

How Can A Monotheistic Jew Worship Jesus As God?

A great difficulty arises for a faithful Jew when he or she realizes that Christianity declares Jesus the Messiah to be God. The doctrine of the Trinity can be a stumbling block to their faith. First it must be said that true Christianity has never denied the truth of monotheism as described in the Shema: "Listen, Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD is One."¹ There is only one true God, but diversity within the one being of God is foreshadowed in the Hebrew Scriptures and revealed in the New Testament. I want to briefly explain the doctrine of the Trinity to help the troubled Jewish believer, Muslim or Jehovah Witness understand this mysterious doctrine.

I want to look at one Old Testament passage and see how it reveals the truth that Jesus is God. God wrote the Bible by what theologians call "progressive revelation." Progressive revelation means God revealed Himself and His plan of redemption to His creation gradually over a long period of time. He did not reveal Himself all at once. First, He gave us "general revelation" which is the revelation of God that we see in His creation. By looking at the world, I know there had to be an all-powerful, all wise, all loving God (Psalm 19; Romans 1). This tells us a little about God but not enough. Next, God revealed himself in "special revelation." This is specific information about God that He revealed to the prophets. This revelation is more reliable because God made sure it was an accurate revelation kept from corruption (2 Peter 1:20-21). Finally, He revealed himself in his Son, which is the most complete revelation of God. Hebrews 1:1-3a says:

Long ago God spoke to the fathers by the prophets at different times and in different ways. In these last days, He has spoken to us by His Son. God has appointed Him heir of all things and made the universe through Him. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact expression of His nature, sustaining all things by His powerful word.

Even during the life of Jesus the people could not handle the full teaching of God, so they had to wait for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit who would "guide them into all truth" (see John 16:12; Mark 4:33; and Matthew 19:8). Because of this method of God revealing Himself we can expect the Bible to get clearer and more specific in the later Old Testament books, and we can anticipate the clearest presentation of God in the New Testament, which is a record and explanation of the full revelation of God in Jesus. We can also expect the New Testament to explain the Old Testament (remember that according to Hebrews 1:1 the Old Testament is only a partial revelation of God - accurate but not complete).

Now I would like to show an example of this progressive revelation of God by looking at a passage in Isaiah and appropriate New Testament passages that explain and add to our understanding of this passage. Isaiah 44:6:

This is what the LORD, the King of Israel and its Redeemer, the LORD of Hosts, says: I am the first and I am the last; there is no God but Me.

Let's look at each segment of this passage in detail.

¹ Deuteronomy 6:4

1) “This is what the LORD... says” - The Hebrew term יהוה (YHWH) is used here. This is the personal name for God many translate as Yahweh or Jehovah.² This is not a representative of God; it is the Supreme Creator himself.

2) “the King of Israel and its Redeemer” - There are three parts to this segment:

a. God is the king and redeemer of *Israel*. He has a special relationship, a covenant relationship with Israel. They are the people of God in the Old Testament. The New Testament people of God are the church. In fact both Jew and Gentile who trust in Jesus as their savior are called Abraham’s seed and together are the covenant people of God (Galatians 3:26-29; Ephesians 2:14-18; 3:6). Since we are the people of God, He is our king and redeemer as well.

b. God is the king. Isaiah wrote under the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah (Isaiah 1:1), but he saw God as the supreme King. In 1 Timothy 6:15-16 God is called the “King of kings and Lord of lords” and the “blessed and only Sovereign.” This title is also given to Jesus in Revelation 17:14 and 19:6. To be the King of kings and Lord of lords means He is the supreme King and Lord over all other kings and lords. Either Jesus is King over God who is king, or they are one and the same. I believe the New Testament passages are revealing who this Yahweh is. He is Jesus!

c. God is the redeemer. The term redeemer (גֹּאֲל) is a term used to set prisoners free. We are under the bondage of sin until God redeems us. In other words, God is our savior (Isaiah 45:21). In fact Isaiah 43:11 says, “I, I am Yahweh, and there is no other Savior but Me.” God is the only savior. But the New Testament says Jesus redeemed us (Galatians 3:13-14). The New Testament also calls Jesus our savior twenty-three times. Which one is the savior, God or Jesus? The confusion is even more pronounced in Titus. 1:3; 2:10; and 3:4 use the phrase “God our Savior.” 1:4 and 3:6 use the phrase “Jesus Christ our Savior.” 2:13 explains this dilemma: “While we wait for the blessed hope and appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.” The King James Version of this verse is a little obscure, but the Greek is very clear - Jesus is God. The context proves it. We are all waiting for the appearing of Jesus known as the second coming. Titus wasn’t confused. He could interchangeably call God the savior and Jesus the savior because he believed Jesus was God.

3) “The LORD of Hosts” - יהוה צְבָאוֹת literally means Yahweh of armies. This is a technical term for Yahweh being the mightiest warrior. In the Septuagint (the Jews Greek translation of the Old Testament) the word pantokrator (παντοκράτωρ), which means “Almighty, is used.” Revelation 1:8 calls the Lord God the “Almighty” (pantokrator) and “the Alpha and the Omega.” In Revelation 22:13 Jesus calls himself the “Alpha and the Omega.” There are not two alpha and omegas. In Isaiah 9:6 the Messiah (Jesus) is called “the mighty God.” Some have claimed that Jesus is the mighty god, but he is not the Almighty God; however, just a little while later in the book Isaiah calls Yahweh the mighty God (Isaiah 10:21 also see Luke 22:69). Jesus is the LORD Almighty, the mighty God, and the Alpha and Omega.

4) “I am the first and I am the last” - God calls Himself the first and the last (also in Isaiah 48:12). This phrase speaks of His supremacy and eternal being. It is similar to the phrase “the Alpha and the Omega” which are the first and last letters in the Greek alphabet. God has always been, and He will always be. The four living creatures of Revelation 4 never stop singing “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God, the Almighty, who was, who is, and who is coming.” This same book

² Judaism began to shy away from the use of the personal name for God out of reverence, but it should be noted that nowhere in Scripture do we find this prohibition. God gave His personal name to His people because He wanted an intimate relationship with them. I don’t want to disrespect the Jews but I believe God wants us to use His personal name.

calls Jesus the first and the last in 1:17; 2:8; and 22:13. 22:13 also calls Jesus the Alpha and the Omega, tying Him in with the God Almighty of 1:8. John was not confused as to who was the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last - He is Jesus (also God is called the beginning and the end in Revelation 21:6-7 and Jesus is called the beginning and the end in Revelation 22:12-16). 5) “there is no God but Me” - Throughout the entire Bible, the belief in monotheism (there is only one God) is taught. Isaiah brings this out several times (43:11; 44:8; 45:5, 21-22; 46:9). 43:10-11 states:

“You are my witnesses” – this is the LORD’s declaration – “and My servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe Me and understand that I am He. No god was formed before Me, and there will be none after Me. I, I am Yahweh, and there is no other Savior but Me.”

Isaiah goes out of his way to declare that there is only one true God. All other gods are false gods (Psalms 96:5). Jesus is called God in John 1:1, 14: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... The Word became flesh and took up residence among us.” The Jehovah’s Witnesses translate this verse saying, “The word was a god.” They think this preserves them from having to admit Jesus is God, but they are mistaken. They are forced in saying that Jesus is a god but not the one true God. If this is true then Jesus is a false god and we should have nothing to do with Him. The fact is Jesus is the one true God and that is why we worship Him. Isaiah 45:22-23 says:

Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth. For I am God, and there is no other. By Myself I have sworn, Truth has gone from My mouth, a word that will not be revoked: Every knee will bow to Me, every tongue will swear allegiance.

Philippians 2:10-11 explains this passage in more detail. It says, “So that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow.” It says, “Every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.” This same passage says that Jesus is, in His very nature, God (in the form μορφή of God) just as He is, in His very nature, a servant (in the form μορφή of a servant); He is just as much God as He is a servant (Philippians 2:6-10). Throughout the New Testament Jesus is called God (i.e. John 20:27-29; Hebrews 1:8) and is worshiped as God (i.e. Revelation 5:12-14). Even the angels worship Jesus (Hebrews 1:6). Jesus is worshiped even though the law says to worship God alone (Deuteronomy 6:13; see also Revelation 19:10 and 22:8-9). The New Testament explains and expands upon the Old Testament, showing us clearly that Jesus is Yahweh - Jesus is God!

This is what the LORD, the King of Israel and its Redeemer, the LORD of Hosts, says: I am the first and I am the last; there is no God but Me.

I would like to examine a few other passages that teach the deity of Jesus. John 8:58-59 says, “Jesus said to them, ‘I assure you: Before Abraham was, I am.’” At this they picked up stones to stone him.” In English, as well as in Greek, this statement by Jesus uses an improper verb tense. It should be “Before Abraham was, I *was*.” Jesus deliberately used the wrong tense for a reason (He doesn’t make mistakes by accident); He was claiming to be God. The Greek words used are εγω εἰμι (ego eimi), which are the Greek words for the Hebrew words used for God’s personal name, which He told Moses to call Him in Exodus 3:14. Yahweh (called the

tetragrammaton (יהוה) is derived from the verb הָיָה found here. Jesus was saying, “Before Abraham was, I have always been, Yahweh.” That is why the Jews tried to kill him. Jesus’ pre-existence is also taught in Colossians 1:16-17:

For everything was created by Him, in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and by Him all things hold together.

This passage says Jesus created all things and that he holds everything together. If Jesus were a created being and not God, then this passage would be stating that Jesus created Himself (all things), but that is illogical. In John 1:3 John goes out of his way to make this point; he says, “All things were created through Him, and apart from Him not one thing was created that has been created.” Jesus has always existed and is the great I AM!

John 20:28 says, “Thomas responded to Him, ‘My Lord and my God!’” Thomas specifically calls Jesus his God. Some say that Thomas just made a mistake in his excitement, but if that were true Jesus would have corrected him; instead He praised him! For Jesus to accept worship as God when He was not in fact God would have been a horrendous sin, but if Jesus is God then it is natural.

There are several other passages that state Jesus is God. These references are found in all of the new translations of the Bible because they are based on the earliest and most accurate manuscripts. John 1:18 says, “No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.” (NAU) Romans 9:5 says, “The ancestors are theirs, and from them, by physical descent, came the Messiah, who is God over all, praised forever. Amen.” Titus 2:13 says, “While we wait for the blessed hope and appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.” 2 Peter 1:1 says, “...through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ.”

It should be clear by now that Jesus is God, according to the New Testament. Church history also backs up the belief that Jesus is God. All of the early church fathers proclaimed that Jesus is God. Papias and Polycarp who were both disciples of John declared the deity of Jesus. Clement and Ignatius, as well as many other second century Christians, also clearly proclaimed the deity of Christ.³ The idea that Jesus was not God was not historically held by anyone within the Church until the fourth century and is refuted by the early church fathers and then the councils. The Bible, as well as the earliest followers of Jesus, taught that Jesus is God.

Now we have to try to make sense of the Bible’s teaching. God is called the Father (Jude 1:1). He is also called Jesus (as we have already seen). The Holy Spirit is also referred to as God (Acts 5:3-4). The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all considered persons in the Bible. Some would argue that the Holy Spirit is not a person but is a force. The Holy Spirit can be grieved (Ephesians 4:30); He can be lied to (Acts 5:3); He teaches us, comforts us, convicts us, and counsels us as Jesus’ substitute (John chapters 13-17). In these chapters in John, Jesus specifically uses the masculine pronoun (he) in referring to the Holy Spirit to show that he is a person. The term Holy Spirit is a neuter term and would normally call for a neuter pronoun (it), but Jesus wanted his people to know that someone would be coming after he left to continue what he started. The Holy Spirit is not a force; you do not grieve or lie to a force, and you are not taught by a force (this is not Star Wars). If the Holy Spirit is only the power of God rather

³ Michael Holmes, editor and translator, *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 47, 75, 77, 109, 123, 139, 225, 271, s95, 325, 705.

than a person in the Godhead, then Luke 4:14 would not make sense. It says, "And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee." If the Spirit is just the power of God then this verse would read, "And Jesus returned in the power of the power into Galilee." The Holy Spirit is a person. The Bible also teaches that there is only one God (Deuteronomy 6:4; Isaiah 44:6, etc.). So the facts according to the Bible are that the one God is made up of the three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Father is not the Son. The Son is not the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not the Father. They are three separate persons. These three persons are the one God. This is the doctrine of the Trinity.

It is difficult for us to understand how one being can be made up of three persons, because in the physical realm all we see are individual beings made up of only one person each. I am one being and one person. You are one being and one person, etc. But just because this is all we see in the physical realm, it does not mean it is impossible for a being to be made up of three persons. This is the majesty of God. This just says that his being is so much greater than ours. He is so far above and beyond us; as theologians say, he is "other" than us. If God were just like us, it would give us a reason to question whether or not we made up this god ourselves. Because God is infinite it makes sense that finite creatures cannot fully comprehend him (Deuteronomy 29:29).

Though the doctrine of the Trinity is difficult to understand, it is not illogical. If we were to say God is one god, and at the same time in the same way, he is three gods, we would be stating illogical nonsense. If we were to say God is three persons, and at the same time and in the same way he is one person, we would be irrational. But we are not saying those things; we are saying he has always been one God, and he has always been three persons. He may be beyond our ability to comprehend, but the doctrine of the Trinity is not illogical.

We should be concerned about the rationality of the doctrine, but our primary concern must be "What does the Bible say?" It has already been conclusively shown in the Bible that God has revealed himself as three persons in the Bible. Let us look at a few other Trinitarian passages: Matthew 28:19 says, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name [not names] of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Are we baptized in the name of God, a created being and a force? No, we are baptized in the name of the Trinity. This passage continues with Jesus saying, "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." In order for this to be true Jesus would have to be omnipresent (everywhere all at once), which is an attribute only God holds. 2 Corinthians 13:14 says, "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." Does this grace by which we are saved come from God or a created being? Do we have fellowship with a force or the third person in the Trinity?

Some are troubled by the doctrine of the Trinity because the Bible calls Jesus the Son of God and it teaches that he is in subordination to God (1 Corinthians 11:3; 15:28). Subordination does not necessitate inferiority. 1 Corinthians 11:3 says, "Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God." God being the head of Christ does not necessarily make him superior anymore than man being the head of woman makes him superior. The truth of the Trinity is "Ontological equality but economic subordination," in other words, equal in being but subordinate in role. There is an order in the Trinity. The Son submits to the Father and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, bringing glory to the Son. The confusion can be cleared when we understand the use of the terms "God" and "Lord." In the Old Testament God was referred to by the terms "God" (Elohim), "LORD" (Yahweh) and "Lord" (Adonai). In the New Testament's full

revelation of God as Trinity, the Father is primarily referred to as “God” and Jesus is primarily referred to as “Lord,” though Jesus is referred to as God a few times and the Father is referred to as Lord a few times.

Some are also confused when the Bible calls the Son the “only begotten.” There is a strong case for translating this term “the One and only” or “unique one” (see NIV). But even if we go with the translation “Only begotten,” we must understand the uniqueness of this term in referring to Jesus. We are sons by adoption, but he is a son by generation. When dogs have babies they have little dogs (cats, humans and everything else are the same). The offspring of God would be deity. If the offspring is deity then this deity would have to be eternal; therefore, we are not talking about his coming into being; we are referring to only the Son’s relationship with the Father. Also, when Colossians 1:15 calls Jesus the firstborn over all creation, Paul is not speaking about a time when Jesus came into being. The term “firstborn” (πρωτοτοκος) refers to preeminence and rule not birth order. Psalm 89:27 brings this out clearly; when speaking of David God says, “I will also appoint him my firstborn, the most exalted of the kings of the earth.” David was not the first king or the firstborn of his family; he was actually the youngest son. The verse shows that by firstborn the psalmist means “most exalted.”

When the difficulties are examined we find there are Biblical solutions. The Bible never says, “Jesus is not God,” but actually says in several places “Jesus is God.” The proper response is to worship and proclaim Jesus as God, holding to the doctrine of the Trinity.

There are many hints of the Trinity in the Hebrew Scriptures. Millard Erickson notes well:

The teaching of the Old Testament on this subject may naturally be expected to be less direct than that of the New Testament. So, for example, the idea of incarnation is not really asserted in the Old Testament. What we find instead are anomalies in the Old Testament witness, which do not necessarily teach, but are consistent with, the Trinity. They may be hints at the doctrine, which lead us to that conclusion.⁴

Elohim is a plural noun used for the singular subject *God*. Though this may simply be a use of the plural of majesty, there are other places where the idea of “plural of majesty” simply does not fit. Genesis 1:26 says, “Then God said, ‘Let *us* make man in *Our* image...’” Here we see that Moses uses the singular form for *said* and the plural form for *us* and *our*. Erickson points out that the Jewish commentators give several explanations because “plural of majesty” does not answer this particular problem.⁵ Even in the great passage on monotheism in Deuteronomy 6:4-5 called the “Shema” where it says Yahweh is one, the Hebrew word for “one” is peculiar. In Hebrew the word *yahid* (יְחִיד) is used to present the one and only or unique one, such as in Genesis 22:2, 12, 16. But in the Shema Moses uses *ehad* (אֶחָד). This is the same word used in Genesis 2:24, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.” *Ehad* can simply be used for a singular subject, but it

⁴ Millard Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 31. I am indebted to Millard Erickson for the information on the Old Testament witness of the Trinity 31-34.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 32; this is also true concerning Genesis 3:22, 11:7, and Isaiah 6:8 where the Targums, Philo, The Book of Jubilees and the Talmud give conflicting explanations or simply alter the reading because of the difficulty. *Ibid.*, 32-33.

can also “be used to speak of a unity that is actually a union or composite of several factors.”⁶ The Hebrew Scriptures leave open the possibility of a plurality within the one true God.

The exalted terminology used for Messiah also gives credence to the idea of Messiah being both God and human. Micah 5:2 says “His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity.” Daniel 7:14 speaks of the Son of Man stating, “And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed.” In many places the “Angel of the LORD” or some human-like figure can be seen as a theophany or manifestation of God in a physical form because the nature of the “Angel” is divine not angelic (i.e. Genesis 18:1-2, 16-18, 22, 19:1; 32:24-32; Joshua 5:13-15; Judges 6:11-24; 13:3-23). In reference to Messiah Isaiah 9:6-7 states:

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. 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.

This clear messianic prediction declares the Messiah to be “Mighty God.” *El gibbor* for “Mighty God” (אֱלֹהִים גִּבּוֹר) always refers to God in the Hebrew Scriptures. Daniel Akin notes, “This is a clear and direct affirmation of Messiah’s deity. What that would mean was, no doubt, shrouded in mystery at the time of the prophecy, but there is no textual reason for shying away from what it says.”⁷ In all of these instances we see hints or shadows of the Trinity, which foreshadow the New Testament’s full revelation.

I would like to conclude with a quote on the importance of the doctrine of the Trinity by Wayne Grudem:

Why was the church so concerned about the doctrine of the Trinity? Is it really essential to hold to the full deity of the Son and the Holy Spirit? Yes it is, for this teaching has implications for the very heart of the Christian faith. First, the atonement is at stake. If Jesus is merely a created being, and not fully God, then it is hard to see how he, a creature, could bear the full wrath of God against all of our sins. Could any creature, no matter how great, really save us? Second, justification by faith alone is threatened if we deny the full deity of the Son. (This is seen today in the teaching of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, who do not believe in justification by faith alone.) If Jesus is not fully God, we would rightly doubt whether we can really trust him to save us completely. Could we really depend on any creature fully for our salvation? Third, if Jesus is not infinite God, should we pray to him or worship him? Who but an infinite, omniscient God could hear and respond to all the prayers of all God’s people? And who but God himself is worthy of worship? Indeed, if Jesus is merely a creature, no matter how great, it would be idolatry to worship him - yet the New Testament commands us to do so (Phil. 2:9-11; Rev. 5:12-14). Fourth, if someone teaches that Christ was a created being but nonetheless one who saved us, then this teaching wrongly begins to attribute credit for salvation to a creature and not to God himself. But this wrongfully exalts the creature

⁶ Ibid., 33.

⁷ Daniel Akin, editor, *A Theology for the Church* (Nashville: B and H Publishing Group, 2007), 488.

rather than the Creator, something Scripture never allows us to do. Fifth, the independence and personal nature of God are at stake: If there is no Trinity, then there were no interpersonal relationships within the being of God before creation, and, without personal relationships, it is difficult to see how God could be genuinely personal or be without the need for a creation to relate to. Sixth, the unity of the universe is at stake: If there is not perfect plurality and perfect unity in God himself, then we have no basis for thinking there can be any ultimate unity among the diverse elements of the universe either. Clearly, in the doctrine of the Trinity, the heart of the Christian faith is at stake. Herman Bavinck says that “Athanasius understood better than any of his contemporaries that Christianity stands or falls with the confession of the deity of Christ and of the Trinity.” He adds, “In the confession of the Trinity throbs the heart of the Christian religion: every error results from, or upon deeper reflection may be traced to, a wrong view of this doctrine.”⁸

If God is not Triune, then he had to create in order to love and therefore could not be a necessary being, but rather contingent on his creation. To reject the Trinity is illogical. There was infinite love expressed throughout eternity between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He created us and loves us simply out of the overflow of his love, not because he needed something to love. If we receive his love through Jesus Christ we will have an eternity to grow in our understanding of him without ever exhausting the knowledge of God because of his infinite nature. If God is not Triune, then the Father giving his son as a sacrifice is not love, but rather cruelty; what father would send his son, rather than himself, to be tortured? If Jesus is God, then the Father sending the Son is a loving act because God himself is the one suffering in our place. May this doctrine draw you closer to our Creator.

⁸ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), pp.247-248.