

## *A Deafening Silence*

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**NUMBERS 23:19**, “God *is not a man*, that He should lie nor a son of man, that He should repent.”

The doctrines of the Trinity, the deity of Christ and the “Incarnation,” the belief that in Jesus “God the Son became a man,” are foundational to *Institutional Christianity*.

Christianity began as a movement within the ancient faith of Israel. All of the first believers were Jews or Gentile proselytes to Judaism. The Book of Acts demonstrates that the early church did not immediately discard all Jewish beliefs, traditions and practices. In the first third of the book of Acts the gospel was proclaimed only to Jewish audiences and was only later opened to Gentiles as a consequence of Divine intervention (Acts chapter 10). The early church did not see itself as a “new religion” distinct from the faith of Israel but as a messianic movement within Second Temple Judaism. The promises of the scriptures of Israel were now fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

The books of the New Testament show that the earliest churches were not free of conflict. The letters of Paul in particular were written to individual congregations to deal with specific issues. The Apostle was did not hesitate to confront problems.

Some of the controversies in the New Testament represent the kinds of problems one would expect in a movement based on the faith of Israel that began to accept uncircumcised Gentiles into the fold. From the day that the gospel was offered to Gentiles disputes arose over circumcision, Jewish dietary restrictions, Sabbath keeping and the observation of feast days (**Acts 11:1-3, Romans 14:1-20, Galatians 4:10, 5:2-3, Colossians 2:16**).

Non-Christian Jewish contemporaries of Paul found aspects of Jesus’ life and status objectionable, particularly his crucifixion by Roman authorities. Paul described the proclamation of a crucified messiah as an “*offense* to Jews and folly to Gentiles” (**1 Corinthians 1:23**). He used the same Greek word in **Galatians 5:11** for the “*offense* of the cross” (*skandalon*). The term originally referred to a “trap” or “snare” used by hunters to catch prey. It later acquired the sense of that which *offends, scandalizes*, is a *stumbling block*.

Crucifixion was a Roman form of execution used in particular for rebellious slaves and political revolutionaries, that is, *enemies of the State*. To Roman citizens crucifixion was the most dreaded form of death, so much so that in polite Roman society it was a social blunder to even mention it. Roman law forbade the execution of its citizens by crucifixion. The usual form of capital punishment for a condemned citizen was decapitation. One purpose of crucifixion was

to shame the condemned. This is precisely why the victim was crucified naked and his body left to rot. It demonstrated Rome's irresistible power over any and all threats to the political order.

The crucifixion of Jesus was acutely offensive to Jews. The idea that Rome, Israel's worst enemy, executed God's promised messiah in such a dishonorable manner was beyond the pale. **A "crucified messiah" was a contradiction in terms.** Did not the Mosaic Law teach that anyone "hung on a tree" was under God's curse and by definition outside the Law and covenant of Israel (**Galatians 3:10, Deuteronomy 27:26**)?

Not only did Paul make no attempt to explain away this "embarrassing" fact, he proclaimed "Christ crucified" to be God's very "power and wisdom" (**1 Corinthians 1:24**). He boasted of God's long hidden mystery that had now been revealed in the crucified Messiah. In an ironic twist the very attempt to stop God's purposes by killing His messiah procured the overthrow the very "powers and principalities" that instigated it (**1 Corinthians 2:6-8**).

Foundational to the faith of Israel was the absolute oneness of God. The *Shema* repeated daily by devout Jews began with the proclamation, "hear, O Israel, Yahweh our God, Yahweh is one." Isaiah wrote, "thus says Yahweh, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, Yahweh of hosts: 'I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god'" (**44:6**). The Law claimed God is "not a man" or flesh, but a spirit who fills heaven and earth (**Numbers 23:19, Isaiah 57:15, Jeremiah 23:24**).

Doctrinal notions developed by later Nicene Christianity including the Trinity and the Incarnation would have generated vociferous objections from Jews in Paul's day. The novel idea of one God existing in three persons would be seen to be self-contradictory and a threat to Jewish monotheism. Was not the belief that God "became a man" contrary to scripture? While expectations about the Messiah varied among Jews of the period, none conceived of one who was God "incarnated" in human flesh, let alone a deity executed by the hated Roman ruler, Pilate. Even today many Christians find the concept of one God "existing in three persons" incomprehensible. While later Christians might accept this as a matter of faith, they are hard-pressed to produce rational explanations of it. How much more would a Jew of Paul's day find this idea inexplicable and theologically offensive?

***Why is there no evidence in the New Testament of Jewish objections to the doctrines of the Trinity, the deity of Christ or the Incarnation?*** The New Testament records objections to a crucified messiah as well as disputes over circumcision, Sabbath keeping, dietary regulations and eating food offered to idols. Moreover, ideas like the Trinity and God "becoming man" are so unique and difficult to comprehend that one would expect a thoroughgoing teacher like the Apostle Paul to address them constantly, yet nowhere in his epistles is there an example of him attempting to explain the inexplicable to his congregations. Nowhere does Paul discuss how the one God can be "three persons in one" or teach how in Christ Jesus "God became a man." Such lessons would have required constant repetition.

What one does not find in the New Testament is controversy about the Trinity or deity of Christ. ***This is a Deafening Silence that calls for explanation by Institutional Christianity.***