

Problematizing the Divinity of Jesus: Why Jesus Is Not θεός

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Abstract

The debate on Jesus's divine nature is as old as the New Testament text itself. The so-called "titles" ascribed to Jesus often take centre stage in this type of discussion. The aim with this study, however, is to show that Jesus is not an equivalent of θεός. To argue my case convincingly, I will have to show that, textually, Jesus is a distinctly different literary character from that of θεός. I will also need to show that Jesus never claimed to be θεός. As an introduction, I will briefly sketch the Jewish-Hellenistic background and possible meanings of the term θεός. I will then deal with all those references traditionally used to argue that Jesus is equivalent to θεός. This will be followed by concluding remarks.

Key Terms

divinity; Jesus; God; Theos; Kyrios; Philippians 2:6; Romans 9:5; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 1:8–9; John 1:1; John 20:28

1 Introduction

... divinity seemed to betoken status or being significantly greater than that of human beings. In general, to be divine is not to be human. (Mark S. Smith 2001, 6)¹

As the title suggests, this study will problematise the divinity of Jesus by showing that, according to the text, Jesus is not θεός. To claim that "Jesus is not θεός" is in some sense stating the obvious.² It is a claim with potential

¹ Smith (2001, 6–7) also states that deities and people constitute two different divisions within reality.

² This statement is a *negativa* in the sense that it is not asking who Jesus might be, nor stating who Jesus is, but rather who Jesus is *not*. It is a close-ended statement, as opposed to an open-ended question. Many NT scholars who address this issue opt for an open-ended question: e.g.,

ontological implications,³ although it is primarily a linguistic and conceptual claim. The issue of Jesus’s divinity cuts to the heart and soul of Christianity.⁴ In some way, the statement “Jesus is not θεός” stands in direct opposition to what the church at Nicaea settled in 325 CE, namely that the “Son was God” and was not a creature; he was “true God of true God.” That Jesus is not θεός is the classic case of Arian and his followers,⁵ who went up against Athanasius of Alexandria and his disciples. From the authors of the NT to the apologists of the medieval church and beyond, those involved in the debate were aware of the conundrum facing those attempting to define Christology. The aim here is to show that on a semantic, linguistic and syntactic level, Ἰησοῦς (a proper noun) is not θεός (a common noun).⁶ The intention is to show that the NT text draws a clear distinction between Jesus and Theos as literary figures. On this point, there are passages in the NT that seem to suggest that Ἰησοῦς is in fact θεός. By revisiting these so-called proof texts, which people have relied on to argue this position, the present study will endeavour to disprove the notion that Ἰησοῦς (Jesus) is θεός (Theos).

The divinity⁷ of Jesus has captured the imagination of many since the founding of the Jesus movement in the first century of our Common Era and

Taylor (1962, 116–118); Brown (1965, 545–573); Sadananda (2004), with the title of his second chapter being “Is Jesus God?”; Swingburne (2008). There are other, more positivistic titles: Harris (1992); Rubenstein (1999); Overman (2010); Litwa (2014); Bird (2014a, 11–21).

³ The claim can imply that Jesus is not *the* “God” in as far as the term θεός calls to mind a deity of the OT, who is in turn interpreted by Judaism and Christianity as the one and only “God.” Another implication is that Jesus is not a “god” in the transcendent sense. A third inference is that Jesus is not divine.

⁴ The intention here is to engage with other disciplines in order to get a better understanding of what it means when we say “God.” A similar approach appears in the essays published in Dalferth and Stoellger (2008), which deal with what Jesus thought of himself (cf. Ehrman 2014, 49–71; Bird 2014b, 45–70), as well as what the first Christians thought of Jesus (cf. Gathercole 2014, 94–116).

⁵ Arian, a Libyan presbyter and ascetic (256–336 CE), taught the uniqueness of God and the subordination of Christ to the father.

⁶ Ehrman (2014, 50) asserts that Jesus is hardly ever called God in the NT and that some authors do not equate Jesus with God. Ehrman further refers to John Meier, E. P. Sanders, Geza Vermes, Dale Allison and other scholars, who all agree that Jesus did not spend his ministry declaring himself to be divine.

⁷ This study is aware that consideration of the assertion “Jesus is not Theos” is not the only way to determine whether Jesus is divine or not. There are numerous indicators, markers, characteristics and categories to consider when addressing the issue of Jesus’s divine nature. These include the christological titles (e.g., Messiah, Son of God, Lord, Saviour, Lamb of God), Jesus’s actions, his miracles and his attitude towards the temple, the Sabbath and judgment, to mention only a few (cf. Brown 1965, 545–546). Ochs (2013, 6) remarks: “The divinity of Jesus is, thus, not an arbitrary topic of Jewish investigation, and Christian theologians likewise could not refuse the challenge of addressing the objections against this most central of Christian beliefs.” Ehrman (2014, 11–84) offers valuable insights into when and how humans were considered to be “divine” in ancient Greece, Rome and Judaism.

continues to do so until our present day.⁸ The Judeans accusing Jesus of blasphemy is a testimony to this. According to them, he was a human being who declared himself θεός (cf. John 10:33). In a letter to Emperor Trajan after a visit to Bithynia in 112 CE, Pliny the Younger reports on how the Christians conduct themselves: “They maintained, however, that the amount of their fault or error had been this, that it was their habit on a fixed day to assemble before daylight and recite by turns a form of words to Christ as a god” (Pliny, *Ep.* 10.96.7; Stevenson 1974, 14).⁹ Pliny’s understanding of a ritual as something conducted “as if it is dedicated to a god” made the Christians, in their habit of singing hymns dedicated to Christ, guilty of denying the supreme rule of the Emperor. This issue was further amplified when, according to Pliny’s investigator (cf. *Ep.* 10.96.6), some who claimed to be Christians denied it later on, and he added: “All these too both worshipped *your statue* and the *images of the gods*, and cursed Christ.”¹⁰ The issue at hand was that Christ, as opposed to the Emperor, was worshipped as “lord” and “god” rather than the gods of the Empire. This, of course, would result in certain punishment, according to the response from Trajan, if they did not agree to deny Christ and worship their (i.e., Roman) deities (see Pliny, *Ep.* 10.97.1–2).

Jesus’s resistance to claim the status of Theos was acknowledged by Rudolph Bultmann in 1955, and soon after him by Vincent Taylor (1962), when they concluded that the NT exercises great restraint in describing Jesus as “God” (cf. Brown 1965, 546–547). Raymond Brown (1965, 546–548) notes three main objections by scholars to the claim that Jesus is God, two of which are ruled out, rightfully so, in terms of corrective emphasis.¹¹ Ochs (2013, 2) states that both those who defend (e.g., Hurtado 2005; 2008; Bauckham 2008) and those who challenge Christianity, particularly on this point, find the contents of the Christian canon useful for their arguments (cf. Dunn 2010).¹² A more recent and prominent voice is that of Bart Ehrman (2014, 44), who argues that Jesus did not think of himself as God, nor did

⁸ See the histories of research in Bird (2014a; 2014b), Ochs (2013) and Ehrman (2014).

⁹ Original text: *Affirmabant autem hanc fuisse summam vel culpae suae vel erroris, quod essent soliti stato die ante lucem convenire, carmenque Christo quasi deo dicere secum invicem seque sacramento non in scelus aliquod obstringere.*

¹⁰ Original text: *<Hi> quoque omnes et imaginem tuam deorumque simulacra venerati sunt et Christo male dixerunt.*

¹¹ Brown (1965, 548) also deals with Bultmann and Taylor’s claim that the formulation “Jesus is God” is not biblical.

¹² According to Litwa (2014, 1), some Christian authors cited Tiberius’s attempt to deify Jesus with a kind of curious approval, but for them and even for many Christians today it is a theological scandal to speak of the deification of Jesus. Only a few Christians, it seems, were comfortable with the idea that Jesus became a god.

his disciples consider him to be God. I concur with Ehrman and others, but I take issue with the way in which scholars¹³ use the term *Gott* (German) and God (English), as if the term θεός can refer only to an absolute deity, an ontological entity of which there can be only one. But the issue is far more complex than that. A more nuanced understanding of the term θεός and its history is required for a deeper understanding of what is meant by the claim that Jesus is not θεός. This study will therefore take the history and layered meaning of the term θεός into consideration,¹⁴ with the traditional passages used in support of the assertion that “Jesus is God” as its primary focus. These passages are: Heb 1:8–9; John 1:1; 20:28; Rom 9:5; Phil 2:6; Titus 2:13.¹⁵ Before we move on to the texts, however, the question of what is meant by the term θεός demands attention.

2 The Term “Theos”

The German, English, Afrikaans and isiXhosa equivalents to the term θεός¹⁶—namely *Gott* (German), God (English), *God* (Afrikaans) and *uThixo*¹⁷ (isiXhosa)—are not helpful at all; in fact, they contribute to a general misunderstanding around the complexity of what the term θεός might imply.¹⁸ If one claims that Jesus is not Theos, does it mean that he is not divine, that he is not a god, that he is not the monotheistic deity of early Judaism, that he is not Yahweh, or that he is not *the* Deity?¹⁹ What is certain

¹³ E.g., Bultmann, Taylor, Brown, Ehrman and many others.

¹⁴ It must be noted that in this study the noun θεός is transliterated as Theos. There are many instances where it will seem as if Theos and God are used interchangeably. This is because numerous scholars—in fact all referred to in this study—interpret the term θεός to mean “God” (and its equivalents in other languages), maintaining that this term references *the* ontological deity introduced by Judaism. The current study, however, acknowledges and appreciates the use of the term θεός without subscribing to an understanding of this term as meaning “the God.”

¹⁵ There are other significant references (e.g., Mark 10:18; 15:34; Eph 1:17; John 17:3; 1 Cor 8:6; Eph 4:4–6; 1 Tim 2:5), but the passages under discussion are central to the debate and should suffice to counter the traditional notion. The notion put forward in Col 1:15 (ὃς ἐστὶν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου; “he who is in the image of the invisible Theos”) is noted, but being εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ in addition to being πρωτότοκος “firstborn” refutes the idea that Christ is here being equated with Theos.

¹⁶ The Greek term θεά (“goddess”) is relevant for this study in as much as it shares similar qualities with θεός, especially that of “being” a deity. The term is obviously never used in relation to Jesus as the Christ or Lord.

¹⁷ The isiXhosa term *uThixo* denotes the single deity of monotheism, prominent in Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

¹⁸ Dalferth and Stoellger (2008, 9) suggest that all the questions relating to “God” and *Gott* are determined by the hermeneutical variations of the logical status of the expression “God.” Their contention is that such an expression demands clarification about whether it is a “name,” a “proper noun,” a “description of a characteristic,” a “term,” a “vocative” or something else.

¹⁹ It can be argued that if Jesus is not θεός, then he is by implication not divine. This is indeed true, but one should add that Jesus is then not divine in the θεός sense of the word, that is, whatever type of divinity is expressed by the term θεός.