

## THE DEITY OF CHRIST IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

Written to produce faith in Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of God” (John 20:31), the gospel narrative of the apostle John could be titled “The Gospel of Belief in the Deity of Jesus.” From beginning to end, the beloved apostle reveals the God-Man, Jesus. This is not to say that John reflects the belief of the early church in an exalted and supernatural Jesus void of any foundation in the historical reality of His life. The God-Man of history must precede the God-Man of faith. This order alone provides a reasonable explanation for the amazing proclamation of this Jewish writer that Jesus is God.

The opening statement of the gospel reads, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Three facts concerning the relationship of the Word (the *logos* who is Jesus, John 1:14-15, 29) to God are proclaimed here. First, the Word exists eternally with God. “John does not say that the Word had a beginning. But he is asserting that when there came to be a beginning the Word was there.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, “there never was a time when the Word was not. There never was a thing which did not depend on Him for its very existence”<sup>2</sup> (cf. Colossians 1:16). *In the beginning the Word was.*

Second, the Word exists as a distinct personality in close supplication and fellowship with God. Literally, the Word was “towards,” “right up next to,” or “face to face” with God.

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<sup>1</sup>H. D. McDonald, *Jesus—Human and Divine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1968), 96.

<sup>2</sup>Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 73.

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The Greek preposition *pros* “expresses nearness combined with the sense of movement towards God and so indicates an active relationship. The Logos and God do not simply exist side by side, but are on terms of living intercourse, and such fellowship implies separate personality.”<sup>3</sup> The Word and God, therefore, are distinct and at the same time one (John 10:30; 17:22).

Third, the Word exists as God. In nature, essence, and being, the Word is Deity. The *New World Translation* of the Jehovah’s Witnesses attempts to avoid the force of John’s statement by translating “the Word was a god.” This is based on the absence of any definite article before *theos* in the Greek text. Beside implying polytheism, however, this rendering is inconsistent with other passages in the *New World Translation* where the anarthrous *theos* is rendered “God” with a capital “G” (John 1:6, 12, 13). This mistranslation also overlooks the following rule of Greek grammar.

A definite predicate nominative has the article when it follows the verb; it does not have the article when it precedes the verb. . . . The absence of the article does *not* make the predicate indefinite or qualitative when it precedes the verb; it is indefinite in this position only when the context demands it. The context makes no such demand in the gospel of John.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 76, citing G. H. C. MacGregor, *The Gospel of John* (London, UK: n.p., 1928), no page given.

<sup>4</sup>Bruce M. Metzger, “The Jehovah’s Witnesses and Jesus Christ,” *Theology Today* X, no. 1 (April 1953), 75, citing E. C. Colwell, “A Definite Rule for the Use of the Article in the Greek New Testament,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* LII, no. 1 (April 1933), 12-21.

John omits the article and thereby “emphasizes Christ’s participation in the essence of the divine nature”<sup>5</sup> without denying the fellowship of Jesus with the Father. Usage of the article would equate *theos* and *logos* as regarding personality and would deny the previous statement of John that “the Word was with God.”

As Morris suggests, “John is leaving open the possibility that there may be more to “God” than the “Word” . . . but when he thinks of the Word he lays it down unequivocally that nothing less than God will do for our understanding of the Word.”<sup>6</sup> In this respect, the opening verse of John sets the tone for the entire gospel. It provides the foundation for Christ’s being sent into the world and the mission He was sent forth to accomplish. McDonald believes, “Precisely because the Word was personally distinct from God, and is yet essentially God, He could make God known—for only through God is God known.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1927), 140.

<sup>6</sup>Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, 78.

<sup>7</sup>McDonald, *Jesus—Human and Divine*, 96.

That Jesus realized His essential oneness with God is plain.<sup>8</sup> Jesus told the Jews, “My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working” (John 5:17). While the Jews spoke of “our Father” when referring to God, Jesus “habitually thought of God as in the closest relationship to Himself.”<sup>9</sup> He addresses God as “My Father” (cf. 6:32, 40; 10:25, 29; 14:2; 15.1, 8, 10, 15, 23; 20:17), and compared His person and His activity with that of God. The Jews did not fail to grasp the significance of this. They sought to kill Jesus, since He “was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God” (5:18). On another occasion, Jesus explicitly asserts, “I and the Father are one” (10:30). It is evident that Jesus means more than unity of purpose or unity of will with the Father as indicated again by the reaction of the Jews (vv. 31-33). “The anger of the Jews against Jesus is explicable only on the basis of their understanding him to claim for himself equality with God.”<sup>10</sup>

So intimate is this equality, this Father-Son association, that Jesus tenderly uses the collective “we” when speaking to the Father (John 17:11, 21, 22). Jesus is in the Father, and the Father is in Jesus (14:10). To have known Jesus is to have known the Father (14:7), and to have

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<sup>8</sup>An objection to this oneness is the saying of Jesus: “the Father is greater than I” (John 14:28). It is asserted that, regarding His humanity, Jesus is inferior to the Father. But the passage is not comparing the divinity of Christ with His humanity; the passage speaks of the subordinate position of the Son to the Father due to the incarnation (Philippians 2:6-11). From His position of humiliation the Son would return to the Father to be glorified and exalted (John 14:12). Once exalted, Jesus would give greater power to His disciples. Jesus places no qualification on statements of oneness with the Father; His purpose is to comfort His followers.

<sup>9</sup>Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, 309.

<sup>10</sup>Metzger, “Jehovah’s Witnesses and Jesus Christ,” 309.

seen Jesus is to have seen the Father (14:9, 11; cf. 6:46). To believe in Jesus is to believe in the Father (12:44; cf. 14:1), and to hear the words of Jesus is to hear the words of the Father (3:34; 12:49-50). Both Father and Son act mutually (5:19, 20); they bestow life (5:21; cf. 11:25) and execute judgment (5:22-29; cf. Acts 17:31). The Father and the Son are deserving of equal honor (5:23), and both are possessors of inherent life (5:26; cf. 1:4).

These interrelated and interpenetrating aspects of their being spring forth from their eternal co-existence. Before the days of Abraham (John 8:58), from the very beginning (1:1-2), even prior to the foundation of the world (17:5, 24), the *logos* existed with *I AM*. When Jesus declares, “Before Abraham was, I AM,” He claims for Himself the incommunicable name of Yahweh (see Exodus 3:14; cf. Deuteronomy 32:39; Isaiah 43:10), the eternal One of the Old Testament. The Jews fully understood His claim as a reference to absolute Deity, because they attempted to stone Him for blasphemy (John 8:59; cf. Leviticus 24.16).

Having been sent forth (John 3:17; 10:36; 11:42; 17:3) and sealed (3:31; 6:27) by the Father, this eternally existing *logos* descended from above (3:31; 8:23). He became flesh and dwelt among men (1:14) and operated as the revelatory agent of God (1:18). He therefore rises far above mere humanity by working and existing from God, for God, and as God. His Deity finds expression in the terminology used by John to define His office. He is God’s anointed and appointed, “the Christ,” the Coming One who declares all things (4:25-26; 11:27). He is “the Son of Man” who alone has ascended into heaven (3:13; cf. Acts 2:34). He is “the Son of God”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Note the Jewish understanding of the use of this title in John 19:7.

and “the King of Israel” (1:49). He is “the Holy One of God” (6:69) and “Lord” (13:13-14; 21:15-17). Above all He is “one of a kind from the Father” (*monogenes para patros*, 1:14), “one of a kind God” (*monogenes theos*, 1:18),<sup>12</sup> and “one of a kind Son of God” (*monogenous huiou tou theou*, 3:18; cf. v. 16). In contrast with many adopted sons (1:12-13; cf. Galatians 4:5), He is *Only*<sup>13</sup> Son. Being God Himself and having a continuous dwelling place in the bosom of the Father, the Son sustains a unique and affectionate relationship with the Father.<sup>14</sup> They are two, yet they are one.

This oneness of essence permits John to attribute to Jesus qualities belonging only to God. Jesus is eternal (John 1:2, 15, 30; cf. 1 Timothy 1:17; 6:16); He forgives sins (1:29; 8:34-36; cf. Mark 2:7) and thereby brings peace (14:27; 20:19-23); He is all-knowing and has perfect

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<sup>12</sup>This variant is favored over *monogenes huios* in the following Greek texts: Kurt Aland, et al., eds., *The Greek New Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York, NY: American Bible Society, 1966), 322; and Eberhard Nestle, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 25<sup>th</sup> ed., eds. Erwin Nestle and Kurt Aland (London, UK: United Bible Societies, 1963), 231.

<sup>13</sup>This is the preferred meaning of *monogenes*, literally “‘one of a kind,’ ‘only,’ ‘unique,’ (*unicus*), not ‘only-begotten,’ which would be *monogennetos* (*unigenitus*).” James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1930), 416-417. “The idea of ‘only begotten’ goes back to Jerome who used *unigenitus* in the Vulgate to counter the Arian claim that Jesus was not begotten but made.” Karl Heinz Bartels, “*Monos*,” *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. II, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976), 725.

<sup>14</sup>Whether the Sonship of Jesus is economical (temporal) or ontological (eternal) is disputed by theologians. Vos argues strongly for the latter alternative. Geerhardus Vos, *The Self-Disclosure of Jesus*, ed. Johannes G. Vos (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1954), 196-226. Compare Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Lord of Glory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, n.d.), 198-199.

knowledge of all men (1:47-50; 4:16-19, 29, 39; 16:30; 21:17); He foretells future events (2:19-22; 14:29; 16:4; 21:18; cf. Isaiah 46:9-10); He possesses miraculous power (2:1-11; 4:46-54; 5:1-9; 6:19; 9:1-7; 20:30-31); He has power even over death (11:25, 43-44; 20:1-18); and He receives and accepts worship (9:38; 11:32; 20:28; cf. Matthew 4:10). Concerning this last point, how could the doubter Thomas, when he saw the risen and nail-scarred Jesus, restrain from crying, “My Lord and My God”? This is an open confession of Deity. “If Jesus were not truly divine as God is divine, Thomas erred seriously in thus adoring him as God.”<sup>15</sup> The proof that Thomas made no mistake lies in the realization that Jesus does not rebuke but commends the faith of Thomas (20:29). To Jesus belongs the full and unreserved honorific “God.”

To Him who can be and do what God alone can be and do belongs the fullness of Deity (see Colossians 2:9). Jesus can proclaim, “*I am* the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6); “*I am* the light” (8:12; cf. Isaiah 60:19-20); and “*I am* the good shepherd” (10:11; cf. Isaiah 40:10-11). In these claims, especially the last, Jesus performs functions identical to that performed by Yahweh. In fact, John cites two statements made by the prophet Isaiah concerning the LORD (Yahweh) as a reference to Lord Jesus (12:38, 40; cf. Isaiah 53:1; 6:10). John writes, “These things Isaiah said, because he saw His glory, and he spoke of Him” (12:41). What Isaiah beheld was the glory of *Yahweh* (see Isaiah 6:3). What John says is that Isaiah beheld the glory of *Jesus* (12:36-37). John does not distinguish between the two (cf. 1:23; Isaiah 40:3). To John it is plain that in Jesus the full glory of Yahweh is displayed and made known. So completely does Jesus

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<sup>15</sup>Metzger, “Jehovah’s Witnesses and Jesus Christ,” 71.

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portray Yahweh's glory that John unhesitatingly presents *Him* as the object of Isaiah's vision and, by doing this, presents *Him* as Yahweh.

John is clear as to the identity of the *logos* he proclaims. He is Man-Jesus; but more importantly He is God-Jesus. To miss this point, the reader must be biased against the teachings of John.

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