

What does Romans 9:5 *really* say?

Does it call Jesus “God”?

by

Dr Trevor R Allin

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Bible translations referred to:

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- NWT (1961) “New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures”, Copyright © 1961, 1984 by the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania [the Jehovah’s Witness publishers]
- NWT (2013) “New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures”, Revised edition, Copyright © 2013 by the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania [the Jehovah’s Witness publishers]
- KIT “Kingdom Interlinear Translation” produced by the Jehovah’s Witnesses, Brooklyn, New York: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc., 1969.

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About the Author

Dr Trevor R Allin graduated from the University of Leeds with a 1st Class Honours degree in Phonetics, French, Spanish and Philosophy and History of Religion. Following studies in linguistics, he undertook original research on a South American indigenous language, for which purpose he lived within the indigenous community and studied the language with native speakers over a period of more than a year. The University of St Andrews subsequently awarded him a Ph.D. for his thesis “A Grammar of Resígaro”.

For many years he taught a range of languages up to and including “Advanced” level standard in state schools in England and in Germany, and in state-recognised schools in Scotland and Spain. He also worked full time over a period of many years supporting and inspecting qualified Modern Language teachers and giving them professional development training. Teaching and examination materials written by him for French, German and Spanish at a wide range of levels, up to and including “A” Level, have been published by mainstream U.K. educational publishers and examination boards, for whom he has written and marked examination question papers.

He is also the published translator of books from Spanish and German into English and is the author of “Curso de Griego Bíblico: Los elementos del Griego del N.T.”¹, the Spanish edition of the leading textbook on New Testament Greek, Jeremy Duff’s “The Elements of New Testament Greek”.² He has taught New Testament (Koiné) Greek to Spanish-speaking adult students in Spain and has delivered lectures in various places in Spain on the important early Greek manuscript of the Bible, Codex Sinaiticus.

¹ CLIE, 2019 See <https://www.clie.es/curso-de-griego-biblico>

² Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005

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Introduction

In a passage that lists some of the attributes and advantages of the Jewish people, the Apostle Paul writes,

“Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen.”
(Romans 9:5, NIV, 1984)

The 2011 revision of the NIV, Anglicised edition, renders this verse as follows:

“Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all, for ever praised! Amen.”
(Romans 9:5 NIV, Anglicised edition)

So the 2011 revision puts “the Messiah” where the earlier edition had “Christ” and it divides the word “forever” into two words: “for ever”. Apart from this, no changes are introduced.

The English Standard Version text of 2016 gives the following translation:

“To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.”

All of these – and many other translations – are clear that this passage describes Christ as “God”.

This presents a problem for those groups who do not believe that Christ is God but who nevertheless claim to base their teachings on the Bible. For them, various options are possible. Principally they might:

1. Change their beliefs to match what the Bible says;
2. Change the Biblical text to match what *they* say.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses have done what they always do with Biblical texts that show that their teachings are wrong: they have decided to change the Biblical text. They say that other translations have mistranslated or misunderstood the text, and that their version, the “New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures”, is the only correct one. Their original 1961 version renders this verse as follows:

“to whom the forefathers belong and from whom Christ [sprang] according to the flesh: God, who is over all, [be] blessed forever. Amen.”

By inserting a colon before the word “God”, they tried to separate the last phrase of the verse from the rest of the sentence. They also, crucially, added the word “be” to the next phrase. What is more, by changing the order of the words, their version says that it is God who is over all, whereas the Greek text indisputably says that it is Christ who is over all – a Biblical statement that they reject because it conflicts with their teachings.

In their 1961 version they show the words that they have added by putting them in square brackets: []. They said that they had “needed to add” these words, supposedly “in order to convey the meaning”, in spite of the fact that they were not in the original text.

Even though they had changed so many parts of this verse, they became dissatisfied with this version, as when the word “be” that they had added was removed, the verse could still be seen to be stating that Christ is God, so in their 2013 revision they changed the text again, to remove the possibility that readers might think that this passage says that Christ is God.

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Their new edition says this:

“To whom the forefathers belong, and from them the Christ descended according to the flesh. God, who is over all, be praised forever. Amen.”

We note that in their 2013 edition they have removed all such brackets, in order to hide the fact that they have here added a word that totally changes the meaning. They have also changed the punctuation in order to break the clear grammatical structural link between the last two phrases of the verse and the words that precede them. They thus separate even further the final phrases from the previous one that was talking about Christ.

So in 2013 they created two separate sentences where previously they had one.

Their new independent sentence at the end of the verse actually has a complex structure, with a subordinate clause, “who is over all”, which is introduced by the relative pronoun “who”, which – by totally changing the word order – they make apply to the word “God”, whereas in the Greek it can only refer back to the previous noun, “Christ”.

Essentially they are saying that the Apostle Paul was writing about Christ, but at this point at the end of verse 5 he stopped writing about Christ and instead wrote something about God the father, and that the two themes are not related.

They also continue to mistranslate the text by changing the word order so that their version hides the fact that the Greek text unambiguously and undeniably says that it is Christ who is over all. Again, the phrase “who is over all” is moved from the previous clause, where it refers to Christ, and is placed in the new sentence that they have created.

In order to understand whether or not they are right, we need to consider eight points:

- the context
- the structure and punctuation
- the significance
- the evidence of the oldest and most authoritative Greek manuscripts
- the conclusions of experts as to the exact content of the original text of Romans 9:5
- what the Greek text itself says
- the Kingdom Interlinear Translation produced by the Jehovah’s Witnesses
- the stability of the Greek text

Part 1: The Context

Romans 9:5 does not stand in isolation and it must not be read – nor translated! – in isolation. The Apostle Paul starts this section on the relationship between Christ and the Jewish people in Romans chapter 9 verse 1 and continues developing the same theme throughout the whole of chapter 9, the whole of chapter 10 and very nearly the whole of chapter 11, up to verse 32, inclusive.

In fact, there were no chapter divisions – or verse numbers! – in the original text, so this is one long exposition of the relationship between Christ and the Jewish people and an analysis of why the majority of the Jewish people had rejected Christ.

According to the Jehovah’s Witnesses, while Paul was working through this complex theme, he temporarily abandoned the exposition about Christ and the Jews, and wrote a sentence about God being blessed, then went back to his theme in what for us is the next verse.

The kindest evaluation that we can make of this claim made by the Jehovah's Witnesses is that it is highly improbable. If the Jehovah's Witnesses are right, then Paul's statement about God being over all and blessed is out of place. Of course, if the passage means what the other translations that we have quoted state, then it is not out of place: in an exposition about who Christ is, the Apostle Paul says he is "over all" and calls him "God".

Part 2: The Structure and Punctuation

The earliest manuscripts of the New Testament generally have little punctuation, as was normal with Greek writing at the time and indeed most of any text is also written without spaces between the words. However, the meaning of texts is not dependent on punctuation but on the structure of the sentences, clauses and phrases.

In the case of Romans 9:5, it is essential to understand the function of a part of speech known as a "relative pronoun". As explained in my article on 1 Timothy 3:16³, a relative pronoun fulfils two functions:

- it is the subject or object of a verb or preposition;
- it refers back to a subject that precedes it.

Relative pronouns join the clause that they introduce to an earlier clause in the same sentence, and the series of relative pronouns in Romans 9:4-5 join all the clauses structurally into one sentence.

The Greek sentence starts in verse three and it states a series of facts about the Jewish people and Christ, joined together into one sentence by five relative pronouns: "who" (οἷτινέξ), "of whom" (ὅν), "of whom" (ὅν), "from whom" (ἐξ ὅν) and "who" (ὅ):

"... for my brothers, for my relatives according to the flesh,

- ⁴ **who** are Israelites
- **of whom** is the adoption and the glory and the covenants and the law and the service [of God] and the promises
- ⁵ **of whom** are the fathers [patriarchs]
- and **from whom** is Christ according to the flesh, **who** is
 - over all,
 - God blessed for ever, Amen."

Grammatically, this is all *one sentence*. That is not a matter of *interpretation*; it is a *factual statement* based on the grammatical structure of the sentence. No-one who understands Greek grammar could dispute this.

The final relative pronoun in these verses, "who", refers back to Christ and is the subject of the next clause, which specifies two attributes of Christ:

"**who** is:

1. over all
2. God", and for that reason he is "blessed for ever".

However, in their 1961 edition of the Bible, the Jehovah's Witnesses stripped off the last phrase of Romans 9:5, "God blessed for ever", and made it into a separate clause, cut off from the preceding words by adding punctuation that is not present and does not have an equivalent in the original text, a

³ The article can be seen here: http://livingwater-spain.com/1Tim3_16.pdf

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colon. They also moved the phrase “over all” from the clause describing Christ to the new clause that they had created.

In fact, “God blessed for ever” is not a clause as can be seen by the fact that it does not have a finite (conjugated) or imperative/hortative verb, which would be required if it were a clause. It is in fact a phrase, and phrases are dependent on another part of the sentence of which they are a part. The Jehovah’s Witnesses therefore added a verb, the word “be”, which in their edition of 1961 they admitted was not in the Greek text.

In the 2013 edition of their version of the text, they increased the disconnect between the final phrases “over all” and “God blessed for ever” and the preceding part of the sentence, by replacing the colon that they had previously added with a full stop. They thereby tried to break completely the clear grammatical structural link between these phrases and the rest of the sentence.

Secondly, in their 2013 edition they removed the square brackets that they had put round their additional word “be” in the 1961 edition, in order to hide now from the reader that here they have added the word “be”. Without this additional word, it would be clear to the reader that the phrases “over all things” and “God blessed for ever” are part of the sentence that is describing some of the key attributes of Christ:

- he is humanly of the Jewish race;
- he is over all things
- he is God blessed for ever.

Part 3: The Significance

The significance of both of the last two phrases is clear.

1. Christ: over all

As regards the statement that Christ is “over all”, Lenski in “Interpretation of St Paul’s Epistle to the Romans”⁴ writes:

“Christ is over all, i.e., the Supreme Lord. This apposition is complete in itself. If no more were added, this apposition makes Christ God, for we have yet to hear of one who is over all who is not God.”

A.T. Robertson, in his *Word Studies*, says of this text,

“a clear statement of the deity of Christ following the remark about his humanity.”⁵

This is of course totally in keeping with what the Apostle Paul wrote to the Colossians:

“The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶ For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.” (Colossians 1:15-18, NIV)

⁴ Lenski, Richard C.H., “Interpretation of St Paul’s Epistle to the Romans: chapters 8-16” 2nd edition, Augsburg Fortress Publisher, 2008

⁵ See <http://www.godrules.net/library/robert/robertrom9.htm> Consulted on 15.4.20. Wikipedia describes Archibald Thomas Robertson as a “biblical scholar whose work focused on the New Testament and Koine Greek”. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archibald_Thomas_Robertson Consulted on 15.4.20.

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This article is not the place to enter into a detailed study of this passage from Colossians, but it has close parallels with Paul's statement in Romans 9:5, and even with the vocabulary he uses in Romans 9, with repeated use of the same word "all" in various forms (dependent on the rules of Greek grammar).⁶

2. Christ: God blessed for ever

Likewise, Romans 9:5 is not the only one of his letters in which the Apostle Paul refers to Christ as God. In Titus 2:13-14 he writes:⁷

[we are] "waiting for the blessed hope and appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us".⁸

Part 4: The Contents of major Greek manuscripts and structural breaks within them

Although words in the oldest Greek manuscripts are not usually separated by spaces and there is little punctuation, *there is some punctuation*. When there are lists of words, words are sometimes separated by spaces.⁹

Full stops are sometimes included. In Greek, a full stop is a dot which is not placed on the line but about half way up the height of the letters of the text or in the middle of the total height of a line of text.

Also, when there is a change of subject, such as that claimed here by the Jehovah's Witnesses, a new paragraph is frequently started.

Here we will look at the two most important early manuscripts of the New Testament, Codex Sinaiticus, which was produced in about 340 AD, and Codex Vaticanus, which was produced in about 360 AD.¹⁰ We need to bear in mind that these manuscripts were obviously copied from earlier manuscripts. Those exemplar manuscripts could easily have been 200 years old or older at the time that they were copied, so this takes us back to a time very close to the original manuscripts, or perhaps indeed to the original manuscripts themselves (which are sometimes called "the autographs").

1. Codex Sinaiticus

Here we reproduce a photographic copy of Romans 9:5 in Codex Sinaiticus. At the top of this photograph we see the end of verse 4 and at the bottom the beginning of verse 6:¹¹

⁶ Naturally, the Jehovah's Witnesses mistranslate this passage, too, by adding words that totally change the meaning. A detailed study of the passage can be found on this website, here: <http://livingwater-spain.com/beduhn.pdf> (in chapter 14 in the edition of that review consulted on 15.4.20).

⁷ Many manuscripts also indicate that he referred to Christ as "God manifest in the flesh" in 1 Timothy 3:16, although this reading is not supported by some manuscripts. See the article on this verse on this website, here: http://livingwater-spain.com/1Tim3_16.pdf

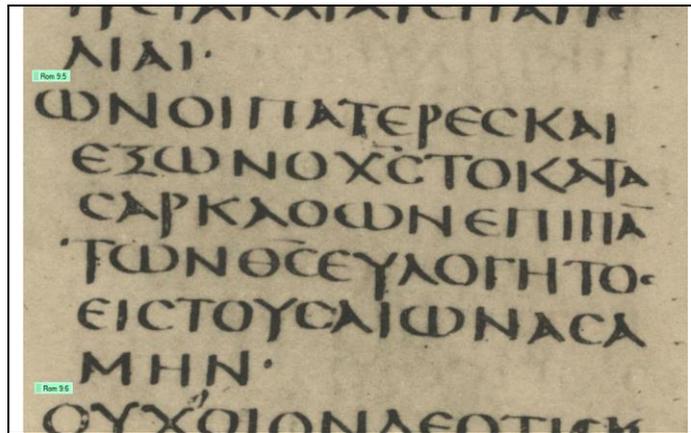
⁸ As is to be expected, the Jehovah's Witnesses also add key words here in order to change the meaning. However, the above quotation is a direct translation from the Greek text. This article is not the place to discuss this verse further. Nevertheless, its original meaning is clear. For a detailed study of Titus 2:13, see https://livingwater-spain.com/Titus_2_13.pdf

⁹ A good and particularly long example is Luke 3:23-37 in Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus. However, this brief article is not the place to reproduce that text.

¹⁰ Such dates have to be approximate, but are generally considered to be accurate to within a period of approximately 50 years, in other words, the date given plus or minus up to 25 years.

¹¹ The leaders of the Jehovah's Witness Organization, who were and are responsible for the text of their version of the Bible, should be highly familiar with these manuscripts and should have no difficulty reading them.

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Romans 9:5 in Codex Sinaiticus

Verse numbers have been added to this photograph by a publisher in the 20th century.

The text is identical with the Greek text reproduced later in this article, except that we use the modern shapes of Greek letters.¹²

We note two forms of punctuation in this text:

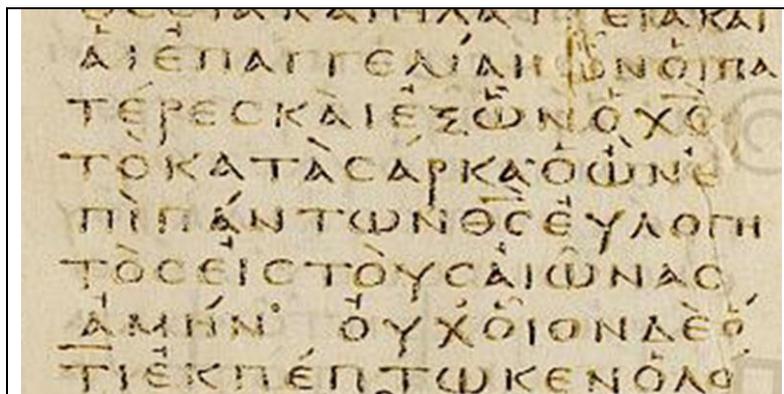
- There are paragraph breaks above and below verse 5.
- Verse 4 ends with a Greek full stop (a raised dot), as does verse 5.

Significantly, there are no breaks in the text within verse 5 and there is no punctuation within the verse. The breaks and the punctuation in the Jehovah's Witness version have been added by them.

Also, there is no finite or imperative/hortative verb within the final phrase. The Jehovah's Witnesses have added the verb "be" in their English version of Romans 9:5, even although this does not correspond to any word in the Greek text, and they have changed the word order by moving the phrase that says that Christ is over all things to a place later in the sentence, with the purpose of changing the meaning of the sentence.

Codex Vaticanus

Here is the same section in Codex Vaticanus:



Romans 9:5 in Codex Vaticanus

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At the time of writing, this page can be seen on-line at the Vatican Library website here:

http://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.gr.1209/1457

¹² This is to be expected, as the modern published editions of the Greek text of the New Testament are based on a meticulous study of a very large number of the oldest Greek manuscripts of the New Testament.

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The text in Vaticanus is identical with that in Sinaiticus and therefore also identical with modern printed editions of the Greek text.

Unlike Sinaiticus, there are no paragraph breaks before or after this verse: the text flows on from verse 4 and into verse 6. This should not surprise us, as verse 5 is the continuation of a sentence that starts in verse 3, and it is part of a passage that starts in verse two and continues for most of three chapters, as explained above.

The text in Vaticanus contains accents and breathings, possibly added by a later hand. It also contains just one full stop, which is to the right of the word “Amen” and slightly above the height of the final letter “n”. This is clearly original, as is confirmed by the space after the full stop before the beginning of the next word.

Significantly, exactly as with Codex Sinaiticus, there are no breaks in the text within verse 5 and there is no punctuation within the verse. So the breaks and punctuation in the Jehovah’s Witness version go against the evidence in this authoritative manuscript.

Likewise, there is no verb in the final phrase, so again the addition of the word “be” by the Jehovah’s Witnesses changes the text as preserved in Codex Vaticanus and the word-order change introduced by them changes the meaning of the text in Codex Vaticanus, which says that Christ is above all things and he is God.

Other manuscripts

We could of course look at other manuscripts, but we would find that they agree with the two reproduced here. For instance, Codex Alexandrinus, a manuscript of major importance that was produced in approximately the year 420 AD, agrees entirely with Sinaiticus and Vaticanus in Romans 9:5 and the surrounding verses. There is a paragraph break after the word “Amen”, but no break within the verse, no punctuation within the verse and no verb “be” in the final phrase. The word order is also the same as in Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus.

Part 5: Expert evaluations of the Greek text of Romans 9:5

For nearly a century, the Greek text of the New Testament prepared by a panel of experts for the Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft and the United Bible Societies has been considered the most authoritative and reliable text of the Greek New Testament. For nearly 40 years the latest edition of this text was known as UBS4 (United Bible Societies’ Fourth Revised Edition). It is in full agreement with the text known as Nestle-Aland 27. In 2012, parts of this text were re-examined in the light of new studies of further ancient Greek manuscripts of parts of the New Testament, resulting in UBS5, the text of which is identical with that of Nestle-Aland 28th Revised edition, which was published in the same year.

However, the new edition did not include a study of any new manuscripts of the Apostle Paul’s letters. Therefore, in Romans (as indeed in most of the New Testament), UBS5/NA28 is identical with UBS4/NA27.

We will therefore consult the “Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament” that was published in 1971, with a second edition in 1994 and reprints since then.¹³ This commentary records in great detail the work of the expert committee that produced the NA27 / UBS4 Greek text. The members of the committee were drawn from leading academic institutions throughout the world and also reflected a very broad spectrum of Christian denominations. They examined every word in a vast number of

¹³ Metzger, Bruce M, “A Textual Commentary on The Greek New Testament”, 2nd edition, Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994 I here quote from the 9th printing in 2012.

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early Greek manuscripts of the New Testament in order to determine as accurately as possible the original text. For Romans 9:5 there was virtual unanimity among the manuscripts, so determining the text was not difficult. However, they were aware of the dispute that we are examining here concerning the correct translation of the text.

They were, as always, thorough, and the record of their consideration of this verse covers almost three pages of text. We will therefore have to quote from these experts selectively, while fairly presenting their conclusions and some of the arguments that guided them in their decision.

As regards the punctuation, Metzger reports:

“In deciding which punctuation should be used, the Committee was agreed that evidence from the Church Fathers,¹⁴ who were almost unanimous in understanding the passage [God blessed for ever] as referring to ὁ Χριστός [ho christós, the Christ], is of relatively minor significance. ... the tradition, whether patristic or palaeographical, originated at a time subsequent to Paul’s writing (i.e. dictating; cf. 16.22) the passage, and is therefore of questionable authority.” (p. 460)

We note two key points here:

1. The Church Fathers were almost unanimous in understanding the phrase “God blessed for ever” as referring to Christ.
2. In spite of this, the Committee was not willing to be influenced by this information; their decisions were to be taken on the basis of what the passage itself actually said.

We can only commend the Committee’s determination to be guided by the Biblical text in their decision-making.

As regards the structure, Metzger reports:

“(1) The interpretation that refers the passage [God blessed for ever] to Christ suits the structure of the sentence, whereas the interpretation that takes the words as an asyndetic doxology to God the Father is awkward and unnatural.” An asyndetic doxology to God the Father is a sentence that praises God, but missing out key linking words that would normally be present.

Metzger continues:

“As Westcott observes, “The juxtaposition of ὁ Χριστός τὸ κατὰ σάρκα and ὁ ὄν κ.τ.λ. seems to make a change of subject improbable.”” (p. 460) In other words, the phrase “God blessed for ever” must refer to Christ, not to God the Father.

This quotation comes from B. F. Westcott in “Notes on Select Readings,” in Westcott and Hort, *The New Testament in the Original Greek*, [II], *Introduction [and] Appendix*, 2nd ed. (London, 1896), p. 110 and it is interesting to note that this is the edition of the New Testament text on which the Jehovah’s Witnesses claim that they base their translation!¹⁵ If that is the case, in this instance they clearly ignored the Greek text that they had before them!

Metzger goes on to state,

¹⁴ There is no definitive list of “the Church Fathers”. However, this title is generally used to refer to leading Christian writers from the time of those who had known the Apostles and over the subsequent three or four centuries. At the time of writing, there is a good introduction in Wikipedia, here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_Fathers (Consulted on 11.4.20).

¹⁵ Amongst many other sources in Jehovah’s Witness literature, see the title page of “The Kingdom Interlinear Translation of the Greek Scriptures”, Brooklyn, New York: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc., 1969. This is often referred to by them by the initials for the title, “K.I.T.”

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“Similarly Nigel Turner declares it to be grammatically unnatural that a participle agreeing with Χριστός “should first be divorced from it and then given the force of a wish, receiving a different person as its subject” (*Grammatical Insights into the New Testament* [Edinburgh, 1965], p. 15).”¹⁶

Metzger’s report of the committee’s discussions continues as follows:

“(2) If the clause ὁ ὢν κ.τ.λ. is an asyndetic doxology to God the Father, the word ὢν is superfluous ... The presence of the participle [ὢν] suggests that the clause functions as a relative clause ... and thus describes ὁ Χριστός as being “God over all.” (p. 461, emphasis added)

“(3) Pauline doxologies, as Zahn points out,¹⁷ are never asyndetic but always attach themselves to that which precedes ...

“(4) Asyndetic doxologies, not only in the Bible but also in Semitic inscriptions, are differently constructed ...

“(5) In the light of the context, in which Paul speaks of his sorrow over Israel’s unbelief, there seems to be no psychological explanation to account for the introduction of a doxology at this point.” (p. 461)

Metzger continues:

“The Committee also considered the possibility that by accident in transcription” one of the Greek phrases had been accidentally changed. However, he states that it “was unwilling to introduce a conjectural emendation into the text.” (p. 462) In other words, to make the Jehovah’s Witness version work, one would need to change the Greek text – with no manuscript evidence available to support such a change! The Committee rejected that option.

Part 6: What the Greek text says

Let us look at the content of the Greek text, now using the modern shape of the letters and putting spaces between the words and breathings and accents, but not otherwise changing the text. So what we present below corresponds to the form of the text that is observed in Codex Vaticanus, with the addition of spaces between the words.

As we explained above in the section on the structure and the punctuation, the Greek sentence starts in verse three and it states a series of facts about the Jewish people, introduced by four relative pronouns that refer to the Jewish people (“who”, “of whom”, “of whom” and “from whom”):

“... for my brothers, for my relatives according to the flesh,

- ⁴ who are Israelites
- of whom is the adoption and the glory and the covenants and the law and the service [of God] and the promises
- ⁵ of whom are the fathers [patriarchs]
- and from whom is Christ according to the flesh,

Having explained who are the Jews, with an obvious parallelism of thought and structure the same sentence continues with an explanation of who is Christ:

- who is
 - over all,
 - God blessed for ever, Amen.”

The Jehovah’s Witnesses object to the translation of the second part of verse 5, although the Greek meaning is clear and unambiguous.

¹⁶ Metzger op. cit. pp. 460-461, fn 3.

¹⁷ Theodor Zahn, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Römer* (Leipzig, 1910) p. 433, Anm. 78

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Let us make an interlinear word-for-word translation of the Greek text:

ὧν οἱ πατέρες καὶ ἐξ ὧν ὁ Χριστὸς τὸ κατὰ σάρκα ὁ ὢν
of whom the fathers/patriarchs and from whom the Christ the according to flesh the one being
ἐπὶ πάντων θεὸς εὐλογητὸς εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας ἀμήν.
over all things God blessed into the eternal ages amen

Translated into flowing English, this says [the Israelites]:

“of whom are the patriarchs and from whom is Christ, according to the flesh, the one who is
1. over all,
2. God
3. blessed for ever, Amen.”

This could also be translated

“of whom are the patriarchs and from whom is Christ, according to the flesh, the one who is
1. God over all,
2. blessed for ever, Amen.”

The two possibilities

As to which of these is a better translation, this merely depends on where one pauses when reading the Greek text, and – as indicated above – there is no punctuation to guide us here.¹⁸

If we pause after ἐπὶ πάντων [epi pantōn, “over all”], we must translate the passage as follows:

“Christ ... the one who is
1. over all,
2. God blessed for ever, Amen.”

This reading of the passage is given by some translations, including the Authorised Version of 1611 and the NRSV of 1989.

If we pause after ἐπὶ πάντων θεὸς [epi pantōn theos, “over all God”], we must translate the passage as follows:

“Christ ... the one who is
1. God over all,
2. blessed for ever, Amen.”

This reading of the passage is given by many translations, including the NIV and the ESV.

We also note two things that the passage does *not* say and cannot be made to say:

1. It does not say that Christ is “blessed by God”.
2. It does not break into the flow of the text about Christ in order to pronounce suddenly a blessing on God the Father.

The words in the Greek text and the structure of the sentence make both of these impossible. We note that the second of these impossible interpretations is the one that is given by the Jehovah’s Witnesses.

¹⁸ In grammatical terms, we are here referring to determining the boundaries of each appositional word or phrase. However, we prefer not to take up space in this article to describe the grammatical principles of appositional words and phrases, as the practical result as regards the meaning is the same as referring to where we pause when reading the sentence.

What does Romans 9:5 *really* say?

However, regardless where we pause, the meaning is the same: the passage says that Christ is over all and it says that he is God. As Lenski (quoted above) states:

“Christ is over all, i.e., the Supreme Lord. This ... is complete in itself. If no more were added, this ... makes Christ God, for we have yet to hear of one who is over all who is not God.”

Furthermore, this is in line with the explicit meaning of other uses of this phrase by the Apostle Paul, as also indicated above, where we give multiple examples from his letter to the Colossians.

In simple words, the Greek text says that Christ is over all things and he is God.

It also tells us that in consequence of this, Christ – like God the Father – is blessed and praised. That Christ was praised by the believers of the first century is seen throughout the New Testament. Merely by way of example, we would refer readers to Philippians 2:9-11 and Revelation 5:12-14.

For the brief study of this theme, see the article on this website entitled “Was Jesus Worshipped in the New Testament and the Early Church?”, here: <https://livingwater-spain.com/worship.pdf> .

Romans 9:5 says that Christ is

1. over all things
2. God
3. blessed and worshipped

That is what the Greek text means. It is not ambiguous. It is not difficult to translate. It cannot mean something else, so changing the meaning of the text cannot happen unintentionally. Those people in the Jehovah’s Witness Organization who produced their version of the Bible have taken the words that are in the Greek text of this verse, and they have consciously made them say something that they do not actually say.

The problem purely arises because some people, in our days principally the Jehovah’s Witnesses, essentially claim, “It can’t mean this. Therefore what can it mean instead of this?” This is in fact the approach of the Jehovah’s Witnesses to any verse whose obvious meaning they reject, and Jehovah’s Witnesses have said precisely this to me: “It can’t mean this, so it must mean something else.”

In this, they are approaching the Greek text “from the wrong end”:

- they are starting with *their beliefs* and they are then trying to find a meaning in the passage that does not conflict with those beliefs, so they change the obvious meaning and say something different, sometimes adding or suppressing words, changing the word order or adding punctuation that is not justified by the structure of the original text.

However, this is not the way to do a translation.

- The way to do a translation is to start with what the text says and to render that meaning into the target language – in the case of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, always only into English, as all their “translations” into other languages are actually translations from their English version (The New World Translation), not from the Greek!

If what the Greek text actually says creates a problem for the adherents of any religious group, or for those who believe any particular religious dogma, that should be tackled by the theologians or interpreters of that group. It is not the job of translators to avoid problems for their doctrine by changing the meaning of the text. Yet that is what the Jehovah’s Witnesses have done throughout their version of the Bible, which therefore really doesn’t merit the description “translation”, as it isn’t;

it's a *modification* or a *change* of the meaning of the text, so that it matches the doctrines of the "Organization".

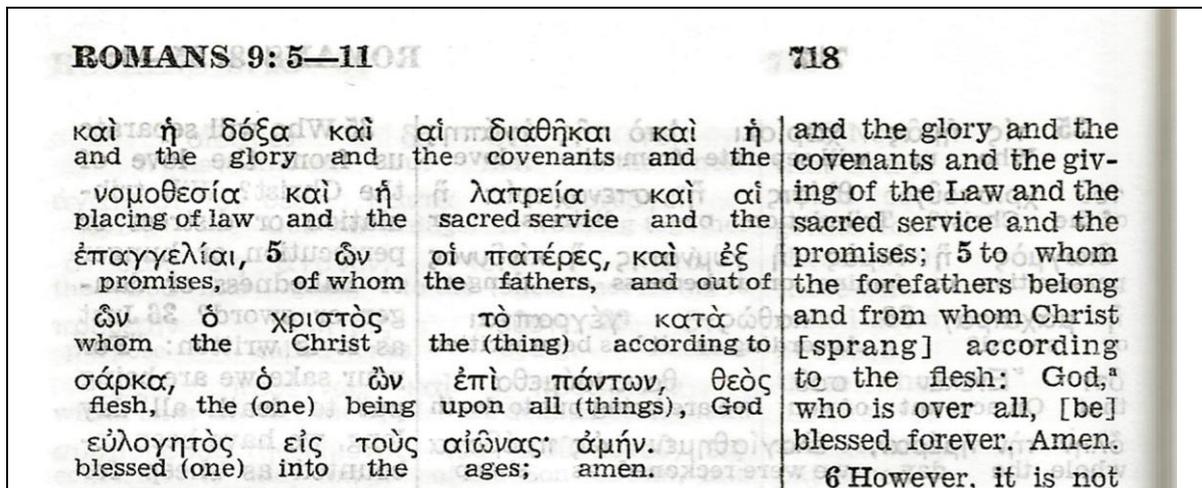
And that is exactly what they do here with Romans 9:5.

Part 7: The Kingdom Interlinear Translation

Subsequent to the publication of their version of the Bible in 1961, the Jehovah's Witnesses found that they were constantly challenged that in numerous places their "translation" was inaccurate. Consternation was experienced by Jehovah's Witnesses on the doorsteps, who discovered that the arguments that they had been taught by the Organization failed to convince people who were familiar with the Greek text of the New Testament.

The Organization responded with an edition of the New Testament that they named "The Kingdom Interlinear Translation of the Greek Scriptures".¹⁹ In this they presented an interlinear translation of Westcott and Hort's 1881 Greek text referred to above, with their "New World Translation" in a column to the right.

We here reproduce a scanned copy of Romans 9:5 in that publication.



"The Kingdom Interlinear Translation of the Greek Scriptures", p. 718

We see that their interlinear text confirms what we have said above. Indeed, it is quite close to the interlinear translation given above in this article, which was translated by the present author from the Greek text without consulting interlinear texts. This is what their interlinear English text says:

"of whom the fathers, and out of whom the Christ the (thing) according to flesh, the (one) being upon all (things), God blessed (one) into the ages; amen."

We would disagree with their addition of the word "(thing)" to the word "the" in the translation of τὸ ["to"]. τὸ ["to"] means "the", not "the (thing)". It here clearly refers to the previous word, Χριστὸς ["Christos", "Christ"], and to refer to Christ or any person as a "thing" is clearly a mistranslation. However, the Jehovah's Witnesses constantly refer to the Holy Spirit as a thing,²⁰ so we should not be surprised that they here refer to Christ as "the (thing)". They are, after all, here trying to belittle Christ and divert attention from the fact that the Greek here describes him as "over all" and calls him "God".

¹⁹ Reference as above

²⁰ See the following article on this website: <http://livingwater-spain.com/jwhs.pdf>

What does Romans 9:5 *really* say?

Their interlinear translation of ἐπί [“epi”] as “upon”, also makes no sense. This may be intentional or accidental, as some parts of their interlinear text reveal that it was produced by people with very limited knowledge of Greek who were looking up the Greek words one at a time in a Greek – English dictionary, and sometimes choosing the wrong translation.

There is also no justification in the Greek text for their addition of the word “one” after “blessed”, and the fact that they put it in brackets shows that they recognise that it is not in the Greek text. *The whole purpose of a Greek-English interlinear text is to give a word-for-word translation, without trying to produce a text in flowing English. Their anxiety to separate the word “blessed” from reference to Christ has led to them tampering again with a correct interlinear translation at this point.*

However, in spite of all these flaws, if we look at the English interlinear text that they provide, *it still clearly says that Christ is God:*

“Christ the (thing) according to flesh, the (one) being upon all (things), God blessed (one) into the ages; amen.”

Their “New World Translation” text, which they reproduce to the right of the interlinear text, and which we quoted in the introduction to this article, *is in clear conflict with their own interlinear English text.*

They were acutely aware that their “New World Translation” was not supported by the Greek text, nor even by their own English interlinear translation of the Greek text, and they knew that it was not possible to justify this conflict here, so they added a footnote: “5^a See Appendix under Romans 9:5.”

That note is to be found on page 1161 of the “Kingdom Interlinear Translation”. It is an absolute model of Jehovah’s Witness intellectual intimidation, in which they bombard the reader with incomprehensible quotations from writers from various centuries who appear to support, or by selective quotation can be made to appear to support, the Jehovah’s Witness view.

However, as no adequate bibliographical information is given, it is always difficult and generally it is impossible to locate the original texts and see from the original context whether what the Jehovah’s Witnesses *claim* that these writers wrote corresponds to what they actually wrote.

This Jehovah’s Witness explanation also fails to present a balanced view, as it fails to refer to any of the experts (the vast majority!) who do not support the Jehovah’s Witness argument. This is a supreme example of what Jonsson describes, regarding a different Jehovah’s Witness claim, with the following words:

“it would be difficult to find a more striking example of inconsistent, misleading scholarship.”²¹

However, this is not the purpose of this Jehovah’s Witness explanation; their purpose is to intimidate the readers into accepting an argument that they have been unable to understand, assuming that the deficiency is in their own lack of understanding and that the academic world is united in supporting the Jehovah’s Witness view. I regret to have to say that nothing could be further from the truth.²²

²¹ Jonsson, Carl Olof, “The Gentile Times Reconsidered”, Atlanta: Commentary Press, Fourth Edition, 2004, p. 87

²² I address the use by the Jehovah’s Witnesses of intellectual intimidation elsewhere on this website, for instance, here: https://livingwater-spain.com/John8_58.pdf and here: <https://livingwater-spain.com/beduhn.pdf>. I am indebted to “In Search of Christian Freedom” by Raymond Franz for drawing my attention to this technique in the publications of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. As a former member of the Governing Body of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and a former leading writer in their books and magazines, he was well-placed to be aware of the use of this technique. (Publication details: 2007, Atlanta: Commentary Press, especially pp. 453-454.)

Part 8: Stability of the Greek text

We must point out that the Greek text here is secure: there is no dispute about the presence of the phrases “Christ who is over all”, “Christ who is ... God” and “Christ who is ... blessed for ever” in the Greek text. Specialists in the Greek source texts of the New Testament refer to verses such as Romans 9:5 as “textually secure”, i.e., “the NT manuscripts have no competing [textual] variants”²³ – they all say the same thing: there are no Greek manuscripts that do not have these phrases, or that put them somewhere else, where they might have been more appropriate *if they had not referred to Christ as God*.

Conclusion

It might be claimed that the evaluation reached here is my own personal conclusion, and that is of course true. However, it is not an opinion; it is an analysis based on the structure of the Greek text and an examination of the text, punctuation and other textual division markers in some of the earliest and most important Greek manuscripts that have survived to our day.

Secondly, we see that this same conclusion has also been reached by those who have dedicated decades of their lives to the study of the Greek text of the New Testament, as a consequence of which they have prepared modern authoritative editions of the earliest Greek text that have found very nearly universal acceptance amongst academics, Greek experts and specialists in the text of the New Testament world-wide.

Thirdly, this same conclusion has been reached by the translators of the principal translations into English, from the “Authorised Version” of 1611 to translations produced at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. Even the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ own interlinear English text shows that the Greek text actually describes Christ as “upon²⁴ all things” and calls him “God”!

Just one version disagrees with all this evidence: the one produced by the Jehovah’s Witnesses in order to create a “Bible” that is in harmony with the doctrines of the “Organization”.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses claim the “support” of some other translations. This should not surprise us, as many Jehovah’s Witness doctrines were copied from other sectarian Christian groups from the 19th century and earlier centuries, and some of these groups produced their own “translations” that supported their beliefs, thereby providing inspiration for the Jehovah’s Witnesses, who in the 20th and 21st centuries have produced their own versions of the Bible, in order to avoid the problems presented to them by the major non-sectarian translations that have found wide acceptance both amongst Christians of many different backgrounds and by academics who are experts in the Biblical text.

So the Jehovah’s Witnesses claim support from other translations, but it turns out that the translations that they select contain errors. We note that they claim, justifiably, the support of the Revised Standard Version (RSV) of 1946. However, they fail to mention that in the revised edition of the RSV, the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of 1989, this translation error is corrected. This selective use of relevant information demonstrates a lack of even-handedness in their presentation of “supporting evidence”.

²³ Karen H Jobs and Moisés Silva in “Invitation to the Septuagint”, 2000, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, pp. 190-191

²⁴ Their erroneous translation of the Greek word ἐπὶ [“epi”], which means “above”.

Other erroneous translations

We must also note that in the last decades of the 20th century there was a virtual “explosion” in the numbers of individuals and groups that produced paraphrases and other versions of the Bible in “modern English”, “today’s English” or with names like “Good News”.

Most of these versions were produced by people with little or no knowledge of the original languages, who worked from existing English translations and reworded these translations in accordance with their own speech style and their own beliefs. Inevitably, many of these amateur writers consulted the original version of the RSV, which was widely sold at the time, and some of them followed its mistranslation of Romans 9:5.

In another article on this website (here: <https://livingwater-spain.com/women.pdf>) we address the issue of translators of newer versions being influenced by previous mistranslations and by their own personal opinions. See chapter 7 of that article, starting on page 31 in the edition consulted on 16.7.22.

Even although some of these popularising versions of the Bible in colloquial English were widely sold, they were not accepted by scholars with a knowledge of the original languages of the Bible, who realised that these versions were not accurate translations of the original.

Attitudes to the Bible

We need to ask an important question:

Do we stand above the Biblical text, judging it and changing it when we think that it is “wrong” (as judged by our beliefs and our culture)?

or:

do we accept the Biblical text as the authority which, if necessary, judges our doctrines and either supports them or refutes them?

The leaders of the Jehovah’s Witness Organization in the USA have decided to exalt themselves above the Biblical text, judging it and changing it to make their version support their preconceived dogmas. Any objective observer will see that this is never a justifiable stance.

In Romans 9:5 they have:

1. changed the word order so that “who is over all” is made to apply to God the Father, instead of to Christ, which is indisputably the case in the Greek text;
2. introduced a break between the word “God” and the preceding phrases, which are about Christ, by adding punctuation that is not in the Greek manuscripts.
3. They have added a word, “be”, to the new separate sentence that they have created, which would otherwise be a defective sentence without a verb. The truth is that in the Greek it is not an independent sentence, but a phrase in the sentence that starts with the words that precede it,
4. They have ignored the context, which is a single discussion about Christ and the Jews.
5. They have broken off the discussion to insert a sentence praising God that cannot be justified by the words, the structure or the meaning.
6. This doxology goes against the structure of sentences in the New Testament that praise God.
7. In their 2013 edition they have increased the deception by hiding the fact that they have added a word that they needed in order to make possible the new sentence that they have created.
8. They have ignored the Greek text that they claim to have used.
9. They have gone against their own English interlinear translation of that text.

They have, quite simply, not given an honest translation of what the Greek text undeniably says.

What does Romans 9:5 *really* say?

Given all this distortion and deception, both here and in other parts of the Bible, it is no surprise that the Jehovah's Witness version of the New Testament has been rejected both by Christians worldwide of all backgrounds and traditions and by the experts in New Testament Greek, who know what the original text *really* says.

In their version of Romans 9:5, the Jehovah's Witnesses have not *accidentally* made a poor translation; they have *deliberately distorted* what the text really says. The Jehovah's Witnesses who may knock on your door will not know this. They are probably sincere and they believe that the Watch Tower Organization of New York and Pennsylvania, USA, is the only body on earth that really understands what the Bible says. We need to respond to these people with respect and with Christian love, and to pray for them. But one day the leaders of "the Organization", who are knowingly leading so many people astray, will have to give account of their deceptive actions before the tribunal of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10). We are saddened by what they have done and what they continue to do, and we must leave that judgment in Christ's hands, as He is "over all", as is written in Romans 9:5.

The most obvious translation of Romans 9:5, closely following the Greek text, is:

"of whom are the patriarchs and from whom, according to the flesh, is Christ, the one who is over all, God blessed for ever, Amen."

or (pausing at different points):

"of whom are the patriarchs and from whom, according to the flesh, is Christ, the one who is over all God, blessed for ever, Amen."

How should we respond?

When we read the Bible, it should never be merely an academic or intellectual exercise. Christ said to the religious leaders of his day, who enjoyed intellectual arguments:

"You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, ⁴⁰ yet you refuse to come to me to have life." (John 5:39-40, NIV)

So we don't read the Bible in order to win an argument; we read the Bible in order to meet with Jesus Christ. Romans 9:5 tells us that Christ is "over all things" and "God blessed for ever." Will we ignore this passage and ignore him? Or will we come to him to have eternal life? Will we respond to him with faith and worship?

Earlier on the same occasion, Christ said, "that all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father. He who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father, who sent him." (John 5:23, NIV)

What about us? Will we honour the Son just as we honour the Father? (John 5:23) Will we bless him and worship him as God over all? (Romans 9:5) Or will we try to divert attention from the clear meaning of Romans 9:5 by starting an argument about a different verse (the usual Jehovah's Witness response)? The decision is ours.