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The divinity of Jesus

Biblical answers to Muslim objections



JESUS AND THE TRINITY

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Does the Bible teach the divinity of Jesus?

Why the central Muslim objections to Christ’s deity do not hold

Companion study to the debate between Matt and Deen

Abstract

The decisive question in the debate is not whether biblical passages exist in which Jesus prays, obeys, receives authority, or shows human limitation. Of course these texts exist. Christian doctrine expressly maintains that the eternal Son truly became human.

What matters instead is whether the Bible simultaneously places Jesus on the Creator’s side: he is called God, exists before the world, creates everything created, gives eternal life, judges humanity, receives the same honor as the Father, and is identified in New Testament texts with statements about YHWH.

Precisely here lies the fundamental problem of Deen’s Muslim argumentation. Texts about Jesus’s humiliation and humanity are treated as immediate and unambiguous. Texts about his deity, by contrast, are categorically classified as ambiguous, delegated, or reinterpreted later.

> **THE ACTUAL QUESTION**
>
> The actual issue in dispute is therefore not merely “What does this or that verse say?” It is: by what principle may one decide which texts explain the others?

If the sum of biblical testimony is taken seriously, the result is no merely human or creaturely Christology. The New Testament distinguishes the Son from the Father, yet simultaneously includes him within the divine identity.

Translation note: Complete English translation of the supplied German source. All biblical quotations are translated from the wording in that source, not quoted verbatim from an official English Bible. Names, references, examples, historical assertions, and argumentative judgments reproduce the source; no independent theological revision or source verification has been undertaken.

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1. The actual issue in dispute: Creator or creature?

Josef, Charlie, and André discuss the debate between Matt and the Muslim Deen. Later Matt explains his strategy and individual key moments of the exchange.

The debate was titled “Does the Bible teach the divinity of Jesus?”

It must first be clarified what “divinity” means. The issue is not merely whether Jesus is extraordinary, holy, sent from heaven, or endowed with divine authority. Prophets can be extraordinary. Angels can come from heaven. Human beings can be authorized by God.

The stronger question is:

> **CREATOR OR CREATURE?**
> Does the Bible classify Jesus within created reality, or does he stand on the Creator’s side?

This distinction is decisive. There is no sliding scale between God and everything God created. The Bible does not have God at the top and increasingly powerful demigods beneath him. There is the Creator and his creation (Genesis 1:1; Isaiah 44:24; Romans 1:25).

If Jesus himself belongs to created things, he is a creature.

If, however, everything created was created through him, he cannot himself belong to this class.

Precisely for this reason it is strategically insufficient to reduce the entire debate to the question:

> Where does Jesus literally say: I am God, worship me?

A doctrine need not appear in a single sentence form prescribed by its opponent. It can follow necessarily from several expressly revealed statements.

No serious Bible reader would, for example, demand that the Bible contain the sentence: “God is omniscient in the technical philosophical sense of this later German word.” One gathers Scripture’s statements and asks what conclusion follows from them.

Psalm 119 formulates a fundamental principle:

> The sum of your word is truth.
>
> Psalm 119:160

Sola Scriptura therefore does not mean extracting an individual verse from context. It simultaneously requires tota Scriptura: the whole of Scripture.

2. The positive overall biblical testimony

Before difficult objections are addressed, the positive data should be clarified.

The New Testament does not possess only a single “proof text” for Jesus’s deity. Different, independent lines of argument converge on the same point.

Jesus is expressly called God

The most important texts include:

- “The Word was God” (John 1:1).
- Thomas says to Jesus: “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28).
- In Hebrews 1 the Son is addressed with “Your throne, O God” (Hebrews 1:8).

- Further elevated designations as God occur, for example, in Titus 2:13.

Individual grammatical questions can be discussed. The overall question, however, does not depend on a single one of these texts.

Jesus stands outside the class of created things

John 1:3 is particularly strong:

> Everything came to be through him, and without him not even one thing came to be that has come to be.

John thus logically divides reality into two domains:

1. Everything that came to be.

2. The Logos through whom everything that came to be did so.

If one wishes to count the Logos himself within the class of what came to be, the immediate problem arises: he too would then have to have come to be through the Logos.

He would therefore have had to participate in bringing himself forth before he existed.

Yet the text makes no exception:

> Without him not even one thing came to be.

The same idea appears in Colossians 1:

> For in him everything in the heavens and on earth was created […] everything has been created through him and toward him.
>
> Colossians 1:16–17

Hebrews 1 additionally applies an Old Testament Creator text to the Son (Hebrews 1:10–12; compare Psalm 102:26–28).

This becomes especially significant when Isaiah is added:

> **YHWH AS SOLE CREATOR**
> YHWH describes himself as the one who alone stretched out the heavens and spread out the earth (Isaiah 44:24).

If YHWH alone is Creator of all things, and the New Testament simultaneously says that all things were created through Christ, Christ cannot simply be introduced as a creature standing outside God.

> **THE BOUNDARY**
> The delegation solution reaches the Creator/creature boundary here.

Jesus possesses divine life-giving power

John 5 goes still further:

> For just as the Father raises the dead and makes them alive, so also the Son makes alive whom he wills.
>
> John 5:21

Not merely: God makes someone alive through Jesus.

The Son makes alive whom he wills.

And:

> For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has also given the Son to have life in himself.
>
> John 5:26

Jesus also says:

> I give them eternal life.
>
> John 10:28

Jesus receives the same honor as the Father

John 5:23 formulates a remarkable consequence:

> So that all may honor the Son as they honor the Father.

Not merely: honor the Son a little because God sent him.

Rather: as the Father.

In Revelation 5 the universal doxology is finally directed jointly to the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb (Revelation 5:11–14).

YHWH texts are applied to Jesus

The New Testament does something else that is extraordinarily significant within Jewish monotheism. Statements about YHWH are applied to Christ.

Isaiah says of YHWH:

> To me every knee will bow.
>
> Isaiah 45:23

Paul writes of Jesus:

> So that at the name of Jesus every knee may bow […] and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.
>
> Philippians 2:10–11

Joel speaks of calling on YHWH's name (Joel 3:5). Paul uses this text in connection with confessing Jesus as Lord (Romans 10:9–13).

In 1 Corinthians 8:6 Paul writes:

> Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom all things are […] and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things are.

This is not the introduction of two gods. Paul expressly operates within Jewish monotheism and nevertheless integrates Jesus into the universal creation relationship.

A cumulative picture thus emerges:

- One God.
- Father and Son are personally distinct.
- The Son is Creator.
- The Son gives life.
- The Son judges.
- The Son receives divine honor.
- The Son bears designations as God.
- YHWH texts are applied to him.

Only against this background should the objection texts be examined.

3. John 17:3: is only the Father God?

One of the most important texts in Deen’s argumentation is:

> And this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.
>
> John 17:3

The argument runs approximately as follows:

1. The Father is the only true God.

2. Jesus is sent by this God.

3. Therefore Jesus cannot also be God.

The decisive step, however, lies in premise 3.

John 17:3 expressly says that the Father is the only true God. Trinitarian Christians do not dispute this at all.

What the text does not say is:

> Only the person of the Father possesses the divine nature.

This additional statement would first have to be proved.

The doctrine of the Trinity specifically does not claim that Jesus is the Father. The Father is not the Son. The Son prays to the Father. The Father sends the Son.

John 17 therefore undoubtedly proves personal distinction.

But personal distinction is not the same as ontological inequality.

The context makes a merely prophetic interpretation difficult

Immediately beforehand, Jesus says that the Father has given him authority over all flesh so that he may give eternal life (John 17:2).

Just two verses later Jesus prays:

> And now, Father, glorify me with yourself with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.
>
> John 17:5

This is not an ordinary prophetic statement.

Jesus claims glory with the Father before the world's existence.

At the end of the same prayer, Jesus again speaks of the glory and love that already existed "before the foundation of the world" (John 17:24).

John 17 thus fits precisely with the Gospel's prologue:

> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
>
> John 1:1

The Word is with God, thus personally distinct.

The Word is God, thus not merely a creature.

And this Word becomes flesh (John 1:14).

John therefore does not distinguish between:

- God on one side.
- A merely human envoy on the other.

He distinguishes Father and Son within a much higher Christology.

"Sent" does not mean "created"

Nor does describing Jesus as sent prove creaturehood.

John specifically connects both ideas:

- The Son is sent by the Father (John 3:17).
- He came forth from the Father and came into the world (John 16:28).
- He had glory with the Father before the world existed (John 17:5).

> **MISSION AND NATURE**
> In John, being sent describes the mission of the preexistent Son. It does not define his nature as that of a merely human prophet.

John 17:3 therefore cannot be read as a Christian version of an Islamic shahada without first importing a unitarian ontology of God into the text.

4. Mark 13:32: when Jesus did not know something

Probably Deen's strongest objection is Mark 13:32:

> But of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

The argument is understandable:

1. God is omniscient.

2. Jesus did not know the time.

3. Jesus therefore was not omniscient.

4. Therefore Jesus is not God.

This objection should not be answered by minimizing Jesus's actual human limitation as much as possible.

Classical Christology specifically says:

> **TRUE GOD AND TRUE MAN**
> The Son is true God and true man.

If Jesus possessed no genuine human intellect, no human will, no human body, and no real human development, the incarnation would be mere appearance.

Luke can therefore write:

> And Jesus increased in wisdom and age and favor with God and people.
>
> Luke 2:52

The decisive logical question is not:

> Can Jesus be omniscient and not omniscient?

Rather:

> Are omniscience and lack of knowledge attributed to him in the same respect?

This would indeed be a contradiction:

> Jesus as God knows proposition P, and Jesus as God does not know proposition P.

But the doctrine of two natures does not maintain this.

It maintains that the one personal Son possesses a complete divine and a complete human nature.

The properties of the two natures are not mixed together.

- The divine nature remains divine.
- The human nature remains human.

The Son therefore possesses a divine mode of knowing and a genuinely human mode of knowing.

> **THE LAW OF NONCONTRADICTION**
> A contradiction exists only when A and not-A are attributed to the same subject at the same time and in the same respect.

Precisely this “same respect” is what the Muslim objection would have to prove.

The immediate context also has a high Christology

What stands immediately before Mark 13:32 is noteworthy.

Jesus says:

> Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.
>
> Mark 13:31

In the Old Testament it is God’s word that stands forever (Psalm 119:89), while heaven and earth can pass away (Psalm 102:26–28).

Shortly before this, the Son of Man appears with power and glory and sends out his angels to gather his elect from the entire world (Mark 13:26–27).

The context therefore does not present an ordinary prophet who happens not to know something.

It presents a person with astonishingly elevated authority charged with divine significance and simultaneously genuine human limitation.

Precisely this tension is explained by the incarnation.

Mark 13:32 does not refute it. It is one of the reasons Christological precision became necessary in the first place.

5. John 5:30: “I can do nothing of myself”

Another frequent objection is:

> I can do nothing of myself.
>
> John 5:30

Read in isolation, this initially sounds clear:

- Jesus is dependent.
- God is independent.
- Therefore Jesus cannot be God.

But John 5 does not begin in verse 30.

What the Son does, the Father also does

Already in verse 19 Jesus explains:

> For whatever he does, the Son likewise also does.
>
> John 5:19

This is not an ordinary prophetic self-description.

No prophet can say:

> Everything God does, I do in the same manner.

The context intensifies further.

The Son sovereignly gives life

> So also the Son makes alive whom he wills.
>
> John 5:21

The Son judges humanity

> For the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son.
>
> John 5:22

The Son receives the same honor

> So that all may honor the Son as they honor the Father.
>
> John 5:23

The Son possesses life in himself

> So he has also given the Son to have life in himself.
>
> John 5:26

Only afterward appears:

> I can do nothing of myself.
>
> John 5:30

In context, the statement therefore does not mean:

> I am a powerless creature.

Rather:

> **INSEPARABLE ACTION**
> The Son never acts as a divine being separate from and competing with the Father.

Father and Son do not act like two independent gods with separate centers of will who occasionally pursue the same projects.

God’s works are inseparable.

Precisely for this reason Jesus can say, on one hand:

> I can do nothing of myself.

And on the other:

> What the Father does, the Son likewise also does.

The objection transforms unity of action into the Son’s inability.

The context does the opposite.

> **THE WHOLE CONTEXT**
> Anyone using John 5:30 against Jesus’s deity must explain John 5:19, 21, 23, and 26 with the same seriousness.

6. Authority and delegation: is the agency solution sufficient?

The idea of delegation becomes increasingly important in the course of the debate.

The model is: Jesus can do extraordinary things because God authorized him.

This would explain:

- Miracles.
- Forgiveness of sins.
- Judgment.
- Raising the dead.
- Giving life.
- Perhaps even creation.

After all, an authorized representative can act in another’s name.

This is correct in principle. But it by no means follows that every action is explicable through mere delegation.

Authority is not the same as ability

Matt uses a helpful idea in the discussion.

Suppose both pilots of an airplane suddenly become unconscious. Someone comes to me and says:

> I hereby give you authority to land this airplane.

I now possess permission.

But I by no means thereby possess the ability.

> **AUTHORITY AND CAPACITY**
> Authority can be transferred. Ontological capacity does not arise through a mere commission.

This becomes decisive with creation.

If Jesus brings forth all created reality, one cannot simply say:

> God just gave him authority to do it.

One must explain what kind of being possesses the capacity to bring forth all created reality at all.

John 1:3 sharpens the problem still further.

If everything that came to be did so through the Logos, the Logos cannot himself be a creature that came into existence.

Delegation does not solve this problem.

Isaiah 44:24 puts the agency solution under further pressure

YHWH says:

> I, the LORD, am the one who does everything, who stretched out the heavens, I alone, who spread out the earth — who was with me?
>
> Isaiah 44:24

Now the New Testament declares:

- Everything came to be through the Logos (John 1:3).
- Everything was created through the Son and toward him (Colossians 1:16).
- The Son sustains all things (Colossians 1:17; compare Hebrews 1:3).

It is therefore not sufficient to say:

> Jesus is only an instrument outside God.

For Isaiah would then have formulated his statement about YHWH’s sole creative sovereignty surprisingly.

The Trinitarian solution is more coherent:

> **ONE CREATOR GOD**
> The Son is not a second Creator alongside God. The Son belongs to the identity of the one Creator God.

The same problem appears with honor, life, and judgment

An individual delegated activity does not in itself prove deity.

A prophet can perform miracles.

A prophet can announce judgment.

A prophet can speak in God’s name.

But the New Testament portrays not one individual extraordinary feature but a cumulative divine profile:

- Everything is created through Christ.
- Everything holds together through him.
- He gives eternal life.
- He makes alive whom he wills.
- He judges all humanity.
- All are to honor him as they honor the Father.
- YHWH texts are applied to him.
- All creation directs doxology to him.

The more of these properties one attributes to a supposedly created mediating figure, the more urgent the question becomes:

> **DIVINE IDENTITY**
> What actually remains as an exclusively divine identity marker?

7. Further objections and the question of Nicaea

Besides the three major key texts, a number of further classical objections were raised in the debate. Many rest on the same fundamental error: statements about Jesus's genuine humanity, his mission, or his personal distinction from the Father are immediately transformed into statements about his ontological inferiority.

"God is not a human being"

Numbers 23 says:

> God is not a human being, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should repent.
>
> Numbers 23:19

The second part of the sentence explains the first.

The issue is God's truthfulness and unchangeability over against human unreliability.

The text does not say:

> God possesses the metaphysical inability ever to assume a human nature.

Such a statement would have to be read into the text.

Furthermore, the incarnation does not maintain that God's divine nature ceased to be divine and was transformed into humanity.

John formulates it:

> The Word became flesh.
>
> John 1:14

Philippians 2 first describes Christ in the form of God and then in the form of a servant and human appearance (Philippians 2:6–8).

Deity is not abolished.

Humanity is truly assumed.

"Why do you call me good? No one is good except God"

Jesus asks the rich man:

> Why do you call me good? No one is good except one, God.
>
> Mark 10:18

The conclusion is occasionally drawn:

> Jesus expressly refuses to be good and therefore God.

But precisely this is not what Jesus says.

He says neither:

> I am not good.

Nor:

> I am not God.

He asks a question.

Rather, this question compels the conversation partner to consider the implications of his own form of address.

As counterevidence to Jesus's deity, Mark 10:18 is therefore far less unambiguous than is often claimed.

"Jesus calls the Father his God"

After the resurrection Jesus says:

> I ascend to my Father and your Father and my God and your God.
>
> John 20:17

The glorified Christ also speaks of "my God" in Revelation 3:12.

Again the question is: does a real relationship of subordination and mediation automatically imply a lesser nature?

No.

The incarnation is not undone by the resurrection. Christ remains the incarnate Son and mediator.

Anyone inferring creaturehood solely from "my God" would first have to prove that the divine Son in assumed humanity cannot possibly stand in such a covenantal and mediating relationship to the Father.

Incidentally, only a few verses after John 20:17 comes Thomas's confession directly to Jesus:

> My Lord and my God!
>
> John 20:28

Jesus does not correct Thomas.

Rather, he connects Thomas's response with faith (John 20:29).

"The Father is greater than I"

John 14:28 also describes the position of the Son sent into the world and humbled.

"Greater" does not automatically imply:

> Of a different and lower nature.

A king is greater in office than his minister without thereby possessing a different human nature.

Role order and the question of essence must not simply be equated.

“Jesus was only made God in 325”

Historically, the claim that Nicaea first made Jesus God in the year 325 is untenable.

The New Testament itself already predates Nicaea by centuries and contains:

- John 1:1.
- John 20:28.
- Philippians 2:6–11.
- Hebrews 1.
- 1 Corinthians 8:6.
- Romans 10:9–13.

The actual question is thereby already settled:

> **OLDER TEXTS**
> Nicaea cannot have invented a Christology demonstrably present in much older texts.

What developed historically was above all the technical terminology with which the already existing biblical data were clarified against particular errors.

Long before Nicaea, Tertullian speaks in Adversus Praxean 2 of Father, Son, and Spirit, their distinction, and simultaneously their shared substance.

Eusebius of Caesarea also expressly discusses Nicene terminology and its relation to the conviction of faith already held in his letter concerning the Council of Nicaea.

Individual pre-Nicene formulations can and must be discussed with care. Some authors use expressions that appear problematic or imprecise from a later perspective.

But:

> **TERMINOLOGY AND CONTENT**
> Development of terminology is not the same as invention of the content of faith.

A council clarifying a doctrine under the pressure of controversy is not automatically that doctrine’s birthday.

8. The key presuppositional question and the overall judgment

Here the debate reaches its deepest level.

Deen’s starting thesis amounts to:

> The Bible does not clearly teach Jesus’s deity. The apparent deity texts are ambiguous. The clear texts instead show that Jesus is not God.

This produces two classes of texts.

Texts supposedly allowed immediate validity

- The Father is the only true God.
- Jesus does not know the hour.
- Jesus prays.
- Jesus obeys.
- Jesus receives authority.
- Jesus calls the Father his God.

Texts requiring an additional interpretive key

- The Word was God.
- Everything came to be through the Logos.
- Thomas: “my God.”
- The Son makes alive whom he wills.
- All are to honor the Son as the Father.
- YHWH texts are applied to Jesus.
- Christ possesses glory before the world.

The decisive question is:

> **WHO SET THE HIERARCHY?**
> Who established this hierarchy?

Why may Mark 13:32 interpret John 1:3, but John 1:3 may not interpret Mark 13:32?

Why is a statement about limited human knowledge immediately read ontologically, while a universal Creator statement may be weakened through “delegation”?

Here the presuppositional level becomes visible.

No one reads without presuppositions

There is no exegesis “without lenses.”

Every reader brings convictions about:

- Who God is.
- What is possible.
- What a human being is.
- What a person is.
- How revelation works.
- Which texts may be harmonized with one another.

The problem is therefore not that someone possesses presuppositions.

The question is:

> **CORRECTABILITY**
> Which presuppositions are corrected by the text, and which are immunized against correction?

If the Muslim reader already presupposes:

> God is necessarily unipersonal.

Then no text can ever show that the one God personally distinguishes Father, Son, and Spirit.

For every corresponding statement is automatically categorized differently:

- “God” means only an honorary title.
- Creation means delegation.
- Worship means respect.
- Preexistence means special election.
- YHWH texts mean representation.
- Divine attributes are bestowed.

The starting thesis thus remains intact regardless of what the text says.

The decisive stress test

During the debate it was even argued, in effect, that numerous explicit-sounding statements of deity could not overcome Mark 13:32.

Precisely here the central counterquestion should be asked:

> **WHAT WOULD CHANGE YOUR VIEW?**
> What would the Bible have to say at all for you to change your view of Jesus?

Let us hypothetically assume that the Bible expressly said:

> Jesus is God.

If the answer were then:

> That still cannot be true because he did not know the hour.

The actual debate question has already shifted.

One is no longer openly investigating:

> Does the Bible teach the divinity of Jesus?

One is arguing:

> Jesus cannot be God on the basis of my presupposed concept of God; therefore every biblical passage that appears to say otherwise must be explained differently.

This is the epistemic core of the problem.

> **THESIS AND SCRIPTURE**
> The starting thesis is not tested by Scripture. Scripture is tested by the starting thesis.

Which explanation has greater scope?

Trinitarian incarnational Christology really must explain several data points simultaneously:

- There is only one God.
- The Father is God.
- The Son is distinct from the Father.
- Jesus is truly human.
- Jesus prays.
- Jesus obeys.
- Jesus grows in wisdom.
- Jesus assumes a servant's position.
- Jesus simultaneously possesses glory before the world.
- Jesus creates everything created.
- Jesus gives eternal life.
- Jesus makes alive whom he wills.
- Jesus judges the world.
- Jesus is called God.
- Jesus receives the same honor as the Father.
- YHWH texts are applied to Jesus.

Classical Christology attempts to erase none of these series of data.

It says:

- One God.
- Father, Son, and Spirit personally distinct.
- The eternal Son becomes true man without ceasing to be true God.

Texts about humiliation are thus not removed. They receive their place within the incarnation.

The unitarian counterposition faces a different problem. It must systematically weaken a whole series of very elevated Christological texts so that Jesus can remain within an already fixed creaturely category.

This does not automatically make the Christian position true. But it shows where the argumentative burden of proof lies.

Conclusion

The Bible teaches Christ's deity not merely through an isolated ambiguous sentence.

It develops a coherent overall Christological picture.

> **CHRIST AND CREATION**
> Jesus does not stand within the class of things that came to be. Everything that came to be does so through him.

He is distinct from the Father, but not excluded from divine identity.

He possesses genuine humanity without therefore being a mere creature.

He receives authority within the mission of salvation history, yet simultaneously possesses capacities and prerogatives Scripture attributes to the Creator.

He is sent and nevertheless had glory with the Father before the world existed.

He prays to the Father and simultaneously is to be honored by all as the Father.

He is true man.

And he is true God.

> **THE FUNDAMENTAL ERROR**
> The fundamental error of many Muslim objections consists in equating personal distinction with difference of essence, subordination with creaturehood, and humanity with exclusion of deity. Yet precisely these equations would first have to be proved.

The question about Jesus is therefore much more than an interesting debate in philosophy of religion.

John writes his Gospel not so that we merely pass a correct Christology examination.

He expressly names his purpose:

> But these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and so that through faith you may have life in his name.
>
> John 20:31

Christ's identity determines whom we trust.

The Jesus of the New Testament is not merely one more envoy in a long line of religious teachers.

He is the incarnate Logos through whom everything came to be, the Lord over life and judgment, the crucified and risen one, and the one to whom Thomas confesses:

> My Lord and my God!
>
> John 20:28