

(2) Jesus as God in the New Testament

Last time we saw that the biblical writers confronted the difficulty of saying that Jesus is God but without implying that Jesus is the Father. This is problematic because, as I shared, the word for God in the Greek – *ho theos* (*ho* is the definite article “the” so “the God” literally) – typically refers to the Father. The New Testament Christians, while believing that Jesus was deity (was divine) did not think that he was the Father. That is why you don’t find many statements in the New Testament that Jesus is *ho theos* – that Jesus is God. That would be to say Jesus is the Father. Instead, as we saw, they picked a different term to characterize Jesus, and that was the term *kyrios* or Lord. *Kyrios* is the Greek word that translates the name of God in the Old Testament – Yahweh. The early Christians, as we saw, would call Jesus “Lord” and they would apply to him Old Testament passages about Yahweh saying that these are in reference to Christ and retroject Christ into Old Testament narratives about Yahweh. We find in the New Testament that the writers attempted to do everything they could to affirm the deity of Christ but without saying that he was the Father. The second point that illustrates this is the fact that Christ is given the role of God. To Christ these authors ascribed roles that are normally reserved for God, such as being the Creator.

For example, let’s look again at Colossians 1 beginning with verse 15 and following.

He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or

principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.

Here the role of being the Creator of all reality other than God is ascribed to Christ.

Similarly, in John 1:1-3 we have the same teaching.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.

Here, again, you have ascribed to Christ, the Word of God, the creation of all reality apart from God himself.

Finally, look at Hebrews 1:1-3a where you have the same teaching:

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power.

Here, just like Paul in Colossians 1 and John in John 1, Christ is said to be the creator of the world, he is the heir of all things just as Paul says he is the first-born of all creation, he reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature. The idea there is like a signet ring which is pressed into hot wax to seal a document or a letter. Just as that wax bears the imprint of the ring, so Christ bears the very stamp or imprint of the divine nature. He upholds the universe by his word of power, just as John says all things were created through him.

So the fact that we have in Colossians 1, Hebrews 1, and John 1 this same teaching about the cosmic Christ as the Creator and Sustainer of all things apart from God shows that this was the widespread conviction of the early church. This is not a doctrine taught by some idiosyncratic author. These are three different authors – Paul, an anonymous author of Hebrews, and then John of the Gospel of John. All of them teach the same thing with respect to Christ – that he is the Creator of the world. He plays the role of God in being the source of all reality apart from God.

Third, full deity is ascribed to Christ. Look at Colossians 1:15-19 and then also 2:9. By way of background to the letter of Colossians, Paul is faced here with a sort of incipient Gnosticism in Colossae. Gnostics held that the realm of the spiritual is good and the realm of the material is evil. Therefore, God, being fully good, cannot have any sort of concourse or relationship with the material world because that would taint him with evil. So Gnostics developed this system whereby God in his fullness and purity is utterly diverse and detached from the world. But there emerged from God in a sort of descending staircase fashion quasi-divine beings that increasingly mediate between God and the material world, a kind of increasing materialization as you descend these stairs. What Paul says in Colossians 1:15-19 and 2:9 is that this linkage between God and the world is utterly misconceived. Paul says that the whole fullness of deity – that pure God substance – dwells in Christ in the flesh, in bodily form. Let's read Colossians 1:15-19. He says of Christ:

He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation, for in him all things were created in heaven and on

earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities – all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.

Here Paul says this fullness of the Godhead dwells in Jesus Christ. Then in 2:9 he says even more clearly, “For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.” That is so un-Gnostic! The fullness of deity dwells bodily in Christ. This is a statement of the deity of Christ which is, I think, one of the strongest in the New Testament. Jesus Christ is literally God incarnate. He is the fullness of deity dwelling bodily in this world.

Fourth, Finally, sometimes the authors in the New Testament simply lose all restraint, and they come right out and say, yes, Jesus Christ is *ho theos* – Jesus is God. Not that they were completely unguarded in their assertions: in any context in which Christ is referred to as *theos* there is almost always some personal differentiation between the Father and Christ, lest Christ be confused with the Father. Their personal distinction remains inviolate. Nonetheless, on several occasions the NT does affirm that Jesus Christ is God.

The majority of NT scholars hold that *theos* is applied to Jesus no more than nine but no fewer than five times in the NT. These remarkable texts have been meticulously examined and ranked by Murray Harris in his book *Jesus as God*. I shall briefly examine these texts in what I consider to be an ascending order of confidence in their referring to Christ as (*ho*) *theos*, climaxing with

the decisive texts of the Johannine corpus. I shall present the NRSV translation.

Rom 9.5

to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

The key interpretive question regarding this statement concerns its punctuation. Should there be one sentence or two? Translations differ. If it is two sentences, the second sentence begins after the word “Messiah”: God, who is over all be blessed forever.

The basic difficulty with taking “*who is*” to begin a new sentence is that such an understanding separates “*who is*” from its natural antecedent “*the messiah*”. Harris judges that to divorce “who is” from the grammatical antecedent “*the messiah*” is “unconscionable.”¹

Moreover, a major problem with the two sentence view is that whenever “*blessed*” occurs in an independent doxology, it always *precedes* God’s name (II Cor 1.3; Eph 1.3; I Pet 1.3). Normal biblical word order for independent doxologies would require here something like “Blessed be God”. Word order thus makes it quite improbable that Rom 9.5 contains an independent doxology to God the Father.

Harris reports that of the 56 principal commentators consulted for his study, only 13 take *theos* to refer to God the Father, while 36 see a reference to Christ, a reading that is captured by the punctuation of the Greek text adopted in the 26th edition of the

¹ Harris, *Jesus*, 158.

Nestle-Aland text and the third edition of the United Bible Society text, in a significant reversal of their previous positions.²

Accordingly, in Rom 9.5 Christ is very probably said to be God. The designation of Christ as God cannot plausibly be construed as some weak sense of divinity, because Christ is said in this very passage to be “over all things.” So in calling Christ *theos*, Paul is either identifying Christ with God the Father or ascribing to Christ the same divine status held by the Father. Since Paul obviously distinguished between Christ and the Father, he must be placing Christ and the Father on the same plane but without sacrificing his Jewish monotheism. So here Christ is held to be God, just as the Father is God.

Heb 1.8

In the opening chapter of Hebrews we read that God says to the Son,

Your throne, O God, is forever and ever

The principal question to be settled here is whether *ho theos* should be understood as a vocative form of address (“Your throne, O God, is forever and ever”) or as a nominative subject (“God is your throne forever and ever”). Since either is grammatically possible, considerations of background and context must guide our determination of meaning.

In terms of background, the author is citing LXX Ps 44.7 (= Ps 45.7): “your throne, O God, is forever and ever,” so that either the king or God Himself is addressed. The whole point of the opening section of Hebrews is to show the Son’s superiority to the angels. In order to show the Son’s superiority to any angelic being the Son

² Harris, *Jesus*, 172. The revised punctuation is retained in the current NA²⁸ and UBS⁵.

is addressed in vv8, 10 as both “God” and “Lord,” twin titles for deity:

“Your throne, O God, is forever and ever” (v8)

“In the beginning, Lord, you founded the earth” (v10).

Calling Christ both “God” and “Lord” in contrast to angels thus supports the theological point that the author is making.

There is no denying the Christological import of this passage. The parallelism of the Son’s being addressed as both “God” and “Lord” and the exalted descriptions of him in his superiority to angelic beings make it clear that Christ is not addressed merely in the way that a Jewish king might be called *elohim*. God is said to have created the world through the Son and made him heir of all things (Heb 1.2). “He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature [*hypostasis*], upholding the universe by his word of power” (v3). Nothing of this sort could be said of any angelic being.

Tit 2.13

The writer to Titus expresses our hope in Christ’s eschatological appearing with the words,

while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

The main interpretive question about this statement concerns its grammatical construction. Do “*God*” and “*Savior*” designate one person (“our great God and Savior”) or two (“the great God and our Savior”)? Fortunately, there is a clear answer to this question. There is broad majority support for understanding the reference to be to a single person, for at least two reasons.

First, it is characteristic of Greek grammar, roughly speaking, that the construction <definite article + common noun + “and” + common noun> takes a single referent rather than two. This principle was originally formulated by Granville Sharp and so is known as Sharp’s Rule.

Second, the expression “God and Savior” was a stereotyped formula common in first century religious terminology. It invariably denoted one deity, not two.

Harris reports that on the basis of such considerations almost all grammarians and lexicographers, many commentators, and many writers on NT theology or Christology are agreed in the verdict that in Tit 2.13 Jesus Christ is called “our great God and Savior.”³ More recently Gordon Fee observes that this view is “the currently ‘reigning’ point of view, adopted by almost everyone in the NT academy.”⁴

II Pet 1.1

The same grammatical question that attends Tit 2.13 also attends II Pet 1.1, which speaks of

the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ

The only difference in the construction is that here the possessive pronoun “*our*” is brought forward rather follows *Savior*. But the difference in the position of “*Our*” is trivial.⁵ What is critical is that the two substantives are governed by a single definite article. Grammatically, Sharp’s Rule and the use of the standardized

³ Harris, *Jesus*, 185, with appropriate documentation.

⁴ Gordon Fee, *Pauline Christology* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2007), 441.

⁵ See discussion by Wallace, *Sharp’s Canon*, 265-66.

formula *God and Savior* require here as well reference to one person.

Harris reports that the view that in II Pet 1.1 the title “our God and Savior” is applied to Jesus Christ is endorsed by the great majority of 20th-century commentators, by most grammarians, and by authors of general works on Christology or II Peter. Tit 2.13 and II Pet 1.1 are thus mutually reinforcing, confirming the view that by the time these works were written Christ was being referred to as God.

Johannine Writings

Even highly sceptical critics overwhelmingly admit that by the time we get to the Johannine writings, the belief in the full deity of Christ had come to expression in the NT.⁶ The Christological bookends of the Gospel of John are the affirmation of Christ’s deity in the Prologue (Jn 1.1) and Thomas’ ringing confession in the narrative of Christ’s resurrection appearance to Thomas and the Twelve (Jn 20.28).

Jn 1.1

The Prologue opens with a triadic formula:

In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God. (Jn 1.1)

⁶ Space permits just two examples: Rudolf Bultmann thought that Jn 20. 28 is the one instance in the NT where Jesus Christ is “undoubtedly designated” as God (*Essays: Philosophical and Theological* [London: SCM, 1955], 276). Bart Ehrman thinks that in John’s Gospel, “Jesus is decidedly God and is in fact equal with God the Father – before coming into the world, while in the world, and after he leaves the world” (*How Jesus Became God* [New York: HarperOne, 2014], 271).

The Prologue reflects the influence of the Logos doctrine of Middle Platonism.⁷ So I shall speak henceforth of the Logos. According to v1a the Logos was “in the beginning,” doubtless an echo of LXX Gen 1.1, “In the beginning. . .” (*En archē*). The statement thus endorses the traditional Logos doctrine that the Logos “pre-existed,” in the sense that the Logos did not begin to exist at the moment of creation or is a creature. As in Middle Platonism, the Logos is the instrumental cause of creation (Jn 1.3). This Logos is said in v1b to have existed with God and so to be in some sense differentiated from God. Nonetheless v1c states that the Logos was God, thus in some sense identifying them. As in Middle Platonism, then, the deity of the Logos is clearly affirmed, while an inner distinction within God is postulated.

So the crucial question is, Whom are we talking about here? It is indisputable that John identifies the Logos with the pre-incarnate Christ (Jn 1.14, 17b). The Logos himself entered human history (Jn 1.10-11). The Prologue thus affirms the pre-existence of Jesus Christ, his uncreated being, and his deity.

Jn 1.18

No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known. (Jn 1.18)

After referring to Jesus as *the only begotten of the Father* in v14, now John boldly calls him *the only begotten God*. The presence of “the only begotten God” in both p⁶⁶ and p⁷⁵ has convinced most textual critics that here Jesus Christ is called *theos*.⁸ By means of the stunning appellation “the only-begotten God” John

⁷ See my *God Over All* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), chap. 2.

⁸ For a discussion of the textual variants see Harris, *Jesus*, 74-83.

differentiates Christ the Son from God the Father while regarding both as God.

Although interesting interpretive questions arise concerning the meaning of “only begotten” (*monogenēs*), their resolution is not germane to our interest in Christ’s deity. The overriding point remains that all of the proposed translations of *monogenēs theos* refer to Jesus as “God.”

Jn 20.28

We reach the Christological climax of the Gospel of John in Thomas’ confession to the risen Jesus:

My Lord and my God! (Jn 20.28)

Here we confront no textual issues, no interpretive conundrums, no translation difficulties, just a blunt and straightforward confession. Bringing together the titles “Lord” and “God,” Thomas’ confession of who Jesus truly is constitutes a fitting climax to the entire Gospel. This pairing of *kyrios* and *theos* is abundantly attested in the LXX, the closest parallel being LXX Ps 34.23 [35.23]: *ho theos mou kai ho kyrios mou*, addressed to Yahweh.⁹ That Thomas’ confession was not just ecstatic utterance is obvious not only from its OT background but also from the fact that Jesus blesses him for his confession, along with those who believe similarly (v29).

I Jn 5.20

we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding so that we may know him who is true; and we

⁹ See list of citations in Harris, *Jesus*, 120-21.

are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. (I Jn 5.20)

The question, in Greek as in English, concerns the antecedent of the demonstrative pronoun “this” or “he” (*houtos*): is it “him who is true” or is it “Jesus Christ”? Either is grammatically possible, and so considerations of context will have to guide our decision. Although Harris esteemed both alternatives to be equally probable, the wide majority of scholars since he wrote have argued that *houtos* refers to Jesus Christ as God.¹⁰

Generally, *houtos* refers back to the most recently mentioned available antecedent, which in this case is *Iēsou Christō*. Referring to Jesus Christ accords with I Jn 5.5-6: “Who is it that overcomes the world but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? This is he who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ.”

Many commentators have observed that taking *houtos* to refer to “him that is true” makes the phrase into a tautology (“This True One is the true God”) and functions poorly rhetorically at the letter’s close.¹¹ But a description of Jesus Christ as the true God is a dramatic closing wholly consonant with Johannine theology and, in light of Jn 1.1, 18; 20.28, almost to be expected. John believed that just as the Father is God, so the Son is God.¹² Whether we can make sense of such a statement is a question for the philosophical, not the biblical, theologian.

¹⁰ Komoszewski informs me that of the 38 scholarly sources he has consulted on I Jn 5.20 since Harris’ work in 1992, 31 think that the text calls Jesus *theos*; while only seven disagree (private communication, March 23, 2022).

¹¹ E.g., Birger Olsson, “*Deus Semper Maior?* On God in the Johannine Writings,” in *New Readings in John*, ed. Johannes Nissen and Sigfred Pedersen (Sheffield, England: Sheffield, 1999), 149.

¹² N.B. that John does not say in Jn 17.3 that only the Father is the true God (to the exclusion of the Son) but that the Father is the only true God (as is the Son).

Most NT scholars, then, do not agree with Harris' judgement that in I Jn 5.20 it is equiprobable that *houtos* refers to God or to Jesus Christ. Indeed, many consider the reference to Jesus Christ to be more than merely probable. The preeminent Johannine commentators Raymond Brown and Rudolf Schnackenburg, for example, conclude respectively, "I think the arguments clearly favor *houtos* as a reference to Jesus Christ"¹³ and "There is no longer any doubt . . . that the following *houtos*. . . refers to Jesus Christ."¹⁴

Together the passages we have examined combine to constitute a powerful case that Jesus Christ is presented as God in the pages of the NT. Christ is declared to be divine, just as the Father is divine. The specification of necessary and sufficient conditions for (full) divinity is thus somewhat beside the point. What matters is that Christ is divine in the same sense that the Father is divine, that they are equally divine.

The last point I want to make with respect to the affirmation of the deity of Christ in the New Testament is that there are many, many other passages which we will not take the time to read in which Christ functions as God. For example, receiving worship. This is unique to God. Only God can properly receive worship. And yet Christ receives worship in the New Testament.

The point is that these New Testament believers thought that Jesus of Nazareth, who had lived among them, who had died, who was

¹³ Raymond Brown, *The Epistles of John* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982), 66.

¹⁴ Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 262.

raised from the dead by God, and ascended into heaven, that in some difficult to express way he was God himself. Now, he was not the Father. That's clear. But he was equal to the Father. That is to say, he was God.