

Notes on 1 John 5:20

Is the Father the true God, or is Jesus the true God? Or are both the true God? In 1 John 5:20 the question comes down to grammar, and specifically the Greek word "this" (*outos*).

1Jn 5:20 And we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know him that is true, and we are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. **This is [Gr. *outos estin*] the true God, and eternal life.**

There are many lines of evidence that *outos* in this verse is referring to Jesus and not the Father.

1. Grammar favors a reference to the nearest antecedent, and Jesus is the nearest antecedent.

Robertson states the rule:

"But *outos* does, as a rule, refer to what is near or last mentioned and *exei vos* to what is remote." - A.T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*

According to this rule, Jesus Christ being the nearest antecedent to the words *outos estin* ("this is" or "he is"), means that He is the one whom John is identifying as the true God and Eternal Life.

Dr. Robert A. Morey explains why we should view this as a statement about Christ:

"This passage, more than any other, illustrates the importance of following the normal rules of Greek grammar. The word *houtos* is a pronoun. No one can disagree with this. As a pronoun, *houtos* would naturally refer back to the person just mentioned. No one can disagree with this either." - Robert A. Morey, *The Trinity: Evidence and Issues*, pg. 354

2. Jesus is the prominent subject of the epistle. He begins his letter by describing the Son as "the Word of life", "the life", and "that eternal life":

1 John 1:1-3 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of **the Word of life**; (For **the life** was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you **that eternal life**, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;) That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.

Thus it would be very strange if John would end his first epistle, which began by calling Him "the eternal life" would now shift the focus away from Him.

3. John's great object in both his gospel and in this epistle is to tell us who and what Christ is. He begins his gospel with "the Word" who "was God" being made flesh (John 1:1-18). He ends his gospel by glorifying Jesus, stating that "even the world itself could not contain the books that should

be written" about Him. We should expect that his epistle, which also begins with "the Word of life", would follow the same pattern as his gospel and end by glorifying Jesus.

Robert M. Bowman summarizes this pattern (*inclusio*), seen in both John's gospel and in his first epistle:

"In [1 John] 1:2 the 'eternal life' is Jesus Christ (who was "with the Father"), an apparent example of *inclusio* (repetition of a theme or idea at the beginning and end of a text)." - Robert M. Bowman, *The Biblical Basis of the Doctrine of the Trinity: An Outline Study*

4. John uses the language of "this one is...", "this is he...", "the same is he..." in reference to Jesus repeatedly in his writings (John 1:30, 33, 34; 4:29, 42; 6:14, 42, 50, 58; 7:18, 25, 26, 40, 41; 1 John 5:6), but not once for the Father.

There are approximately 70 instances in which "this" (Gr. *outos*) is referring to a person. The majority of these references are to Jesus. Significantly, in none of these instances is the Father in reference (see Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*, pp. 326,327 - <https://tinyurl.com/1john520>).

Earlier in the chapter John uses this same formula for Jesus: "This is he ... Jesus Christ" (1 John 5:6).

5. John always refers to Jesus as "Life" (John 1:4; 5:26; 6:33,48; 8:12; 11:25; 14:6) and "Eternal Life" (e.g. 1 John 1:2; 5:11,12), but he never once refers to the Father as "Eternal Life" or bestows the appellation of "Life" upon the Father.

While both the Father and Jesus possess life (John 5:26; 6:57), John consistently points to Jesus as the source and fountain of life (John 11:25; 14:6). And if John has clearly stated that the true God is also the Eternal life, it follows that the only way that Christ can be the Eternal Life is if He is also the true God.

Thus, it seems certain that John is identifying Jesus as the true God, especially when he has already referred to Christ as the Eternal Life at the start of his epistle.

6. John applies the adjective "true" (Gr. *alethinos*) to Jesus many times:

"the true Light" (John 1:9)

"the true Bread" (John 6:32)

"the true Vine" (John 15:1)

"the true One" (Revelation 3:7)

"the true Witness" (Revelation 3:14)

That this word is also applied to the Father (John 17:3) is evidence that both the Father and the Son are the "true God".

7. According to John, Jesus is the Light that provides illumination for every person in the world to find eternal life:

"In him was life; and the life was the **light of men**. And the **light** shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not." - John 1:4,5

"The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world." - John 1:9 (ESV)

"Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the **light of the world**: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the **light of life**." - John 8:12

"As long as I am in the world, I am the **light of the world**." - John 9:5

"Then Jesus said unto them, Yet a little while is **the light** with you. Walk while ye have **the light**, lest darkness come upon you: for he that walketh in darkness knoweth not whither he goeth. While ye have **light**, believe in **the light**, that ye may be the **children of light**. These things spake Jesus, and departed, and did hide himself from them." - John 12:35,36

"I have come into the world as **light**, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness." - John 12:46 (ESV)

The Old Testament makes it clear that it is from *Yahweh's* light that believers receive the illumination which leads to eternal life:

"For thou wilt **light** my candle: the LORD my God [*Yahweh, Elohim*] will **enlighten** my darkness." - Psalm 18:28

"The LORD [*Yahweh*] is my **light** and my **salvation**; whom shall I fear?" - Psalm 27:1

"For with thee [*Yahweh, Elohim* vss. 6,7] is the **fountain of life**: in **thy light** shall we see light." - Psalm 36:9

"O house of Jacob, come ye, and let us walk in the **light** of the LORD [*Yahweh*]." - Isaiah 2:5

"Arise, shine; for thy **light** is come, and the **glory** of the LORD [*Yahweh*] is risen upon thee. For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the LORD [*Yahweh*] shall arise upon thee, and his **glory** shall be seen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall come to thy **light**, and kings to the **brightness** of thy rising." - Isaiah 60:1-3

In order for Christ to be the true Light, He must be the true God. If Jesus is not the true God, then John would be ascribing a divine characteristic of *Yahweh* to an entity not worthy of this appellation.

8. John giving Jesus the title "the true God" would be wholly consistent with his affirmation of Jesus as fully God (John 1:1,2,18; 5:17,18,23; 8:58; 9:38; 10:30-36; 14:9; 20:28; c.f. Revelation 19:10; 22:8,9).

If John said, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God", and "all things were made by Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made", and who recorded Jesus as saying, "I am my Father are one", and the declaration of Thomas, "my Lord and my God", then it should not be surprising or controversial that John applies to Him the appellation "the true God".

9. John records the confession of Thomas in John 20:28:

"And Thomas answered and said unto him, **My Lord and my God.**"

What makes Thomas' confession (which Christ blesses and accepts) remarkable is that his words echo what the prophet David wrote in the Psalms concerning *Yahweh*:

"Stir up thyself, and awake to my judgment, even unto my cause, **my God and my Lord.** Judge me, O LORD my God [*Yahweh, Elohim*], according to thy righteousness; and let them not rejoice over me." - Psalm 35:23,24

The only way a monotheistic Jew like Thomas and John could ever proclaim that Jesus is Lord and God is if they believed that Jesus is *Yahweh* Incarnate!

10. John begins his gospel by explaining who Jesus is (John 1:1-18) and he concludes in the same way (John 20:28-30). In his epistle, John begins by affirming Jesus' humanity (1 John 1:1-4) and it would make sense that he concludes with an affirmation of His deity (1 John 5:20).

"For here the full identity of Jesus with God is recognized without reserve (note the article with *theos*, God). This seems to occur intentionally at the end of the letter, at the climax of the triumphant expression of faith. It is hardly an accident that it is precisely from the beginning (1:1, 18) and the end (20:28) of the Gospel of John that the light of Jesus' divinity shines forth most fully. The climactic Christological confession becomes visible here in all its clarity." - Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles*, pg. 263.

11. If "the true God" refers to the Father in the last clause of 1 John 5:20 then we have a tautology (needless repetition of a statement). John would be saying, "the true God is the true God".

"In the first place, if *houtos* has as its antecedent 'the real God' (the Father), then the statement is a tautology; John would say: 'This *real* God is the *real* God.' He would say it after having twice said: we know the real God and are in the real God." - Robert A. Morey, *The Trinity: Evidence and Issues*, pg. 357

12. There would likely be no controversy over who "this" (Gr. *outos*) refers to in this text were it not for the fact that the subject is being called "the true God" (Gr. *theos alēthinos*). If the text simply said "This is Eternal Life", there would be no controversy and everyone would agree that "this" is referring to Jesus Christ. The grammar is unequivocal that it's referring to Jesus, but the controversy arises because it's calling Him *Theos* (God).

13. If John was not here calling Jesus "the true God", then he made himself liable to be misunderstood by the use of this expression. In the very next verse he admonishes his readers to guard against idolatry - that is, the sin of worshiping one who is not God as if he were the true God. Since the grammar of the text is so naturally interpreted to be referring to Jesus, if John did not intend to call Jesus the true God, then he was opening up his readers to the very sin that he warns against by making it likely that this expression would be misconstrued by the majority of his readers.
14. So strong is the grammatical and exegetical evidence that the subject of the last clause of the verse is Jesus Christ, that the ESV, NIV, NIRV, NLV, NLT and other versions rightly express the view that "this" (Gr. *outos*) is Jesus: "*He* is the true God and eternal life."
15. According to John, who is in agreement with the other inspired author of Scripture, both the Father and the Son are identified as the only true God:
- a. The Bible is clear that there is only one God (Deuteronomy 6:4; Isaiah 44:6; Jeremiah 10:10; Mark 12:29-31).
 - b. Jesus stated that the Father is the only true God (John 17:3; c.f. 1 Corinthians 8:6).
 - c. At the same time, Jesus is the God of Thomas and, by extension, the God of all the disciples (John 20:28; c.f. Titus 2:13; 2 Peter 1:1).
 - d. Since Jesus is the disciples' God, and since they only have one God over them, Jesus must, therefore, be the only true God as well.
 - e. Yet Jesus is not the Father, but is personally distinct from Him (John 1:1,2; 8:17-19; 17:5,24).
 - f. Although they are personally distinct from each other, Jesus and the Father are united as one (John 10:30; 14:9; 17:21), possessing the same glory and each receiving the same honor and worship (John 5:22,23; 9: 35,38; 17:5; 20:28; Acts 1:24; 7:59,60; 2 Corinthians 12:3-9; Philippians 2:9-11; 1 Thessalonians 3:11,12; 2 Thessalonians 2:16,17; 1 Timothy 1:2; Hebrews 1:6; Revelation 5:11-14).
 - g. The Scriptures are emphatic that *Yahweh* alone is to be worshiped, since He does not share His glory and praise with any other (Exodus 34:14; 2 Kings 17:35,36; Isaiah 42:8; 45:5,6; Matthew 4:10; Revelation 19:10; 22:9).
 - h. This means that both the Father and the Son are identified as *Yahweh*.
 - i. Therefore, since the Father is the only true God, and Jesus is one with Him, sharing His name, glory, honor, worship, and divine works, then Jesus is also the only true God.