

Is Jesus God in the Gospel of John?

by Servetus the Evangelical

Nearly all Christians have believed Jesus is God. Scholars call them “traditionalists.” And most scholars claim that the foremost New Testament (NT) book that identifies Jesus as God is the Gospel of John. It contains the two most formidable NT texts that have been interpreted as declaring that Jesus is God. They are John 1.1 and 20.28.

Even liberal and historical-critical NT scholars, such as those of the Jesus Seminar, assert that the Gospel of John presents Jesus as God. Since the synoptic gospels do not, most of these scholars deem this gospel a fictional creation of the church and thus historically inaccurate. Ernst Kasemann called it “naïve docetism.” He said sarcastically, “John changes the Galilean teacher into the God who goes about on the earth.”

Albert Schweitzer acknowledged that the first scholars to allege a disparity between the Synoptic Jesus and the Johannine Jesus were skeptic D.F. Strauss and F.C. Bauer. Later, Rudolf Bultmann followed Wilhelm Bousset in proposing the Gnostic Redeemer myth as the primary basis of Johannine Christology. It is about a heavenly being sent to earth to become man, redeem humankind by enlightenment, and return to heaven. But it was later discovered that this myth originated in Persia (Iran) in the 2nd century.

So, the Gospel of John has been very misunderstood. It is mostly because church father Clement of Alexandria rightly described it as “the spiritual gospel,” and scholars ever since have endorsed this description. It’s because the Johannine Jesus used so much figurative language (John 10.1-6; 16.25-30). Yet scholars often have not recognized this and treated some of Jesus’ words literally when he meant them metaphorically.

It is a grievous error to interpret that the Gospel of John declares that Jesus is God. This gospel presents Jesus’ humanity and subordination to the one and only sovereign God more than the synoptics do. And it contains the foremost verse in the Bible which shows that Jesus cannot be God. Jesus prayed to the Father, “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (John 17.3). So, Jesus here calls the Father “the only true God” and distinguishes himself from him. Jesus earlier had called the Father “the one and only God” (5.44). In each case, Jesus affirms the Jews’ Shema, that God is “one” (Deuteronomy 6.4).

The preferred text in John 1.18 contradicts this. It states, “No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him.” Unbiased folks would think that this rendering says there are two Gods. Some Greek manuscripts have *huios* (Son), thus translating “only begotten Son,” which is more Johannine. But the earliest and therefore best manuscripts have *theos* (God).

Over half of the NT texts traditionalists cite to support that Jesus is God have grammatical problems. The main one is John 1.1c. It usually is translated, “and the Word was God.” But “God” (*theos*) is anarthrous (without the article). This somewhat unusual grammatical construction is problematic. That’s why Jehovah’s Witnesses wrongly translate it, “the Word was a god,” and some scholars render it “divine.” William Barclay is right: the New English Bible has the perfect translation—“what God was, the Word was.” This says the Word was exactly like God, not was God.

That is what the Johannine Jesus meant when he later said to Thomas and Philip, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (John 14.9). Many Christians have misunderstood

this saying by thinking Jesus identified himself as the Father. Not at all; he next explained what he meant, that “the Father is in Me” (v. 10, cf. v. 11).

In the Gospel of John, John the Baptist and Jesus seem to say that Jesus preexisted. Many traditionalists have insisted this indicates he is God. But some of these texts merely signify rank (John 1.15, 30; 8.58). And in Jesus’ discourse on his being the bread of life come down from heaven, he meant it spiritually, not literally (6.32-58, 63; cf. 8.23). Plus, his later mention of his glory is likely the preexisting Shekinah, not himself (17.5).

Ask traditionalists who know their Bible, “Where in the Bible does Jesus say he is God?” and they’ll likely answer, “in John 10.30 he said, ‘I and the Father are one.’” But its previous context reveals that Jesus meant only that they were unified in purpose. Plus, he explained “one” by saying, “the Father is in Me, and I in the Father” (v. 38).

Most scholars claim that the foremost biblical text which declares unequivocally that Jesus is God is doubting Thomas’ confession to the risen Jesus, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20.28). On the contrary, Thomas meant what Jesus taught him and Philip ten days prior, about seeing the Father in him (John 14.9-11). That is, Thomas now understood that the Father indwells Jesus, which is not the same thing as calling Jesus God.

Also, this author records only a few verses earlier that the risen Jesus said to Mary Magdalene, “go to My brethren, and say to them, ‘I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God’” (v. 17). She did and exclaimed, “I have seen the Lord” (v. 18). This context suggests that the author understood Thomas to mean that Jesus is Lord and the Father in him is God. And it is very unlikely that the author would have Jesus identifying the Father “My God” and Thomas identifying Jesus “my God.”

Two verses later the author ends his gospel by saying, “Many other signs therefore Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name” (John 20.30-31). Saying Jesus is the Son of God is anti-climatic if it had just been said that he was God.

In sum, the Gospel of John is very historically reliable. It has been misinterpreted to say Jesus is God due to failure to recognize it as the spiritual gospel. Instead, it parallels the synoptics by declaring that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.