

Does Paul call Jesus “God” in Romans 9:5?

30 March 2011

By David Maas

218 Main Street, Unit 133

Kirkland, Washington, 98033, USA

david.maas@gospeltoallnations.org

eleutheria@prodigy.net

www.gospeltoallnations.org

There is only one passage in Paul’s writings where he appears to explicitly call Jesus “God” or *theos* in Greek, ROMANS 9:5. Since the faith of Israel from which Christianity arose was firmly monotheistic, the scarcity of such statements in Paul’s letters raises questions. ROMANS 9:5 is translated in the *New International Version (NIV)* as:

“Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of ***Christ, who is God over all, for ever praised!*** Amen.”

The opening paragraph of Romans chapter 9 literally reads (verse 1-5):

“Truth I say in Christ, I lie not, my conscience bearing witness to me in the Holy Spirit, that to me is great distress and incessant sorrow in my heart. For I was wishing, I, myself, to be accursed from the Christ on behalf of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh;

Who are Israelites,

Of whom [*are*] the sonship and the glory and the covenants and the legislation and the divine service and the promises,

Of whom [*are*] the fathers and,

From whom [*is*] the Christ, that according to flesh.

God is over all, blessed unto the ages. Amen.”

Paul’s purpose in Romans chapters 9 through 11 was not to expound on the nature of God or Christ. At issue was the present status of ethnic Israelites in light of God’s covenant promises and the nation’s rejection of Jesus. Since God is now fulfilling His promises in Christ, and since most Jews repudiated Jesus as Messiah, ***had God’s word failed*** (verse 6)?

Paul was keenly aware of his kinsmen’s rejection of the Gospel. He expressed deep sorrow over this sad state of affairs. Ethnic Jews “are Israelites” by blood and descendants of Abraham, accordingly the sonship, the covenants, the legislation and so on, belonged to them by inheritance.

The three dependent or relative clauses that follow “who are Israelites” are each governed by a relative pronoun (“who”) in the genitive case (“of whom”) and plural number (*i.e.*, each is plural). Ethnic Jews are Israelites “of whom” is the sonship, “of whom” are the patriarchs and “from whom” is the Messiah. A grammatical question is whether there should be a full stop after “flesh” in verse 5. That is, is “who is God over all blessed unto the ages” a new sentence or an additional dependent clause following a fourth relative pronoun (*i.e.*, “who”). If the latter, the final clause of verse 5 is part of the sentence that begins in verse 3.

A problem with translating the final clause of verse 5 as another relative clause in a series is that ***there is no relative pronoun in this clause in the Greek***. That is, there is no fourth “whom” that begins the final stanza. As stated above, the three relative pronouns in the genitive case govern the three dependent clauses in verses 4-5a. In short, the *NIV* has inserted a relative pronoun where there is none in the Greek text.

In the Greek sentence the final clause of verse 5 consists of "God" with the definite article (*i.e.*, "the"), which is in the nominative case (the subject). There is a present tense participle ("is"), the preposition "over" (Greek, *epi*) used with "all," the adjective "blessed" in the nominative case, and a prepositional phrase in the accusative case ("unto the ages"). Because both "God" and "blessed" are in the nominative case, "blessed" modifies "God." "Unto the ages" is the direct object of the verb "is" since it is in the accusative case.

Based on the syntax the final clause can be translated one of four ways as follows, with the first option being the most likely:

- (1) - "The God is over all, blessed unto the ages."
- (2) - "The God is over all, blessed, unto the ages."
- (3) - "The God, blessed, is over all unto the ages."
- (4) - "The God is unto the ages, blessed over all."

Option (2) differs from the first only in the addition of a comma following "blessed" (there were no punctuation marks in the original Greek text). In the first option "the God" who is over all is acknowledged by Paul to be "blessed unto the ages." In the second option God is "blessed" as well as "over all unto the ages." But the sense in all four options is essentially the same.

Because the clause from verse 5 consists of a subject ("God"), present tense participle ("is"), indirect object ("over all") and direct object ("unto the ages"), it is a standalone statement not dependent the preceding sentence. This clause is not a statement about the deity of Christ but praise to and acknowledgement of, God. This interjection of praise is fitting since Paul was engaged in theodicy in Romans, the defense of God's faithfulness and righteousness. Since most Jews rejected their messiah the question was unavoidable: ***Had the word of God failed*** (verse 6)? Because Paul was about to ask this very question, his exclamation of praise for God who "is over all" was most appropriate at this juncture.

Including ROMANS 9:5, Paul applied the term "blessed" (*eulogétos*) to God five times but never to Jesus or the Holy Spirit. Note the following:

ROMANS 1:24-25, "Therefore **God** gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than **the Creator, who is blessed for ever!** Amen."

2 CORINTHIANS 1:3, "**Blessed be the God and Father** of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort."

2 CORINTHIANS 11:31, "**The God and Father** of the Lord Jesus, **who is blessed for ever**, knows that I do not lie."

EPHESIANS 1:3, "**Blessed be the God and Father** of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly *places* in Christ."

Additionally, in his letters Paul always maintained a distinction between God and Christ, and often referred to God as "the God and Father of Jesus" (ROMANS 15:6, 1 CORINTHIANS 15:24, 2 CORINTHIANS 1:3, 11:31, EPHESIANS 1:3, 5:20, 1 THESSALONIANS 1:3). On several occasions he identified the Father as alone "God" (1 CORINTHIANS 8:6, EPHESIANS 4:6, PHILIPPIANS 4:20, 1 THESSALONIANS 3:11, 3:13).

Noteworthy is the lack of direct references to Jesus as "God" in Paul's writings. If ROMANS 9:5 is the only such passage, and not a clear one, this lack is telling. The New Testament provides clear evidence of controversies in the early church over a variety of issues. Paul was not one to hesitate to confront opponents and problems. Yet missing from the New Testament are any indications of conflict over the claim that Jesus is God or that God became a man. While this is an argument from silence, the silence speaks volumes.

Christianity grew out of the faith of Israel with its **strict monotheism** (e.g., DEUTERONOMY 6:4). Yahweh alone was God and alone merited worship. The Old Testament taught explicitly that God is not a man (NUMBERS 23:19, “God is not a man, that He should lie”). Any claim of deity for Jesus or that “God became a man,” would be seen as blasphemous. If Paul taught that Jesus is God his Jewish opponents would have fought him tooth and nail. It was Paul’s practice when arriving at a city to preach in the local synagogue. His contacts with local Jewish communities were frequent and often contentious (2 CORINTHIANS 11:24, “five times I received from the Jews forty lashes less one”). The noise levels raised by claims of deity for Jesus would have necessitated Paul to teach constantly on the subject, but there are no such discourses explaining the deity of Jesus or the “Incarnation” in any of his letters.

In summary, ROMANS 9:5 does not call Jesus “God.” Instead, it is a declaration of praise to God offered immediately before Paul’s question, had the Word of God failed? It affirmed that Paul did not doubt even for an instance that God’s word had not failed. His faith in God was absolute. The clause is a standalone statement not grammatically dependent on the preceding sentence. The translation found in the *NIV* inserts a relative pronoun where there is none. Since ROMANS 9:5 is not a clear statement about the deity of Christ, since there is no reason in this context to make such a statement, and since Paul elsewhere does not explicitly state that Jesus is God, the burden of proof for the claim that the Apostle Paul taught the deity of Jesus remains on those who make it.