The Only True God: Early Christian Monotheism in its Jewish Context

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The original publication appeared at:


DOI: Not Available
§ Monotheism and Worship in the Book of Revelation

There can be no doubting the importance of worship as a theme in the Book of Revelation. Just considering the frequency with which the verb "to worship" (proskunein) and its cognates appear, without yet considering any other related terminology or actions, one finds a statistically high occurrence when compared with other New Testament writings. It is found in some form in Revelation 3:9; 4:10; 9:20; 11:1; 13:8, 13, 15; 14:7, 9, 11; 15:4; 16:2; 19:10, 20; and 22:8–9. The spread and frequency of the term alone can be said to give us some initial indication of the theme's importance in the book. Of particular interest in recent times has been the theme of the angelic refusal of worship, which is often considered to be highly significant when contrasted with the worship that is offered to the risen, exalted Christ. However, before considering this narrower theme, it is important to have a sense of the overarching theme of worship and its role in the Book of Revelation.

We have already seen the emphasis placed on worship in recent discussions of early Jewish and Christian monotheism. However, as has been noted, the exact type of "worship" offered to a figure is also of great importance, since the Greek word for "worship" spans a whole range of activities, from simply bowing before another figure [the primary meaning of this verb] to cultic worship involving liturgy, prayer, and sacrifice. The former could be offered to figures other than God Most High within most streams of Judaism (as discussed in previous chapters), the latter seems to have been reserved exclusively for their...
God, and certainly sacrificial worship appears to have been the make-or-break issue for most Jews and Christians. It is thus important to consider the kind of worship offered to Jesus (and other figures) in the Book of Revelation, as well as the titles and actions associated with both the figures in question and their worshippers.

Hurtado, in one of his recent books on the importance of worship in early Christianity, and in particular early Christology, notes this breadth of the verb proskunein, and he thus lists a number of other words that normally denote an action or type of worship reserved for the deity alone. Of these, the noun latreia ("service") does not occur in Revelation, and the verb latreuein occurs only twice: once in 7:15, where it has God as its object, and once in 22:3, where even though there is a reference immediately preceding to the throne of God and of the Lamb, it is nevertheless specified that his servants worship or serve him, which in the context can only be a reference to God. Other verbs Hurtado lists as similarly reserved for cultic and sacrificial worship do not occur at all in Revelation. These terms are, of course, relatively rare in the New Testament; apart from in Hebrews, where the whole argument of the letter revolves around the themes, language, and imagery of cultic worship. However, were Revelation intended to make a Christological point by applying worship-language to Jesus that is normally reserved only for God, then one could only conclude that it misses many opportunities to make this point in a clear and unambiguous manner. Not even the broader verb proskunein has Christ as its object in Revelation. We are not told anything more than that others fell down before him (1:17, 5:8). And although such worship or reverence is explicitly said to be inappropriate when offered to angels by human beings, this type of worship or bowing down is said to be appropriately offered to Christians in Revelation 3:9. Thus while it is clear that the language and terminology of worship plays an important role in this book, its precise significance and meaning is less immediately apparent, and therefore requires further careful study, which shall be the aim of the rest of this chapter.

Let us begin by looking at who is and is not worshipped in the Book of Revelation and what significance this may have for the author's understanding of the relationship between Jesus and God on the one hand and Jesus and angels or other figures on the other. First and foremost, and most obvious, is the worship offered to God, often designated as "him who sits on the throne." God is the recipient of the majority of the worship mentioned in the book, and of most if not all the worship that is evaluated positively. Chapter 4 marks the beginning of John's
heavenly journey, and the first thing he witnesses is a scene of heavenly worship. The description of the worship of God in heaven in 4:1-11 is followed by the description of the Lamb, who is also worthy of praise, honor, glory, and power in 5:1-14. The worship in chapter 5 includes the Lamb, in ways we shall consider below, but God continues to be the recipient of worship, and perhaps remains its principal focus. Not much later, in 7:9-17, worship is once again offered to God and the Lamb. Songs of praise and prayers are offered to God in 11:15-19. While songs of thanksgiving are offered for both God and the Lamb and the salvation they have brought to humankind, this one who is always clearly and unambiguously the recipient of both worship and prayer is God, “him who sits on the throne.” This is seen again in 15:2-4, where the song that is sung is the song of Moses and of the Lamb but it is addressed to the “Lord God Almighty,” who is also the one addressed in the prayers of 16:5-7. In chapter 19, further praise is offered, with God as its recipient. In all such instances of worship, even if the salvation accomplished by the Lamb is the reason and motivating factor for the worship in question, and thus the worship has the Lamb in view as well, nevertheless God is always either the sole or primary recipient of the worship that is offered. Moreover, in all of the instances mentioned thus far, the worship offered constitutes the offering of honor or adulation, and does not incorporate cultic or sacrificial elements.

So are there any examples of cultic or sacrificial imagery being applied to the worship offered to Christ? There are a couple of passages that must be considered. In 14:4 there is a potentially significant metaphor. The chaste remnant of Israel is said to be offered “as first fruits” to God and the Lamb. Here we have the use of an interesting cultic metaphor in reference to both God and the Lamb, with the Lamb being mentioned alongside God precisely as recipient of this offering. However, precisely because it is a metaphorical usage, its significance should not be pressed too far. In context, it need mean no more than that this group represents the first of a larger group to be dedicated to God and the Lamb.

A further cultic image involving both God and the Lamb is to be found in 20:6. Those who participate in the first resurrection are said to be priests of God and of Christ. Since “priests of God” would normally refer to those who offer cultic worship to God in the temple, it is legitimate to ask what the concept of a “priest of Christ” might mean in this context. Here too it seems unlikely that the full cultic overtones and traditional duties of priesthood are in view here. In Revelation 21:22-23, the author’s ideal is expressed in terms of a Jerusalem in which no temple is needed, because God and the Lamb are its temple and its light.
To whatever extent the millennial period either foreshadows or symbolizes this eternal ideal, the language of priesthood is best understood in a broader sense, without implying cultic activity or involvement in literal sacrificial worship. That only a broad, metaphorical meaning is in view is most obvious when one considers that those referred to in this way are Christian martyrs. Yet it is said that they will be priests, rather than that they are priests. In other words, had the author wished to depict the Lamb being offered sacrificial worship, this would have provided a perfect opportunity, since the deaths of the martyrs could have been depicted at this point as sacrifices offered to God and the Lamb. The author, however, chooses not to do so. Also significant is that the only result of their being priests that is explicitly mentioned is that they will reign. The notion of God's people as set apart, a “kingdom of priests,” probably provides the background for the language used here. In view of these considerations, the point here is simply that these individuals are set apart for the service of God and Christ during the millennial kingdom.

The sacrificial worship due to God alone is thus not shared in Revelation. What is shared are the divine throne and titles. If at the beginning of the book, “the one seated on the throne” was a designation of God in contrast to the Lamb, by the end of the book the throne is described as being “the throne of God and of the Lamb” [22:1, 3]. There is also a clear sharing of the same titles between God and Christ—in particular, “Alpha and Omega” [21:6, 22:13] and “Beginning and End” [21:6, 22:13]. This sharing of titles stands within Jewish agency tradition, which transferred titles to an emissary as a way of showing his authority to speak and act for the one who sent him. In one sense, there is no more need to ask what these designations mean when applied to Christ, any more than it would be appropriate to ask what the name of God means when borne by the angel Yahoel or what the designation “the little Yahweh” means when applied to Enoch-Metatron in 3 Enoch. The transfer of name or title singled out the individual in question as the divine agent who represents God’s interest fully. When read from our standpoint in history, many find these ideas to be problematic, and indeed, it is for this reason that later rabbis took steps to limit speculation about a chief divine agent. Yet it is important not to read texts like Revelation in light of definitions of monotheism that only arose later. This transfer of designations to God’s agent (including ones that normally belong to God alone) is a frequent feature of Jewish and Christian texts from this period. There is thus no need to introduce new terminology such as “divine identity,” as Bauckham does. The already-existent terminology is sufficient.
existing language and category of agency appears to do justice to the observed phenomena.

It is sometimes asked whether "Beginning and End" when applied to Christ refers to his role in the first creation or in the new creation. But as in other comparable agency texts, the point is neither the same nor a different meaning that the divine name or title carries when borne by the agent, but precisely the fact that these names or titles point away from the agent back to the source of his authority, the one who sent him. The examples from Revelation precisely parallel the transfer of roles and attributes between the sender and the sent, between God and his agent, that one finds elsewhere in early Jewish literature. The language and imagery used is thus well within the bounds of what one might expect to find in a Jewish context as a response to the arrival of God's eschatological redeemer. The fact that the same sharing of throne and sovereignty is explicitly said to extend to Christians as well is not without significance.

Although John prostrates himself before the risen Jesus in 1:17, the first actual occurrence of the verb proskuneo is found in 3:9, where it is before Christians that those of the "synagogue of Satan" will worship. When taken together with the points made previously, it becomes clear that neither sharing the throne nor receiving worship was something this author reserved exclusively for God alone, or even exclusively for God and Christ. It is therefore unlikely that worship is used in Revelation to make a subtle Christological point. The act of worship or prostration before another is a sign of submission, expressing recognition of the status of the other as worthy of honor. Presumably the Christians who are in view had had contacts with a synagogue which had been felt by them to be dishonoring. Here the risen Christ is depicted promising to the church that their opponents will eventually show them honor and acknowledge that they were right.

After overcoming through death and showing himself worthy to open the scroll, the Lamb is said to stand in the midst of the throne, and to receive worship in the form of prostration and song (5:6-14). The most striking point in this passage for our purposes is probably the mention of the elders holding not only harps, but also bowls of incense "which are the prayers of the saints." The prayers/incense mentioned here, while clearly part of the paraphernalia of worship employed in the Lamb's presence, are nowhere said to be offered directly to the Lamb. It is thus possible that the author assumed such prayers to be either offered to God in thanksgiving for Christ, or offered to God through Christ, just as the elders appear to be mediators of the prayers in bringing and
presenting them before God and the Lamb. The description in 8:3-4 of an angel offering these prayers/incense before God, with no mention of the Lamb, can be regarded as confirming this reading. It is often suggested that the heavenly worship that is described in Revelation is patterned on the worship services of the early Christian communities. If this is true, then the description of the prayers of the saints as incense may indicate a conviction that the worship of the Christian churches in some way replaces the cultus of the Jerusalem temple. The author could presumably also be making the same point over against the worship in the synagogues, as some of the hymns in Revelation bear striking resemblance to those used in the synagogue liturgy in later times. This may, however, simply be due to the fact that the worship of the Christian churches is indebted to Jewish models, without any further polemical interest intended.

The inclusion of God's appointed representative alongside God as recipient of praise is noteworthy, but it is neither unique nor without precedent. Such a development was foreseen to a certain extent, and was perhaps even to be expected as a response to the appearance of God's agent in the realization of his eschatological salvation. Thus far we have observed no acts of worship that were normally reserved for God alone being unambiguously transferred to the Lamb. None of the features we have considered in this study appear inappropriate within the boundaries of early Jewish monotheism as attested in the extant literature from this period. And so the depiction of Christ in the Book of Revelation represents a development within the context of Jewish monotheism rather than a development away from Jewish devotion to only one God.

We must now turn to two additional examples of worship in the Book of Revelation, the illegitimate worship of the beast and of an angelic figure. These negative examples are foils which are presumably intended to bring out the significance of that worship which the author regards as legitimate. We may begin with the worship of the beast, which presumably has in view the situation that arose wherein Christians were put under great pressure to offer sacrifice to the emperor and/ or pagan gods (cf. 12:8,15-17). This worship is one reason for the divine judgment that comes upon the empire and upon humankind, as is described later in Revelation. While the enigmatic character of some of the riddles associated with this worship may hinder any attempt to offer a detailed interpretation, what is quite unambiguously clear is that the heavenly worship of God and the Lamb is evaluated positively while the earthly worship of the beast is a dark counterfoil thereto. The contrast is cemented further from the outset. This is an indication that the author finds the worship of the beast to be manifestly in opposition to God's worship and no other cults or things.

The worship of the beast may also be seen as typical of the attitude towards the organization of the Roman Empire (i.e., the equivalent of the Jerusalem temple cult) that is taken by the Revelation author and his community. When the emperors assumed the divinity of their ancestors, the empire was considered to be the continuation of the ancient Jewish nation. This was seen as a powerful example of humanism extending over the whole of the Roman world and its dynastic rule. Though there are some very specific references to the Roman emperor in the Revelation text, and though the author may be less than enthusiastic about the power and influence of the empire, the latter is not explicitly cast as evil in the early chapters of the book. Indeed, the author appears to take the emperor and the political system as a whole into account when speaking of worship and the state of the world. Thus in the worship of the beast, which appears to be associated with the Roman emperor, the two themes of the state and religion are closely intertwined. Which is the more important for the author?
is described in 8:3–4 of Revelation and is certainly intentional. Of particular interest is the way this evidence from Revelation suggests that the worship of Christ was not patterned on non-Jewish models. On the contrary, in this very Jewish work, one finds an outright rejection of the Greco-Roman cultus side by side with an incorporation of Jesus into the heavenly worship (which presumably in turn reflects his incorporation into the earthly worship of the Christian Church). This confirms (if there was ever any doubt) that the worship of the Lamb is not added alongside the worship of Israel's only God to form a sort of Christian pantheon. Rather, he is allowed to share God's throne, titles, and other prerogatives in a manner familiar from other Jewish literature that uses the agency model to attribute such things to other figures in a similar way.

The depiction of the worship of the beast as blasphemous also shows the strength of Jewish and Christian sensibilities as regards the cultic (i.e., sacrificial) worship of another figure. Persecutions on the part of the Roman authorities against Christians in the centuries that followed regularly focused on worship of this sort, and it was here that the martyrs took their stand. No other god or figure was to receive this worship. This sensibility continued long after there ceased to be a sacrificial cult offered to their own God in the Jerusalem temple. This provides further confirmation that Hurtado, Bauckham, and others are right to regard worship as the (or at least the most important) “dividing line” that defined Jewish monotheism in this period. However, it seems to have been specifically the issue of sacrificial worship, which suggests that other types of “worship” will not have functioned to make a Christological point about the divinity of Christ. As the death of Christ was regarded as the sacrificial worship par excellence that was offered to God, there was no real way that he could be portrayed as both the one who offers such sacrificial worship, and at the same time the recipient thereof. Thus while important in understanding monotheism in this period, worship is unlikely to provide the key to unraveling the development of early Christology into later trinitarianism. It must also be emphasized that early Jewish sensibilities regarding worship in the broader sense appear to have depended to a large extent on the question of whom one honored in this way. To show reverence and obeisance before God's agent of salvation could often be appropriate; to show the same reverence to a pagan king who did not honor God or to a god other than the one true God was unacceptable and blasphemous.

What, then, of the worship offered to and rejected by the angelic figure? In two verses, 19:10 and 22:9, we find the seer prostrating himself before the angel to worship him. This feature of the Book of Revelation
has been the subject of a significant amount of scholarly attention in recent times.²⁷ It is frequently thought that the author's coupling of this motif with his portrait of the worship of Jesus makes a Christological point, namely, that Jesus is now placed on the divine side of the dividing line between God and creation, so that he receives the worship that was previously reserved only for God himself. In view of the evidence surveyed, this appears to be an over-interpretation of the evidence. The worship/prostration offered to Jesus was not without parallel within Judaism, and most Jews are unlikely to have found it objectionable in and of itself.²⁸ What, then, is the meaning of the angelic refusal of worship? If such prostration before another figure was often acceptable and is permitted in Revelation itself as an appropriate action toward Christians (3:9), then the point is presumably not about worship per se but relates specifically to the significance of the worship of an angelic figure by a human being.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to ask whether there is any significance in the fact that the angelic refusal of worship is repeated, rather than representing an emphasis through repetition on this particular worship-related point, the repetition is part of a larger structural and linguistic parallelism between two passages, Revelation 17:1–19:10 and 21:9–22:9, as Aune has clearly demonstrated.²⁹ The repetition of this particular element may therefore be little more than a way for the author to draw attention to the parallel between these two passages, rather than being intended to draw attention to the angelic refusal of worship for its own sake.

In the literature of this period, there are a number of places where the view is expressed that angels and similar heavenly figures are antagonistic to humans. Here we must avoid seeking to relate Revelation to significantly later writings, such as the rabbinic literature and the Life of Adam and Eve. Although these works provide some of the most interesting parallels and points of comparison, they are too distant temporally from the time when Revelation was written to be legitimate to appeal to them in our search for knowledge of the background against which Revelation was written.³⁰ Nevertheless, the idea of some form of angelic antagonism toward humans is attested clearly in the New Testament (including but not limited to the Book of Revelation itself) and the Dead Sea Scrolls.³¹ There is thus no need to depend on or appeal to the evidence of later works, which present these ideas in a much more elaborate form and presumably represent further developments along the same trajectory as the Book of Revelation.
In the Gnostic and mystical writings of subsequent centuries, the antagonism of celestial forces usually comes to expression when one seeks to ascend past the heavenly powers. By way of contrast, as Aune has rightly noted, the cosmology of a multistoried heaven that is typical of such ascent traditions is entirely absent from Revelation. There are no references to multiple heavens, nor to anything that would indicate that the existence of such is presupposed. Nevertheless, as in works that presuppose the Ptolemaic cosmology, Revelation regards heaven not as the dwelling place of God and his allies alone, but also of antagonistic celestial powers. Thus it is that Satan is eventually “cast down to the earth” after having been involved in warfare in heaven (cf. Revelation 12:7–13). The author appears to share the apocalyptic view that the struggles of the people of God on earth are parallels to heavenly struggles that are taking place. The role of angels in the Book of Revelation cannot be underestimated. They serve throughout as those who inflict God's judgment upon the earth, and beginning with chapter 12 (although hints had already been given in 2:9, 13, 24; 3:9, with their references to Satan) it becomes increasingly clear that the struggle of the church is not just between Christians and earthly authorities but has a spiritual, celestial dimension as well. In this context, the relationship between humans and angels would have been important. In Revelation, we find the following uses of worship, and it will soon become apparent how these may relate to the issue of the relationship between angels and humankind:

1. Christians will be worshipped by their human opponents (13:9).
2. God and the Lamb are worshipped by humans and angels (chaps. 4–5).
3. Disobedient humans worship the beast and/or its image (13:8, 15).
4. Humans like John should not worship angels because they are their fellow servants of God (19:10, 22:9).

The meaning of the angelic refusal of worship probably has little to do with distinguishing Christ from angels or with making a subtle point concerning monotheism and Christology. Rather, the refusal of worship has to do with the point the angel himself is presented as making: Angels are fellow servants of God together with Christians, and thus Christians are to regard themselves as equal to them. In the context of persecution in which the book was written, the whole world appeared to be against the Christians, and they believed themselves to be the targets of an onslaught by malevolent heavenly beings. In this context,
the emphasis placed on the dignity and equality of humans in God's creation presumably would have offered considerable encouragement. Rather than having to live in subjection to the whims and attacks of antagonistic celestial forces, Christians were encouraged to believe that God and Christ are rulers over the creation. This is a point that is made in other early Christian literature as well, in particular Colossians. Here in Revelation it is further emphasized that humans are not to be considered inferior to angels. The worship offered to Christ also would have reinforced this point: In heaven, seated on the throne, a throne which Christians who overcome will share, the recipient of the worship of all creation (both human and angelic) is a human being, Jesus Christ. This is presumably one of the key points that the author wished to make through his multifaceted use of a multiplicity of worship-related images in Revelation. These points were certainly new and distinctive emphases of Christianity. Their distinctive claims were made, however, in a way that did not depart in any obvious or significant way from the Jewish understanding of and devotion to one God alone.

In the next chapter, we shall jump ahead several centuries from the New Testament age to the rabbinic literature in an attempt to determine when the controversy between Jews and Christians over monotheism does in fact begin. But before proceeding, it is worth noting that even in the second century, when Justin Martyr (to take one convenient example) clearly regarded Jesus as the incarnation of the preexistent, personal Logos, he does not argue against Jewish accusations that he (and others like him) had denied or abandoned monotheism. In his Dialogue with Trypho the Jew, he argues whether Jesus was the Messiah, whether the Messiah would be a preexistent figure, and whether the preexistent Logos would become a human being and suffer, but the idea that there is such a Logos is not in and of itself controversial. And so it seems that the agreement between Jews and Christians over monotheism lasted beyond the New Testament era. How far beyond? That is the question we address in the next chapter.