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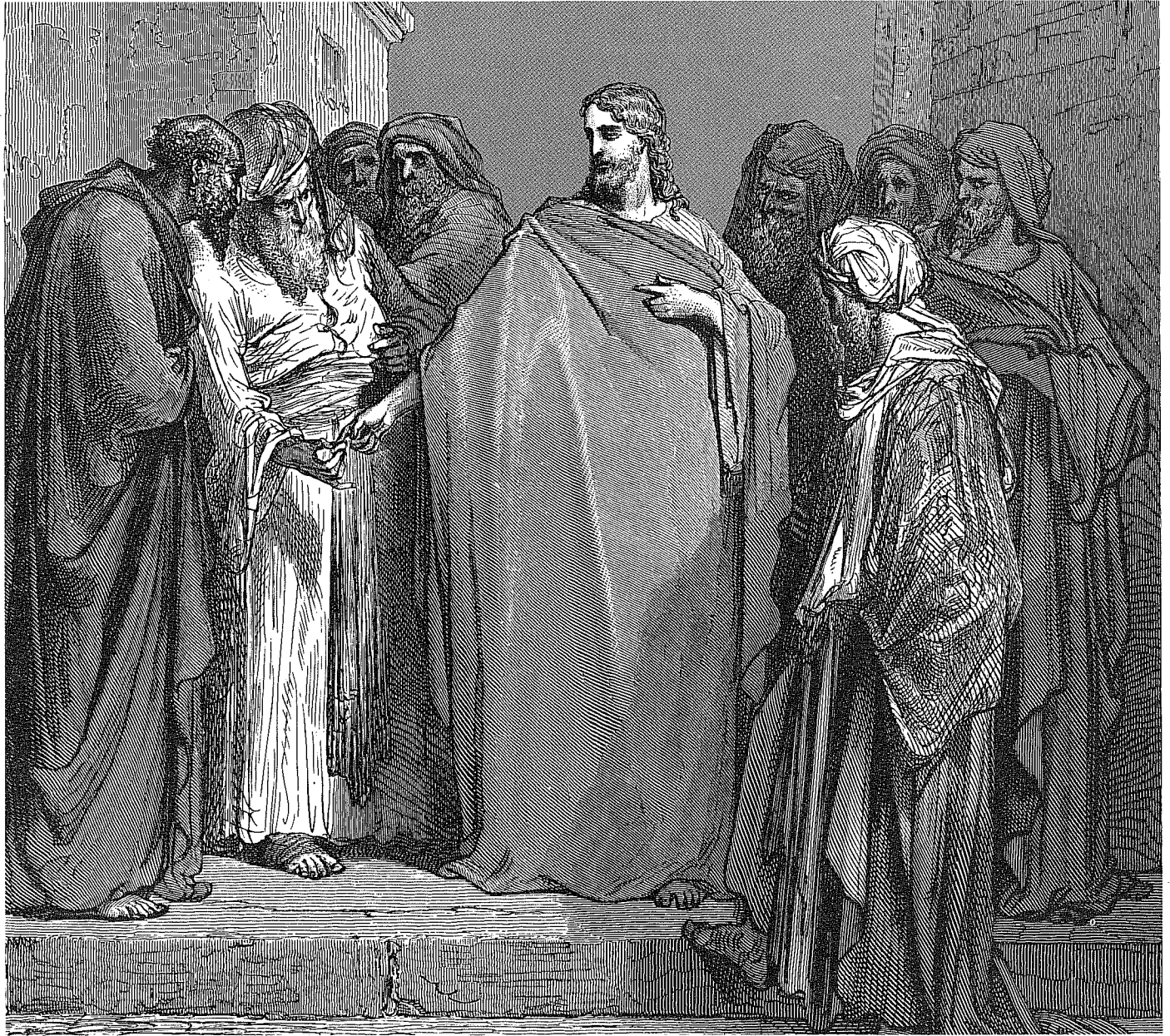
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Did Jesus Really Claim to Be God?



by Wayne A. Brindle

“What are we to make of Jesus Christ?” When C. S. Lewis asked that question, he laughed, for the picture of a fly pondering what it is going to make of an elephant has comic elements about it. “The real question,” he said, “is not what we are to make of Christ, but what is He to make of us?”

Nevertheless, throughout the history of the church many have raised the questions, “Who was Jesus Christ?

He claimed to be the Son of God, at the right hand of power, and the Son of Man who would come on the clouds of heaven.

Did He really claim to be who the church has made Him out to be?”

When I became a Christian, an agnostic asked me a startling question: “You realize, don’t you, that Jesus Christ never claimed to be God?” When we look at the Gospels, we discover that Jesus did indeed claim to be God, and He was clearly understood by those who heard Him to be claiming deity.

Jesus as the “I AM.” The phrase “I am” appears in the Old Testament in several places, with significant meaning. In Isaiah 45:18 “I am” represents

"Jehovah." Frequently the statement "I am he" is translated "I am" (Isa. 41:4; 43:10; 46:4). The expression was an alternate way of saying, "I am Jehovah," and means "I am he"; it is a way of expressing that He is the only God. In Isaiah "I am he" is always spoken by Jehovah. If anyone else uses the phrase, it is a false and presumptuous claim to be equal with God.

The origin of "I am" may be traced to Exodus 3:14, where God said that His name was "I am" or "I am that I am." By the time of Isaiah it had become a fixed formula. Jesus told the Jews in Jerusalem, "If ye believe not that I am he, ye shall die in your sins" (John 8:24).

Often, Jesus gives no predicate for the phrase "I am," either in the sentence or in the context. Most interpreters recognize this as a use by Jesus of the tetragrammaton (YHWH or Jehovah), the personal name of God, for Himself.

When the Jews declared that Jesus' offer of eternal life could not possibly be valid, since even Abraham died and Jesus was certainly not greater than Abraham, Jesus immediately disputed their assumptions. "Before Abraham was," He said, "I am" (John 8:58). The reference is unmistakably to the divine name of God.

Jesus claimed eternal existence, the self-existence that belongs to God alone. God applied this same phrase to Himself (Exod. 3:14). His mode of existence is an eternal present without beginning and without end, and this is Jesus' claim for Himself.

He sets up a double contrast with Abraham—a contrast of duration and mode of existence. "Abraham was"; "I am." Abraham "came to be," came into existence; "I am" eternal. "I am" is the claim to an existence above history and time, an existence "with God" (see John 1:1). It is not that Jesus is greater than Abraham, but that He does not compare at all. The "I am" was not used to compare Jesus with Abraham, but was to assert His deity.

In John 13:19, Jesus warns His disciples of something before it happens, so "that when it is come to pass, ye may believe that I am he." Jesus had spent several years sharing His identity with the disciples, and this particular demonstration of His omniscience would give them further proof of His deity and cause them to believe even more deeply.

When Jesus is arrested (John 18:5-8) and He identifies Himself by saying, "I am," or "It is I," it is not only self-

identification on Jesus' part, but an intentional assertion of the divine name. Even in the other Gospels the same is true. When Jesus says that "many shall come in my name, saying, I am" (Mark 13:6), can He not mean the same thing? Jesus reserves this name for Himself; only pretenders would use it otherwise. With such expressions Jesus unmistakably claims to be God.

Jesus as one with the Father. In John 10:28, Jesus claims in effect to be

He could have avoided Crucifixion simply by denying His deity. But instead he chose to make it clear.

all-powerful. He attributes the same kind of omnipotence to the Father. Then, in verse 30, Jesus explains the basis for this unity of power: "I and my Father are one."

The word translated "one" does not refer to a singleness of person between Jesus and the Father, but a "unity of essence," an identity of substance. Nor does it speak of mere unity of purpose; Jesus claims to be in the Father and the Father in Him (John 17:21).

We know that the Jews understood Jesus' claim to deity, because they attempted to kill Him for blasphemy (John 10:31). He was making Himself God (10:33). He did not deny it.

Jesus as the Son of God. At Jesus' first trial, the high priest could get no answer from Jesus, so he put Him under oath (Matt. 26:63) and asked Him directly, "Tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God." And under oath Jesus responded, "Thou hast said . . . Hereafter ye shall see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven" (v.64). Not only did Jesus answer that He was indeed the Christ, the Son of God, He also made definite assertions of His divine identity.

He claimed to be the Son of God, the one who would sit at the right hand of power, and the Son of Man who would come on the clouds of heaven. The Sanhedrin, the Jewish court, caught all three points, and the high priest responded by tearing his garments and

saying, "What further need have we of witnesses?"

Jesus was tried not for what He had done, but for who He was. He could have avoided His Crucifixion simply by denying His deity once and for all. But instead He chose to make it clear. And instead of accepting His statement on oath that He was who He claimed to be, the priests used it to execute Him.

As Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River, a voice out of the heavens said, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17). At the Transfiguration a voice from heaven declared to three of the disciples, "This is my beloved Son . . . hear ye him" (Matt. 17:5-7). Jesus accepted this announcement for what it was—the testimony of God. This was the highest witness given to Jesus' sonship, apart from His self-testimony.

Satan and his demons used "Son of God" as their most common designation for Jesus. When Satan came to Jesus, he prefaced his first two temptations with the phrase, "If thou be the Son of God" (Matt. 4:3-7).

The demons also knew Jesus to be "the Son of God" (Mark 3:11-12). They identified Him publicly (Luke 4:41), and Jesus never denied their testimony. In Mark 5:7-8 the demon called Jesus the "Son of the most high God."

Jesus also accepted the "Son of God" title from His disciples. After Jesus walked on the water and the wind ceased, the disciples said to Him, "Of a truth thou art the Son of God" (Matt. 14:33). In answer to Jesus' question, "Who say ye that I am?" Peter responded, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16-17).

Jesus responded with the words: "Flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven." Jesus impressed His disciples with the fact of His deity, and He accepted the title "Son of God" as being a direct revelation from God.

Nathanael's first response to Jesus was "Rabbi, thou art the Son of God" (John 1:49). Jesus accepted this title, and implied that this was only the beginning of faith: "Because I said unto thee, I saw thee under the fig tree, believest thou? Thou shalt see greater things than these" (John 1:50). Martha said to Jesus, "I believe that thou art the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world" (John 11:27). This was apparently the kind of faith that Jesus was looking for from her; He accepted it as an accurate description of Himself.

Jesus is worshiped as God. The Old Testament forbids worship of anyone but God (Exod. 20:1-4; Deut. 5:6-9). Men were not to accept worship (Acts 14:15) and even angels refused to be worshiped (Rev. 22:8-9). Yet Jesus received worship on various occasions without rebuking His worshipers.

When Jesus walked on the water, those who "were in the ship came and worshipped him" (Matt. 14:33). When a recently healed man was cast out of the temple, Jesus found him and introduced Himself as the Son of Man. The man immediately "worshipped him" (John 9:38). In effect Jesus was saying to the excommunicated man, "If they will not let you worship God in the temple, worship Him in Me here on this city pavement."

When the resurrected Jesus showed Himself to the women who came to the tomb, they "held him by the feet, and worshipped him" (Matt. 28:9). Jesus had used the same term when he told Satan, "It is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve" (Matt. 4:10). When the disciples later met Christ on the mountain in Galilee, they immediately wor-

shipped Him (Matt. 28:17). He responded by proclaiming His own sovereignty and authority.

Contrast these actions of Christ with the actions of some of the apostles. Peter refused to be worshiped by Cornelius (Acts 10:25-26), and Paul and Barnabas refused to be worshiped by the people of Lystra (Acts 14:15-18). They surely recognized that Jesus alone is God and worthy of worship.

Jesus placed Himself by the side of the Father and the Spirit as constituting one God.

Jesus as equal with God. Jesus claimed to be equal with God when He said, "For the Son of man is Lord even of the sabbath day" (Matt. 12:8). God created the Sabbath; only God is Lord of the Sabbath.

Jesus claimed that His own words were eternal: "My words shall not pass away" (Matt. 24:35; see Isa. 40:8). Jesus told the disciples to baptize the nations "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (Matt. 28:19). He thus placed Himself by the side of the Father and the Spirit as together with them constituting the one God, as equal in all respects to the Father and the Spirit.

In explaining why He healed on the Sabbath, Jesus said, "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work" (John 5:17-18). This aroused the Jews' anger for two reasons: Jesus was calling God His own Father, and Jesus was making Himself equal with God (v.18). Jesus wanted all to "honour the Son, even as they honour the Father" (John 5:23). Jesus here claimed, even demanded, the right for worship as God.

Jesus claimed, "If ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also" (John 8:19). Jesus put faith in Himself on a level with faith in God, when He said, "Believe in God, believe also in me" (John 14:1). To know Jesus fully is to know God.

On being asked by Philip to show the Father to the disciples, Jesus responded, "Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14:9). Philip

asked Him to show them GOD; Jesus rebuked him for ignorance of Himself. What Philip asked revealed his ignorance of what he saw—God Himself.

Jesus claimed the authority to forgive sins (Matt. 9:2-7). The Jews recognized that only God can forgive sins (Mark 2:7), and certainly no one can forgive sins committed against God except God Himself. So they accused Jesus of blaspheming when He said to the paralytic, "Thy sins be forgiven thee." The subsequent healing of the paralytic served to prove His authority.

Jesus even claimed to be sinless (John 8:46). His attitude was, "You, to whom I am talking, are all sinners," and He never remotely suggested that this same thing could be said against Him. Repentance is never seen in the life of Jesus. He never cried a tear of penitence, never cried for forgiveness, and never admitted a fault. Even His prayers asserted His sinlessness.

Did Jesus claim to be God? Jesus was never regarded as simply a moral teacher. C. S. Lewis wrote that "He did not produce that effect on any of the people who actually met Him. He produced mainly three effects—Hatred—Terror—Adoration." The consistent reaction of the Jewish leaders was to charge Jesus with blasphemy, which ultimately led to His Crucifixion (Mark 2:6-7; John 5:18; 8:59; 10:31,33; 19:7; Matt. 26:65; 27:40,43).

If Christ did not claim to be coequal with God, He then deliberately allowed the Jews to kill Him for what He never claimed—to kill Him for a mutual mistake, which He could have rectified by even once distinctly repudiating His deity.

Jesus affirmed His deity and equality with God, and took for Himself prerogatives appropriate only to such a position. Jesus accepted and even encouraged the titles appropriate only for God. The reaction of many who heard Him shows that they also understood that He was claiming to be God.

There is no parallel in other religions. The idea of a great moral teacher saying what Christ said is out of the question. In light of the fact that the apostles clearly distinguished between their words and the words of Jesus, the conclusion that Jesus claimed to be the almighty God Himself is inescapable.

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