

Introduction

Knowing Jesus as God

There's no denying it: Jesus is one of a kind.¹ He is the central figure of the world's largest religion (Christianity) and viewed as a major prophet in the world's second largest religion (Islam). Most people, in fact, regard Jesus as one of the greatest human beings who ever lived. But this remarkable consensus begs the question: Why are there so many conflicting interpretations of Jesus?

Your Own Personal Jesus

Interpretations of Jesus are fraught with bias. He's a powerful figure whom people want on their sides – and they're willing to re-create him in their image to enlist his support. Animal-rights activists imagine a vegetarian Jesus. New Agers make him an example of finding the god within. And radical feminists strip him of divinity so that Christianity doesn't appear sexist. "Frankly, it's hard to escape the feeling that our culture has taken Jesus' question 'Who do you say that I am?' and changed it to 'Who do you want me to be?'"²

It is an interesting irony, though, that the Jesus Seminar, a group of radically liberal scholars, warned, "Beware of finding a Jesus entirely congenial to you."³ If only they had followed their own advice! From the start, the seminar was intent on finding a merely human Jesus who was concerned with radical equality and refused to make exclusive religious claims. In other words, they sought a Jesus who was, by today's standards, *politically correct*.⁴ The seminar has been extraordinarily successful in getting publicity. In fact, their "findings" have been the cornerstone of several cover stories for *Time* magazine⁵ and the thread holding together two prime-time ABC News documentaries hosted by the late Peter Jennings.⁶

Dan Brown excited interest in another way of looking at Jesus with his book-turned-movie *The Da Vinci Code*.⁷ Although a novel, the book popularized a variety of misconceptions about the origins of Christianity. One especially troublesome bit of disinformation promulgated in the book is the claim that the deity of Jesus was not something embraced by his earliest followers but was, in fact, the invention of a council that convened nearly three hundred years after Jesus' time. More than one scholar has demonstrated that *The Da Vinci Code* shares more in common with conspiracy theories than with sober historical analysis,⁸ yet its message continues to resonate with contemporary culture.

These are just a few examples of the many self-serving interpretations of Jesus that circulate today. What do they share in common? An aversion to the New Testament view of Jesus as God. As attracted to Jesus as a lot of people seem to be, many are looking for a merely human Jesus—or at least a Jesus who is entirely on our side of the line between Creator and creature. Why is this?

One scholar put his finger on the problem when he explained that belief in the deity of Jesus—his unique status among human beings as God in the flesh—implies that Jesus is the only way for people to be properly related to God.

Traditional orthodoxy says that Jesus of Nazareth was God incarnate . . . who became man to die for the sins of the world and who founded the church to proclaim this to the ends of the earth, so that all who sincerely take Jesus as their Lord and Savior are justified by his atoning death and will inherit eternal life. It follows from this that Christianity, alone among the world religions, was founded by God in person. God came down from heaven to earth and launched the salvific movement that came to be known as Christianity. From this premise it seems obvious that God must wish all human beings to enter this stream of saved life, so that

Christianity shall supersede all the other world faiths. They may perhaps have some good in them and be able to function to some extent as a preparation for the gospel, but nevertheless Christianity alone is God's own religion. . . . It is therefore divinely intended for all men and women without exception. All this follows logically from the central dogma of the deity of Jesus.⁹

It is remarkable, however, that the person who made this observation doesn't believe in the deity of Jesus. He is, in fact, a well-known opponent of that doctrine. Among his many accomplishments, John Hick served as editor for the 1977 book titled *The Myth of God Incarnate*. (By "God incarnate" is meant that God came "in the flesh" as a human being.) Hick has seen more clearly than most that if Jesus was uniquely God incarnate, then he is also uniquely the way to God.¹⁰ And that is what really offends people today. Almost no one minds a strong affirmation of belief in Jesus. To suggest, however, that without Jesus people of other religions are missing something of eternal importance is regarded by many as an attack on the right of people to believe whatever they want. In an age when so many reject the idea that any one viewpoint is superior to another, that Jesus is regarded as uniquely God incarnate is the epitome of intolerance.

Back to the Sources

It's easy to be tempted to focus our efforts on making Jesus "relevant" to today's cosmopolitan, postmodern tastes. Non-Christians are becoming increasingly guarded – if not hostile – toward traditional Christian beliefs. By emphasizing Jesus' humanity, some Christians are, indeed, bending over backward to make Christianity – and Christ himself – more "approachable." They may not deny the deity of Jesus, but in practical terms his humanity overwhelms his deity. In the end, though, a lack of appreciation of Jesus' identity as God makes him *less* approachable. As New Testament scholar Grant Osborne warns, some of us have lost the holy reverence and awe that we should have

toward Jesus:

Christians are guilty of the syndrome “Your Jesus is too small.” We have made Jesus our “big brother” and “friend” to such an extent that we have lost the sense that he is also our sovereign Lord. We must recapture the realization that he too is our God and worthy of worship at the deepest level.¹¹

If we are to experience a healthy relationship with God, we need to be intimately acquainted with the biblical teaching about the divine identity of Jesus. This involves more than merely knowing about, and agreeing with, the doctrine of the deity of Christ, though that is certainly essential. It must become more to us than a line we say in a creed. We need to know what it means to say that Jesus is God and why it matters. We need to see Jesus as God. We need to think about Jesus and relate to him in the full light of the truth of his identity. We need to appreciate the significance of his divine identity for our relationships with God and others.

In our quest to know who Jesus was and is, we must give careful attention to the understanding of Jesus presented in the sources closest to him: the New Testament writings. We recognize that in the early centuries of Christianity people wrote other books representing views of Jesus that differed greatly from that presented in the New Testament. In recent years much has been made of these “lost scriptures” and of the “lost Christianities” that they represent.¹² These “scriptures” all originated, however, after the New Testament writings, and none of them was written by a first-generation believer in Jesus. Even in the case of the much-heralded Gospel of Thomas, biblical scholars of all stripes agree that the apostle Thomas did not write it. In fact, almost all scholars agree that it was written at least one or two generations after the apostles.¹³

We also recognize that the New Testament writings have different ways of talking about Jesus. Several different individuals wrote the New Testament books, and they

had different ways of expressing what they thought about Jesus. Nevertheless, all of them stand in that earliest stream of Christian belief that started with the original apostles. These are the writings that later came to be recognized as the primary sources of orthodox Christian teaching. Moreover, as we shall make clear, a “high” view of Jesus as deity is evident throughout the New Testament.¹⁴

Laying the Foundation

In this book, then, we will be examining what the New Testament writings say about Jesus’ identity as God. In doing so, we will take certain things for granted.

First, we will assume that Christians should base their beliefs about Jesus on the teachings of the New Testament. For the most part, we will assume that the passages on which we are commenting are true. Only in some key instances will we seek to establish their historical accuracy. Also, we will generally not debate the inspiration of the New Testament authors’ explanations of who Jesus is and what his words and deeds mean. We ourselves affirm that the New Testament is historically accurate and its teachings divinely inspired. Even if some readers do not share our convictions about the New Testament’s accuracy and inspiration, those interested in what the New Testament has to say about Jesus will, nevertheless, find help here.¹⁵

Second, we will take as given certain historical claims about Jesus that are basic to the New Testament. We will assume that Jesus was a real human being, that he died on the cross, and that he rose bodily from the grave.¹⁶ Our focus in this book, of course, is on the deity of Jesus. To understand all that the New Testament says on that subject, however, we also must recognize that Jesus was human—and that in the resurrection he remains a human, albeit a glorified, immortal one.¹⁷

Third, we take for granted that Jesus is not God the Father. Rather, Jesus is “the Son of the Father” (2 John 3 NASB). The New Testament makes a distinction between the two, sometimes as the Father and the Son and sometimes as God and the Son of God.

Although it's hard to understand, the New Testament both distinguishes Jesus from God and identifies him as God—sometimes in the same breath (e.g., John 1:1; 20:28–31; Heb. 1:8–9; 2 Peter 1:1–2). It is this fact about New Testament teaching—paralleled in what it also teaches about the Holy Spirit—that led Christian theologians to formulate the doctrine of the Trinity. We will not be discussing the Trinity in this book, although Jesus' identity as God is a key part of that doctrine.¹⁸

What to Expect

Our aim is to provide a comprehensive case from the New Testament for the deity of Jesus Christ. Many of us were taught that the deity of Jesus can be proved using one or two verses—say, John 1:1 (“and the Word was God”) or John 20:28 (where Thomas calls Jesus, “My Lord and my God”). To be sure, we will say something about these important texts. But there is much more biblical evidence for Jesus' deity. It is not limited to a few verses but includes both explicit statements that say he is “God” and implicit indications of his deity. The evidence covers a wide range of closely-related truths about Jesus that are taught repeatedly in one biblical book after another. The deity of Christ is, therefore, a major theme throughout the New Testament. Recognizing that theme in all of its many expressions will not only help you in your faith in Jesus as God but also make your understanding of Scripture much richer.

Throughout this book, we will not only cite biblical passages in support of the deity of Jesus but also discuss their interpretation. Along the way, we will interact with a wide range of contemporary biblical scholarship. The endnotes provide a wealth of references to recent scholarly literature—commentaries, published doctoral dissertations, periodical articles, and specialized studies—of relevance to the subject matter. Many of the endnotes also comment on some of the more technical issues that come up in these academic discussions. Since the main points you need to know are in the body of the book, you can skip these endnotes if you wish, but the information is

there if you want it.

Although biblical scholarship informs every part of the book, our subject matter is not merely the object of academic research. We try to make it clear that relating to Jesus as to God is important for every aspect of the Christian life. We hope it is obvious that understanding Jesus' identity as God is extremely relevant to how we relate to Jesus. Knowing that he is God incarnate is the only sound foundation for approaching Jesus, for coming to him in prayer, and for trusting in him for salvation. Relating to Jesus as God is also crucial to the message we take to the rest of the world. We must know whom we represent if we are to represent him faithfully. Our Christian walk, witness, and worship all must reflect a sound understanding of the identity of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Our purpose in this book is not limited to presenting the big picture of the New Testament evidence for the deity of Jesus and explaining its relevance to the Christian life. We also want to equip you to *remember* this information and be able to present it to others. To that end, we organize the biblical teaching on the deity of Jesus into five categories that will be both memorable and easy to explain. We summarize these five categories using an acronym based on the word HANDS. This acronym recalls the dramatic experience of Thomas told in John 20:24–29. Despite what the other disciples told him, Thomas doubted that Jesus had risen from the dead. But when he saw the marks in Jesus' hands left by the nails of the crucifixion, Thomas was persuaded of more than the resurrection! Amazingly, he called Jesus his Lord and his God (John 20:28). Just as an examination of the nail prints convinced Thomas he was beholding the hands of deity, a closer look at the Bible reveals that Jesus shares the HANDS of God:

- Honors:** Jesus shares the *honors* due to God.
- Attributes:** Jesus shares the *attributes* of God.
- Names:** Jesus shares the *names* of God.

Deeds: Jesus shares in the *deeds* that God does.

Seat: Jesus shares the *seat* of God's throne.

This acronym is not a gimmick. It is a tested and proven device for enabling people of different backgrounds to remember and explain the biblical evidence for identifying Jesus as God.¹⁹ Each chapter will go into detail on the biblical teaching relating to one aspect of the five-point outline. We think this method will help you much better understand the biblical teaching on the deity of Christ, as well as remember the essential elements of that teaching, so that you will be able to explain them to others.

The biblical teaching about Jesus found in his HANDS constitutes a powerful cumulative case for regarding Jesus as our Lord and God. If you do not yet believe in Jesus as God, consider the evidence presented here. If you do believe in the deity of Christ, the biblical teaching reviewed here will enrich your understanding of that truth and equip you to share it with others. After you have read this book, we invite you to find additional resources and to participate in discussions on this subject by visiting our web site: <http://www.deityofchrist.com>.

Wherever you are now in your understanding of Jesus, our heartfelt prayer is that your life will be revolutionized by the realization that Jesus Christ is indeed "our great God and Savior" (Titus 2:13).

Notes

Introduction: Knowing Jesus as God

1. Some deny that Jesus ever existed, but the influence of these persons is negligible. As the late British scholar F. F. Bruce noted, “The historicity of Christ is as axiomatic for an unbiased historian as the historicity of Julius Caesar. It is not historians who propagate the ‘Christ-myth’ theories” (F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* 5th rev. ed. [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1960], 19).
2. J. Ed Komoszewski, M. James Sawyer, and Daniel B. Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus: How Contemporary Skeptics Miss the Real Jesus and Mislead Popular Culture* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006), 262.
3. Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*, A Polebridge Press Book (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 5.
4. The Jesus Seminar is a prime example of people creating Jesus in their own image. Indeed, their revisionist Jesus “probably tells us more about various members of the Jesus Seminar than about Jesus” (Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth*, 2d ed. [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997], 57).
5. E.g., “Jesus at 2000,” *Time*, December 6, 1999; “The Search for Jesus,” *Time*, April 8, 1996; “Who Was Jesus?” *Time*, August 15, 1988. Since 1996, Jesus has made the cover of *Time* in four issues — equal to the number of issues in which he did so in all the years of the magazine prior to that date.
6. Peter Jennings, *The Search for Jesus* (ABC News documentaries, 2000); and idem, *Jesus and Paul: The Word and the Witness* (ABC News documentaries, 2004). For two complementary critiques of these programs, see Darrell L. Bock, “Jesus and Paul:

Looking at a Journalistic Approach to Christianity's Beginnings," *Christianity Today*, April 5, 2004 [online version only], <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/114/21.0.html> (accessed July 14, 2004); and Robert M. Bowman Jr., "Peter Jennings, Jesus, and Paul" (Center for Biblical Apologetics, 2004), available at <http://www.biblicalapologetics.net>.

7. Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code: A Novel* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).
8. See, e.g., Darrell L. Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code: Answers to the Questions Everyone's Asking*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Nelson, 2006); Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel Code: Novel Claims About Jesus, Mary Magdalene and Da Vinci* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004).
9. John Hick, "A Pluralist View," in *More Than One Way? Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, ed. Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 51-52.
10. See also John Hick, *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993), 35-101; and idem, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, 2d ed. (London: SCM Press, 2005), 7, 175.
11. Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 266.
12. See, e.g., Bart D. Ehrman's two recent books, *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) and *Lost Christianities: The Battle for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).
13. For informed, accessible treatments of these works, especially the "Gnostic gospels," see Darrell L. Bock, *The Missing Gospels: Unearthing the Truth Behind Alternative Christianities* (Nashville: Nelson, 2006); and Craig A. Evans, *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006). For more on their exclusion from the New Testament canon, see

- Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus*, chaps. 10–11.
14. Even Bart Ehrman, while arguing that Christianity was more diverse than the New Testament and that orthodoxy was a later development, acknowledges that the New Testament writings share a united tradition that led to orthodoxy. See Bart Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 33n. 11; 36nn. 25–26. Ehrman acknowledges that the New Testament writers, whom he calls “proto-orthodox,” held to the same “paradoxical view of Christ” as both God and man. “These proto-orthodox Christians opposed anyone who claimed that Christ was a man but not God, and anyone who claimed that he was God but not a man, and anyone who claimed that he was two distinct beings, one divine and one human” (ibid., 13–15).
 15. For a broad overview of the historical reliability of the New Testament, see Craig Blomberg, *Making Sense of the New Testament: Three Crucial Questions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), chap. 1. For a detailed treatment of the accuracy of New Testament manuscripts, see Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus*, chaps. 4–8.
 16. For a popular-level defense of these claims, with references to supporting literature, see Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman Jr., *20 Compelling Evidences That God Exists* (Colorado Springs: Cook Communications-RiverOak Publishing, 2002), 189–261.
 17. On the New Testament teaching on the resurrection of Jesus, see especially N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003). For a thorough, accessible, and practical treatment of historical evidence for the resurrection, see Gary R. Habermas and Michael R. Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004).
 18. A helpful introduction is Millard J. Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity: Three*

Crucial Questions (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000). See also Robert M. Bowman Jr., “The Biblical Basis of the Doctrine of the Trinity: An Outline Study” (Center for Biblical Apologetics, 2004), online at <http://www.biblicalapologetics.net>.

19. The acronym was originally developed by one of the authors (J. Ed Komoszewski), who has presented it to a variety of audiences in both academic and popular settings.