

Jesus and the God of the Jews

A popular defense of the “deity of Jesus” claims that Jesus left us in no doubt about his identity. “To clear up the confusion about God, I announce to you that I am God! I am *the* way, *the* truth and *the* life.” This, according to Josh McDowell and Bart Larson, is the way Jesus settled the issue for posterity. “That is the type of claim Jesus made for Himself.” We are then offered a choice. “Either this man is psychotic, with delusions of grandeur, or a deceiver out to pull off the greatest hoax of all time—or He is God.”¹

Admitting that there is a certain ambiguity about the biblical data in relation to Jesus’ status, the authors proceed to argue with complete conviction that “Jesus is God.”

Editors of journals such as this are prompted to reflect anew on a heritage which finds the equation of Jesus with Jehovah simply incredible. It appears to be inconsistent with a vast amount of biblical texts. For a start, any doctrine which proposes the existence of more than one who is God collides with the entirety of Hebrew Scripture. The Jews have always known this, and so do a mass of biblical scholars, amongst them those who have gone into print to discuss the Trinity and its incompatibility with the creed of Israel. How then does the argument for the Triune God still apparently carry such weight, even though it relies on a fraction of the evidence provided by the Bible?

The answer must lie in the long-standing dogmatic insistence that if Jesus is not God Himself, he cannot be the Savior. It does not seem to occur to proponents of Trinitarianism that this idea has no foundation in the teaching of Jesus and the Apostles. If God has chosen to save us through His fully accredited human representative, the Messiah, why should this not be acceptable? Is God’s sinless agent inadequate?

It is a bizarre system of exegesis which lays aside the united testimony of the Hebrew Bible, as well as the evidence of Matthew, Mark and Luke

(to say nothing of Peter in Acts and his epistles), and proposes a radical alteration of Israel’s unitary monotheism by declaring that Jesus’ repeated “I am” statements mean “I am Jehovah.” The argument is shaky. As Barrett (quoted on another point by our authors) states: “*Egō eimi* does not identify Jesus with God, but does draw attention to him in the strongest terms. ‘I am the one—the one you must look at, and listen to, if you would know God.’”² There is a very great difference between the divine utterance in Exodus 3:14, “I am the self-existent one. . . . Tell them that ‘I am’ sent you” and Jesus’ “I am he,” “I am the one you should believe in if you want to be saved.” In Exodus the “I am” is a proper noun standing as subject. Jesus does not use it that way. Much less does he ever say, “I am self-existent.” His claim is to be the Messiah, as in John 4:26: “I who speak to you am [he, the Messiah, v. 25].”

Other proof-texts advanced by Trinitarianism are supposed to contain self-evident testimony that Jesus is the supreme God. Second Peter 1:1 and Titus 2:13 call Jesus “God,” if indeed Granville Sharpe’s rule for the joining of two nouns with a single article applies. McDowell and Larson do not mention that Nigel Turner, a Trinitarian, noted in connection with Titus 2:13 that “unfortunately, at this period of Greek we cannot be sure that such a rule [Granville Sharpe’s] is really decisive. Sometimes the definite article is not repeated even where there is clearly a separation in idea.”³ So much for the proof from II Peter 1:1 or Titus 2:13 that Jesus is God.

One is left to marvel that a subject so momentous as that of deciding who in the Bible God is should depend on a debatable technicality of Greek syntax. Equally astonishing is Trinitarianism’s almost exclusive reliance on John’s Gospel, especially its opening verse, to settle the issue in favor of Jesus’ coequal deity. Trinitarianism seems at this point to have little sense of the proportions of the biblical evidence. Surely if Jesus cited the creed of Israel and obviously agreed with it (Mark 12:28ff.) the case is closed. Whatever the *shema* tells us about God is the Christian creed, since Christ confirmed it. Trinitarianism should begin, then, by telling us how the God of the Hebrew Bible is really Triune. If that cannot be done, some explanation must be offered as to why they think John presents Jesus as disturbing the cardinal tenet of Judaism, while at the same time

² *The Gospel According to St John*, London and Philadelphia, 1975, 342.

³ *Grammatical Insights into the New Testament*, T & T Clark, 1965, 16.

¹ *Jesus, A Biblical Defence of His Deity*, Crossway Books, 1983.

reporting that Jesus referred to God, in good Deuteronomy 6:4 style, as “the only true God,” and “the one who alone is God.”⁴

Nothing of the uniqueness of Jesus is lost if we confine ourselves to the language of Scripture. An incomprehensible mystery about the number of Persons in the Godhead, at which “Reason stands aghast and Faith herself is half confounded,”⁵ obstructs rather than promotes a plain reading of Scripture. The sooner it is recognized that the Bible does not need the help of the Greek councils and creeds to tell us who God is, the clearer will become the essential Jewishness of Jesus and his message. And the Jews who at present recoil from what they perceive to be a veiled polytheism in Christian circles will more easily be led to belief in the God of Israel and His Messiah. To that end this journal offers its contribution.

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⁴John 17:3; 5:44.

⁵Bishop Hurd, *Sermons Preached at Lincoln’s Inn, 1776-1780*, Vol. 2, 287.