

11. IS JESUS REALLY GOD?

Fr Luigi Gioia
Theologian In Residence

1. “Is Jesus *really* God?”: this might be considered a rhetorical question similar to “Is the Pope Catholic?” or “Is the rain wet?”.
 - 1.1. If we did not believe that this is the case, that Jesus is God, we would not even ask such a question.
 - 1.2. In reality this question is an invitation not so much to wonder whether Jesus is God, but in what sense, in what way this is the case.
2. This has been a real question for Christians throughout the first 300 years of the history of Christianity, until the Council of Constantinople in 381.
3. It has become a burning question again for most Christian thinkers since the 18th century especially under the influence of the Enlightenment, the birth of the critical exegesis of the New Testament, some forms of historicism, deism, just to mention few. What these school of thoughts have in common is that they want to redefine or deny the way in which we should understand the divine identity of Jesus.
4. Especially with regards to the first centuries of the history of Christianity this was an apparently insoluble conundrum
 - 4.1. Some of course did squarely deny that Christ was God, for example Jewish people or pagan philosophers like the Emperor Julian called “the Apostate” (331-368 CE).
 - 4.2. Christians of course worshipped Jesus, were baptized in his name, confessed that he is the Messiah, Christ, the Son of God
 - 4.3. And yet virtually everyone until the 4th century was prepared to talk about the divinity of Christ only with some provisos, always implying some reservations.
 - 4.4. Virtually every Christian thinker up to the 4th century was a “*Subordinationist*”,
 - i. from the word “subordinate”, meaning that they confessed that Jesus was God, but not in exactly the same way as the Father
 - ii. Jesus is God but *inferior* to the Father (this is the case not only of authors that were later consider heretics, but also of Fathers of Church like Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Origen, and Irenaeus).
 - 4.5. In other words, when they said that Jesus is God they implied that he is not God in *exactly* the same way as the Father is God.
5. This realization should not surprise us nor be considered a problem – exactly the contrary! We can even say that this was a good thing, it was the result of a healthy concern with the most fundamental tenet of the biblical (both Jewish and Christian) faith, namely that *God is one*.
 - 5.1. What was at stake was whether or not just like Judaism, Christianity too is a monotheism, Christians too believe that God is *one*.
 - 5.2. It is precisely because Christians were unreservedly committed to monotheism that this question kept hovering for centuries and caused countless and often fierce controversies.
6. Moreover, especially two sentences which the Gospels attribute to Jesus himself kept nagging Christian theologians:

SHARP FAITH

SUNDAY THEOLOGY TALKS AT SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE, NYC

John 14: 28 - You heard me say to you, I am going away, and I will come to you. If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I.

Mt 24:36 – Concerning that day and hour [the end of time] no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.

7. So the question “Is Jesus *really* God” is not rhetorical, but rather a question that it is crucial to take seriously, a constant invitation to dig deeper, and especially to expand our understanding of what being *one* means when applied to God.
8. This might also be the reason why there is no saying attributed to Jesus himself in the Gospels in which he declares about himself simply and directly “I am God”. Why is this the case?
9. Of course, as we know, there are sentences in the Gospels in which *others* say about Jesus that he is God:
 - John 1:1 - In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
 - John 20:28 - After Jesus’ resurrection, Thomas declares to Jesus “My Lord and my God”.
10. But Jesus never says this about himself. Instead, he opts for roundabout ways of declaring the same thing – almost as if he was prepared to say it only in riddles.
11. One of the ways is claim for himself prerogatives which belong to God
 - 11.1. forgiveness of sins:
 - Mark 2:5ff - When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, “Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?”.
 - 11.2. Power over the Sabbath:
 - Mark 2: 28 - the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.”
12. Then there is the way in which he uses for himself the titles “Son of God” and “Son of Man”.
13. Jesus is often called the “Son of God” in the Gospels”, not only by angels (Luke 1:30-35), disciples (Matthew 14:32), demons (Matthew 8:29) and Gentiles (Matthew 27:54), but also by the Father
 - Matthew 3:16f - when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”
14. And yet, while Jesus refers to God constantly as the “Father”, interestingly he calls himself the “Son of God” only rarely and almost accidentally:
 - John 10:33-36 - The Jews answered him, “It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God.” Jesus answered them, “Is it not written in your Law, ‘I said, you are gods’? If he called them gods to whom the word of God came—and Scripture cannot be broken— do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, ‘You are blaspheming,’ because I said, ‘I am the Son of God’? You are blaspheming,’ because I said, ‘I am the Son of God’?”

SHARP FAITH

SUNDAY THEOLOGY TALKS AT SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE, NYC

John 5:25 - Truly, truly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.

15. The reality is that in Jesus' time the title "Son of God" applied to Jesus could not easily be interpreted as meaning that he *really* was God. The reason for this is that in the Old Testament this title is applied to many people:
 - 15.1. God said to King David:
'You are my Son; today I have begotten you' (Psalms 2:7).
 - 15.2. God says the same more generally about judges, prophets and kings:
'I said, 'You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you' (Psalms 82:6).
 - 15.3. God says the same about Israel:
'Israel is my firstborn son' (Exodus 4:22)
16. This usage is attested in rabbinic literature and it was never perceived as a threat to monotheism. Significantly, in the construction 'son of God' rabbis did not use *Yahweh* but *Elohim*.¹
17. Hence the question: how did Jesus *really* refer to himself as God? Interestingly, while Jesus almost never says absolutely about himself that he is the "Son of God", he often refers to himself instead as the "**Son of Man**".
18. This can be confusing, but in fact in Jesus' time the title "Son of Man" was a much greater claim to divinity than the title "Son of God".
19. In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus refers to himself as "Son of Man" in three contexts:
 - 19.1. With reference to power over sin and sabbath (mentioned above) and to his ministry:

Mark 2:10f – So that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the paralytic— "I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home."

Mark 2: 28 - The Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.

Matt 11:19 - The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds.
 - 19.2. When he talks about his coming suffering, death, and resurrection

Mark 9:9,12 - And as they were coming down the mountain, he charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead might mean. And they asked him, "Why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?" And he said to them, "Elijah does come first to restore all things. And how is it written of the Son of Man that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt? But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him.
 - 19.3. About his future coming in heavenly glory to act with sovereign power at a final judgement

a. _____

¹ "The Old Testament often uses בן (ben) and בר (bar) for beings which belong to the divine world or sphere but they are combined with other words for God, never with the name יהוה (Yahweh), rather with אֱלֹהִים (Elohim).", Cf. Theological dictionary of the New Testament. 1964- (G. Kittel, G. W. Bromiley & G. Friedrich, Ed.) (electronic ed.). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, quoted in <https://www.reviewofreligions.org/27744/jesus-son-of-god-historical-context-long-read/> 3

SHARP FAITH

SUNDAY THEOLOGY TALKS AT SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE, NYC

Mark 8:38 - For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

Matt 24:27 - For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.

19.4. A crucial statement is given in Mark 14:61-62:

The high priest stood up in the midst and asked Jesus, “Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?”. But he remained silent and made no answer. Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” And Jesus said, “I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.” And the high priest tore his garments and said, “What further witnesses do we need? You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?” And they all condemned him as deserving death.

20. To the question whether he is the Son of God, Jesus replies that he is the “Son of Man” – but instead of conciliating the High Priest, this is seen as the ultimate blasphemy, as a claim to be God!

21. The reason for this reaction is that here Jesus refers to a passage from the book of Daniel in which the title "Son of Man" appears in the context of a prophetic vision.

21.1. This vision portrays a cosmic conflict between the beasts, which represent earthly kingdoms, and the "Ancient of Days," that is God.

21.2. In this vision, Daniel sees a figure who is distinct from the human kingdoms and is intimately connected with God's divine rule:

Daniel 7:13-14 - In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

21.3. The literary context of the book of Daniel is essential to understand the significance of the Son of Man in this passage. Daniel is written during a time of great upheaval and persecution for the people of Israel, which was struggling to maintain their faith in the face of oppressive foreign rule.

21.4. By including the Son of Man in his prophetic vision, Daniel emphasizes the divine intervention that will take place in the midst of human history.

21.5. The Son of Man is presented as a figure who will act on behalf of God's people, bringing about their ultimate deliverance and the establishment of God's eternal kingdom.²

21.6. He receives authority, glory and sovereign power and he is an object of worship which in the Old Testament is strictly and exclusively given to God.

22. Then, in John's Gospel the "Son of man" is presented as a pre-existent figure (that is Jesus says that he existed even before he was born):

John 3:13 - No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

a. _____

2

<https://www.biblelyfe.com/blog/son-of-man#:~:text=What%20is%20this%3F,described%20as%20everlasting%20and%20indestructible>

4

SHARP FAITH

SUNDAY THEOLOGY TALKS AT SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE, NYC

John 6:62 - Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, "Do you take offense at this? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?"

23. Then only in the Gospel of John Jesus refers to the Father in ways which his opponents interpret as making himself equal to God

John 5:16ff The Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. But Jesus answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I am working." This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.

John 10: 30-33 – [Jesus declared:] "I and the Father are one." The Jews picked up stones again to stone him. Jesus answered them, "I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you going to stone me?" The Jews answered him, "It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God.

24. Another way in which Jesus suggests equality with God is passages in which he seems to advocate for himself the name God had given to Moses, *I am*:

John 8:24 - I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that *I am he* you will die in your sins.

John 8:28 - So Jesus said to them, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that *I am he*, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me.

John 8:58f - Jesus said unto them, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was born, I am". They took up stones therefore to cast at him: but Jesus hid himself, and went out of the temple.

* * * * *

25. So rather than saying about himself "I am God", Jesus prefers to let other people infer this

- 25.1. from his actions,
- 25.2. from the prerogatives he advocates,
- 25.3. from the way he talks about God as his Father,
- 25.4. from the use of ambiguous titles like "Son of Man",
- 25.5. and using for himself the name "I am".

26. This leaves us with the question as to *why* he does this, why he seems to entertain ambiguity about this crucial aspect of his identity.

27. We can look for an answer to this question to another assertion by Jesus, in Matthew 11-25-30

At that time Jesus declared, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth,

- that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.
- All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and
- no one knows the Son except the Father, and
- no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

SHARP FAITH

SUNDAY THEOLOGY TALKS AT SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE, NYC

- Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”
- 27.1. We have a confirmation that Jesus spoke in riddles, that is in ways which hide and reveal at the same time, intentionally
- 27.2. Those to whom revelation is granted are called “little children”
- 27.3. There is a sense in which we can recognize the Father only by becoming his children – that is becoming one with his own Son.
- 27.4. That is, understanding requires transformation or conversion.
- 28. We constantly use the title “God” as if we knew what it means, and “one” God as if it was similar to other things which are ‘unique’ in our experience.
- 29. The ways Scripture and Jesus talk about God forces us to take another approach.
- 30. Jesus’ reluctance to call himself “God” can be seen in parallel to God’s reluctance to give his name in Exodus 3:14
 - “And God said to Moses, “Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh,” sent me to you.”
 - 30.1. Hebrew does not have past, present or future tense. The possible translations could be
 - i. "I was who I was" (past tense),
 - ii. "I will be who I will be" (future tense) or
 - iii. "I am who I am" (present tense).
- 31. Karl Barth

There is no objective definition that we can discover for ourselves. We might say of this revelation of His name that it consists in the refusal of a name, but even in the form of this substantial refusal it is still really revelation, communication and illumination. For *Yahweh* means the Lord, the I who gives Himself to be known in that He exists as the I of the Lord and therefore acts only as a He and can be called upon only as a Thou in His action, without making Himself known in His I-ness as if He were a creature.³

a. _____

³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. W. Bromiley, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance vol. 2/1 (London: T&T Clark, 2009), §61. 6