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Christology and Monotheistic Scriptures in an Oral Context

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ABSTRACT

While recent studies of the New Testament have found the methods of intertextuality and orality studies to be fruitful approaches, there has been insufficient interplay between the two. This article explores the capacity of hearers of texts to pick up on echoes of familiar texts, stories, and songs. Using as an example Paul's interpretation of Scripture in connection with the topics of monotheism and Christology, the article suggests that, in the absence of explicit and emphatic statements of the difference or distinctiveness of his views, Paul's allusions to key monotheistic texts would have been understood to indicate Paul's agreement with the axiom of Jewish monotheism, the Shema.

On Hearing (Rather Than Reading) Intertextual Echoes:
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Whether the subject is the literary dependence of one Gospel upon another or the interpretation of Israel's Scriptures by New Testament authors, intertextuality in all its forms and nuances is an understandably popular – and unsurprisingly fruitful - approach to New Testament studies. Yet in considering literary relationships it is important to find ways to do justice to the *primarily oral context* in which early Christians wrote the works now found in the New Testament, works which often allude to the Jewish Scriptures. While this factor is relatively neglected in studies of intertextuality, some might say that it is no oversight if an approach which focuses on the interplay of *texts* sets to one side the topic of *orality*.

Yet while it was not at all a *purely* oral culture, the contexts of the New Testament authors were characterized by a high degree of residual orality. Literacy estimates vary – presumably in large part because of the wide range of *degrees* of literacy in that time period (cf. Bar-Ilan 1992). It seems certain, however, that the majority of people were not fully literate, and we have good reason to believe that Paul's letters, as well as other early Christian literature, would have been *heard read aloud* by most who were exposed to them, rather than *actually read* with their own eyes (Keck 18, citing 1 Thess 5:27 and Philemon 2; outside the Pauline corpus Revelation 1:3 is perhaps the clearest example of this practice). It is the relevance of this to the study of intertextual echoes in early Christian literature that this article will explore.

Intertextuality is an approach embraced in different ways by both structuralists and poststructuralists, although the term is also used in a more general sense, without such theoretical underpinnings, by many of those working on "the New Testament's use of the Old." And so it is perhaps worth noting that oral utterances, in theory at least, potentially fit better within a structuralist framework of interpretation than do texts. By its very nature ephemeral, a verbal utterance is for that very reason clearly embedded in a place and time, a conversation or dialogue, a historical setting and the concreteness of human communication, in a way that, again in theory at least, might be susceptible to a description in terms of synchronic exploration of symbols and vocabulary, and their meaning in a specific time and place (Ong 101-102). It is the *textualization* of thoughts and utterances that allows them to float through history, cut free of the specificity of their cultural and linguistic moorings, and be subjected to varied interpretations by individuals and groups that can never hope to stand in or fully recover the situation of the earliest readers. And so both the structuralist perspective on communication, and the poststructualist critique thereof, have relevance to our endeavor to interpret the New Testament. The cultural, historical and linguistic embeddedness of the New Testament authors' thought and writing is closely connected to their intertextuality in the narrow sense, and may indeed be described as their "intertextuality" in the broader sense that cultural "scripts" echoed therein may also be construed as "texts" (Hays 1989: 15). Yet New Testament texts also reflect and allude to *interpretations* of texts that we can only surmise about today. Moreover, these New Testament writings have been discussed and commented on to such an extent that we find it a challenge to read them other than through the lens of the *intertexts* or *hypertexts* of subsequent interpreters.

Let us turn our attention to what we know about the primarily oral context of early Christian literature, and then consider the relevance of this context to intertextuality, focusing on examples of monotheistic texts quoted in Pauline Christological passages. What needs to be remembered, it bears repeating, is that very few early Christians would have *read* Paul's letters. Most who encountered the words Paul authored would have encountered them when they were *read aloud*. This adds an additional facet to Paul's intertextual echoes. The audience was hearing echoes of texts which some of them might have remembered, and those texts being echoed they likewise would have *heard* rather than *read*. Paul likewise would rarely have had the texts he quoted or alluded to open before him, and so would have quoted them from memory. Perception of an echo of Scripture in one of Paul's letters would have had to have been possible at an auditory level if it were to be noticed at all. Memory was a factor on both ends of the process of communication.

It is interesting to consider the practicalities of making and perceiving echoes. If I were to say that in the field of intertextuality payback takes the form of "an ear for an ear," or "a quote for a quote," most who heard me would probably detect an allusion to the famous *lex talionis* principle, "an eye for an eye." What is interesting is that this allusion contains as identical wording only two indefinite articles and the preposition "for," an overlap in vocabulary that would not normally be considered adequate grounds for identification of an allusion (or for the making of a pun, for that matter). But in this case, the fact that the phrase "an eye for an eye" is so well known makes it possible to echo it *structurally* without extensive reproduction of *vocabulary,* and still have the echo perceived (cf. Hays 2005: 35-36).

Yet even as this familiarity makes an echo so easy to detect, it also makes it less likely that anyone would relate the allusion to a *specific text*, whether from the Code of Hammurabi or from Exodus, Leviticus or Deuteronomy. There is often a converse relationship between familiarity and contextual specificity of a saying or text. As it is widely repeated and takes on proverbial status, a saying's familiarity increases (and thus so does the chance of an allusion to it being noticed). But its connection to a specific textual context decreases at the same time. Ironically, this may perhaps suggest that the more likely Paul's hearers may have been to pick up on an echo, the less likely they would have been to relate it to the literary context from which it originally stemmed.

If the oral context of early Christian intertextuality is often ignored, so too is the fact that oral communication cannot be subjected to close, line-by-line analysis in the way a written text can. Interestingly, Biblical scholars ought to be particularly aware of this. We regularly *listen to* papers being *read*, but cannot interact with them in detail unless we either frantically jot down notes, or e-mail the presenter asking for a copy of the paper. Otherwise, the *gist* is what remains with us, and perhaps a pithy saying or two. Beyond that, what is perhaps most likely to be remembered is an allusion to or quotation of something familiar that someone else has said or written. And so too, for at least some of those hearing Paul's letters read aloud, the most easily remembered content may have been the quotations from Scripture, and perhaps quotations of hymns or creedal formulae to the extent that these had been encountered previously. And so, in an oral setting, it would not have been the case that Paul would have employed Scripture merely as *embellishment* or *ornamentation* to his argument. It is rather more likely that Paul would have been using the familiar quotations from Scripture as "pegs"

upon which to hang his own points and help them to be remembered. And thus we must ask whether it is likely that Paul would have consciously "tampered with" or otherwise risked undermining the pegs that were, from the perspective of a listening audience, the most secure and most memorable parts of his letters. As Walter Ong has put it, "Once a formulary expression has crystallized, it had best be kept intact. Without a writing system, breaking up thought – that is, analysis – is a high-risk procedure" (39).

We may now turn our attention to some specific examples, chosen from among instances where Paul alludes to monotheistic passages from the Jewish Scriptures in Christological contexts. One question we need to ask ourselves is whether Paul is likely to have made his most substantial points about the nature of Jesus by quoting or alluding to key texts that were slogans of Jewish monotheism, while at the same time supposedly making subtle but significant additions or insertions so as to (in the words of N. T. Wright) "split the Shema" or (in the terminology of Richard Bauckham) "include Jesus within the divine identity." Even in written communication, one can often be misunderstood if one uses a term or refers to a story, and yet one's understanding of that term or story is different than the generally accepted one. This obviously doesn't mean that you *can't* disagree about the meaning of something generally accepted. But if one's understanding is significantly different from the prevailing viewpoint, then one must *explicitly argue* for one's understanding, or else risk misunderstanding. We ought to be wary therefore of suggestions that Paul introduced highly innovative Christological developments solely or primarily by the subtle phrasing of passages in which he alludes to authoritative texts, texts that would be assumed to be making a different point unless Paul explicitly said otherwise.

Modern scholarship on New Testament intertextuality considers Paul to have written his letters expecting hearers thereof to detect his Scriptural allusions and conjure up echoes of the wider context in which they were found in Scripture. Isaiah 45:23, which is alluded to in Philippians 2:10-11, is preceded in that chapter alone by some *five affirmations that Yahweh alone is God, and there is no other*. That which was *repeated* in Isaiah 45 would presumably have been remembered best, and associated with any specific phrase or verse quoted from the chapter. If Paul were not merely assuming this affirmation of what we today would call "monotheism," but were modifying it, *even in a way that could be argued not to be inconsistent with that monotheism*, could he really have done so in passing and have expected to be understood? Since Paul did not go on to clarify his meaning as being other than the "standard interpretation" within Judaism, are we not justified in assuming that his allusion to the language of Isaiah 45:23 presupposed and was consonant with the meaning of that text as generally understood in Paul's time? Those who believe Paul was making a subtle yet extremely significant Christological and theological point *only* through his echo of Isaiah 45:23 are perhaps treating his letter as though its meaning were to be found with the help of a pocket Bible and footnotes or a concordance. It is perhaps better to take seriously the aural medium whereby the Philippians would have encountered Paul's words, and attribute to the letter's author a meaning his earliest *hearers* could have realistically been expected to perceive.

Of course, it may be that Paul as a reader of Isaiah overestimated those who heard his letters. We find multiple quotations of and allusions to this part of Isaiah particularly in Romans, but also in Galatians, the Corinthian correspondence and elsewhere. Isaiah 45:23 itself is quoted in Romans 14:11. We must therefore either presume Paul's deep familiarity with this

part of the Book of Isaiah, or that he regularly had it open before him when writing letters. The latter is the less likely of the two possibilities, given the logistics of ancient reading and composition. And so it is indeed possible that Paul made the (admittedly common) authorial blunder of overestimating the clarity of his meaning. Presumably all those who have become very familiar with a subject have, at one point or another, presumed more knowledge or greater familiarity on the part of our hearers than turned out to be present. Nevertheless, given that the language of Isaiah 45:23 is not found widely quoted or echoed in Second Temple Jewish sources, Paul ought to have been aware that an allusion to it might not be perceived by many hearers of his letter.

Paul's ability as a capable communicator is indicated by his use of quotation formulas (such as "As it is written") to introduce many Scriptural quotations. Yet such signposts are absent from two Christological passages that have become interpretative cruxes: 1 Corinthians 8:6 and Philippians 2:10-11. And so we need to pay close attention to other passages in Paul's letters where the same texts come into focus more explicitly. Of course, when we look at one Pauline passage to elucidate another, this too is a form of "intertextuality." As it turns out, the questions we've been raising about Paul's meaning become all the more pointed when we compare Paul's use of classic monotheistic texts in those passages containing explicit citations, with other places where Paul alludes more subtly to the same texts.

Consider for instance Romans 14, where Paul explicitly quotes the same text, Isaiah 45:23, that is in the background in Philippians 2:10-11. Even though we ought not to presume that early hearers of either of Paul's letters would be familiar with the other, nevertheless it is

usually considered appropriate to allow one text by an author to inform our understanding of another text by the same author. In Romans 14, Paul gives no indication that he is using the Isaianic language to make a point that involves rethinking or reinterpreting Jewish monotheistic allegiance as understood in his time. Ought we to envisage him using echoes of the same text to make a very different point in another letter? It may be that even scholars have a tendency to isolate certain Christological passages in which the intertextual echoes are less prominently highlighted, while ignoring the evidence provided in passages where Paul quoted and interpreted the same texts more explicitly.

Paul's understanding of Isaiah 45:23 in Romans 14:11 shows no evidence of any reinterpretation of monotheism, Christological or otherwise. He writes,

> For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. For it is written: " 'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bow to me; and every tongue will confess to God.' " So then, each of us will give an account of themselves to God.

Interestingly, the quotation (almost verbatim from the Septuagint) has a characteristic typical of texts favored by those referred to in rabbinic texts as heretically claiming "there are two powers in heaven." This group regularly made much of texts in which there is one who speaks as Lord or God while also referring to "Lord" or "God" in the third person (as did Christians from the second century onward). And yet we have no evidence of Isaiah 45:23 being utilized by those of a "two powers" viewpoint. Perhaps this was precisely because so much of Isaiah 45 seemed to affirm a rigorous understanding of monotheism. Yet even if we were to suggest that Paul's audience might have been prepared to make a distinction between "God" and "Lord," it

is noteworthy that in Romans 14:11 we would have to understand *the Father* to be the "Lord" who speaks about *God* in the third person, the reverse of the terminology Paul uses in Philippians and 1 Corinthians. It therefore seems best to conclude that the variation between "God" and "Lord" in the quotation would *not* have been understood to be distinguishing between two figures, much less two figures who were both "intrinsic to the divine identity."

The absence from Paul's letters of any attempt to *emphasize* a distinctive Christian reconfiguration of Jewish monotheism, and the lack of any attempt to defend such an innovation against foreseen objections, is the proverbial dog that did not bark (McGrath 47, 54, 68, 80; Dunn 2010: 113-116). Paul's use of monotheistic Scriptures, in the absence of explicit clarifications or arguments to the contrary, would have been understood to reinforce Paul's message as being thoroughly in accordance with Jewish monotheism as understood in his time.

Raising this aspect of Paul's quotations and allusions brings our discussion back to intertextuality in its broader sense. Historical-critical interpretation has sometimes sought a meaning that could have been intended by an author, but at least pursues a meaning that could have been comprehended by the earliest readers and hearers. Yet it is often difficult for interpreters in the present to imagine themselves back into a time before the later creeds articulated the full-fledged Christian doctrine of God as Triune and of Jesus as God incarnate, a time before even the debates about various forms of monarchianism had occurred. Debates about the meaning of the New Testament Christological passages raged for centuries (and in some circles continue down to the present day). This fact suggests one thing very clearly, namely that, in the context of the questions being asked in the second, third and fourth

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centuries, the meaning of these passages was contested and debated, rather than being considered unambiguous. Although space prohibits us from exploring this here, a survey of the history of interpretation of these various intertexts is crucial information if we wish to approximate the earliest meaning of Paul's Christological statements. The debates that ensue subsequently often provide important evidence about what questions were not felt to be explicitly answered in a given piece of literature.

Predominantly oral societies are known to deal in *stereotypes* to an extent that we consider inappropriate today. Generalizations are inevitable and quite possibly indispensible when memory is the only grounds for interaction with others. The language of the Shema, far from being thought of as a text which could readily be subjected to a range of interpretations, is perhaps better thought of as a *slogan*, emphasizing a stereotypically Jewish point about allegiance to and belief in one God alone, as a key element distinctive of Jewish identity vis-à-vis other peoples. The Shema was recited in Jewish communities and synagogues around the known world. Could Paul have subtly reworked the Shema and expected his slight variations to be perceived amidst the recitations in unison, all presupposing it to mean something that Paul, allegedly, was in one sense affirming but in another modifying or challenging (cf. Hays 2005: 34-37)?

The unlikelihood of Paul's distinctive meaning being perceived in such a scenario is compounded when we ask the question in terms of orality. Take the language found in 1 Corinthians 8:4-6:

> We know that an idol is nothing in the world and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things and us to him; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and us through him.

To use a phrase popular in recent studies, could someone have *heard* that Paul "split the Shema" in this passage? Is the alleged "splitting" of the Shema *audibly distinguishable* from an *addition alongside* the Shema of a divinely appointed ruler and mediator? Would not most hearers have assumed that an allusion to the Shema *affirms* stereotypically Jewish monotheism rather than modifies it? Was this not especially true when we add into our consideration the fact that Paul was quoting this stereotyped slogan in a stereotypical context, namely that of polemic against idols (see Hays 2005: 36 n.23)? Also relevant is the stereotypical use of the shortened slogan "one God" in contexts that supplemented it with a corollary such as "one people" or "one temple." Examples include Josephus' statement in *Against Apion* 2.193 §24, "There ought also to be but one temple for one God," and 1 Timothy 2:5 which says "there is one God and one mediator between God and human beings, the human being Christ Jesus" (see further McGrath 41-43). Given such precedent for setting a correlated "one" *alongside* rather than *within* the affirmation of "one God," those who had heard such formulas before would probably have perceived Paul's language in 1 Corinthians 8 to be in the same vein when it was read aloud to them.

Walter Ong has highlighted the way that visual analysis allows for division and distinction, while hearing is inherently unifying, even at the most basic level that multiple sounds combine in a single auditory experience (Ong 72-74). If one heard 1 Corinthians 8:6 read aloud not on its own, but as part of the whole letter, what would a hearer be likely to remember and take away with them by the time the end of the letter was reached? Presumably the key points would include that there is "no God but one" and that "an idol is nothing." Paul might be remembered to have echoed the Shema and to have contrasted the "many so-called gods and lords" of the prevailing culture with allegiance to one God and one Lord. This exclusive allegiance was presumably already typical of his audience - an audience that he never even provides with a label, such as "Christian," so as to distinguish their identity sharply from that of others. Can we assume Paul had a distinctive reinterpretation of the Shema, a central affirmation of the Jewish faith, when Paul does not even appear to have used a *label* to set this movement apart from other forms of Judaism? It is rather instructive that Paul never suggests that anything to do with the oneness of God separates those to whom he writes from other Jews, but only that it separates them from other Gentiles in typically Jewish fashion.

We must add to the aforementioned considerations yet one more way in which the aural encounter with Paul's letter read aloud would have worked against hearers concluding that Paul had "split the Shema" or in some other way created a distinctive "Christological monotheism." It is not clear that those who read Paul's letters to churches would have made long pauses to allow for material to be digested before continuing. It would be some time before Paul's letters would be treated as Scripture, with the consequent regular reading of small excerpts on repeated occasions. A hearer of Paul's letter that we call *1 Corinthians*, who

thought they perceived Paul doing something unusual with the Shema around the middle of the letter, might have had that perception challenged closer to the end of the letter. Material closer to the end could have had a potentially overpowering influence on the understanding of the letter which hearers took away with them. While introductions are likewise crucial, particularly in an oral context, the limits of human memory can at times counterbalance the tone-setting of the beginning with the freshness in the mind of the end. I mention these considerations because in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul depicts the relationship between the Messiah and God in a classic "theocratic" fashion: God is not subjected to Christ, but subjects all things *but himself* to Christ; and in the end, the Son will hand all things over to the Father so that God may be all in all (see further Kreitzer 157-164; Dunn 2010: 110-112).

For the most part, discussions of Paul's Christology, like discussions of the Christologies of other New Testament authors and documents, depend to a large extent on what we consider it likely that Paul and his hearers and readers could be *assumed to already know*, to be familiar with, and to *already believe* and *presuppose*. Orality, memory and intertextuality are key components here as well. I've already noted that the widespread knowledge of the Shema in Paul's time was a loud, unified voice, and that Paul would have needed to shout vociferously were he disagreeing with that dominant voice in some significant way. Yet he does not do so. It seems advisable therefore to assume that Paul's earliest hearers would have heard him as *joining in unison with those voices*, perhaps adding a distinctive descant about the Anointed One, but not dissonantly singing a different note or even noticeably out of tune. Paul would have seemed to be building on that already-established foundation rather than challenging it.

This is not to say that Paul's Christological formulations did not use Scripture in creative ways, in ways that would eventually lead the Christian tradition to rethink monotheism and his letters as well. But we must also consider how the prevailing voices and echoes to which *we* have been exposed may represent an important difference between us and Paul's earliest audience. In our time, many of us have heard the Shema far less frequently than the *Nicene Creed*. This cannot but be an influence, even on scholarly interpreters who make an effort to avoid reading our assumptions and contemporary influences into the texts we study. There is no doubt that it is possible to read Paul's affirmations in the framework of a faith tradition that upholds the creeds, as has been done now for more than a millennium and a half. But historical study seeks to hear Paul's voice not as an expression of a Nicene orthodoxy that had not been defined as such in his time, but as a specific voice of his own time in an earlier period (Dunn 2009: 5). Paul's journey may well have been on the same road that eventually led to Nicaea and Chalcedon, but the debates and conflicts of the intervening centuries suggest that the road from Paul to Nicaea was often uphill and frequently rocky, and by no means an instance of a casual linear stroll through flat, familiar terrain.

Be that as it may, whether we are seeking to read Paul in the context of his own historical setting and the Judaism of his time, or within a faith tradition that recites the creeds weekly and Paul's Christological statements less frequently, we are all as interpreters entangled in a reality that can rightly be categorized as *intertextual*. And while the aim of this article has been to highlight the ways in which orality is a neglected component in our interpretation of Paul's Scriptural allusions in his ancient context, it is often echoes of things *we* today have heard recited, and not just the experience of frequently reading and rereading Paul's writings

on numerous occasions, that are responsible for the varied interpretations that we give to these Pauline texts today.

And so in concluding it is important to stress that we will not manage to declare "victory" for this or that interpretation of Paul's Christology, merely by bringing the reading aloud of Paul's letters by and to their earliest interpreters more centrally into the discussion. Nevertheless, it does seem that a consideration of the nature and practicalities of oral communication may make some meanings more likely to have been perceived by Paul's audience than others. In this case, it seems overwhelmingly probable that Paul echoes the Shema and other monotheistic passages so as to support his monotheism, rather than to redefine it or transform it into something radically new.

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