

The Biblical Unitarian Podcast - by Dustin Smith, PhD

Episode 175—Was Jesus a Monotheist?

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Introduction

In this week’s episode, we will look at the question, which might seem obvious to some but curious to others, *Was Jesus a Monotheist?* In other words, we will be exploring the historical question as to whether Jesus Christ believed, adhered to, and taught monotheism.

I will be drawing inspiration from a 2004 article by James Dunn entitled, “Was Jesus a Monotheist? A Contribution to the Discussion of Christian Monotheism.” It was published in a collection of essays in the volume *Early Jewish and Christian Monotheism* in the Library of New Testament Studies, published by T&T Clark.

I probably will be making podcast episodes on a few of the essays in this edited volume, so please look forward to those as well.

How does James Dunn answer the question regarding whether Jesus Christ was a monotheist based on a historical inquiry?

Let’s find out on this week’s episode of the BUP!

1. What We Can Infer From Jesus' Upbringing

"Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. "These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. "You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. "You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut 6:4-9)

- This is what is called the Shema. The name Shema comes from the first imperative in verse 4, which means “hear” or “listen.”
 - It can be inferred that the recitation of the creed of God’s oneness was to take place when you rise up and when you lie down.
 - By the time the Mishnah was composed, which is the first written collection of the oral laws of the Jewish people (circa 200 AD), the practice of reciting the Shema was long established.
 - The 2nd century BC Letter of Aristeas (132) indicates that the Jewish focus on only one God was widely known, even as far as Alexandria. Egypt.
 - Josephus likewise indicates that it was “common among all the Hebrews” that there is one God (Ant. 5.112).
- Why mention all of this?
 - Jesus was a Jew.
 - We can infer that Jesus was raised by religiously pious parents.
 - Mark 6:3 indicates that Joseph and Mary named their other children James/Jacob, Judah, Simon/Simeon, and Joseph/Joses. These are famous names in the Abrahamic family.
- A pious upbringing would certainly include the recitation of the Shema. Jesus would have grown up confessing the creed of God’s oneness.
- The Gospels also note that Jesus frequented the synagogues in his preaching of the kingdom of God, suggesting that Jesus was a regular attendee of the synagogue, likely attending and participating on each Sabbath as he was growing up.
- We can also surmise that Jesus was able to read, based on various indicators in the Gospels. The Jewish practice, recorded by Josephus, indicates that every seventh day should be given over to the study of the Torah and Jewish customs (Ant. 16.43).
 - Jesus’ religious devotion can be observed in many other details. He wore prayer tassels and took pilgrimages to Jerusalem for the feasts. He even spoke of tithing.

- We can surmise that Jesus was a Jew who practiced Judaism faithfully. This would also indicate that he was a believer in only one God, as the Jewish creed insists. But what exactly did Jesus teaching about God?

2. Jesus' Teachings Regarding God

- All 3 synoptic gospels indicate that Jesus recited and affirmed the Shema (Matt 22; Mark 12; Luke 10). Most importantly, Jesus regarded the Shema--to love the one God with all of one's being and to love one's neighbor as himself--as the greatest commandment.
 - This indicates that Jesus regarded the monotheistic creed of Israel as the foremost commandment, thereby reaffirming this fundamental Jewish pillar in the teaching of his followers and the subsequent church community.
 - In other words, Jesus affirmed Jewish monotheism and taught his followers to likewise affirm Jewish monotheism. Jesus does not expand, redefine, or further unpack the oneness of God when he regards the Shema as the foremost commandment.
- We also have the account of Jesus' encounter with the rich young ruler (Matt 19; Mark 10)
 - *Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" "Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone.* (Mk 10:17-18)
 - Jesus affirms that only God is good, because God is the source and definition of all goodness.
 - Matthew's version, while softening the suggestion made by Jesus, nevertheless affirms the Markan point that "there is only one who is good" (Matt 19:17)
 - By connecting goodness to only one person--God, Jesus is continuing to affirm the monotheistic confession of the Shema.
- The Lord's Prayer, which appears in both the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 6) and in a Lukan parallel (Luke 11) speaks to Jesus' understanding of God and God's holiness.
 - *Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name.* (Matt 6:9)
 - Jesus taught his disciples to regard the name of the Father as holy, hallowed, set apart. This indicates that Jesus thought that God should be set apart and placed on a whole other level from everyone else.
 - Jesus, of course, defines the one God as the Father.
 - The Father's commitment and devotion due unto him demanded exclusive respect and commitment.
- The next petition in the Lord's Prayer is to let your kingdom come. The inauguration of God's kingdom marks God's rule and reign as most important in the lives of God's people.
 - The commitment to God's kingdom--and to God as the ultimate king--is to be a whole-hearted devotion.

- *You cannot serve God and wealth* (Matt 6:24)
- “God” is consistently defined by Jesus as the Father. From the various ways in which he was remembered speaking about God as Father, his own monotheism was confessed as well as taught to his immediate followers:
 - “My Father”
 - “Your Father”
 - “Our Father”
- In the temptation of Jesus within the wilderness, we have another statement from Jesus regarding God and the cultic service he alone deserves:
 - YOU SHALL WORSHIP THE LORD YOUR GOD, AND SERVE HIM ONLY." (Mat 4:10 NAU)
 - You shall fear the LORD your God; and you shall worship Him (Deu 6:13 NAU)
 - Note how Matthew’s Jesus add the word “only” to the acts of serving God in a cultic act. (*latrevo*).
 - If only one person is worthy of cultic service, then this affirms a monotheistic stance.

3. The Impact of Jesus’ Teaching on Monotheism

- Dunn has this great quote about Jesus’ own monotheism and the developing Christologies of the next centuries. Dunn writes, “the affirmation that, for example, Jesus was God incarnate, cannot ignore the possibility that Jesus as a devout monotheistic Jew would himself have denied that affirmation or even found it ridiculous.”
- The first thing we can safely conclude is that Jesus’ habit of addressing God as Father (Aramaic *abba*) was remembered by his earliest followers, treasured, and continued. This can be observed in Greek-speaking contexts, like Paul’s letters and Mark’s gospel:
 - *For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!"* (Rom 8:15)
 - *Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"* (Gal 4:6)
- If Jesus addressed God as abba Father and Jesus’ followers are to address God as abba Father, then what does this say about their shared monotheistic outlook? If Jesus and his followers share the same Father, then it goes to show that they are members of the same family--the renewed family of God.
 - *For those whom [God] foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that [Jesus] would be the firstborn among many brethren [brothers and sisters]* (Rom 8:29)
- Dunn concludes his essay with a start reminder that Jewish monotheism is incompatible with the attempt to view God as a trinity. Dunn states: *For Christians continue to assert*

that they are monotheists, that God is one, even if their sophisticated attempts to state what that means (unity in trinity) leave both Jew and Muslim at best puzzled or simply unconvinced.

Conclusion

James Dunn's article "Was Jesus a Monotheist? A Contribution to the Discussion of Christian Monotheism", I think, persuasively demonstrated that Jesus was indeed a monotheist. Dunn showed that Jesus' Jewish upbringing was characterized by pious devotion, where the Shema, the creed of Israel that confessed the Lord God as a single person, was likely recited multiple times a day.

Dunn furthermore demonstrated that Jesus' teachings showed his acceptance of Jewish monotheism. Jesus taught the Shema to his immediate followers and frequently defined God as the Father alone.

Lastly, Dunn showed that the lasting impression of Jesus' teachings further indicates that Jesus was a monotheist. Jesus' characteristic manner of addressing God as abba Father was remembered, cherished, and was continued to be taught in Greek-speaking communities of faith. Furthermore, Paul the Apostle regarded Jesus as a son of God within the new family of God in which Christian believers were even included.

It goes to show that if Jesus Christ was a monotheist, then he did not regard himself as the only true God. Jesus unwaveringly taught that the Father alone was the only true God, making Jesus a good Jewish monotheist.

Thanks for listening to this week's episode of the BUP!

Join us next week as we look at early Christian attitudes towards the offering of sacrifices and how their practices offer insight into their Christological understandings of Jesus.

Please look forward to it.

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