

# Where Jesus is Called "God"

by Wanda Shirk

The Greek scriptures use the term *theos*, God, over 1300 times in reference to the Father. The term is used only twice with certainty in reference to Jesus. In a handful of debatable texts *theos* may apply to Jesus. Even if we grant (the highly unlikely possibility) that every one of the debatable texts is an actual application of *theos* to Christ, still fewer than one percent of uses of *theos* in the New Testament refer to Jesus. The doctrines of the trinity and the deity of Christ are actually based on about one-half of one percent (.005) of uses of the word *theos*.

## 1. Where Jesus is called God - John 20:28 and Hebrews 1:8.

John 20:28 - "Thomas answered and said to Him, 'My Lord and my God!'"

Hebrews 1:8 - "But of the son He says, 'Thy throne, O God is forever and ever ...'"

These are the only two texts in which *theos* is applied with certainty to Jesus. We make the following observations:

A. Levels of Meaning: The word god, like the word president, has levels of meaning. "I went to the bank and met the president" does not mean that I met the President of the United States. There are many presidents (of clubs, companies, banks, universities, etc.), but at a given time there is only one President of the U.S.

B. Variety of application: The English god, the Latin deus, the Greek theos, and the Hebrew elohim are all broad terms, not necessarily referent to the one God Almighty. As Paul said, "there are many gods and many lords, yet for us there is one God, the Father ... (I Cor. 5:5-6) Like lord, god can be a title that is given to national heroes, sports idols, etc. or others held in high regard.

C. Scripture uses: Scripture uses the term god in other than the absolute sense., It is applied to judges of Israel (Ex. 22:8,9,28), to angels (Ps. 8:5, Heb. 2:7), to Moses ("See, I make you elohim to Pharaoh" - Ex. 7:1), to God's chosen people (Ps. 82:6, John 10:34), and even to Satan ("the god of this age" - 2 Cor. 4:4). Only the most immature of interpreters would understand the meaning to be "Absolute God," whose name is Yahweh, every time he saw the word god.

D. Messianic application: The title God is applied to the Messiah in Ps. 45:6,7. This passage is quoted in Heb. 1:8. Thomas, like the writer of Hebrews, was recognizing that Jesus was truly the promised Messiah. His exclamation does not mean that he suddenly believed his master to be the supreme deity but that he recognized Jesus as truly God's anointed one. It was the highest compliment he could pay his master. He had finally recognized the truth in the resurrection, that God had raised Jesus from the dead and made Him, in a unique sense, God, now immortal.

## 2. The Logos verses - John 1:1ff.

Three interpretations are commonly proposed for these verses.

A. Logos = Jesus. "The Word/Logos was God" is most commonly understood today as Jesus = God. We need to keep in mind that this is an interpretation, that the text does not say "Jesus is/was God." This interpretation is Greek/gnostic in origin.

B. "The God/"God". John wrote that the logos was with ho theos, "the God," and the logos was theos, God. Without getting deeply into the Greek here, we could roughly say that "the logos was with 'the God' and the logos was [a] God.' "

C. Logos = Wisdom, God's creative purpose. This interpretation is Jewish in origin, following the wisdom personification of Proverbs 8. This view of John's poem reads "In the beginning was God's wisdom/plan, and the wisdom/plan was with God, and it was fully

expressive of God." In this view, Jesus appears when "the wisdom/plan became flesh and dwelt among us" (v. 14). Jesus, thus, is the "fleshing out" of God's ultimate design.

Conclusion: In light of the distinctions made between God and Jesus throughout the gospel written by John, it seems highly unlikely that John opened his book by stating that Jesus was the supreme God. The rest of the book does not support this thesis, and in fact John's closing statement argues against it. He had set out to demonstrate that Jesus was "the Christ, the Son of God," (John 20:31), whom he distinguished from "the only true God" (John 17:3).

### 3. The Only Begotten God" - John 1:18.

The KJV, following the majority manuscripts at this point, speaks of "the only begotten Son" in this verse, but better manuscripts, such as those used in the translation of the NASB and NIV, give us "only begotten God." This is an interesting concept, because while it applies the title "God" to Jesus, it places him in a unique category as "begotten God" as opposed to the unbegotten Father. The NIV rendering "One and Only" also places Jesus in a unique category distinct from the Father.

[Editor's note: It seems highly unlikely that the writer of the Gospel of John would have written the words "monogenes theos" ("the unique" or "one and only, God"). As G.B. Caird states, "the evidence of Clement [2nd century A.D.] and Irenaeus [2nd century A.D.] makes it clear that *monogenes theos* arose *after* the Fourth Gospel had already gone into circulation. *Huios* [son], incidentally, conforms to John's usage elsewhere (John 1:14; 3:16, 18; cf. 1 John 4:9), and is therefore to be preferred" (*NT Theology*, p. 321, n. 79)].

### 4. The Punctuation Problem - Romans 9:5.

Seven different ways of punctuating this verse have been proposed. The basic choice is between an ending of

"... Christ, who is over all. God be blessed forever" or "Christ, who is God over all, forever blessed."

Interestingly, this text was never used by trinitarians in the Nicene era debate. Its form is similar to the doxologies to the Father in Rom. 1:25 and Gal. 1:4,5. That interpretation seems truer to Paul.

### 5. The Granville Sharp verses - Titus 2:13 and 2 Peter 1:1.

Titus 2:13 - "Looking for the blessed hope and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ" (KJV).

2 Peter 1:1 - "...through the righteousness of God and our Savior Jesus Christ" (KJV).

The KJV renderings of each of these verses indicate that God and Jesus are two distinct persons, as we always find otherwise in the writings of Paul (e.g. Titus 1:1) and Peter (e.g. 2 Pet. 1:2). In the 1790's a trinitarian by the name of Granville Sharp put forth the proposition, now known in Greek grammars as the Granville Sharp Rule, that when "the" appears before the first of two nouns joined by kai ("and"), but not before the second noun, the two nouns refer to the same thing, and the second is a description of the first. Thus, modern translations such as the NASB and NIV have translated these two verses as "Our God and Savior Jesus Christ." This translation makes theos applicable to Jesus. We would note the following:

A. The decisiveness of the rule's applicability to the koine Greek of the time of the writing of the New Testament is acknowledged even by some trinitarians to be uncertain (Question: Are the NASB and NIV the same since I didn't use the before NIV?).

B. Exceptions to the rule have been established in other, similar constructions.

C. Even if the title God is given to Jesus here, contrary to all other uses of Paul and Peter, we have to establish the level of meaning and the specific type of application, remembering the scriptural use of the term as a Messianic title.

6. "Church of God" or "Church of the Lord" - Acts 20:28.

The textual apparatus gives theos a "C" rating here [Editor's note: this means that the compilers of the United Bible Society's textual apparatus had "great difficulty in deciding which variant [i.e. "God" or "Lord"] to place in the text.]. If we were to grant that theos is the authentic reading, we would translate not "church of God which he purchased with his own blood" but "church of God which He purchased with the blood of His own [Son]."

7. "He is the true God" - I John 5:20.

The pronoun "He" in the last line of this verse can be applied to Jesus (the nearest antecedent) or to the Father. Twice previously in the verse the phrase "Him who is true" clearly refers to the Father, because it refers first to the One whom the Son of God came to show us, and second to the one who has a Son Jesus Christ. Few interpreters apply "He" to Jesus in this verse.

8. "Immanuel" - "God with us" - Matthew 1:23, Isaiah 7:14.

These are simply names. Though significant in denoting God's presence via Christ (Matt. 1:23) it is obvious that the name itself doesn't mean that Jesus is God any more than the original Immanuel of Isaiah 7:14 was God. The name "Ithiel", for example, in Proverbs 30:1 means "God is with me," but Ithiel wasn't God!

Conclusion: There are no other verses in the Greek Scriptures in which theos (God) refers to Jesus. This gives us a minimum of two, a likelihood of three (John 20:28, Hebrews 1:8 and John 1:18 [but see editor's note above on this verse]), and a very maximum of ten verses in which theos applies to Jesus - out of 1,300 uses of the word. Exegetically, theos applies to God the Father only in more than 99% of its uses. It is almost always impossible to substitute the words "the trinity" or "Jesus" for the Greek word theos and have the scriptures make sense.

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