



## Did Jesus think he was God?

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*This talk was originally given at Nottingham Trent University as a lunchtime talk. We apologise that the quality of the sound recording was limited due to the the sound equipment available and the location at which the talk was given. The notes provide a full account of the talk. The question and answer session is available separately so that this can be listened to on its own if preferred.*

### I. Introduction: Who did Jesus really think he was?

Recently there has been a lot of speculation concerning the real identity of Jesus, especially with *The Da Vinci Code* and *The Gospel of Judas* in the news this last year. The question we are considering is, did *Jesus himself* think he was just a great teacher, a social revolutionary, a prophet, a miracle worker even, but still just a human being? Or, did *he* think he was more? Did he think he was what Christians have been claiming for almost 2000 years, to be the unique, eternal Son of God; that is, God incarnate – God in human flesh?

This is a big topic to tackle, but it is an important one. If Jesus was just a human being, then although his teaching may be special, it can be added to the common pot of human religious wisdom. But if he was somehow God, we had better pay more careful attention to what he said.

### A prior question and a careful approach

There is also a starting point that is behind the question, 'Did Jesus claim to be God?' and needs some attention. That is: What do we mean by

'God'? There are many ideas of this floating around today. For instance, much of Western thinking is influenced by Greek thought that had God at a distance, a god who did not enter time and space or get personal with people. The God of Plato and Aristotle was this way, as well as the god of the Arians (an early group related to Christianity). The Jehovah's Witnesses, and even Islam, and many other people today view God in this basic way. But this was not the God of the Jews of Jesus' day, or the God depicted in the Bible. The God of the Bible can enter time and space and has an enormous interest in revealing himself to people and interacting with them personally. We need to be careful with the ideas we are already bringing to the question, 'Did Jesus think he was God?' I am using the idea of God found in the Bible which was the common view of the Jews in Jesus' day.

Also, *how* we approach this question of Jesus' identity is important. I think we would all agree that we should go to the most reliable historical sources of what Jesus said and did, and look through them for any statements that would shed light. Since he lived in the first century of this era, we need to go to sources that have proved themselves to be sound historical sources that fit that first century. Through a lot of study for myself I have come to the conclusion that the gospels in the Bible are the earliest and best historical sources concerning the life and words of Jesus.

### Implicit and explicit claims

Also, if one looks carefully through the gospels, one will find that Jesus did make claims to deity. There are both implicit claims and explicit claims. The implicit ones are things like:

The authority he indirectly claimed for himself – this was demonstrated in what he taught, as well as specific titles he claimed for himself that he then supported with miracles.

The explicit ones are direct statements that to someone in the first century would have clearly been an unambiguous claim to be God.

Unfortunately, we do not have space to look at his implicit claims in detail. But let me at least mention a couple of things about them. These kinds of claims to deity are the most numerous

that Jesus made. This was because he was a master-teacher and did not want to overwhelm his audience.

For instance, the titles he took for himself contained implicit claims to deity, sometimes bordering on the explicit. Claiming to have authority to forgive sin,<sup>1</sup> exorcising demons in his own authority,<sup>2</sup> calling himself the Bread of Life,<sup>3</sup> the Resurrection and the Life,<sup>4</sup> the Way, the Truth, and the Life,<sup>5</sup> the Light of the World,<sup>6</sup> the Son of Man,<sup>7</sup> the Son of God,<sup>8</sup> and even the Messiah,<sup>9</sup> to a first century Jewish mindset all had at least some implications of deity. Many books have been written on how these titles implied deity. There are a number of recommendations in the footnotes.<sup>10</sup>

However, I want to spend the bulk of our time on the most *explicit* claim Jesus made to be God in human flesh.

## II. An explicit claim: 'I AM' in John 8:58

Jesus' boldest statement<sup>11</sup> as to his divine identity is in John 8:56–59. Jesus made it during one of the many confrontations he had with the Jewish leaders of his day. It also contains two implicit claims:

'Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.' 'You are not yet fifty years old,' the Jews said to him, 'and you have seen Abraham!' *'I tell you the truth,' Jesus answered, 'before Abraham was born, I am!'* At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds.

Permit me to make some observations on this short account.

1) Jesus starts with the well known formula, 'I tell you the truth' or a more literal and precise translation, 'Truly, truly I say to you' (or as the AV puts it, 'Verily, verily I say unto you'). Jesus *uniquely* used this phrase to introduce his teaching instead of 'Thus says the Lord...' He did it to show he was claiming an authority greater than any other biblical prophets.<sup>12</sup> No other Hebrew prophet, or scribe, or religious leader had ever spoken with that kind of personal authority. This is one reason why people were so amazed at his

teaching. He was claiming not only divine inspiration, like a prophet would, but also divine authority and *the power of direct divine speech!*<sup>13</sup> This is a strong implicit claim to deity.

2) Jesus asserts that he didn't just live before Abraham, but that he is eternal. He didn't say 'I was' but I AM.<sup>14</sup> He lives in the eternal present tense. Jesus drew a contrast between himself and Abraham - the created vs. the uncreated, the temporal vs. the eternal.<sup>15</sup> The attribute of eternity in this sense is an attribute of God only. This is an even stronger implicit claim to deity. This is also what separates the Bible's view of Jesus from those of groups like the Arians, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and Islam, as mentioned earlier.

3) By calling himself, I AM, Jesus was claiming for himself the personal name of Israel's God, Yahweh. This is the name God used when he revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush. Consider Exodus 3:14:16

*God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM. That is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'*

In Hebrew, this name came to be expressed in the form 'Yahweh' and was held to be the most holy name of God. Its meaning also spoke of not just eternal existence, but of the loving, comforting, eternal presence of God with his people.<sup>17</sup> Jesus was in effect saying, 'Before Abraham was even born, I have always been your God.'

This is an explicit claim to deity to be Israel's God that could not have been said more strongly to that particular audience. *(It would be like saying in English, 'I am your God', or to a Muslim, 'I am your god, Allah.' It was of that strength and clarity to that audience. I realised this during the question time following this talk.)*

4) And the Jewish leaders understood it this way. They took it as a clear assertion of deity, and that Jesus was identifying himself as the God they worshipped.<sup>18</sup> That is why they picked up stones to stone him. That was the penalty for blasphemy from the Law of Moses.<sup>19</sup> They took it for a clear, unambiguous assertion of deity before multiple witnesses that he could be legally held

accountable for. And this was the crucial charge the Jewish leaders brought against him at his trial; a charge which they condemned him for, and had him crucified for.<sup>20</sup>

### III. Conclusion: Why is this important?

So Jesus may have claimed to be God in human flesh – so what? Why does that make a difference to us today?

1) First of all, Jesus' identity is not a peripheral issue to Christianity. If he was not God in human flesh he was not the Saviour, he is not the eternal Lord and Judge. According to the gospels, Jesus focused all attention on himself. He made himself the centre attraction for salvation and approach to God.<sup>21</sup> One early church history scholar observed that Christians have believed this from the very beginning – it is not some idea that Christians invented later and put back into Jesus' mouth.<sup>22</sup> He observed that:

*the oldest Christian sermon, the oldest account of a Christian martyr, the oldest pagan report of the Church, and the oldest liturgical prayer (1 Cor. 16:22) all refer to Christ as Lord and God... Clearly it was the message of what the church believed and taught that 'God' was an appropriate name for Jesus Christ.*<sup>23</sup>

In fact, the very existence of Christianity as a distinct religion cannot be explained apart from the belief that Jesus died and rose again from the dead, and that He was God in human flesh. Without these things early Christianity would have merely been a pietistic Jewish reform movement; a mere footnote in history books.<sup>24</sup>

2) Jesus presented himself as the *only* means by which a person could be forgiven of their sins, enter heaven after death, and have a personal relationship with God in this world and the next. There are many verses which support this but the clearest is perhaps John 3:16:

*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

Jesus made greater claims for himself than any major religious figure, before or since. You owe it to yourself to consider them with as objective and

sincere a mindset as you can. I can testify that if you do you will not be disappointed. I have found Jesus to be the loving and just Saviour and Lord that he claims to be. He also claims he will be our eternal judge concerning eternal punishment or eternal life. It would be better to deal with him now, than later, just in case this is true.

Jesus said:

*For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day (John 6:40 NIV).*

See the website, [www.spotlights.org](http://www.spotlights.org).

### Some additional quotes:

*Jesus thought he was the person appointed by God to bring in the climactic saving act of God in human history. He believed he was the agent of God to carry that out—that he had been authorized by God, empowered by God, he spoke for God, and he was directed by God to do this task. So what Jesus said, God said. What Jesus did was the work of God.*

*Under the Jewish concept of agency, 'a man's agent is as himself.' Remember how Jesus sent out his apostles and said, 'Whatever they do to you, they've done to me'? There is a strong connection between a man and his agent whom he sends on a mission.*

*Well, Jesus believed he was on a divine mission, and the mission was to redeem the people of God. The implication is that the people of God were lost and that God had to do something – as he had always done – to intervene and set them back on the right track. But there was a difference this time. This was the last time. This was the last chance.*

*Did Jesus believe he was the Son of God, the anointed one of God? The answer is yes. Did he see himself as the Son of Man? The answer is yes. Did he see himself as the final Messiah? Yes, that's the way he viewed himself. Did he believe that anybody less than God could save the world? No, I don't believe he did.<sup>25</sup>*

Concerning the title Son of God, and Jesus' use of

## 'My Father'

*To date nobody has produced one single instance in Palestinian Judaism where God is addressed as 'my Father' by an individual person ... Nowhere in the literature of the prayers of ancient Judaism ... is this invocation of God as Abba to be found, neither in the liturgical nor in the informal prayers.*<sup>26</sup>

Concerning the use of the Divine name: 'I AM'

*where I am, there is God, there God lives, speaks, calls, asks, acts, decides, loves, chooses, forgives, rejects, hardens, suffers ... Nothing bolder can be said or imagined.*<sup>27</sup>

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## References

1 Luke 5:20.

2 Luke 4:35.

3 John 6:35.

4 John 11:25

5 John 14:6.

6 John 8:12

7 John 1:51.

8 John 3:16, 17.

9 Matthew 16:15–17.

10 Here are some: Bauckham, Richard, *God Crucified*, Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 1998. McDowell, Josh and Wilson, Bill, *He Walked Among Us*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993, 311–18; Harris, Murray J., *Jesus as God*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1992. Strobel, Lee, *The Case For Christ*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998. Wells, David F., *The Person of Christ*,

11 Morris, Leon, *The Gospel According to John*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1971, 474, citing Stauffer, E., *Jesus and His Story*, London: 1960, 159.

12 'Second, Jesus' use of 'am n' expresses his authority. The expression frequently attributed to Jesus, 'Truly, truly I say to you', is historically unique and is recognised on all hands to have been used by Jesus to preface his teaching.' Craig, William Lane, *Reasonable Faith*, Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1994, 248. Also note this: 'It is insufficient to compare it to "thus says the Lord", although that is the closest parallel. Jesus is not merely speaking for Yahweh, but for himself and on his own authority – something a prophet did not do in any authoritative utterance addressed to God's people .... This strongly suggests that he considered himself to be a person of authority above and beyond what prophets claimed to be. He could attest to his own truthfulness and speak on his own behalf, and yet his words were to be taken as having the same or greater authority than the divine words of the prophets. Here was someone who thought he possessed not only divine inspiration, like David ... but also divine authority and the power of direct divine utterance.' Witherington III, Ben, *The Christology of Jesus*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990, 188.

13 Matthew 7:28–29.

14 'That is a supreme claim to Deity; perhaps the most simple and sublime of all the things he said with that great formula of old, the great 'I AM'. Not, I was. That would simply mark priority, the priority of existence. But the 'I am' claims the eternity of existence, antedating the whole of the Hebrew economy, existing in the eternal Being. These are the words of the most impudent blasphemer that

ever spoke, or the words of God incarnate.' Morgan, G. Campbell, *The Gospel According to John*, Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 161. Also Morris, *John*, 474, and Tenney, Merrill C., *John: The Gospel of Belief*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976, 150.

15 Westcott, Brooke Foss, *The Gospel According to St. John*, Greenwood, South Carolina: Attic Press, Inc., 1958, 140.

16 'It is not easy to render into Greek the Hebrew underlying passages like Exod. 3:14. The LXX translators did so with the use of the form we have here. It is an emphatic form of speech and one that would not normally be employed in ordinary speech. Thus to use it was to recognizably adopt the divine style.' Morris, *John*, 473. See also Isaiah 41:4 and 43:11–13.

17 Walvoord, John F. and Zuck, Roy B. (eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Old Testament Edition edn., Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1985, 112, and Gaebelin, Frank E. (ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990, 2:320–21.

18 Tenney, *John*, 150. See also John 1:1, 5:18; 20:28; Phil. 2:6; and Col. 2:9.

19 Exodus 20:7; Leviticus 24:16.

20 Luke 22:16–71. Though Pilate convicted him on the basis of him being 'The King of the Jews' – a political offence a pagan Roman would recognise, the Jewish leaders used this political charge to get him convicted and executed by the Romans. In their minds, the real charge was theological: blasphemy – Jesus claiming to be God in the

person of the Messiah. Bromiley, Geoffrey W. (ed.), *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1979, 2:1050, Geldenhuys, Norval, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979, 588.

21 Small, Keith, 'Jesus' Self-consciousness as a Prophet: A Biblical Quranic Comparison', Masters of Theology thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1988, 59.

22 Actually, this is what the Qur'an does – assert a new view of Jesus and puts it back into the mouth of Jesus – from a distance of more than five centuries. The view of Jesus in the Qur'an does not present a credible first-century view of Jesus or the setting in which he ministered. Instead, it is a view of Jesus that would have him more at home in the religious discussions of the 500s and 600s AD.

23 Craig, *Reasonable*, 243, citing Pelikan, Jaroslav, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, Chicago: University of Chicago, 1971, 173. He is referring here to events in Acts 2 and 7 from before 70 AD, and the Roman writer Pliny the Younger writing in about 111 AD. (Bruce, F.F., *Jesus & Christian Origins Outside the New Testament*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974, 23–25). Three of four of these were written within the lifetimes of the Apostles well before 70 AD.

24 Barnett, Paul, *The Birth of Christianity: The First Twenty Years*, After Jesus, Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005, 185–87; Craig, William Lane, *The Son Rises*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1981, 127–34; Craig, *Reasonable*, 289–98; McDowell, Josh and Larson, Bart, *Jesus: A Biblical Defense of His Deity*, San Bernardino, California: Here's Life Publishers, 1983, 77–86; Marshall, I. Howard, *The Origins of*

*New Testament Christology*, Leicester: Apollos, 1990, 119; Strobel, *Case*, 139–41.

25 Ben Witherington III quoted in Strobel, *Case*, 140–41.

26 Craig, *Reasonable*, 244–45, citing Jeremias, Joachim, *The Central Message of the New Testament*, London: SCM Press, 1965, 16, 19.

27 Morris, *John*, 474, citing Stauffer, *Jesus*, 159.