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# Did Jesus Claim to Be God?

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Free media and discipleship resources for pastors, leaders, and growing disciples.

# Did Jesus Claim to Be God?

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At the core of Christianity is the belief that God came to earth in the Person of his Son, Jesus Christ.

At least two of those who saw and wrote about Jesus called him the Creator of the universe. The apostle John said, “All things were made by Him, and without Him nothing was made (John 1:3). The apostle Paul said, “All things were made by Him and for Him” (Colossians 1:16).

As J. I. Packer explains, “The gospel tells us that our Creator has become our Redeemer.”<sup>1</sup> Because this conviction is the central theme of Christianity, denying the deity of Jesus Christ places a dagger into the heart of the Christian message.

But did Jesus really claim to be God, or is that a teaching that evolved over time? Since Jesus spoke Aramaic (a dialect of Hebrew), we need to understand what his claims meant to his Aramaic-speaking audience. How did they react to his claims?

Since his Jewish audience was immersed in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament), we need to also understand Jesus’ claims about himself in light of their teaching about God.

## Did Jesus Teach God is One?

The Bible reveals God as the sole Creator of the universe. He alone is infinite, eternal, all powerful, all-knowing, personal, righteous, loving, just, and holy. Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, God says, “I alone am God. There is no other God; there never has been and never will be. I am the Lord, and there is no other Savior” (Isaiah 43:10-11, NLT).

When God spoke to Moses at the burning bush 1500 years before Christ, he told Moses his name is Yahweh, (I AM) (English translation: Jehovah or LORD). Since that time, the foundational Scripture (Shema) for Judaism has been: “Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God is one LORD” (Deuteronomy 6:4).

It is in this world of monotheistic belief in one God that Jesus Christ began making claims that astounded all who heard them.

The question we must ask is: did Jesus equate himself with Yahweh, the one true God who spoke with Moses at the burning bush?

To find out, let's look further at the names Jesus used for himself, and what those names meant to his Jewish audience. Who did they think Jesus was claiming to be?

## **Did Jesus use God's Name for Himself?**

As Jesus' popularity swelled with the masses, the Jewish leaders (Pharisees, Sadducees, and Scribes) began to see Jesus as a threat. Suddenly they began looking for ways to trap him.

One day Jesus was debating some Pharisees at the Temple, when suddenly he said, "I am the light of the world." It is almost bizarre to picture this scene, where a traveling carpenter from the lowlands of Galilee tells these PhD's in religion that he is "the light of the world?"

Believing Yahweh alone is the light of the world, they replied indignantly:

"You are making false claims about yourself" (John 8:13 NLT).

Jesus then told them that, 2,000 years earlier, Abraham had foreseen him.

Their response was incredulous: "You aren't even fifty years old. How can you say you have seen Abraham?" (John 8:57 NLT).

Then Jesus shocked them even more with words no ordinary man would dare to say: "The truth is, before Abraham was, I AM" (John 8:58 NLT).

To the shock of the religious leaders who heard him, Jesus claimed to have always existed with God the Father, meaning he never had a beginning.

Furthermore, he had used the I AM title (Greek translation: ego eimi),<sup>2</sup> the sacred name for God! These religious experts lived and breathed the Old Testament Scriptures declaring Yahweh alone as God.

It's easy to understand the rage of those who realized Jesus was speaking of himself as God. Since the penalty for blasphemy was death by stoning, the Jewish leaders angrily picked up stones to kill Jesus. At that point Jesus could have said, "Wait! You misunderstood me—I'm not claiming to be Yahweh." But Jesus didn't alter his statement, even at the risk of being killed.

C. S. Lewis explains their anger:

He says... “I am begotten of the One God, before Abraham was, I am,” and remember what the words “I am” were in Hebrew. They were the name of God, which must not be spoken by any human being, the name which it was death to utter.<sup>3</sup>

Some may argue that this was an isolated instance, and Jesus never meant to use God’s holy name for himself. But Jesus also used “I AM” for himself on several other occasions. Imagine the religious leaders’ reactions upon hearing Jesus’ other radical claims:

- “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12)
- “I am the way, the truth and the life” (John 14:6)
- “I am the only way to the Father” (John 14:6)
- “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25)
- “I am the Good Shepherd” (John 10:11)
- “I am the door” (John 10:9)
- “I am the living bread” (John 6:51)
- “I am the true vine” (John 15:1)
- “I am the Alpha and Omega” Revelation 1:7-8)

As Lewis observes, if these claims were not from God himself, Jesus would have been deemed a lunatic. But what made Jesus credible to those who heard him were the numerous miracles he performed, and eventually his resurrection from the dead.

Jesus called himself “Son of man,” and “Son of God” on several occasions. Let’s examine the meaning of those names in context of how his Jewish audience understood them.

## **What Did Jesus Mean by Son of Man?**

Over eighty times in the New Testament Jesus refers to himself as “Son of man.” So, what did Jesus mean by Son of man, and what did it mean to his Jewish audience?

Packer writes that the name, Son of man referred to Jesus’ role as Savior-King, fulfilling the messianic prophecy of Isaiah 53.<sup>4</sup> In other words, God’s Messiah would be a man. Yet, the prophet Isaiah also said that the child who would be born would

be the “Mighty God,” “Everlasting Father,” Prince of Peace,” indicating he would be both man and God (Isaiah 9:6).

By calling himself the Son of man, Jesus was also referring to himself as the fulfillment of Daniel’s prophecy. Daniel prophesies,

I looked, and there before me was one like a Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him (Daniel 7:13-14).

In Luke 21:27, Jesus said that when he returns to earth, he will fulfill Daniel’s prophecy of the Son of man. “Then everyone will see the Son of man arrive on the clouds with power and great glory.”

So, why is the Son of man being worshiped, when God alone is to be worshiped—unless he is God? Jesus’ claim to be the “I AM,” and his claim to be the Son of Man point to his claim to deity.

## **What Did Jesus Mean by Son of God?**

Jesus also claimed to be the “Son of God.” This title doesn’t mean Jesus is God’s biological Son. Nor does it imply inferiority any more than a human son is inferior in essence to his father. A son shares his father’s DNA, and although he is different, they are both equal as men.

Scholars say that the term “Son of God” in the original languages refers to likeness, or “of the same order.” Jesus meant by it that he has divine essence, or in 21st century terms, the “DNA of God”. Professor Peter Kreeft explains,

What did Jesus mean when he called himself the “Son of God?” The son of a man is a man. (Both “son” and “man,” in the traditional language, mean males and females equally.) The son of an ape is an ape. The son of a dog is a dog. The son of a shark is a shark. And so, the Son of God is God. “Son of God” is a divine title.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus continually referred to his Father as God. And in John 17 Jesus refers to his Father as “the one true God.” However, in the same passage, Jesus speaks about the glory he and his Father shared before the world began. How could Jesus have existed eternally with the Father unless he and his Father shared the same divine attribute of eternal existence?

Packer explains what Jesus meant by using the term, “Son of God.”

When, therefore, the Bible proclaims Jesus as the Son of God, the statement is meant as an assertion of his distinct personal deity.<sup>6</sup>

Jesus’ use of the names, “I AM,” “Son of Man,” and “Son of God,” all point to the fact that he was claiming equality with God. Certainly, that’s the way the Jewish leaders understood him.

But if Jesus was truly claiming to be God, did he make it known in other ways? To find out, we need to examine Jesus’ actions during his three-year ministry. Did he speak and act with the authority of God? Or did he simply speak for God like Moses and other prophets?

## **How Could Jesus Forgive Sin?**

In the Jewish religion, forgiveness of sin was reserved for God alone. Forgiveness is always personal; someone else cannot do the forgiving for the person offended, especially if the Person offended is God. But on several occasions Jesus acted as if he was God by forgiving sinners. His jaw-dropping claim to forgive sins infuriated the Jewish religious leaders who witnessed Jesus’ claim to forgive the sins of a man with palsy.

Mark records the instance. “The scribes who heard him said blasphemy! Who but God can forgive sins!” (Mark 2:7).

That’s just the point; no man has the right or authority to speak for God when it comes to forgiveness of sins. Lewis imagines the stunned reactions of all those who heard Jesus. Lewis wrote:

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.

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>7</sup>

## **What Did Jesus Mean by Being “One with God?”**

Those who listened to Jesus, observed his moral perfection, and saw him perform miracles, wondered if he was the long-promised Messiah. Finally, in order to find out, his opponents surrounded him at the Temple, asking: “How long are you going to keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.”

Jesus answered, “The proof is what I do in the name of my Father.” He compared his followers with sheep saying, “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish.” He then revealed to them that “the Father is greater than all,” and that his deeds were “at the Father’s direction.” Jesus’ humility must have been disarming. But then Jesus dropped a bombshell, telling them, “The Father and I are one.” (John 10:25-30).

Some argue that Jesus only meant he was in agreement with God. But if Jesus had meant that he was merely in agreement with God, why did the Jews respond by picking up stones to kill him? Their understanding of Jesus’ claim to be one with his Father becomes clear in the follow-up conversation.

Jesus then asked them, “At my Father’s direction I have done many things to help the people. For which one of these good deeds are you killing me?”

They replied, “Not for any good work; but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, have made yourself God” (John 10:33). Once again, Jesus could have denied that he was God—but the fact that he didn’t is evidence that his statement about being one with the Father was a claim to deity.

## **Was Jesus the image of God?**

As Jesus was preparing his disciples for his upcoming death on the cross and departure, Thomas wanted to know where he was going and the way there. Jesus answered Thomas:

I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me. If you had known who I am, then you would have known who my Father is. From now on you know him and have seen him (John 14:6).

They were confused. Philip then speaks up, asking Jesus to “show us the Father.” Jesus answers Philip with these shocking words: “Philip, don’t you even yet know who I am, even after all the time I have been with you? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father!” (John 14:9). In effect Jesus was saying, “Philip if you want to see the Father, look at me!”

In John 17 Jesus reveals that this oneness with his Father had existed in eternity past, “before the world began.” According to Jesus, there has never been a time when he did not share God’s very glory and essence.

It wasn’t just Jesus’ enemies who were astounded at his jaw-dropping words. John Piper writes,

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>8</sup>

## **Why Did Jesus Accept Worship?**

Nothing is more fundamental to the Hebrew Scriptures than the fact that God alone is to be worshiped. In fact, the first of the sacred Ten Commandments is,

“Do not worship any other gods besides me” (Exodus 20:3, NLT).

The most terrible sin a Jew could commit was to either worship another creature as God, or to receive worship. So, if Jesus is not God, it would be blasphemy for him to receive worship. That is why the words of his disciple, Thomas, are so significant.

After Jesus’ resurrection, the other disciples told Thomas they had seen the Lord alive (see John 20:24-29). The skeptical Thomas scoffed, telling them he would only believe if he could put his fingers on the nail wounds of Jesus’ hands and into his pierced side.

Eight days later the disciples were all together in a locked room when the resurrected Jesus suddenly appeared in front of them. Jesus looked at Thomas and told him to “Put your finger here and see my hands. Put your hand into the wound in my side.” Thomas needed no more proof. He instantly believed, exclaiming to Jesus: “My Lord and my God!”

Thomas could have simply called him, “Lord.” However, he further called Jesus “God,” and worshiped him. If Jesus is not God, he certainly should have reprimanded Thomas right there. But instead of reprimanding Thomas for worshiping him as God, Jesus commended him, saying: “You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who haven’t seen me and believe anyway.”

Jesus accepted worship on nine recorded occasions. In context of Jewish belief, Jesus’ acceptance of worship speaks volumes about his claim to deity. But it was after Jesus ascended to heaven that his disciples fully understood. Before Jesus left earth, he told them to “baptize new disciples in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19), putting both the Holy Spirit and himself on the same level as the Father.

## **Was Jesus the Alpha and Omega?**

While John the apostle was in exile on the Island of Patmos, Jesus revealed to him in a vision the events that will occur in the last days. In the vision, John describes the following incredible scene:

“Look! He comes with the clouds of heaven. And everyone will see him—even those who pierced him.... I am the Alpha and the Omega—the Beginning and the End,” says the Lord God. “I am the one who is, who always was, and who is still to come, the Almighty One.” (Revelation 1:7-8, NLT).

So, who is this Person who is called “the Alpha and Omega,” “the Lord God,” “the Almighty One”? We are told that he was “pierced.” Jesus is the one who was pierced on the cross.

Then John sees Jesus on a throne, judging people from every nation. “And I saw a great white throne, and I saw the one who was sitting on it. ... And the one sitting on the throne said ... “I am the Alpha and the Omega—the Beginning and the End” (Revelation 20:11; 21:6).

It is the Lord Jesus Christ who reigns from the throne. Jesus had already told his disciples that he would be the final judge of men. Then, in the following verse, Jesus removes all doubt about whether he is God. As the Alpha and Omega, Jesus says, “All who are victorious will inherit all these blessings, and *I will be their God*, and they will be my children” (Revelation 21:7).

So, did Jesus claim to be God?

- He did so by calling himself, I AM.
- He did so by calling himself the Son of Man.
- He did so by calling himself the Son of God.
- He did so by forgiving sin.
- He did so by accepting worship.
- He did so by rising from the dead.
- He did so by claiming to be the Alpha and Omega.
- He did so by saying, “I will be their God.”

C. S. Lewis writes of Jesus’ uniqueness as both God and man. “What is beyond all space and time, what is uncreated, eternal, came into nature, descended into His own universe, and rose again.”<sup>9</sup>

And, his purpose was to become our Savior, making it possible for us to live eternally with God. As Packer writes, “Our Creator has become our Redeemer.”

Jesus’ claim to be God the Son needs to be understood in the context of his oneness with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 13:14; Matthew 28:19). The Bible teaches that all three persons of the Godhead are one in essence, attributes and eternal existence. The early church fathers called this unique oneness of God in three distinct persons the “Trinity.”

So, what did the apostles and early church fathers believe about Jesus’ deity? To find out, read the article, “[Did the Apostles Believe Jesus is God?](#)”

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## Endnotes