

Did Thomas Call Jesus “My God” in John 20.28?

by Servetus the Evangelical

When the risen Jesus appeared to his gathered disciples on the first Easter evening, the Apostle Thomas was not present (John 20.19-24). The disciples later told him they had seen Jesus. Thomas said he would not believe unless he saw Jesus for himself (v. 25).

One week later the risen Jesus appeared again to his gathered disciples, with Thomas present. Jesus spoke to him, and Thomas replied, “My Lord and my God” (John 20.28).

Most Christians have believed that Thomas then called Jesus “God.” And most New Testament (NT) scholars claim it is the strongest biblical evidence that Jesus is God.

On the contrary, no other NT character calls Jesus “God,” which would depart from Jewish monotheism. Plus, John records two occasions when Jesus’ antagonists accused him of making himself out to be God, which he then denied (John 5.18-47; 10.30-37).

Thus, Christians have exceedingly misunderstood Thomas’ words “my God.” Their interpretation of them ignores this gospel’s context, which unlocks their meaning.

First, John records that the risen Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene a week prior to the Thomas incident. He told her, “go to My brethren, and say to them, ‘I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God’” (John 20.17). So, the risen Jesus called the Father “My God.” The question arises: How can Jesus be God if he has a God? Indeed, John would not have meant that Thomas called Jesus “my God” when this author had just recorded that Jesus called the Father “My God.”

Then, one verse after Thomas’ words John concludes his gospel by writing, “Many other signs therefore Jesus also performed ... but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God” (John 20.30-31). This statement would be anti-climactic following Thomas’ words if he indeed called Jesus “God.” And calling Jesus “the Son of God” is not synonymous with “God.”

Moreover, John records a conversation that Jesus had with the apostles Thomas and Philip at the Last Supper, only ten days prior to Thomas’ Confession. Jesus told them he would soon go to “My Father’s house” (John 14.2), referring to his heavenly ascension to soon follow his death and resurrection. Then John adds,

4 “And you know the way where I am going.” 5 Thomas said to Him, “Lord, we do not know where You are going, how do we know the way?” 6 Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me. 7 If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; from now on you know Him, and have seen Him.” 8 Philip said to Him, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.” 9 Jesus said to him, “Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? 10 Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own initiative; but the Father abiding in Me does his works. 11 Believe Me that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me.”

Jesus’ words, “the Father is in Me,” must have left a strong impression on Thomas. Indeed, they are the key to correctly understand what doubting Thomas later meant when he said to Jesus, “my God.” That is, Thomas acknowledged what Jesus had taught ten days prior, that God the Father is *in* Jesus.

Jesus had taught the same thing many days earlier. He had said, “I and the Father are one” (John 10.30). His Jewish opponents misunderstood him and were about to stone

him. They accused him of “blasphemy,” saying, “You, being a man, make Yourself out to be God” (v. 33). Jesus implicitly denied this and explained the oneness as “the Father is in Me, and I in the Father” (v. 38). Scholars call this the Mutual Indwelling.

Some ill-taught Christians get confused about Jesus’ words in John 14.9—“He who has seen Me has seen the Father.” They think he therein claimed to *be* the Father. In the 3rd century, the Church rightly deemed this belief, called Sabellianism, as heretical. Jesus and NT writers often distinguished the Father and Jesus as two separate individuals.

The Johannine Jesus taught similarly on other occasions. Once when he attended a feast at Jerusalem, “Jesus cried out and said, ‘He who believes in Me does not believe in Me, but in Him who sent Me. And he who beholds Me beholds the One who sent Me’” (John 12.44-45). Again, Jesus was talking about God the Father. In fact, the Father sending the Son is the most prominent theme in the Gospel of John, occurring 40 times.

This indwelling of God in Christ, and God sending Christ, reflects the concept of agency. In antiquity, especially in the business world and among Jews, a principal would select someone to represent him as his agent. It was common knowledge that a man’s son usually proved to be the best candidate as his agent. So, with the son as agent, dealing with a man’s son was akin to dealing with the man himself, as if the father was in his son.

The Johannine Jesus taught this concept of agency in various ways. He often said the Father had given him his words and deeds (John 12.49; 14.10, 24; 17.8). And he said of the Father, “My teaching is not Mine, but His who sent Me. If anyone is willing to do His will, he will know of the teaching, whether it is of God or whether I speak from Myself” (7.16-17). Notice he distinguishes himself from God. Another time he said, “I have come in My Father’s name,” and he then called the Father “the one and only God” (5.43-44).

To rightly understand Jesus in the Gospel of John, Agent Christology can hardly be over-emphasized. It is the corrective to misinterpreting several Johannine texts in which Jesus is wrongly identified as God, claiming to be God, or God becoming a man.

Moreover, in this gospel Agent Christology, also called Sending Christology, is the primary focus of saving faith for believers (John 16.27-30; 17.8). As God’s supreme agent, the Johannine Jesus functioned as God without actually being God.

In my book, *The Restitution of Jesus Christ* (2008), I devote 17 pages to Thomas’ words “my God” in John 20.28 and cite 38 scholars in doing so. In using John 14.9, 11 as key to understanding Thomas, I regard this as the pinnacle of my research in this book. It is a God-in-Christ interpretation as opposed to the traditional Christ-is-God interpretation.