



THE BASIC ARGUMENT FOR DYOPHYSITISM

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DYOPHYSITISM DEFINED

- Dyophysitism is the doctrine that Jesus Christ is a single “person” in two “natures” (*dyo physeis*), one divine and the other human. Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, 2nd edn. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), p. 95.
- This means that the one individual named “Jesus” is such as to count as both divine and human. He exemplifies both divinity and humanity. He is a single person who is perfectly divine and perfectly human.

THE BASIC ARGUMENT FOR DYOPHYSITISM

- There is a “basic argument” for Dyophysitism that has been proposed by Christian theologians in the catholic tradition for effectively two thousand years.
- **Because things are said of the human being Jesus which normally can only be said of God (or of a person with a divine nature), therefore he is both human and God (or a person with a divine nature).**
- The *Westminster Larger Catechism* provides an elegant summary:

Q. 11. How doth it appear that the Son and the Holy Ghost are God equal with the Father?

A. The Scriptures manifest that the Son and the Holy Ghost are God equal with the Father, ascribing unto them such names, attributes, works, and worship, as are proper to God only.

THE BASIC ARGUMENT FOR DYOPHYSITISM

- One can find many historical examples of the “basic argument” from the earliest days of the Christian religion.
- **Irenaeus of Lyons, commenting on Mark 2:1–10:** “Therefore, by remitting sins, He did indeed heal man, while He also manifested Himself who He was. For if no one can forgive sins but God alone, while the Lord remitted them and healed men, it is plain that He was Himself the Word of God made the Son of man” *Against Heresies* 5.17.3; cf. **Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 4.10**
- **Novatian, commenting on John 8:51:** “[C]ertainly He is not man only who gives immortality, which if He were only man He could not give; but by giving divinity by immortality, He proves Himself to be God by offering divinity, which if He were not God He could not give” *On the Trinity* 15.

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- One can also find contemporary theologians and biblical scholars proposing the “basic argument” in defense of the idea of a “high Christology” in the New Testament.
- **Richard Bauckham:** Jesus is “included in the divine identity” because typically divine actions and properties are ascribed to him. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament’s Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).
- **Sigurd Grindheim:** “The Jesus who emerges [from the synoptic Gospels] is a Jesus who said and did what only God could say and do.” Sigurd Grindheim, *God’s Equal: What can we Know about Jesus’ Self-Understanding in the Synoptic Gospels?* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011), p. 220.

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- **Thomas Joseph White:** “Christ bears within himself a power and authority akin to that of God. He can perform actions that are normally reserved to God alone. We see this in the opening chapters of Mark, when Jesus forgives sins by his own authority, to which the Pharisees respond: ‘Who can forgive sins but God alone?’ (Mk 2:7–10). Mark seemingly would have us understand that Jesus himself has the authority to forgive sins that is proper to the Lord of Israel.” Thomas Joseph White, *The Incarnate Lord: A Thomistic Study in Christology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press), p. 15.
- **J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig:** “[S]omething of a consensus has emerged among New Testament critics that in his teachings and actions—such as his assertion of personal authority, his revising of the divinely given Mosaic Law, his proclamation of the in-breaking of God’s reign or kingdom into history in his person, his performing miracles and exorcisms as signs of the advent of that kingdom, his messianic pretensions to restore Israel, and his claim to forgive sins—Jesus enunciated an implicit Christology, putting himself in God’s place.” J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, “The Trinity,” p. 22, in Michael C. Rea, ed., *Oxford Readings in Philosophical Theology*, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 21–43.

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- Robert Bowman and J. Ed Komoszewski: Jesus shares in the “honors, attributes, names, deeds, and seat of the throne” of God.
Robert M. Bowman, Jr. and J. Ed Komoszewski, *Putting Jesus in His Place: The Case for the Deity of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2007)
- This book presents a comprehensive case for the deity of Christ from a number of different angles in a single volume.

AN INITIAL OBJECTION

What is said of Jesus

- He is born (Luke 2:7) and an “account of his genesis” (*biblios geneseōs*) can be given (Matt. 1:1)
- He grows in wisdom, age, and favor from God and men (Luke 2:52)
- He is tempted and goes hungry (Luke 4:1–2)
- He is empowered by the Spirit (Luke 4:14–21) and “can do nothing on my own” (John 5:30)
- He is given all authority (Matt 11:27, 28:18)
- He suffers and dies (Heb 5:8, 1 Cor 15:3)

What is said of God

- He is “from everlasting to everlasting” (Ps 90:2).
- He created wisdom at the beginning (Prov 8:22–23) and has never been taught by anyone (Isa 40:13)
- He cannot be tempted (Jas 1:13) and does not need anything at all (Ps 50:12–13)
- He does everything by his own power (Isa 50:2)
- He owns everything by right (Ps 24:1–2)
- He alone is immortal (1 Tim 1:17, 6:16)

AN INITIAL OBJECTION

- **The initial objection:** Things are said of Jesus which normally cannot be said of God at all.
- **The dyophysite response:** This proves that Jesus has two natures. Typically divine things are said of him in virtue of his divine nature, and typically creaturely things are said of him in virtue of his assumed human nature.

PARTITIVE EXEGESIS

- This method for interpreting the New Testament is called **partitive exegesis**.
- **R. B. Jamieson:** “Partitive exegesis is a reading strategy that recognizes that [the New Testament authors write] of Christ in two distinct, complementary registers, the divine and the human, and that distinguishes between what [they ascribe] to Christ insofar as he is divine, and insofar as he has become human.” R. B. Jamieson, “I Corinthians 15.28 and the Grammar of Paul’s Christology,” *New Testament Studies* 66 (2020): p. 188.

PARTITIVE EXEGESIS

- **Gregory of Nazianzus:** "In sum: you must predicate the more sublime expressions of the Godhead, of the nature which transcends bodily experiences, and the lowlier ones of the compound, of him who because of you was emptied, became incarnate and (to use equally valid language) was 'made man'." *Orations* 29.18
- **Thomas Aquinas:** "Those passages of Scripture by which [the heretics] endeavored to show that Christ is not God by nature are of no avail to prove their contention. For we confess that in Christ the Son of God, after the mystery of the Incarnation, there were two natures, namely, the human and the divine. Hence both those things that are proper to God are said of him by reason of his divine nature (*ratione divinae naturae*), and those things that would seem to savor of imperfection are said of him by reason of his human nature (*ratione humanae naturae*)." *Summa Contra Gentiles* 4.4

PARTITIVE EXEGESIS/*COMMUNICATIO IDIOMATUM*

- Partitive exegesis is the hermeneutical corollary to the ontological principle of *communicatio idiomatum*.
- The *communicatio idiomatum* says that because Jesus Christ is a single person in two natures, the properties of either nature can be rightly attributed to him as their single subject.
- **Ian McFarland:** “[B]ecause in Jesus both divine and human natures are united in one hypostasis, any of the properties (*idiomata* in Greek) of either nature are rightly predicated of the single hypostatic ‘someone’ that Jesus is.” Ian A. McFarland, *The Word Made Flesh: A Theology of the Incarnation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), p. 79.

RECAPITULATION

- The "basic argument" for dyophysitism can be summarized as follows.
- Because things are said of the human being Jesus in the New Testament which normally can only be said of God or of a person with a divine nature, therefore he is both divine and human.
- Those things said about Jesus in the NT which normally could not be said of God must be understood to apply to him in virtue of his assumed human nature.
- Because Jesus is a single person in two natures, it is always possible to speak of him simply with reference to only one or the other nature as the NT apparently does.

A FIRST OBJECTION

- The first objection to make against the “basic argument” for dyophysitism is that *it is logically invalid*. This means that the conclusion does not follow from the premises.
- One can grant that things are said of Jesus in the NT which normally can only be said of God. This does not mean that Jesus is God or a person with a divine nature.

A FIRST OBJECTION

- There are two ways that a thing can possess a quality or property: *originally* or *derivatively*. A thing possesses a quality *originally* if it possesses it simply in virtue of what it is, i.e. in virtue of its nature. A thing possesses a quality *derivatively* if it possesses it in virtue of the action of something else upon it.
- For example, human beings possess the capacity to learn language *originally*, i.e. simply in virtue of what they are as human beings, but they possess speaking knowledge of English *derivatively*, through the assistance of parents, friends, teachers, etc. So also, the sun luminates the surface of the earth *originally*, in virtue of its native luminousness, whereas the moon luminates the surface of the earth *derivatively*, by reflecting the light of the sun.

A FIRST OBJECTION

The Basic Argument

- Normally, only God (or a person with a divine nature) is said to be X.
- Jesus is said to be X.
- Therefore, Jesus is God (or a person with a divine nature).

Parody Example

- Normally, only the sun is said to illuminate the surface of the earth.
- The moon is said to illuminate the surface of the earth.
- Therefore, the moon is (the same sort of thing as) the sun.

A FIRST OBJECTION

- The proponent of the “basic argument” for dyophysitism needs to reformulate his or her argument like this:
 - Only God (or a person with a divine nature) is *X* by nature.
 - Jesus is said to be *X* by nature.
 - Therefore, Jesus is God (or a person with a divine nature).

A FIRST OBJECTION

- This reformulated argument would be logically valid.
- The problem is that the second premise is unjustifiable.
- The New Testament nowhere uses the words for “nature” (*physis*, *ousia*) in connection with Jesus, let alone specify that specifically divine qualities and powers belong to him by nature.

SUMMARY

- The first objection to make to the "basic argument" for dyophysitism is that it is logically invalid.
- From the fact that things are said of Jesus which normally can only be said of God (or of a person with a divine nature), it does not follow that Jesus is God (or a person with a divine nature). It could be that divine things are said of him not *originally*, i.e. in virtue of what he is by nature, but *derivatively*, i.e. in virtue of God's action upon him.
- Consider how normally only the sun is said to luminate the surface of the earth. But we can also say that the moon luminates the surface of the earth—not originally, not because it is the same sort of thing as the sun, but because it reflects the light which the sun shines upon it.

A SECOND OBJECTION

- The New Testament attributes both typically divine and typically creaturely things to Christ.
- How do we know which qualities belong to Jesus originally and which derivatively? Is Jesus a divine person become human, or a human person made divine in a way?
- The New Testament answers the question. It says that the typically divine qualities of Jesus have been given to him by God.

A SECOND OBJECTION

- **Racovian Catechism:** “the Scriptures explicitly declare that whatever of a divine nature Christ possessed, he had received it as a gift from the Father; and refer it to the Holy Spirit, with which he had by the Father been anointed and filled.” Thomas Rees, trans., *The Racovian Catechism, with Notes and Illustrations, Translated from the Latin: To Which Is Prefixed a Sketch of the History of Unitarianism in Poland and the Adjacent Countries* (London: Paternoster Row, 1818), p. 57.

A SECOND OBJECTION

- “‘But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’—he then said to the paralytic—‘Stand up, take your bed, and go to your home.’ And he stood up and went to his home. When the crowds saw it, they were filled with awe, and they glorified God, who had *given* such authority to human beings” (Matt. 9:6–8).
- “All things have been *handed over* to me by my Father” (Matt. 11:27).
- “All authority in heaven and on earth has been *given* to me” (Matt. 28:18).
- “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has *anointed* me to bring good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18).

A SECOND OBJECTION

- “Now if I cast out the demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your exorcists cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. But if it is *by the finger of God* that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Luke 11:19–20).
- “For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has *granted* the Son also to have life in himself, and he has *given* him authority to execute judgment because he is the Son of Man” (John 5:26–27).

A SECOND OBJECTION

- “My teaching is *not mine* but *his who sent me*. Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is *from God* or whether I am speaking *on my own*” (John 7:16–17).
- “Now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I *heard from God*” (John 8:40).
- “Jesus of Nazareth, a man *attested to you by God* with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did *through him* among you” (Acts 2:22).

A SECOND OBJECTION

- “God *anointed* Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; ... he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God *was with him*” (Acts 10:36).
- “When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having *become* as much superior to angels as the name he has *inherited* is more excellent than theirs” (Heb. 1:3–4).

A SECOND OBJECTION

- The New Testament writes that the various divine qualities of Jesus have been granted to him by God. He has been empowered and authorized by God to accomplish typically divine effects—his teaching, healing, miracles, forgiving, and so on.
- This entails that Jesus is *not* originally divine, i.e. that he is not divine by nature.

A SECOND OBJECTION

- An argument:
 - If Jesus were divine by nature, he would already possess divine power and authority.
 - If Jesus already possessed divine power and authority, then he could not be given them by God.
 - But the New Testament says that Jesus was given divine power and authority by God.
 - Therefore, Jesus is not divine by nature.

A SECOND OBJECTION

- The traditional opinion is that Jesus's Incarnation does not take away from his divinity. He remains God even after he takes on all the properties of humanity in becoming human.
- **Hilary of Poitiers:** "For He, being of two natures united for that Mediatorship, is the full reality of each nature; while abiding in each, He is wanting in neither; *He does not cease to be God because He becomes man, nor fail to be man because He remains for ever God.*" *On the Trinity* 9.3
- **Gregory of Nazianzus:** "He whom you presently scorn was once transcendent, over even you. He who is presently human was incomposite. *He remained what he was; what he was not, he assumed.*" *Oration* 29.19

A SECOND OBJECTION

- Thomas Joseph White: Jesus Christ is "the Lord incarnate, God the Word become fully human, without ceasing to be God." *Incarnate Lord*, p. 23
- Ian McFarland: "[T]he divine hypostasis of the Son or Word, without ceasing to be divine, assumed a human nature as Jesus of Nazareth, such that it is true to say that whatever Jesus does, God does." *Word Made Flesh*, p. 78
- This point is required by the "basic argument." If Christ had ceased to be God in becoming human, then he could not demonstrate his divinity by performing typically divine deeds. He would have no divinity to demonstrate.

A SECOND OBJECTION

- **A principle:** You cannot be given what you already have, nor can you be made what you already are.
- You cannot kill a dead person (i.e., make them dead), nor can you wet a garment that is already soaked.

A SECOND OBJECTION

- A rich person can become richer than they already are, and a fat cat can become fatter. But a rich person cannot be made rich, since they already are rich, nor can a fat cat be made fat, since it already is fat. And the rich person does not already possess the further money that makes them richer, nor does the cat already possess the fat that makes it fatter.
- You may already have a book, and I can give you another copy of the same book, but you do not already have the particular copy that I can give you, nor can I give you the particular copy that you already have.
- The moral of the story: **If something is given, it is not already possessed. If it is already possessed, it cannot be given.**

A SECOND OBJECTION

- If Jesus were divine by nature, then he would already possess divine power and authority prior to his Incarnation.
- If Jesus did not cease to be God in becoming human, then he would still possess that divine power and authority even after becoming incarnate.
- If Jesus still possessed divine power and authority upon becoming incarnate, then he could not be given divine power and authority.
- And yet the New Testament says that God empowered and authorized Jesus to perform typically divine works.
- Therefore, he cannot have been divine by nature.

A SECOND OBJECTION

- The dyophysite response to this argument is that all language of empowerment or authorization should be understood with reference to the humanity of Jesus.
- **Gregory of Nazianzus:** “This ‘receiving’ belongs to his manhood.” *Oration 30.9*

A SECOND OBJECTION

- The rejoinder to make is that **the New Testament never says this**. There is no qualified talk of Jesus's human nature in the New Testament at all but only of the person Jesus himself.

A SECOND OBJECTION

- **“God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power”** (Acts 10:36).
- This sentence speaks of Jesus the person being anointed with power. But one cannot be given what one already has. If Jesus were divine by nature, then he would already have power and his becoming incarnate would not have changed this. Thus, this verse implies that Jesus is *not* divine by nature.

A SECOND OBJECTION

- **“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me”** (Matt. 28:18).
- If Jesus were divine by nature, he would already possess all authority in heaven and on earth. His becoming incarnate would not have changed that about him, since he does not cease to be God in becoming human. But he could not be given what he already has. If he already possessed all authority in heaven and on earth, then he could not be given these things by his Father. Therefore, this text implies that Jesus is not divine by nature.

A SECOND OBJECTION

- **“Therefore God exalted him and gave him the name that is above every other name, so that at the name given to Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:9–11).**
- If Jesus were divine by nature, he would already be as highly exalted as possible and would already possess the name that is above every name. His becoming incarnate would not have changed this about him, since he would not have ceased to be God in becoming human. And Jesus cannot be given what he already has. Yet this text says that Jesus was granted exaltation and the name that is above every name. This means that he is not divine by nature.

A SECOND OBJECTION

- The dyophysite theory requires that one qualify all such language so that it refers to Jesus's humanity in some way.
- Either the human nature of Jesus is made powerful, or else Jesus is made capable of exercising power through his human nature which he did not possess before.
- **The New Testament does not say any of this.** And the goal of interpretation is not to reconcile the text to one's preferred theory but rather to ground one's theory in the text.

A SECOND OBJECTION

- Hans-Georg Gadamer wrote that the “first, last, and constant task” of an interpreter is “to let himself be guided by the things themselves” and “to keep one’s gaze fixed on the thing throughout all the constant distractions that originate in the interpreter himself.” Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 279.
- The proper method in interpretation is to let the text be *magister* (teacher) and the interpreter to be *discipulus* (student).
- We must allow the New Testament texts to dictate how we interpret them, rather than trying to reconcile their way of speaking with our own theories.

THE PROBLEM WITH DYOPHYSITISM

- Not only does the NT never say that Jesus possesses divine power and authority by nature, but it also says that his divine power and authority is given to him by God. This implies that he is not divine by nature, since he could not be given power and authority that he would possess naturally.
- The dyophysite doctrine requires that the NT's language in this respect be understood in a qualified way to refer to Christ's humanity. Yet the NT itself never says this. The qualification demanded by dyophysite theology is never found in the NT itself. The NT itself does not talk about Jesus the way that dyophysite theologians do.
- This suggests to me that the NT's theology is not dyophysite. It does not understand Jesus Christ to be a single person in two natures, one divine and the other human.

SUMMARY

- **The basic argument for dyophysitism:** Because things are said of the human Jesus in the NT which normally can only be said of God (or of a person with a divine nature), therefore Jesus is both human and God (or a person with a divine nature).
- **The first objection:** This argument is logically invalid. It is possible for Jesus to possess qualities that are proper to God in a derivative manner, which would not entail that he is divine by nature.
- **The second objection:** The NT asserts that Jesus's divine power and authority has been granted to him by God. But he cannot be given what he already has, and he would already have divine power and authority if he were divine by nature. Therefore, the NT's language implies that Jesus is not divine by nature.