

God Was Here!

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Throughout these lessons we have emphasized the fact that Jesus was both "one of us" and "God with us." Previous lessons focused on the biblical teaching that portrayed Jesus as "one of us" and the various ways this concept may be understood. Here we enter into a study of the biblical portrayal of Jesus as "God with us," and the various ways this concept may be understood.

Pliny, the Roman governor of Bithynia in the first decade of the second century AD (a non-Christian), wrote concerning the Christians of his province:

. . . they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god (*Letters to the Emperor Trajan*, Book 10.46).

From his understanding of the Christians in the early second century, they clearly believed Jesus to be "a god," or as the Christians themselves would have put it, they believed Jesus to be "God." From what we learn from Christian writings of the early second century, Jesus' presence here on earth was believed to have been a visitation of God. Ignatius, an elder of the second century church, in his letter to the church in Ephesus speaks of, "Our God, Jesus the Christ," and says concerning the incarnation of God in Christ, "God was manifested as man;" and in his letter to the church in Smyrna he speaks of "Jesus Christ the God who has thus given you wisdom."

There can be little doubt that Christians of the early second century believe Jesus to be "God with us" as well as "one of us." But

how did they come by this belief? Was this view of Jesus an innovation of thought at the close of the apostolic period (100 AD), or did the Christians of the first century believe Jesus to be God?

How was the deity of Christ understood by those personalities most immediately associated with Jesus of Nazareth? What of the beliefs of Jesus of Nazareth himself and the beliefs of his earliest disciples who later became his apostles? The New Testament data contributing to this discussion falls into two groups: evidence of an implicit nature (i.e., data from which one may conclude that he was God) and evidence of an explicit nature (data which ascribed the very title of God to him). Both types of evidence are interwoven throughout the New Testament documents.

What Jesus Believed about Himself

As Revealed by His Own Claims

"*He Who Has Seen Me Has Seen the Father,*" (John 14:8-9). Perhaps the clearest insights Jesus gives us into his divine identity are found in his response to Philip's request that Jesus show them the Father:

*Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? **He who has seen me has seen the Father;** how can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"*

According to John 1:18, no one has ever seen God, Jesus came to show him to us: "No one has ever seen God; the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known." The Greek term here translated "has made him known," is *exegeomai*, from which we derive our technical term "exegesis," (interpretation). Jesus is the exegesis of God. He, as one who has come from the bosom (from the midst of) the Father, has interpreted him for us - he has shown us the Father.

The Theophany Sayings of Jesus. The word *theophany* means "a manifestation or appearance of God." Theophanies are found throughout the Old Testament. In the Gospels there are numerous

instances of Jesus, in something of an esoteric fashion, making statements that imply that in him God is, in some way, manifesting himself or appearing to man. One New Testament scholar has observed that, "the deity within him keeps breaking through the fabric of his humanity." (Vincent Taylor, *The Person of Jesus*.)

One of these esoteric glimpses of the divine identity of Jesus is found in the "**I Am**" sayings of Jesus found in the Gospel of John. The Hebrew name for God is YHWH (pronounced YaH'VeH). In translation it means, "I am," which is how it is translated in the Greek Old Testament (*ego eimi*, "I, I am"). Throughout the Greek text of the Gospel of John, Jesus uses this expression in a very curious way. One of the most curious is found in John 8. Jesus states that anyone believing in him would never die, at this the Jews responded:

*Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you claim to be?" Jesus answered, "If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing; it is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say that he is your God. But you have not known him; I know him. If I said, I do not know him, I should be a liar like you; but I do know him and I keep his word. **Your father Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day; he saw it and was glad.**" The Jews then said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, **before Abraham was, I am (ego eimi).**" So they took up stones to throw at him; but Jesus hid himself, and went out of the temple (John 8:53-59).*

Why did they take up stones to kill him? They believed he had blasphemed by using the designation "*ego eimi*" (I AM) to identify himself. He didn't say "I was," which would have been more grammatical, rather, he says "*ego eimi* - I AM," the divine designation for God in the Greek Old Testament. What was Jesus doing with this expression here? Was this an esoteric self-revelation of his divine identity? Jesus uses this expression throughout the Gospel of John to speak of his identity (cf. John 4:26; 6:20; 8:24, 58; 13:19; 18:5, 6, 8).

Another of these is his use of Old Testament images of God as a way of speaking of himself. The judgment scene Jesus portrays in

Matt 25 clearly recalls judgments scenes of the Old Testament (Daniel 7:9f; Joel 3:1-12; Zech 14:5). In Matt 21:16 Jesus applies to himself the praise of God found in Psalms 8:1-2, as sung by the children of the streets. In Luke 19:10 Jesus applies to himself the role of God as the divine shepherd of Ezek 34:16, 22, whose responsibility it is to seek and save his lost sheep. Jesus' words in Mark 13:31 - "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away" - are almost identical to the words of Isa 40:8 - "The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever."

One of the most fascinating and revealing examples of Jesus' use of Old Testament images of God as a self-revelation is found in his interpretation of the role of John the Baptist. Malachi 3:1, 4:5-6 and Isa 40:3 were used by Judaism, and by Jesus and the NT writers, to refer to the reappearance of the prophet Elijah as the forerunner heralding of the coming of Yahweh to deliver Israel. In Matt 3:1ff; 11:10-14; 17:11-12, Jesus identified John the Baptist with Elijah. The implications here are of great significance. The Isaiah 40 text clearly states that this "voice from the wilderness" would herald the coming of "the Lord" (in Hebrew *Yahweh*) and "our God" (in Hebrew *Elohim*). There can be no question as to who the major player in this prophecy was, it was God himself; and Jesus identifies himself as the very fulfillment of this prophecy.

Another of these "theophany sayings" of Jesus is found in John 17:5 [22, 24], ". . . and now, Father, glorify thou me in thy own presence with the glory which I had with thee before the world was made." Two points of significance are present: (1) he here identifies himself the glory of God, and (2) his statement implies his pre-existence with God.

Also of significance is Jesus' claim of oneness with God. "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). What can he possibly mean by such a claim. To make oneself one with God was, to the Jews, blasphemy. In fact they accused Jesus of doing this very thing and attempted to stone him for it in John 5:18.

In his PhD dissertation in development of this theme, R. T.

France came to the conclusion that, "Jesus did not scruple to apply to himself and his work words and ideas which the Old Testament used to describe the attributes and word of Yahweh." (R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament: His Application of Old Testament Passages to Himself and His Mission*, p. 159.)

As Revealed by His Actions

Not only does Jesus imply his divine identity in many of his statements, his actions lead to the same conclusion.

He Does Only What God Can Do. Jesus' deeds were constantly raising questions in the mind of his disciples as to what more he may have been than the Messiah. Their expectations concerning the Messiah was that he would lead Israel to deliverance from their enslavement to Rome.

The messianic figure before them, however, was much more than a political or military deliverer. Over and over again his disciples were confronted with this fact. One such instance is found in Mark 4:35-41 where Jesus demonstrates his authority over the forces of nature, a power the Rabbis claimed belonged only to God. The Mark 4 text says, ". . . he rebuked the wind and said to the waves, 'Peace, be still!' Then the wind died down and it was completely calm." Seeing such a demonstration of power, his disciples were terrified and asked, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him?" The obvious answer to their question, he was more than a man ("one of us"), in time they were to learn that he was none other than "God with us."

He Forgives Sins. To the Jew there was only one who could forgive sins, and that one was God. This is why the Jewish leadership was so outraged with Jesus when he said to the paralytic in Mark 2:5, "Son you sins are forgiven." The events that followed here are very revealing:

Now, some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming!

***Who can forgive sins but God alone?"** Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, "Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? But **that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins . . .** He said to the paralytic, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!" (Mark 2:6-12)*

Not only did he imply his divinity by forgiving the sins of the paralytic, he confirmed it by healing him.

He Accepts Worship Due Only to God. Here is one of the strongest pieces of evidence confirming Jesus' belief in his divine identity. This is clear from the following line of reasoning. In the temptation scene of Matt 4:9-10, when Satan asked Jesus to fall down and worship him, Jesus responded by quoting Deut 6:13, ". . . it is written: you shall worship the Lord your God, and him only you shall serve." In John 4:23-24 Jesus instructed the woman at the well in Samaria that the true worshipper worships the Father.

This very same concept was clear in the minds of the apostles of Christ, as is evidenced by Peter's words to Cornelius in Acts 10:25-26, Paul's instructions to the people of Lystra in Acts 14:11-18, and John's words in Rev 22:8-9, where John is told that not even an angel is worthy of worship.

It is without dispute that Jesus was worshipped in the New Testament as a baby at this birth (Matt 2:1--11), and as a Risen Lord in Matt 28:6-9 and John 20:26-28 (Jesus' responses in Matt 28 and John 20 are very revealing). In view of his comments in Matt 4:9-10, Jesus knew that only God may be worshipped by man, yet he accepted the worship of men in these two accounts of his resurrection appearances without censuring the worshipper. Why? He knew there was no violation of Deut 6:13 in their worship of him. There can be no doubt but that he believed himself to be "God with us."

What Others Believed About Him

The Testimony of Paul

The apostle Paul is the earliest of the New Testament writers. His belief in the deity of Christ is unquestionable and his witness to this fact is significant. The depth of his belief in Christ's deity may, perhaps, be traced to the manner in which his disbelief was confronted by the risen Jesus (cf. Acts 9, 22, 26). Whatever the cause, the fact remains that Paul's belief in the deity of Christ is the most expressed of all the New Testament writers, with the possible exception of John. The most important texts here are: Phil 2, Col 1 and 2, and Titus 2:13.

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men (Phil 2:5-7).

This text states that Jesus, in his pre-existence, existed in the form of God, and was equal with (*isos* - the same as) God. In his letter to the Colossians Paul says of Jesus:

He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities - all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in very thing he might be pre-eminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell . . . (Col 1:15-19).

This text is filled with both implicit and explicit teaching concerning the deity of Christ. The statement, "He is the image of the invisible of God" could be taken as a reference to his role as the second Adam; in this context, however, more is being said, *viz.*, that he is the visible manifestation of the invisible God. The expressions, "in him all things were created," and "all things were created through

him and for him" can only be applied to a creator being; that being, according to Gen 1-2 and Psalms 33:6, 9, is none other than God himself. The expression "in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" is the parallel of Col 2:9, "in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily." By the expression "the fullness of deity," Paul is clearly saying that in Christ dwelt the very presence of God - in the person Jesus of Nazareth "God was with us."

In Titus 2:13, we find the clearest statement of Paul concerning his belief in the divine identity of Jesus. The apostle here, in speaking of the second coming of Christ, says (reading literally from the Greek text): ". . . **awaiting the blessed hope and appearing of the glory of the great God and Savior of us, Jesus Christ.**" The expression "great God" is found also in the Greek text of Isa 9:6 (translated "Mighty God" in most English version) and the full designation, "Great God and Savior" is a title ascribed to a number of pagan deity figures of the first century Mediterranean world, as well as to the Roman emperor.

Paul here appears to be ascribing a title to Jesus which would be recognized by those who knew the Old Testament as a title of God; and for those who would have recognized it as a title for pagan deities, the apostle is reminding them that, "our Great God and Savior is Jesus Christ." There can be little question but that, in the belief of the apostle Paul, "God was in Christ, reconciling to world to himself" (2 Cor 5:19).

The Testimony of John

The apostle John is as clear in his belief in the deity of Christ as is the apostle Paul. The most explicit expression of his belief is found in the prologue to his Gospel.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men (John 1:1-4).

The language here could hardly be made clearer. The Word (Greek *logos* - the concept of a reality) was God. The *logo* was in the beginning (i.e., the creation of time). All things were made by means of the *logos* (i.e., creative activity); he was the source of life, and he was the source of light for man. All designations and attributes given in this text relate directly to God. This one who is here called by the Greek term *logos* is clearly a divine being in the thinking of John. John further informs us:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father (John 1:14).

Here we have the clearest expression in the New Testament to the incarnation - the Word became flesh (human). The moral attributes of this one who was made flesh are all moral attributes associated with the Holy One of Israel - *Yahweh*. Grace, truth, and glory are all characteristics associated with the Divine One of the Old Testament Scriptures. But here "Son" does not appear in the Greek text of this verse; the term found here is *monogenes* - a new idea is introduced. This one who was God became "the only begotten." This "only begotten" one is identified in verse 17 as "Jesus Christ," who as God came one with human existence by means of "begetting." The reason he came was to show us the Father, which is stated in verse 18:

No one has ever seen God; the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known (John 1:18).

The "bosom of the Father" is from the midst of the Father. He came from the very midst of God; and he came to show us what we had failed to see in the revelation God had given. As discussed above, he came to show us the Father; i.e., he has made him known. The Greek term translated "made him known" is *exegeomai*, which means to interpret or reveal the meaning of. It is the term from which biblical scholarship derives the technical term "exegesis." Jesus is the interpretation or exegesis of the Father.

Further, in John 20:28, we have John's preservation of Thomas' confession upon seeing the risen Jesus.(John 20:26-2

Eight days later, his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. The doors were shut, but Jesus came and stood among them, and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe," (John 20:26-29).

Thomas uses two of the most common names for God in the Old Testament, "Lord" (*Yahweh*) and "God" (*Elohim*), and directs them both to Jesus. Thomas addresses Jesus with the divine titles "Lord" and "God," implying his belief that Jesus is both Lord and God; and John preserves this confession and Jesus' acceptance of it.

A further evidence of John's belief in the deity of Christ is found in his first letter (1 John 5:20), where he clearly ascribes the title "God" to Jesus.

And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, to know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life (1 John 5:20).

He speaks first of "the Son of God," and states that to know him is to know the one who is true (i.e., the genuine redeemer as verses the false redeemer of Gnosticism). He then identifies this "true one" as "his (God's) Son Jesus Christ." The next line, read literally from the Greek text, states, "this one is the true God and eternal life." The one who is identified as "God" in this text is the one about whom John has been speaking throughout the text, namely, Jesus Christ.

The Testimony of the Writer of Hebrews

Of great significance to the New Testament case for the deity of

Christ is the testimony of the writer of Hebrews found in Heb 1:8-9.

But of the Son he says, "Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever, the righteous scepter is the scepter of thy kingdom. Thou hast loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; therefore God, thy God, has anointed thee with the oil of gladness beyond thy comrades." (Heb 1:8-9)

In the context here the writer of Hebrews is citing Psalms 45:6-7 to contrast the Son of God with the angels of God in order to show the Son's superiority. In verse 6 the angels are commanded to worship the Son, where, by contrast, God says to the Son, "Your throne, O God, is forever." Clearly, the title "God," in verse 8, is addressed to the Son. Then, in verse 9, we read: "Your God, O God, has anointed you." The anointed one is the Messiah. The writer of this Psalms, as interpreted by the writer of Hebrews, is saying to the Messiah, "Your God (the God of the Messiah), O God (the Messiah is here addressed as God), has anointed you with the oil of gladness above your fellows (i.e., the Messiah is anointed to a greater position than the angels of God).

This interpretation is further strengthened by the fact that in verse 3 this writer stated concerning the "Son," - "He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature." It is clear that this biblical writer believed Jesus of Nazareth to be the Son of God, who was, in reality, "God with us."

Conclusion

The belief that Jesus was God was nothing new to the Christians of the second century. What is important for us to see is that the roots of this belief can clearly be traced back into the first century through the writings of the New Testament. From what we learn from these writings, this Jesus of Nazareth was believed to be a man, one who shared our humanity with us; but those who walked this earth with him believed that he was more. Why? Perhaps, because, in the words of Vincent Taylor, "the deity within him kept breaking through the fabric of his humanity."

In Matt 1:18-23 we read of an angelic revelation given to Joseph the husband of Mary concerning the child she is carrying. According to the angel, Mary's pregnancy was a fulfillment of an Old Testament messianic prophecy. The child to be born would be "one of us," in that he would be the offspring of Mary, but, what should not be missed here is what else this text says concerning the identity of this child of Mary:

. . . she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel" (which is by interpretation, God with us), (Matt 1:21-23).

The line of text which most concerns us here is, ". . . his name shall be called *Emmanuel* (which is by interpretation, God with us)." Now, how or in what sense was he "God with us"? If the messianic consciousness of Jesus was in part rooted in the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament Scriptures, who did he understand himself to be as reflected in the Isaiah 7:14 text? And further, what did those who were in constant association with him come to believe about who it was who was walking among them? From what we have seen in the above collection of New Testament data, there can be little doubt but that Jesus and those most immediately associated with him believed that in him "God was here!"

MWLIII

Questions for Discussion

1. What is significant about the statements of Pliny and Ignatius about what the Christians of the second century believed about Jesus of Nazareth?
2. Why is it important to consider what those persons most closely associated with Jesus believed concerning his divine identity?
3. Why is what Jesus believed about himself important in the

consideration of his identity as a divine being?

4. To what extent is Jesus claiming to be deity in his statement of John 14:8-9?

5. If in Jesus of Nazareth we have seen the Father, what then is the Father like?

6. In what way do the theophany sayings of Jesus reveal his divine identity to us? Which of these do you think is the most convincing: the I am sayings, the OT images of God Jesus applies to himself, the identification of himself with the glory of God, or his claims of oneness with God?

7. In what way does the divine activity of Jesus evidence his divine identity? Which of his divine activities is the most convincing as proof of his divine identity?

8. Discuss the testimony of Paul concerning the deity of Christ. What of Paul's testimony concerning the deity of Christ is the most convincing to you?

9. Discuss the testimony of John concerning the deity of Christ. What is the most convincing of John's testimony concerning the deity of Christ?

10. Discuss the writer of Hebrews testimony concerning the divine identity of Jesus of Nazareth.

11. Do you think that any of these biblical writers actually calls Jesus God? Which texts is the most convincing?

12. In what sense may we understand Isa 7:14 as a prophecy of the actual coming of God into our world to be "God with us?" Was this prophecy literally fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth? Was he really "God with us?"