

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

Module 2: The Life of Jesus STUDY AIDS

TITLE	PAGE
Between the Testaments A timeline of the period of history between the two Testaments (400-4BC) with a special focus on the family of King Herod.	2S.1
Historical Background to the Gospels Background information about the places, languages and people mentioned in the Gospels	2S.2
The Four Gospels An introduction to the four Gospels – their authors and themes	2S.3
A Harmony of the Gospels A chart reconstructing the chronological order of events in Jesus' life from the accounts in the four Gospels	2S.4
The Parables of Jesus A table sowing the parables of Jesus with Bible references and suggestions of their key message	2S.5
The Miracles of Jesus A table showing the miracles of Jesus with Bible references	2S.6
Is Jesus Jehovah God? An essay showing that the Bible teaches that Jesus is God	2S.7

Between the Testaments

The Old Testament finishes with the book of Malachi, written around 430 BC. The people of Israel were back in their own land, having been purified by the Exile, but they were still under the rule of the kings of Persia. The next prophet to be sent by God was John the Baptist (see *Part 10*). During the period between the Testaments there were several changes in the government of Judah as the power bases in the Middle East changed:

330 BC – Alexander the Great conquers the Persian Empire

The Greek-Macedonians led by Alexander the Great conquered the Persian Empire. After the death of Alexander, Judah became part of the kingdom of one of Alexander's generals, Ptolemy, who ruled from Egypt.

200 BC – The Seleucids take Judah from the Ptolemeans

The Seleucids (descendants of another of Alexander's generals whose kingdom was based in Syria) took Jerusalem and Judah. Under the Ptolemean and Seleucid kings, Judah was exposed to Greek culture, with its many gods, and many Jews accepted the Greek way of life.

168 BC – The Maccabean revolt begins

Many Jews, unhappy with Greek influence, rioted against their Seleucid rulers. At the same time a civil war began between two factions of Jews led by the High Priest Jason and his rival Menelaus. The Seleucid King Antiochus sent an army to take Jerusalem. He built a military settlement and rededicated the Temple to the Greek god Zeus in December 168. The Jews protested, but the king became even harder in his policy. He was probably influenced by Menelaus, who saw an opportunity to modernize his country and show his loyalty to the king. The usual Jewish offerings were forbidden (pigs had to be sacrificed instead), circumcision was no longer allowed, scrolls were burnt, and people who still followed the Mosaic Law were burnt alive. Many Jews revolted, led by Judas the Maccabean ('battle hammer'), who led a small army against the Seleucid army and defeated it. In **165 BC**, after several military victories against the Seleucid armies, Judas liberated Jerusalem, cleansed the temple and defeated the Seleucids.

152 BC – The independence of the Hasmonean Kingdom recognised

The Seleucid king recognised Judas's brother Jonathan as High Priest, effectively recognising the independence of Judah. The family of Judas and Jonathan became the new royal dynasty of Judah, the Hasmoneans. The Jewish people were in the land God had given them, but although they were independent they did not have God's king ruling over them, since the Hasmoneans were not descendants of King David.

63 BC – The Romans conquer Judah

The Roman general Pompey conquered Jerusalem, bringing Judah under Roman rule. Judah became the Roman province of Judea.

40 BC – Herod confirmed as king of Judea

Herod, an Idumean (descendants of Edom, the nation descended from Jacob's brother Esau) whose father had helped Julius Caesar win a battle in Egypt, was confirmed as king of Judea by Rome. At that time Judea had been overrun by the Parthians who set up a Hasmonean as a puppet king. Herod spent the next three years fighting with the Romans to confirm his position as their appointed ruler over Judea. Herod had limited power, and was effectively a puppet king under the Romans. Although he rebuilt the Temple and the walls of Jerusalem, and married a Hasmonean woman, he was only half Jewish himself. The people of God (Israel) found themselves in the land God had given them but ruled by a king who was not Jewish and under the power of Rome. They waited for the Messiah to come and restore God's Kingdom. The family of King Herod are important figures in the New Testament. After Herod's death his kingdom was divided between his sons. The table below summarises the members of Herod's family mentioned in the New Testament:

NAME	PLACE IN FAMILY	DATES OF RULE & REGION RULED	ROLE IN NEW TESTAMENT
Herod the Great	Founder of the Herodian dynasty	King of Judea, Galilee, Perea, Idumea and Samaria from 40 BC until his death in 4 BC	King at time of Jesus' birth. Killed the infants of Bethlehem for fear that the Messiah might be born there (Matthew 2:1-9; Luke 1:5).
Herod Antipas	Son of Herod the Great and a Samaritan wife	Tetrarch of Galilee and Perea from 4 BC until banished by the Roman Emperor Caligula in AD 39	King at time of Jesus' death. Had John the Baptist imprisoned and later executed (Matthew 14:1-12; Mark 6:14-29; Luke 3:1, 19&20), was confused by Jesus' ministry (Luke 9:7-9), plotted to kill Jesus (Luke 13:31-35), and was involved in the trial of Jesus (Luke 23:6-12).
Herod Agrippa I	Nephew of Herod Antipas and grandson of Herod the Great	King over most of the kingdom of Herod the Great – appointed by the Roman Emperor Caligula in AD 37, died AD 44	Persecuted the early Christians (he was highly pro-Jewish). Had the Apostle James executed and Peter imprisoned (Acts 12:1-5). Died as a judgement by God (Acts 12:20-23).
Drusilla	Daughter of Agrippa I	<i>Wife of Roman procurator of Judea, Felix</i>	Her husband kept Paul locked in prison because he favoured the Jews (Acts 24:24-27)
Agrippa II	Son of Agrippa I	King of Chalcis – appointed by Roman Emperor Claudius in AD 50	Tried the Apostle Paul in around AD 59 (Acts 25:22-26:32).

Historical Background to the Gospels

PLACES

The Old Testament ends with the Jews in Jerusalem, but still under the rule of the Persian Empire. By AD 29, when Jesus began His public ministry, Herod's Kingdom had been divided into several different regions, which were ruled in different ways – the three most important in the gospels are:

1. **Judea** – this province covered a similar region to the southern Old Testament Kingdom of Judah, and included the city of Jerusalem, although the Roman capital of the province was in Caesarea. At the time of Jesus' ministry Judea was ruled directly by a Roman procurator named Pontius Pilate. Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea.
2. **Galilee** – a region around Lake Galilee in the north of Palestine. At the time of Jesus' ministry it was ruled by Herod Antipas, a son of Herod the Great. Jesus grew up in Nazareth, a town in Galilee and much of his ministry took place in this region.
3. **Samaria** – a region between Galilee and Judea. The Samaritans were descendants of Jews who had stayed in the land during the Exile but had inter-married with non-Jewish people. They were hated by the Jews, and worshipped God on their own mountain rather than at the Temple in Jerusalem. Samaria was also ruled by the procurator of Judea.

LANGUAGES

The Old Testament was written in Hebrew (the language of the Jews). Jesus would have spoken Aramaic (a form of Hebrew) but the New Testament was written in Greek, which was the most widely used language in the Roman Empire. The existence of the Roman Empire, and the fact that Greek had become the international language of communication during the years between the Testaments, gave the perfect opportunity for the message about Jesus to spread across the world in the years following Jesus' death.

PEOPLE

During the period between the Old and New Testaments several religious and political groups were formed among the Jewish people. These groups are important in the story of Jesus as He interacted with the people around Him:

The Sanhedrin – an assembly of learned Jews which directed the religious affairs of the people and was the highest court for Jewish people. It had authority over religious affairs in the time of Jesus, but did not have authority to execute people without the approval of the Romans.

Pharisees – a religious group which was very devoted to following the Old Testament Law and widely respected by the common people as being very religious. The Pharisees began as a movement to take Judaism back to greater faithfulness to the Old Testament. They added extra laws to the Old Testament Law as a way of protecting themselves from breaking it, but, by the time of Jesus, many Pharisees had become hypocritical and were more obsessed with appearing to be right than with loving God and loving others.

Sadducees – a religious group that denied some Old Testament ideas that the Pharisees believed in, including the existence of angels and demons, and the idea that the body could be raised to life again after death and that people will exist forever. During the time of Jesus the High Priests were Sadducees, and so this group was powerful and controlled the Temple. They were more influential with the Romans but less respected by the common Jewish people than the Pharisees. Some Sadducees were prepared to compromise truth to keep their status and influential position with the Romans.

Teachers of religious law (scribes) – these people were dedicated to copying and teaching the Old Testament Law. They were experts in it and could be consulted in any disputes over the Law.

Tax collectors & sinners – tax collectors were highly unpopular not only because they took money from people but also because they were collaborators with the Roman occupiers. The Pharisees believed it was wrong to associate with such people. Other people, especially the sexually immoral, were known by the Pharisees as "sinners", and again were not to be associated with by religious people.

Herodians – this group of Jews had been heavily influenced by Greek culture, and were strong supporters of King Herod. They were a political rather than a religious group but were less influential with the Romans than the Sadducees and less popular with the people than the Pharisees.

The Four Gospels

The New Testament opens with four books which are known as "Gospels". These are records of the life and teachings of Jesus written by the four men who gave their names to the books.

Four different authors

The four men who wrote the Gospels were either members of the group of twelve disciples of Jesus or were closely connected with them:

Matthew – Matthew was a tax collector working for the Roman authorities before Jesus called him to be one of the Twelve (see Matthew 9:9-13). He was, therefore, an eyewitness of Jesus' ministry.

Mark – Mark is not mentioned in the Gospels, but he was close to the apostles Paul (see II Timothy 4:11) and Simon Peter (see I Peter 5:13). According to early Christians, Mark based his Gospel on Simon Peter's memories of Jesus' ministry.

Luke – Luke is not mentioned in the Gospels. He was a medical doctor and a close friend of the apostle Paul (see Colossians 4:14). His Gospel was written to a man called Theophilus with the intention of giving an accurate record of the life of Jesus based on the accounts of eye-witnesses (see Luke 1:1-4). The book of Acts is a sequel to this Gospel written by Luke to tell Theophilus about the development of the early Church.

John – John was a fisherman (together with his brother James) and the youngest of Jesus' twelve disciples. He wrote his Gospel later than the other three Gospel writers. In his Gospel John refers to himself as the "disciple Jesus loved" rather than using his name.

Four different themes

Although the four Gospels are all based on eye-witness accounts, none of them contains a complete record of Jesus' life, and the authors selected episodes from Jesus' life to emphasise different aspects of truth about Him. Together, they give a more complete picture of the truth about Jesus' identity in the same way that four newspaper records of one event give a more complete account of it.

Matthew focuses on Jesus as *the King of Israel*. He wrote his Gospel to Christians from a Jewish background to show them that Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies about the King who would come from David's family, and as a result he often quotes from Old Testament prophecies. Matthew opens with a list of the ancestors of Jesus describing Him as "*the Son of David, the Son of Abraham*" (Matthew 1:1) and then describes the birth of Jesus with a focus on the visit of the Magi who came to see the new born King.

Mark focuses on Jesus as *the Suffering Servant*. He wrote his Gospel to Christians who were suffering for their faith, and wanted to encourage them that their suffering was not meaningless and so he focuses on Jesus' suffering in obedience to God and what He accomplished through it. As a result, Mark is the shortest Gospel, and opens immediately with John the Baptist's ministry.

Luke focuses on Jesus as *the perfect man*. Perhaps this was a special interest of his because of his medical training. He often gives additional details in describing people and illnesses. Luke's Gospel opens with a historically detailed account of the birth of Jesus which emphasises that he was born to a virgin (necessary for Him to have no sin) to be the Saviour for all people.

John focuses on Jesus as *the Son of God* who became human. He wrote his Gospel in a time when some people were claiming that Jesus wasn't really human, but was a spiritual being who only appeared to have a body. His style is quite different from the other three Gospels, and he often adds comments that explain the meaning of events or words spoken by Jesus. John's Gospel opens with one of these comments by speaking about Jesus existing before His birth and coming into the world to reveal God to us.

One unified picture

Together we have a wonderful picture of Jesus:

*Jesus was the perfect sinless man (Luke) who was God living among us (John).
He fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies about the Suffering Servant (Mark)
and the Conquering King (Matthew).*

A Harmony of the Gospels

This table helps to fit the stories in the four Gospels together in the order in which they happened:

EVENT(S)	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
The Birth / Youth of Christ, 4 BC onwards				
Mary prepared for His birth & her family	----	----	1:5-80	----
Joseph prepared for His birth	1:18-25	----	----	----
Birth of Jesus & visit of shepherds	----	----	2:1-17	----
Jesus presented at the Temple	----	----	2:22-38	----
The visit of the Magi (wise men)	2:1-12	----	----	----
The escape to Egypt & return to Nazareth	2:13-23	----	----	----
Visits the Temple aged 12 years	----	----	2:41-52	----
The first year of ministry (inauguration), AD 29-30				
John the Baptist & his baptism of Jesus	3:1-17	1:1-11	3:1-22	1:19-36
The temptation of Jesus	4:1-11	1:12-13	4:1-13	----
First miracle – water made into wine	----	----	----	2:1-11
First Passover trip to Jerusalem & the Temple cleansed	----	----	----	2:13-25
Jesus teaches Nicodemus about the new birth	----	----	----	3:1-21
Jesus' early ministry in Judea	----	----	----	3:22
Jesus visits Samaria – teaches about living water	----	----	----	4:4-42
Jesus' early ministry in Galilee	4:12-17	1:14-15	4:14-27	4:3, 43-54
The second year of ministry (popularity), AD 30-31				
Continued ministry in Galilee	5-9	2:1-3:12	4:28-6:11	----
Second Passover trip to Jerusalem	----	----	----	5
The twelve disciples chosen	10	3:13-19	6:12-16	----
Jesus & John the Baptist	11:1-19	----	7:18-28	----
Teaching & miracles in Galilee	11:20-13:51	3:22-5	7:36-8	----
The third year of ministry (opposition), AD 31-32				
The turning point – many disciples leave Him	14	6	9:1-17	6
Further miracles	15	7-8:26	----	----
Peter's confession of Christ & the Transfiguration	16:13-17:9	8:27-9:10	9:18-36	----
Teaching the disciples	17:14-18:25	9:14-50	9:37-50	----
Rejected in Samaria on the way to Jerusalem	----	----	9:51-56	----
The seventy-two disciples sent out	----	----	10:1-16	----
Teaching & miracles in Judea & Perea	19-20	10	10:17-11:13	7-10
Raising of Lazarus	----	----	----	11:1-46
The suffering Christ (the last week), AD 33				
Sunday				
Triumphant entry into Jerusalem	21:1-11	11:1-11	19:29-44	12:12-19
Monday				
Cursing a fig tree & cleansing the Temple	21:12-20	11:12-21	19:45-46	----
Tuesday / Wednesday				
Challenges to His authority & teaching about His opponents	21:23-23:39	11:27-12:44	20:1-21:4	----
The visit of the Greeks & teaching about unbelief	----	----	----	12:20-5
Prophecies & parables about the end times	24&25	13	21:5-22:6	----
Thursday				
The last Passover meal (Jesus washes the disciples' feet)	26:17-20	14:12-18	22:7-30	13:1-17
The traitor & the Lord's Supper	26:21-29	14:18-25	22:19-23	13:21-30
Parting teaching for the twelve	----	----	----	14-16
Jesus' priestly prayer	----	----	----	17
Prayer in the Garden & betrayal by Judas	26:36-56	14:32-52	22:39-51	18:1-13
Friday				
Before the High Priest	26:57	14:53	22:54	18:13-14
Peter's denial of Jesus	26:58, 69-75	24:54, 66-72	22:54-62	18:15-18, 25-27
Before the Sanhedrin	26:59-68	14:55-65	22:66-71	18:19-24
Before Pilate	27:1-2, 11-14	15:1-5	23:1-5	18:28-38
Before Herod	----	----	23:6-12	----
Before Pilate again – condemned to death unjustly	27:15-30	15:6-15	23:13-24	18:39-19:16
Beaten, mocked & crucified	27:30-27:54	15:16-39	23:26-45	19:16-30
Buried	27:57-66	15:42-47	23:50-53	19:31-42
The risen Christ				
The women come to the tomb – it is empty	28:1-7	16:1-8	24:1-2	20:1
Mary Magdalene runs to tell Peter	----	----	----	20:2
Jesus appears to the other women	28:8-10	----	----	----
Peter & John run to the empty tomb	----	----	----	20:3-9
Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene	----	----	----	20:10-17
Jesus appears to Peter	----	----	24:34	----
Jesus appears to the two on the road to Emmaus	----	----	24:13-35	----
Jesus appears to the disciples, Thomas absent	----	----	24:36-48	20:19-25
Jesus appears to the 11, Thomas present	----	----	----	20:26-29
Jesus appears in Galilee – Peter restored	----	----	----	21
His last words to the 11 in Galilee (Great Commission)	28:16-20	----	----	----
Jesus ascends to Heaven	----	----	24:50-53	----

The Parables of Jesus

PARABLE	BIBLE REFERENCES	KEY MESSAGE
Parables about the Kingdom of God		
The Soils (or sower)	Matthew 13:3-8; Mark 4:4-8; Luke 8:5-8	Different responses of people to the message about the Kingdom
The Weeds and Wheat	Matthew 13:24-30 & 13:36-43	Those who are in the Kingdom will be separated out from the world in the final judgement, not before it
The Mustard Seed	Matthew 13:31-32; Mark 4:30-32; Luke 13:18-19	The Kingdom will start like a very small seed but will grow to become very large
The Yeast	Matthew 13:33; Luke 13:20-21	The Kingdom of God will start like a small piece of yeast but will have a massive impact
The Hidden Treasure	Matthew 13:44	The Kingdom is of greater value than anything else, and once found it is worth giving everything up for it
The Pearl	Matthew 13:45-46	
The Fishing Net	Matthew 13:47-50	The wicked will be separated from the righteous in the final judgement
The Wedding Feast	Matthew 22:1-14	Many are invited but few are chosen to be part of the Kingdom
The Growing Seed	Mark 4:26-29	God's Kingdom will grow by His power until the day of harvest
Parables about service and obedience to the Master		
The Workers in the Harvest	Matthew 20:1-6	In the Kingdom the last shall be first and the first shall be last
The Loaned Money (Talents)	Matthew 25:14-30	We are stewards of gifts God has given and must use them for His service
The Nobleman's Servants	Luke 19:11-27	The King responds fairly to His servants and judges those who reject him
Parables about prayer		
The Friend at Midnight	Luke 11:5-8	God will answer the prayers of His people without needing persuasion
The Unjust Judge	Luke 18:1-8	
Parables about love for neighbours & forgiveness for others		
The Unforgiving Servant	Matthew 18:21-35	We must forgive others to be able to receive God's forgiveness
The Good Samaritan	Luke 10:30-37	The duty to love neighbours includes all people
Parables about humility		
The Wedding Feast	Luke 14:7-11	Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and everyone who humbles himself will be exalted
The Proud Pharisee & Humble Tax Collector	Luke 18:9-14	
Parables about the distraction of possessions		
The Rich Fool	Luke 12:16-21	Spiritual riches matter more than material possessions
The Great Festival	Luke 14:16-24	Nothing should distract us from the Kingdom
The Shrewd Manager	Luke 16:1-13	No one can serve both God and money
Parables about God's love for and forgiveness of the lost		
The Lost Sheep	Matthew 18:12-24; Luke 15:3-7	There is rejoicing in Heaven when even one sinner turns to God in repentance
The Lost Coin	Luke 15:8-10	
The Lost Son	Luke 15:11-32	
The Forgiven Debts	Luke 7:41-43	Whoever has been forgiven much by God will be most thankful for it
Parables about the future return of Christ		
The Wise & Faithful Servants	Matthew 24:45-51; Luke 12:42-48	The time when Christ will return is unknown so we should be ready and serving Christ
The Ten Bridesmaids	Matthew 25:1-13	
The Travelling Owner of the House	Mark 13:34-37	
Parables judging the hypocritical religious leaders		
The Two Sons	Matthew 21:28-32	Sinners are entering the Kingdom before the Pharisees
The Evil Farmers	Matthew 21:33-46; Mark 12:1-9; Luke 20:9-16	The Kingdom will be removed from the Pharisees and chief priests
Parables about repentance		
The Unproductive Fig Tree	Luke 13:6-9	Repent or you will die

The Miracles of Jesus

MIRACLE	MATTHEW	MARK	LUKE	JOHN
Jesus has authority over matter (multiplying / changing matter)				
5000 people are fed	14:15-21	6:35-44	9:12-17	6:5-14
4000 people are fed	15:32-38	8:1-9		
Water turned into wine				2:1-11
A man born blind is healed				9:1-7
Jesus has authority over natural forces				
Calming the storm	8:23-27	4:35-41	8:22-25	
Jesus walks on water	14:22-33	6:45-52		6:17-21
Jesus has authority over death (raising people to life)				
Jairus' daughter raised	9:18-26	5:22-24, 35-43	8:41-42, 49-56	
A widow's son raised			7:11-16	
Lazarus raised from the dead				11:1-45
Jesus has authority over sickness				
A sick woman is healed	9:20-22	5:25-34	8:43-48	
A paralysed man is healed	9:1-8	2:1-12	5:17-26	
A leper is healed at Gennesaret	8:1-4	1:40-45	5:12-15	
Peter's mother-in-law healed	8:14-17	1:29-32	4:38-39	
A deformed hand restored	12:9-13	3:1-5	6:6-11	
Blind Bartimaeus receives sight	20:29-34	10:46-52	18:35-43	
A Centurion's servant is healed	8:5-13		7:1-10	
Two blind men given sight	9:27-31			
A mute man healed	9:32-33			
A deaf and mute man healed		7:31-37		
A blind man sees at Bethsaida		8:22-26		
A crippled woman healed			13:10-17	
A sick man healed			14:1-6	
Ten lepers healed			17:11-19	
A man's ear restored			22:49-51	
An official's sin healed in Cana				4:46-54
A lame man healed				5:1-16
Jesus has authority over evil spirits				
Demons sent into pigs	8:28-34	5:1-20	8:26-39	
A boy with an evil spirit healed	17:14-21	9:14-29	9:37-42	
A girl is freed from a demon	15:21-28	7:24-30		
An evil spirit cast out of a man		1:23-27	4:33-36	
A mute demonised man healed	12:22		11:14	
Jesus has authority over living things				
Cursing the fig tree	21:18-22	11:12-14, 20-24		
A coin in a fish's mouth	17:24-27			
The first miraculous catch of fish			5:1-11	
The second miraculous catch of fish				21:1-14

Is Jesus Jehovah God?

Jehovah – God’s personal name

Jehovah is one of the names by which God was known in the Old Testament. Members of the cult group called *Jehovah’s Witnesses* correctly point out that the Old Testament uses the name *Jehovah* more than any other for God, and that it was a personal name for God revealed to His chosen nation, Israel, rather than a title. This is not immediately clear in most English translations of the Old Testament, as the Hebrew word *YHWH* is translated by the English word *lord*. When the original Hebrew word is *YHWH* most English translations express it as *LORD* in capital letters. The English word *lord* written with a capital L alone (*Lord*) represents the Hebrew word *Adonai* (which is really a title recognising God as the master and ruler). The reason why the Hebrew *YHWH* is usually translated *LORD* is because the Jews in the centuries before Christ held God’s personal name in such respect that they never spoke it. When reading the Old Testament they would substitute the written word *YHWH* with the word *Adonai*. The correct pronunciation was forgotten, and because the Hebrew of the Old Testament does not record vowels, it is difficult for us to know how to write the word *YHWH* in English. This is one example of a mistake made by the Jehovah’s Witnesses, since they claim to have rediscovered the correct name for God, but their spelling and pronunciation is based on 19th Century attempts to translate the name into English, which have since been proven wrong (the *Jehovah’s Witnesses* began in the 19th Century in the USA). The Hebrew word *YHWH* should more accurately be expressed as *Yahweh* rather than the inaccurate form *Jehovah*, but since this article is partly in response to the teachings of the *Jehovah’s Witnesses*, I will keep the spelling as *Jehovah* to avoid confusion.

“Father” – Jesus’ new name for God

Despite the Old Testament usage, Jesus did not normally address God as *Jehovah*. He spoke about God as His *Father*, which was a new way of praying to God. Jesus also taught His followers to pray to God as their Father (see Matthew 6:9), which represented a new kind of relationship with God. Jesus claimed that He was one with the Father (see John 10:30). The Jehovah’s Witnesses claim that in saying this He meant simply that He shared one purpose with the Father rather than sharing the same nature as God. This was not, however, how the apostle John, who recorded these words, understood what Jesus was saying. John begins his Gospel with a very clear claim that Jesus was God (read this in John 1:1-18). John says that Jesus (the Word) was not only with God but He “*was God*”. In Chapter 1 verse 18 he calls Jesus “*God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side*”. Not only this, but Jesus explained His own meaning later in John’s Gospel. In Chapter 8 verse 38 He explained that He meant “*the Father is in me and I in the Father*”. The relationship Jesus is describing is one of belonging in each other, not just one of working together.

Jesus – the “Son of God”

Jesus is consistently described in the New Testament as the *Son of God*. This is a claim He made about Himself and which is agreed with by all of the other people who wrote books in the New Testament. Groups like the *Jehovah’s Witnesses* try to explain away this description of Jesus as God’s Son by saying that He was only the first of many sons of God. It is true that the Bible describes those who become Christians through faith in Christ as “*sons of God*” or “*children of God*” (e.g. Romans 8:14-16; 1 John 3:1), but Jesus is singled out as being the Son of God in a unique way. We can see this very clearly in John 3:16, where Jesus is called the “*one and only Son*” (NIV) or “*only begotten son*” (KJV) of God. The relationship Jesus had with His Father was unique in that He was the only Son begotten by God. Hebrews 1:5-14 is helpful in showing that this way of speaking about Jesus distinguishes Him from the angels, since God never said to the angels that they had become His sons (verse 5). In fact, the Father commands the angels to worship the Son (verse 6)! We cannot take time in this essay to discuss when or how God “begat” Jesus as His Son, but it should suffice to note that this is a unique relationship, and we must seek to understand what the nature of the relationship is by seeing how Jesus spoke about His relationship with His Father. It is not simply that Jesus was the first-born son (Romans 8:29) – He became God’s Son in a different way from Christians. Christians are born as God’s children and become His heirs through faith in Christ and the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:4-7), but Jesus never became the heir of God (this was always His position) and certainly did not become the Son of God through regeneration or faith in Himself. He is the one who made salvation possible and through whom the Holy Spirit is poured out on Christians, and He never required salvation Himself. Although Christians may speak of themselves as God’s children, and Jesus taught Christians to address God as Father, no one can claim that their relationship with God is the same as Jesus Christ’s. He is in a unique category, and we must consider His identity based on what He said and what His apostles taught.

Jesus – the “I AM”

In John’s Gospel we also read some other claims by Jesus to be God, for example when He said “*Before Abraham was born I am*” (John 8:58). This is a very strange use of words in English, as proper grammar should read, “*Before Abraham was born I was*”. The reason Jesus used the unusual grammar “I am” is because He was referring to another name for God in the Old Testament. In Exodus 3:14, God told Moses to use the name “I AM” to describe Him. In fact, the name *Yahweh* is derived from the phrase “I AM”. So, Jesus was claiming to be the God who spoke to Abraham. The name “I AM” has a special meaning because it reflects the fact that God has always existed and does not depend on anyone else for His existence. That is the most fundamental quality of God that distinguishes Him from every other being. They are created, He is the Creator. On two occasions (John 8 and John 10) some of the Jewish religious leaders wanted to kill Jesus because they knew that He was claiming to be God (see John 8:59 and John 10:31).

The miracles of Christ – proof of His divinity

In addition to this, the way that Jesus spoke and the miracles He did showed that He had the full authority of God. He showed in His miracles that He had authority that only the creator God can have – authority over:

- Nature (for example calming storms and walking on water)
- Diseases (He healed many types of illness)
- Evil Spirits (on many occasions He cast out demons)
- Death (raising at least three people from death)
- Sin (He claimed the have authority to forgive sins)

In Mark 2:1-12 we read about one of Jesus' miracles which He performed to prove that He really had the authority to forgive sins. The religious leaders knew that only God can forgive sins (verse 7) and so they were angry with Jesus for making this claim. They were absolutely correct that only God could forgive sins, but they did not realise that Jesus actually was God. Only God can forgive sins because He is the one who has offended by them. This is the amazing truth of the sacrificial death of Christ in our place: God, the one who was offended by our sin, becomes the solution to our sin by taking our sin in Himself. This truth (which is clear in passages like Romans 3:21-26) is completely misunderstood by groups like the *Jehovah's Witnesses*, who see the death of Jesus as a price paid by Him to Jehovah. This is a different concept, where Jesus is our Saviour although He is not the one against whom we have sinned. The Biblical understanding is that God is both the offended one, who has the right to (and in fact must) punish sin, but He also becomes the One who takes our place and bears His own punishment for sin in the person of Jesus Christ. Because God is the offended one, and the one from whose character the moral universe is derived, only God can become the solution! Jesus also claimed to be the one who gives and sustains life and who fulfils our deepest longings (e.g. John 6:35, John 8:12, John 11:25, John 14:6), often using the formula "I am ..." (further references to His identity as the "I AM" who spoke to Moses). This is also something that only God could claim - all other living beings have life only because it is given to us by God, but Jesus was the giver of life (God Himself).

Jesus accepts Thomas's worship as God

The disciples took time to understand who Jesus was - it was only after His death and resurrection that they fully understood. After the resurrection, however, the disciples were very clear in claiming that Jesus was God. One of them, Thomas, when he saw Jesus after the resurrection called Him "*My Lord and my God*" (John 20:28). When he said this Jesus did not correct him by saying that he was wrong in calling Him God, but actually said that it was a good thing that Thomas believed this (verse 29). So, Jesus not only claimed to be God, He also allowed others to worship Him as God. There are only three possible ways to understand this (as scholar C.S. Lewis observed):

- a) Jesus was mad - He thought that He was God, but He was wrong.
- b) Jesus was bad - He knew that He was not God but still tried to deceive people into thinking He was God.
- c) Jesus was God - Jesus really was who He claimed to be.

The *Jehovah's Witnesses* deny that Jesus claimed to be God, but they are disagreeing with the Jewish religious leaders and the disciples who actually heard Him speak and who spoke the same language and came from the same culture as He did in how they understand what Jesus said.

References to Jesus as God in the New Testament epistles

In the New Testament letters (epistles) written by the apostles (who had been Jesus' disciples during His time on earth and had been trained and given authority by Him to lead and teach the Church) there are also many claims that Jesus is God. For example:

- *Romans 1:3&4* - Paul speaks of Jesus having two natures - the human nature (He was a "*son*" or descendant of David according to His "*human nature*") and the divine nature (He was proved to be the Son of God by His resurrection). Jesus was both man and God.
- *Romans 9:5* - Paul says that Jesus "*is God over all*" - this is a very clear statement of Jesus' divinity.
- *II Corinthians 4:4* - Jesus is called the "*image of God*". The word used here does not just mean that He is like God (in the same way that, according to Genesis 1:27, mankind was made "*in the image*" of God), but that He is the image itself (a good English word would be "prototype" - He is not made from the pattern, He is the pattern). In other words, God was revealing Himself in Christ.
- *Philippians 2:5-11* - Paul says that Jesus was "*in very nature God*" (verse 6) before He became a man, and that He did not "*consider equality with God something to be grasped*". In other words, although Jesus was completely God (that was the very nature of who and what He was) He did not cling on to His position of being recognised as God, but became a man (and a servant of the Father) and eventually died. Now, however, the Father has exalted Him back to that place that He deserves.
- *Colossians 1:15-20* - Jesus is the "*image of the invisible God*" (again the word means that He is the pattern, not made in that pattern) and the one through whom and for whom all things were created. If all things were created by Him then He cannot have been created, and only God was not created. Not only this, but Paul says in verse 19 that all the fullness of God lived in Jesus.
- *Colossians 2:9* - again Paul says that "*in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form*". Jesus was fully God but also fully human.
- *Titus 1:3&4* - in verse 3 Paul speaks of "*God our Saviour*" and in verse 4 he speaks of "*Christ Jesus our Saviour*" - this equates Jesus with God
- *Titus 2:13* - we wait for "*the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ*", another very clear statement.

- *Hebrews 1:1-4* - Jesus is the "radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being, sustaining all things by His powerful word". The phrase "exact representation" does not mean that He was like God, but that He is God in every way.

The Alpha and the Omega

Three times in the book of Revelation (in 1:8, 21:6 and 22:12-16) we read the phrase "*the Alpha and the Omega*" used to describe a person. Who is this "Alpha and Omega"? In 1:8 we learn that this person is "*the Lord God ... the Almighty*". This name for God emphasises a similar truth to the Old Testament name "I AM" - it speaks about the eternal existence and self-sufficient nature of God (*alpha* and *omega* are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet). Next we need to look at Revelation 1:17-18, where Jesus (the one who was dead and is now alive) calls Himself "*the First and Last*". This title sounds similar to the title "*Alpha and Omega*", but it is not identical. In Revelation 21:6 we learn that God (verse 7) is "*the Alpha and the Omega*" and also the "*Beginning and the End*", another phrase with a similar meaning to "*First and Last*". It sounds as if these phrases, "*the Alpha and Omega*", the "*First and Last*" and "*the Beginning and the End*" all refer to both God and Jesus, speaking of their eternal existence. However, this becomes absolutely clear in Revelation 22:12-16, where the speaker describes Himself as "*the Alpha and Omega, the First and Last, the Beginning and the End*", showing us that these three titles are indeed identical in meaning and refer to one person, who is called "*Lord God*" in 1:8 and identified as Jesus in 1:17-18. If any doubt still remains, a few verses later (verse 16) the speaker calls Himself "*Jesus*". So, according to Revelation, Jesus is the Lord God, the Alpha and Omega, the First and Last, the Beginning and the End. He was without beginning, has existed eternally, and is fully God. It is no wonder, then, that He is the centre of worship in the book of Revelation.

References putting Jesus equal with Father and Holy Spirit

Before Jesus left His disciples to return to the Father He told them to baptise new disciples "*in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*" (Matthew 28:19). This was a new way of speaking - putting these three persons together as equal in authority. At the beginning of Jesus' ministry these three were seen working together at His baptism - Jesus was baptised, but the Spirit rested on Him in the form of a dove and the Father spoke from Heaven (see 3:16-17). Jesus told His disciples before His death that after He left them the Holy Spirit would come to live in them and that the Spirit had begun to prepare them for Jesus' work (see John 14:16-17). Then, in Matthew 28:19, as He spoke about baptism He placed these three persons (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) on a level of equal authority. There are also many other verses in the New Testament (too many to list here) that place Jesus and God the Father (often called simply "God") together as equals and the givers of grace, peace and comfort. The New Testament also calls upon us to make Jesus Christ the Lord of our lives and to depend on Him for our salvation. Why did the people in the New Testament worship and look to both God and Jesus if only God is to be worshipped? It is because they knew that both Jesus and the Father are God. The Church throughout history, and from the very earliest records, has continued this New Testament pattern of worshipping Jesus. If Jesus was not God, why does He have such an important position, and why is He to be worshipped when the angels of Heaven tell us not to worship anyone but God (Revelation 22:8&9). Since Jesus is the one who sends the angels (Revelation 22:16), and the one who receives worship in Heaven together with the "one who sits on the throne" (the Father - Revelation 5:13-14), how can we say that the Bible presents Him as anything less than God?

The "trinity" - a word to describe the God who is "three in one"

In the Old Testament, God revealed Himself as one God (see Deuteronomy 6:4 for example), but even in Genesis (the first book of the Old Testament) there are some hints suggesting that although there is one God there is more than one person within God. For example, in Genesis 1:26 God says "*let us make man in our image*" (using the plural to refer to Himself). This may seem strange at first reading, but the Old Testament does not develop it further into explaining how God can be one yet more than one person. The New Testament, however, beginning with the statement by Jesus about the "*Father, Son and Holy Spirit*" in Matthew 28:19, speaks of these three persons as being God. Three examples are:

- *1 Corinthians 13:14* - the blessing is from these three
- *Ephesians 4:3-6* - Paul is speaking about the things that unite us as Christians, and he speaks about three people here - "*one Spirit*", "*one Lord*" (Jesus) and "*one God and Father of all*".
- *Titus 3:3-6* - Paul outlines the role of these three persons in our salvation.

This truth of the three persons who together are one God is often referred to by Christians as "trinity". This word does not appear in the Bible (the *Jehovah's Witnesses* often make this point as if it proves that the idea of the trinity is false), but is an attempt to explain the truth that the Bible reveals of a three in one God (trinity derives from "tri-" meaning three and "unity" meaning one).

The progressive revelation of the trinity in the Bible

So, the Bible clearly teaches that Jesus is God and also speaks of the Father and Holy Spirit as being God. This truth is revealed progressively in the Bible. In the Old Testament, the concept of the trinity (three in one God) is not clearly revealed, although there are some hints of the fact that there is a plurality of persons within the divine nature. It is only with the life and ministry of Jesus that we discover that God can be both the Father and the Son. In the relationship of Jesus with His Father we see the perfect relationship that had existed eternally within the divine nature. However, since Jesus was fully human as well as fully God, He lived a life of perfect submission to His Father, demonstrating perfect humanity. This sinless life qualified Him to be the Saviour for sinful human beings. Only one who was both fully God and fully human could become the perfect sacrifice for sin, because that representative must be both human and also perfect.

So, with the life of Jesus we realise that God is so great that He is able to both live in all His fullness in human form in Jesus (Colossians 2:9) and yet remain the King and sustainer of the Universe. After Jesus returned to His Father's side the Holy Spirit came upon the Church, and we discover another person who is fully God but yet operates in a distinct way from the Father and Son.

The limitations of our understanding

Part of our problem in understanding the truth of the trinity is that we are so small and limited in our thinking and experience. We have no concept of what it is to be at the same time one person and also another. We are very aware of where we end and another person begins because we are physically limited to a body and mentally limited in the capacity of our brains, which, no matter how powerful they might be, are much less than God's knowledge and understanding. At one level we can try to understand the reality of the triune (three-in-one) God, and we can use illustrations to picture this (like St Patrick's shamrock – a plant which has three leaves coming from one stem), but at another level we can never find a picture that can fully capture this amazing reality since it is beyond our understanding. Perhaps it should reassure us to know that the nature of God is so wonderful that we cannot completely understand it (a God who could be fully described and explained would surely be a "god" of our making, not the true God who created us). We may ultimately come to the point of saying that although we cannot understand it fully, because the Bible shows that these three persons are fully God and yet there is one God and not three, then it must be true.

Conclusion

I have tried to present in this article the clearest of New Testament references to Jesus as God, but this is by no means a complete list. In fact, the central claim and statement of faith of Christianity is that "*Jesus is Lord*" (see, for example, Acts 2:36; Romans 10:9; Philippians 2:11). When we understand the fact that in the Jewish context "Lord" referred to God and that the Greek word translated "Lord" in these verses is the same word that was used to translate *YHWH* in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, we realise that the recognition of Jesus as God is actually central to the New Testament and to the Christian faith as a whole. This is no minor theme in the New Testament, nor is it an insignificant detail for Christians, it is the very basis for our Christian life to know that Jesus is God and that we are saved by Him.

I hope that this article has been helpful to you, and that it has helped you to develop your thinking further. Please do not be tricked by people like the *Jehovah's Witnesses* who twist the Bible to support their beliefs. Although they may be very sincere people they are sincerely wrong in their teaching. The fact of the "trinity" can be very difficult to accept, but once a person has experienced God's work in their life it becomes clearer to them since it becomes an experienced reality rather than simply an intellectual theory. They discover that they can pray to God as their Father, they can learn from and worship Jesus Christ as Lord and God, and they can experience the power of God living in them in the person of the Holy Spirit. These three relate to Christians in different ways, but are always in harmony with one another. Their fellowship is the ultimate pattern for us to learn how to relate to other people. I will close by borrowing Paul's expression of wonder at the mystery of our faith from I Timothy 3:16:

*Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great:
He appeared in a body,
was vindicated by the Spirit,
was seen by angels,
was preached among the nations,
was believed on in the world,
was taken up in glory.*

This article was originally written in reply to a question from a mainland China scholar who had been influenced by the Jehovah's Witnesses. It has been revised for online publication. It is written with prayer for the many Chinese who struggle with this question.