

Is Jesus God in Titus 2.13?

by Servetus the Evangelical

Some traditionalist New Testament (NT) scholars cite 2 Thessalonians 1.12, Titus 2.13, and 2 Peter 1.1 to support their belief that Jesus is God. All three of these passages have a similar syntax (word order), which makes them somewhat ambiguous. Thus, the dispute between traditionalists and non-traditionalists over these three passages concerns only a phrase and its grammar. Yet many traditionalists who cite Titus 2.13 to support their view that Jesus is God deny that 2 Thessalonians 1.12 and 2 Peter 1.1 do too.

Traditionalists claim that Titus 2.13 is their second-best Pauline text which supports that Jesus is God, with Romans 9.5b being foremost. The entirety of Titus 2.13 reads as follows in the King James Version (KJV): “Looking for that blessed hope, and glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ.” But this verse reads differently in the New American Standard Bible (NASB): “looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus.”

The critical words for Christology in Titus 2.13 are its last clause. In it, the NASB and other versions call Jesus “God,” whereas the KJV and others do not. As for “the blessed hope,” it refers to the future resurrection of God’s deceased people (cf. 1 Thessalonians 4.13-18). This event will accompany Christ’s return, which is the “appearing.”

The reasons for the view that Paul calls Jesus “God” in Titus 2.13 are as follows, with rebuttals added:

1. Due to Granville Sharp’s rule of Greek grammar, no definite article preceding *soterou* (Savior) requires that it be conjoined with *theou* (God), making both refer to *Christou Iesou* (Christ Jesus).

Rebuttal: (a) Many modern grammarians have insisted that Sharp’s rule is uncertain. For example, Greek grammarian and traditionalist Nigel Turner admits, “Unfortunately, at this period of Greek we cannot be sure that such a rule is really decisive.” And J.N.D. Kelly adds, “the absence of the article cannot count as decisive, for ‘Savior’ tended to be anarthrous (cf. 1 Tim 1.1), and in any case the correct use of the article was breaking down in the late Greek.” (b) Other grammarians claim that there is an exception to Sharp’s rule, in which the second article can be omitted when the author knows his/her readers presume a distinction in subjects.

2. Since the phrase *tou megalou theou* (the great God) does not appear anywhere else in the NT, it seems more appropriate to apply it to Jesus rather the Father.

Rebuttals: (a) Jesus is only called “great” in the NT when implicitly compared to other human beings. And since he said, “The Father is greater than I” (John 14.28), it seems best to take this phrase “the great God” as a reference to God the Father. (b) It seems more appropriate to call God the Father “great” in this context, since he bring about the glorious second coming of Christ (1 Timothy 6.14-15).

3. Regarding the translation, “the glorious appearing of the great God,” the Greek NT never applies the word *epiphaneia* (appearing) to God the Father.

Rebuttals: Indeed, *epiphaneia* is applied to Christ five times in the NT, all in Paul’s letters, and never to the Father. This usage requires that *epiphaneian tes doxes* should be translated “the appearing of the glory” rather than “the glorious appearing,” which provides that “the appearing” is “the glory” and not “the great God.”

4. In the NT era, the phrase “God and Savior” was applied to some Roman emperors, so that it would have been natural for Paul to say the same of Jesus.

Rebuttal: Paul calling Jesus God is a serious theological departure from his Jewish background of a strong monotheism, which would demand explanation. Besides, Paul would not develop his theology in reaction to titles attributed to pagan rulers.

As with Romans 9.5b, scholars who do not think Paul calls Jesus “God” in Titus 2.13 argue mostly according to Paul’s teaching and usage in his other letters. For example, J.E. Huther says of this issue in Titus 2.13, “It cannot be decided on purely grammatical grounds.... The question can only be answered by an appeal to NT usage.”

Reasons for the view that Titus 2.13 does not call Jesus “God” are as follows:

1. Since *megalou theou* (great God) precedes *soterou* (Savior), and *hemou* (our) follows *soterou* in the Greek text, it seems “our” modifies only “Savior,” as in the KJV.
2. The word “our” more likely modifies “Saviour” and not “God” because the NT does not contain the following expressions: “our God Jesus Christ,” “God Jesus Christ,” or “Jesus Christ our God.” If NT authors had believed that Jesus Christ was God, one would expect these simple phrases to appear in their NT writings.
3. The word *theos* (God) appears in Paul’s ten NT letters over 500 times. Except for Romans 9.5 and Titus 2.13, he always applies it to the Father and never to Christ.
Rebuttal: Murray Harris argues, “every NT author must be permitted the luxury of some stylistic, verbal or theological” departure from that writer’s “habitual usage.”
4. Paul consistently and repeatedly distinguishes “God” and “(Jesus) Christ” throughout his corpus as two separate and distinct Persons or Beings. So, he would not obliterate this distinction in perhaps only two instances—Romans 9.5 and Titus 2.13. Johannes Schneider and Colin Brown consequently explain that calling Jesus “God” in Titus 2.13 “is linguistically possible but contradicts the otherwise rigorously maintained distinction in the Pastorals between God and Christ.”
5. Applying the adjective “great” to “God” suggests that “God” is an independent subject to be distinguished from “Christ Jesus.”

Although a slight majority of Bible versions and NT scholars render Titus 2.13 as calling Jesus God, it seems Paul’s overall usage in his letters should be the determining factor, so that this grammatically ambiguous clause does not call Jesus God.