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Jesus

Whilst ‘Jesus’ was the name given by God to the infant born in Bethlehem, in the opening verses of the John’s Gospel we read of a special and puzzling title: “In the beginning was *the Word*, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.” Why was John inspired to title Jesus, first, as the Word?

A number of answers have been advanced offering at least a partial explanation. First, we consider how the people of Jesus’ own day would have understood by the title, before looking at how it has been viewed in later times. The earliest Christian preaching was by Jews to Jews who would readily have understood the concept of the Messiah. As the gospel spread it was necessary to address a wider world, not steeped in Old Testament teaching. After Judaea and Galilee (and, to a lesser extent, Samaria) it was the Greek/Roman world that was the first to encounter Christianity. It became necessary to find ways to communicate the lordship of Jesus to the Greek mindset. John found this in the powerful concept of *the Logos* —the Word.

As a Jew, John would have approached the concept of the Word firstly in a Jewish way. A word was not seen as being simply a

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sound in the air, it was an effective power, almost a unit of energy. Words did not only *say* things, words *did* things. In the creation, every act in the creation process commenced: “And God said” A Jew would have understood John’s description of Jesus as *the Word* to be the very motive and creative power of God. The prophet Jeremiah said that the Lord’s word was like fire, like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces (Jer 23:29). God’s word, we read in Isaiah, “...will not return to me [God] empty handed but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:11).

In Jewish thought, also, the concept of wisdom was held in high esteem; see for example, Proverbs 8. Wisdom was the companion of God before the World began, and His helper in creation (Prov 8:22-30). Wisdom was seen to exist almost as a person at God’s side. The Greek word Logos conveys more than just the idea of a word. It can also be translated ‘mind’ or ‘reason’, again suggesting something of the intimacy of the Word with God. These two meanings need to be kept in mind, because the English word ‘Word’ in this context is quite inadequate to convey the full force of what John was saying. The idea of the Logos had come powerfully into Greek consciousness via the Greek philosopher Heraclitus who lived five centuries before Christ. He taught that, although the universe was in a constant state of flux, it was still a dependable universe and the ‘law’ in operation was the Logos—the mind, the reason, on which the whole order of the universe depends. This concept was further developed among the Greek philosophers in the centuries that followed.

The most sophisticated Greek view of the Logos was developed by Philo, an Alexandrian Jew (a Hellenist) born in 20 BC. In this man Greek and Jewish thought mingled. He was a prolific writer and in his books (according to William Barclay) the word Logos appears some 1,200 times. “To him Logos is the image of God and in a unique sense the bridge between God and man. The Logos is God’s instrument of creation, God’s mind stamped on the universe, the tiller by which God steers the world, the bond which holds the world together, the High Priest through whom

God communicates with men.”¹ The Word, then, is a means of communication. People communicate primarily through words. In Jesus God spoke to men in a way that He had never done before, and has never done so since. In Jesus everything that God said to mankind became incarnate in a person. The word is a means of revelation. A word expresses a thought and Jesus is the perfect expression of the mind of God.

Such was the Jewish and Greek appreciation of the concept of *the Logos*, the Word of God. In modern times, church leaders have stressed the love of God—and rightly so. God is the great Lover. Because He is love, he is always seeking ways of communicating that love to his creatures. The Old Testament shows how God communicated with His people by delivering them from their enemies, by establishing the temple ritual and the priesthood and through special messengers—the prophets. Jesus, however, is much greater than any Old Testament prophet. He not only brought God’s words to His people, He *was* that Word. The apostle John continued his theme on the Word: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). In human relationships, a word may be heeded or spurned. The modern church emphasises that this is also true of God’s Word. Because God has spoken to us through His Son, there is a heavy responsibility upon us to respond to that Word. As the writer to the Hebrews said: “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of His being, sustaining all things by his powerful word” (Heb 1:1-3).

The power in a Name

Names can be powerful and meaningful in their own right, even causing strong emotions, as any parent who has had the difficult task of choosing a name can recognise! Many people in history

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have been given popular titles inspired by their achievements or their notoriety, titles that have become instantly recognisable as a ‘celebration’ of the person and what they did. So we have all heard of Alexander *the Great*, of William *the Conqueror*, of *Bloody Mary*, and of John *the Baptist*. Slightly less well known may be the English King Ethelred *the Unready*. From biblical times we have already met Judas Maccabeus —*God’s Hammer*, a popular title given because of his stunning victories over the Persians. One of Jesus’ own disciples is principally remembered not for what he did but for the simple fact that he was an adherent of a political movement: Simon *the Zealot*.

The Lord Jesus was given many titles which can be seen as both affirmations of what He was and confessions of faith in Him. W. Graham Scroggie lists in his *Guide To The Gospels* fifty-two such titles given to Jesus,² but it is the simple name ‘Jesus’ by which the Lord is most often referred to in the Gospels —almost six hundred times, in fact. The name Jesus emphasises the real humanity of the Lord. Whilst to us it has become a sacred name, and we would consider it irreverent to give the name to any child today (though in some Latin societies this is not an uncommon practice), in New Testament times Jesus was one of the most common names for a boy. ‘Jesus’ is the Greek form by which the Old Testament name Joshua (e.g. as in the Book of Joshua) is translated. Whilst a common name when Jesus was born, by the second century AD it was rapidly dying out. Among Jews it had become a hated name whilst among Christians it was too sacred for common use.

Ordinary though the name Jesus was, it was nevertheless a significant one. In the ancient world names were seen as being very meaningful, often describing something about the person to whom it was given. The name Jesus was given to our Lord by the direct instruction of God (Matt 1:21), and indeed this name might have been thought somewhat irregular by people at the time because it was customary to name eldest sons after their fathers. We would note, in this regard, that Jesus had no biological father, so in His name may be found some clue as to His heavenly Father.

The Jewish rabbis had a saying: “Six persons received their names before they were born, namely, Isaac, our great lawgiver Moses, Solomon, Josiah, Ishmael and the Messiah.” Jewish belief was that God would directly command what the name of the Messiah must be.

In both Hebrew and Greek the name Jesus has a special meaning, being in a sense, a one word summary of the work that the Lord was sent to do. In Hebrew the name Joshua means, variously, ‘Jehovah is my help’, or, ‘Jehovah is rescue’, or, ‘the help of Jehovah’. In Matt 1:21 we read, “...you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” The very name Jesus, therefore, marks Him out as Saviour. “He is God’s divinely appointed and divinely sent Rescuer,” writes William Barclay, “whose function it is to deliver men from their sins. He came to rescue men from the estrangement and the alienation from God which is the consequence of their past sins, and for the future to liberate them from the bondage to sin, from the moral frustration and the continuous and inevitable defeat which are the result of sin. He came to bring friendship for fear, and victory for defeat.”³

To the Greek mind a connection was made between the name Jesus and the verb *iasthai*, which means *to heal*. The connection between the two words is only in the sound, but the Greeks made much of the idea of Jesus as the healer of the bodies and souls of men. Jesus was the only one who could bring health to the body in its physical pain and renewal of the soul polluted by the spiritual disease of sin. It was no accident, therefore, that Jesus was given His name, for it summarises the things He came to do and which *only* He could do. He came to be the divine rescuer of men from the consequences and the grip of sin.

Jesus, Man and God

The traditional Christian view is that the baby born in Bethlehem is both God and Man, an astounding thought and a stumbling block for many, notably the Jehovah’s Witnesses in the Western world and Moslems in the east. How did this doctrine develop?

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Is it biblical? What did Jesus Himself have to say? We will try to answer these questions as we evaluate whether anyone other than God, Himself, could ultimately pay the debt owed for rebellion (sin) against Himself.

The first point to make is that Jesus was a real, complete and ordinary human being. He was born like us and developed through childhood to adulthood in a completely normal way. In the Bible we read that he ate, drank, slept, sweated, became tired, felt pain and emotion. Ultimately He died. He was also tempted to sin as we are, even in a quite unprecedented way by the devil himself (Luke 4:1-13), although Jesus did not surrender to the temptation and so we can say with certainty that He was without sin. Just as He taught His disciples to pray, so Jesus Himself needed to pray, to remain in close intimacy with His heavenly Father. He acknowledged He could do nothing without His Father's power and taught only what His Father had shown Him (John 8:28). In spite of all Jesus' undoubted supernatural power, He was fully dependent on His heavenly Father, so He stated plainly that He did not know the time when He would return —this was known only by His Father (Mark 13:32).

So why do Christians equate God with Jesus? The foundations of the belief are in the Bible itself —indeed it should be said that the doctrine is based on viewing the Bible as an organic whole; the doctrine is alluded to, albeit indirectly, throughout the unveiling of salvation history. It should be added, straight away, that Christians do not claim to have a perfect understanding of this Incarnation - of God becoming flesh. We can, however, say that the evidence is overwhelming as this following short study will illustrate:

*** What can we say of God? He is...**

One and only	Isaiah 44:6 (and Gal 3:15-20)
Unchangeable	James 1:17
Invisible	Col 1:15
Infinite	1 Kings 8:27
Holy	1 Peter 1:15-16
Spirit	John 4:24

* **His unity**

Deuteronomy 6:4

Gal 3:20 (see also verse 16)

1 Tim 2:5

James 2:19

* **Father, Son and Holy Spirit**

Matt 28:19 (name, not names!)

2 Cor 13:14

Heb 1:8

1 Peter 1:2

* **“I AM”**

Exodus 3:13-15 —God reveals His name to Moses

* **Jesus uses the phrase ‘I am’ to describe His attributes**

John 8:58 —before Abraham was born, I AM!

John 6:48 —the bread of life

John 10:7 —the gate

John 10:11 —the good shepherd

John 10:36 —God’s son

John 11:25 —the resurrection and the life

John 14:10 —in the Father and the Father is in me (see also John 10:30)

John 15:1 —the true vine

It is plain that Jesus was claiming the divine co-existence of God the Father and Himself, the Son. So it was that the people in His own home town rose up against Him (Luke 4:29) when He compared Himself to Elijah. “My Father is always at work to this very day, and I, too, am working,” said Jesus in John 5:17. The Gospel writer continues: “For this reason the Jews tried to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God” (John 5:18). It is true that nowhere did Jesus ever say unambiguously ‘I am God’, but He nevertheless made some explicit statements leading

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to this conclusion. Thus “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30) is the most obvious, but is reinforced by, for example, “All that belongs to the Father is mine” (John 16:15), and, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matt 28:18). So, whilst we read in Acts 10:36 that Jesus is Lord of all, elsewhere we read that, “the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below” (Joshua 2:11), and similarly in Genesis 28:13 we read of God introducing Himself to Jacob as, “I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac.”

Since the earliest days of the church, Christian belief has been that the man Jesus is also God. Not a man with god-like qualities, nor God *appearing* in human guise, but God the eternal Logos who “became flesh” (John 1:14). Four great ecumenical Councils of the fourth and fifth centuries AD wrestled with the mysteries of the godhead, and each clarified an important aspect of it. The Council of Nicea (AD 325) affirmed that Jesus is truly God, and the Council of Constantinople (AD 381) confirmed that He is truly man. The Council of Ephesus (AD 431) clarified that, although God and Man, He is one Person. Finally the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451) confirmed that, although one person, Jesus is both God and man perfectly. These beliefs have been reaffirmed both by Roman Catholics and the Reformers down through the centuries.

Critics of the doctrine of the Trinity often ask how God can be in two places at once. We might as well ask how God can create a universe, or how he can raise from the dead someone who has been crucified. The very question, perhaps, tries to lock the infinite God into a one-dimensional Being, easily comprehended by the finite minds of simple men. It has been rightly observed, *we can call Jesus God, but we cannot call God Jesus*. God continued to control the universe in His omniscience, omnipotence and omnipresence when the man Jesus was on this earth. However, in the man Jesus we meet absolutely and completely God in His personal relationship with men. We see perfectly, in Jesus, God, in His attitude to, and in His relationship with, men. Although this mystery is in the fullest sense incomprehensible to humans, this is God as He has revealed Himself: as three distinct persons

JESUS

—one in three and three in one.

Notes

¹ William Barclay *Jesus As They Saw Him* (SCM Press Ltd, 1962), p. 426.

² W. Graham Scroggie DD *A Guide To The Gospels* (Pickering & Inglis Ltd, 1948), p. 519.

³ *Op. cit. Jesus As They Saw Him* p. 12.

