paul’s statements about his persecution of Jewish believers) typically alludes to Phinehas’ violent action against a fellow Israelite (Num. 25:1-13), whom he saw as collaborating in the efforts of the Moabites to promote worship of their gods among Israel; and similar forceful actions could be justified, even required, in cases where fellow Jews were guilty of *serious violations of Torah* such as idolatry, apostasy, seduction by false prophets, and perjury.¹² Failing to observe Pharisaic *halakha* does not feature, neither does social relations with Gentiles. These were hardly considered a legitimate basis for the kind of forceful reaction that Paul links with his “zeal”. I remain of the view that a far more likely provocation would have been expressions of Jesus-devotion that were deemed offensive, and perhaps deemed as compromising the uniqueness of God.

Chapter 4 includes a critical engagement with Richard Bauckham’s thesis that earliest Christianity saw Jesus as included with the “divine identity” (141-44). Here Dunn offers some cogent critique and proposes instead “equation” as ‘a better way of saying that if Jesus is God he is not YHWH . . .’ (144). This deserves further reflection in our efforts to capture the religious concepts of earliest Christians.

¹¹ Granted, in Gal. 1:15-16, Paul says that God revealed “his Son” to him so that God’s fore-ordained purpose that Paul would “preach the gospel among the Gentiles” would be carried out. But Paul presents his Gentile-mission as a new development, not as assent to some supposedly previous policy on Gentiles that he had found objectionable among the Jewish believers he had been persecuting.

¹² Torrey Seland, *Establishment Violence in Philo and Luke: A Study of Non-Conformity to the Torah and Jewish Vigilante Reactions* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), esp. 42-74. Key primary texts are Josephus, *Ant.* 4.145-58 and Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 1.54-57.

In the conclusion to this chapter, and more fully in the Conclusion to the book, Dunn's concerns about drawing lessons for Christian worship today become more explicit. Dunn urges avoidance of what he calls "Jesus-olatry", a worship-focus on Jesus to the neglect of God the Father, which he characterises (provocatively) as a kind of idolatry and "a denial of Christianity's claim to be a monotheistic religion" (147-48).

Dunn bases this appeal on the exegetical judgement that "by and large the first Christians did not worship Jesus as such" (150), by which he appears to mean that the NT texts do not present Jesus as worshipped apart from reference to God the Father, as if Jesus were a separate deity in his own right. This is a correct observation, though I wonder whether his understandable reaction against "Jesus-olatry" may have led him to take a somewhat reluctant view of the NT evidence at some points. The combination of historical/exegetical questions and practical/theological concerns reflected in this book is in my view entirely legitimate, so long as the latter does not shape adversely the former.¹³ In the case of this study, however, I am not entirely sure that this danger has been fully evaded.

More specifically, Dunn's approach focuses mainly on how the NT texts verbally articulate Jesus' significance vis-à-vis God (the Father). These texts reflect rather consistently express and justify Jesus' own high status, not as self-derived or free-standing so to speak, but with reference to God. E.g., Jesus is God's Son, Image, Word, and Messiah. Also, in the devotional actions referred to in these texts Jesus features prominently and yet either explicitly or implicitly is revered in connection with God, not as a separate deity. As I have repeatedly indicated over the years, this very interesting way of reverencing Jesus in relationship to God is what I mean to underscore in referring to a "*binitarian* devotional pattern" (as distinguished from a "di-theistic" pattern in which reverence would be given to two gods).¹⁴ Unquestionably, in NT texts (Pauline and others including the Gospel of John, Hebrews and Revelation), Jesus is not worshipped as a god in his own right, which appears to be the meaning of Dunn's statement that Jesus is not worshipped "as such". It appears at times, however, that for Dunn this means that Jesus was not really

¹³ In a small study I have combined historical analysis about early Christian worship and some reflections for Christian worship today: *At the Origins of Christian Worship: The Context and Character of Earliest Christian Devotion* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

¹⁴ Note, e.g., Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988; 2nd ed. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 98-99.

worshipped (though he admits Jesus was revered in an extraordinary degree), because he thinks that this would produce too much of a theological strain on the affirmation of one God.

If, on the other hand, we approach the matter focusing on the *phenomena* that comprised the worship practices of earliest Christian circles, and with a concern to try to appraise their significance in that historical context, I think that we get another perspective. I submit that must recognize something unprecedented in these practices, a devotional pattern that involves a remarkable, novel and programmatic inclusion of a second figure, Jesus, alongside, and in unique relation to, God (the Father). Indeed, as noted, Dunn grants this at some points in his discussion. But I also submit that in this devotional pattern Jesus features in such a programmatic way that we can say that he is included as a recipient of worship with God, specifically meaning by “worship” the sorts of corporate devotional actions by which a given religious group expresses and maintains its relationship with its deity.¹⁵

As noted already, at points, though Dunn comes to a very similar view, he then also seems somewhat uncomfortable with it. I think that this is perhaps because he finds the phenomena of early Christian worship unsettling for the theological stance that he advocates. But this need not be so. Worship of Jesus by Christians need not be (or lead to) what Dunn calls “Jesus-olatry”, a reverencing of Jesus to the neglect of God (the Father). Earliest believers as reflected in the NT texts seem variously to have given unhesitating cultic reverence to Jesus without the sort of anxiety that appears to trouble Dunn. Theologically, if really “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor. 5:19), then the continuing Christian devotional response can and should be unhesitating as well, for the worship of the exalted Jesus thus celebrates his status with reference to God (the Father).

Notwithstanding my reservations about his views on some matters, Dunn’s energetic and articulate discussion is an important contribution to scholarly debate and to Christian reflection on worship today. As a Christian myself, I certainly share his view that the beliefs and devotional practices reflected in the NT texts can provide stimulating resources for shaping and inspiring Christian worship today.

¹⁵ I have repeatedly laid out the specifics of devotional practices involved. See, e.g., Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (Philadelphia: Fortress; London: SCM, 1988; 2nd ed., Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 100-14; *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 134-53. I have also striven to be clear about what I mean by “worship”: See, e.g., Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship*, 65-69.