

Making Himself Equal with God

Scripture: Daniel 7:13–14; John 1:1; John 6:62; John 10:30; John 12:45; John 14:9–10; John 17:5; Colossians 2:9; Titus 2:13

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Did Jesus really claim to be God incarnate in human flesh? Or, as skeptics argue, did His followers later invent those claims and attribute them to Him? Thankfully, the biblical account of His life and ministry leaves no doubt about who Jesus declared Himself to be.

Jesus frequently spoke of His unique, otherworldly origin, of having preexisted in heaven before coming into this world. To the hostile Jews He declared, "You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world" (John 8:23). "What then," He asked, "if you see the Son of Man ascending to where He was before?" (John 6:62). In His high-priestly prayer Jesus spoke of the glory which He had with the Father before the world existed (John 17:5). In John 16:28 He told His disciples, "I came forth from the Father and have come into the world; I am leaving the world again and going to the Father." Thus, John described Jesus in the prologue of his gospel with these words: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1).

Amazingly, Jesus assumed the prerogatives of deity. He claimed to have control over the eternal destinies of people (John 8:24; cf. Luke 12:8-9; John 5:22, 27-29), to have authority over the divinely-ordained institution of the Sabbath (Matthew 12:8; Mark 2:28; Luke 6:5), to have the power to answer prayer (John 14:13-14; cf. Acts 7:59; 9:10-17), and to have the right to receive worship and faith due to God alone (Matthew 21:16; John 14:1; cf. John 5:23). He also assumed the ability to forgive sins (Mark 2:5-11)—something which, as His shocked opponents correctly understood, only God can do (Mark 2:7).

Jesus also called God's angels (Genesis 28:12; Luke 12:8-9; 15:10; John 1:51) His angels (Matthew 13:41; 24:30-31); God's elect (Luke 18:7; Romans 8:33) His elect (Matthew 24:30-31); and God's kingdom (Matthew 12:28; 19:24; 21:31; Mark 1:15; Luke 4:43; John 3:3) His kingdom (Matthew 13:41; 16:28; cf. Luke 1:33; 2 Timothy 4:1).

When a Samaritan woman said to Him, "I know that Messiah is coming (He who is called Christ); when that One comes, He will declare all things to us" (John 4:25) Jesus replied, "I who speak to you am He" (John 4:26). In His high-priestly prayer to the Father, He referred to Himself as "Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (John 17:3); "Christ" is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word translated "Messiah." When asked at His trial by the high priest, "Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" (Mark 14:61) Jesus replied simply, "I am" (Mark 14:62). He also accepted, without correction or amendment, the testimonies of Peter (Matthew 16:16-17), Martha (John 11:27), and others (e.g., Matthew 9:27; 20:30-31) that He was the Messiah. He was the One of whom Isaiah prophesied, "His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6).

The Lord's favorite description of Himself was "Son of Man" (cf. Matthew 8:20; Mark 2:28; Luke 6:22; John 9:35-37, etc.). Although that title seems to stress His humanity, it also speaks of His deity.

Jesus' use of the term derives from Daniel 7:13-14, where the Son of Man is on equal terms with God the Father, the Ancient of Days.

The Jews viewed themselves collectively as sons of God. Jesus, however, claimed to be God's Son in a unique sense. "All things have been handed over to Me by My Father," Jesus affirmed, "and no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him" (Matthew 11:27). In John 5:25-26 He said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself." After receiving word that Lazarus was ill Jesus said to the disciples, "This sickness is not to end in death, but for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by it" (John 11:4). When asked at His trial, "Are You the Son of God, then?" Jesus replied, "Yes, I am" (Luke 22:70; cf. Mark 14:61-62). Instead of rejecting the title, the Lord embraced it without apology or embarrassment (Matthew 4:3, 6; 8:29; Mark 3:11-12; Luke 4:41; John 1:49-50; 11:27).

The hostile authorities clearly understood that Jesus' use of the title Son of God was a claim to deity. Otherwise, they would not have accused Him of blasphemy (cf. John 10:46). In fact, it was Jesus' claim to be the Son of God that led the Jews to demand His death: "The Jews answered [Pilate], 'We have a law, and by that law He ought to die because He made Himself out to be the Son of God'" (John 19:7). And in John 5:18 — "The Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God." Even while He was on the cross, some mocked Him, sneering, "He trusts in God; let God rescue Him now, if He delights in Him; for He said, 'I am the Son of God'" (Matthew 27:43).

Jesus further outraged the unbelieving Jews by taking for Himself the covenant name of God, "I am" (Yahweh). That name was so sacred to the Jews that they refused to even pronounce it, lest they take it vain (cf. Exodus 20:7). In John 8:24 Jesus warned that those who refuse to believe He is Yahweh will perish eternally: "Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins." (The word "He" is not in the original Greek.) Later in that chapter "Jesus said to [His hearers], 'Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am'" (John 8:58). Unlike many modern deniers of His deity, the Jews knew exactly what He was claiming, as their subsequent attempt to stone Him for blasphemy makes clear (John 8:59). In John 13:19 Jesus told His disciples that when what He predicted came to pass, they would believe that He is Yahweh. Even His enemies, coming to arrest Him in Gethsemane, were overwhelmed by His divine power and fell to the ground when Jesus said "I am" (John 18:5-8).

All of the above lines of evidence converge on one inescapable point: Jesus Christ claimed absolute equality with God. Thus He could say, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30); "He who sees Me sees the One who sent Me" (John 12:45); and "He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9-10). And thus we can conclude that "in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily" (Colossians 2:9), and we can worship Him accordingly as "our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus" (Titus 2:13).

Adapted from John's commentary on the Gospel of John 1-11 (Moody, 2006).

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