

The Doctrine of the Trinity: Where We Are So Far March 7, 2021

I am in the middle of a very long thread dealing with the question of where the doctrine of the Trinity came from. I started the thread on January 7, here: <https://ehrmanblog.org/is-the-trinity-in-the-bible/>, and so have been at it for nearly two months, on and off (with a other things thrown in en route, obviously). And I have gotten nowhere near, yet, to answering the question.

So it goes in the world of complicated historical questions. (It is obviously a theological question, but I'm answering it historically rather than theologically). We are at a point where it would be a good time to explain where we are, why we have come this way, and where we are going. I need to begin by explaining why I have spent SO much time on the question of what it meant for early Christians to call Jesus God.

It's very simple really. Christians over time developed more and more exalted views of Jesus, from being a human messiah, to being a human sacrificed for the sins of others, to being a human made into a divine being through exaltation to heaven, to being a divine being who appeared on earth, to being given a position and authority equal to the one God of all, to being the creator of the universe, to ... well we are soon going to see to WHAT. It's as high as it can possibly go.

This Christological progression was not strictly linear. It was not that at one moment all Christians thought one thing, then they started thinking something else, then they started thinking yet something else. It was not and still is not like that. Even today there are many, many different views of Christ, even among faithful Christians, even among Christians in the same denomination, even among Christians in the very same small community. So too in antiquity: lots of Christians with lots of different views all at the same time, with new views coming into play and lots of people preferring one view or another, especially older views instead of newer ones.

This Christological development is what eventually drove thinkers to a doctrine of the trinity. The logic is simple. Once Christians said Jesus was God, and they already knew that his Father was God, and they wanted to insist there was just One God — they had an obvious theological and logical problem on their hands. They had to explain it. The Spirit was eventually thrown into the mix, even though that was not nearly as central a component and is not actually discussed at ALL as much in our early sources, as we will see later. But the addition of the Spirit makes perfect sense, once one admits that Christ and God are both God yet there is one God. As we will see.

All that is why I've been trying to explain at such length how it is that Jesus became thought of as God. I have not finished. Not nearly. But we are at the key point for yet other serious developments to occur. Here, by way of quick summary is what we have seen so far, before I begin to build on it. If you are puzzled by any of these points, or have questions about them, simply look at the old blog posts going back to January 7. These are just the conclusions I have shown:

- The doctrine of the Trinity is not taught anywhere in the Bible, even if later theologians read it into the Bible. (As most Christians still do today.)
- It arises from the idea that both God the father and Jesus are God, and yet there is only one God.
- The key then is to understand why and how Jesus came to be thought of as God and what early Christians meant by it.
- It was not at all weird in the Greek and Roman worlds to think that a human had been born of a God and so was a demi-god, or that a God came to earth in human form, or that a mere mortal had become God. It is a well-documented phenomenon.
- And these views can (even more unexpectedly to modern readers) occur in Judaism as well.

- Jesus himself did not claim to be a divine being and his earthly followers did not see him as divine.
- The turning point occurred when they came to believe he had been raised from the dead.
- Jesus' followers did not think merely that at the resurrection Jesus' cadaver came back to life and he returned to earth; they believed, at the outset, that God had taken him (body and all) up to heaven.
- In ancient thought, anyone taken up to heaven was made divine: they live with the gods, or God, as an immortal being, no longer a mere mortal.
- Some of Jesus' followers later came to think he had not "merely" been exalted to be divine, but that he was born as a divine being (his mother was a virgin whom God impregnated).
- Some later still came to think he existed before his birth and was a divine being with God who became human.
- Some thought that at his resurrection God had actually made him *equal* with himself in power and authority
- Some thought that as a divine being before his birth he had been in the beginning with God and created the universe.
- All of these ideas appear in the New Testament.
- But you cannot arrange the New Testament writings chronologically in order to see a clear linear progression from one view to the next. Ideas – of any kind (religious, political, economic, social, etc.) — almost never are strictly linear in their appearance and acceptance.

This is where we can pick up with key, fundamental developments that occurred after the writing of the books of the New Testament. And that is where the thread is going: how views of Christ developed later, leading almost inexorably to an explanation of how Christianity could worship different beings as God and yet insist there was one God, an explanation that eventually resulted in the Doctrine of the Trinity.