One God and Trinitarian Language in the Letters of Paul

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I

From the point of view of the biblical theologian any discussion of monotheism and trinitarian thought in the letters of Paul contains a double anachronism. The word "monotheism" is unknown to the writers of the Christian Bible of Old or New Testament, and the terminology of a trinitarian doctrine cannot be traced in any book of the New Testament.

The term "monotheism" was introduced in the later European renaissance, together with a cluster of relatives as "atheism," "theism," and "polytheism," to provide definitional clarification for divergent types of human concepts of the divine. The English deist Henry St. John Viscount Bolingbroke employs the word as the summation of a rational idea of God that describes "one supreme self-existent Being" as "the first intelligent cause of all Things." David Hume uses the term "monotheism" to distinguish the pristine Persian religion from a Babylonian form of belief; in Immanuel Kant the notion of "monotheism," assumes the key-function of the highest principle of speculative reason; and for Friedrich Schleiermacher "monotheism," itself an idea derived from the philosophy of religion, becomes fundamental for the understanding of the essence of Christianity. "Monotheism" is a philosophical construct about the existence of a single divine being which arose relatively late in the history of Western philosophy, and could be used polemically against ecclesiastical creeds (especially the Trinity!), as a postulate of reason independent of Christian or Jewish confessions and as a presupposition of Christian faith.' The phrase "trinitarian thought" is equally anachronistic if it is seen through the texts of the Christian Bible, including the New Testament. "Trinitarian thought" is more or less fixed for us through its classic conciliary definitions as the doctrine of differentiations within one divine being and the relationships of these differentiations with each other. Technical phrases like "three persons in one essence" are as distant from the language of the apostle Paul and the New Testament as a whole as are such words as "appropriations" or "perichoresis" which belong to the standard vocabulary of trinitarian speech. It is therefore easily understandable why New Testament scholarship has almost totally ignored the later Christian teaching of the Trinity as a guide to its own task. It considers it a foregone conclusion that trinitarian language is the invention of philosophical minds trained in the Greek tradition which has superimposed a thick layer of

The historically trained New Testament scholar will today proceed with the task of interpretation without wasting a minute on the suspicion that the trinitarian confessions of later centuries might be rooted in the New Testament itself, and that trinitarian creeds might continue to function as valuable hermeneutical sign-posts for a modern understanding.²

II

Both “monotheism” and “trinitarian thought” carry the weight of a tradition distinct from the conceptual framework of the New Testament, but they also have an affinity to the subject matter which is at the heart of New Testament theology. We turn, first of all, to the confession of one, single God.

By the time of the first century CE the daily recitation of the Shema in the morning and in the evening had become established practice among Jews. Its opening sentences from Deut 6:4, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord, our God, is one Lord,” expresses the foundational conviction of Jewish faith in one exclusive deity. The confessional statement “the Lord is one” is picked up in two other places in the Old Testament and given expanded significance. Zech 14:9 turns the confession into an eschatological and universal hope: “the Lord will become king over all the earth; on that day the Lord will be one and his name one.” Mal 2:10 asks the rhetorical question “Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us?” The creation of Israel is the work of one God alone, and this God is identical with the Lord of Israel’s confession. The statement of the singularity of Israel’s God, captured in the LXX by the phrase κύριος εἶ,³ embraces in the Old Testament three dimensions: it expresses the present rule of only one God for Israel (confessional); it projects the hope for an ultimate rule of this one God for the entire world of human history (eschatological); and it casts its claim back into the origins of Israel at the hand of its only creator God (protological).

These Israelite and Jewish convictions of the legitimate claim of only one, single God remained to Paul an unshakable and unquestioned inheritance. The advocate of the emergence of a people of God made up of Jews and non-Jews in a single community would never consider realizing his aims by abolishing the exclusionary claims of one distinct God in favor of the adoption of a religious syncretism which was there for the taking in the form of the theocracy dominating Greco-Roman religion. The κύριος εἶ of the Shema echoes unmistakably in his letters. It reverberates in a closing doxology “to the only wise God, to whom be the glory for ever! Amen” (Rom 16:27); it excludes the notion of a secondary divine cause in the statement “a mediator involves more than one party; but God is one” (Gal 3:20); it resounds in the justification given to the formation of a