

Divinity of Jesus? An Inquiry

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Man is made to adore and to obey: but if you will not command him, if you give him nothing to worship, he will fashion his own divinities, and find a chieftain in his own passions.

—Benjamin Disraeli, *Coningsby*



The critical difference between Jesus' teachings and the Trinitarian formula lies in elevating Jesus to divine status—a status Jesus denies in the gospels:

“Why do you call me good: No one is good but One, that is, God.” (Matthew 9:17, Mark 10-18, and Luke 18:19)

“My Father is greater than I.” (John 14:28)

“I do nothing of myself, but as the Father taught me, I speak these things.” (John 8:28)

“Most assuredly, I say to you, the son can do nothing of himself ...” (John 5:19)

“But I know Him, for I am from Him, and He sent me.” (John 7:29)

“He who rejects me rejects Him who sent me.” (Luke 10:16)

“But now I go away to Him who sent me ...” (John 16:5)

“Jesus answered them and said, ‘My doctrine is not mine, but His who sent me.’” (John 7:16)

“For I have not spoken on my own authority; but the Father who sent me gave me a command, what I should say and what I should speak.” (John 12:49) ¹

What does Pauline theology say? That Jesus is a partner in divinity, God incarnate. So whom should a person believe? If Jesus, then let’s hear what else he might have to say:

“The first of all the commandments is: ‘Hear O Israel, The Lord *our* God, the Lord is one.’” (Mark 12:29)

“But of that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, *nor the Son*, but *only* the Father.” (Mark 13:32)

“You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him *only* you shall serve.” (Luke 4:8)

“My food is to do the will of Him who sent me ...” (John 4:34)

“I can *of myself* do nothing ... I do not seek my own will but the will of the Father who sent me.” (John 5:30)

“For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of Him who sent me.” (John 6:38)

“My doctrine is *not mine*, but His who sent me.” (John 7:16)

“I am ascending to *my* Father and your Father, and to *my* God and your God.” (John 20:17)

¹ See also Matthew 24:36, Luke 23:46, John 8:42, John 14:24, John 17:6-8, etc

My italics in the above verses do not imply that Jesus spoke with that emphasis, although nobody can claim with certainty that he didn't. Rather, the italics stress the fact that Jesus not only never claimed divinity, but would be the first to deny it. In the words of Joel Carmichael, "The idea of this new religion, with himself as its deity, was something he [Jesus Christ] could never have had the slightest inkling of. As Charles Guignebert put it, 'It never even crossed his mind.'" ²

So if Jesus never claimed divinity, then what was he exactly? He answered that question himself:

"A *prophet* is not without honor except in his own country, among his own relatives, and in his own house." (Mark 6:4)

"But Jesus said to them, "A *prophet* is not without honor except in his own country and in his own house." (Matthew 13:57)

"It cannot be that a *prophet* should perish outside of Jerusalem." (Luke 13:33)

Those who knew him acknowledged, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth of Galilee" (Matthew 21:11), and "A great prophet has risen up among us ..." (Luke 7:16). The disciples recognized Jesus as "a prophet mighty in deed ..." (Luke 24:19). Also see Matthew 14:5, 21:46, and John 6:14). If these statements were inaccurate, why didn't Jesus correct them? Why didn't he define his divinity if, that is, he truly was divine? When the woman at the well stated, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet" (John 4:19), why didn't he thank her for her lowly impression, but explain there was more to his essence than prophethood?

Or was there?

Jesus Christ, a mere man? Could it be? A good part of the religiously introspective world wonders, "Why not?" Acts 2:22 records Jesus as "Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested by God to you

² Carmichael, Joel. p. 203.

by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves also know.” Jesus himself is recorded as having said, “But now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth which I heard from God ...” (John 8:40). Strikingly, a similar quote is found in the Holy Qur’an:

“He [Jesus] said: ‘I am indeed a servant of Allah: He has given me Revelation and made me a prophet’” (Quran 19:30)

So was Jesus a “servant of Allah (i.e., servant of God)?” According to the Bible, yes. Or, at least, that is what we understand from Matthew 12:18: “Behold! My servant whom I have chosen ...” Furthermore, Acts of the Apostles traces the growth of the early church for the first thirty years following Jesus’ ministry, but nowhere in Acts did Jesus’ disciples ever call Jesus “God.” Rather, they referred to Jesus as a man and God’s servant.³

In fact, the *only* New Testament verse which supports the doctrine of the Incarnation is 1 Timothy 3:16.⁴ However, with regard to this verse (which states that “God was manifest in the flesh”), Gibbon notes, “This strong expression might be justified by the language of St. Paul (I Tim. iii. 16), but we are deceived by our modern bibles. The word λ (*which*) was altered to $\theta\epsilon\omega$ (*God*) at Constantinople in the beginning of the sixth century: the true reading, which is visible in the Latin and Syriac versions, still exists in the reasoning of the Greek, as well as of the Latin fathers;

3 Man: see Acts 2:22, 7:56, 13:38, 17:31; God’s servant: see Acts 3:13, 3:26, 4:27, 4:30.

4 In the past, some theologians attempted to validate the Incarnation on the basis of John 1:14 and Colossians 2:9. However, in the face of modern textual criticism these verses have fallen from favor, and for good reason. John 1:14 speaks of “the Word,” which by no means implies divinity, and “the only begotten of the Father,” which by no means is an accurate translation. Both of these subjects were discussed (and discredited) in previous chapters. As for Colossians, problems transcend the incomprehensible wording, beginning with the simple fact that Colossians is now thought to have been forged. For details, see Bart D. Ehrman’s *Lost Christianities*, page 235.

and this fraud, with that of the *three witnesses of St. John*, is admirably detected by Sir Isaac Newton.”⁵

Fraud? Now there’s a strong word. But if we look to more modern scholarship, it’s a word well applied, for “some passages of the New Testament were modified to stress more precisely that Jesus was himself divine.”⁶

The Bible was *modified*? For doctrinal reasons? Hard to find a more appropriate word than “fraud,” given the circumstances.

In a chapter entitled “Theologically Motivated Alterations of the Text” in his book, *Misquoting Jesus*, Professor Ehrman elaborates on the corruption of 1 Timothy 3:16, which was detected not only by Sir Isaac Newton, but also by the eighteenth century scholar, Johann J. Wettstein. In Ehrman’s words, “A later scribe had altered the original reading, so that it no longer read “who” but “God” (made manifest in the flesh). In other words, this later corrector changed the text in such a way as to stress Christ’s divinity.... Our earliest and best manuscripts, however, speak of Christ ‘who’ was made manifest in the flesh, without calling Jesus, explicitly, God.”⁷

Ehrman stresses that this corruption is evident in five early Greek manuscripts. All the same it was the corrupted, and not the “earliest and best,” biblical manuscripts which came to dominate both the medieval manuscripts and the early English translations.⁸

5 Gibbon, Edward, Esq. Vol. 5, Chapter XLVII, p. 207.

6 Metzger, Bruce M. and Ehrman, Bart D. *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*. P. 286.

7 Ehrman, Bart D. *Misquoting Jesus*. P. 157.

8 Ehrman, Bart D. *Misquoting Jesus*. P. 157.

* For further clarification, see Metzger, Bruce M. *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*. Pp. 573-4.

Consequently, from medieval times on, the tenets of Christian faith have suffered the corrupting influence of a church devoted more to theology than to reality.*

Ehrman adds: “As Wettstein continued his investigations, he found other passages typically used to affirm the doctrine of the divinity of Christ that in fact represented textual problems; when these problems are resolved on text-critical grounds, in most instances references to Jesus’ divinity are taken away.”⁹

Given the above there should be little surprise that twentieth-century Christianity has expanded to include those who deny the alleged divinity of Jesus. A significant sign of this realization is the following report of the London *Daily News*: “More than half of England’s Anglican bishops say Christians are not obliged to believe that Jesus Christ was God, according to a survey published today.”¹⁰ It is worth noting that it was not mere clergy that were polled but *bishops*, no doubt leaving many parishioners scratching their heads and wondering who to believe, if not their bishops!

9 Ehrman, Bart D. *Misquoting Jesus*. P. 113.

10 *London Daily News*. June 25, 1984.