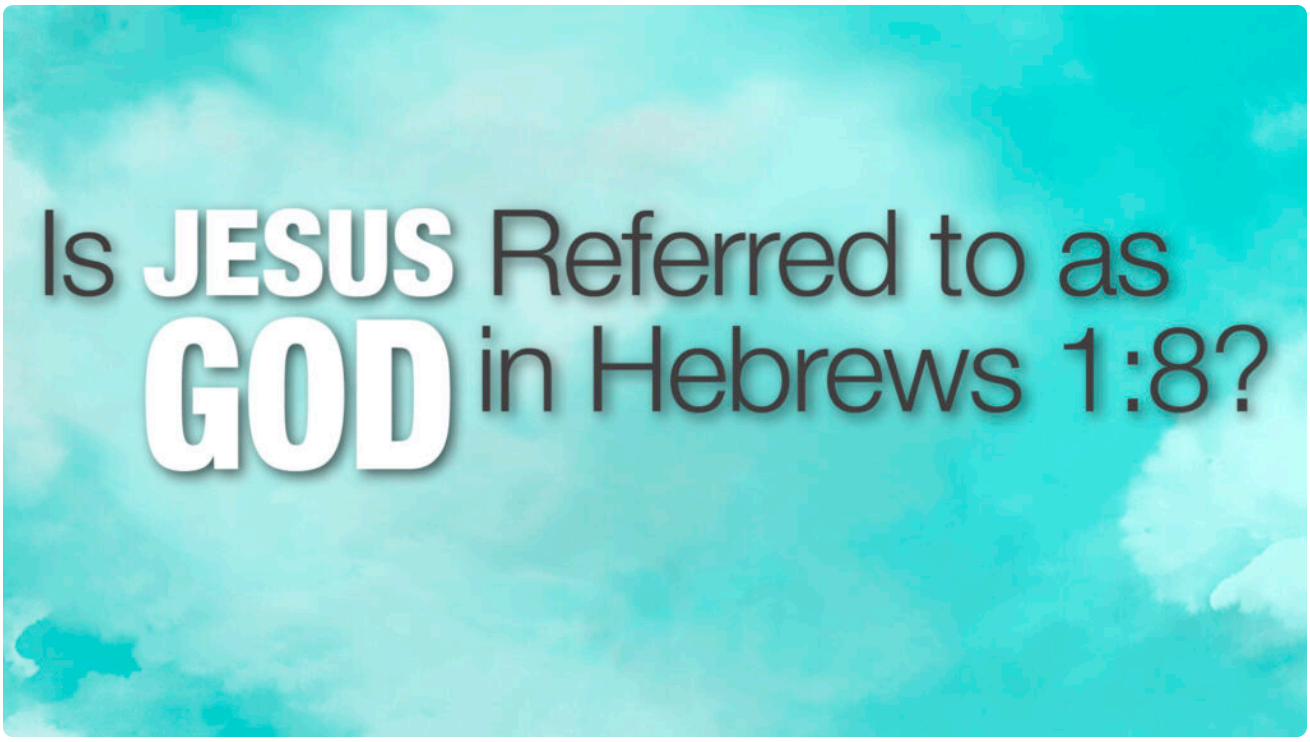


Is Jesus Referred to as God in Hebrews 1:8?

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Considerable discussion has surrounded the meaning of Hebrews 1:8 which reads in the NKJV: "But to the Son He says: 'Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; a scepter of righteousness is the scepter of Your Kingdom.'" This verse is actually a quotation of Psalm 45:6. The 2013 edition of the Jehovah's Witnesses *New World Translation* renders Psalm 45:6 as "God is your throne forever and ever." Moving to the Hebrews writer's quotation of Psalm 45:6, the *New World Translation* 2013 edition reads: "But about the Son, he says: 'God is your throne forever and ever…'" Observe that these renderings depict God the Father as saying to Jesus the Son that God the Father is Jesus' throne. Apart from the fact that the rendering is nonsensical, it flies in the face of Greek grammar and linguistic considerations.

The discussion centers around whether "God" (*theos*) is intended to be the subject, or a predicate nominative, or a vocative nominative. If the first is intended, the phrase would be translated "God is your throne." If the second is intended, the phrase would be rendered "your throne is God." If the third possibility, the vocative nominative, is intended, the phrase should be translated "Your throne, O God, is forever…" The bulk of scholarship treats the third possibility as the appropriate rendering

based on strong linguistic/grammatical evidence for the vocative use in which Jesus is addressed as "God." Wallace offers an extensive discussion of the three syntactical possibilities and gives four grammatical reasons why the third option is the correct one.[1]

Additional Greek scholars confirm Wallace's observations. For example, in his *Handbook to the Grammar of the Greek Testament*, Samuel Green notes: "When the Nominative is used for the Vocative in direct address, the Article is prefixed" and he gives Hebrews 1:8 as an instance of this Greek idiom, describing it as "elliptical."[2] Alford indicates either of the first two renderings "seems forcing them from their ordinary construction," describing the rendering "Thy throne is God" as "repugnant to the decorum."[3] Noting that the nominative case is often used for the vocative, Clarke notes that "the original Hebrew cannot be consistently translated any other way" and that the predicate nominative rendering "will not make the sense contended for without adding *esti* to it" (*esti* being the third person singular of the verb "to be"—DM).[4] Indeed, Lenski rightly observes that "here we have a vocative even in the Hebrew as well as in the LXX [Septuagint—DM] and in Hebrews, and only the unwillingness of commentators to have the Son addressed so directly as *Elohim*…'God,' causes the search for a different construction…. The Son is 'God' in the fullest sense of the word."[5] Delitzsch similarly observed: "God is neither the substance of the throne, nor can the throne itself be regarded as a representative or figure of God: in this case the predicative Elohim would require to be taken as a genitive…which, however, cannot possibly be supported in Hebrew by any syntax."[6] In his classic treatment of the Psalms, Alexander likewise opposed the first two possibilities: "To avoid the obvious ascription of divinity contained in the first clause, two very forced constructions have been proposed…. The explanation of *God* as a vocative is not only the most obvious,…but is found in all the ancient versions and adopted in the New Testament."[7] In his celebrated treatment of the psalms, Leupold agreed that the third possibility is "the simple and obvious translation, upheld by all the prominent versions."[8] Barnes asserted that Psalm 45:6 "is undoubtedly an address to the 'king' here referred to as God—as one to whom the name God may be properly applied; and, as applied to the Messiah by the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, it clearly proves that Christ is Divine."[9] In his comments on Hebrews, Barnes adds: "The word *God* should be taken in its natural and obvious sense…. The *form* here—*the God*—is in the vocative case and not the nominative…. This then is a direct address to the Messiah, calling him God…. [f]ull proof that the Lord Jesus is divine."[10] Linguistic authorities could be multiplied endlessly. The Jehovah's Witnesses' renderings of Psalm 45:6 and Hebrews 1:8 are unjustifiable. Jesus is God.

Endnotes

[1] Daniel Wallace (1996), *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), p. 59; also Daniel Wallace (2000), *The Basics of New Testament Syntax* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), p. 36.

[2] Samuel Green (1880), *Handbook to the Grammar of the Greek Testament* (New York: Fleming Revell), pp. 213,224.

[3] Henry Alford (1980 reprint), *Alford's Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker), p. 20.

[4] Adam Clarke (n.d.), *Clarke's Commentary on the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon), pp. 365-366.

[5] R.C.H. Lenski (2001 reprint), *The Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and of the Epistle of James* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson), p. 54.

[6] F. Delitzsch (1976 reprint), *Commentary on the Old Testament: Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 5:82-83.

[7] Joseph Alexander (1975 reprint), *The Psalms Translated and Explained* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker), p. 203.

[8] H.C. Leupold (1969 reprint), *Exposition of the Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker), p. 361.

[9] Albert Barnes (2005 reprint), *Notes on the Old Testament: Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker), p. 32.

[10] Albert Barnes (2005 reprint), *Notes on the New Testament: Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker), p. 38.

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