

God Series E15

Is Jesus God?

Podcast Date: October 29, 2018

(56:21)

Speakers in the audio file:

Jon Collins

Tim Mackie

Is Jesus God?

- Jon: Is Jesus God? That's a question that people who read the Bible don't all agree on it. And as it turns out...
- Tim: ...the word "Jesus is God" never appears in the New Testament anywhere.
- Jon: Yet throughout church history, the majority view is that Jesus is God. So where did we get this?
- Tim: What does appear many times is "Jesus is Lord." I think for most people, what they're trying to say with the sentence "Jesus is God" is what the apostles are saying by the phrase "Jesus is Lord."
- Jon: I'm Jon Collins, and this is The Bible Project podcast. Tim and I are working through a discussion on the identity of God in the Bible, and we've finally gotten to Jesus. In this episode, we look at what the apostles thought of the identity of Jesus of Nazareth.
- Tim: What modern Westerners typically want for the apostles is to just say it. Just say what you think about Jesus.
- Jon: But instead, we get a very Jewish way to talk about Jesus is God. We'll look at how Mark narratively portrays Jesus as Yahweh himself arriving on the scene. We'll see how the baptism of Jesus shows God's complex identity of Father, Son, and Spirit all together as one, and we'll see how Jesus walking around forgiving sins is a clear narrative signal of who he thinks he is. Finally, we end the episode today looking at how Jesus refers to God as my Father.
- Tim: You go through Jesus's teachings about "my Father." He lived in a place of deep, deep conviction that in his essence, the Father was gracious, extremely generous, merciful, compassionate, and that the Christian tradition has received this three-part identity, Father, Son, and Spirit and that Father is grounded in Jesus's on choice of that word.
- Jon: Thanks for joining us. Here we go. You're ready?
- Tim: I think so.
- Jon: All right.
- Tim: What are we talking about, Jon Collins?
- Jon: Is Jesus God? That's how you posed it when we first had this conversation hours ago. Saying that Jesus is God is confusing. And I think you said something like not helpful.

Is Jesus God?

Tim: Yeah. Given our current cultural situation, I don't think it is a clear way to communicate what the apostles want us to understand about Jesus.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: And the word "Jesus is God" never appears in the New Testament anywhere. What does appear many times is "Jesus is Lord."

Jon: Which is a transliteration of?

Tim: Yeah, we'll talk about it. It's their way of saying "what we wish Jesus is God would mean to people." I think for most people, what they are trying to say with the sentence "Jesus is God" is what the apostles are saying by the phrase "Jesus is Lord."

Jon: Okay. So we're going to talk about Jesus as God - God revealed in Jesus.

Tim: The God revealed in Jesus who surprise turns out to be complex. A complex unity.

Jon: Which that phrase will sound familiar if you've been listening. And if you haven't, I recommend going back.

Tim: We're going to dive into New Testament stories about Jesus and passages in Paul and John, that for me just has so many more layers of significance now than they did many years ago before I started learning about any of this.

Jon: Yeah, cool.

Tim: So let's start with what I call just the facts on the ground. There's just the fact, and you don't have to be a religious person, a Christian to acknowledge this fact. The fact is that all of a sudden out of Second Temple Jewish culture living in the land of Israeli-Palestinian in the first century, there emerged a movement, a vibrant, energetic movement that started out of Jerusalem connected to the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

This movement made incredibly exalted claims about Jesus, and those claims generated tension within... These are all Jewish people at first, and the way they talked about Jesus, it both fit within Jewish culture, it was recognizable as a Jewish messianic movement, but it also generated tension. And the way that these early followers of Jesus talked about Jesus, it fit within Jewish categories, but also was without precedent.

And the things like this, the early Christians, if you to read the literature, whether it's in the New Testament and the literature, after the New Testament, you can find worship songs and hymns sung to Jesus the Messiah and about Jesus the Messiah. So that's true, no other religious figure in Jewish history except Yahweh the God of Israel. You sing songs of worship to Yahweh.

Is Jesus God?

Jon: Not to Moses, not to David.

Tim: You can sing songs that maybe talk about how Yahweh raised up David in Psalm 78. David's exaltation as king is the culmination in many poems, but to create full on hymns and praise songs sung to Jesus and about him. And many of them are preserved within the New Testament itself. So that's interesting.

What you see reflected in the earliest Christian writings are people praying to Jesus and to God, like alongside. Or Paul will write letters. "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus the Messiah." Whereas 100 years earlier, you would say, "May God's grace be with you." It's a very Jewish thing to say. And now you have Jewish people saying, "May God's grace and the grace of Jesus be with you." As if they're just—

Jon: There's new edition.

Tim: You get things like the Passover meal all of a sudden becomes in these communities...

Jon: ...a celebration of Jesus.

Tim: Yeah, a Jesus meal. People start using the name of Jesus in prayers and blessings. So all over the Hebrew Bible, "May you be blessed by Yahweh. May Yahweh's name be with you." But now you can pray in the name of Jesus in these communities.

Here's one that never stuck out to me until someone pointed it out. Twenty years after Jesus of Nazareth, you have Paul the Apostle and he's all over the ancient Mediterranean world, and he can write a letter was in 20 years to the non-Jewish followers of Jesus in Corinth in 1 Corinthians. He says at the end of the letter, he uses an Aramaic phrase, "maranâ thâ'" - Maranatha is how English speakers butcher it - and just assumed that these people know what it means.

He's writing in Greek to people who don't know Hebrew or Aramaic. But he can just throw out an Aramaic phrase "maranâ thâ'," which means "our Lord come." So what that assumes is within two decades, Aramaic phrases have become normalized in this religious movement so that even new converts who don't speak the language of the first generation back in Israel-Palestine are adopting phrases that aren't their own. Like an English, "baptism" or "Eucharist" are good examples. They are Greek words that we've used.

The phrase means, "Oh, Lord, come." So it's a phrase address to Jesus asking him to come as if he's the Lord. Which again, that sounds normal. That's normal Christian vocabulary now. But try and imagine a day where that was a brand new thing to say. So these are the facts on the ground.

Jon: Well, Jewish people would have said it.

Is Jesus God?

Tim: They would have said it about Yahweh. May Yahweh's justice come. May Yahweh...that kind of thing. But now they are saying it about Paul.

Jon: But now Paul says to the Corinth, "Maranatha." Maranâ thâ'.

Tim: Maranâ thâ'.

Jon: So you're saying the significance of that is one, that they know Aramaic phrases, but more specifically, that they know an Aramaic phrase that is taking what Jewish people would say about God, but now applying it to Jesus?

Tim: And now they're saying about Jesus, yeah.

Jon: Okay. So nobody can dispute these things. You can say, "Yeah, the early Christians believed and said all this and they made it up," but you have to provide an explanation one way or another. How do you explain the rise of an extremely vibrant, enthusiastic movement that is what Christianity became in human history? How do you explain it? There's no precedent for a Jewish group coming around...

Jon: There's no other Jews group that came around a person like this?

Tim: ...that ever did this constellation of things. Because these are the things that essentially equate in Jewish culture to treating someone as if they are Yahweh. All of these practices were reserved for Jews just for Yahweh alone.

Jon: Worshiping, saying prayers, anticipating the coming back of, that in particular is a very Jewish thing for God to come, and now they're using it for Jesus.

Tim: Yeah. So there's a New Testament scholar, his name is Larry Hurtado, I mentioned him earlier, he's been the one really pushing this thesis forward. That you can't just look at the New Testament and the theological claims that they make, that the apostles make about Jesus; you also need to look at what he calls the devotional life of these communities.

So Paul can make an argument about who Jesus is, but when you look at the actual daily habits and lives of these communities, those also tell us something.

Jon: Yeah, the actions are saying something.

Tim: Yes. And you can disagree with Paul or think that maybe he didn't actually think Jesus was God, because, look, you know, maybe you could explain his words this way or that way. But once you look at their behavior of the early followers of Jesus in his line up, you just go, "Oh, my God."

Jon: There's no other explanation.

Is Jesus God?

Tim: No one ever did this for Moses. There's no Moses cult or like a Melchizedek. I mean, people said all exalted things about Moses or Melchizedek or Michael the archangel, but there was no... people didn't worship the archangels in the temple.

Jon: And pray in his name and that kind of thing.

Tim: No, no. So, again, in a Jewish setting, these things speak loud and clear about who they believe Jesus to be. So, if these are the facts on the ground, the question is, can we look to the new testament to help us understand what gave rise to this movement? It's a different way to kind of come up the question.

Jon: Right, okay. So instead of like, "Let's try to prove through the verses what they believe, we observe what they believe by their actions, now, let's try to figure out how they came to that belief."

Tim: Yes. I found over time, the debates about Jesus deity tend to be emotionally charged for people. At least for many people. And so, what I found refreshing about Larry Hurtado's work is he is himself a committed Christian but he really is trying to come out of it as a historian, and just what kinds of beliefs would give rise to this kind of behavior that is so abnormal and without precedent in the Jewish tradition. When you ask it that way, it helps you to see new things that you maybe wouldn't have noticed before.

[00:12:49]

Tim: Another fact on the ground that requires a little bit of more Old Testament nerdiness. We talked about Daniel 7 a lot already.

Jon: Son of Man

Tim: So here's something. This is a good trivia. The apostles and Jesus really had a high view of the Hebrew Scriptures or the Greek scriptures - The Septuagint. What is the most quoted and alluded to most often mentioned text from the Jewish scriptures that you find in the New Testament writing?

Jon: Oh. Well, isn't the most quoted verse in the Bible of itself the Exodus verse, "God is just and—

Tim: Oh, yeah, yeah.

Jon: What's the verse?

Tim: Exodus 34:6. Yahweh is gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in covenant love. So yeah, within the Old Testament—

Jon: That's the most quoted.

Tim: In the Old Testaments use of the Old Testament, that's the most quoted.

Is Jesus God?

Jon: But the New Testaments use Old Testament.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: What is it?

Tim: It Psalm 110:1.

Jon: Oh, it's a verse? It's one verse.

Tim: It's a sentence from Psalms. The opening sentence of Psalm 110. In fact, it was so important that it's made its way into all of the historic creeds of the church. It's the statement of Jesus sitting at the right hand of the Father. Sitting at the right hand. Where did that come from?

Jon: So whenever they say, "Jesus sat at the right hand or sits at the right hand," they're quoting Psalm 110?

Tim: Psalm 110, yeah. Psalm 110 is a psalm connected to David, and it opens in the mouth of David saying, "Yahweh said to my Lord." It opens like a little narrative. A poem in David's mouth. So imagine David speaking and he's telling you, the reader of the poem about something that happened. He's telling you an old story. "You know, one day I heard Yahweh my God say to my Lord."

Jon: Who is the Lord?

Tim: Yes, it's the first thing that strikes you.

Jon: And this isn't Lord meaning Yahweh, this is Lord—

[crosstalk 00:15:07]

Tim: Master.

Jon: Master. David is saying he has a master that Yahweh was talking to him.

Tim: David says, "Yahweh said to my master." And then, "Here's what Yahweh said to my master, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet." End of quote from Yahweh. And then the poet goes on. "The Lord will stretch forth your strong scepter from Zion saying, 'rule in the midst of your enemies.'"

Jon: And that second Lord, is that Yahweh?

Tim: It is.

Jon: Okay. So Yahweh says to my master, "Sit at my right hand till I make your enemies a footstool for your feet. Then Yahweh will stretch forth your strong scepter." Referring to the master?

Is Jesus God?

- Tim: Yeah. In the first sentence, he's reporting to me the reader of the poem what Yahweh said to his master. "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool." Then the poet addresses the master. David addresses his master saying, "May Yahweh stretch your scepter from Zion saying, 'rule in the midst of your enemies.'"
- Jon: By the way, sitting at the right hand of a king, this is important, right?
- Tim: Okay.
- Jon: Is this where we get the phrase "right-hand man"?
- Tim: Oh, yeah, I think so. To be at someone's right hand is the equivalent of being their like number one go-to. I think that's a good English - still a good English phrase. So one, David's acknowledging that he has some greater authority that's other than Yahweh, and that —
- Jon: Wait. He's King.
- Tim: He's the king.
- Jon: There's no one above him in Jerusalem.
- Tim: Search high and low in the David story.
- Jon: Who would he be calling his master?
- Tim: Correct. That's interesting.
- Jon: That's really interesting.
- Tim: The other thing is that this one who's above him is invited to rule the world on Yahweh's behalf sitting right next to Yahweh. So, what other biblical passage in the Hebrew Bible is there where God as King is described as having a seat next to him? There's only one.
- Jon: In Daniel 7 throne?
- Tim: Daniel 7. Do you remember that little detail that when his vision of final justice brought on—
- Jon: Yeah, we never closed the loop on that. There was thrones.
- Tim: Thrones. Plural. And the Son of Man was brought up on the clouds into the divine presence and given God's rule. Here's what you find.
- Jon: So you think Daniel 7 was just talking about two thrones?
- Tim: More than one throne.

Is Jesus God?

- Jon: More than one throne. It was funny as when we were in Daniel 7 and it said thrones, I just pictured a whole like—
- Tim: A ton of them?
- Jon: Like a big group.
- Tim: A bunch.
- Jon: Like a circle of like...You know, a dozen thrones for some reason. But who knows? It's thrones.
- Tim: It's just more than one.
- Jon: More than one.
- Tim: So here's what you see throughout the New Testament. And we'll come across it. We're going to look at some passages in the Gospels and in Paul's writings and in the gospel and letters of John, and you'll see this pattern right across is that the apostles and Jesus Himself hyperlinked Psalm 110 and Daniel 7 to make a claim about Jesus. That Jesus is the master referred to here, in Psalm 110, and that he is the Son of Man.
- Jon: Let me try to remember Daniel 7.
- Tim: Okay, yeah. That's right.
- Jon: So, Daniel's having a vision of all the crazy beasts, and then there's the super beast that is like an amalgamation of all the beasts. And then he sees the skies open or he sees a bunch of thrones in the sky.
- Tim: Yeah. The beast has been trampling, killing people.
- Jon: The beast is trampling the saints?
- Tim: Yeah. It's a symbol of human empires at their worst.
- Jon: And the innocent blood being shed. Then the skies open and he sees thrones. I was picturing a bunch but more than one throne. Sitting on the throne is Yahweh, the Ancient of Days. He calls him the Ancient of Days. And then—
- Tim: And rides on a God mobile.
- Jon: Oh yeah, it's on the chariot throne.
- Tim: Totally.
- Jon: That's crazy. And there's another thrown - at least one more throne. Then we see this other character called the Son of Man rising up on the clouds.

Is Jesus God?

- Tim: After the beast has been judged—
- Jon: Oh, that's right. First, he judges the super beast. "You're done, you're out of here." He throws them in the fiery lake. Is it a lake?
- Tim: A river.
- Jon: Oh, the river of fire.
- Tim: Well, it seems like what John did is do a logical conclusion. If there's a river fire pouring out from before the throne, it collects into a lake. So you get the lake of fire.
- Jon: John the visionary throws a bunch in because he's riffing off of Daniel 7. Making you think again of like even Eden of like the rivers coming from the mountain of God.
- Tim: Out of the divine presence.
- Jon: Cool. Then Son of Man riding in the clouds. And you made the point of saying, "The only other time the Hebrew Bible talks about a crowd rider, is always referring to Yahweh in reference to him being in control over creation. But all of a sudden, it's a man—
- Tim: A human.
- Jon: A human who is riding the cloud and he's riding it up to the throne. And then God gives them the authority to rule and he says that His kingdom will be an eternal kingdom, and people will worship Him forever.
- Tim: Yes, yes. So what I'm saying is, now, another fact on the ground alongside all that other stuff about what the early Christians did and said about Jesus, this poem, Psalm 110 got connected together.
- Jon: So the early Christians said, "Oh, wait a second. We got the Daniel 7 crazy thing, Son of Man, Jesus calls himself up Son of Man, that was Jesus being elevated. But then we also have the Psalm 110 where King David is referring to his Lord who's not Yahweh, who God gives a seat next to him. Oh, this is obviously talking about the same thing." So they put these two ideas together and then the shorthand way of them talking about both of them is to say Jesus sat at the right hand of God.
- Tim: That's right. Jesus rules, sat at the right hand of God over all things, which is a Jewish first century way of saying Jesus is Lord.
- Jon: Jesus is Lord.
- Tim: Jesus is Lord.
- Jon: The master.
- Tim: We'll get there.

Is Jesus God?

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Jesus is Lord, which is the equivalent of what modern Westerners want to mean when they say the sentence "Jesus is God." But I think saying "Jesus is Lord" is actually more faithful to what the apostles were trying to get across.

Jon: Well, we'll have to get into the difference of that, what you mean.

Tim: Okay. So there you go. Facts on the ground, Jesus is treated like Yahweh, like Jews treat Yahweh and they use these handful of biblical passages in a unique way. Why and how did this happen?

[00:22:59]

Tim: All right, let's go to the accounts of Jesus. So just pointing out what people point out in the stories about Jesus in the gospels. First of all - I already mentioned it. We've talked about it before - there's a really robust Jewish hope based on the Hebrew Scriptures that Yahweh himself would come to visit, rescue his people from violent oppressors that had been ruling them since Babylon, and that Yahweh himself would come and do it. It's expressed in many passages.

Jon: Yeah, in the God's kingdom.

Tim: Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zachariah, the Psalms. So consider the Gospel according to Mark. The opening sentences of the Gospel according to Mark, the first sentence is "the beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God." Oh, this is going to be a story about Jesus making a claim that he's the Messianic King, royal Son of David.

Jon: Yeah. Which doesn't mean he's Yahweh. It just means he is the hoped-for king to bring deliverance.

Tim: That's right. Up to this point, the meaning of the Messianic King was he's going to be a—

Jon: And Son of God was a common term for someone in the line of David?

Tim: Kings from the line of David.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: But then what happens next is the story actually doesn't begin. He pauses and he just copies and pastes a long block quote from the Hebrew prophets. "Like it's written about in Isaiah the prophet: 'Behold, I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness:' Here's what the voice cries. "Make ready the way for the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

Is Jesus God?

So even though he said he's quoting from Isaiah, he's actually quoting from two different Hebrew prophets. He's selling them together. So he's quoting from the Prophet Malachi and the prophet Isaiah. So a couple things here. First of all, the word "Lord" is really important.

Jon: Make ready the way of the Lord.

Tim: Yes, the way the Lord. So this is a document written in Greek. The quotations from the Old Testament are all rendered into the Greek and most of them using the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. Jon Collins, you studied Greek?

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: You know the Greek word for "Lord" and all this?

Jon: Kurios.

Tim: Oh, you know, there's different pronunciation traditions. I always say kurios.

Jon: Kurios.

Tim: But I think they're probably some people that say kurios. So it's the word for "master" or "Lord." Remember, the divine name stuff? By the time Septuagint translators are translating the Bible Jews have already stopped saying the divine name.

Jon: Yahweh.

Tim: Yahweh.

Jon: They won't say it. In fact, they won't even write it. Instead, they write Adonai which means Lord.

Tim: They'll say it, they'll leave the four letters in divine name in Hebrew texts. But when they translated it into other languages, they wrote the equivalent of the divine name, the swap in word, which was Lord or master. In Greek, Lord or master is kurios.

So it creates this interesting dynamic where when you read kurios from an old testament quotation, but in the New Testament, nine times out of ten it's standing for to the actual divine name, Yahweh in its Old Testament source. And this is one of them. So, what Mark's telling us is, "Hey, the story you're about to read about Jesus is the fulfillment of these two characters hoped for in the prophets. It's coming messenger who would prepare your way, O kurios, O Lord." And then he goes on to tell you a story about a messenger who showed up.

And so, if you map it right onto the Old Testament quotation, so John.

Jon: John's the messenger. Then who's the Lord?

Is Jesus God?

Tim: And then Jesus shows up the next character in the story which means he fits the slot of kurios.

Jon: The divine name.

Tim: So within a plain face value reading of the first page of the earliest gospel according to Mark, the first of the four to be written you have a clear narrative argument for Jesus' identity.

Jon: He didn't come out right and say, "Jesus is Yahweh but..."

Tim: But virtually.

Jon: Basically.

Tim: Basically, the equivalent would be to say, "Just...what would be an equivalent? Like quoting a super well-known storyline and then telling a story about your friends or your friends—

Jon: It stands in.

Tim: Stand in for the different character. So at "Washington Crossing the Delaware" and then it would be "Jon Collins, I was having a hard day but then John crossed the Willamette to deliver me a cup of coffee or something." That's a stupid example. The Willamette is the river that divides Portland east and west.

Jon: Well and what's interesting is it's not just a story. This was a prophetic hope.

Tim: For something that would happen.

Jon: That would happen. So I'm trying to think of an example of something that we're expecting to happen and then for us to go, "Oh, this guy." A lot of antichrist stuff happens in predictions but that's not helpful. I mean, but it's very intuitive. Like you're taking a prediction from the Old Testament - a prophecy - saying, "God's going to come and here's how they're talking about it prophetically. That a messenger will come ahead, prepare the way for Yahweh himself to come."

And then Mark says, "Hey, I want to tell you a story about Jesus, who's the Messiah, and it was all written about by the prophets, and there was a messenger and then preparing for Yahweh himself to come. And then he tells a story about John the Baptist as a messenger." And then the question is, okay, well, then where's Yahweh?"

Tim: Yeah, Yahweh's going to show up.

Jon: Yahweh's going to show up. And then who shows up? It's Jesus.

Tim: Yeah, in the narrative, Jesus of Nazareth. There you go. What modern Westerners typically want for the apostles is to just say it. Just say what you think about Jesus.

Is Jesus God?

And they don't say it the way we wish they would say it. That's why you don't find the sentence "Jesus is God" in the New Testament.

Jon: Or "Jesus is Yahweh."

Tim: What you get is "Jesus is Lord" and narratives like this, that so clearly are putting Jesus in the slot of Yahweh arriving personally.

Jon: As a Jewish person, reading Mark 1, you would go, "I see what you're doing and this is scandalous."

Tim: Well, or it's more than I could have hoped for. Because if you're reading the Gospel of Mark, you're part of a church community and you've already been told the story about Jesus.

Jon: That's true if you're already stoked on Jesus. But if you're not—

Tim: These are evange—

Jon: They are not evangelist...

Tim: They're called the gospels, but they weren't a means of evangelism. The church itself as a living community of people was the means of spreading the good news.

Jon: These are records for the Jewish.

Tim: Yeah, these were written for communities to foster and learn the story of Jesus that you've already heard orally taught. So that's how Jesus is introduced. Then this is what happens. Jesus is baptized. Here's the story. It's in Mark 1 starting in verse 9. "In those days, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee. He was baptized by John in the Jordan. Immediately coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens open." Very similar prophetic vision. Just like Daniel.

Jon: From Daniel 7. Skies are opening.

Tim: It is, yeah, a common phrase. And what does he see when the divine command room's curtain's peeled back and see what's really happening. And so what does he see?

Jon: Behind the scenes.

Tim: He sees the Spirit descending on him in a bird-like form. And then here's a heavenly voice saying what? "You are my beloved Son, in you I'm well pleased." So there's a universe happening. And we've unpacked some of this before in the Spirit stuff.

Jon: Oh, the Spirit stuff, yeah.

Tim: The Spirit in the water.

Is Jesus God?

Jon: Yeah, the Spirit hovering. The word "hovering" in Genesis 1 - Was it 1:2? - is the word used of birds flying. So the Spirit has this kind of bird-like quality already and it's connected to creation. Here is the Spirit of God like a bird descending on Jesus. What else is significant about that?

Tim: The words that the voice says to the Son, which is to quote from three different Old Testament passages. "You are my Son" is copied and pasted from the opening words of Psalm 2, which is what God says about his Messiah. "The beloved son" is the phrase used to describe Isaac in the story of Abraham and Isaac. "Take your Son, your beloved Son." And then, "in you I am well pleased" is copied and pasted from Isaiah 42, which is the poem that introduces the servant who will go on to suffer and die for the sins of his people. And this is coming from a heavenly voice.

Notice that the depiction of God here it's very similar to the depiction of God in the opening sentence of Genesis.

Jon: The Spirit was hovering and there was a voice.

Tim: You have a very clear God figure in the heavens, speaking from the heavenly throne room. You have the personal presence of God being communicated in a bird-like form of the invisible presence of the Spirit. And then the heavenly voice speaks a word. Here, it speaks a word to someone called the Son.

So it's clear in one sense, Mark is already...There's an event being recounted, but it's being recounted by the vantage point of the apostles after decades of reflection on all of this. And notice, he presents God as one in three. So this is a story about how Yahweh is coming to be with his people.

Jon: This is Yahweh appearing.

Tim: Here's Yahweh showing up just like Isaiah 40 said. And it's Jesus being addressed by the one enthroned in heaven saying, "I love you," and that love is communicated through and by means of the Spirit.

So there's two layers. One is something remarkable happen. Every one of the Gospel accounts retells this moment as a key turning point in the life and vocation of Jesus. So there's something happened in history, and all four of the Gospel accounts represent it as a revelation of the one and more than one Yahweh.

It's significant because we already have shelf space for this from the Hebrew Scriptures. That's what we've been talking about for so long. And then right out of the gate, all four the accounts of Jesus just tap into that portrait of the complex unity of God's identity. But they just stick Jesus right in the thick of it. It's the heavenly enthroned one speaking to the Son by means of the Spirit.

Is Jesus God?

Jon: By means of the Spirit. I mean, he's speaking words just himself and then the Spirit is there.

Tim: Yeah, that's right. but we have to think about the heavenly voice is saying, "I love you," and essentially communicating "You are the one that I have appointed as Messiah and Lord to rule and do the suffering servant stuff."

Both in the story of David who's kind of the first anointed missing messianic ruler and in the story in Isaiah of the servant, both of them are empowered and by the Spirit. So it's the Spirit who carries the energy and love from Yahweh to the Son. The point is, this is a portrait about God that the apostles reflected on. We're getting decades of reflection as they represent this event.

Jon: And this is how they rendered it.

Tim: And all of this is in response to the opening lines of Mark. This is what it looks like when Yahweh—

Jon: When Yahweh arrives.

Tim: When Yahweh arrives.

Jon: Yahweh himself arrives.

Tim: The Father is speaking to the Son.

Jon: So it's not so simple as saying, "When Yahweh arrives, here's Jesus." When Yahweh arrives, it's Jesus being spoken to by the one enthroned in heaven and the Spirit of God. That's Yahweh arriving. All three.

Tim: Yes. So notice that it has a three-part shape.

[00:37:17]

So from here in Mark, just to keep with Mark, Jesus starts walking around doing...I call it Yahweh stuff.

Jon: Stuff attributed to Yahweh.

Tim: Yeah, stuff that's Yahweh's prerogative in the Hebrew Scriptures, but Jesus does it. The most famous example because it's registered in the story itself that this is what's happening, that Jesus would walk around pronouncing that people were forgiven of their sins. In English, it doesn't faze us as much.

Jon: Tim, I forgive you for stepping on my foot.

Tim: But in that case, that's legitimate because if I wronged you, then you can forgive me for you. But that's not what Jesus is doing. He's going around saying that people just

Is Jesus God?

are forgiven, not because they wronged him. You now live in a state of being forgiven by God. Oh, really?

Jon: Well, that's something that priests do.

Tim: That's right. I think that's why we have categories for it now in the Christian tradition of someone else mediating God's forgiveness.

Jon: That didn't happen in Jewish culture?

Tim: Oh, it did. It did. And it happened in one place.

Jon: At the temple.

Tim: At the temple.

Jon: Did Jesus walk around outside the temple doing temple stuff?

Tim: That's right. It would be like someone walking around - we thought of analogies like this before - just saying like, "Hey, I'm the president." Or like I'm walking around to a college campus. This is a good one. Walking around a college campus saying, "Whoever has debt, come to me."

Jon: "I'll pay up the tuition. Don't worry about it, your debts are cleared. And here's your degree."

Tim: "Here's your degree." That's right.

Jon: "Go and be well."

Tim: Yeah, that's right. And then, like, the school administrators will come out and be like —

Jon: "This guy is not appraised to do that."

Tim: "Who authorized you to pass out degrees?"

Jon: "We have a system."

Tim: Yeah. "We've got protocol and the system for this whole deal for people to gain official forgiveness." And he goes around—

Jon: Official forgiveness in the temple.

Tim: That's it. So, for example, when Jesus says to the paralyzed man, "Little boy, little child, your sins are forgiven," it doesn't say, "I forgive your sins." They are forgiven. And some of the religious Bible nerds, scribes sitting there and they get it immediately and they say, "Why does he speak this way? He's blaspheming, which means he is offending the honor and reputation of God. Who can forgive sins, but the one God?" Literally, they say "The one God." They use the Shema. "We have one

Is Jesus God?

God and He forgives sins. What's happening." It's a narrative argument for Jesus's identity.

Jon: Jesus doing Yahweh stuff.

Tim: Jesus doing Yahweh stuff. So the one on the throne calls Jesus "My Son." Jesus and all of his teachings, you go right through all the parables—

Jon: Well, let's stop there for a second.

Tim: Okay, all right.

Jon: So the voice from heaven is saying, "You're my Son." What's that quoting from? Psalm 2?

Tim: It's quoting from three texts in the Old Testament.

Jon: The Son part.

Tim: Oh, "You are my Son" is Psalm 2.

Jon: Okay. And that's referring to a messianic King?

Tim: Yeah. The one that God has appointed to bring justice over the rebellious nations. Psalm 2.

Jon: So God saying, "You're my Son," he isn't saying, "I birthed you. I parented you."

Tim: Yes, yes, yes. Thank you.

Jon: He's just saying, "You are the one who will inherit this divine line of kings and then rescue Israel."

Tim: Yes. Thank you. Yeah, actually, thank you. When son language is introduced in the Old Testament, it's not that Yahweh gave birth to David. It's about someone being appointed to the unique one and only place of the status of the firstborn son. In other words, in Psalm 2, God isn't saying to David, "I gave birth to you." It's "I'm granting you the status that a son gets as the firstborn."

Jon: Let's talk about that. What does that mean, the status of firstborn?

Tim: Oh, it had to do with a majority of the inheritance and then the one who represents the father's authority in his place.

Jon: So it's a bunch of kids, who's in charge after the father. It's the firstborn son.

Tim: Yeah, as dad gets older, who runs a family business? Firstborn who gets the majority of the state when dad passes away.

Is Jesus God?

- Jon: Okay. So then, as it relates to God and His people, it's like who gets to stand in for God and rule over us?
- Tim: Yeah.
- Jon: That's the Son of God.
- Tim: In that language, just inherently doesn't necessarily mean this figure is divine. It means that they hold the status of a special representative. However, when the apostles apply it to Jesus in light of all this other stuff, that category Son of God—
- Jon: It gets packed with everything else.
- Tim: Again, it's a shelf space that existed from Old Testament, but once Jesus gets put on the shelf,...
- Jon: It becomes a divine title.
- Tim: ...it exceeds; it explodes the ceiling.
- Jon: In my interactions with that title, it's always been divine to me. There's never been a moment in time where that just meant someone who was like a king. That always meant Jesus was—
- Tim: That's right. And that's how the apostles use the title. But they use it because they've developed its meaning in a new direction based on their whole set of convictions about Jesus. Again, the Gospels, they're telling us events that happened as the foundation of the Christian movement, but the accounts have been shaped by people who have had decades to reflect on these things. And so, the language is loaded with that reflection. That's right.
- Jon: Cool.
- Tim: Here's another layer to this Son language. In the baptism is just the one speaking from heaven from the divine throne room. In Jesus's teachings, the sayings of Jesus, teachings, parables, the most common title that he used is to call the one on the throne is Father. My Father.
- Jon: When he's referring to the voice from heaven, the one enthroned in the skies?
- Tim: That's right. He will sometimes say, God, he will most often say, "Father" or "my Father."
- Jon: Which is just a unique thing to Jesus
- Tim: Well, it's interesting. The phrase or the idea of God as Father, I forget the total count. It's like 10 times or so in the Old Testament. So it's there. It's not a dominant way

Is Jesus God?

that God's referred to. It's the proportion that makes Jesus stand out. He uniquely referred to the God of Israel as his Father.

Jon: There was no other Jewish sect that was their preferred way of talking about God?

Tim: That's right. This is the unique marker of Jesus, his teaching and then of the Jesus movement. And so there's Father language everywhere. You see it in the baptism. You see it in Jesus' teachings. You see it in the Lord's Prayer where Jesus invited other people to relationship to the Father that he had, which is why we pray "Our Father" instead of "Jesus' Father." I pray to my Father because he's also Jesus' Father.

Jon: Now, is this significant? Because it seems like as we've talked about the complex nature of Yahweh, it's always in context of how Yahweh is interacting with someone. That's where we kind of see a part of his identity.

So we have this kind of abstract sense of Yahweh himself, but that is still the transcendent Yahweh we don't have access to. When we access him, it's the angel of the Lord or it's the Word of God, or it's the glory of God, or it's all these things. And so, how does Father fit into that?

In my mind, it seems to mean that the way Jesus interacts with Yahweh is through the identity of Father. That's almost like another way Yahweh is made known. Is that right or is it just a stand-in for Yahweh?

Tim: Well, for the gospel authors, Yahweh is the whole package. He's the Father and Jesus.

Jon: So it wasn't just a swap for Yahweh?

Tim: Yeah. The whole claim of chapter 1 of Mark is Yahweh showed up. What does it look like? The heavenly voice speaking to Jesus by means of the Spirit. That's Yahweh by the logic of Mark 1. Here, I think what we see is Jesus' relationship to the one he called God, His dominant image and Word was my Father. And you go through Jesus's teachings about "my Father" and he lived from a place of deep, deep conviction that in his essence, the Father was gracious, extremely generous, merciful, compassionate, and he allowed that to determine his identity.

That's what's going on the baptism. Jesus' identity, fundamentally, is as one who is eternally loved. The internally loved one. And is before Jesus has lifted a finger as like to do anything. So Jesus' whole ministry of announcing of the kingdom flows out of his identity as the beloved one of the Father. And so when he talks about the Father, it's always just this very intimate, precious language. There you go. And that's going to become really, really important as we get into Paul letters and gospel and letters of John because they both are carrying on the conviction from Jesus, that it's

Is Jesus God?

that love between the Father and the Son that followers of Jesus are invited to experience.

Jon: So let me ask this way. In the Old Testament, in Hebrew Scriptures, there's categories that help us understand Jesus being Yahweh.

Tim: You mean the ones that we worked through.

Jon: Yeah. So Jesus being exalted to the right hand of God, the Son of Man character, the Word of God character, all these characters, there's like, "Okay, this is a manifestation of Yahweh." Or what would be the word you would use?

Tim: Attribute. Isn't that what we were using? The glory, the wisdom.

Jon: Personified attributes. But then also the Son of Man character.

Tim: Oh, yes.

Jon: Anyways, there's shelves already and you go, "Okay, we'll put Jesus on that shelf." And then the Spirit, that's there. But is Father there in the Hebrews scriptures?

Tim: I see. In the Old Testament, "father" is a metaphor to describe Israel's experience of God's mercy and generous love. So the first time it's used is in the introduction to the Exodus story where God says to Pharaoh, "You've enslaved my son, let my son go."

Jon: He's referring to Israel.

Tim: He's talking to the people of Israel as a whole. It's the first time the concept of Yahweh as Father, Israel as the son. So in the Old Testament, Israel's the beloved Son. And then when they come to have a king, they are represented by the king who is the metaphorical and literal Son in terms of he's born into the line of David literally, which makes him a metaphorical Son of God, and represents the covenant people. And so, he has the status of a firstborn son.

Jon: So do we need to develop that shelf too in the video?

Tim: It's not a personified attribute, it's just an image that the biblical authors use—

Jon: Yeah, but Son of Man is not a personified attribute, and angel of Yahweh is not either. And that helps know help create shelves.

Tim: I see. Yeah, I suppose. But passages where God's called Father it's alongside other descriptions like "you keep your promises forever," "you are Father." Like Isaiah where Yahweh is called Father. And then that famous metaphor: We are the clay you are the potter. So God's called Father and Potter in the same couple of lines. And they're metaphors.

Is Jesus God?

Jon: Okay, maybe that's a helpful way to try to unpack this for me. The Trinity, the identity of God in three parts seems very sacred. It's not kind of like, "Oh, let's just choose the word Father." It's like, "These are very distinct, important personhoods all uniting." And so why Father?

Tim: I see.

Jon: If Jesus' preferable way was to call God the potter for some reason, and he told us to pray, "Oh, Potter in heaven," would now the Trinity be Potter, Son, and Holy Spirit?

Tim: I understand. Got it. Well, I guess here's what I say. I don't think you can just draw a neat line from the Old Testament to the trinity of Father. It seems to me from what I understand the Christian tradition has received this three-part identity, Father, Son, and Spirit, and that Father is grounded in Jesus' own choice of that word.

Jon: It seems like that's where I was thinking, "If all of this identity conversation is around how God interacts, then, really, we're talking about, well, how did God interact with Jesus?"

Tim: Yeah, that's right.

Jon: And it wasn't something that we ever really had access to. There's no other characters in the Hebrew Scriptures who are having the same sort of experience that Jesus had except for...you said Israel.

Tim: Yeah. I mean, Israel's called the firstborn son, and occasionally there are poets that call Yahweh Father. Okay, but the way that Jesus is the Son and what that means, and the way that he addressed God as his Father is unique. It's unique.

Jon: Well, you use the phrase of exploding categories. So is it a category that's exploded or is it a brand new category?

Tim: I think so. In other words, it doesn't just seem to have been a handy metaphor for Jesus. It's that he experienced God in some fundamental way as the loving, generous Father.

Jon: And then he wanted us to experience God that way too.

Tim: Correct, yeah. And it's Father the one who generates life. I mean, you need to-

Jon: Like a biological father?

Tim: Yeah, totally. You need two humans to do that - a male and female. So there's something fundamental about that. So there you go. For Jesus, this was a special and important term because he used it in a fundamental way to describe his experience of my Father.

Is Jesus God?

Jon: And is it just by the nature of him using it now that's one of God's three important personhoods?

Tim: I mean, that's the reason why it's not Yahweh the Son and the Spirit or why you don't say God, the Son, the Spirit.

Jon: Because Yahweh is the Father, Son, and the Spirit.

Tim: Yeah. And once we get farther on into how John and Paul reflect on this, it's because for them God is this eternal community of life-giving others centered intimate love between the Father and the Son communicated by the Spirit.

As the conversation goes on, we're going to continue to have these moments where, what are we talking about? We're going to lack language. And I actually think the apostles themselves came to that moment quite often, because what they will use is scriptural imagery or they'll simply just use the language of Jesus himself to describe things that are talking about ultimate reality - the nature of the universe, and its center, and the being regenerated.

And that's so other, that in a way I think that Jesus uses such a familiar term that doesn't have positive meaning for everybody - the word Father. But the way Jesus experienced and define that word allows us to both critique our own fathers and allow it to be its own category.

Jon: Thanks for listening to this episode of The Bible Project podcast. If you've been following this conversation about God, I've got good news. Our video on God is now up on our YouTube channel and on our website. It's called God. It's our most ambitious video to date. I think it came together really wonderfully. It's got really cool motion graphics, and we tackle the complex identity of God in a way that really ties everything together nicely. You can find the link to that video in the show notes.

This show was edited and produced by Dan Gummel, music by Tae the Producer and the music by the band Tents. We're nonprofit in Portland, Oregon, and make all sorts of resources, videos, study notes. This podcast, it's all free because of the generous support of people like you chipping in to make it happen. So thanks for being a part of this with us.

Man: We believe the Bible is a unified story that leads to Jesus. We are a crowdfunded project by people like me. Find free video, study notes and more at the bibleproject.com.