

Is Jesus Jehovah God?

by Dr Paul B Coulter, June 2006

Jehovah - God's personal name

Jehovah is one of the names by which God was known in the Old Testament. Members of the cult group called "Jehovah's Witnesses" correctly point out that the Old Testament uses the name *Jehovah* more than any other for God, and that it was a personal name for God revealed to His chosen nation, Israel, rather than a title. This is not immediately clear in most English translations of the Old Testament, as the Hebrew word *YHWH* is translated by the English word *lord*. When the original Hebrew word is *YHWH* most English translations express it as *LORD* in capital letters. The English word *lord* written with a capital L alone (*Lord*) represents the Hebrew word *Adonai* (which is really a title recognising God as the master and ruler). One reason why the Hebrew *YHWH* is usually translated *LORD* is because the Jews in the centuries before Christ held God's personal name in such respect that they never spoke it. The correct pronunciation was forgotten, and it is, therefore, difficult for us to know how to write the word *YHWH* in English. This is one example of a mistake made by the Jehovah's Witnesses, since they claim to have rediscovered the correct name for God, but their spelling and pronunciation is based on 19th Century attempts to translate the name into English, which have since been proven wrong (the Jehovah's Witnesses began in the 19th Century in the USA). The Hebrew word *YHWH* should probably be more accurately be expressed in English as *Yahweh* rather than the inaccurate form *Jehovah*, but since this article is partly in response to the teachings of the Jehovah's Witnesses, I will keep the spelling as *Jehovah* to avoid confusion.

"Father" - Jesus' new name for God

Despite the Old Testament usage, Jesus did not address God as *Jehovah*. He spoke about God as His *Father*, which was a new way of praying to God. Jesus also taught His followers to pray to God as their Father (see Matthew 6:9), which represented a new kind of relationship with God. Jesus claimed that He was one with the Father (see John 10:30). The Jehovah's Witnesses claim that in saying this He meant simply that He shared one purpose with the Father rather than sharing the same nature as God. This was not, however, how the apostle John, who recorded these words, understood what Jesus was saying. John begins his Gospel with a very clear claim that Jesus was God (read this in John 1:1-18). John says that Jesus (the Word) was not only with God but He "was God". In Chapter 1 verse 18 he calls Jesus "God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side". Not only this, but Jesus explained His own meaning later in John's Gospel, in Chapter 8. In verse 38 of that chapter He explained that He meant "the Father is in me and I in the Father". The relationship Jesus is describing is one of belonging in each other, not just one of working together.

Jesus - the "Son of God"

Jesus is consistently described in the New Testament as the *Son of God*. This is a claim He made about Himself and which is agreed with by all of the other people who wrote books in the New Testament. Groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses try to explain this description of Jesus as God's Son away by saying that He was only the first of many sons of God. It is true that the Bible describes those who become Christians through faith in Christ as "sons of God" or "children of God" (e.g. Romans 8:14-16, 1 John 3:1), but Jesus is singled out as being the Son of God in a unique way. We can see this very clearly in John 3:16, where Jesus is called the "one and only Son" (NIV) or "only begotten son" (KJV) of God. The relationship Jesus had with His Father was unique in that He was the only Son begotten by God. Hebrews 1:5-14 is helpful in showing that this way of speaking about Jesus distinguishes Him from the angels, since God never said to the angels that they had become His sons (verse 5). In fact, the Father commands the angels to worship the Son (verse 6)! We cannot take time in this essay to discuss when or how God "begat" Jesus as His Son, but it should suffice to note that this is a unique relationship, and we must seek to understand what the nature of the relationship is by seeing how Jesus spoke about His relationship with His Father. It is not simply that Jesus was the first-born son (Romans 8:29) - He became God's Son in a different way from Christians. Christians are born as God's children and become His heirs through faith in Christ and the

regenerating work of the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:4-7), but Jesus never became the heir of God (this was always His position) and certainly did not become the Son of God through regeneration or faith in Himself. He is the one who made salvation possible and through whom the Holy Spirit is poured out on Christians, and He never required salvation Himself. Although Christians may speak of themselves as God's children, and Jesus taught Christians to address God as Father, no one can claim that their relationship with God is the same as Jesus Christ's. He is in a unique category, and we must consider His identity based on what He said and what His apostles taught.

Jesus - the "I AM"

It is also in John's Gospel that we read some of Jesus' other claims to be God - for example when He said "Before Abraham was born I am" (John 8:58). This is a very strange use of words in English, as proper grammar should read, "Before Abraham was born I was". The reason Jesus used the unusual grammar "I am" is because He was referring to another name for God in the Old Testament. In Exodus 3:14, God told Moses to use the name "I AM" to describe Him. So, Jesus was claiming to be the God who spoke to Abraham. The name "I am" has a special meaning because it reflects the fact that God has always existed and does not depend on anyone else for His existence. On two occasions (John 8 and John 10) some of the Jewish religious leaders wanted to kill Jesus because they knew that He was claiming to be God (see John 8:59 and John 10:31).

The miracles of Christ - proof of His divinity

In addition to this, the way that Jesus spoke and the miracles He did showed that He had the full authority of God. He showed in His miracles that He had authority that only the creator God can have - authority over:

- Nature (for example calming storms and walking on water)
- Diseases (He healed many types of illness)
- Evil Spirits (on many occasions He cast out demons)
- Death (raising at least three people from death)
- Sin (He claimed the have authority to forgive sins)

In Mark 2:1-12 we read about one of Jesus' miracles which He performed to prove that He really had the authority to forgive sins. The religious leaders knew that only God can forgive sins (verse 7) and so they were angry with Jesus for making this claim. They were absolutely correct that only God could forgive sins, but they did not realise that Jesus actually was God. Only God can forgive sins because He is the one who has offended by them. This is the amazing truth of the sacrificial death of Christ in our place: God, the one who was offended by our sin, becomes the solution to our sin by taking our sin in Himself. This truth (which is clear in passages like Romans 3:21-26) is completely misunderstood by groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses, who see the death of Jesus as a price paid by Him to Jehovah. This is a different concept, where Jesus is our Saviour although He is not the one against whom we have sinned. The Biblical understanding is that God is both the offended one, who has the right to (and in fact must) punish sin, but He also becomes the One who takes our place and bears His own punishment for sin in the person of Jesus Christ. Because God is the offended one, and the one from whose character the moral universe is derived, only God can become the solution! Jesus also claimed to be the one who gives and sustains life and who fulfils our deepest longings (e.g. John 6:35, John 8:12, John 11:25, John 14:6), often using the formula "I am ..." (further references to His identity as the "I AM" who spoke to Moses). This is also something that only God could claim - all other living beings have life only because it is given to us by God, but Jesus was the giver of life (God Himself).

Jesus accepts Thomas's worship as God

The disciples took time to understand who Jesus was - it was only after His death and resurrection that they fully understood. After the resurrection, however, the disciples were very clear in claiming that Jesus was God. One of them, Thomas, when he saw Jesus after the resurrection called Him "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28). When he said this Jesus did not correct him by saying that he was wrong in calling Him God, but actually said that it was a good thing that Thomas believed this (verse

29). So, Jesus not only claimed to be God, He also allowed others to worship Him as God. There are only three possible ways to understand this:

- a) Jesus was mad - He thought that He was God, but He was wrong.
- b) Jesus was bad - He knew that He was not God but still tried to deceive people into thinking He was God.
- c) Jesus was God - Jesus really was who He claimed to be.

The Jehovah's Witnesses deny that Jesus claimed to be God, but they are disagreeing with the Jewish religious leaders and the disciples who actually heard Him speak and who spoke the same language and came from the same culture as He did in how they understand what Jesus said.

References to Jesus as God in the New Testament epistles

In the New Testament letters (epistles) written by the apostles (who had been Jesus' disciples during His time on earth and had been trained and given authority by Him to lead and teach the Church) there are also many claims that Jesus is God. For example:

- *Romans 1:3&4* - Paul speaks of Jesus having two natures - the human nature (He was a "son" or descendant of David according to His "human nature") and the divine nature (He was proved to be the Son of God by His resurrection). Jesus was both man and God.
- *Romans 9:5* - Paul says that Jesus "is God over all" - this is a very clear statement of Jesus' divinity.
- *II Corinthians 4:4* - Jesus is called the "image of God". The word used here does not just mean that He is like God (in the same way that in Genesis 1:27 mankind was made "in the image" of God), but that He is the image itself (a good English word would be "prototype" - He is not made from the pattern, He is the pattern). In other words, God was revealing Himself in Christ.
- *Philippians 2:5-11* - Paul says that Jesus was "in very nature God" (verse 6) before He became a man, and that He did not "consider equality with God something to be grasped". In other words, although Jesus was completely God (that was the very nature of who and what He was) He did not cling on to His position of being recognised as God, but became a man (and a servant of the Father) and eventually died. Now, however, the Father has exalted Him back to that place that He deserves.
- *Colossians 1:15-20* - Jesus is the "image of the invisible God" (again the word means that He is the pattern, not made in that pattern) and the one through whom and for whom all things were created. If all things were created by Him then He cannot have been created, and only God was not created. Not only this, but Paul says in verse 19 that all the fullness of God lived in Jesus.
- *Colossians 2:9* - again Paul says that "in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form". Jesus was fully God but also fully human.
- *Titus 1:3&4* - in verse 3 Paul speaks of "God our Saviour" and in verse 4 he speaks of "Christ Jesus our Saviour" - this equates Jesus with God
- *Titus 2:13* - we wait for "the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ", another very clear statement.
- *Hebrews 1:1-4* - Jesus is the "radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being, sustaining all things by His powerful word". The meaning of "exact representation" does not mean that He was like God, but that He is God in every way.

The Alpha and Omega

Three times in the book of Revelation (in 1:8, 21:6 and 22:12-16) we read the phrase "the Alpha and the Omega" used to describe a person. Who is this "Alpha and Omega"? In 1:8 we learn that this person is "the Lord God ... the Almighty". This name for God emphasises a similar truth to the Old Testament name "I AM" - it speaks about the eternal existence and self-sufficient nature of God (*alpha* and *omega* are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet). Next we need to look at Revelation 1:17-18, where Jesus (the one who was dead and is now alive) calls Himself "the First and Last". This title sounds similar to the title "Alpha and Omega", but it is not identical. In Revelation 21:6 we learn that God (verse 7) is "the Alpha and the Omega" and also the "Beginning and the End", another phrase with a similar meaning to "First and Last". It sounds as if these phrases, "the Alpha

and Omega", the "First and Last" and "the Beginning and the End" all refer to both God and Jesus, speaking of their eternal existence. However, this becomes absolutely clear in Revelation 22:12-16, where the speaker describes Himself as "the Alpha and Omega, the First and Last, the Beginning and the End", showing us that these three titles are indeed identical in meaning and refer to one person, who is called "Lord God" in 1:8 and identified as Jesus in 1:17-18. If any doubt still remains, a few verses later (verse 16) the speaker calls Himself "Jesus". So, according to Revelation, Jesus is the Lord God, the Alpha and Omega, the First and Last, the Beginning and the End. He was without beginning, has existed eternally, and is fully God. It is no wonder, then, that He is the centre of worship in the book of Revelation.

References placing Jesus in equality with the Father and the Holy Spirit

Before Jesus left His disciples to return to the Father He told them to baptise new disciples "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). This was a new way of speaking - putting these three persons together as equal in authority. At the beginning of Jesus' ministry these three were seen working together at His baptism - Jesus was baptised, but the Spirit rested on Him in the form of a dove and the Father spoke from Heaven (see 3:16-17). Jesus told His disciples before His death that after He left them the Holy Spirit would come to live in them and that the Spirit had begun to prepare them for Jesus' work (see John 14:16-17). Then, in Matthew 28:19, as He spoke about baptism He placed these three persons (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) on a level of equal authority. There are also many other verses in the New Testament (too many to list here) that place Jesus and God the Father (often called simply "God") together as equals and the givers of grace, peace and comfort. The New Testament also calls upon us to make Jesus Christ the Lord of our lives and to depend on Him for our salvation. Why did the people in the New Testament worship and look to both God and Jesus if only God is to be worshipped? It is because they knew that both Jesus and the Father are God. If Jesus was not God, why does He have such an important position, and why is He to be worshipped when the angels of Heaven tell us not to worship anyone but God (Revelation 22:8&9). Since Jesus is the one who sends the angels (Revelation 22:16), and the one who receives worship in Heaven together with the "one who sits on the throne" (the Father - Revelation 5:13-14), how can we say that the Bible presents Him as anything less than God?

The "trinity" - a word to describe the God who is "three in one"

In the Old Testament, God revealed Himself as one God (see Deuteronomy 6:4 for example), but even in Genesis (the first book of the Old Testament) there are some hints suggesting that although there is one God there is more than one person within God. For example, in Genesis 1:26 God says "let us make man in our image" (using the plural to refer to Himself). This may seem strange at first reading, but the Old Testament does not develop it further into explaining how God can be one yet more than one person. The New Testament, however, beginning with the statement by Jesus about the "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" in Matthew 28:19, speaks of these three persons as being God.

Three examples are:

- *1 Corinthians 13:14* - the blessing is from these three
- *Ephesians 4:3-6* - Paul is speaking about the things that unite us as Christians, and he speaks about three people here - "one Spirit", "one Lord" (Jesus) and "one God and Father of all".
- *Titus 3:3-6* - Paul outlines the role of these three persons in our salvation.

This truth of the three persons who together are one God is often referred to by Christians as "trinity". This word does not appear in the Bible (the Jehovah's Witnesses often make this point as if it proves that the idea of the trinity is false), but is an attempt to explain the truth that the Bible reveals of a three in one God (trinity derives from "tri-" meaning three and "unity" meaning one).

The progressive revelation of the trinity in the Bible

So, the Bible clearly teaches that Jesus is God and also speaks of the Father and Holy Spirit as being God. This truth is revealed progressively in the Bible. In the Old Testament, the concept of the trinity (three in one God) is not clearly revealed, although there are some hints of the fact that there is a plurality of persons within the divine nature. It is only with the life and ministry of Jesus that we discover that God can be both the Father and the Son. In the relationship of Jesus with His Father

we see the perfect relationship that had existed eternally within the divine nature. However, since Jesus was fully human as well as fully God, He lived a life of perfect submission to His Father, demonstrating perfect humanity. This sinless life qualified Him to be the Saviour for sinful human beings. Only one who was both fully God and fully human could become the perfect sacrifice for sin, because that representative must be both human and also perfect. So, with the life of Jesus we realise that God is so great that He is able to both live in all His fullness in human form in Jesus (Colossians 2:9) and yet remain the King and sustainer of the Universe. After Jesus returned to His Father's side the Holy Spirit came upon the Church, and we discover another person who is fully God but yet operates in a distinct way from the Father and Son.

The limitations of our understanding

Part of our problem in understanding the truth of the trinity is that we are so small and limited in our thinking and experience. We have no concept of what it is to be at the same time one person and also another. We are very aware of where we end and another person begins because we are physically limited to a body and mentally limited in the capacity of our brains, which, no matter how powerful they might be, are much less than God's knowledge and understanding. At one level we can try to understand the reality of the triune (three-in-one) God, and we can use illustrations to picture this (like St Patrick's shamrock – a plant which has three leaves coming from one stem), but at another level we can never find a picture that can fully capture this amazing reality since it is beyond our understanding. Perhaps it should reassure us to know that the nature of God is so wonderful that we cannot completely understand it (a God who could be fully described and explained would surely be a “god” of our making, not the true God who created us). We may ultimately come to the point of saying that although we cannot understand it fully, because the Bible shows that these three persons are fully God and yet there is one God and not three, then it must be true.

Conclusion

I hope that this article has been helpful to you, and that it has helped you to develop your thinking further. Please do not be tricked by people like the Jehovah's Witnesses who twist the Bible to support their beliefs. Although they may be very sincere people they are sincerely wrong in their teaching. The fact of the “trinity” can be very difficult to accept, but once a person has experienced God's work in their life it becomes clearer to them since it becomes an experienced reality rather than simply an intellectual theory. They discover that they can pray to God as their Father, they can learn from and worship Jesus Christ as Lord and God, and they can experience the power of God living in them in the person of the Holy Spirit. These three relate to Christians in different ways, but are always in harmony with one another. Their fellowship is the ultimate pattern for us to learn how to relate to other people. I will close by borrowing Paul's expression of wonder at the mystery of our faith from I Timothy 3:16:

*Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great:
He appeared in a body,
was vindicated by the Spirit,
was seen by angels,
was preached among the nations,
was believed on in the world,
was taken up in glory.*

This article was originally written in reply to a question from a mainland China scholar who had been influenced by the Jehovah's Witnesses. It has been revised for online publication. It is written with prayer for the many Chinese who struggle with this question.