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Q&A: The Deity of Jesus Christ

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The Deity of Jesus Christ:

Question: I have been listening to arguments both ways concerning the deity of Jesus. Even some "Christians" don't believe that Jesus was God incarnate. So let's be honest, what is the evidence? How does his rising from the dead count as evidence of divinity?
Also, what about verses that seem to indicate that Jesus wasn't God? Like when Jesus said, "I ascend to my God and your God" or "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?"

Answer: Basically, the argument is that Jesus claimed to be Deity and then he was raised from the dead. Of all the people in the world, including founders of world religions, why would God have raised Jesus, and only Jesus, if he was a false prophet? Since Muslims, Jews, and Christians all believe that God is very, very careful about heresy, especially regarding his nature, you'll have to tell me why I shouldn't believe what Jesus says about himself in light of God raising him from the dead?
As far as the verses like those you mention, Jesus always said that he could only obey his Father. Classic Christian orthodoxy has always taught that while Jesus shared the same nature/Deity as the Father, he was also obedient, meaning that Father and Son have different positions in the Godhead. For example, there is no problem with two Beings who share the exact same nature but are different in position. For example, my son and I have the same nature (or essence), but he is obedient and obeys me (position). The latter has nothing to do with the former. Jesus said on several occasions that he was the obedient Son who did what his Father gave him to do.

Question: As Jesus used the title "Son of Man" is this just a common indication of humanity, or is it more? Is there any way it can indicate a claim to Deity?

Answer: I think it is plain that the Son of Man is a title of divinity or even Deity. For example, in Mk 2:1-12, Jesus stated that the Son of Man can forgive sins & his listeners cried "blasphemy." But then we are told that Jesus healed the man in order to show that he could, indeed, forgive sins. In Mark 14:61-64, Jesus answered "I am" to the High Priest's question of whether he was the Messiah, the Son of God. Then Jesus stated that he would share God's throne. The High Priest responded by tearing his clothes and declared that this was blasphemy. So does the NT think of the Son of Man as Deity? I think it's clear. Look at Acts 7:56 where Jesus appears standing on God's right hand. And in John, this title is connected with John's very high Christology.

Question: Are the "Son of Man" sayings peppered throughout the Synoptic Gospel tradition more highly evidential than the "I Am" sayings of John's Gospel because the Synoptics date earlier?

Answer: Personally, I'd use the "Son of Man" or "Son of God" sayings in Mark over the "I am" sayings in John. The former are earlier, as you mention, but the main reason is my using the "minimal facts" argument and critics are much more accepting of the former over the latter. Remember, we're discussing methodology here.

Question: Why didn't Jesus simply appear in the Twentieth Century? And if Christianity is true, why doesn't God perform more miracles, like maybe in the middle of an atheist meeting, or in public, so that more people will believe in him? Why doesn't he do it? Why doesn't God respond more?

Answer: See "Religious Doubt" category.

Question: What advice would you give when debating Jehovah's Witnesses concerning the deity of Christ?

Answer: I have had many discussions with Jehovah's witnesses. If you get them off their beaten path, they usually struggle, sometimes very much. I would talk about Jesus' deity and use their translation (the New World Translation) whenever possible. For example, they don't mistranslate John 20:28 and many scholars think it is the clearest reference to Jesus' deity in the New Testament. Remind them that in the Greek, Thomas addresses all of these words to Jesus and Jesus then commends him for it. Also, Philippians 2:6 refers to Jesus "existing in God's form" which is great, because "form" (morphe) means the nature of God. I think I would also mention Colossians 2:9, Jesus' "divine quality" although their translation is far too weak. Finally, since John 1:1 will probably come up, point out that that particular Greek construction comes up four times in the New Testament and John 1:1 is the only time that they translate it "a god."

Question: Could you recommend a few good books on the Deity of Christ, ones that study the relevant New Testament texts?

Answer: For a more general book, see I. Howard Marshall, The Origins of New Testament Christology (InterVarsity) or David Wells, The Person of Christ (Crossway Books; reprinted by Bible Scholar Books, 1395 Westwood Ave, Alliance, Ohio, 44601). Although I don't own a copy, another very good book that might really provide a lot of help is Murray Harris' book on the Deity of Christ, by Zondervan. Another strong treatment is Ben Witherington's The Christology of Jesus (Fortress).

Darrell Bock's Blasphemy and Exaltation in Judaism (Baker) is excellent on Mark 14:61-64, which may be the most important New Testament text.