

Who Do You Say That I Am? Part 2

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Throughout the New Testament we find numerous messianic titles used to express whom the people of the first century believed Jesus to be. In fact, every confession of faith in the New Testament draws upon one or more of these titles to express belief in Jesus. For our purposes in this study, these titles may be grouped into two categories: (1) those titles which describe a messianic figure who is human, and (2) those titles which ascribe to him characteristics of a deity figure. The fact that both sets of titles are used to confess belief in Jesus gives us great insight into who he was believed to be by the earliest Christians as reflected by the inspired writers who preserved these confessions in the documents we call the New Testament Scriptures. In Part I of this study, we looked at those titles that describe a messianic figure who is human. Here we take up Part II of this study for a look at those titles that ascribe to Jesus characteristics of a deity figure.

Titles of Deity Applied to the Messiah

The Son of God / the Only Begotten

In the final days of his ministry, Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do men say the son of man is?" Their response: "a prophet." Then he asked them, "Who do you say that I am?" Their answer, as voiced by Peter, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God" (Matt 16:16). Whereas some could only see him as a prophet, the twelve saw him as more. Jesus of Nazareth was clearly more to his disciples than a man with supernatural powers; their belief in him ran far deeper than this. It was their belief that he was the very "son of the living God." But what is meant by this expression? Implied in this title are, at

least, two things: the idea of sonship, and, in some special sense, a relationship to deity, or even divine identity itself.

*God is called **the Father** in view of his relationship to us as the creator, but in what sense may he be called **the Son**? The New Testament tells us that the sense in which he is to be understood as **the Son** has something to do with his experience of sonship in his incarnation. God became "the Father" at the time of his creative activity; he became "the Son" at the time of his created state - in the incarnation by means of miraculous conception. In what sense could he be called "the Son" prior to the incarnation unless he was a created being prior to the incarnation. If this is the case, how could he be called an eternal being who was one and the same with God? (Cf. John 1:1ff; Phil 2:6ff).*

Concerning the sonship of Jesus, some scholars argue that this term could mean that he was a son of God in the sense that we are all sons and daughters of God (2 Cor 6:17-18; Hosea 1:10) or in the sense that the kings of Israel were God's sons by divine adoption on the day of their coronation (cf. Psalms 2:6-7). But the fact is that Jesus is not simply call "a" son of God; rather, he is called "the Son" and "the only begotten Son," expressions which clearly imply more than adoptive sonship.

*All things have been delivered to me by **my Father**; and no one knows **the Son** except **the Father**, and no one knows **the Father** except **the Son** and any one to whom **the Son** chooses to reveal him (Matt 11:27; Luke 10:21-22; cf. John 5:17-20; 10:33-36; 11:4; 17:1)*

Then there is the apostle John's repeated reference to Jesus as "the only begotten Son," a Greek expression that is translated "only son" in most modern English versions. The Greek phrase is *monogenes huios*. *Monogenes* is a word made up of two words: *monos* - only and *genes* - (when used of persons) a noun meaning to be conceived or begotten (taken from the verb *gennaō* - to beget or impregnate). The Greek term *huios* is the word for "son". To translate *monogenes* as "only" is to translate the adjective prefix *monos* and ignore noun *genes* (to be begotten/conceived). The reason given by

the scholars standing behind this translation as to why they rendered *monogenes huios* as "only son" is that "only begotten" is awkward and archaic. But the result of this reasoning and translation is that a tremendous theological truth is compromised in the name of "good English."

It is not the case that Jesus is an "only son," which in Greek would be *monos huios*, or, as is found in the writings of Paul, *idios huios* (God's "own son" - Rom 8:32). The point the apostle John makes here in the expression he has chosen has been eliminated, and that point is that Jesus is a son by means of begetting, this is the significance of the Greek *monogenes huios* - only begotten Son.

*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] Son** from the Father (John 1:14).*

*No one has ever seen God; **the only [begotten] Son** [some older manuscripts read "only begotten God"], who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known (John 1:18).*

*For God so loved the world that he gave **his only [begotten] Son**, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent **the Son** into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of **the only [begotten] Son of God** (John 3:16-18).*

*In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent **his only begotten Son** into the world, so that we might live through him (1 John 4:9).*

The Lord

The title "Lord" has a double significance as a title of Christ. It has significance as a majesty title used of rulers and deity figures throughout the Greco-Roman world; but, it has greater significance

as in Jewish usage in that it was the very title by which Greek-speaking Jews designated their God *Yahweh*. The universal language of the first century Mediterranean world was Greek, thus, the title with which we are concerned, as used by the Greco-Roman world and the Jews is the Greek *Kurios*.

Kurios (pronounced *koo'ri-os*) was the Greek term used to translate the Hebrew *Yahweh* in the Greek Old Testament Scriptures (the Septuagint). Throughout the Greco-Roman Mediterranean world the title *Kurios* was used as a majesty title for the rulers and/or kings (especially the Caesars), as well as a designation for their deity figures. Essentially, the title *Kurios*/Lord was a designation for one possessing great or absolute power and/or authority. Only a monarch or deity was designated a *Kurios*/Lord in the absolute sense. This is why this title is so significant as ascribed to Jesus in the New Testament.

Throughout the Gospels Jesus is addressed by this title, after his resurrection, however, it becomes the major Christological title by which he is designated. This is seen especially in the book of Acts of Apostles and throughout the writings of Paul. On the day of Pentecost the apostle Peter declared to the Jewish world: "Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both **Lord** and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified," (Acts 2:36)

Paul declares that as the risen Lord of heaven and earth Jesus has received the name/title that is above every title, that title is "*Kurios*/Lord," the very title of God himself:

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Kurios), to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:9-11).

In Romans 10:9, Paul writes that it is in confessing Jesus as Lord that one receives the promise of salvation . . . because, if you confess with your lips that **Jesus is Lord** (*Kurios*) and believe in your heart

that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

According to Paul it is the very lordship of God that Jesus assumes, ruling from the throne of God as one in possession of all authority in heaven and on earth (cf. Matt 28:18). The title *Kurios*/Lord is used in over 550 occurrences in the New Testament as a majesty title for Jesus; in fact, it is the most dominant and significant title of Christ to be found in the New Testament.

The Word

Perhaps, no title better reveals the divine identity of Jesus of Nazareth than the designation "the Word/*Logos*" found in the prologue of the Gospel of John. Here in the opening lines of this Gospel are found the roots of two of the greatest doctrines of the New Testament: the pre-existence and incarnation of Christ. In 1:1-2 we are told:

In the beginning was the Word/Logos, and the Word/Logos was with God, and the Word/Logos was God. He was in the beginning with God (John 1:1-2).

Then in verse 14 we are told:

And the Word/Logos 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).

Then in verse 18 we are told that this one who became flesh (human) and dwelt among us was a very revelation of the Father himself:

*No one has ever seen God; **the only [begotten] Son**, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known [he has revealed him].*

Our English term *word* hardly expresses the meaning of the Greek term *logos*, in that in the Greek language *logos* is a term with broader meaning than the English term. In Greek it is the term for

that which is spoken or written as well as the concept or idea lying behind the word. Words are sounds (when spoken) or symbols (when written) that stand for ideas or concepts held within the mind. The Greek word *logos* represents not only the sound (sound) or symbol (written), it represents the very idea or concept itself. This is perhaps the reason John chose it to describe Jesus as the very revelation of God. Jesus of Nazareth was the very expression of God himself (the word as sound or symbol); but even more, he was the very idea or concept of God for which the word stood - he was, in reality, God himself.

By analogy we may speak of the word of God as the revelation of God; and by this we mean that in the Scriptures we have the very thoughts or concepts of God revealed to us in scrolls or books. In a similar sense, we may speak of Jesus as the very thought or concept of God revealed to us in a person. In this sense, Scripture may be called the word of God - it is revelation from God. So also, in this sense, may Jesus of Nazareth be called "the Word" - he is the revelation of God!

God / Our Great God and Savior / Everlasting Father

One of the most important messianic prophecies of the Old Testament Scriptures is Isaiah 9:6,

*For to us a child is born, to us **a son** is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called "Wonderful Counselor, **Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace,**" (Isa 9:6).*

Here we are told that this "son" who would be given would be called: "Mighty/Great God" and "Everlasting Father," two designations that clearly belong to God himself. This raises the question of whether Jesus is ever directly called (or given the name) "God" in Scripture. There are nine passages wherein Jesus is directly called "God," these will be studied in a later lesson. Here we need only to give in part what that lesson will develop more fully. Three passages will suffice for our purposes here. The first is John 1:1-2, the

passage previously considered, where Jesus, as the Word made flesh, is identified as God.

*In the beginning was **the Word**, and the Word was with God, and **the Word was God** (John 1:1).*

Here in the prologue (1:1-18) of the Gospel of John, Jesus is the one identified as the Word, and the Word is identified as God. This affirmation of deity to the Word is even more emphatically expressed in the Greek text. The second passage is Paul's letter to Titus where, in speaking of the second coming of Christ, he identifies the one who is to come again as "our Great God and Savior Jesus Christ."

*. . . awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of **our great God and Savior Jesus Christ**, (14) who gave himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds (Titus 2:13-14).*

Here Jesus is clearly addressed by the very title found in the Greek version of the OT (the Septuagint) of Isa 9:6 (i.e., *megas theos* - "Great/Mighty God" [the Greek text of Titus 2:13 literally reads, "the Great God and Savior of us, Jesus Christ"]. The third text is John 14:7-9 where Jesus clearly identifies himself with the Everlasting Father of the OT Scriptures:

*If you had known me, you would have known my Father also; henceforth you know him and have seen him." Philip said to him, "Lord, **show us the Father**, and we shall be satisfied." 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?" (John 14:7-9)*

There are other titles of deity which could be considered; e.g., the Lord the Spirit (2 Cor 3:17), the life-giving Spirit (1 Cor 15:45), the radiance/reflection of God's glory (Heb 1:3), the fullness of the Godhead (Col 2:9), and the divine mystery titles of John ("I Am," "the Light [Hebrew - *Shekhinah*]," "the Alpha and Omega," etc.). These titles, however, should introduce us to the wide and colorful variety

of titles of deity ascribed to Jesus in the writings of the earliest Christians.

Conclusion

The New Testament clearly portrays Jesus of Nazareth as a man, one who shared in our humanity. But, those who walked this earth with him were convinced that he was more, in that the deity within him kept breaking through the fabric of his humanity. Who or what was this one that even the wind and the seas obeyed him? He was Jesus of Nazareth, which is **who** he was. **What** was he? In the beliefs of his earliest disciples he was more than a man from Nazareth. He was the very presence of **God with us** (Matt 1:23), **our Great God and Savior Jesus Christ** (Titus 2:13), one who could say, "**in that you have seen me, you have seen the Father** (John 14:9).

Questions For Discussion

1. What do you understand by the expression "Son of God"?
2. If Jesus is an offspring of God (i.e., a created being), how can he be called an eternal being?
3. What is the meaning and significance of the expression "only begotten Son" and why does this expression have such theological significance in terms of the sonship of Jesus?
4. In what sense is God "the Father" to Jesus of Nazareth? In what sense is God "the Father" to us?
5. Why would the title "*Kurios*/Lord" have been of such significance to a first century Jewish Christian?
6. What would the Lord title have meant to a Greco-Roman Christian of the first century?
7. What would have been implied by ascribing this title *Kurios*/Lord to Jesus of Nazareth by the first century Christians?

8. What do you think the apostle John is saying about the identity of Jesus of Nazareth in the prologue (1:1-18) of his Gospel?
9. What is the meaning and/or significance of the title *Logos*/Word as used to identify Jesus in his pre-existence?
10. Do you think the NT actually identifies Jesus as God? If so, what must be believed by the Christian in order to have first century faith?