

Jesus' Divinity

The aim of this article

What does the New Testament teach about who Jesus is? This very issue led to controversies from the first centuries onwards and is a reason for schisms even today. Although we generally do not reject the thoughts and the ideas of the period of the Church Fathers and the early councils, we want to concentrate rather on the testimony of the Holy Scripture, because that is the ultimate source of everything we believe. In spite of the human shortcomings of the authors of the New Testament we trust deeply in God that he provides clear answers to the most important questions of faith, so that everyone who is looking for the truth may come to the same understanding. In this article we presuppose the entirely human nature of Jesus—who called himself the “Son of Man”—and we abstain entirely from ascribing his purity and his perfect devotion to God and people to his divinity. Our aim is to prove that according to the New Testament Jesus is the true God—of the same nature as the Father.

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⚓ 1 The Concept of a Divine Messiah Is Not Foreign to the Old Testament

Some passages in the Old Testament already hint at the divinity of the Messiah, even if the majority references to Israel's Saviour do not allow this conclusion. One passage that stands out among the few exceptions is *Daniel 7:13-14*.

I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. (*Daniel 7:13-14*)

Here the Son of Man, who is clearly distinguished from “the Ancient of Days”, receives divine adoration. Furthermore, the story teaches the simultaneous existence of God's kingdom and earthly authorities who had been robbed of their former power (verse 12). From this fact it is possible to derive that the Messianic Kingdom has a spiritual and not a political character. These two points might have been a reason for Jesus to choose the title “Son of Man” as his most frequent self-designation.

I will tell of the decree: The Lord said to me, “You are my Son; today I have begotten you.”

(Psalm 2:7)

Your throne, O God, is for ever and ever. The sceptre of your kingdom is a sceptre of uprightness; (Psalm 45:6)

Although Psalm 2:7 and Psalm 45:6 do not speak of the divinity of the Messiah as clearly as the passage in Daniel 7, this interpretation cannot be entirely excluded. At any rate, the usual explanations referring them to Solomon and to other kings are dissatisfying if one considers the personality and the political importance these rulers had. Psalm 45 will reappear later in our discussion.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined. You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil. For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. (Isaiah 9:1-7)

Among the prophetic texts Isaiah 9:1-7 (the prophecy of the Prince of Peace) is perhaps the most telling example. Although the prophet himself presumably thought of the king-to-be Hezekiah (cf. *Isaiah 7:14-17*), his words are so deeply inspired that none of the earthly, political rulers were or ever will be able to fulfil them. It seems to have frequently occurred that prophets were unable to grasp all the aspects of the meaning of God's thoughts which they themselves communicated, failing to foresee horizons too far off for them. But who among mere humans could we ever call "Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace"?

⚓ 2 The Testimony of the Synoptic Gospels

But the hope for a powerful earthly ruler in the manner of David was deeply rooted in Jewish thought and Jesus had to take this phenomenon into consideration, too. In fact, many of Jesus' statements and actions were aimed at helping his audience change their perception of the Messiah, and consequently their view of God. It is against this background that his ministry takes on its true significance. The reports of all four gospels are in agreement here. However, there is a noticeable difference in the depth of the description in the synoptic Gospels on the one hand and the Gospel of John on the other. Let us consider the former scriptures first.

The gospels of Matthew and Luke both begin with a description of the circumstances surrounding Jesus' conception and birth. However, the differences between them—most of which can be easily explained—lead to the inference that the two gospels drew on different sources of information. This being the case, they do both agree on one very important point: Joseph is not the father of Jesus, but it is God who caused the miraculous conception in the womb of the virgin Mary. The agreement of the two gospels strengthens the credibility of this fact. Mark's silence about this matter has apparently mere structural reasons. In fact Mark does not say anything about Jesus' origin and childhood, however the expression "son of Mary", used in *Mark 6:3* (compare the parallels in *Matthew 13:55* and *Luke 4:22*) reveals a good deal of his insight into the

controversy surrounding the birth of Jesus. At that time it was common practice to name a person after his father. The fact that people referred to Jesus as the “son of Mary” suggests that they didn’t regard Joseph as his father. Thus these gospels deliver a powerful indication of Jesus’ divine nature which can otherwise be derived from but a few further passages, such as *Matthew 11:25–30; 23:37–39; Mark 2:1–12*. But these statements of Jesus are not convincing by themselves because their intention is not to reveal his divinity. Yet a full understanding of these passages without acknowledging Jesus’ divinity is impossible. Whereas *Matthew 25:31* is in itself a clear indication of his divinity, because the Son of Man who comes in glory is also the judge of the world, a function plainly ascribed to God alone. Furthermore, the gospel writer describes the way the disciples worshipped Jesus in words that were reserved exclusively for the worship of God (*Matthew 28:9,17*) by which he shows clearly who he considered Jesus to be. Finally the expression to baptize “in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit” in *Matthew 28:19* speaks for itself.

✠ 3 The Divinity of Jesus in the Letters of Paul

We should also expect to find the same testimony in the books of the New Testament that provide us with information about the life and teaching of the first Christians, first and foremost in the letters of Paul. However, although Paul writes a lot about Jesus and points out with strong conviction that having faith in Christ means to be saved (which, of course, inherently requires a divine position of Jesus), he apparently does not feel any need to explain Christ’s nature to his addressees—he simply shared the very same belief with them. Nevertheless, we find a few passages that stress Jesus’ divinity in such a strong way that denying this fact would mean violating the text.

In *Philippians* we find Christ’s spirit equated with the Holy Spirit (1:19), and right after that (1:23) he defines being with God simply as being with Christ. *Chapter 2:5–11* is especially obvious, because here he directly expresses that Jesus is of the same nature as God, and receives adoration that is reserved for God alone.

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE SHOULD BOW, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (*Philippians 2:5–11*)

Colossians 1:15 says, “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation”,—an expression that is intended to point out the degree of relationship between the Father and the Son rather than the succession of further sons after Him. Paul goes on to say, “all things were created through him and for him”, which would be highly blasphemous if Christ were not God. Later on in 2:9 Paul writes, “For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily”, which can hardly be interpreted as anything less than God. Likewise, in *Titus 2:13* he expresses what all Christians are waiting for: “...the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ.”

Unarguably there is only one saviour, God himself! The objection that in many passages Paul teaches a Christ subordinated to God (e.g. *1 Corinthians 15:27 f.*—this passage and in fact the whole chapter sheds light on Jesus as the resurrected one. Resurrection, however, is something reserved for man only) cannot reduce the validity of the above mentioned statements. One is rather forced to admit that he naturally and non-dogmatically deepens the teaching of the two natures of Jesus. Moreover one has to concede that Paul, who was very familiar with what we call the Old Testament, wanted to back up this understanding by

allusions and quotations from these Holy Scriptures, e.g. compare *1 Corinthians 2:8* with *Psalms 24:7-9* and *Exodus 24:16*, compare *1 Corinthians 10:4,9* with *Psalms 78:15* and *Exodus 17:6 f.* and compare *Romans 10:9-13* with *Joel 2:32* and *Psalms 145:18*.

✠ 4 The Book of Acts and Other New Testament Letters Testify of Jesus' Divinity

If we consider the rest of the NT-scriptures—leaving aside those written by John for the moment—we can find a number of conclusive arguments. Thus, Luke renders the words of Stephen during his lynching (*Acts 7:51-60*) in a way that Jesus' messianity, divinity and humanity are so closely connected that the only reasonable solution is to acknowledge His two natures.

Interestingly, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews testifies to Jesus' divinity by quoting from the Scripture. He refers the messianic *Psalms 45* to Jesus rendering the Hebrew "Elohim" with the Greek word "Theos" (1:8 f.), whereby every attempt to consider Jesus lower than God is doomed to failure. Further on he directs the praise given to God in *Psalms 102* to Christ (1:10-12), which proves again that the Christians considered Him to be the creator.

Finally, Peter's frequent repetition of the terms, "Lord" and "Saviour" in his second letter reveals his own conviction. These terms are explicitly applied to Jesus in 1:1,2,8,11,14,16; 2:1,20; 3:2,18 and rather to God in 2:9,11; 3:8 ff.,15, though these passages could also be applied to Jesus, which shows clearly that Peter presupposed Jesus' divinity.

✠ 5 The Greatest Testimony: The Writings of the Apostle John

All these testimonies—and we could mention even more—are confirmed, deepened and surpassed by the writings of John the apostle. He does not begin his gospel with a description of the circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth. Instead he invites his audience to see the depths and mysteries of Christ's nature—not in order to veil or mystify, but to illuminate God's great love for His creation and so to explain the background of Jesus' coming. Already in his first words (1:1-3) he leaves no room for doubt that the Word of God—the "Logos"—is of the same nature as God the Father himself, even if his words seem to be a bit complicated at first glance. John tells us plainly that this "Word" became flesh (1:14)—a further unambiguous proof for the two natures of Christ. Verse 18 deserves special attention due to the statement, "...the only begotten God..." (NASB)—or according to some other early manuscripts, "the only (begotten) Son"—"...who is at the Father's side...", which makes Jesus' equality with the Father clear due to his being begotten. Since God is spirit (*John 4:24*) and his existence is eternal, also this begetting can only be eternal. Consequently, verse 18 does not depict a later beginning of the Son's existence, but it is an appropriate characterization of the intimate relationship between the two persons who are in complete unity both in nature and mind. This message is repeated and confirmed in the subsequent chapters that narrate Jesus' ministry. However John does not neglect the human side of Christ. On the contrary, this gospel—a first hand account written by one of the Lord's closest acquaintances—portrays in a vivid and credible fashion the remarkable earthly ministry of Jesus, as well as the thoughts of the disciples who had to internalize all the drastic and challenging realities taking place before their eyes. John provides the reader with a clear and believable insight into the far-reaching consequences of the events he experienced and the knowledge and understanding that resulted. The way Jesus identified himself, namely as the true image and the perfect minister of God, is testified in numerous passages. It is entirely understandable that He used clear statements concerning his divinity sparingly, for even His messianic claim caused increasing opposition. But it was precisely in the vehement controversies with his main adversaries that he could not and did not hide the truth about himself, not least due to the presence of his disciples and hidden adherents. Thus, in

8:37–59, in the course of the dispute over whether his opponents were true descendants of Abraham, we find a powerful allusion—to call it an allusion is an understatement—to his deity, to which they responded with “appropriate” indignation. His statement,

Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM. (*John 8:58*)

far exceeds the claim—in itself hardly acceptable—that Abraham had seen him (8:56) leaving no room for an interpretation other than “I am God.” This striking grammatical “error” had never been “corrected” in the course of copying manuscripts, since all copyists throughout all ages understood the meaning of the words, “I AM”—this is the name of God from Exodus 3:14.

Likewise, the Jews felt challenged to stone Jesus in the situation depicted in chapter 10:22–39, since Jesus claimed to have authority to give life and salvation. His words, “I and the Father are one” must have appeared to be an example of unspeakable blasphemy to his already irritated listeners. And, really, even if strictly speaking this statement still allows the interpretation, “I and the Father are entirely like-minded, one in spirit, and we pursue exactly the same goal”, naming oneself and the Father in one breath and in this sequence strengthens the claim of having divine attributes enormously. At first glimpse, Jesus’ consequent explanation seems to be a retreat, but finally, after turning their own weapons against them, he simply and plainly confirms what he had said before. Actually, the Jews should have given up all opposition then and there, for the testimony of Jesus’ deeds made his words reliable. But even the greatest sign he ever performed—raising Lazarus from the dead, the sign that overshadowed all the other incredible miracles—would not change their mind. On the contrary, it transformed the stubbornness and hatred of the High Priests and the Pharisees into a specific plan to eliminate Jesus.

On the final evening before his crucifixion Jesus revealed many important things to his friends, whereby he continued to support the reliability of his words: “Believe in God; believe also in me; I am the way, and the truth, and the life; Whoever has seen me has seen the Father; I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (14:1–10) by the testimony of his deeds (14:11). He also provided his disciples with a deeper insight into His relationship with the Father, and last but not least he explained to them the role of the Holy Spirit. Although in this matter the disciples still displayed a rather low level of understanding—as we see from their questions and statements in 14:5,8,22; 16:17 f. + 29 f.—slowly but surely the seed of faith started to sprout, culminating in Thomas’ spontaneous confession, “My Lord and my God” (20:28). Certainly Thomas, who had even doubted the resurrection of the Lord (20:24–25), did not suddenly come to a deeper understanding of Christ than all the other disciples. Rather he expressed what his friends had understood all the more before him. That is the conviction John wanted to get across and to strengthen throughout his whole gospel.

In Revelation John reaffirms what he claimed before in saying that Jesus is the “First and the Last” (1:17; cf. Isaiah 44:6), who is worthy of praise in the same way as the One who is sitting on his throne (5:12–14), and who, like God (21:6), is “the Alpha and the Omega” (22:13). The fact that John refers the clearest monotheistic statements in the Old Testament (Isaiah 40:10 and 62:11) to Jesus should actually compel all the deniers of Jesus’ divinity to surrender unconditionally. Otherwise they must consider John to be a heretic who wanted to undermine the Jewish belief in the one and only God, something that was surely unthinkable for John and the rest of the NT writers. Instead, they consistently testify that the Almighty God has revealed that He himself is the messianic Saviour of His nation and of all people, showing his everlasting love to the world in his one and only begotten Son (If the Son were only a created being, God could have or still could send many such “sons”).

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