

## Is Jesus divine?

The divinity of Jesus has long been affirmed by the church, but questions have been raised as to whether this was the belief of the early Christians. Some claim the New Testament is unreliable on the subject. Others claim the early church did not believe in the divinity of Jesus until the Emperor Constantine forced them to do so in a political move at the Council of Nicaea in 325AD. The theory is that he wanted a religious backing for the empire and so needed Jesus to be regarded as divine. So let us briefly address these issues.

## How reliable are the Gospels?

We do not have exact dates for when the Gospels were written but there are some indications. It is widely accepted that Matthew, Mark and Luke, who concentrated on historical facts, would have mentioned the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in AD70 if they had known about it. It was, after all, a remarkable fulfilment of Jesus' prophecy in Matthew. 24:1; Mark 13:1; Luke 21:6.

In addition, Luke, who is generally accepted as the author of Acts, would doubtless have mentioned in that book the persecution of Christians by the Emperor Nero's and the deaths of three apostles James (A.D. 62), Paul (A.D. 64), and Peter (A.D. 65). This suggests Acts was could have been written before those events. Since Luke refers to his "first account" (his gospel) in Acts 1:1-2, this strongly suggests the Gospel of Luke was written before AD63 and possible before AD55-59. So it is very likely that Luke was written within 30 years of Jesus' death. It is generally accepted that Mark was the earliest Gospel, based on information supplied by Peter and written between AD55 and AD70. Matthew is also generally believed to be of a similar date. John, who was more interested in theology than in a purely historical account, was probably written in the 80s or 90s, although some scholars would put it much earlier.

However, it is likely that there were written records that pre-dated the Gospels. Jesus' teaching was very important and needed to be conveyed accurately to new disciples. Also he was controversial, so written accounts would have been important to set the record straight. We know that in the time of the ancient rabbis written notes were often taken. The Qumran community, which produced the Dead Sea Scrolls, followed this practice. There was even a form of shorthand. Matthew especially, as a tax-collector would probably have taken notes when he interviewed tax-payers. History shows that many tax-collectors used shorthand. Scholars have referred to a prior written account called Q which the Gospel writers used, which could have been written as early as 50AD, just 20 years after the death of Jesus.

Whatever written accounts pre-date the Gospels, it is known from history that the rabbis stressed memorisation, even of whole books of the Bible. The education system emphasised learning by rote and disciples would normally memorise the teaching of their rabbi. Scholars have pointed out that in his teaching Jesus was using devices which would have aided memorisation. It should be remembered that Jesus would have repeated his teaching on many occasions, probably with some variations.

So, in conclusion:

- The account of Jesus' life and teaching would have been accurately memorised
- It would probably written down in note form.
- Scholars think there was a written account which predates the Gospels.
- Within 30 years of Jesus' death it was written up into the Gospels.

What about variations and corruption in the text of the ancient manuscripts? It is a silly and totally inaccurate barrack room philosophy that the Bible is full of inaccuracies and contradictions. But some people still try to dismiss the reliability of the Bible by saying there are so many variations and alterations that the text is unreliable. The facts are:

- No Christian doctrine depends on any textual variation in the Bible. They do not affect Christian belief.
- 95% of variations in the New Testament are small mistakes: spelling mistakes, repetition of words, etc.
- Only two variations affect more than a couple of verses (the last few verses in Mark's Gospel and the Woman taken in Adultery in John 8).
- There are far fewer questions about the text of the Bible than about the text of other ancient manuscripts.
- We have 24,000 ancient copies of the New Testament or parts of it – far more than of other historic documents.

## Does the New Testament explicitly teach “Jesus is God”?

Scholars have debated whether the New Testament clearly states that Jesus is God as opposed to inferring he is divine. Some point out that in a number of the texts which seem to state clearly Jesus is God there is uncertainty about the translation, perhaps about arrangement of words or the original punctuation. This is reflected in the different translations of the Bible. They add that these statements tend to be in the context of a hymn or prayer, rather than a teaching passage, although this seems a weak point.

However, it is quite clear that Jesus’ Jewish contemporaries recognised that he was claiming to be divine. In Matthew 9:1 when he forgave the sins of the paralyzed man, they responded: “This fellow is blaspheming!” When Jesus says: “From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven ... The high priest tore his clothes and said, ‘He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy.’” (Matthew 26:64). Then when he claims that “before Abraham was born, I am!” ... they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds (John 8:58-59). Again when he claimed: “I and the Father are one” .... his Jewish opponents picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus said to them, “I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?” “We are not stoning you for any good work,” they replied, “but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God.” (John 10:30-33).

Then scholars point out that there are three passages which they claim contradict the idea of Jesus being God:

- John 17.3 “Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”
- 1 Cor 8.4, 6 “So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that ‘An idol is nothing at all in the world’ and that ‘There is no God but one.’ ..... yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.”
- Eph 4.4-6 “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism;<sup>6</sup> one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”

However, all these passages teach is that there is only one God and there is a distinction between God the Father and Jesus the Son. To argue that they disprove the idea that Jesus is divine is to read too much into them.

The passages which are widely accepted as clearly stating Jesus is God are:

- Jn. 1:1; 1:18, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God .... No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.”
- John 20:28-29 “Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!” Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”
- Heb 1:8-9 “But about the Son he says, “Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever; a sceptre of justice will be the sceptre of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy.

Some scholars suggest that explicitly calling Jesus God developed late in New Testament times but this does not mean that people did not believe he was God before that. Others say the early Christians avoided explicitly calling Jesus God in the early stages because it could be misunderstood as a belief in two gods and could have encouraged a greater Jewish backlash.

This debate, however, is only about explicit statements that “Jesus is God.” It is beyond doubt that the New Testament material below clearly teaches that Jesus is divine

## An outline of New Testament teaching about Jesus’ divinity

### The first three Gospels

Matthew teaches that Jesus is:

- the fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophecy “*The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel*” (which means “*God with us*”). (Matt 1:22-23 cf. Isa 7:14).

- the object of the worship of the magi (2:11).
- the Son of God (*Baptism 3:17 cf. Mark 1:11; Luke 3:21-22; Transfiguration 17:1-5 cf. Mark 9:2-7; Luke 9:28-36; Satan 4:3, 6, cf. Luke 4:1-9; demons (Mark 3:11-12).*)
- the one who claimed he:
  - could forgive sins which only God could do, and so was accused of blasphemy (9:1-8, *cf. Mark 2:5-7; Luke 5:20-21).*
  - alone knows the Father and makes him known (11:27, *cf. Luke 10:22).*
  - is the Son of God (21:33-41 *cf. 16:13-17 and the angel in Luke 1:30-35)*
  - is superior to King David (22:41-45, *cf. Mark 12:35-37).*
  - is “Lord of the Sabbath” (12:8 *cf. Mark 2:28; Luke 6:5).*
  - would return in power and great glory, send out angels in judgment (13:40-43, *cf. Mark 13:26-27)* and to gather his elect from the whole world (24:30-31) and he would judge the nations (25:31ff). Again, he was accused of blasphemy (26:64-65, *cf. Mark 14:60-64).*
  - had “all authority in heaven and on earth.” (28:16-20).

## John’s Gospel

John affirms that Jesus is:

- God (John 1:1-2 “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.*”)
- the agent of creation (John 1:3 “*Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made*”).
- The Son of God (1:14, 18 “*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. .... No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.*” *Cf. 1: 49; 3:16-18; 5:19-23, 25-26; 6:40; 17:1).*
- the only means of receiving eternal life (*John 3:16-18, 35-36).*
- The one who claims to be:
  - one with the Father, incurring Jewish objections that he was claiming to be God (10:30-33, *cf. 20:28-29).*
  - equal with God (in calling God his own Father he was “making himself equal with God” incurring Jewish accusations of blasphemy (5:18).
  - eternal (8:52-59 “*Very truly I tell you ... before Abraham was born, I am!*”).
  - the one who shared God’s glory before the world began (17:5).
  - the only one who has seen the Father (6:46).
  - the one who came from heaven (6:41-42).
  - judge of the earth (5:22-23, 27).
  - the only means of salvation, eternal life (5:21, 24-26, *cf. 6:32-40, 53; 8:51).*
  - the only way to God (14:6-7)

## Acts

Peter affirms that Jesus is:

- the only source of salvation (4:12).
- The judge of the whole earth (10:42)

Stephen sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God (7:55-56).

## Paul

Paul affirms that Jesus is:

- in very nature God (*Phil 2:5-6; Col 1:15, 19; 2:9).*
- the Son of God (*Romans 1:1-4; Gal 1:15; Col 1:15).*
- the one exalted above all others (*Eph 1:20-22; Phil 2:9-11).*
- the one who fills the whole universe and everything in every way (*Eph 4:10; 1:23).*
- the firstborn over all creation (*Col 1:15).*
- the agent and heir of creation (*1 Cor 8:6; Col 1:16).*
- the source of life (*1 Cor 8:6).*

- the judge of all (*Rom 2:16; 2 Cor 5:10; 2 Thess 2:8*).
- the Lord of both the dead and the living (*Rom 14:9; 1 Cor 12:3*),
- the source of eternal life (*Rom 5:21, 6:23, 8:1; 10:9*),
- the source of reconciliation with God (*2 Cor 5:17-19; Col 1:20*).
- the means of redemption from the condemnation of the law (*Gal 4:4*).
- the one who indwells the believer (*Gal 2:20*) and redeems us

## Hebrews

The writer to the Hebrews teaches that Jesus is:

- the eternal Son of God (*1:2, 3, 5, 6, 8; 3:6; 5:5*).
- the heir of all things (*1:2*).
- the agent and sustainer of creation (*1:2-3*).
- the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being (*1:3*).
- the object of angelic worship (*1:6*).

## Peter

Peter writes that Jesus is:

- the one at the right hand of God (*1 Peter 3:15, 22*).
- the one to whom angels submit (*1 Peter 3:22*).
- the Son of God (*2 Peter 1:17*).

## John's epistles

John teaches that Jesus is:

- the eternal Word of life who came from the Father (*1 John 1:1*).
- the one, to reject whom is to reject God (*1 John 2:22-23; 4:15; 2 John 9*).
- the Son of God (*1 John 4:10-15; 5:5, 9-13*).
- the source of eternal life (*1 John 5:11-13*).

## Revelation

John portrays Jesus as:

- the glorious eternal divine figure (*1:12-18; 19:11-16*).
- the Son of God (*2:18*).
- the ruler of creation (*3:14*).
- the Lord of lords and King of kings (*17:14; 19:16*).
- the object of heavenly worship: *"They sang a new song, saying: 'You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.'"* Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they were saying: *"Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!"* Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying: *"To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power, for ever and ever!"* The four living creatures said, *"Amen,"* and the elders fell down and worshiped" (*5:9-14*).

## The whole New Testament

Summarising the above shows that the New Testament teaches the following.

Jesus is:

- God (*especially Jn. 1:1-2; 1:18; 20:28-29 but many would add: Matt 1:22-23; Phil 2:5-6; Col 1:15, 19; 2:9; Heb 1:3*).
- The eternal Son of God (*Matt 3:17; 4:3, 6; 17:1-5; Mark 1:11; 3:11-12; 9:2-7; Luke 3:21-22; 4:1-9; 9:28-36; John 1:14,*

18; Romans 1:1-4; Gal 1:15; Col 1:15; Heb 1:2, 3, 5, 6, 8; 3:6; 5:5; 2 Peter 1:17; 1 John 4:10-15; 5:5, 9-13; Rev 1:12-18; 19:11-16; 2:18).

- The eternal Word of life who came from the Father (1 John 1:1).
- The one, to reject whom is to reject God (1 John 2:22-23; 4:15; 2 John 9).
- The Lord of all, exalted above all others (Rom 14:9; 1 Cor 12:3; Eph 1:20-22; Phil 2:9-11; 1 Peter 3:22; Rev 17:14; 19:16).
- The one who fills the whole universe and everything in every way (Eph 4:10; 1:23).
- The agent, ruler, sustainer and heir of creation (John 1:3; 1 Cor 8:6; Col 1:15-16; Heb 1:2-3; Rev 3:14).
- The source of life (1 Cor 8:6).
- The only source of eternal life, salvation (John 3:16-18, 35-36; Acts 4:12; Rom 5:21, 6:23, 8:1; 10:9; 2 Cor 5:17-19; Gal 4:4; Col 1:20; 1 John 5:11-13).
- Worshipped (Matt 2:11; Heb 1:6; Rev 5:9-14).
- The judge of the whole earth (Acts 10:42; Rom 2:16; 2 Cor 5:10; 2 Thess 2:8).
- At the right hand of the Father (Acts 7:55-56; 1 Peter 3:15, 22).

Jesus claimed he:

- was one with the Father - a claim to be God (John 10:30-33, cf. 20:28-29).
- is equal with God (John 5:18)
- is eternal (John 8:52-59; 17:5)
- alone knows the Father and makes him known (Matt 11:27, cf. Luke 10:22; John 6:46).
- is the Son of God (Matt 16:13-17; 21:33-41; Luke 1:30-35).
- came from heaven (John 6:41-42).
- could forgive sins which only God could do (Matt 9:1-8, cf. Mark 2:5-7; Luke 5:20-21).
- is the only means of salvation, eternal life (John 5:21, 24-26, cf. 6:32-40, 53; 8:51).
- is the only way to God (John 14:6-7)
- the one who indwells the believer and redeems us (Gal 2:20).
- is judge of the whole earth (Matt 13:40-43; 25:31ff, cf. Mark 13:26-27; John 5:22-23, 27).
- has “all authority in heaven and on earth.” (Matt 28:16-20).

## An outline of early Christian writings

It is quite clear from the evidence we have that the earliest Christians did believe in the divinity of Jesus. The idea that they (or most) didn't until Constantine forced the issue at the Council of Nicaea in 325AD is completely unbelievable. Here is a very brief summary of the evidence from before 325AD:

- *Clement of Rome* (c.95AD) spoke of Jesus as God<sup>1</sup>
- *Ignatius of Antioch* (c.115AD) speaks of Jesus as our God some 16 times.<sup>2</sup> He is “God incarnate.”<sup>3</sup> His blood is “God’s blood.”<sup>4</sup> He writes: “God was revealing himself as a man” and “God appeared in the likeness of man.”<sup>5</sup> He uses the Trinitarian formula “Son, Father, and Spirit.”<sup>6</sup>
- *The Epistle to Diognetus* (c.125AD) says God sent Jesus “as God.”<sup>7</sup>
- *The Didache* (c.125 AD) uses the Trinitarian formula “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”
- *Polycarp* (69-155 AD) speaks of Jesus as “our Lord and God.”<sup>8</sup>
- *Melito of Sardis* (died c. 190) wrote “He rose from the dead as God, being by nature God and man”<sup>9</sup> and “Being God and likewise perfect man, he gave positive indications of his two natures: of his deity by the miracles”<sup>10</sup>
- *Justin Martyr* (100-165 AD) wrote that Christians “worship the Son” and “the Word incarnate, is divine.”<sup>11</sup> He also wrote: “Christ is King, and Priest, and God and Lord . . . God was born from a virgin.”
- *Tatian* (110-172 AD) wrote: “God was born in the form of man.”<sup>12</sup>
- *Irenaeus* (120-202 AD) wrote: “Jesus Christ our Lord and God”<sup>13</sup> and “He was very [true] man, and that He was very [true] God.”<sup>14</sup> He also wrote that Jesus “not a mere man...but was very God” and “God became man.”<sup>15</sup>
- *Tertullian* (145-220 AD) is the first to use the Latin word trinitas about God.<sup>16</sup> He says about Jesus: “He is God and man.... We have here a dual condition—not fused but united—in one person, Jesus as God and man.” “This One was sent by the Father into the Virgin, and was born of her, man and God, the Son of Man and the Son of God, and called Jesus Christ.”<sup>17</sup> “he proceeds forth from God, and in that procession He is generated; so that He is the Son of God, and is called God from unity of substance with God. For God, too, is a Spirit. . . Thus Christ is Spirit of Spirit, and God of God.” “That which has come

forth out of God is at once God and the Son of God, and the two are one. In this way also, as He is Spirit of Spirit and God of God, He is make a second in manner of existence--in position, not in nature. . . .in His birth God and man united.”<sup>18</sup>

- *Clement of Alexandria* (c.210 AD) writes of Jesus: “He alone being both, both God and man.”<sup>19</sup>
- *Caius* (180-217 AD) sums up the situation: “Justin and Miltiades, and Tatian and Clement, and many others,—who is ignorant of the books of Irenaeus and Melito, and the rest, which declare Christ to be God and man?”<sup>20</sup>
- *Hippolytus* c.228 writes: “Christ is the God over all.”<sup>21</sup>
- *Origen* (c.230 AD) wrote of “the Trinity” and said: “Although he was God, he took flesh; and having been made man, he remained what he was: God.”<sup>22</sup>
- *Cyprian of Carthage* c.253AD writes: “One who denies that Christ is God cannot become his temple...”<sup>23</sup>
- *Dionysius* 262 AD uses the term Trinity and describes the unity of the three persons to prove that they are not three gods.
- *Gregory Thaumaturgus* (205-265 AD) wrote: “All [the persons] are one nature, one essence, one will, and are called the Holy Trinity; and these also are names subsistent, one nature in three persons, and one genus [kind].”<sup>24</sup>
- *Novatian* (210-280 AD) wrote: “He was also God according to the Scriptures.... Scripture has as much described Jesus Christ to be man, as moreover it has also described Christ the Lord to be God.”<sup>25</sup>
- *Arnobius* c. 305 “‘Well, then,’ some raging, angry, and excited man will say, ‘is that Christ your God?’ ‘God indeed’ we shall answer.”<sup>26</sup>
- *Lactantius* c. 307 “He was made both Son of God in the spirit and Son of man in the flesh, that is, both God and man.”<sup>27</sup>

There is also evidence from two non-Christian sources:

- *Pliny the Younger*, governor of Pontus/Bithynia from 111-113 AD, wrote to the Emperor Trajan that the Christians “sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god.”<sup>28</sup>
- *Lucian of Samosata*, a Greek satirist c.170AD wrote that the Christians worship Christ “the crucified sage.”

## Conclusion

It seems clear that the Gospels and their oral and written sources are reliable and that they do not conflict with the rest of the New Testament, particularly Paul’s epistles. It is beyond doubt that the New Testament material clearly teaches that Jesus is divine. It is also quite clear that the earliest Christians did believe in the divinity of Jesus. There is no truth in the idea that Constantine introduced the idea of the divinity of Christ at the Council of Nicaea in 325AD.

Jesus truly is “the only begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.” (*Nicene Creed*)

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<sup>1</sup> Second Epistle of Clement

<sup>2</sup> Eph inscr, Eph 15:3, Eph 18:2, Tral 7, Ro inscr 2x, Ro 3:3, Smyr 10:1.

<sup>3</sup> Eph 7:2

<sup>4</sup> Eph 1:1

<sup>5</sup> Eph 19:3

<sup>6</sup> Mag 13

<sup>7</sup> 7:2, 4

<sup>8</sup> Philippians 12:2

<sup>9</sup> Homily on the Passion

<sup>10</sup> Fragment in Anastasius of Sinai's The Guide 13

<sup>11</sup> 1st Apology 6, 10, 63

<sup>12</sup> Dialogue with Trypho

<sup>13</sup> Against Heresies 1:10:1

<sup>14</sup> Adversus Haereses 4: 6,7

<sup>15</sup> Adversus Haereses 3:19

<sup>16</sup> Adversus Praxean

<sup>17</sup> Adversus Praxean 27

<sup>18</sup> Apology 21

<sup>19</sup> Exhortation to the Greeks 1:7:1

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- <sup>20</sup> Against the Heresy of Artemon  
<sup>21</sup> Refutation of All Heresies 10:34  
<sup>22</sup> The Fundamental Doctrines 1:0:4  
<sup>23</sup> Letters 73:12  
<sup>24</sup> On the Trinity 2  
<sup>25</sup> On The Trinity 11  
<sup>26</sup> Against the Pagans 1:42  
<sup>27</sup> Divine Institutes 4:13:5  
<sup>28</sup> Letters 10. 96-97