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## Is Jesus God?

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# Is Jesus God?

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Have you ever met a man who is the focus of attention wherever he goes? Some mysterious, indefinable characteristic sets him apart from all other men.

Well, that's the way it was two thousand years ago with Jesus Christ.

Jesus' greatness was obvious to all those who saw and heard him. And while most great people eventually fade into history books, Jesus is still the focus of thousands of books and endless media controversy. And much of that controversy centers on the radical claims Jesus made about himself—claims that astounded both his followers and his adversaries.

Jesus' unique claims caused him to be viewed as a threat by both the Roman authorities and the Jewish hierarchy. Although he was an outsider with no credentials or political powerbase, within three years, Jesus changed the world for the next 20 centuries. Other moral and religious leaders have left an impact on our world—but nothing like that unknown carpenter's son from Nazareth.

What was it about Jesus Christ that made the difference? Was he merely a great man, or something more?

Some believe Jesus was merely a great moral teacher; others believe he was simply the leader of the world's greatest religion. But many believe something far more. Christians believe that God actually visited us in human form. And they believe the evidence backs that up.

After carefully examining Jesus' life and words, former Oxford scholar and skeptic, C. S. Lewis, came to a startling conclusion about him that altered the course of his life. So, who is the real Jesus? Many will answer that Jesus was a great moral teacher, but nothing more. As we take a deeper look at the world's most controversial person, we begin by asking: could Jesus have been merely a great moral teacher?

## Great Moral Teacher?

Even those from other religions acknowledge that Jesus was a great moral teacher. Indian leader, Mahatma Gandhi, spoke highly of Jesus' righteous life and profound words.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, Jewish scholar Joseph Klausner wrote,

It is universally admitted ... that Christ taught the purest and sublimest ethics ... which throws the moral precepts and maxims of the wisest men of antiquity far into the shade.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount has been called the most superlative teaching of human ethics ever uttered by an individual. In fact, much of what we know today as "equal rights" is largely the result of Jesus' teaching. Historian Will Durant, a non-Christian, said of Jesus that,

...he lived and struggled unremittingly for 'equal rights'; in modern times he would have been sent to Siberia. 'He that is greatest among you, let him be your servant'—this is the inversion of all political wisdom, of all sanity.<sup>3</sup>

Many, like Gandhi, have tried to separate Jesus' teaching on ethics from his claims about himself, believing that he was simply a great man who taught lofty moral principles.

But if Jesus falsely claimed to be God, he couldn't have been a good moral teacher. Before we look at what Jesus claimed, we need to examine the possibility that he was simply a great religious leader?

## Great Religious Leader?

Surprisingly, Jesus never claimed to be a religious leader. He never got into religious politics or pushed an ambitious agenda, and he ministered almost entirely outside the established religious framework.

When one compares Jesus with the other great religious leaders, a remarkable distinction emerges. All other religions provide instruction for a way of living. But only Jesus offers deliverance, forgiveness for sin, and personal life transformation through faith in him. Jesus' teaching message was simply "Come to me" or "Follow me" or "Obey me." Also, Jesus made it clear that his primary mission was to forgive sins, something only God could do.

And that leads us to the question of what Jesus really did claim for himself; specifically, did Jesus claim to be God?

## **Did Jesus Claim to Be God?**

In *The World's Great Religions*, Huston Smith observed that of all great religious leaders, only Jesus claimed to be divine.<sup>4</sup>

What is it that convinces many scholars that Jesus claimed to be God? Author, John Piper explains that Jesus claimed power which uniquely belonged to God. He cites a few of Jesus' radical claims,

...Jesus' friends and enemies were staggered again and again by what he said and did. He would be walking down the road, seemingly like any other man, then turn and say something like, 'Before Abraham was, I am.' Or 'If you have seen me, you have seen the Father.'

Or, very calmly, after being accused of blasphemy, he would say, 'The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.' To the dead he might simply say, 'Come forth,' or 'Rise up.' And they would obey. To the storms on the sea he would say, 'Be still.' And to a loaf of bread he would say, 'Become a thousand meals.' And it was done immediately.<sup>5</sup>

But what did Jesus really mean by such statements? Is it possible Jesus was merely a prophet like Moses or Elijah, or Daniel? Even his enemies acknowledged that no prophet ever spoke like Jesus (John 7:46).

The Gospels reveal that Jesus claimed to be someone more than a prophet. No other prophet had made such claims about himself; in fact, no other prophet ever put himself in God's place.

Although Jesus never explicitly said, "I am God," He also never said, "I am a man," or "I am a prophet." Yet Jesus was undoubtedly human, and his followers considered him a prophet like Moses and Elijah.

In fact, Jesus' statements about himself contradict the notion that he was simply a great man or a prophet.

- On more than one occasion, Jesus referred to himself as God's Son.
- He told Philip, "If you've seen me, you've seen the Father" (John 14:9).

- He said, “I and my Father are one” (John 10:30).

So, the question is: “Was Jesus claiming to be the Hebrew God who created the universe?”

## **Did Jesus Claim to Be the God of Abraham & Moses?**

In the Hebrew Scriptures, when Moses asked God his name at the burning bush, God answered, “I AM (Yahweh).” God was revealing to Moses that he is the one and only God who is outside of time and has always existed.

Since the time of Moses, no practicing Jew would ever refer to himself or anyone else by “I AM” (Yahweh). The name was holy and revered exclusively for God. Yet Jesus referred to himself as “I am,” when telling the Pharisees, “Before Abraham was, I am.”

As a result, Jesus’ “I AM” claims infuriated the Jewish leaders. One time, for example, some leaders explained to Jesus why they were trying to kill him: “Because you, a mere man, have made yourself God.”<sup>6</sup>

These Old Testament scholars knew exactly what Jesus was saying—he was claiming to be God, the Creator of the universe. It is only this claim that would have brought the accusation of blasphemy. To read into the text that Jesus claimed to be God is clearly warranted, not simply by his words, but also by their reaction to those words. Former atheist C. S. Lewis explains the shock Jesus’ claim had on the Jewish leaders:

Then comes the real shock, among these Jews there suddenly turns up a man who goes about talking as if He was God. He claims to forgive sins. He says He always existed. He says He is coming to judge the world at the end of time.<sup>7</sup>

To Lewis, Jesus’ claims were simply too radical and profound to have been made by an ordinary teacher or religious leader (For a more in-depth look at Jesus’ claim to deity, see Appendix page 82, Did Jesus claim to be God?).

## **What Kind of God?**

Some have argued that Jesus was only claiming to be part of God. But the idea that we are all part of God, and that within us is the seed of divinity, is simply not a possible meaning for Jesus’ words and actions.

Jesus taught that he is God in the way the Jews understood God and the way the Hebrew Scriptures portrayed God, not in the way the New Age movement understands God. Neither Jesus nor his audience had been weaned on Star Wars, and so when they spoke of God, they were not speaking of cosmic forces.

Lewis explains,

Now let us get this clear. Among Pantheists, like the Indians, anyone might say that he was a part of God, or one with God....

But this man, since He was a Jew, could not mean that kind of God. God, in their language, meant the Being outside the world, who had made it and was infinitely different from anything else.

And when you have grasped that, you will see that what this man said was, quite simply, the most shocking thing that has ever been uttered by human lips.<sup>8</sup>

Although there are still people who believe Jesus was just a great moral teacher, Lewis argued that such a belief defies logic. He writes,

I am trying here to prevent anyone from saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say.<sup>9</sup>

In his quest for truth, Lewis knew that he could not have it both ways with the identity of Jesus. Either Jesus was who he claimed to be—God in the flesh—or his claims were false. And if they were false, Jesus could not be a great moral teacher. He would either be lying intentionally, or he would be a lunatic with a God complex.

## **Could Jesus Have Been Lying?**

Having dismissed the possibility that Jesus was merely a great moral teacher, Lewis concluded he was either lying, or he was a self-deluded lunatic—or he was who he claimed to be—the Son of God.

If Jesus was lying, the question we must deal with is: What could possibly motivate Jesus to live his entire life as a lie? He taught that God was opposed to lying and hypocrisy, so he wouldn't have been doing it to please his Father. He certainly didn't lie for his followers' benefit, since all but one were martyred rather than renouncing his Lordship.

Do historians believe Jesus lied? Scholars have scrutinized Jesus' words and life to see if there is any evidence of a defect in his moral character. In fact, even the most ardent skeptics are stunned by Jesus' moral and ethical purity.

According to historian Philip Schaff, there is no evidence, either in church history or in secular history that Jesus lied about anything. Schaff argued,

How, in the name of logic, common sense, and experience, could a deceitful, selfish, depraved man have invented, and consistently maintained from the beginning to end, the purest and noblest character known in history with the most perfect air of truth and reality?<sup>10</sup>

To go with the option of liar is in direct contradiction to everything Jesus taught, lived, and died for. To most scholars, it just doesn't make sense. Yet, to deny Jesus' claims, one must come up with some explanation. And if Jesus' claims are not true, and he wasn't lying, the only option remaining is that he must have been self-deceived.

## **Could Jesus Have Been Self-Deceived?**

Lewis considered this option carefully. He deduced that if Jesus' claims weren't true, then he must have been insane. Lewis reasons that someone who claimed to be God would not be a great moral teacher.

He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell.<sup>11</sup>

Most who have studied Jesus' life and words acknowledge him as extremely rational—the opposite of someone self-deceived. Although his own life was filled with immorality and personal skepticism, the renowned French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) acknowledged Jesus' superior character and presence of mind, stating,

When Plato describes his imaginary righteous man...he describes exactly the character of Christ. ...If the life and death of Socrates are those of a philosopher, the life and death of Jesus Christ are those of a God.<sup>12</sup>

The claims of Jesus Christ force us to choose. As Lewis stated, we cannot put Jesus in the category of being just a great religious leader or good moral teacher. Neither does the evidence support him being a liar or madman. This former skeptic

challenges us to make up our own minds about Jesus, stating,

You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.<sup>13</sup>

In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis explores the options regarding the identity of Jesus, concluding that he is exactly who he claimed to be. His careful examination of the life and words of Jesus led this great literary genius to renounce his former atheism and become a committed Christian.

The greatest question in human history is, “Who is the real Jesus Christ?” Lewis and countless others have concluded that God visited our planet in human form.

In the next chapter we will examine the historical and textual evidence demonstrating the overwhelming reliability of the New Testament.

Endnotes