

# Did Jesus Claim to be God?

Did Jesus really claim to be God, or is that belief a misunderstanding of his words? Some words Jesus spoke reflect his humility as a servant and his limitations as a man. However, on other occasions Jesus made claims that only God could make.

Jesus didn't parade around the hills of Judea shouting, "Hey everybody, look at me – I'm God!" On the other hand, neither did he go around proclaiming, "I am a teacher," "I am a prophet," or, "I am the Messiah." Yet his followers called him by each of those names. They also called him, "Lord."

After the apostles died, several first and second century church leaders wrote of Jesus' deity. In fact, early church historian Larry Hurtado states, that from the very beginning of the church Jesus was worshipped as Lord along with God the Father.[1]

But what did Jesus Christ say about himself? What did Jesus mean by the terms, "Son of Man," and "Son of God?" If Jesus wasn't God, why did his enemies accuse him of "blasphemy?" More importantly, if Jesus wasn't God, why did he accept worship?

## From Creator To Carpenter?

According to the New Testament, God came to earth in the Person of His Son, Jesus Christ.[2] The Bible teaches that Jesus is not a created being like the angels, but is the very Creator of the universe.[3] As theologian J. I. Packer writes, "The gospel tells us that our Creator has become our Redeemer." [4]

The New Testament reveals that, in accordance with his Father's will, Jesus temporarily set aside his power and glory to become a tiny helpless baby. As he grew, Jesus worked in a carpenter shop, experienced hunger, got tired, and suffered pain and death like us. Then at age 30 he began his public ministry.

## One God

The Bible reveals God as the Creator of the universe. He is infinite, eternal, all powerful, all-knowing, personal, righteous, loving, just, and holy. He created us in His image, and for His pleasure. According to the Bible, God made us to have an eternal relationship with Himself.

When God spoke to Moses at the burning bush 1500 years before Christ, He reaffirmed that He is the only God. God told Moses His name is Yahweh, (I AM). (Most of us are more familiar with the English translation, Jehovah or LORD.) [5] At the time of Christ, each worship service began with a recitation of the Shema. [6]

"Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God is one LORD." (Deuteronomy 6:4)

It is in this world of monotheistic belief that Jesus entered into, ministered in, and began making claims that astounded all who heard them.

And according to Ray Stedman, Jesus is the central theme of the Hebrew Scriptures.

"Here, in the form of a living, breathing human being, is the one who satisfies and fulfills all the symbols and prophecies of Genesis through Malachi. As we move from the Old Testament to the New, we find that one person, Jesus of Nazareth, is the focal point of both Testaments." [7]

But if Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament, his claims should confirm that "God is one LORD," beginning with what he called himself. Let's look further.

## God's Sacred Name

When Jesus began his ministry, his miracles and radical teaching immediately drew huge crowds, creating a frenzy of excitement. As his popularity swelled with the masses, the Jewish leaders (Pharisees, Sadducees, & 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 told them he is “the light of the world.” It is almost bizarre to picture this scene, where a traveling carpenter from the lowlands of Galilee tells these PhDs in religion that he is “the light of the world?” Believing that Yahweh is the light of the world, they replied indignantly:

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

Then Jesus 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:

“The truth is, before Abraham was, I AM.” (John 8:58 NLT)

Out of the blue, this maverick carpenter with no degree in religion claimed to eternal existence. Furthermore, he had used the I AM title (ego eimi),[8] the sacred Name of God for Himself! These religious experts lived and breathed the Old Testament Scriptures declaring Yahweh alone as God. They knew the Scripture spoken through Isaiah:

“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)

Since the penalty for blasphemy was death by stoning, the Jewish leaders angrily picked up stones to kill Jesus. They thought Jesus was calling himself, “God.” At that point Jesus could have said, “Wait! You misunderstood me—I am not 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.”[9]

Some may argue that this was an isolated instance. But Jesus also used “I AM” for himself on several other occasions. Let’s look at some of these, trying to imagine our reactions upon hearing Jesus’ 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” Rev.1:7,8)

As Lewis observes, if these claims were not from God Himself, Jesus would have been deemed a loony. But what made Jesus credible to those who heard him were the creative miracles he performed, and his wise authoritative teaching.

## Son of Man

Some say that Jesus didn't intend the name I AM to mean he is God. They argue that Jesus' reference to himself as the "Son of Man," proves he didn't claim divinity. So what is the context of the title, "Son of Man," and what does it mean?"

Packer writes that the name, "Son of Man" referred to Jesus' role as Savior-King, fulfilling the messianic prophecy of Isaiah 53.[10] Isaiah 53 is the most comprehensive prophetic passage of the coming Messiah, and clearly depicts him as the suffering Savior. Isaiah had also referred to the Messiah as "Mighty God," "Everlasting Father," "Prince of Peace" Isaiah 9:6).

Additionally, many scholars say Jesus was referring to himself as the fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy about the "son of man." Daniel prophesies that the "son of man" will be given authority over mankind and receive worship:

"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 worshipped him." (Daniel 7:13, 14)

So who is this "son of man," and why is he being worshipped, when God alone is to be worshipped. Jesus told his disciples that when he returns to earth, "Then everyone will see the Son of man arrive on the clouds with power and great glory" (Luke 21:27). Is Jesus saying here that he is the fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy?

## Son of God

Jesus also claimed to be the, "Son of God." This title does not mean Jesus is God's biological Son. Neither does the term "Son" imply inferiority anymore 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 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." [11]

In John 17, Jesus speaks about the glory he and his Father shared before the world began. But by calling himself the "Son of God" is Jesus claiming equality with God? Packer answers:

When, therefore, the Bible proclaims Jesus as the Son of God, the statement is meant as an assertion of his distinct personal deity." [12]

Thus, the names Jesus used for himself point to the fact that he was claiming equality with God. But did Jesus speak and act with the authority of God?

## Forgiving 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. The simmering religious leaders finally erupted at Jesus when he forgave the sins of a man with palsy right in front of them.

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

Lewis imagines the stunned reactions of all those who heard Jesus:

‘Then comes the real shock,’ wrote Lewis: ‘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.’[13]

## Claiming Oneness 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 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, (John 10:25-30)

“The Father and I are one.”

If Jesus had meant that he was merely in agreement with God, there would have been no strong reaction. But, the Jews again picked up stones to kill him. 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).

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 14:5-9)

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!”

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.

## **God’s Authority**

The Jews always regarded God as the ultimate authority. Authority was a well understood term in Roman-occupied Israel. At that time, Caesar’s edict could instantly launch legions into war, condemn or exonerate criminals, and establish laws and rules of government. In fact, Caesar’s authority was such that he himself claimed divinity.

Prior to leaving earth, Jesus explained the scope of his authority:

“Jesus said, ‘I have been given complete authority in heaven and on earth’” (Matthew 28:18, NLT).

In these remarkable words, Jesus is claiming to be the supreme authority, not just on earth, but in heaven also. John Piper observes,

“This is why 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.”[14]

Some might argue that since the authority came from his Father, it has nothing to do with Jesus being God. But God never gives His authority to a created being in order that they are to be worshipped. To do so would be to violate His Command.

## **Accepting Worship**

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

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

Thus, 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 to receive worship.

After Jesus’ resurrection, the disciples told Thomas they had seen the Lord alive (John 20:24-29). 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 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 worshipped Jesus as God! If Jesus is not God, he certainly should have reprimanded Thomas right there. But instead of reprimanding Thomas for worshipping 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 divinity. But it wasn’t until after Jesus ascended to heaven that his disciples fully understood. Before Jesus left earth, he told his apostles to “baptize new disciples in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19), putting both the Holy Spirit and himself on the same level as the Father.[15]

## 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.’”

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.” That makes it clear that the Alpha and Omega is Jesus. He is the one who was pierced on the cross.

John, who was closer to Jesus than any other disciple, sees the image of the Person speaking to him. He writes:

“And standing in the middle of the lampstands was the Son of Man....His head and his hair were white like wool, as white as snow. And his eyes were bright like flames of fire....And his face was as bright as the sun in all its brilliance (Rev. 1:13, 14, 16b).

It is impossible to grasp John’s emotions as he sees this Person shining like the sun in full strength, with eyes like flames of fire. He immediately fell as a dead man in front of the one he saw. If this was Jesus, why didn’t John know him? Perhaps he thought it was an angel? Let’s listen to John’s words.

“But he laid his right hand on me and said, ‘Don’t be afraid! I am the First and the Last. I am the living one who died. Look, I am alive forever and ever’” (Rev. 1:17)!

The One talking to John identifies himself as, “the First and the Last,” a clear reference to his eternity. And since only God is eternal, this must be God. But in the same sentence he tells John that he is “the living one who died.” Thus, we know this could not be God the Father because the Father never suffered death as a man.

“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 rules from the great white throne. Jesus had already told his disciples that he would be the final judge of men. He promised that those who put their trust in him would be saved from the judgment of sin, but those who reject him will be judged.

But did Jesus mean that he is really God the son, and not merely a created being like a prophet or an angel?

Jesus answers that question in the next verse: "All who are victorious will inherit all these blessings, and I will be their God, and they will be my children." (Revelation 20:7)

## Conclusion

So did Jesus claim to be God, or was he simply misunderstood. Let's take another look at Jesus' claims and ask: would Jesus have made such radical claims if he was not God?

- Jesus used God's Name for himself
- Jesus called himself "Son of Man"
- Jesus called himself "Son of God"
- Jesus claimed to forgive sin
- Jesus claimed oneness with God
- Jesus claimed all authority
- Jesus accepted worship
- Jesus called himself the "The Alpha and Omega"
- Jesus called himself "God"

Some might say, "how can we believe Jesus' claims? What proof did he leave?" Three days after his crucifixion, his disciples claimed they saw him alive. If their story was a hoax, it would have died out as the Romans submitted them to the most horrendous torture known to man. But their conviction and sincerity overpowered Rome and changed our world (See <http://y-jesus.com/wwrj/6-jesus-rise-dead>). Lewis explains the reason for their conviction:

"What is beyond all space and time, what is uncreated, eternal, came into nature, descended into His own universe, and rose again." [16]

This brilliant scholar had originally thought of Jesus as a myth, much like the man-made gods of Ancient Greece and Rome. But as he began to look at the evidence for Jesus Christ, he realized that the New Testament accounts of Jesus Christ are based upon solid, historical facts. (See <http://www.y-jesus.com/wwrj/4-are-the-gospels-true>) This former skeptic concludes his investigation of the evidence for Jesus Christ with these thoughts:

"You must make your choice: Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse ... But let us not come up with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us." [17]

Lewis discovered that a personal relationship with Jesus gave his life meaning, purpose, and joy that surpassed all his dreams. He never regretted his choice and became a leading spokesman for Jesus Christ. What about you? Have you made your choice?

## Endnotes

1. Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ* (Cambridge, UK, Eerdmans, 2003), 650.
2. John 1:1-14.
3. Hebrews 1:1-13.
4. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 189.
5. The Hebrew Scriptures sometimes join Yahweh (Jehovah) with an additional word to emphasize God's dealing with man. "Yahweh Elohim" and "Adonai Yahweh" are translated "Lord God," and "Yahweh Sabaoth" is translated "Lord of hosts." (C.I. Scofield, *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 6, 983.
6. George A. Barton, *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Macmillan, 1931), 39.
7. Ray C. Stedman, *Adventuring Through the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House, 1997), 479.

8. *Ego eimi* is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew name Isaiah used to describe God in Isaiah 43:10, 11. Dr. James White notes, "The closest and most logical connection between John's usage of *ego eimi* and the Old Testament is to be found in the Septuagint rendering of a particular Hebrew phrase, *ani hu* in the writings (primarily) of Isaiah. The Septuagint translates the Hebrew phrase *ani hu* as *ego eimi* in Isaiah 41:4, 43:10 and 46:4" (<http://www.aomin.org/EGO.html>).
9. C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2,000), 157.
10. Packer, 198.
11. Peter Kreeft, *Why I am a Christian*, Norman L. Geisler, Paul K. Hoffman, eds, "Why I Believe Jesus is the Son of God" (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001), 223.
12. Packer, 57.
13. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1972), 51.
14. John Piper, *The Pleasures of God* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2000), 35.
15. The Scriptures teach that God is omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, eternal and infinite. Although one in essence, He exists in three distinct, equal Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (trinity). Two examples in nature illustrate how one entity can exist in multiple forms. 1. Light appears in nature as a wave, a particle, and a visible spectrum. 2. Water is one its molecular essence (H<sub>2</sub>O), yet exists as steam, water, and ice. The God of the Bible, however, is beyond any natural analogy.
16. Lewis, *God in the Dock*, 80.
17. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 52.

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