

Does the Bible Identify Jesus as God?

by Kermit Zarley

Early Jewish Christianity

The post-apostolic, institutional church has always proclaimed that Jesus was both man and God, and this is still the situation to this day. This church asserts that Jesus preexisted as God, being one of three co-equal and co-eternal members of a Trinity: the Father, the Son (Jesus), and the Holy Spirit. In the fourth century the Catholic Church proclaimed in its Nicene Creed that Jesus was fully God and anathematized (cursed) anyone who believed otherwise, thus deeming them non-Christian. The later Protestant Church accepted this determination. Thus, the institutional church has assessed that anyone who does not believe Jesus is God is not a Christian. But this was not the case with the apostolic church of the first century CE.

The Book of Acts reveals that the earliest followers of Jesus were Jews who preached that He was the Messiah and the Son of God; but they did not claim he was God (e.g., Ac 2:36; 3:18, 20; 4:26; 9:20, 22). Later, when this Jesus Movement spread into neighboring lands to produce Gentile Christianity, these Christians asserted that Jesus was the Messiah *and* God. It happened because Gentile church fathers had become somewhat anti-Semitic, supersessionistic (church replaces Israel), and influenced by Greek metaphysics. *In proclaiming that Jesus is God, these Gentile Christians departed from biblical, apostolic Christianity.*

The book of Acts also relates that this early Jesus Movement was first called "the Way" (Ac 9:2; 24:14, 22). It is an innocuous term that seems to have not been applied to these early followers of Jesus by their opponents, as is sometimes the case with religious sects, but one chosen by them perhaps due to Jesus calling himself "the way" (Jn 14:6). Later, the Apostle Paul's Jewish opponents - the temple high priest and some elders at Jerusalem - identified him as "a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes" (Ac 24:5).

This term Nazarenes originated because Jesus, during His earthly sojourn, was called "Jesus the Nazarene" by His disciples, enemies, and angels (Mt 2:23; Mk 10:47; 14:67; 16:6; Lk 24:19; Jn 8:5, 7; Ac 2:22; cf. 3:6; 4:10; 6:14). It was because His parents had resided in the village of Nazareth in Galilee, and that's where Jesus grew up and lived until He departed from there soon after He began His public ministry (Mat 2:23; 4:13). Furthermore, this identification as Nazarene was nailed to His cross (Jn 19:19). Moreover, the heavenly Jesus, speaking in a vision to Saul (Paul), identified Himself as "Jesus the Nazarene" (Ac 22:8). Similarly, Jesus was identified as "Jesus of Nazareth," even by demons (Mk 1:24; Lk 4:24). Paul later testified, "I thought to myself that I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth" (Ac 26:9).

Walter Bauer, the great German NT lexicographer of the early 20th century, wrote an important book entitled *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*.^[2] In it, he convincingly demonstrates that the penchant of church fathers as heresy hunters was often misguided, misrepresenting the historical situation. George Strecker wrote a 45-page appendix added to this ET volume. He explains that Bauer concluded "that for broad areas the heresies [so deemed by church fathers] were 'primary,'" meaning they were the true apostolic teachings. Strecker continues, "Jewish Christianity, according to the witness of the New Testament, stands at the beginning of the development of church history, so that it is not the gentile Christian 'ecclesiastical doctrine' that represents what is primary but rather a Jewish Christian theology. Consequently, knowing early Jewish Christianity is of utmost importance in establishing Christian origins.

In the early post-apostolic centuries, as Christianity was being established in Gentile lands, some church fathers tell in their writings about two groups of Jewish people called Nazarenes and Ebionites. These Jews, often referred to in modern times as Jewish Christians, believed Jesus was Israel's Messiah and that God had vindicated Him by raising Him from the dead. The Ebionites seem to have been so named due to the Hebrew word 'ebyon, which means "poor." It is well known that most of the Ebionites did not accept Jesus' virgin birth, and all of them detested the Apostle Paul and his writings; whereas the Nazarenes accepted all of these. Both groups were Law Observant, keeping the Jewish Sabbath as well as the Christian Eucharist. The Nazarenes, however, did not demand that Gentile Christians keep the Law, whereas the Ebionites generally did. Moreover, both groups clearly rejected that Jesus was God, although there seems to have been some later Ebionites who also believed that Jesus had preexisted.

The Book of Acts informs that "it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called "Christians" (Ac 11:26). And according to Acts 24:5 and church fathers Tertullian and Epiphanius, in the beginning of Christianity all Christians were also called Nazarenes (=Nazoraeans). Some notable, modern scholars believe the post-apostolic Nazarene Jewish Christians were called Nazarenes since they were the successors of apostolic Christianity, having had a historical connection to the early Jerusalem church.^[3] If so, these Nazarenes rejecting that Jesus was God is strong evidence that the apostolic church at Jerusalem did too.

The Three Foremost Irrefutable Texts

Now let us return to the extant documents penned by the early believers in Jesus that have survived in the NT corpus, and let us see whether they say that Jesus is God. Two major points will emerge repeatedly in this book to show that Jesus cannot be God and that the NT provides a massive amount of evidence affirming this. These two points are that (1) only the Father is God, and (2) Jesus Christ is distinguished from God. Three irrefutable texts that declare both of these points are as follows, with the first one being in Jesus' high-priestly prayer and the other two occurring in Paul's writings:

- “And this is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent” (Jn 17.3).

- “There is no God but one.... yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him” (1 Cor 8.4, 6).

- “There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph 4.4-6).

These three texts establish without any doubt whatsoever that Jesus is not God. If there are other biblical texts which proclaim that Jesus is God, they conflict with these verses.

The Scarcity of Biblical Texts

So, what about those biblical texts which traditionalists claim identify Jesus as God? Indeed, some traditionalist expositors cite not a few of them. Scholarly authorities on this subject usually classify these passages by separating them into two categories: (1) those believed to call Jesus “God” *explicitly*, having *theos* in the Greek text, and (2) those believed to do so *implicitly*, not having *theos* in the Greek text.

Regarding the first category, the Greek NT contains twenty-two instances that contain the word *theos* which various traditionalist expositors throughout church history have thought identify Jesus as “God.”[4] However, the majority of recent traditionalist authorities—those who have written rather extensively on the subject of whether Jesus is God[5]—concede that most of these twenty-two biblical texts *do not* identify Jesus as “God” (Gr. *theos*). Murray Harris claims “only seven certain, very probable, or probable instances out of a total of 1,315 uses of *theos*” in the NT are applied to Jesus.[6] Harris provides a survey of twenty-seven of the most notable NT scholars who have written on this subject over the past century, and he observes, “the majority of [these] scholars hold that *theos* is applied to Jesus no fewer than five times and no more than nine times in the NT.”[7] Indeed, Oscar Cullman proposes at least nine;[8] R.N. Longenecker thinks there are “only eight or nine;”[9] A.W. Wainwright identifies seven;[10] Karl Rahner reckons for only six;[11] R.E. Brown decides that three are certain and five are probable.[12]

Historical critics are inclined to decide that there are even fewer *theos* texts applied to Jesus in the NT. For example, Rudolf Bultmann decides on only one for certain, it being Jn 20.28, and perhaps two or three others having some degree of divinity applied to Jesus. He concludes, “Neither in the synoptic gospels nor in the Pauline epistles is Jesus called God; nor do we find him so called in the Acts of the Apostles or in the Apocalypse.”[13] Vincent Taylor subscribes to Bultmann’s conclusion by saying, “The one clear ascription of Deity to Christ” in the NT is Jn 20.28.[14]

Some traditionalist authorities therefore admit that their position is not firmly rooted in Scripture. Wainwright explains, “Indeed it might have been expected that the predicate *theos* would have

been used of Jesus far more often in the pages of the New Testament.”[15] And John Macquarrie remarks in his typically candid style, “it may strike us as rather odd that such an apparently central Christian affirmation as ‘Jesus Christ is God’ is so minimally attested in the Scriptures that we have to hunt around for instances, and when we have found them, argue about what they really mean.”[16] Indeed.

It is also surprising that, with the possible exception of Jn 1.1c, none of these NT *theos* texts are found in any treatise, however brief, which identifies Jesus. Traditionalist R.E. Brown readily admits concerning these *theos* texts, “none of the instances attempt to define Jesus essentially.”[17] And he adds, “even in the New Testament works that speak of Jesus as God, there are also passages that seem to militate against such a usage.”[18]

Some contemporary traditionalists have sought to defend their position by offering an explanation for this scarcity of biblical support. Their most common explanation has been that calling Jesus “God” was a late NT development, so that those passages that are presumed to call Jesus “God” were authored at a late date.[19] (See Appendix C: Modern Christologies.) R.E. Brown is representative of this position. He asserts, “The New Testament does call Jesus ‘God,’ but this is a development of the later New Testament books. In the Gospels, Jesus never uses the title ‘God’ of Himself.”[20]

A few traditionalist scholars, e.g., M. Harris, reason that if the early Christians had called Jesus *theos* as regularly as they did the Father, Jews and pagan Gentiles alike would have tended to regard Christianity as di-theistic.[21] Harris therefore implies what R.N. Longenecker states outright,[22] that the early Christians largely avoided such an identification due to the likelihood of this misunderstanding. On the contrary, since when do we think that the first Spirit-filled, emboldened Christians formulated their theology in reaction to others, especially to non-believers? And why should we think that people in the 1st century would so react any more than people in any other century?

The Major, Debated *Theos* Texts

Scholars refer to these few texts, which arguably call Jesus “God,” as “the major, debated *theos* texts.” They are called “major” because they are considered of utmost importance compared to other *theos* texts that allegedly identify Jesus as “God.” They are called “debated” because, except for Jn 20.28>, there exists considerable disagreement among modern scholars as to whether these passages call Jesus “God.”

Indeed, upon examining these major, debated *theos* texts in various English translations of the Bible, it is surprising to learn that half or more of them are translated quite differently.[23] Some English versions translate these verses so that they read that Jesus is “God;” yet other reliable English versions do not translate them as calling Jesus “God,” but that the word “God” (*theos*) in such cases refers to the Father.[24]

(Throughout this book, these two variations in either interpretation or translation of a passage that mentions both God and Jesus will be referred to as follows: (1) “the one Person view” identifies Jesus as “God,” and (2) “the two Person view” mentions both God and Jesus as two separate Persons and therefore does not identify Jesus as “God.”)

In addition, some modern Bible versions translate these major, contested *theos* texts a certain way while including an alternate translation as a footnote, or a “marginal reading” (“mg”), which states otherwise. Accordingly, some particular text of a modern English version of the Bible might have a reading that identifies Jesus as “God” while the alternate reading does not identify Jesus as God.

William Barclay well summarizes this rather confusing situation. He explains, “It is when we begin to examine the evidence that we run into very real difficulties. The evidence is not extensive. But we shall find that on almost every occasion in the New Testament in which Jesus seems to be called God there is a problem either of textual criticism or of translation. In almost every case we have to discuss which of two readings is to be accepted or which of two possible translations is to be accepted.”[25] Barclay concludes, “One of the most vexed questions in Christian thought and language is whether or not we can directly and simply call Jesus “God.”[26]

Perhaps the most disturbing problem that Barclay hints at regards variants in the MS evidence.[27] Traditionalist D.A. Fennema observes, “Most of the passages which may call Jesus ‘God’ are plagued by textual variants or syntactical obscurity, either of which permits an entirely different interpretation of the passage.”[28] Oscar Cullmann similarly states, “Passages which apply the designation ‘God’ to Jesus are not numerous, and some of them are uncertain from the standpoint of textual criticism. Even in ancient times some people apparently attributed undue importance to the question whether or not Jesus was to be called ‘God’ ... This explains the many textual variants precisely in the passages.”[29] What Cullmann infers is the dreaded problem that textual critics sometimes encounter in the ancient Greek MSS of the NT or portions of it: scribal interpolations. These are unwarranted, purposeful, even fraudulent, insertions or alterations by copyists.

Many of these debated christological *theos* texts only contain grammatical problems that arise due to the unpunctuated Greek NT. That is, during the 1st century, when the documents that eventually comprised the NT were originally written in the Greek language, they had no punctuation, all letters were in upper case (uncials), and there were no spaces between words, as with the Hebrew Bible. Often, it is uncertain how the grammar of these critical verses in the Greek NT should be treated. Usually, the disputed text only concerns a brief phrase or a single word. The question may be whether to place a comma or a period in a certain place, or how to treat an indefinite (anarthrous) noun. These grammatical issues can be complex, if not incomprehensible, for most Bible readers because they do not know *koine* (“common”) Greek.

This grammatical uncertainty becomes even more evident when perusing these verses in the better NT commentaries. M. Harris explains, “it is a curious fact that each of the [disputed *theos*] texts ... contains an interpretative problem of some description; actually, most contain two or three.”[30] And A.E. Harvey alleges, “The New Testament writers ... show no tendency to describe Jesus in terms of divinity; the few apparent exceptions are either grammatically and textually uncertain or have an explanation which, ... brings them within the constraint of Jewish monotheism.”[31]

It is surprising to discover that, with the exception of perhaps only two of these NT *theos* passages, contemporary traditionalist authorities are about evenly divided as to whether these major *theos* passages call Jesus “God.” For instance, R.T. France adduces, “in many cases the

apparent direct attribution of divinity to Jesus melts away in the light of uncertainty about either the text, or the punctuation, or the syntax, leaving us with no undisputed (or almost undisputed!), direct attribution of divinity to Jesus outside the opening and closing declarations of the Gospel of John (Jn. 1:1; 1:18, 20:28).”[32]

Indeed, the two *theos* passages in the NT that traditionalist authorities have regarded as providing incontrovertible evidence that Jesus Christ is “God” are Jn 1.1c> (“the Word was God”) and Jn 20.28> (“Thomas ... said to Him, ‘My Lord and my God.’”). And this has held true among not only traditionalists but most historical critics. O. Cullmann calls these two texts “indisputable” evidence that Jesus is God;[33] M. Harris renders them “incontestable.”[34] These two texts will be examined in detail in Chapter Six, and we will see that a few of these authorities only regard Jn 20.28 as indisputable.

The following table shows all nine major, debated christological texts (arranged in their NT order) which contain the word *theos* and their type(s) of problem(s) and genre. (A difficulty with syntax is herein regarded as a grammatical problem.)

Table 1: Jesus as *Theos* in the New Testament

Text	Problem(s)	Genre	Translation (NASB)
Jn 1.1c	punctuation grammatical	hymn (?)	In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
Jn 1.18	textual grammatical	hymn (?)	No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him.
Jn 20.28	grammatical	confession	Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!"
Rom 9.5	punctuation grammatical	doxology	whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen
2Th 1.12	grammatical	doctrine	according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.
Tit 2.13	grammatical	prophecy	looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus
Heb 1.8-9	textual grammatical contextual	Old Testament citation	But of the Son He says, THY THRONE, O GOD, IS FOREVER AND EVER, . . . THEREFORE GOD, THY GOD, HATH ANOINTED THEE
2 Pt 1.1	textual grammatical	salutation	by the righteousness of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ
I Jn 5.20	grammatical	summary	we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.

The genre of these *theos* texts is significant. The first four listed above, in Table 1, appear in a liturgical context. Only one out of the nine—1 Jn 5.20—can legitimately be classified as didactical. Due to this evidence, some scholars concede that in such instances these authors were not primarily concerned with the doctrinal precision of most of these texts. Some of these scholars thus recommend caution in appealing to liturgical or otherwise non-didactical NT material when seeking to determine the identity of Jesus. Wilhelm Bousset especially cautions about NT hymns, “Singing is something different from the hard, fixed formula of doctrine and even from prayer.”[35] (See Appendix C: Modern Christologies.) Accordingly, Christology would have proceeded from exposition to hymnology rather than the reverse.[36]

Likewise, the categories in which these *theos* texts do not appear is significant as well. They are not in any of the following NT material: (1) the gospel sayings of Jesus, (2) the evangelistic speeches recorded in the book of Acts, (3) descriptive information about what the apostles preached, (4) definitions of the gospel, or (5) an author’s didactic expositions in which he seeks to establish Jesus’ identity. Obviously, these five categories are critical for determining what the NT teaches about the identity of Jesus.

In sum, this avalanche of evidence strongly suggests that grammatical problems in these few disputed *theos* texts should be resolved so that they do not call Jesus “God.”

The Debated, Non-*Theos* Texts

Most traditionalists further contend that the following major, non-*theos* NT texts *implicitly* identify Jesus as God: Jn 5.18; 8.24, 28, 58; 10.30-33; Phil 2.5-11; Col 1.19; 2.9; 1 Tim 2.5; 3.16. (Note that the last three appear in what are regarded as hymns or hymnal fragments.) Some traditionalists cite the following minor, non-*theos* texts as also implicitly identifying Jesus as God: Mt 1.23; 28.19; Mk 2.5-12; 10.17-18 par.; Jn 3.13; Ac 20.28; Gal 2.20; Eph 5.5; 1 Jn 5.7; Rev 1.8.

As for the OT, many traditionalist scholars regard the following as major, implicit texts that substantiate that Jesus is God: Gen 1.26; 3.22; 11.7; Isa 7.14; 9.6. And many traditionalists cite OT quotations or allusions to OT texts which appear in the NT and are applied to Jesus as further evidence that He is God.

In my book, *The Restitution of Jesus Christ*, I thoroughly address each of these major, debated *theos* and non-*theos* texts, showing that none of them identify Jesus as God.

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Endnotes

- 1 ET edited by Robert Kraft and Gerhard Krodel (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1971) German original 1934.
- 2 George Strecker, "on the Problem of Jewish Christianity," in *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, 241.
- 3 Petri Luomanen, "ebionites and Nazarenes," in *Jewish Christianity Reconsidered: Rethinking Ancient Groups and Texts*, edited by Matt Jackson-McCabe (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 99.
- 4 Jackson-McCabe, *Jewish Christianity Reconsidered*, 103; Wolfram Kinzig, "The Nazoraeans," in *Jewish Believers in Jesus*, edited by Oskar Skarsaune and Reidar Hvalvik (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 479.
- 5 E.g., Albrecht Ritschl, *Die Entstehung der altkatholischen Kirche: Eine kirchen-und dogmen-schichtliche Monographie*, 2nd ed. (Bonn, Germany: Adolph Marcus, 1857), 152-54; Ray A. Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity: From the End of the New Testament Period until Its Disappearance in the Fourth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 1988); Martinus C. de Boer, "The Nazoreans: Living at the Boundary of Judaism and Christianity," in *Tolerance and Intolerance in Early Judaism and Christianity*, edited by Graham N. Stanton and Guy G. Stroumsa (Cambridge: University, 1998). Indebted to Jackson-McCabe, *Jewish Christianity Reconsidered*, 82, 105.
- 6 Murray J. Harris, *3 Crucial Questions about Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 119n16.
- 7 The foremost include (in alphabetical order) W. Barclay, G.H. Boobyer, R.E. Brown, O. Cullmann, M. Harris, B.A. Mastin, K. Rahner, E. Stauffer, and A.W. Wainwright. See "Selected Bibliography."
- 8 M. Harris, *Jesus as God*, 274. See also p. 268.
- 9 M. Harris, *Jesus as God*, 274.
- 10 O. Cullman, *The Christology of the New Testament*, 308-14.
- 11 R.N. Longenecker, *The Christology of Early Jewish Christianity*, 139.
- 12 A.W. Wainwright, "The Confession 'Jesus is God' in the New Testament," 294.
- 13 Karl Rahner, "Theos in the New Testament," in Rahner's *Theological Investigations* 1:136.
- 14 R.E. Brown, *Jesus God and Man*, 23, 28-29.
- 15 Rudolf Karl Bultmann, *Essays, Philosophical and Theological*, tr. J.C.G. Greig (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 275.
- 16 V. Taylor, "Does the New Testament Call Jesus God? 118.
- 17 A.W. Wainwright, *The Trinity in the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 1962), 66. Likewise, R.N. Longenecker, *The Christology of Early Jewish Christianity*, 141.
- 18 J. Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*, 295.
- 19 Raymond E. Brown, "Does the New Testament Call Jesus God?" *JTS* 26 (1965): 572.
- 20 R.E. Brown, *Jesus God and Man*, 33.
- 21 E.g., R.E. Brown, R.T. France, A.W. Wainwright, J.L. D'Aragnon, and tentatively R.N. Longenecker.
- 22 R.E. Brown, *Jesus God and Man*, 86.
- 23 Murray J. Harris, "Titus 2:13 and the Deity of Christ," in *Pauline Studies: Essays Presented to Professor F.F. Bruce on His 70th*, eds. Donald A. Hagner and Murray J. Harris (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 265-66.
- 24 R.N. Longenecker, *The Christology of Early Jewish Christianity*, 140-41.
- 25 Of the eight major, disputed *theos* texts (so not including Jn 20.28 and 1 Jn 5.20), the following versions translate half as identifying Jesus as "God" and the other half as not: AV, RV, RSV, NEB. The NRSV even has five of the eight calling Jesus "God." So much for Christian Fundamentalists alleging the AV adheres to the true doctrine about Jesus more than modern versions do, especially the one preferred by (liberal) scholars!
- 26 See the chart published by Graeser-Lynn-Schoenheit (*One God & One Lord*, 618), which shows how the major English versions translate the major, disputed *theos* texts. This chart is reproduced from Victor Perry's journal article, "Problem Passages of the New Testament in Modern Translations: Does the New Testament Call Jesus God?" *ExpT* 87 (1975-76): 214-15. Incidentally, this chart shows that the NASB translates more of these texts as calling Jesus "God" than any other English Bible version. However, it wrongly cites the NEB as identifying Jesus as "God" in Jn 1.1c, surely a misunderstanding of that rendering

²⁷ William Barclay, *Jesus As They Saw Him: New Testament Interpretations of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1962), 20-21.

²⁸ W. Barclay, *Jesus As They Saw Him*, 20.

²⁹ Textual criticism is indispensable to the Bible. See, e.g., Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption and Restoration*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University, 1968); Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament: An Introduction to the Critical Editions and to the Theory and Practice of Modern Textual Criticism* [1981], tr. Erroll F. Rhodes (Grand Rapids: Leiden, 1987).

³⁰ D.A. Fennema, "John 1.18: 'God the Only Son,'" *NTS* 31 (1985): 125.

³¹ O. Cullmann, *Christology*, 307-08.

³² M. Harris, *Jesus as God*, 11.

³³ A.E. Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraint of History*, 157. Similarly, idem, "Christology and the Evidence of the New Testament," in *God Incarnate: Story and Belief*, ed. A.E. Harvey (London: SPCK, 1981), 52.

³⁴ R.T. France, "The Worship of Jesus: A Neglected Factor in Christological Debate?" in *Christ the Lord: Studies in Christology presented to Donald Guthrie*, ed. H.H. Rowdon, 23.

³⁵ O. Cullmann, *Christology*, 308.

³⁶ M. Harris, *Jesus as God*, 284.