

1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of recognizing that the New Testament identifies Jesus as deity, and yet as completely one with the Father, cannot possibly be over-stated. For the authors of the NT, this Christ himself became not only the interpretive grid, but also the sun at the centre of their scriptural universe, around which everything else has its orbit. Reflecting on the centrality of Christ in the Scriptures as displayed by these NT authors, Trejer states,

It is a Christian truism that Jesus Christ is central when reading the OT and NT as Scripture: he is their basic content, the Word of God; he gives them their form (in a certain sense *Old* and *New* Testaments); he himself is the aim toward which their reading should be oriented.¹

Schlatter, likewise, speaks of the importance of the identity of Christ in the apostles' teaching, saying that the early Christian message "in all its forms" focused on Jesus' identity—in particular, his "oneness with God."² This was so because "their success depended completely on their ability to transcend the notion that they worshipped the man Jesus in place of God or beside God. If they could not utterly discredit this charge, their work would disintegrate."³

Given the centrality and importance of the deity of Jesus Christ to the apostles and the early church, it comes as no surprise that throughout the NT Jesus' divinity is displayed in a diversity of ways. It is the aim of this paper to answer the question, "In what ways does the NT portray Jesus as divine?"⁴ The goal will be to cover material from the different authors and genres of the NT. We will first examine how Jesus' divinity is portrayed through the authority of his teaching and actions in the gospels. Second, we will note particular uses of both κύριος and θεός in reference to Christ, particularly in the epistles. Finally it will be noted how the ministry carried out and the worship offered to the name of Jesus clearly identify him as none other than true, almighty God.

2. A MAN WITH THE AUTHORITY OF GOD: JESUS' DIVINITY IN THE GOSPELS

Darrell Bock notes that whereas the number of times when Jesus is directly spoken of as "God" in the gospels is relatively small, it is "far more common" that Jesus, in his teaching and actions is seen to be "impinging upon space or prerogatives unique to God."⁵ As in Matt 11.2-6, where John the Baptist is instructed by Jesus, so we will likewise turn to what may be seen of Jesus' life in order that we may see what may be properly believed of him.

¹ Daniel J. Trejer, "Jesus Christ, Doctrine of," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 363.

² Adolf Schlatter, *The Theology of the Apostles: The Development of New Testament Theology*, trans. Andreas Köstenberger (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 33.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Obviously an exhaustive answer cannot be conducted here given our present constraints. We will rather work within the limits presently laid out.

⁵ Darrell L. Bock, *Jesus According to Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 605.

A. JESUS' AUTHORITY OVER THE OLD TESTAMENT. From the very beginning of his teaching ministry (the Sermon on the Mount), Jesus makes the double claim that he is the one to whom the OT points (Matt 5.17) and that he has the inherent authority to re-interpret and apply whatever his hearers had previously been taught (vv 21-48). Commenting on this passage, Stonehouse notes boldness of Jesus' teaching:

Six times Jesus, completely on his own authority, and without any attempt to vindicate his categorical declarations, seems to set his own pronouncements in antithesis to "that which had been spoken," the latter deliverances consisting of, or at least including, in every instance quotation from the law of Moses.⁶

Over against the will of God as the people of his day understood it, Jesus declares an authoritative interpretation for all people, "according to *his own authority* as the law's 'fulfiller'."⁷ Both up until this time and ever since no man has lived and preached with this authority. As Carson elsewhere notes from Matthew's gospel, "At the Transfiguration (Matt. 17:1-8), the whole point of the Matthean account is that Jesus alone and not even Moses or Elijah is to be heard as the voice of God; 'Listen to him!'"⁸ Thus the voice of God the Father is heard to be declaring the superiority of the authoritative revelation in Jesus as compared with that which came through Moses (the Law) and Elijah (the Prophets).

B. JESUS' AUTHORITY OVER THE SABBATH. Repeatedly throughout the gospels Jesus is seen to be flatly contradicting the expectations of Sabbath behaviour commonly held by the Jews of his day. Jesus' explanation for this is often a declaration his own authority, such as "one greater than the temple is here" and "the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath" (Matt 12.6, 8). Jesus' boldness in "working" on the Sabbath could elsewhere be used to display his oneness with the Father:

When Jesus heals a man on the Sabbath (John 5), he claims that God has given him authority to work on the Sabbath, to give life, and to raise the dead. These three privileges belonged only to God. Jesus' claim that he rightfully exercises these prerogatives because God has authorized him to do so is not lost on his hearers, who hear in his words an impious claim to equality with God.⁹

This type of claim to be carrying out the work of God with the authority of God smacked of blasphemy to his disbelieving audience, who clearly perceived that he was claiming equality with God himself, and therefore divinity.

⁶ Ned B. Stonehouse, *The Witness of the Synoptic Gospels to Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1944), 198.

⁷ D.A. Carson, "Matthew," in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, v.8, ed. Frank Gæbelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 148. Emphasis added.

⁸ D.A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to the Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 75. For a discussion on the role of such "reliable statements" concerning Jesus and their role in developing the Christology of Matthew, see Terence L. Donaldson, "The Vindicated Son," in *Contours of Christology in the New Testament*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 108-109.

⁹ Paul J. Achtemeier, Joel B. Green, and Marianne Meye Thompson, eds. *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 187-188.

C. JESUS' AUTHORITY TO FORGIVE SINS. As Bock notes, it is often the works of Jesus which draw the most attention to his claim to divinity. Thus in Luke 5:17-26 and 7:36-49 where Jesus freely forgives people of their sins, "the leadership complains that he is claiming to do something only God can do. . . . He is claiming to make himself equal with God."¹⁰ Rather than denying or avoiding this challenge from his opponents, Jesus seems desirous in both accounts of drawing public attention to the fact that he has done God's work. Thus, we can conclude that the gospel writers have included these pericopes for the very same reason: to challenge the reader to evaluate Jesus' claims. And we must not miss them, since "Jesus' opponents appear to appreciate the significance of his actions and what they ultimately mean."¹¹ Something so obvious to Jesus' contemporaries must not be overlooked; in forgiving the sins of humans, Jesus is claiming the rights and responsibilities of deity, and making himself to be equal with God.

3. JESUS AS KYPIOS AND ΘΕΟΣ

A. JESUS AS KYPIOS. It must be noted first that we are not primarily dealing with the gospels in this section, since "when people address Jesus as 'Lord' in the Gospels, this is often no more than a customary polite form of address."¹² Rather, we will aim more narrowly at the post-resurrection narratives in Acts and the canonical epistles of the early church.

In the book of Acts, following the account of the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the word κύριος takes on new significance for the earliest Christians. As C.C. Newman observes,

The resurrection undeniably revealed Jesus' true identity as the divine Lord, the *kyrios* (Acts 2:36). Numerous times within the narrative does Acts specifically identify Jesus as the 'Lord' (Acts 1:6, 21; 4:33; 7:59; 8:16; 9:5-6; 11:17, 20; 15:11, 26; 16:30; 19:5, 13; 20:21, 24; 21:13; 22:8; 26:15; in many other places implied). By employing the same word used by the Septuagint to translate the divine name (i.e., Yahweh) as a title for Jesus, Acts comes close to binitarianism.¹³

Trejer agrees, noting that while during his lifetime "Lord" was merely a term of respect akin to "sir" in modern usage, after Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension "its use as the Greek equivalent of the OT Yahweh becomes significant."¹⁴

This significance is carried on from Acts into the epistles of the early church. Of particular significance are the NT passages where OT texts specifically referring to

¹⁰ Bock, *Jesus According to Scripture*, 605.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² I.H. Marshall, "Jesus Christ," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, eds. T. Desmond Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, D.A. Carson, and Graeme Goldsworthy (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 599. For some possible exceptions to this, see Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 544-545. Among the more plausible are Matt 3:3; 22:44; Luke 1:43; 2:11, 18. Nevertheless, the normal use of κύριος throughout the gospels is still simply a "polite address to a superior" (544).

¹³ C.C. Newman, "God," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997), 416.

¹⁴ Trejer, "Jesus Christ", 364.

Yahweh are said to be fulfilled in Christ, who is κύριος.¹⁵ One such text is found in Phil 2.9-11. Here Trejer notes that

Paul uses this name to identify Jesus with Israel's covenant God—in shocking fulfillment of a strong monotheistic text, Isa. 45:21-24. The exaltation of a human being to share in what was, and is now fully revealed to be, Yahweh's identity was a remarkable claim.¹⁶

In this particular context it is essential to note the importance of both names in general, and of the name of Jesus in particular. “In ancient thought a ‘name’ was employed not only as a means of distinguishing one person from another but also as ‘a means of revealing the inner being, the true nature of that individual’.”¹⁷ So in a context where names are significant for identifying the essence of the person it is especially significant to note, with O'Brien the following:

The name (τὸ ὄνομα is definite) greater than any other that God conferred on Jesus as a gracious gift (ἐχαρισματο) is his own name, κύριος ('Lord'), in its most sublime sense, that designation used in the LXX to represent the personal name of the God of Israel, that is, *Yahweh*.¹⁸

O'Brien concludes by noting the greatness of this honour by viewing this statement in light of Is 42.8: “ἐγὼ κύριος ὁ θεὸς τοῦτο μου ἐστὶν τὸ ὄνομα τὴν δόξαν μου ἐτέρῳ οὐ δώσω.” Other passages of similar thrust and importance include 1 Cor 8.6; 12.3; Heb 1.10-12; Rev 19.16, however, space restrictions will not allow for in-depth discussion of these passages here.¹⁹

B. JESUS AS ΘΕΟΣ. Many of the passages which may speak of Jesus as θεός are heavily debated, and some with good reason. The ones which most certainly do refer to Jesus as Θεός are John 1.1; 20.28; Rom 9.5; Tit 2.13; Heb 1.8; and 2 Pet 1.1.²⁰ For our purposes we will need to limit ourselves to a discussion of Rom 9.5 and John 20.28.

Rom 9.5 is famously difficult to translate on account of the great role to be played by punctuation absent from the original. As Witherington sums up, “the argument turns on whether the verse should be read ‘the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever’ (as the NRSV has it), or ‘the Messiah, who is God over all, blessed forever’ (as JB, NIV, and the marginal reading of NRSV have it).”²¹ Schreiner observes that most objections to Christ being here referred to as θεός “though diverse, boil down to one fundamental

¹⁵ See, for some examples, Matt 3.3; Mark 1.3; Acts 2.21; Rom 10.9, 13; 1 Cor 12.3.

¹⁶ Trejer, “Jesus Christ”, 364.

¹⁷ Peter T. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 237.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 238. Emphasis original.

¹⁹ For a more extended discussion of κύριος implying Jesus' deity, see J.I. Packer, *God's Words* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus), 48-51.

²⁰ The most extensive work on this is Murray J. Harris' book, *Jesus as God: The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), where he deals in-depth with these and several other texts.

²¹ Ben Witherington III, “Jesus as the Alpha and Omega of New Testament Thought,” in *Contours of Christology*, ed. Longenecker, 35.

objection: it is improbable that Christ would be called θεός since this is uncharacteristic of Paul elsewhere.”²²

This argument, however, from external tendencies and based on limited evidence must not be allowed to overrule plain grammatical evidence. “The natural antecedent to ὁ ὢν is Χριστός, for doxologies are virtually always attached to the preceding word and asyndetic doxologies do not exist.”²³ Again, grammatically, “it is easier and more natural to maintain an identity of subject from ὁ Χριστός to ὁ ὢν, since there is grammatical concord between the noun and the participle, than it is to assume a change of subject.”²⁴ Therefore, in this passage there are three distinct affirmations made about Christ: “he is Lord of all, he is God by nature, and he will be eternally praised.”²⁵

In John 20.28 the grammar is much simpler and less debated. While there are several alternatives given by various commentators, they are quickly refuted by Harris as unlikely for lack of evidence which, when present, is based largely on Classical tendencies. Rather, the simplest—and best attested—way to understand Thomas’ cry is as a vocative address to Jesus himself.²⁶ Köstenberger points out that “in the OT, ‘Lord’ and ‘God’ are frequently juxtaposed with reference to Yahweh (e.g. Ps. 35:23-24),” just as they are here to Jesus.²⁷

Where it is objected that Thomas’ confession, as recorded in this passage, is too developed for coming only one week after Easter, it must be remembered that (1) there is little evidence to suggest that such Christological titles took time to evolve, and, (2) there are accounts in the Jewish OT—with which Thomas would have been familiar—where men found themselves talking with a man, only to discover to their shock, that it was Yahweh himself. Moreover, the repeated pronoun μου makes Thomas’s confession of faith intensely personal, thus fitting together with the purpose of the book expressed in the immediate context (v 31).²⁸ This confession of Jesus as ὁ θεός μου also functions to form a literary bookend with John 1.1 and 1.18, where Jesus is also referred to as θεός. “In the Johannine narrative, the evangelist desires that the reader respond in the same way Thomas did.”²⁹

4. IN JESUS’ NAME: PRAYER TO AND WORSHIP OF JESUS AS GOD

Aside from being portrayed as deity by his authority in his earthly ministry, and declared to be both “Lord” and “God” throughout the NT, Jesus is also strongly implied to be deity by virtue of the activities which are carried out in his name by his followers.

²² Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 487.

²³ *Ibid.*, 488.

²⁴ Harris, *Jesus as God*, 171.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 167.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 110-111.

²⁷ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 579.

²⁸ D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 658-659.

²⁹ Köstenberger, *John*, 579.

A. PRAYER TO JESUS. Adolf Schlatter, in his discussion of the early church, speaks of the unifying effect of the doctrine of Christ as divine, and the unified church which resulted. The centrality of Jesus' divinity

becomes clear in view of the community's prayer. For its hallmark was that it called upon the name of Jesus (1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Tim. 2:22; Rom. 10:13; Acts 9:21; 22:16; 7:59). Faith directed toward him finds its closest, most simple result in moving man to request his grace and help. The thought that Jesus could be called upon without calling upon God did not arise in the early church. It directed its adoration, its thanksgiving, and its petition to God.³⁰

In other words, this monotheistic community of believers drew together in prayer to Jesus Christ by virtue of their belief in his deity. The NT bears witness to this reality, as is shown by his citations. To his list may be added 1 Cor 16:22; 2 Cor 12:8; and Rev 22:20.³¹ This is a remarkable fact for God-fearing Jews who understood that there is only one God who created the heavens and the earth, and who is able to answer prayer (Dt 6.4; 2 Kgs 19.15).

B. WORSHIP OF JESUS. Heb 1.6 declares that not only men, but also the angels of God are to worship Jesus, and this is the pattern that is laid down for us in the records of the earliest Christians. Throughout the NT "doxologies are addressed to him, either alone (Rom. 9:5 ... 2 Tim. 4:18; 2 Pet 3:18; Rev. 1:5f.) or with the Father (Rev. 5:13; 7:10)."³²

Nor is the worship of Jesus something which is seen to decrease as the church grew. Rather, the book of Revelation records some of the most glorious scenes of Jesus being worshiped.

The lamb in Revelation is both Redeemer and Ruler, the Judge who died for his people, the Lamb-God, who is both slain and triumphant, Lord of lords and King of kings (Rev. 17:14; 19:16).³³

Along similar lines as Woodbridge, Newman notes that "in a book that venerates God's omnipotence in unprecedented ways, it is surprising to find that Revelation also openly encourages and models the worship of the enthroned Jesus."³⁴ Several examples of this may be given, including 1.6; 5.9, 12, 15; 7.10; and 12.10. He continues, "Revelation legitimates and promotes the worship of Jesus and God—the worship of Jesus as God—and it does so at the very places where God is worshiped and with the very language that is used to venerate God."³⁵

Commenting on Rev 1.6, Mounce concludes that this is an "ascription to Christ of glory and dominion forever and ever. In this context, 'glory' is praise and honor, and

³⁰ Schlatter, *Theology of the Apostles*, 365.

³¹ Packer, *God's Words*, 49.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ P.D. Woodbridge, "Lamb," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 622.

³⁴ Newman, "God," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, 428.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

‘dominion’ connotes power and might. ... The statement is both a confident assertion about the exalted Christ and an exhortation to regard him correspondingly,” which is—among other things—to worship him as the true, conquering King of kings and Lord of lords (19.16).³⁶

5. CONCLUSION

Stephen Neill is indeed correct in his summation, that “the Christian finds that he can never think of God without thinking of Jesus Christ, and that he can never think of Jesus Christ without thinking of God.”³⁷ In the NT, the faith of the apostles and the early church is seen to be one which is profoundly centred on the person of Jesus. His deity is inherent in the authority with which he acts in the gospels, it is transparent in the titles of κύριός and θεός as ascribed to him throughout the NT, and it is powerfully evident as he is prayed to and worshiped by the church as a whole. It is experientially true for New Covenant believers that “even the Old Testament idea of God, magnificent as it is, no longer covers the Christian’s experience and has had to be radically transformed. Vast new dimensions have been added.”³⁸ We have spoken of great things, but it will never be enough. Endless eternities of exploration will never allow us to plumb the depths of the realities of this man-God; this conquering, victorious Lamb who loved me and gave himself for me. So let us begin now!

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³⁶ Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 50.

³⁷ Stephen Neill, *What We Know About Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 83.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

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