



Is Jesus God? (Part 1)

Lesson 2

Jesus of Nazareth is one of the most beloved characters in all history. He is held in high regard by the vast majority of people living on the planet today. Many false religions and cults honor him. He is a prophet in Islam. He is the firstborn to Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons. He is viewed as a great moral teacher by many, if not most of the world. But Christians go further than all of these. Christians argue that Jesus Christ is God Himself. As one of the ancient creeds put it: "Very God of very God."¹

Are they right to do so? Many of the cults and false religions of the world would argue "no." In fact, many of them argue that to say that Jesus is God violates Scripture! For example, consider the following scenario:

Let's imagine that you get a knock on your door and standing there are two Mormon missionaries. They ask if you have a minute and, feeling fairly confident in your understanding of God's Word, you decide to dialogue with them. You begin a conversation and eventually it leads to one of the major differences between Mormonism and biblical Christianity... is Jesus God? Your mind immediately races to John 1:1 "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." *Ha! Checkmate!* you think to yourself. Your Mormon friend smiles and informs you that the passage you are reading has been mistranslated.

"You see," he says "in Greek the word for God always has the article when it refers to the God of the Bible. Here there is no article, which means that this passage should be translated 'The Word was a god.'"

At this point you're not sure what to do. You don't know Greek (and neither does your friend, more likely than not), so although his argument sounds off you can't really refute it. You try to think of another passage that says "Jesus is God," but can't come up with any on the spot. You exchange a few more words and eventually the missionaries leave. You sit down and think to yourself, *Well, I do believe John 1:1 teaches that Jesus is God, but what about the verse he brought up?*

This week and next week we will seek to answer that question definitely and clearly from God's Word.

¹ First Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.)

In what ways have you heard the deity of Jesus defended before?

I. Jesus is called God.

The first and most obvious question to be answered is: Does the Bible call Jesus God? The answer is yes, in at least 4 passages Jesus is directly called God. In 3 others the way Jesus is described strongly suggests that he is God.

What passages can you think of where Jesus is called God, either directly or using language that would strongly suggest that he is God?

A. Places where Jesus is called God directly.

There are at least four places in the New Testament where Jesus is called God.² Not surprisingly, these passages are debated by those who deny the divinity of Christ, but in every case their arguments against these passages fall short.

1. John 1:1 “the Word was God”

This is one of the clearest, and consequently one of the most famous and debated passages when it comes to Scripture outright calling Jesus God. Those who try to argue against Jesus being God will be quick to point out that the word for God has no article, and therefore it should be translated as “the Word was a god.” The simple answer to this objection is that this is a way oversimplified understanding of how the definite article works in Greek. In fact, there are six other occasions in John 1:1-18 where the word God appears. Four of those six do not have an article before them in the Greek (6, 12, 13, 18). Yet in each case, the New World Translation (the official translation of the Jehovah’s Witnesses) uses a capital “G.”

2. John 20:28 “my Lord and my God”

Thomas, after stating that he will not believe unless he sees Jesus is given the very thing he asked for. Upon seeing the resurrected Christ he says “My Lord and my God!”

This is a pretty difficult passage to wriggle out of, but again those who deny the

² There are three other passages that might directly call Jesus “God.” These verses do not appear to affirm the divinity of Christ as they are translated in the KJV, but many modern translations do translate them in a way that suggests Christ is divine. (1) The KJV translates John 1:18 as “No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.” However, several very old manuscripts replace the word “Son” with the word “God” (“the only begotten God, which is in the bosom of the Father”). (2 + 3) 2 Peter 1:1 and Titus 2:13 likewise could be an instance where the deity of Christ is affirmed directly. In the KJV, we read “the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ” for Titus 2:13, making it sound like 2 different persons. However, it is also possible to read “the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ,” which would mean that Jesus is both God and Savior. 2 Peter 1:1 reads “through the righteousness of God and our Savior Jesus Christ,” but again it is possible to translate the phrase “through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ.” The divinity of Jesus does not rise or fall on how these challenging passages are translated, but it is good to at least be aware of these references and the role they play in the discussion of Jesus’ divinity.

divinity of Christ will try to do that. Most of them will say that Thomas is speaking to God or even that Thomas is using God's name as an exclamation (we would say that he is using God's name in vain). Doing this fails to take into account the purpose of the whole book of John.

What is the point of John's gospel (John 20:30-31)? How does this story fit in with that purpose?

The story of Thomas is in many ways the climax of what John is doing. He is trying to convince his reader that Jesus is the Son of God and the Messiah, and he uses Thomas as the example of someone who has seen and believes before allowing Jesus to challenge the reader to be one who doesn't see and yet still believes.

3. Romans 9:5 "...Christ came, who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen."

Romans 9:5 clearly uses the word "God" to refer to Jesus, depending on where you put the punctuation. Since the original Greek manuscripts didn't punctuate, any punctuation we have is the result of tradition (although the tradition is very early and very likely). For this reason, some translations translate the last part of this verse as "to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ. God who is over all be blessed for ever. Amen." (RSV)

The note for this entry under the NET study Bible explain this situation well:

...The translational difficulty here is not text-critical in nature [i.e. all of the manuscripts agree, so our problem is not different Greek words in different manuscripts], but is a problem of punctuation. Since the genre of these opening verses of Romans 9 is a lament, it is probably best to take this as an affirmation of Christ's deity (as the text renders it). Although the other renderings are possible, to see a note of praise to God at the end of this section seems strangely out of place. But for Paul to bring his lament to a crescendo (that is to say, his kinsmen had rejected God come in the flesh), thereby deepening his anguish, is wholly appropriate...

In other words, Paul begins the section in Romans 9 with "great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart" (v 2). It would seem odd for Paul to end with a benediction ("blessed be God!") in such a sorrowful section of God's Word. It does make sense that Paul would point out that the very Christ that his fellow Jews rejected was the God blessed over all, bringing this sad introduction to a powerful conclusion.

4. Hebrews 1:8 “But unto the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever...”

This final passage is very clear in the KJV and modern translations: Jesus is God. Again, those who deny the divinity of Christ will seek to translate this verse differently. The New World Translation has “God is your throne forever and ever.” Although this is technically possible on the basis of the Greek and the Hebrew, it is problematic for a couple of reasons. First, God is not usually referred to as a throne and second, the whole point of this passage is that Jesus is better than the angels. For this reason every major translation and almost all of the commentaries translate this a reference to Jesus’ deity.

There are a lot of details in this section! Keeping straight all of the arguments and counter arguments is a deep, deep pit (and believe it or not, there was a lot that was left out!). For this reason, it’s probably not necessarily best to run to these passages, although they might at first seem like the easiest. The following passages that indirectly claim that Jesus is God are in some ways stronger, and the words and behavior of Christ in the following discussion will probably be easier to remember and more helpful if you ever get a chance to sit down with a Mormon, Muslim, or Jehovah’s Witness.

B. Places where Jesus is called God indirectly.

Beyond the verses we have just looked at, there are at least three places where the clearest understanding of the passage is that the author is claiming Jesus is God, even though the word God isn’t used directly for Jesus.

1. Philippians 2:6

This passage fairly states that Jesus is in the form of God.³ Some might try to argue that means that he’s therefore not God, that Jesus is only in the form of God. However, if you have the form of something, that normally implies that you are that thing. If something has the form of a human, then you would assume that it is a human. If it has the form of a dog, you would assume it is a dog. What would it mean for Jesus to always exist in the form of God, but not be God?

This passage is a challenging labyrinth for theologians. What does it mean that “he thought it not robbery to be equal with God?” What does it mean that Christ “made himself of no reputation” (the Greek verb often means “to empty”)? We won’t have time to go through all of these details, but this passage is an important piece as we think about what it means to think about Jesus as God.

³ The KJV, NKJV, NIV, and CSB rightly translate this as “being/existing in the form/nature of God.” The ESV and NASB translate it as “while/although in the form of God.” Although this translation would be an acceptable translation of the Greek in other circumstances, it unnecessarily suggests that Jesus was God but now perhaps no longer is.

2. Colossians 1:15⁴

Here we read that Jesus is the “image of the invisible God.” The word for “image” here means the visible representation of something. Jesus shows us what the invisible God looks like.

Where else do we read about the image of God?

Surprisingly, humans are also called the image of God in Genesis 1:26-27. So if all humans are the image of God, what does it mean that Jesus is the image of God? Much debate surrounds what it means that as humans we are in God’s image, but it means that in some way we reflect the Creator. Even more than that, however, Jesus reflected the Father. What does it mean that Jesus reflected God even more than we do? If Jesus was human, and yet reflected God in a unique and special way, then we have here another passage that strongly suggests Jesus was and is himself God.

3. Hebrews 1:3

Our final passage worth noting describes Jesus as “Who being the brightness of *his* glory, and the express image of his person.” We have to ask what it means that a man is the “brightness” or “radiance” of God’s glory. This is very unusual language to simply refer to a great teacher or even to some sort of supernatural being that is less than God. The second term “express image” is also interesting. The Greek word often referred to an impression made on something, like the impression of a ruler on a coin.

So Scripture describes Jesus as existing in the form of God, being the image of the invisible God, the brightness of his glory, and the express image of person. All of these terms together strongly argue that Jesus is much more than just a man, or even some supernatural creature, he is a representative of God to such a degree that he must be God himself; Jesus is God.

II. Jesus does things that only God does.

Many of the previous sections could lead to long and frustrating conversations. What does the Greek word *morphe* really mean? What difference does an article make? Do you put a comma or a period? While it’s helpful to know these issues, a clearer path forward is to point to several things Christ says and does that clearly point to his divinity.

Can you think of some things Jesus does that only God does?

⁴ When dealing with the divinity of Christ, the phrase “firstborn of every creature” in the second half of this verse becomes a hot point of contention that is beyond the scope of this study. An excellent series of blog posts answering the objection that this means Christ is created can be found at <https://danolinger.com/2018/03/15/firstborn-you-and-the-jehovahs-witnesses-part-1/>

A. Jesus created (Colossians 1:16).

We read in Genesis 1:1 that “in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” In Colossians 1:16 we read that “all things were created by [Christ].” Over and over Scripture tells us that God is the Creator. And yet the writers of the NT almost casually throw out that Christ created all things. Note that if Jesus created all things, he cannot himself be created. This verse doesn’t say that Jesus created everything else, but that he created all things.⁵

Why does God create the world? Notice what the end of verse sixteen says about why everything was created.

B. Jesus accepts worship (Matthew 28:17; Acts 13:2; Hebrews 1:6; Revelation 5:13-14; 19:10; 22:8-9).

There are numerous passages that describe Jesus being worshipped, but the book of Revelation is particularly interesting. It’s interesting because twice the author of Revelation is told not to worship an angel, because only God should be worshipped (Revelation 19:10; 22:8-9). Yet in the book of Revelation itself we see Jesus accepting the worship of heaven and earth and everything in between (Revelation 5:13-14).

That means in the same book we read that only God should be worshipped, and that Jesus is worshipped!

C. Jesus forgives sins (Luke 5:20-24).

Another example we see of Jesus doing things only God should do is his forgiveness of sin. And this is not a conclusion that theologians have come to, it’s a conclusion that the very first audience came to! The logic here is pretty clear: if someone wrongs me, you can’t forgive them, only I can. Sin is an offense against God. God had given Jews a proper path through which they could show their repentance and receive God’s forgiveness (temple sacrifices). Jesus skipped all of that. He spoke on behalf of God and forgave the sins the people.

⁵ Sadly, the New World Translation (translation of the JW’s) translates this verse “because by means of him all **other** things were created in the heavens and on the earth.” [emphasis added] They add the word “other” without one Greek manuscript supporting them. They claim this is to “clarify” the text, because without adding to Scripture the Bible contradicts their teaching.

What was the point of Jesus' response? What was he getting at here?

It's important to realize that Jesus never questions the logic of those making this accusation. He doesn't explain how it is that God gave him the right to forgive sins, in fact he would seem to accept their estimation. Only God could forgive sins, and yet Christ's miraculous power to heal pointed to the fact that they were dealing with someone on a different level!

D. Jesus masters Scripture (Matthew 5:22, 28, 32, 34, 44; 7:28-29).

Finally, we see Jesus talk about Scripture in a way totally unbecoming of someone who didn't write it. Five times Jesus says "Ye have heard that it hath been said" and then he goes on to quote, in most instances, the Old Testament. He then follows that up with, "But I say unto you." If I stood before this group and said, "Well, Scripture says this, but here's what I'm telling you," I would be teaching my last class! In fact, the reaction of the crowd is to marvel at Jesus' authority. This means more than that Jesus pounded the pulpit or yelled a lot. It means that he claimed the right to add clearly and unashamedly add to the teaching of Scripture!

In this lesson, we have seen that Christ is indeed called God several times in Scripture, although those who doubt his divinity will be quick to argue them away. We've also seen that the several statements in New Testament letters clearly indicate that Jesus is divine. Finally, we've seen that the things Jesus says and does only make sense for someone who thinks himself (and is) divine. Next week, we will look at several other statements of Jesus that indicate that he was more than just a good teacher, and then we will conclude with what is likely the strongest argument for Christ's deity: the way in which the NT quotes OT passages relating to Christ.

III. Jesus says things that only God should say.

- A. “Before Abraham was, I am.” (John 8:48-59)**
- B. “I and my Father are one.” (John 10:22-39)**

The actions and statements of Jesus are not the words of some great wise teacher. They are either the words of a crazy person, a charlatan, or someone much more than just an enlightened human. C. S. Lewis made this point very articulately in *Mere Christianity* where he wrote:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

IV. Jesus' followers apply OT passages about God to Jesus.

- A. Isaiah 40:3 applied to John the Baptist in Matthew 3:3.**
- B. Isaiah 6:13 applied to Jesus in John 12:37-42.**
- C. Isaiah 45:23 applied to Jesus in Philippians 2:10**
- D. Psalm 102:25-27 applied to Jesus in Hebrews 1:10-12.**
- E. Romans 10:13**