

Week 3: IS JESUS THE SON OF GOD? IS JESUS GOD?

Opening Questions:

- Who is Jesus to you?
- What part of who Jesus is, as the Christian faith teaches, do you have questions about? What part gives you the most hope?
- How do you interact with Jesus? (Do you?)

Is Jesus God?¹

We get most of our historical information on the person of Jesus from the four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; and the book of Acts.²

Beyond the Christian tradition, there are Jewish and secular historians who agree and acknowledge Jesus as a historical figure whose impact on the world has been massive, even if they do not believe he is God.³

You may have heard of something called the “historical critical” approach in considering the books of the Bible, including the gospel. This approach taken to the gospels gained traction in the 19th and 20th centuries by some scholars.⁴

This approach, where you check for authenticity, find their authorship, verify dates, events, people, and places⁵—tended to emphasize the human aspect of biblical writings, viewing the writings of Scripture as “purely human documents” without inspiration by God.⁶ Some scholars sought to distinguish between actual historical events and supposed historical events. This became known as “the quest for the historical Jesus,” or the Jesus Seminar.⁷ Scholars within

¹ For a 17-minute sermon on Jesus: visit <http://podcast.menlo.church/e/christmas-eve-2016-1483562107/>; John Ortberg Christmas Eve 2016 sermon, Menlo Park podcast.

² James E. Taylor, *Christian Apologetics: Cultivating Christian Commitment*, 173.

³ Claudia Settzer, “The Historical Jesus,” <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/jesus/tikkun.html>.

⁴ “Historical Criticism,” Oxford Biblical Studies Online, <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/article/opr/t94/e883>.

⁵ “Historical Criticism,” Oxford Biblical Studies Online.

⁶ Taylor, 175.

⁷ Taylor, 175.

this movement make a distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. They argue that followers of Jesus mythicized Jesus, adding and distorting him into the Christ.⁸ The conclusion of the Jesus Seminar is that the majority of the accounts in the gospels about Jesus, including what he said, are not historically based, especially not his claims to be divine.⁹

Why trust the gospels?

The gospels were written either by a disciple of Jesus, that is, someone who witnessed the things Jesus said and did (Matthew and John), or by a “close associate of an apostle,” (Mark, who was Peter’s assistant, and Luke, Paul’s coworker).¹⁰

Concerning the gospels of Matthew and John, these books are attributed to these two eye-witnesses because the accounts they record are based on their eye-witness accounts.

An argument against the credibility of the gospels is: the gospels were written using other source materials and bent toward a certain theological framework, that the gospels were not ‘original’, or that not all of them were from eye-witness accounts.

It is true, the author of the gospel of Luke references other sources—he was not an eye-witness after all. That the book of Luke draws from other sources (including the gospel of Mark; and the gospel of Mark draws from Peter’s eyewitness account) does not stand against its reliability—it helps it—in that it was not made up out of thin air.¹¹

Again, the reality that the accounts written of in the gospels may be drawn from other sources is not necessarily a reason to doubt their credibility.¹² It is reasonable to trust the gospels were written as accounts derived from or based on eye-witness accounts.

Think—what document have you ever read or encountered that was completely independent of influence or shaping or scaffolding by any other work? Remember the gospels, along with

⁸ Taylor, 175.

⁹ Taylor, 176.

¹⁰ Taylor, 177.

¹¹ Taylor 178, 179.

¹² Taylor 179.

the rest of Scripture, are divinely inspired, but also very human. These authors would have been writing with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, but they are gleaned from, drawing from, and interpreting, and responding to other writings and earlier traditions as they record the accounts of Jesus.

Another objection states the writers of the gospels wrote them in a bent or slanted way for their own purposes, and this therefore discredits their reliability as historical documents. The writers of the gospels were writing out of particular contexts to particular audiences, so to be sure, they did write in particular ways to speak to their particular people. The writers of the gospels were not collecting information to write a historical treatise—as we understand it today—about Jesus, so we must take care not to impose that lens upon the gospels. However, it does not mean they had no care for recording things as they actually happened—remember, they recorded the gospels as a means to teaching and proclaiming about Jesus. Telling what he had done was prime on their priority lists—they wanted people to know Jesus.

Jews are monotheistic (belief in only one God, all other ‘gods’ are false). It is idolatry—a grave sin and blasphemous—to call anything or anyone apart from YHWH God. The first Christians were Jews. What would compel a people who in their bones know it was blasphemy to equate a man with God to do so, unless they believed it to be true? Unless it *was* true? These Jewish Christians would be rejected by their communities who thought they were sinning; they would die in the name of Jesus because they believed he was who he said he was. It is hard to die for something you do not actually believe to be true.

So, Christians for the last 2000 years have also believed that the gospels have told us of Jesus, and that what is recorded there as being said by Jesus are attributed to Jesus.¹³

A comparison:

Consider Buddha and Jesus. These are the two individuals who have had the largest impact on civilizations since their times—first category. Jesus claimed to be God. Buddha never did—

¹³ Taylor 180-181.

second category. Think: who else in history has truly impacted the *world*, and also claimed to be God? Others who have claimed to be God have not been world-wide history-changers and society-shapers. There are people whose lives have been changed by Jesus—third category. Addicts who stop abusing their substance; thieves who stop stealing; adulterers who stop their infidelity and learn to be faithful; murderers who find forgiveness and restoration and peace. Only Jesus can fit all three of these categories—world-changer, claimed to be God, *and* the source of people’s changed lives.¹⁴ No one else fits these descriptions. So, because we can establish that the gospels were written based on eye-witness sources, and that Jesus likely did claim to be divine as the gospels record—now we can go to why it is reasonable to believe Jesus is the Son of God.¹⁵

Jesus

In the gospels, Jesus claims to be the Son of Man and to be equal with God. His actions point to him acting on behalf of God as God and ushering in the kingdom of God (e.g. forgiving sins, healing diseases, casting out demons, reinterpreting Mosaic laws). Therefore, it is likely Jesus believed these things about himself—he really believed he was divine.

Concerning Jesus’ divinity:

1. Was Jesus a liar?

Given what is written about Jesus in the gospels, his character is not painted as one who would lie—in fact, his character is given as the opposite. Even those who do not believe Jesus is God still consider him as a moral and ethical teacher, therefore, not a liar. Jesus would eventually be killed because of his claim that he is God. If it would save him from death, why would he persist in a lie?¹⁶

2. Was Jesus a lunatic?

¹⁴ John Ortberg Christmas Eve 2016 sermon, Menlo Park podcast:
<http://podcast.menlo.church/e/christmas-eve-2016-1483562107/>

¹⁵ Taylor 181.

¹⁶Kreeft & Tacelli, 158-9.

Apologetics Guide
Week 3

The picture of Jesus portrayed in the gospels is not one who is psychologically or emotionally unstable. Instead, he is portrayed as one with “practical wisdom, tough love, and unpredictable creativity,” i.e. not a lunatic.¹⁷

Because Jesus claimed to be God, he was either a liar or a lunatic (we exclude the argument of myth—refer to reliability of gospels above), or else he was who he said he was—God.

In Judaism, the world’s oldest monotheistic religion, the Hebrew Scriptures, also known as the Old Testament in the Christian Bible, tells of a creator God and God’s relationship to creation and humankind. God created creation, and it was good; human beings were a part of creation, experiencing intimacy with God in the presence of God.¹⁸ Human beings fell into sin,¹⁹ and the Old Testament is a series of books of narrative, wisdom literature, and prophetic books telling the story of Israel, the people God chose to model to their neighboring countries what God’s people looked and lived like.²⁰

Israel failed again and again; but through the Old Testament, an expectation of a savior, a Messiah develops. Israel’s hope for this Messiah was that he would deliver them from oppression, establish a kingdom of justice and peace, and rule not only over Israel, but over the whole world.²¹ This is how we need to hear Jesus’ proclamation of himself as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy in Isaiah 61, and when we hear Jesus saying the kingdom of God has come near.²² The miracles performed by Jesus are meant to serve as testimony to his claim to be from God, to *be* God, and to be the Messiah.²³ The supernatural acts—miracles—Jesus did in the name of God.²⁴

¹⁷Kreeft & Tacelli, 158-9.

¹⁸ Genesis 1-2.

¹⁹ Genesis 3.

²⁰ On the calling of Abraham and the growth of Israel: Genesis 15, 21-22, Exodus 1-9.

²¹ Servant songs in Isaiah: Isaiah 42:1-9, 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12; also Isaiah 9.

²² Mark 1:15, Matthew 12:25-28, Luke 10:9.

²³ Mark 1:14-15; Matthew 16:13-17.

²⁴ John 9:1-7, Mark 5:1-13; Taylor 194.

Apologetics Guide
Week 3

If God is Creator²⁵ and Redeemer²⁶ and Jesus is God,²⁷ then Jesus is one with God who is Creator and Redeemer.²⁸ Then Jesus's miracles would be of the kind that would point to who he and who God is—miracles that would show he is Lord over creation (calming storming seas, turning water to wine, multiplying fish and loaves to feed people); and miracles showing he is redeemer (healing broken and sick bodies, exorcising impure spirits from evil, raising the dead, Jesus being transfigured). In summary, the gospel accounts of Jesus performing miracles are true and add to the credibility of Jesus' claim that he is the Son of the Creator and Redeemer God, that he *is* God.²⁹

²⁵ Genesis 1-2

²⁶ Isaiah 44:24

²⁷ Colossians 1:19-20

²⁸ Colossians 1:15-17, John 1:1-4

²⁹ Taylor 195. For more on the divinity of Jesus and the Trinity, see *An Introduction to Christian Theology* by Richard J. Plantinga, Thomas R. Thompson, and Matthew D. Lundberg, chapter 5 "The Triune God."

Apologetics Guide
Week 3

Resources Used:

Claudia Settzer, "The Historical Jesus,"

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/jesus/tikkun.html>.

James E. Taylor, *Christian Apologetics: Cultivating Christian Commitment*, Baker Academic, 2006.

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Peter Kreeft & Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, IntersVarsity Press, 1994.

Richard J. Plantinga, Thomas R. Thompson, and Matthew D. Lundberg, *An Introduction to Christian Theology*, Cambridge University Press, 2010.