

(to be completed)

## **Is the Deity of Jesus Essential to the Gospel?** **John Hepp, Jr.**

Our current preaching usually starts with Jesus' divinity. Jesus is God—the eternal divine Word, made flesh. He is divine in a way no man will ever be; He has the same nature as His Father. This teaching is unmistakable in the writings of the Apostle John—and occasionally in the Epistles. In the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke), however, it is not explicit though a logical conclusion. And it is not even mentioned in Acts. Does a person have to understand that Jesus is God to be saved? (NOTE: In this paper *Messiah* is used instead of *Christ*.)

### **Evidence from Acts & the Synoptics**

#### **Evidence from Acts**

The Book of Acts gives the Spirit-inspired story of how the church began. It does not lack for evidence of what was preached, evidence every serious student should study. (See my paper entitled “Evangelistic Sermons in Acts.”) Acts includes nearly eighty summaries of “gospel” sermons to the unsaved:

- a. 12 sermons it summarizes in some detail—from two sentences to many sentences each
- b. about 60 sermons it summarizes in a sentence or less
- c. about 6 summaries by unbelievers

It would be highly presumptuous to say that the summaries in Acts are flawed—or that the preachers were misguided. Yet, all those sermons revolve around Jesus' Lordship and Messiahship, not His deity. In fact, in them there is not a single unambiguous reference to His deity.

The message was the same for Jews or Gentiles. Consider, for example, what Peter preached (a) to start the church with Jews at Pentecost and (b) to extend it to Gentiles at Caesarea.

- a. Acts 2:14-40 David's Descendant, Jesus, has risen from death and ascended to God's throne—all as predicted—proving that He is Messiah.
- b. Acts 10:34-43 God's Anointed (Messiah) did miracles but was crucified; by raising Him, God showed that He is the coming Ruler and only Savior.

#### **Evidence from Mark compared to Acts**

Matthew, Mark, and Luke—just like Acts—have no unambiguous reference to Jesus' deity. (On a separate page see the possible references in Matthew.) Should we therefore conclude that those Gospels do not present the gospel? That would be a brazen conclusion!

Take the Gospel of Mark as an example. From the first verse it claims to present “the beginning of the gospel about Jesus Messiah, the Son of God.” In fact, there was an early and powerful tradition that Mark is the evangelistic preaching of the Apostle Peter. Acts substantiates that tradition by summarizing Peter's sermon at Caesarea, which exactly fits the Marcan mold. He says that Jesus is “Messiah, Lord [Master] of all” (Acts 10:36), “anointed...with the Holy Spirit and power” (10:38), was “killed” (10:39), was “raised from the dead...and...seen by witnesses” (10:40-41), and is “the one whom God appointed as judge [ruler] of the living and the dead” (10:42). “Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness” (10:43). In this sermon Peter's

emphasis and argument are identical to those in Mark: **Jesus is Messiah**. Neither in Mark nor Acts 10 is there a clear statement about His deity.

### **Is that what we preach?**

We have glanced at some summaries of the gospel as preached in Mark and Acts. Do we preach the gospel with the same emphasis as documented for the early church? No, we use a different emphasis. We evangelize from John or from epistles that we see through a Johannine lens. We emphasize the fact of Jesus' divinity and rarely if ever mention His Messiahship. Perhaps we assume that divinity is a "greater" truth that includes Messiahship. But in effect we neglect or cancel the original message.

## **Was Divinity Implied?**

### **Was Jesus' divinity implied by His Sonship?**

Call John's writings "A"; call the Synoptics and Acts "B." A clearly teaches Jesus' deity, whereas B does not. On the surface this seems to be a discrepancy. Can we reconcile A and B? Perhaps we can if B *implies rather than states* that fact. For example, Jesus often said He was God's Son. Regardless of what He meant, did His audience understand Him to claim deity? If they did, the same terminology would imply deity in the Acts period. But notice that in the Greek text with two exceptions (Acts 9:20; 13:33) that terminology is not used in Acts. It is used, however, in the Gospels.

### **"The Jews" in Jerusalem so understood Jesus.**

In all the Gospels Jesus spoke of God as His Father and Himself as God's Son. At this point the issue for us is not what Jesus meant but what His hearers thought He meant—what the terms implied in evangelism. Did they think He was claiming divinity? Only the Gospel of John tells us that anyone understood Him that way (John 5:17-18; 10:30,33). Those who came to that conclusion were "Jews," a term that John seems to restrict to Jerusalemites (e.g., 1:19; 11:19,31,33,36,45). Their conclusion apparently was based on Jesus' description of His relation to the Father, not just His use of certain words. Did non-Jerusalemites come to the same conclusion as "the Jews"? John doesn't say.

### **But others did not.**

The picture in Matthew, Mark, and Luke is different from that in John. Except for Passion Week the Synoptics have practically nothing about Jesus' ministry in and around Jerusalem. On no occasion did anyone suggest that by claiming sonship Jesus was claiming deity.

### **"Son of God" was ambiguous.**

Why could people avoid that conclusion? Because "Son of God" was used in other senses. For example, some Near Eastern coronation texts (used when crowning kings) referred to the king as son of the god. It meant he was the royal heir of his god. For example, the Pyramid Texts use the same terms as Psalm 2:6, partly quoted by the Father at Jesus' baptism (see Acts 13:33).

[Quote from Pyramid texts]

In other words, “Son of God” did not necessarily imply deity. It was another title for a king—and for *the Anointed*—Messiah—*par excellence*. The Scriptures clearly gave this title to Israelite kings, such as David and Solomon (2 Sam. 7:14 and Ps. 89:26-27).

### “Son of God” in the Great Confession

Apparently, “Son of God” meant Royal Heir in the Great Confession. If it meant divinity, both Mark and Luke, who left it out, missed the point. In the three parallel accounts of that confession (Matt. 16:20; Mark 8:29, Luke 9:20), only Matthew 16:20 includes “Son of God” as part of it (“the Messiah, the Son of God”). Mark has only “the Messiah,” and Luke has “the Messiah [Anointed] of God.” But there is no difference in meaning; “Son of God” in Matthew simply elaborates what is already implied in “Messiah,” that He is the Heir. In other words, Jesus was the promised King, the One who would fulfill God’s promises and bring His everlasting kingdom. It did not mean that Jesus was divine (though that is true), which the disciples did not yet realize. He was God’s Son in the same sense that David and his royal descendants had been.

### “Son of God” in Hebrews 1, etc.

This meaning for “Son of God” also clarifies the argument in Hebrews 1:4-5, which says that Jesus “inherited” (obtained by inheritance) the name “Son.” Since He **obtained** this name, it did not refer to the deity He had before. Instead, it referred to something **new**, His dignity as a human.

Similarly, the angel Gabriel explained “Son of God” as a new title: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you,” he told Mary, “so the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35). He did not trace the name to Jesus’ preexistence—which was never mentioned—but to His birth as a man.

Very few heard God call Jesus His Son. At Jesus’ baptism probably no one but John the Baptist heard “You are my Son” (Luke 3:22; cf. John 1:32-34). At His Transfiguration only three disciples heard “This is my Son” (Luke 9:35). Did they realize that this title implies more than “Royal Heir” (as Messiah)? There is no evidence that they did. At His trial Jesus accepted this title (Luke 22:70). His judges apparently used it on the same level as “Messiah” (Luke 22:67; Matt. 26:63, “Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God”). Even the high priest’s charge of “blasphemy” (Matt. 26:65) does not imply a claim to deity. “Blasphemy” referred to any speech that violated God’s power and majesty (Acts 6:11; Rev. 13:6; 16:11,21).

In fact, the Jews did not expect Messiah to be divine. They correctly answered Jesus that Messiah would be David’s son (Luke 20:42). Jesus then quoted something David said under divine inspiration: “The Lord said to my Lord...” (Psalm 110:1). “If then David calls him ‘Lord,’” Jesus asked, “how can he be his son?” “No one could say a word in reply” (Luke 22:46) because no one knew that David’s Son would be divine.

### Does *Lord* imply divinity?

Notice that “Lord” (Greek *kurios*) is used twice in quoting Psalm 110:1. It represents two very different words in the original Hebrew. The second one stands for *Adoni*, which—like *kurios*—means “Master.” But the first one stands for God’s special name *Yahweh*, which Jews do not

say. In Hebrew Scriptures the consonants of the name *Yahweh* are written with the vowels of *Adonai*, which is the word they read. English translations also substitute *Lord* for *Yahweh*.

On the day of Pentecost Peter used “Lord” (*kurios*) for God’s name in his Bible quotations (Acts 2:21,25,34). Thus, it has been argued that the same title means divinity in Peter’s conclusion: “God hath made...Jesus...both **Lord** and Messiah” (Acts 2:36). But Peter also used *kurios* in its normal sense of “master” (“my Lord” in 2:34). That is its logical meaning in the conclusion. Since God “made” Jesus Lord, it refers to authority He gave Him, not to the divinity He already had. Now—as a human—He is Master. Notice the same thought in Philippians 2:9,11, where God has “given him a name” identified as “Lord.”

### **Summary**

In summary, from the Synoptics and Acts one cannot prove that the divinity of Jesus is essential to the gospel or that a person has to understand that He is God to be saved.

That does not mean, however, that a person who **denies** His deity is a genuine Christian. Just as a real believer will not fail to do good works, neither will he refuse a clear inference about His Savior. He will grow in knowledge as well as holiness.

## Possible References to Jesus' Deity in the Gospel of Matthew

- 1:18,20 The child would be conceived by the Holy Spirit. This was a miracle, but how could anyone know that the child was divine, much less preexistent?
- 1:23 His name *Immanuel* means "God with us." Yet, names were often testimonies rather than descriptions of those who bore them. *Joshua*, for example, meant "The LORD is salvation," not that Joshua was divine.
- 3:3 John the Baptist was making "ready the way of the Lord." This did not necessarily mean, however, that His agent was divine. The Lord was not limited to coming in person.
- 7:29 Jesus taught with authority. Didn't all prophets speak with authority?

Jesus' many miracles identify Him as Messiah, who can bring the kingdom as prophesied. Miracles in themselves do not necessarily prove divinity. Moses, Elijah, Elisha did them. The False Prophet will do them too.

- 9:2 When Jesus forgave sins, He was accused of blasphemy. Yet, He later promised His followers, "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven..." (John 20:23). On the occasion in Matthew 9, He forgave as "the Son of Man" (v. 6) and the crowd "praised God, who had given such authority to **men**" (v. 8, bolding added). So they were wrong that only God can forgive sins.
- 11:27 Only the Son and the Father know each other without special revelation. This can imply the Son's divinity but is unclear.
- 22:42-45 If Messiah is David's son, how does David call Him Lord? "Lord" here means "Master" but does imply divinity.

Jesus' resurrection declares Him to be God's Son (Rom. 1:4). But remember that (1) "God's Son" can refer to Him as Messiah and Heir rather than divine, (2) we shall rise too, without being divine.

## Jesus' Son/Father relationship with God

- 2:15 God calling His Son out of Egypt. This relationship is analogous to that of Israel and God, to whom the quotation originally referred.
- 3:17; 17:5 God from heaven saying "This is My beloved Son"
- 4:4,6 The tempter saying, "If you are the Son of God" Also 8:29
- 10:32,33; 11:27; 12:50; 16:17,27; 18:10; 20:23; 26:42,53 Jesus calls God "My Father"
- 14:33 Disciples call Him "God's Son"
- 16:16 Simon confesses, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God"
- 21:37-38 The landowner sent his son, whom the vine-growers killed to get his inheritance.
- 22:2 Kingdom of heaven is like "a king who gave a wedding feast for his son."
- 24:36 The Son does not know of that day and hour, but the Father does.
- 26:63-65 (cf. v. 68) The high priest adjures Jesus to tell if He is "the Messiah, the Son of God," calls His answer "blasphemy."
- 27:40 Those passing by the cross challenged Him to come down if He was the Son of God.
- 27:43 Chief priests, scribes, elders challenged God to deliver Him if He was the Son of God.
- 27:54 Centurion and guards after His death: "Truly this was the Son of God."
- 28:19 Baptizing "in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit"