

Study Guide #9: Is Jesus Really God?

Introduction

In Explorer I, Study Guides #5-8, we discovered that (1) a Jewish man named Jesus lived in the 1st century A.D. in Judea, (2) that the New Testament gospels provide an accurate history of His life, leaving aside the miracles for the time being, and (3) that this Jesus did indeed claim to be God. The Muslim and *unorthodox* Christians are simply teaching historical error when they claim that later Christians changed their Scriptures to make Jesus say that He was God.

How can we answer the question title of this Study Guide? Mental institutions are filled with people who claim to be God. So unless someone is intentionally lying through his teeth, anyone who seriously claims to be God will demonstrate severe mental health issues that are easy to spot by any normal person. To determine if a person is a great liar *or* a severely mentally impaired person, historians look for evidence in his character that would point to either quality in his life.

Question #1: Isn't it possible that Jesus was simply a good moral teacher or prophet and not God?

Answer: One thing ought to be clear after examining the historical documents of the New Testament (see Explorer I, Study Guides #6-8). No one can be intellectually honest and simply call Jesus a great moral teacher or prophet. C. S. Lewis, the British former atheist-turned-Christian, made this point most eloquently:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him [Jesus]: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. (C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972, pp. 55-56.)



Jesus Teaching the People

In his statement here, C. S. Lewis articulated the three-fold rational argument for the divinity of Jesus, although he probably didn't invent it. The trilemma is as follows: Jesus was either a (1)

lunatic, (2) liar, or (3) God as He claimed. Critics have railed against it as too simplistic. But in our view, no one has actually offered a rational argument to refute it. We agree, then, with Lewis that these are the only 3 options available to us after examining the historical record.

Question #2: Isn't it possible that Jesus' apostles wanted to believe He was God so badly that they failed to perceive His mental impairment?

Answer: *First*, if Jesus had been delusional about His identity, His closest followers, who spent 3 ½ years with Him almost day and night, would have seen more than sufficient evidence of His delusional personality and other mental health problems. *Second*, you might speculate that they wanted to believe Jesus was God so badly that they somehow amazingly failed to perceive these deficiencies. However, tradition is very strong that except for Judas Iscariot and the apostle John, the other 10 apostles died as martyrs for their faith in Jesus as God. Surely, when faced with a martyr's death, these men would have remembered peculiar behaviors in Jesus and at least been awakened to the *possibility* that Jesus might have been mentally delusional. Yet they willingly went to their deaths. Moreover, these apostles recognized and chronicled their own human character flaws in the gospels, including their cowardice at the time associated with Jesus' crucifixion. Is it likely that recognizing basic human character flaws, they would have completely missed the signs of lunacy? Hardly likely. Finally, people who are delusional in thinking they are God don't attract thousands of people in crowds to hear them speak about morality and God. No, it just seems to be too unreasonable for Jesus' apostles to have failed to perceive severe mental impairment if that had been Jesus' mental condition.

Question #3: But Jesus' enemies did accuse Him of being a lunatic, didn't they? And didn't His own family members also question His sanity?

Answer: It's true that some Jews accused Jesus of being demon possessed (John 7:20; 8:48; 10:20). The context in all 3 texts in the gospel of John show that Jesus had basically just claimed to be God—see John 7:15-19; John 8:42-47; John 10:17-19. Jesus' statements are there in the passages, and His words indicate a matter-of-fact approach, with nothing outlandish or bizarre in His manner of speaking. Of course, *if* He were *not* God, then they would have been bizarre. So what you think of Jesus will determine whether you think He was mentally delusional or not.



Jesus Teaching the Scribes

In Mark 3:21, members of Jesus' immediate family appear to think that He was mentally unbalanced also. We know that Jesus' brothers didn't believe in Him during His ministry (John 7:5). But after His crucifixion, they changed their minds about Him, according to Acts 1:14. The context of Mark 3:21 is that Jesus was besought by so many people that He didn't have time eat. This appeared to be the last straw for his family, who tried to reach Jesus and save Him, in essence, from Himself; in their minds, His ministry was self-destructive of His health. [NOTE: The Greek word in Mark 3:21 for "**own people**" (NKJV) can refer to merely close friends *or* to family members, according to its use in several ancient papyri. Mark's telling of the story from Mark 3:20 through verse 35 strongly suggests that here it refers to

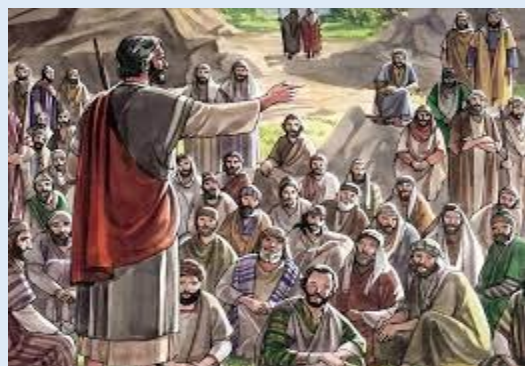
Jesus' family because Mark (a) introduces their presence in verse 21, (b) then interrupts by quoting Jesus' words to certain scribes, and (c) then returns to **"His brothers and His mother"** (NKJV) wanting to talk to Him.]

The point in all of these references to people thinking Jesus might be insane is that there was nothing in Jesus' words or actions that demonstrated mental instability at all. In the gospel of John, Jesus' enemies accused Him of being insane (or having a demon) because He claimed to be God. But if He really *is* God, then He certainly was *not* insane. Regarding Jesus' own siblings, it's not difficult to believe that if Jesus really was God, then His good behavior growing up probably led them to be jealous of Him and thus to be predisposed to *not* believe Him to be a special person. In that scenario, it's not hard to imagine that they would eventually accuse Him of being mad. In Mark 3, it appears that Jesus not eating regularly was the last straw, causing them to attempt to save Him from Himself. In any case, there's no question that His family accepted Him as God *after* His crucifixion. Therefore, none of these accusations in the gospels contains any evidence of actual mental instability or delusion.

Question #4: So what is your conclusion regarding the accusation that Jesus was delusional to think that He was God?

Answer: The evidence cited in the New Testament gospels for Jesus' delusional character is actually non-existent. On the positive side, Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount are especially an example of one who is extremely sane. Indeed, so much so, that the way most people on the earth behave in contrast to Jesus' teachings shows that most of *us* are the mentally unstable ones. It is *we* who are not living the fully authentic human lifestyle that God intended for us to live. After studying the New Testament gospels, two psychiatrists drew the following conclusions about Jesus' mental health:

If you were to take the sum total of all authoritative articles ever written by the most qualified of psychologists and psychiatrists on the subject of mental hygiene...and if you were to have these unadulterated bits of pure scientific knowledge concisely expressed by the most capable of living poets, you would have an awkward and incomplete summation of the Sermon on the Mount. And it would suffer immeasurably through comparison. For nearly two thousand years the Christian world has been holding in its hands the complete answer to its restless and fruitless yearnings...the blueprint for successful human life with optimism, mental health, and contentment. (J. T. Fisher and L. S. Hawley, *A Few Buttons Missing*, Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott, 1951, p. 273)



Sermon on the Mount

Question #5: If Jesus wasn't a lunatic, was He the world's greatest liar?

Answer: The second option after lunacy is that Jesus was a liar, a con man. If He were such a con man, then He would have had to be world history's greatest liar ever, because He managed to fool the greatest proportion of the world's population! As with the charge of lunacy, the charge of being a liar could not be

a simple, mild case of lying. It would have to be a *whopper* to have that much influence in the world even after about 2,000 years after He died the most cruel, humiliating death!



Jesus on the Cross

In His dealings with numerous critics and enemies, Jesus had plenty of motivation to lie or shade the truth, because it could have easily delayed and probably prevented His arrest, trial, and execution. Indeed, if one accepts this idea that Jesus was a great liar about who He was, then we have to believe that He willingly accepted His own execution rather than to retract His lying claims of Deity. For one who also gave evidence of such great sanity, it's inconceivable to believe that Jesus was a con artist.

Question #6: Did any of Jesus' critics/enemies accuse Him of being a liar?

Answer: It's important to note that none of Jesus' critics or enemies accused Him of being a liar about anything except about His claims to being God. But again, if He really *is* God, then He wouldn't be a liar, would He? It's logical to believe that if Jesus was such a successful con artist about who He was, then He would have been a natural liar about many other things as well. Anyone who lies so convincingly about his own nature would reveal himself to be a liar in other important ways as well. But when your critics don't accuse you of being a habitual liar, or a liar about anything else at all, this speaks volumes about your character.

Question #7: Does either the place that Jesus preached in or the people He preached to tell us anything about the accusation of being a con man?

Answer: Yes, we think it does tell us something important. Why would a lying con man choose Judea as the primary place to gather a following? The Jewish religion was, and is, so fiercely monotheistic, most of them could hardly be expected to embrace a man walking on earth claiming to be God. Almost any other culture would have been preferable. Moreover, rabbinical Judaism didn't expect the coming Messiah to be God, but *only* a human male descendant of King David. So if Jesus were a lying con man, He would have been one of the dumbest would-be Messiahs in history! Yet amazingly, Jesus convinced what is today a plurality of the human population that He is God. And even by secular standards, He is probably the single most influential human being who ever lived!

Question #8: So do you really think Jesus is God?

Answer: Think about it this way: Hinduism claims to be the eternal religion, so we don't know its founder. The Buddha never claimed to be God. Muhammed never claimed to be God. Abraham and Moses never claimed to be God. None of the founders of the major world religions claimed to be God. But it's precisely because Jesus, as the founder of Christianity, made such an outlandish and stupendous claim that He was God that makes Christianity the easiest world religion to test for its truthfulness. For such a claim means that Jesus was either (1) a lunatic, (2) a lying con artist, or (3) the God He claimed to be. After examining the evidence—suspending judgment on the alleged miracles for the moment—we are left with just one

conclusion: It is far more likely that Jesus really is God than that He was either a lunatic or the world's greatest con artist. [NOTE: The next 2 Study Guides address the possibility of miracles and answer the question about Jesus' divinity in a more definitive way.]