

Jesus is God

Exploring the Notion of Representational Deity

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Isn't it interesting how one statement can be shocking and controversial in one setting and totally mundane in another? For example, if someone came into a room of NASCAR enthusiasts and said, "racing is so boring to watch—all they do is take left turns over and over," immediately all activity in the room would screech to a halt so that one could hear a pin drop as each person with blazing eyes fixed their best death stare on the intruder. However, if the same phrase were uttered in a room of *normal* people, there might be a brief chuckle but then life would go on. So it is with the phrase, "Jesus is God." Among my own biblical, unitarian¹ brothers and sisters, this statement is not only understood as false and pejorative, it may well trigger memories of instances of persecution and ridicule. Yet, in any other Christian context, trinitarian or modalist,² the phrase is utterly mundane and doesn't even warrant raising an eyebrow. Even so, there are at least two instances in the New Testament in which Jesus is called God.³ So, the question we need to ask is not, "Is Jesus God?" but, "What does the Bible mean when it says, Jesus is God?"⁴ But, before we look at these two places in the New Testament, it is necessary to build our understanding of a biblical notion, representational deity, in order to give us the required interpretive tools to understand what the Bible means when humans are called "Gods."

The word "God" actually has quite a few meanings.⁵ However, when considering what the Bible means by calling Jesus God, we will limit ourselves to two: (1) God in the sense that the Father is called God in Scripture (i.e. Jesus is deity) (2) God as a human representative who is called, "God," because he functions as God to the people. Since everyone is already familiar with the notion, "Jesus is ontologically God," we shall focus our time on the second proposition—the idea of representational deity—before approaching our two New Testament texts. Here are some helpful lexical entries on the word, "God," which mention this representational sense:

The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew Lexicon (BDB)

אלהים:2570 n.m.pl. (f. 1 K 11:33; on number of occurrences of אֱלֹהִים, אֱלֹהִים cf. also Nes:l. c.)

1. *pl.* in number. a. *rulers, judges*, either as divine representatives at sacred places or as reflecting divine majesty and power...b. *divine ones*, superhuman beings including God and angels...c. *angels*...d. *gods*
2. *Pl. intensive.* a. *god or goddess*, always with sf. 1 S 5:7 (Dagon), Ju 11:24 (Chemosh),...b. *godlike one* Ex 4:16 (J; Moses in relation to Aaron), Ex 7:1 (P; in relation to Pharaoh), 1 S 28:13 (the shade of Samuel), Psalm 45:7 (the Messianic king...). c. *works of God*, or things specially belonging to him d. *God* (vid. 3 & 4).
3. אֱלֹהִים *the (true) God*, יהוה האלהים *Yahweh is (the) God* Dt 4:35, 4:39, 7:9, 1 K 8:60, 18:39, 18:39,...
4. אֱלֹהִים = *God* אֱמֶת אֱלֹהִים = *Yahweh is God in truth* Je 10:10...

Friberg Greek Lexicon

θεός, οὐ, ὁ and ἡ

- (1) as the supreme divine being, the true, living, and personal *God* (MT 1.23; possibly JN 1.1b);
- (2) as an idol *god* (AC 14.11); feminine *goddess* (AC 19.37);
- (3) of the devil as the ruling spirit of this age *god* (2C 4.4a);
- (4) as an adjective *divine* (probably JN 1.1b);

¹ We use the term "biblical unitarian" here as denoting someone who because of their trust in the Bible comes to the belief that the Father is the only true God. This is not to be confused with the Unitarians, a non-Christian group of people who do not hold to the veracity of Scripture and are usually called, "Unitarian Universalists."

² Modalism is the belief that God is a single individual who manifests himself in three modes (like an actor changing his costume between acts). Thus Jesus is the Father—they are not two distinct "persons."

³ The two, are John 20.28 and Heb. 1.8. For comments on John 1.1, 14 see Appendix 1. For comments on John 1.18; Acts 20.28; Rom. 9.5; 2 Thes. 1.12; Tit. 2.13; 2 Pet. 1.1; 1 John 5.20 see Appendix 2.

⁴ In this paper I use "God" rather than "god" though a case can be made either way depending on how one distinguishes the meaning of the capital. I am reserving "god" for false gods, i.e. pagan deities, whereas I use "God" for either the one true God or someone who represents him to the people. My reason for this is that the humans who were called "God" were not so called because of their own claim to deity, but because they derived the name from he whom they represented. I am not dogmatic on this point but I had to adopt some convention for this paper. In the end it doesn't really matter because neither the Hebrew nor the Greek manuscripts used capitalization.

⁵ Some of the more unusual usages can be found in Appendix 3.

- (5) figuratively; (a) of persons worthy of reverence and respect as magistrates and judges *gods* (JN 10.34);
 (b) of the belly when the appetite is in control *god* (PH 3.19)

Thayer's Greek Lexicon

Θεός, Θεοῦ, ὁ and ἡ, vocative θεῶ...

1. a general appellation of *deities or divinities*: Acts 28:6; 1 Cor. 8:4; 2 Thess. 2:4;...
2. Whether Christ is called God must be determined from John 1:1; 20:28; 1 John 5:20; Rom. 9:5; Titus 2:13; Heb. 1:8f, etc.; the matter is still in dispute among theologians cf. Grimm, *Institutio theologiae dogmaticae*, edition 2, p. 228ff (and the discussion (on Rom. 9:5) by Professors Dwight and Abbot in the *Journal of the Society for Biblical Literature*, etc. as above, especially, pp. 42ff, 113ff).
3. spoken of *the only and true* God: with the article, Matt. 3:9; Mark 13:19; Luke 2:13; Acts 2:11, and very often; with prepositions...
4. Θεός is used of *whatever can in any respect be likened to God, or resembles him in any way*: Hebraistically, equivalent to *God's representative or vicegerent*,⁶ of magistrates and judges, John 10:34f after Ps. 81:6 (Ps. 82:6)...; of the devil, ὁ Θεός τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου (see αἰών, 3), 2 Cor. 4:4; the person or thing to which one is wholly devoted, for which alone he lives, e. g. ἡ κοιλία, Phil. 3:19.

Gingrich Greek Lexicon

Θεός, οὔ, ὁ and ἡ *God, god* a term generally used in the ancient world of beings who have powers or confer benefits that lie beyond the capacity of mortals. In translation the capitalized term *God* refers to a specific deity and ordinarily to the One God of Israel.—

- I. God of Israel, as opposed to other so-called deities Gal 4:8; as revealed to the Patriarchs Lk 20:37 ; as Creator Mk 13:19; as the Father who sent Jesus Christ J 17:3; as Father uniquely of Jesus Christ Ro 15:6; as the Parent of believers 1:7; ἀσπείρος τῷ θεῷ *very beautiful* (lit. 'beautiful in the sight of God') Ac 7:20; ὁ Θεός as a vocative *O God!* Lk 18:11.—
- II. Other than the God of Israel—1. of nonmortals, nonspecified *so-called gods* 1 Cor 8:5 (in the heavens); Gal 4:8; God Raphia Ac 7:43; ἡ θεός *the Goddess* (Artemis), who is unique from the perspective of the non-Christian and non-Jewish Ephesians Ac 19:37; the Devil, *the God of this age* 2 Cor 4:4.—2. of human beings, nonspecified J 10:34f; 1 Cor 8:5 (on earth); Herod Ac 12:22; Paul 28:6.—3. of a thing, the belly Phil 3:19.—
- III. of Christ J 1:1, 18; 20:28; Hb 1:8 (vocative ὁ θεος); 2 Pt 1:1.

These lexicons ably demonstrate that there is a legitimate secondary or figurative sense that applies to the word, "God." Humans are called "God" in the Bible but this could mean that the person being called God is not actually a distinct god from Yahweh, the true God, but one who represents him to the people. In order to see how this works out, that is, how humans are called God in a representational sense, we will work through a number of texts from the Hebrew Bible and then approach the New Testament. Our Old Testament data can be neatly divided into three categories: (1) Moses called God, (2) the Judges of Israel called Gods, (3) and the Davidic King called God. First we need to consider two critical incidents from the life of Moses.

Exodus 4.14-16 ¹⁴ Then the anger of the LORD burned against Moses, and He said, "Is there not your brother Aaron the Levite? I know that he speaks fluently. And moreover, behold, he is coming out to meet you; when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart. ¹⁵ "You are to speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I, even I, will be with your mouth and his mouth, and I will teach you what you are to do. ¹⁶ "Moreover, he shall speak for you to the people; and he will be as a mouth for you and **you will be as God to him.**

In this instance, Yahweh tells Moses that he will be *as* God to Aaron. This is a good example of "functional deity," that is, Moses functions as God to Aaron in that he will tell Aaron what to say to Pharaoh. It is noteworthy that

⁶ According to Merriam-Webster, a vice-gerent is an administrative deputy of a king or magistrate.

Moses does not self-identify as God, nor does Aaron call him such, but Yahweh is the one who designates Moses to be “as God” to Aaron.

Exodus 7.1-2 Then the LORD said to Moses, "See, I make you *as* God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet. ² "You shall speak all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall speak to Pharaoh that he let the sons of Israel go out of his land.

In this second account, Yahweh says, “I make you God to Pharaoh.” The word, “as,” is not in the Hebrew text. Again, the idea is very similar to the one in chapter four: since Moses was to tell Aaron the message which would be given to Pharaoh, he is functioning in the typical role that God would have. If this were all the data on the subject, we would have to admit that it doesn’t amount to much, but there is more, the judges of Israel were also called Gods.

At the outset, it is important to note that a judge in ancient Israel was more than someone who presided over court cases, but he or she also functioned in a wide variety of administrative capacities (cp. Samuel, Gideon, Deborah, etc.). When someone made the decision to become a bondsman the law dictated that he should be taken to the judges to have his ear pierced. In this case, the judge would act like a notary in our society, a witness that the event was legitimate.

Exodus 21.5-6 ⁵ But if the servant should declare, 'I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free,' ⁶ then his master must bring him to **the judges**, and he will bring him to the door or the doorposts, and his master will pierce his ear with an awl, and he shall serve him forever.

Here is the shocking fact about this rather mundane piece of Old Testament legislation: the word, “judges,” is really the word for God, *elohim*. So, why would the translators put in “judges” if the word is “Gods” (or “gods”)? I suspect the answer is that they did it for the sake of clarity. In our culture, if we see the word, “God,” we assume the Creator, the being who lives in heaven. However, to the Hebrew mind, one could call the judges “Gods” because they represented God to the people. In order to show that this is not an isolated case, we have two more texts to consider with regard to judges. The next is quite similar.

Exodus 22.8-9 ⁸ "If the thief is not caught, then the owner of the house shall appear before **the judges**, to determine whether he laid his hands on his neighbor's property. ⁹ "For every breach of trust, *whether it is* for ox, for donkey, for sheep, for clothing, *or* for any lost thing about which one says, 'This is it,' the case of both parties shall come before **the judges**; he whom **the judges** condemn shall pay double to his neighbor.

Again, the judges are called “Gods” because of their role. They represent Yahweh, the God of justice, and they are to judge the people with equity. In other words, God judges his people through the human judges who have his authority invested in them. But, what happens when justice is not upheld? What happens when the judges, who were meant to represent God, perverted justice for a bribe? Our next text comes from the Psalms and describes God’s judgment of the judges for their wickedness.

Psalms 82.1-8 God takes His stand in His own congregation; He judges in the midst of **the rulers**. ² How long will you judge unjustly And show partiality to the wicked? Selah. ³ Vindicate the weak and fatherless; Do justice to the afflicted and destitute. ⁴ Rescue the weak and needy; Deliver *them* out of the hand of the wicked. ⁵ They do not know nor do they understand; They walk about in darkness; All the foundations of the earth are shaken. ⁶ I said, "You are **gods**, And all of you are sons of the Most High. ⁷ "Nevertheless you will die like men And fall like *any* one of the princes." ⁸ Arise, O God, judge the earth! For it is You who possesses all the nations.

Once more, the judges (here translated as “rulers”) were called *elohim*. In fact, some translations say, “he judges in the midst of the gods.” Below are two notes from the NIV Study Bible, which wonderfully explain what is occurring here in this psalm.

Note from NIV Study Bible on Ps. 82

As the Great King and the Judge of all the earth who “loves justice” and judges the nations in righteousness, he is seen calling to account those responsible for defending the weak and oppressed on earth. An early rabbinic interpretation (see John 10.34-35) understood the “gods” (vv. 1, 6) to be unjust rulers and judges in Israel, of whom there were many.

Note from NIV Study Bible on Ps. 82.1

In the language of the OT—and in accordance with the conceptual world of the ancient Near East—rulers and judges, as deputies of the heavenly King, could be given the honorific title “god” or be called “son of God.”

According to Albert Barnes, author of the *Barne’s Notes* commentary, the “gods” mentioned in Ps. 82.1 refer “undoubtedly to magistrates...”

“...and the idea is, that they were to be regarded as representatives of God; as acting in his name; and as those, therefore, to whom, in a subordinate sense, the name gods might be given. Comp. ver. 6. In Ex 21.6; 22.8-9, 28, also, the same word in the plural is applied to magistrates, and is properly translated *judges* in our common version. Comp. Notes on John 10.34, 35. The idea is, that they were the representatives of the divine sovereignty in the administration of justice. Compare Rom 13.1-2, 6. They were, in a sense, *gods* to other people; but they were not to forget that God stood among them as their God; that if they were exalted to a high rank in respect to their fellow men, they were nevertheless, subject to the One to whom the name of God belonged in the highest sense.”⁷

There is scholarly debate on whether or not Psalm 82 originally referred to Israelite judges or if the psalm should be better understood as a bold polemic against the Ugaritic, Canaanite gods (in particular El) with which it is often compared. I find myself more swayed by the way in which Jesus apparently understood this passage in John 10. But, before we look at how Jesus quoted Psalm 82, we shall look at our third category for how the Old Testament calls humans “Gods.” In at least two key places the Davidic king is called, “God.” The first is found in a beautiful, royal, wedding psalm—Psalm 45.

Psalm 45.1-2, 6-7, 9 My heart overflows with a good theme; I address my verses to the King; My tongue is the pen of a ready writer. ² You are fairer than the sons of men; Grace is poured upon Your lips; Therefore God has blessed You forever... ⁶ Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; A scepter of uprightness is the scepter of Your kingdom. ⁷ You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; Therefore God, Your God, has anointed You With the oil of joy above Your fellows... ⁹ Kings' daughters are among Your noble ladies; At Your right hand stands the queen in gold from Ophir.

The psalmist exudes with a joyful song over his king’s wedding.⁸ In it he exalts the Davidic king as “fairer than the sons of men,” one on whom “grace is poured,” and one whom “God has blessed.” Then in a shocking way (or at least to us), he addresses the king as “God.” Even so, the king still has a God who is termed, “God, your God.” It is important to realize that this Psalm did not originally refer to the Messiah, though it can easily and correctly be applied to him (as occurs in Heb. 1). Here are what the scholars are saying about this Psalm:

⁷ Albert Barnes, *Barnes’ Notes: Notes on the Old Testament (Psalms Volume 1)*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), p. 328 (Reprinted from the 1847 edition published by Blackie & Son, London).

⁸ From the NAB fn #1 on Psalm 45: “A song for the Davidic king’s marriage to a foreign princess from Tyre in Phoenicia. The court poet sings (Psalm 45:2,18) of God’s choice of the king (Psalm 45:3,8), of his role in establishing divine rule (Psalm 45:4-8), and of his splendor as he waits for his bride (Psalm 45:9-10). The woman is to forget her own house when she becomes wife to the king (Psalm 45:11-13). Her majestic beauty today is a sign of the future prosperity of the royal house (Psalm 45:14-17). The psalm was retained in the collection when there was no reigning king, and came to be applied to the king who was to come, the messiah.”

sn 16 from NET on Ps. 45.6

O God. The king is clearly the addressee here, as in vv. 2–5 and 7–9. Rather than taking the statement at face value, many prefer to emend the text because the concept of deifying the earthly king is foreign to ancient Israelite thinking (cf. NEB "your throne is like God's throne, eternal"). However, it is preferable to retain the text and take this statement as another instance of the royal hyperbole that permeates the royal psalms. Because the Davidic king is God's vice-regent⁹ on earth, the psalmist addresses him as if he were God incarnate. God energizes the king for battle and accomplishes justice through him. A similar use of hyperbole appears in Isa 9:6, where the ideal Davidic king of the eschaton¹⁰ is given the title "Mighty God" (see the note on this phrase there).

Note from NIV Study Bible on Psa 45.6

Possibly the king's throne is called God's throne because he is God's appointed regent. But it is also possible that the king himself is addressed as "god." The Davidic king (the "LORD's anointed," 2 Sam 19.21), because of his special relationship with God, was called at his enthronement the "son" of God. In this psalm, which praises the king and especially extols his "splendor and majesty" (v. 3), it is not unthinkable that he was called "god" as a title of honor (cf. Isa 9.6)...

We will return to this particular passage in a little while when we investigate Heb 1.8-9. Yet, before looking at the New Testament, we need to consider a master, Davidic text, which has been used by thinkers from both trinitarian and modalist camps: Isaiah 9.6-7.

Isaiah 9.6-7 ⁶ For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; And the government will rest on His shoulders; And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷ There will be no end to the increase of *His* government or of peace, On the throne of David and over his kingdom, To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness From then on and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this.

The modalists use this text to teach that the Messiah is not only God but also the "eternal Father." Naturally, from the limited view of just these two verses, this interpretation is eminently reasonable, but in view of the mass of the New Testament data it is not at all likely because Jesus and his Father are always distinguished as two distinct individuals with each having their own will (cf. Luke 22.42). The standard trinitarian interpretation has leaned rather heavily on the phrase "mighty God" while simultaneously saying that "eternal Father" is metaphoric. Yet, now scholars are coming to say that neither of these positions is very likely. In fact, Isaiah probably did not have trinitarian theology in mind whatsoever when he called the future Messiah, "mighty God." Here is what they are saying now:

tn 18 from NET on Isa 9.6

גִּבּוֹר (*gibbor*) is probably an attributive adjective ("mighty God"), though one might translate "God is a warrior" or "God is mighty." Scholars have interpreted this title in two ways. A number of them have argued that the title portrays the king as God's representative on the battlefield, whom God empowers in a supernatural way (see J. H. Hayes and S. A. Irvine, *Isaiah*, 181–82). They contend that this sense seems more likely in the original context of the prophecy. They would suggest that having read the NT, we might in retrospect interpret this title as indicating the coming king's deity, but it is unlikely that Isaiah or his audience would have understood the title in such a bold way. Ps 45:6 addresses the Davidic king as "God" because he ruled and fought as God's representative on earth. Ancient Near Eastern art and literature picture gods training kings for battle, bestowing special weapons, and intervening in battle. According to Egyptian propaganda, the Hittites described Rameses II as follows: "No man is he who is among us, It is

⁹ According to Dictionary.com Unabridged a vice-regent is a deputy regent; a person who acts in the place of a ruler, governor, or sovereign.

¹⁰ The eschaton is "the end," commonly denoted in Scripture as "the age to come" or "the kingdom of God."

Seth great-of-strength, Baal in person; Not deeds of man are these his doings, They are of one who is unique" (See Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 2:67). According to proponents of this view, Isa 9:6 probably envisions a similar kind of response when friends and foes alike look at the Davidic king in full battle regalia. When the king's enemies oppose him on the battlefield, they are, as it were, fighting against God himself. The other option is to regard this title as a reference to God, confronting Isaiah's readers with the divinity of this promised "child." The use of this same title that clearly refers to God in a later passage (Isa 10:21) supports this interpretation. Other passages depict Yahweh as the great God and great warrior (Deut 10:17; Jer. 32:18). Although this connection of a child who is born with deity is unparalleled in any earlier biblical texts, Isaiah's use of this title to make this connection represents Isaiah's attempt (at God's behest) to advance Israel in their understanding of the ideal Davidic king for whom they long.

Our purpose in quoting the NET Bible note is to demonstrate that the concept of representational deity is not some *ad hoc*, unitarian contrivance, but a valid and even preferred interpretation for these texts, which even evangelical scholars legitimate. But, if this is the case, that the Hebrew people could call humans, "God," in a representational sense, then what does that mean when we arrive at the New Testament and find at least two instances in which Jesus is called, "God?" Before we look at those two instances, it is necessary to determine whether or not *this* usage of the word "God" was still current as late as the first century. In order to investigate this concept a bit further, let us turn to the New Testament and the words of Jesus himself.

Though the overwhelming majority of the 1,317 occurrences of the word, "God," in the New Testament refer to the Father, there are a few verses in which others are called, "God."¹¹ One such instance is critical for our understanding because it involves Jesus using the word, "God," in this secondary or representational sense.

John 10.31-39 ³¹ The Jews picked up stones again to stone Him. ³² Jesus answered them, "I showed you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you stoning Me?" ³³ The Jews answered Him, "For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy; and because You, being a man, make Yourself out to be God." ³⁴ Jesus answered them, "Has it not been written in your Law, 'I SAID, YOU ARE GODS '?' ³⁵ "If he called them gods, to whom the word of God came (and the Scripture cannot be broken), ³⁶ do you say of Him, whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God '?' ³⁷ "If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; ³⁸ but if I do them, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father." ³⁹ Therefore they were seeking again to seize Him, and He eluded their grasp.

Jesus had told them that he and his Father were united in the task of caring for the sheep. The Jews had misunderstood him (a major theme throughout the Gospel of John) and tried to stone him because "you, being a man, make yourself out to be God." Here is a serious opportunity for Jesus to speak to the issue we are investigating. What does he say? Does he levitate himself two feet off the ground and in the voice of many waters say, "I am the God of your ancestors and your puny, little stones can't hurt me?" Of course not! Remarkably he responds by referring them to Ps. 82, a text we have already mentioned. Essentially he asks them, "If the judges were called Gods (because they received the word of God), what is wrong with calling me the Son of God?" Anthony Buzzard's comments on this text are instructive:

"Quoting Psalm 82.6, he pointed out that the word "God" could be legitimately used of human beings who enjoyed special positions as divinely commissioned agents. "God" in the case of the judges of Israel

¹¹ Assuming Jesus is only called God twice out of the 1,317 occurrences of the word in the NT, that would amount to 0.15%. Assuming that all of the disputed texts in appendix 2 do call Jesus God (a total of 7 texts) this would bring our number up to 0.68%. Please note that this number is less than even one percent! Thus, even if we gave the benefit of the doubt to those saying that all 9 texts call Jesus God we all have to agree that these occurrences are sufficiently rare as to raise our suspicion, especially if the teaching of Christ's deity is supposed to be the climax of the New Testament.

certainly did not mean God, the Almighty. No one would claim Deity in that sense for these human leaders of Israel...Jesus based his argument for a correct understanding of "Son of God" on this Psalm where "gods" are defined as "sons of God": "I said, 'You are gods, and all of you are *sons of the Most High.*' Nevertheless you will die like men" (Ps. 82.6, 7).

It is unreasonable to maintain that Jesus changed this special Old Testament meaning of the word "god," equivalent to the phrase "Son of God" ("Sons of the Most High"), when he expressly appealed to Psalm 82 to clarify his own right to the title "Son of God." In countering the charge of blasphemy, Jesus laid claim to a unique position as divine agent. He is the supreme example of a human ruler invested with divine powers...Thus Jesus' defense of his own status explicitly contains the claim *not* to be Almighty God. Trinitarians frequently pass over John 10.34-36 in silence."¹²

Thus, Jesus himself understood that the word "God" can be applied to both the Creator and those who represent him to the people. Furthermore, Jesus, opted for the latter definition when the question of his own claim to the title came into question.

Now that we have done the necessary background work, it is time to broach our initial question, "What does the Bible mean when it calls Jesus God?" In our brief survey of the Hebrew Scriptures we came across roughly three cases in which humans were called God. The first was when Moses was called God because he was functioning as God—he was giving Aaron the message to tell Pharaoh. The second instances were those in which the judges of Israel were called Gods because they represented God and were invested with his authority to uphold justice. The third consisted of references to the Davidic king being called God. However, we must note that all three of these references find easy application for Jesus of Nazareth. He is *the* prophet like Moses (Deut. 18.18; Acts 3.22; 7.37), the ultimate eschatological¹³ judge who has been invested with God's authority to judge and resurrect (Dan. 7.13-14; John 5.21-27; Acts 17.31), and *the* Davidic king whose destiny is to rule over Jacob forever (2 Sam. 7.14-16; Ps. 2.6-8; Luke 1.31-33). Thus, Jesus is triply qualified to be called God in a representational sense, and we should not be surprised that he is called God, but we should even anticipate it based on what we have seen so far. Two undisputed texts, in which Jesus is called God, are found in Heb. 1.8 and John 20.28. John 1.1 does not call Jesus God, but it does call the pre-incarnate word God (see Appendix 1 for more on this). We will not focus on what Raymond Brown calls, the dubious texts, John 1.18; Acts 20.28; Rom. 9.5; 2 Thes. 1.12; Tit. 2.13; 2 Pet. 1.1; 1 John 5.20 (see Appendix 2 where I offer some thoughts on each). Rather, we shall begin with Heb. 1.8 and then work backwards to the famous confession of Thomas in John 20.28.

The purpose of the first chapter of Hebrews is to exalt Jesus above the angels. This is done by applying several key Old Testament passages to Jesus. One of these texts is contained in Heb. 1.8-9.

Hebrews 1.8-9

but of the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, and a righteous scepter is the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness. So God, your God, has anointed you over your companions with the oil of rejoicing."

The quotation is from Psalm 45.6-7 to which we have already referred. Remember, that this was a text in which the Davidic king was addressed as God. However, it was clear in the original context that this person was not actually God, but God's representative who ruled God's people on God's behalf. What better text to transfer to the ultimate, Davidic king—the Messiah! Surely if Solomon (or whoever Psalm 45 was originally addressed to) could be called "God" by the psalmist then surely Jesus, as the supreme representative of God, the incarnate word of God, the one who perfectly reflected the image of God, can also be called "God" in this sense. In fact, we contend that this is the only responsible interpretation of Heb 1.8-9 available to us. If we were to conclude that

¹² Anthony Buzzard & Charles Hunting, *The Doctrine of the Trinity: Christianity's Self-Inflicted Wound*, (Lanham, MD: International Scholars Publications, 1998), pp. 45-46.

¹³ Something that is "eschatological" has to do with the God's ultimate purpose for the world to be brought about in the end when God's will is done on earth as in heaven.

Jesus was actually a second God or a second member of the same God we would be twisting the text rather than reading it in light of its Old Testament background. If the author of Hebrews had just said, “Jesus is God and he is going to rule over the kingdom of God,” or something to that effect, there would be no issue here. However, this is not the case; rather, the author is engaged in an extended “proof-texting” exercise. His aim is to demonstrate through the Scriptures who Jesus is and why he is superior to the angels. Besides, even if we did completely ignore the representational sense in which the Davidic king is called “God” here, we would not end up with an orthodox viewpoint because we would have two Gods, not two members of one God. Note, the Son is called “God” and then told that “God, your God, has anointed you.” Thus the first God, the Son, has a God, the one who anoints him. If we were to chop this New Testament application from its Hebrew roots we would unwittingly foist polytheism on the writer of Hebrews, not trinitarianism.

But, what of our beloved brother Thomas; is he the first proto-trinitarian? To John 20.28 we must now turn to see if our hypothesis is robust enough to explicate, without coercion, the famous exclamation, found on the lips of Thomas, “my lord and my God.” First, some background information may be helpful to set the scene. Eight days earlier, the disciples had all seen the resurrected Jesus, except for Thomas, and told him about it. However, Thomas, the skeptic, replied, “Unless I see the wounds from the nails in his hands, and put my finger into the wounds from the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will never believe it!” (John 20.25). Shockingly, Jesus appeared in their midst again, this time with Thomas present, and following his greeting, turns his attention to our doubter and says, “Put your finger here, and examine my hands. Extend your hand and put it into my side. Do not continue in your unbelief, but believe” (John 20.27). To this Thomas replied, “my lord and my God” (John 20.28).

Calling Jesus, “my lord” is completely non-controversial and was the typical address one would have made to a whole range of human superiors in their culture. However, the second phrase, “my God,” brings up a critical question about what exactly Thomas meant. So far as I can tell, this phrase can be understood in at least six senses (or a combination of them): as polytheistic, modalistic, ontological, figurative, politically subversive, or representational. I will take each of these options in turn, but first, we need to lay some theological groundwork to understand Thomas’ presuppositions. Since he was a first century, Palestinian Jew, he was no doubt reared to confess the central creed of Israel: the Shema. “Hear O Israel, Yahweh our God, Yahweh is one” (Deu. 6.4). Thomas was trained by his Jewish parents to be a strict monotheist who believed that Yahweh alone was God (2 Kin. 19.19). This was understood universally by Jews to mean that no other gods existed other than Yahweh, who himself was a singular individual (a “he” not a “we”). It is fair to assume that Thomas was a biblical unitarian, at least up until we come across the phrase in question.

Polytheism: Was Thomas saying that in addition to the Father, the God of his childhood, he was now encountering *another* God? If the conversation had taken place in Rome or Ephesus and the participants were not Jews but Gentiles, this would be highly likely. However, as we noted above, Thomas was not a Gentile who grew up worshiping the household deity along with the city, country, and imperial gods. No, he grew up in a culture that had been cured of idolatry through the Babylonian exile, and which took great pains to never return to the idolatrous practices of first temple Judaism. Polytheism was not on Thomas’ mind here, nor should it be in ours.

Modalism: Was Thomas saying that now he had come to understand, by virtue of the resurrection, that Jesus was in fact the God of his Bible (the Old Testament)? Is Thomas the first “Jesus Only” believer? This possibility is possible based on just this context, but again we would have major difficulties working this idea together with the typical Jewish notions about God that were around at the time. For example, the same Gospel, John, states, “No one has seen God at any time” (John 1.18), a thought that Paul echoes in his letter to Timothy when he says that the only God is invisible (1 Tim 1.17). In addition we find frequent statements throughout the New Testament that God was the Father of Jesus.¹⁴ So, if we take the rest of the New Testament as the orthodox view, and Thomas meant that Jesus was the Father, the only true God, then he was mistaken.

¹⁴ Rom. 1.7; 15.6; 1 Cor. 1.3; 8.6; 2 Cor. 1.2-3; 11.31; Gal. 1.3; Eph. 1.2-3, 17; 5.20; 6.23; Php. 1.2; 2.11; Col. 1.3; 3.17; 1 The. 1.1, 3; 3.11, 13; 2 The. 1.1-2; 2 The. 2.16; 1 Tim. 1.2; 2 Tim. 1.2; Phm. 1.3

Ontological: Did Thomas believe that Jesus was a co-equal, co-eternal member of the tripersonal God? Was he confessing that now he saw Jesus as an ontologically divine person *of* God? Since the notion of consubstantiality (the idea that multiple persons all share the substance or essence of God) was completely foreign to the Hebrew thought world of the first century, it is not plausible that this is what Thomas had in mind. No, the notion of multiple persons *in* God had to wait for the highly trained Greek/Christian philosophers of the following centuries. To read later trinitarian theology from the fourth century into this simple confession is anachronistic and mischievous.

Figurative: Nearly two weeks before, at the last supper, in response to a question that Thomas had asked, Jesus replied, "If you had known me, you would have known my Father also; from now on you know him, and have seen him" (John 14.7). Then, after Philip requested further clarification, Jesus said the following:

John 14.9-11

Have I been so long with you, and *yet* you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how *can* you say, 'Show us the Father '? ¹⁰ "Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works. ¹¹ "Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me; otherwise believe because of the works themselves.

Jesus was telling them that God was at work within him. By seeing Jesus this whole time, they were really seeing God in and through him both in word and in deed. Did they really believe this? To what degree did the disciples grasp this concept? Could it be that Thomas, the doubter, was skeptical even at this early moment, and that finally when he encountered the risen Jesus, he confessed that Jesus was his lord and now he knew that his God was in Christ? This possibility depends on breaking the phrase "my lord and my God" into two parts and applying the first to Jesus and the second to the God who was at work in Jesus. If this were the case, I imagine that Thomas would have looked Jesus in the eye while saying "my lord" and then changed his tone a bit and shifted his eyes to say "and my God" in a way that would be clear to all that he was not actually calling Jesus his God. This option, though plausible, lacks a certain convincing power due to the lack, in the text, of any indication that Thomas was not addressing both "my lord" and "my God" to Jesus. Surely John would have inserted a parenthetical for explanation if this was the case as he does in other instances in his Gospel when the text may be read in multiple different ways (i.e. John 2.21-22)

Political Subversion: According to Raymond Brown, Domitian, the Roman emperor at the time of the writing of John's Gospel was called "Lord and God."¹⁵ Could it be that Thomas was juxtaposing Jesus for Caesar by calling Jesus his Lord and his God? Much research has been done, in particular on Paul's writings, which has detected a good deal of anti-imperial subversion in them. There is not yet a consensus among scholars that early first century Christianity actively opposed the imperial cult by applying Caesar titles to Jesus.¹⁶ Even so, what has made much of this research plausible is the fact that Paul was writing to several major cities, not the least of which was Rome, in which the imperial cult was known to have been active. However, our question concerns Thomas, not Paul, in Jerusalem, not Rome, in private conversation, not in a public letter. Could it be that Thomas was making an anti-imperial political confession here? Our answer is probably not—unless we take a more liberal approach to the Gospel of John. For example, if we believed that John was not actually trying to record the words of Thomas, but rather place words on Thomas' lips, in order to communicate some religious truth to his community. Since John was probably living in Ephesus at the time of the writing of this Gospel it is at least plausible to suggest that he would want to subvert the growing Caesar cult through the Thomas confession. Even still, if this were John's agenda, would we not expect to find anti-imperial, subversive statements throughout his Gospel?

Representational: Was Thomas confessing that Jesus was not only his lord but also the authorized representative of God on earth—the one destined to rule the world on God's behalf? Jesus had been crucified for claiming to be God's Messiah. His death proved to everyone that he was a false Messiah. One can scarcely imagine the depths of

¹⁵ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), p 189.

¹⁶ cp. the recent debate between N.T. Wright and John Barclay at SBL (2007).

despair to which the disciples were driven during the days immediately following Jesus' crucifixion. One can just imagine the sorts of thoughts that were clashing within their minds. On the one hand they would be trying to come to terms with the fact that he was dead. They might have thought, "Somehow, we have been deceived...Jesus is not the Messiah...he is dead...not only is he dead but he was publicly executed by the state for claiming to be the Messiah...he was publicly discredited in the most humiliating way imaginable...and to make everything worse, the Torah says that he is under God's curse because 'cursed is everyone that hangs on a tree.'" But then another whole set of thoughts would rush in: "but he healed the sick...he cast out demon after demon...he was righteous...to think that he was pulling off a great deception is impossible...he was attested by God with miracles...he told the storm to be quiet...he raised Lazarus from the dead...he must be the Messiah." We can imagine how these two groups of thoughts would wage war in the minds of the disciples. They were confused; they were at a loss to understand how this could have happened—how Jesus could have been crucified. This experience of cognitive dissonance was extenuated for Thomas because he was the last one to see Jesus. He would not allow himself to believe that Jesus was resurrected even though the women, Peter, the two who were on their way to Emmaus, and even the other eleven had all told him that they had seen him alive. Thomas probably felt that he needed to protect himself by not getting his hopes up (like he had done before) so they wouldn't be dashed to pieces. But, what must it have been like when Thomas finally saw Jesus? Suddenly, in his astonishment, the one last obstacle to faith removed, Thomas came to believe that Jesus was indeed resurrected. But what did that mean to him? What we encounter in John 20.28 is not careful, theological reflection on the event, but a knee-jerk response. Thomas was confessing something he had been denying for the last dozen or so days. Jesus was in fact who he claimed to be: the Davidic king, the Messiah, the holy one of God, God's Son, and the supreme representative of God. The sign that had been hung above his head on the cross which was meant to be a sarcastic absurdity, was now doubly ironic because in that gruesome event the people really were witnessing the crucifixion of God's Messiah! Now at last, all doubts were assuaged and Thomas saw and came to believe exactly what John's intended purpose was for writing his Gospel—that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God—and that is what is conveyed when Thomas said, "my Lord and my God."

Even though we are advocating the representational view for John 20.28, we are the first to admit that the verse, when taken by itself, in the modern context of trinitarian Christianity, can easily be claimed as a supporting pillar of the dogma. Nevertheless, it is better to take the verse in the context of the historical situation (i.e. Thomas suddenly came to see and believe that Jesus was alive). Even so, the trinitarian (or modalist) surely would respond, "That is precisely what we are doing. Jesus was resurrected from the dead, which proves that he is God." To this our response is twofold. (1) Resurrection proves the exact opposite. Since God cannot die (1 Tim. 1.17), and only dead people are resurrected, the resurrection actually proves that Jesus is not God. Our opponent may retort, "You are assuming that death means his whole being died and not just his body." Not at all, we make no such assumption. In 1 Tim. 1.17 God is "immortal" which literally means "not can die." One's definition of death is not at all the issue here. Let's say for a moment, that Plato was right, that death really is no more than the separation of the soul from the body (i.e. just the body dies). If this is one's definition for death, then this is precisely the thing Jesus cannot do if he is God. In other words, if death means the death of the body, then Jesus certainly died on the cross, which in turn means that he was not immortal, and thus not God. (2) Our second response to the claim that resurrection proves that Jesus is God is that it lacks biblical support outside of this incident. How did the earliest Christians interpret Jesus resurrection? What do we find in the sermons contained in Acts? Do we ever find them saying, "Jesus was resurrected, a fact to which we are witnesses, which shows that he is really God?" In order to peer into the minds of the earliest Christians and see how *they* interpreted Jesus' resurrection, consider these texts:

Acts 2.32, 36 ³² "This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses...³⁶ Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ-- this Jesus whom you crucified."

Acts 10:40-42 ⁴⁰ "God raised Him up on the third day and granted that He become visible, ⁴¹ not to all the people, but to witnesses who were chosen beforehand by God, *that is*, to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead. ⁴² "And He ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead.

Acts 17:2-3 ² And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³ explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and *saying*, "This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ."

Acts 17:31 because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead."

The Christians saw the resurrection as proof that Jesus really was who he claimed to be—the human Messiah. This is not the same as saying that he is God nor is there the slightest justification for mutating “Son of God” into “God the Son.” The message was not, “Jesus did all these miracles and last of all he raised himself from the dead, showing to everyone that he really is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” No, the message was focused on what God had done *in* Christ (not *as* Christ). Jesus is “a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through him” (Acts 2.22). He was crucified, not by accident, but “by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2.23). They killed him *but* “God raised him up” from the dead (Acts 2.24). He has been exalted to the right hand of God and the holy spirit is the indication of this. Therefore, let everyone know, that “God has made him both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2.36). Jesus is the eschatological judge of the whole world—the Messiah—and we know this is the case because God raised him from the dead.

So what happened to this Hebrew conception of Messiah? What happened to the notion that Jesus was God in a representational or functional sense? Our thesis is that once Christianity left its native soil and was transplanted into the Greco-Roman context, a curious series of mutations occurred that eventually climaxed in the Chalcedonian understanding of Jesus as the God-Man. What was originally orthodoxy became heresy and vice versa—the faith was corrupted due to the syncretistic spirit of the times. First Jesus was understood to be God in an ontological rather than representational sense. Then, when people began to worship Jesus as a God in addition to the Father, they were driven to ask questions about polytheism and idolatry. The three Cappadocians of the late fourth century (who were steeped in Greek philosophy) articulated the Constantinopolitan Creed of A.D. 381 as a solution to this problem.¹⁷ Their work was as complex as it was mysterious: the Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God, and yet there are not three Gods but one who subsists in three persons. This solution, while ingenious and erudite, was completely unnecessary because the problem for which the trinitarian formulation provides a solution was itself illusory. If the Hebrew Scriptures are used to calibrate our interpretive lenses through which we investigate the Christology of the Greek Scriptures, this phantom crisis of two Gods dissipates like fog in the heat of the day. Unfortunately, the majority of the fourth century Christians were “utterly imprisoned in Hellenistic concepts, notions and thought-models which would have been completely alien to the Jew Jesus of Nazareth and the earliest community.”¹⁸ Hans Küng goes on to say, “Had people kept to the New Testament, they would have spared themselves the notorious difficulties which now arose over the relationship of the three persons ‘in’ God, all the speculations over the numbers one and three.”¹⁹ If our hypothesis about the mutation of unitarian monotheism into trinitarianism is correct, then there are major implications for countless Christians who have lived and died under this “orthodox” corruption. As frightening as this possibility may be to entertain, we dare not squelch our own quest for truth for the sake of those who have believed otherwise. It is intellectually dishonest and cowardly to perpetuate a known error for the sake of convenience. We do not need to make judgments about other people’s salvation; rather we need to work out our own salvation with fear and

¹⁷ Of course, Christians had been long at work on formulating the doctrine of the Trinity before this, but the creed of A.D. 381 marked the final form that this process produced. Often called the Nicene Creed, the Constantinopolitan Creed incorporated what was hammered out in A.D. 325 at Nicea and expanded it (most notably in regards to the Holy Spirit) into the formulation with which we are familiar today. Even so, the more elusive questions about Jesus’ nature were not finally worked out until A.D. 451 at Chalcedon.

¹⁸ Hans Küng, *Christianity: Essence, History, and Future*, (NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1994), p. 182.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 173-4.

trembling. May God and his Son through the influence of the holy spirit shine the glorious light of truth into our hearts and give us strength to fearlessly press forward in our quest to move Godward.

Appendix 1 – A Note about John 1.1, 14

In the prologue to the gospel of John, Jesus is not called God. “The word” is God in John 1.1c, but “the word” is not one-to-one equivalent with Jesus. It is not until verse 14 that the word becomes Jesus. At most we can say that the pre-incarnate word was God. But, even this requires some explanation. Are we talking about a second God in addition to the God mentioned in John 1.1b? Are there two Gods mentioned in John 1.1? This is unlikely considering the fierce monotheism of John the Jew in the remainder of his Gospel (cf. esp. John 17.3; 20.17). So what does the phrase, “the word was God,” mean? Before attempting an answer to that question we must back up a step and ask the question, “What is the word?” Is the word an individual? Is the word an angel or a person within the Godhead? Or is the word more like an idea in the mind of God—a plan for salvation? In order to biblically approach this question, we shall simply observe that in the 42 books of the Bible that preceded the Gospel of John, the word was never a person. The word for “word” in Hebrew is *davar* and in Greek it is either *logos* or *rema*. Below are some charts which enumerate how the NASB translated these words. By looking at how the “word” was translated in both Hebrew and Grekk Scriptures we can gain a greater scope for how the word, “word,” should be understood. (I have bolded the instances which were most frequent.)

Davar

account(2), account(2), act(1), **acts**(52), advice(3), affair(3), affairs(3), agreement(1), amount(2), annals(1), answer(6), answer(5), anything(12), anything(4), asked(1), because(10), business(3), case(9), cases(1), cause(3), charge(2), Chronicles(3), **Chronicles**(38), claims(1), **command**(11), commandment(1), commandments(1), Commandments(2), commands(1), compliments(1), concerned(1), concerning(1), concerning(3), conclusion(1), conditions(1), conduct(2), conferred(1), consultation(1), conversation(1), counsel(1), custom(1), customs(1), dealings(2), decree(2), deed(2), deeds(3), defect(1), desires(1), dispute(5), disputes(1), doings(1), duty(1), edict(1), eloquent(1), event(3), events(5), fulfillment(1), harm(1), harm(1), idea(1), instructed(1), instructions(2), manner(7), **matter**(45), matters(2), **message**(18), **nothing**(21), oath(1), obligations(1), one of the promises(1), order(1), parts(1), pertains(2), plan(2), plot(2), portion(3), promise(8), proposal(3), proposed(1), proven(1), purpose(2), question(1), questions(3), ration(1), reason(4), records(5), regard(1), render(1), reply(1), report(4), reported(1), reports(4), request(3), required(2), requires(1), rule(2), said(5), same thing(1), saying(3), says(1), so much(2), some(1), something(4), songs(1), speak(2), speech(2), talk(2), talking(1), task(1), theme(1), **thing**(96), **things**(36), things at your word(1), things the word(1), this(1), thought(1), thoughts(1), threats (1), thus(1), told(1), trouble(1), verdict(2), way(3), what(4), what(5), whatever(3), **word**(454), **words**(375), work required(1).

Logos

account(7), account(1), accounting(2), accounts(2), answer(1), appearance(1), complaint(1), exhortation(1), have to do(1), instruction(1), length(1), matter(4), matters(1), message(10), news(3), preaching(1), question(2), reason(2), reasonable(1), remark(1), report(1), said(1), say(1), saying(4), sayings(1), speaker(1), **speech**(10), **statement**(18), story(1), talk(1), teaching(2), thing(2), things(1), utterance(2), what he says(1), what(1), **word**(179), **words**(61).

Rema

charge(1), discourse(1), fact(2), matters(1), message(2), nothing(1), remark(1), say(1), say say(1), saying(1), **sayings**(3), **statement**(6), thing(2), **things**(4), **word**(18), **words**(22).

Thus from the vast usage of the word, “word” in both Old and New Testaments as an impersonal saying, statement, command, promise, thing, etc., one can see why the majority of English translations before the KJV called “the word” and “it” rather than a “he.” Here are a few early English translations of John 1.3.

The Tyndale New Testament (1534)

All thynges were made by it and with out it was made nothing that was made.

The Bishops' New Testament (1595)

All thynges were made by it: and without it, was made nothyng that was made.

The Geneva Bible (1599)

All things were made by it, and without it was made nothing that was made.

Why did these translations choose to translate the masculine pronoun as “it” rather than “he?” It is because the pronoun refers to “the word,” itself a masculine word, but not a person and thus not a “he” but an “it.” In other words, the translation depends on one’s interpretation of “the word” rather than the Greek grammar. The same text could be read either way, so citing personal pronouns in favor of a literally pre-existing “Word” is, like a conflict with the Borg in Star Trek, futile.

We now return to our initial question, “What does the statement, ‘the word was God,’ mean?” Once it is determined from the preceding biblical data that “the word” is the utterance of God, not an independent or distinct individual, the phrase begins to make some sense. In fact, the phrase falls into a certain category of Johannine language which uses the verb, “to be,” to express a truth in a way that amplifies its impact. For example, in 1 John 4.8 and 16 we find the phrase, “God is love,” in 1 John 1.5 it says, “God is light,” and in John 4.24 “God is spirit.” Does that mean that God is literally a virtue, a collection of photons, or something who is not in any way physical? No, to take it in such a wooden manner would violate the sense and strip the figurative language of its power. Rather, “God is love,” speaks about God’s character in a way that amplifies this virtue. To say, “God is love,” is much more potent than saying “God is very loving.” In the same way, “the word was God,” means that the word was fully expressive of God—one cannot separate God from his word; it is his very intention, his creative utterance, and the mode of his external expression. The word expresses something about God; it is not an independent reality from him any more than a human’s word is objectively distinct from him or her.

So, the word—the index of God’s mind, his plan of salvation, his creative utterance, the rationale behind his actions, etc.—became a living, breathing, human being in Jesus of Nazareth. Thus, there was a real incarnation, but not of a pre-existent sentient being, but of a pre-existent blueprint in the mind of God. The word was God, not the Son. The truth expressed in John 1.14 is that Jesus is what the word became when it was made flesh. In other words, since the Son is not one-to-one equivalent with the word, this text does not teach that Jesus is God. J. A. T. Robinson aptly expresses the sense of the incarnation of verse 14 when he says:

What I believe John is saying is that the Word which was θεος (1.1), God in his self-revelation and expression, σαρκξ εγενετο (1.14), was embodied totally in and as a human being, became a person, was personalized not just personified. But that the Logos came into existence or expression as a person does not mean that it was a person before. In terms of the later distinction, it was not that the Logos was hypostatic (a person or *hypostasis*²⁰) and then assumed an impersonal human nature, but that the Logos was anhypostatic until the Word of God finally came to self-expression not merely in nature and in a people but in an individual historic person, and thus became hypostatic.²¹

Much more can be, and has been, said about the prologue of John. My intention in these brief comments was to sketch an alternative, biblically grounded interpretation for the reader. For those interested in going deeper into a unitarian reading of the text see our *God is 1 not 3* webpage: www.kingdomready.org/god.

²⁰ *Hypostasis* is here used to refer to personhood. Prior to Chalcedon the word meant the substance and was synonymous with *ousia*.

²¹ John A. T. Robinson, *The Priority of John*, (London: SCM Press, 1985), pp. 380-381.

Appendix 2 – Additional Texts in Which Jesus *May Be* Called God

There are several texts which are used to demonstrate that Jesus was called God in the New Testament. However, these verses are each contested for various reasons. Christopher Kaiser has noted,

“Belief in the deity of Christ has traditionally been the keystone of the doctrine of the Trinity, yet explicit references to Jesus as ‘God’ in the New Testament are very few, and even those few are generally plagued with uncertainties of either text or interpretation.”²²

William Barclay agreed with this sentiment when he said,

“But we shall find that on almost every occasion in the New Testament on 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.”²³

This appendix has been added in an effort to show why each of these has uncertainty attached to it. Since I am not an expert on textual criticism or Koine Greek, I have quoted the scholars who are much more qualified to make assessments on these matters than I. Thus, what follows is a quotation of each of these uncertain texts followed by commentary.

John 1.18

^{NIV} “No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.”
^{HCSB} “No one has ever seen God. The One and Only Son--the One who is at the Father's side--He has revealed Him.”

J.A.T. Robinson:

“It would however be precarious to rest any answer on the quotation of John 1.18, that ‘the only one, himself God, the nearest to the Father’s heart, has made him known’ (NEB margin). For there is a notorious textual crux at this point. From the manuscript evidence there is every reason to believe that μονογεῆς θεός is the reading that reaches furthest back to source, and every modern edition of the Greek Testament properly gives it precedence. It is equally noticeable however that both the RSV and the NEB still prefer ὁ μονογεῆς υἱός in their text, as opposed to the margin, and I am inclined to judge that they are right. For the contrast with ‘the Father’ appears overwhelmingly to demand ‘the only Son’ (as in 1.14), and μονογεῆς θεός is literally untranslatable (‘the only one, himself God’ is a paraphrase to make the best of it) and out of line with Johannine usage (contrast 5.44 and 17.3 of the Father). In other words, I believe that θεός may indeed be the best attested reading, and even go back to the autograph, but that it was a slip for υἱός (there is only the difference between ΥC and ΘC) and the author would have been the first to correct it. But nothing should be made to turn or rest on this, one way or the other.”²⁴

Bart D. Ehrman:

“...[T]he majority of manuscripts are right in ending the prologue with the words: “No one has seen God at any time, but the unique Son (ὁ μονογενῆς υἱός) who is in the bosom of the Father, that one has made him known.” The variant reading of the Alexandrian tradition, which substitutes “God” for “Son,” represents an orthodox corruption of the text in which the complete deity of Christ is affirmed: “the unique God [(ὁ) μονογενῆς θεός] who is in the bosom of the Father, that one has made him known.”...”

²² Christopher B. Kaiser, *The Doctrine of God, A Historical Survey*, (London: Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1982), p. 29.

²³ William Barclay, *Jesus as They Saw Him*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), p. 21.

²⁴ J.A.T. Robinson, *The Priority of John*, (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1985), pp. 372-373.

It must be acknowledged at the outset that the Alexandrian reading is more commonly preferred by textual critics, in no small measure because of its external support. Not only is it the reading of the great Alexandrian uncials (א B C), it is also attested by the earliest available witnesses, the Bodmer papyri ϩ⁶⁶ and ϩ⁷⁵, discovered in the middle of the present [20th] century...

Here it must be emphasized that outside of the Alexandrian tradition, the reading μονογενής θεός has not fared well at all. Virtually every other representative of every other textual grouping—Western, Caesarean, Byzantine—attests ὁ μονογενής υἱός. And the reading even occurs in several of the secondary Alexandrian witnesses (e.g., C3 Y 892 1241 Ath Alex). This is not simply a case of one reading supported by the earliest and best manuscripts and another supported by late and inferior ones, but of one reading found almost exclusively in the Alexandrian tradition and another found sporadically there and virtually everywhere else. And although the witnesses supporting ὁ μονογενής υἱός cannot individually match the antiquity of the Alexandrian papyri, there can be little doubt that this reading must also be dated at least to the time of their production. There is virtually no other way to explain its predominance in the Greek, Latin, and Syriac traditions, not to mention its occurrence in fathers such as Irenaeus, Clement, and Tertullian, who were writing before our earliest surviving manuscripts were produced. Thus, both readings are ancient; one is fairly localized, the other is almost ubiquitous...

It is on internal grounds that the real superiority of ὁ μονογενής υἱός shines forth. Not only does it conform with established Johannine usage, a point its opponents readily concede, but the Alexandrian variant, although perfectly amenable to scribes for theological reasons, is virtually impossible to understand within a Johannine context."²⁵

Timothy Paul Jones:

"It's possible that the same sort of change occurred in John 1.18. This verse may have originally described Jesus as "the one and only Son." Or the text might have read "the one and only God"—the manuscript witnesses to these two readings are, in my opinion, evenly divided."²⁶

Romans 9.5

^{NET} "To them belong the patriarchs, and from them, by human descent, came the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever! Amen."

^{RSV} "to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ. God who is over all be blessed for ever. Amen."

J. Schneider:

Rom. 9.5 is disputed. After Paul has expounded the position of Israel in salvation history and has emphasized as an especial advantage the fact that Christ according to the flesh, stems from this people, he adds a relative clause, which runs lit. "who is over all God blessed for ever. Amen." Even so, Christ would not be equated absolutely with God, but only described as a being of divine nature, for the word *theos* has no article. But this ascription of majesty does not occur anywhere else in Paul. The much more probable explanation is that the statement is a doxology directed to God, stemming from Jewish tradition and adopted by Paul. Overwhelmed by God's dealings with Israel, Paul concludes with an ascription of praise to God. The translation would then read, "The one who is God over all be blessed for ever. Amen." or alternatively, "God who is over all be blessed for ever. Amen."²⁷

Titus 2.13

²⁵ Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 78-79.

²⁶ Timothy Paul Jones, *Misquoting Truth: A Guide to the Fallacies of Bart Ehrman's Misquoting Jesus*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), p. 57-58.

²⁷ J. Schneider, "God" in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 2, ed. Colin Brown, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), p. 80.

^{NASB} “looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus,”
^{NAB} “as we await the blessed hope, the appearance of the glory of the great God and of our savior Jesus Christ,”

Frances Young:

It is sometimes said that he [Jesus] is called God in Romans 9.5; 2 Thessalonians 1.12; and Titus 2.13; but it is more likely that the first is pious ejaculation unconnected with the syntax of the sentence;... that in the second and third, the Greek is rather loose and in fact refers (in the former) to the grace of God plus the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and (in the latter) to the glory of our great God and of our Savior Jesus Christ.²⁸

Jason David BeDuhn:

“Those who defend translations that read as if only Jesus is spoken of in both Titus 2.13 and 2 Peter 1.1 attempt to distinguish those two passages from the parallel examples I have given by something called “Sharp’s Rule.” In 1798, the amateur theologian Granville Sharp published a book in which he argued that when there are two nouns of the same form (“case”) joined by “and” (kai), only the first of which has the article, the nouns are identified as the same thing. Close examination of this much used “rule” shows it to be a fiction concocted by a man who had a theological agenda in creating it, namely to prove that the verses we are examining in this chapter call Jesus “God.””²⁹

“We have no sure way to judge which translations correctly understand the verse and which ones do not. But with the long overdue dismissal of the phantom of “Sharp’s Rule,” the position of those who insist “God” and “Savior” must refer to the same being in this verse is decidedly weakened. There is no legitimate way to distinguish the grammar of Titus 2.13 from that of Titus 1.4 and 2 Thessalonians 1.12, just as there is no way to consider 2 Peter 1.1 different in its grammar from 2 Peter 1.2. This is a case where grammar alone will not settle the matter. All we can do is suggest, by analysis of context and comparable passages, the “more likely” and “less likely” translations, and leave the question open for further light.”³⁰

2 Peter 1.1

^{NASB} “Simon Peter, a bond-servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have received a faith of the same kind as ours, by the righteousness of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ:”

^{ASV} “Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, to them that have obtained a like precious faith with us in the righteousness of our God and *the* Saviour Jesus Christ:”

Patrick Navas:

“The grammatical structure of 2 Peter 1.1 is similar to Titus 2.13. The *MacArthur Study Bible* states: “The Gr. Construction has only one article before this phrase, making the entire phrase refer to the same person. Thus, Peter is identifying Jesus as both Savior and God.” However, it was observed by Dr. Nigel Turner in *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Moulton-Turner, 1963): “The repetition of the article was not strictly necessary to ensure that the items be considered separately.” And in another place: “Unfortunately, at this period of Greek we cannot be sure that such a rule [regarding the article] is really decisive. Sometimes the definite article is not repeated even where there is clearly a separation in idea.”

Numerous other translations (as in the case of Titus 2.13) render the verse so that both God the Father and Jesus Christ are in view. Not only is this way of translating the verse grammatically legitimate, but the very next verse distinguishes between the two so that contextually one finds added reason for doing so.

²⁸ Frances Young, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, ed. by John Hick, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977), p. 44 (fn. 21).

²⁹ Jason David BeDuhn, *Truth in Translation: Accuracy and Bias in English Translations of the New Testament*, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003), p. 92.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

Verse two reads: “Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord” (NASB). Although arguably not decisive (when the grammar is considered independently), such a fact cannot by any means be set aside as irrelevant. This may be why the footnote on 2 Peter 1.1 in the Catholic *New American Bible* acknowledges: “The words translated *our God and Savior Jesus Christ* could also be rendered ‘Our God and the savior Jesus Christ.’” Several other translations also call Jesus God in this instance but are careful to inform their readers about the alternative rendering [including Rotherham’s Emphasized Bible, the RV, RSV, NRSV, and the Jerusalem Bible].”³¹

1 John 5.20

^{NASB} “And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding so that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.”

Joh. Ed. Huth:

“As is well known, views have differed from old times about the meaning of οὗτος. While the Arians understand οὗτος of God, the orthodox refer it to the immediately preceding ἐν τῷ υἱῷ Ἰ. Χρ., and use this passage as a proof of the divinity of the Son. This interpretation remained the prevailing one in the church...and against this the Socinians, and then Grotius, Wetstein, the English Anti-Trinitarians, and the German Rationalists followed the opposite view...The dispute cannot be settled on grammatical lines, for οὗτος can be referred both to τὸν ἀληθινόν and also to τῷ υἱῷ...The former reference...is supported by the expression: ὁ ἀληθινὸς θεός; for, in the first place, it is more natural to understand here the same subject as is previously designated by ὁ ἀληθινός, than any other; and, in the second place, the Father and the Son, God and Jesus Christ, are always so definitely distinguished throughout the whole Epistle, that it would be strange if, at the close of it, and, moreover, just after both subjects have been similarly distinguished immediately before, Christ—without further explanation, too—should be described as ὁ ἀληθινὸς θεός, especially as this designation is never ascribed to the Son in the writings of John, definitely though the divinity of the Son is taught in them.”³²

Glen W. Barker:

“He” in 20b is literally “this one” (houtos)...Grammatically the pronoun most naturally refers to Jesus Christ. Westcott, (p. 187) however, argues that in terms of subject emphasis it more naturally refers backwards to God, who earlier in the text was designated as the one who is true (20a): “This Being—this One who is true, who is revealed through and in His Son, with whom we are united by His Son—is the true God and life eternal.” Stott supports Westcott, noting that all “three references to ‘the true’ are to the same Person, the Father, and the additional points made in the apparent final repetition are that it is *this* One, namely the God made known by Jesus Christ, who is *the true God*, and that, besides this, He is *eternal life*. As He is both light and love (i.5, iv.8), so He is also life” (Stott, p. 196; cf. Brooke, pp. 152-53; Dodd, *Johanne Epistles*, p.140).³³

John W. Stott:

“The final sentence of verse 20 runs: *He is the true God and eternal life*. To whom does *he* refer? Grammatically speaking, it would normally refer to the nearest preceding subject, namely *his Son Jesus Christ*. If so, this would be the most unequivocal statement of the deity of Jesus Christ in the New Testament, which the champions of orthodoxy were quick to exploit against the heresy of Arius. Luther and Calvin adopted this view. Certainly it is by no means an impossible interpretation. Nevertheless, ‘the most natural reference’ (Westcott) is to *him who is true*. In this way the three references to ‘the true’ are to the same person, the Father, and the additional points made in the apparent final repetition are that it is this one, namely the God made known by Jesus Christ, who is both *the true God* and *eternal life*. As he

³¹ Patrick Navas, *Divine Truth or Human Tradition?*, (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2007), pp. 298-299.

³² Joh. Ed. Huth, Th. D., *Meyer’s Commentary on the New Testament*, 1884, pp. 622-623.

³³ Glen W. Barker, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank E. Gaebelein, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), p. 357.

is both light and love (1.5; 4.8), so he is also life, himself the only source of life (Jn. 5.26) and the giver of life in Jesus Christ (11). The whole verse is strongly reminiscent of John 17.3, for there as here eternal life is defined in terms of knowing God, both Father and Son.”³⁴

Acts 20.28

^{NASB} “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.”

^{NRSV} “Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son.”

Raymond Brown:

“Grammatically [the] reading raises the possibility that the passage is referring to Jesus as God who obtained the church “with his own blood.” However, there is another possibility: Perhaps “God” refers to the Father and “his own” refers to the Son; thus, “the church of God (the Father) which He obtained with the blood of His own (Son).” Many favor this interpretation or an alternative: “the church of God which he (Christ) obtained with his own blood,” positing an unexpressed change of subject. And so, even when we read “the church of God,” we are by no means certain that this verse calls Jesus God.”³⁵

2 Thessalonians 1.12

^{NAB} “that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, in accord with the grace of our God and Lord Jesus Christ.”

^{NET} “that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Raymond Brown:

“There are two possible interpretations of the Greek genitives: (a) “the grace of our God-and-Lord Jesus Christ”; (b) “the grace of our God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

The first interpretation, which gives Jesus the title “God,” is favored by the absence in the Greek of an article before “Lord,” creating the impression that the two genitives are bound together and governed by the one article that precedes “God.” Yet, the exact three-word Greek combination for “God and Lord” is not found elsewhere in the Bible in reference to one person; and perhaps “Lord Jesus Christ” was so common a phrase that it would automatically be thought of as a separate entity and could be used without the article. The second interpretation is favored by the fact that pronominal “of us” (= “our”) separates the two titles; but, as we shall see below in discussing 2 Pet. 1.1; this is not a decisive argument. The most impressive argument for the second interpretation is that “our God” occurs four times in 1 and 2 Thessalonians as a title for God the Father. By analogy in the passage at hand, then, “our God” should be distinguished from “(the) Lord Jesus Christ,” as most commentators acknowledge. Thus this text cannot be offered as an example of the use of the title “God” for Jesus.”³⁶

I suppose other texts could be added to this section, but it is already too long, and those which would be added have mostly³⁷ interpretive not translational or textual variations.³⁸ If the reader is interested in gaining more information he or she should obtain one of the various books that are available on the subject.³⁹ Our point for this

³⁴ John W. Stott, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Letters of John (Revised Edition)*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 197-198.

³⁵ Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology*, pp 177-178.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

³⁷ Two exceptions are 1 Tim. 3.16 and 1 John 5.7 which have been corrected in nearly all modern versions.

³⁸ Mat. 1.23; John 8.58; Col. 2.9; Phil. 2.5 turn on one’s interpretation of the text (see books in fn. below)

³⁹ Anthony Buzzard, *The Doctrine of the Trinity: Christianity’s Self-Inflicted Wound*, (Lanham, MD: International Scholars Publications, 1998); Anthony Buzzard, *Jesus Was Not A Trinitarian*, (Fayetteville, GA: Restoration Fellowship, 2007); Jason David BeDuhn, *Truth in Translation: Accuracy and Bias in English Translations of the*

appendix is not to exegete each passage but to demonstrate that the verses in this section do not make good “proof texts” for the deity of Christ. No matter what the doctrine, it is unwise to affix our theological stake into ground which is so unstable, lest one day we find that after considerable effort we have been fighting against the truth of the matter. It is much more advisable to gain our understanding of God from the mass of texts in both the Old and New Testaments which are not at all textually or grammatically uncertain.⁴⁰

Appendix 3 – The Flexibility of The Word, “God”

The word “God” was a lot more flexible in ancient times than it is today. In order to illustrate this point consider the following usages of the word, “God,” in the Bible. In each case the bolded word is the word for God.⁴¹

^{NASB} **Genesis 23:6** "Hear us, my lord, you are a **mighty** prince among us; bury your dead in the choicest of our graves; none of us will refuse you his grave for burying your dead."

^{NASB} **Genesis 30:8** So Rachel said, "With **mighty** wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister, *and* I have indeed prevailed." And she named him Naphtali.

^{NET} **Exodus 9:28** "Pray to the LORD, for the **mighty** thunderings and hail are too much! I will release you and you will stay no longer."

^{NASB} **1 Samuel 14:15** And there was a trembling in the camp, in the field, and among all the people. Even the garrison and the raiders trembled, and the earth quaked so that it became a **great** trembling.

^{NET} **Psalms 36:6** Your justice is like the **highest** mountains, your fairness like the deepest sea; you preserve mankind and the animal kingdom.

^{NASB} **Jonah 3:3** So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an **exceedingly** great city, a three days' walk.

^{NASB} **2 Corinthians 4:4** in whose case the **god** of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel...

^{NET} **Hebrews 2:7** You made him lower than the **angels**⁴² for a little while. You crowned him with glory and honor.

These instances demonstrate how flexible the word, “God,” really is. The word is used in an adjectival sense (i.e. mighty mountains), for someone who is powerful (i.e. Abraham), or for someone who represents God to the people (i.e. judges of Israel). Furthermore, the deities of the nations are called “gods” (i.e. Baal, Dagon, etc.), and so are angels. Even so, the majority of the usages of the word “God” apply to the Creator, Yahweh. But, how is it possible to know if a usage should be understood as “God,” something that is mighty, or a human or angelic agent judging on God’s behalf? The answer is context. Fortunately, (or is it?) our modern versions translate *out* the word, “God,” and substitute a different English word to avoid confusion most of the time.

New Testament, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003); Greg Deuble, *They Never Told Me This In Church*, (Fayetteville, GA: Restoration Fellowship, 2006); Patrick Navas, *Divine Truth or Human Tradition?*, (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2007).

⁴⁰ Ex. 8.10; 19.16-20; 20.1-6; Deut. 4.35-39; 5.1-7; 6.4-5; 7.9-10; 10.17-21; 32.12, 39; 1 Sam. 2.2; 2 Sam. 7.22-24; 1 Kings 8.60; 2 Kings 19.15, 19; 1 Chron. 17.20; Neh. 9.6; Ps. 83.18; 86.9-10; 135.5; Is. 37.16, 20; 41.4; 42.5-8; 43.10-13; 44.6-8, 24; 45.5-7, 12, 18, 21-22; 46.9; Jer. 10.7-10; Joel 2.27; Zech. 14.9; Mat. 19.17; Mark 10.17-18; 12.28-33; John 5.44; 8.41; 17.3; 1 Cor. 8.4-6; Gal. 3.20; Eph. 4.6; 1 Tim. 2.5; James 2.19; Jude 25

⁴¹ *Elohim, Eloah, or El* in Hebrew; *Theos* in Greek.

⁴² Though the author is quoting from the LXX of Ps. 8.5, the MT says *Elohim* as in the NASB, clearly showing that angels were considered to be *Elohim*.