

**G O D
A M O N G
S A G E S**

**WHY JESUS IS NOT JUST
ANOTHER RELIGIOUS LEADER**

KENNETH RICHARD SAMPLES



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To Walter R. Martin—the original Bible Answer Man,
tenacious apologist of historic Christianity,
insightful scholar on the new religious movements,
and mentor to a new generation of apologists

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Faith Seeking Understanding,
Kenneth Richard Samples
Advent 2015

INTRODUCTION

Jesus and the World's Religious Leaders

“Who do the world’s religions say the Son of Man is?”

“The Buddhists say a bodhisattva, the Hindus say an avatar, and the Muslims say one of the prophets of Allah.”

“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

The Christians answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Salvation itself hinges on the answer to the question Christ asked of his disciples in Matthew 16:15: “Who do you say I am?” If that conversation were to include the spiritual sages of other religions, it might resemble the above exchange. Who do you say Christ is as compared to the spiritual sages of the world’s religions?

All the world’s religions—most people in fact—have a particular take on who Christ is. Not surprisingly, when it comes to determining Jesus Christ’s true identity, the views of the world’s religions contrast with what Scripture reveals and what Christians have historically affirmed about Christ.

The question of Christianity’s truth as compared to that of other world religions is one of the greatest apologetic challenges of the twenty-first century. If Christians hope to share their faith with other people—many of whom affirm a non-Christian world religion—it is crucial that they fully

understand what they believe about Jesus Christ and why they believe it. The first step in this pursuit is to examine who Christ is.

This book is intended as a primer for Christians who want to deepen their understanding of Christ's identity, especially in light of the competing spiritual sages.

Part 1 offers the historic Christian portrait of Jesus Christ. Chapters 1 and 2 examine Christ's view of his own identity and offer a detailed review of his unparalleled life. Additional chapters present a biblical and theological study of the doctrines relating to Christ (Christology) and a response to the common skeptical objections regarding the textual and historical support for Jesus Christ.

Part 2 introduces the lives and accomplishments of four of the world's leading religious founders: Krishna, the Buddha, Confucius, and Muhammad. Each leader is compared and contrasted with Jesus Christ using eight relevant categories of evaluation. Chapters in this section also summarize the basic theological agreement and disagreement between historic Christianity and the world religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Islam.

Part 3 moves beyond the founders themselves and develops a basic Christian view of the world's religions. Chapter 9 addresses the issue of religious pluralism along with the controversial question of tolerance. Chapter 10 offers twelve biblically derived principles that shape a Christian perspective on the world's religions.

Apologetically speaking, this book offers a careful examination of the truth of historic Christianity in the context of world religions. May its pages equip you to help others in their quest for the soul-satisfying truth of Christ's true identity and his proper place alongside the spiritual sages.

P A R T 1

**THE HISTORIC
CHRISTIAN
PORTRAIT
OF JESUS
CHRIST**

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JESUS'S STUNNING SELF-UNDERSTANDING

How conscious was Jesus of his divine nature and of his mission during his earthly life?

Gerald Bray, *God Is Love*

Jesus' self-consciousness is without historical parallel and represents a very weighty piece of evidence concerning his unique nature.

Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth*

He not only invoked the phrase that Yahweh in the Old Testament had chosen as His own special term of self-identification, but He also claimed a preexistence appropriate only to one possessing the nature of Yahweh.

Robert L. Reymond, *Jesus, Divine Messiah*

Several times in the Gospel accounts, Jesus directed his disciples and others (including his enemies) to consider his true identity (Matt. 22:41–46; John 8:23–28, 53–58). Matthew 16:13–17 offers one provocative example:

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.”

Who Do People Say Jesus Is?

During his lifetime, Jesus was considered a dangerous blasphemer and heretic. Today many view him as a good moral teacher or social reformer. Among the world’s religions, he is commonly viewed as a great prophet, an enlightened sage, or a kind of mystical guru or avatar. Table 1.1 offers a summary of these views.

Table 1.1. Who Do People Say I Am?

Baha’i	One of many manifestations of God
Buddhism	A bodhisattva
Hinduism	One of many divine avatars of Vishnu
Islam	One of many merely human religious prophets of Allah (though Muslims do affirm that Jesus was born of a virgin)
Jehovah’s Witnesses	A spirit creature who became a perfect man (and is now a spirit creature again)
Judaism	A merely human religious rabbi or blasphemer or sorcerer
Liberal Theology	A merely human social reformer
Mormonism	The first of God’s spirit children to become a God
New Age Movement	One of many mystical gurus with a divine consciousness
Secularism	A mythical religious figure
UFO Religions	An extraterrestrial visitor to earth

Source: Samples, *World of Difference*, 139.

Opinions about the identity of Jesus Christ have mounted over two millennia, but perhaps the most important opinion is that of Jesus himself. Did he view himself as a mere man or as something more? What do the New Testament Gospels reveal about Jesus’s self-understanding? (For the sake

of brevity, I will consider the Gospels to be credible historical accounts. Thus, I view the Gospels as testimony written by those who were actual eyewitnesses or close associates of eyewitnesses of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection. However, see chapter 4 for a discussion of the trustworthiness of the Gospels.)

Did Jesus View Himself as God?

For centuries, various individuals and groups have denied that the New Testament presents Jesus as both fully God and fully human. Yet a fair assessment of the scriptural data leaves little doubt that the New Testament sees Jesus as the divine Messiah (chapter 3 will more fully substantiate this claim). Viewing Jesus Christ as the God-man is the historic and orthodox consensus of Christendom (Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant). But this question must be fairly addressed: Did Jesus view himself as divine? Some critics assert that Jesus never claimed to be God and that the Christian church has erroneously drawn that conclusion. According to this perspective, Christendom is guilty of deifying a mere human Jesus over a couple centuries of intense theological speculation.¹ What follows is a summary of the biblical data that strongly shows Jesus saw himself as the divine Messiah.

Though Jesus never actually said the words “I am God,” the Gospels reveal that Jesus did view himself as divine. The following five major points illustrate that Jesus was conscious of his own deity and that he deliberately made that fact known to others.

Jesus Claimed Equality with God the Father (Yahweh)

In his public ministry, Jesus either directly associated himself with God or claimed unique divine prerogatives in at least twelve identifiable ways.²

1. To know Jesus is to know God: “If you really know me, you will know my Father as well” (John 14:7).
2. To see Jesus is to see God: “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

3. To encounter Jesus is to encounter God: “Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (John 14:11).
4. To acknowledge Jesus leads to a unique acknowledgment before God: “Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven” (Matt. 10:32).
5. To trust in Jesus is to trust in God: “Trust in God, and trust also in me” (John 14:1 NLT).
6. To welcome Jesus is to welcome God: “Whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me” (Mark 9:37).
7. To honor Jesus is to honor God: “That all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father” (John 5:23).
8. To hate Jesus is to hate God: “Whoever hates me hates my Father as well” (John 15:23).
9. To come to Jesus is to come to God: “No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).
10. To love Jesus is the unique way to be loved by God: “The one who loves me will be loved by my Father” (John 14:21).
11. To obey Jesus is the unique way to be found in obedience before God: “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them” (John 14:23).
12. To believe in or reject Jesus is to believe in or reject God: “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on them” (John 3:36).

No one in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) ever claimed to have the kind of intimate and special relationship with Yahweh that Jesus proclaimed he had. In equating himself so intimately with the Father, Jesus became, at minimum, an extension of Yahweh.³ Jewish monotheistic culture was hostile to any such claims, yet Jesus asserted he possessed the prerogatives of the one true God. In other words, one’s relationship with Yahweh depended on one’s relationship with Jesus. Thus, to interact with Jesus was to interact with the Father and vice versa. For a believer in traditional Jewish monotheism to think of himself as an actual extension of Yahweh

would have been nothing short of audacious (were it not true). Table 1.2 presents other parallels between Yahweh and Jesus.

Table 1.2. Parallels between Yahweh and Jesus

Title/Action	Yahweh	Jesus
Call on the name of the Lord	Joel 2:32	Rom. 10:9–13
Tongue confess / knee bow	Isa. 45:22–25	Phil. 2:5–11
Life in himself	Exod. 3:14	John 5:26
Power and authority	Dan. 7:13–14	Matt. 28:18–19
Final judgment of humankind	Joel 3:12	Matt. 25:31–32
“I am”	Isa. 46:4	John 8:58
Creator of the world	Isa. 40:28	John 1:3
Savior of humankind	Isa. 43:11	John 4:42
Power to raise the dead	1 Sam. 2:6	John 5:21
Glory of God	Isa. 42:8	John 17:1–5
First and last	Isa. 44:6	Rev. 1:17
Redeemer	Isa. 48:17	Heb. 9:12
Forgiver of sins	Jer. 31:34	Mark 2:7, 10
Addressed in prayer	Ps. 51:1	Acts 7:59
Worshiped by angels	Ps. 97:7	Heb. 1:6
Light	Isa. 60:19–20	John 8:12
Shepherd	Ps. 23:1	John 10:11
Bridegroom	Isa. 62:5	Rev. 21:2
Rock	Ps. 18:2	1 Cor. 10:4
King	Ps. 95:3	Rev. 19:16

*The Religious Leaders of the Time
Considered Jesus's Claims Blasphemous*

Jesus's extraordinary claims of oneness with the Father came to the attention of the official religious leaders of the time who oversaw Second Temple Judaism.⁴ Being strict monotheists, they were outraged at Jesus's claims to divine authority. His insistence on his unique relationship with the Father was largely the reason some of the Jewish religious leaders charged him with blasphemy. Their reaction illustrates that they understood he was claiming deity for himself. Consider four such instances.

1. John 5:17–18:

In his defense Jesus said to them, “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.” For this reason they tried all the more to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.

Jesus’s constant insistence that he had an intimate and special relationship with God the Father infuriated many Jews because it presumed equality with God. Notice that Jesus didn’t speak of God using the traditional “our Father” but used rather the intimate “my Father.”

2. John 8:58–59:

“Very truly I tell you,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I am!” At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds.

Jesus’s use of “I am” (Greek: *egō eimi*) was tantamount to saying, “I am God,” for he was applying to himself from the Old Testament “one of the most sacred of divine expressions.”⁵ In the Old Testament, Yahweh specifically referred to himself as “I am” or “I am he” (Isa. 41:4; 43:10, 13, 25; 46:4; 48:12). Jesus may also have been appealing to Exodus 3:14, where Yahweh referred to himself as the great “I AM.” In a Jewish context, “I AM” is how someone would assert deity for himself. The fact that the Jews reacted in John 8:59 by wanting to stone Jesus (the prescribed penalty for blasphemy; Lev. 24:16) contextually supports the deity claim.

3. John 10:30–33:

“I and the Father are one.”

Again his Jewish opponents picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus said to them, “I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?”

“We are not stoning you for any good work,” they replied, “but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God.”

The Greek word for “one” (*hen*) used in John 10:30 is in the neuter form; thus, it does not say Jesus and the Father are the same person. It could be translated, “I and the Father, we are one.” The oneness between Jesus and the Father is more than a unity of purpose or action; it clearly has

metaphysical overtones (deity).⁶ The Jews understood Jesus's statement as a reference to his deity, for again they sought to stone him.

4. Mark 14:61–64:

The high priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?"

"I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."

The high priest tore his clothes. "Why do we need any more witnesses?" he asked. "You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?"

They all condemned him as worthy of death."

Jesus was arrested, tried, and sentenced to die by the Jewish religious leaders for the crime of blasphemy because his statements before the high priest were understood to be claims of deity. Notice four things in Jesus's brief exchange with Israel's high priest. First, he affirmatively identified himself as Israel's Messiah (a term from the Old Testament that often carried with it divine titles). Second, he used the title Son of Man, which in certain contexts was viewed as a divine title (e.g., Dan. 7:13–14; see below). Third, he asserted that he will be "sitting at the right hand" of God, which implied that he possessed the authority of God. Fourth, he claimed that he will be "coming on the clouds of heaven," by which he identified himself as the future judge of humanity.

In my vision at night 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 nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed. (Dan. 7:13–14)

Jesus's claims that he had a unique oneness with God were interpreted by the religious scholars and leaders of the time as metaphysical in nature and implying a relationship of deity. These same claims motivated the Jewish religious leaders to seek Jesus's arrest and subsequent trial. And it was finally Jesus's own affirmations of deity before the Jewish high priest that led to his condemnation.

Jesus Invoked Divine Prerogatives

During Jesus's ministry, he engaged in functions that were exclusively reserved for God alone.⁷ In a context of strict Jewish monotheism, the following five activities were considered blasphemous if practiced by anyone other than God.

1. *Forgiving sins*. "When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, 'Son, your sins are forgiven'" (Mark 2:5).

Jesus claimed authority to forgive sins, even sins not committed against him personally—a prerogative reserved for God alone. Because all sin is ultimately committed against God, granting forgiveness lies within the exclusive authority of the Lord God Almighty (Lev. 16:30; 2 Sam. 12:13). Jesus's claim to forgive sins could be viewed by the Jewish religious leaders of the time only as blasphemy and as a radical challenge to their own religious authority and vocation. Christian thinker Paul Copan puts it this way: "[Jesus] forgave sin, not only displacing the temple, but assuming God's authoritative domain."⁸

2. *Accepting worship*. "When they saw [Jesus], they worshiped him" (Matt. 28:17).

Jesus accepted worship from other human beings—a prerogative reserved for God alone. Jesus's act of freely accepting worship (see also Matt. 14:33; John 9:38; 20:28) indicated that he saw himself in a different category of being than that of a mere creature. Venerable apostles such as Paul and Barnabas and even the angelic host diligently refused to receive adoration from other creatures (Acts 14:14–15; Rev. 19:10). In the fiercely monotheistic milieu of Second Temple Judaism, the worship of anyone other than Yahweh was inconceivable and a direct violation of one of the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:3–6). As the *ESV Study Bible* notes, "That a monotheistic Jew like Jesus accepted worship from other monotheistic Jews shows that Jesus realized that he possessed a divine identity."⁹

3. *Answering prayer*. "You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it" (John 14:14).

Jesus possessed the ability to hear and answer prayer—a prerogative reserved for God alone. The omnipresent God is the exclusive recipient of humanity's prayers (Ps. 116:1). Yet Jesus claimed not only to hear prayers but also to possess the sovereign power to answer prayer according to his will, clearly something only God can do.

4. *Raising the dead.* “For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it” (John 5:21).

Jesus exercised unique the power and authority to raise the dead—a prerogative reserved for God alone. As the source of all life, only God can bring forth the living from among the dead (Deut. 32:39; 1 Sam. 2:6). God alone is immortal and possesses the power to overcome death by raising people from the dead. Yet Jesus exercised this exclusive divine power during his public ministry by raising his friend Lazarus (John 11:41–44). All other instances of people being raised from the dead in the Bible are done in the name of Yahweh or in the name of Jesus.

5. *Judging humanity.* “The Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son” (John 5:22). Jesus claimed to possess the authority to judge humanity—a prerogative reserved for God alone. As humankind’s Creator, God exclusively reserves the right to judge all people (Gen. 18:25; Judg. 11:27). Yet Jesus claimed he possessed the judicial power and authority of God to judge all creatures.

Table 1.3. Five Divine Prerogatives Jesus Invoked

Forgiving sin
Accepting worship
Answering prayer
Raising the dead
Judging humanity

If we consider the five divine prerogatives Jesus invoked (see table 1.3), we can begin to build a logical argument:

Premise 1: Whoever does the things that only God can do is God.

Premise 2: Jesus does the things that only God can do.

Conclusion: Therefore, Jesus is God.

Jesus’s Teaching and Use of Scripture Reflected the Authority of God

By invoking divine prerogatives, Jesus made it clear that he equated himself with God. Yet did his teaching and use of Scripture reflect the

authority of God? Consider three points about Jesus and his handling of the sacred text.

First, Jesus's teaching reflected a divine authority. Though not formally trained in a rabbinic school of theology, Jesus taught with unprecedented divine authority. He amazed the crowds, as mentioned in Matthew 7, because "he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law" (v. 29). Richard Bauckham explains, "Jesus spoke and acted with God's authority in a way that went beyond how prophets and other figures in the Jewish tradition usually did."¹⁰

Second, Jesus authoritatively interpreted and reinterpreted Scripture and placed his own word on the level of Old Testament Scripture. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus added to the well-known commandment forbidding murder, saying that "anyone who is [even] angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment" (Matt. 5:22). In Matthew 24:35, he says, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away." Jesus's words carried a final authority that in a Jewish context was true only of God.

Third, Jesus declared that the Hebrew Scriptures spoke specifically about him. Luke 24:27 says that Jesus sat down to explain "beginning with Moses and all the Prophets . . . all the Scriptures concerning himself." Jesus, the living Word, explained how the written Word spoke of him and of his life, death, and resurrection. Again, Jesus's reading and handling of the Hebrew Bible were audacious and unprecedented.

Jesus Claimed Various Divine Titles

Jesus referred to himself by various Old Testament titles that, in certain contexts, carried the implication of deity. A good example is found in his trial before the Sanhedrin in which Jesus used the titles Son of God and Son of Man—two titles that could carry the implication of deity—as designations for himself. Jesus's use of these titles (among other things) led the high priest of Israel to condemn him as a blasphemer worthy of death (Matt. 26:62–66). First, Jesus invoked the title Son of God. This title conveyed Jesus's unique relationship with God (Father-Son intimacy). Jesus's use of this title implied a oneness with God, and the Jews who heard him use it accused him of blasphemy (see John 10:30, 33, 36). Second, he invoked the title Son of Man. This title was Jesus's favorite designation for himself.

It appears more than eighty times in the Gospels, and on each occasion Jesus used it exclusively when speaking of himself (e.g., Matt. 16:13; Mark 13:26). Daniel 7:13–14 likely stands in the background of Jesus's use of this title. Daniel reveals a heavenly messianic figure who comes at the end of history as the Lord and Judge of all things. Daniel's Son of Man figure appears to possess the very prerogatives of deity.

Jesus's consistent use of Old Testament divine titles infuriated the Jews. Bauckham lends helpful insight as to why the Jewish religious leaders viewed Jesus as a blasphemer who was worthy of death: "It would not have been blasphemy simply to claim to be the Messiah, but they took Jesus to be claiming something more, something that sounded to them like an infringement of God's sole prerogative of universal sovereignty."¹¹

Table 1.4. Jesus Was Conscious of His Deity

Jesus claimed equality with God the Father (Yahweh).
The religious leaders of the time considered Jesus's claims blasphemous.
Jesus invoked divine prerogatives.
Jesus's teaching and use of Scripture reflected the authority of God.
Jesus claimed various divine titles.

More could be said about Jesus's provocative identification with deity,¹² but these five points (summarized in table 1.4) provide sufficient evidence that Jesus of Nazareth knew he possessed a divine nature and in fact claimed to be God. But let's consider one additional point about Jesus's self-understanding regarding his divine nature.

Keep in mind that Jesus's followers were Jewish monotheists. Thus, the idea of worshipping a second figure as God was simply out of the question for them. Theologian Gerald Bray notes, "There is a compelling argument for accepting that Jesus must have taught his disciples that he was the Son of God, because if he had not done so, they would never have made it up or tolerated it if it had been suggested by others."¹³ Bray insists that the best explanation for why the primitive Jewish-Christian church quickly came to see Jesus as an extension of Yahweh and to worship him as God was because Jesus specifically taught his followers that great truth.¹⁴ Theologian Bruce Milne explains the astounding reality that the apostles heard

and adopted: “Thus the staggering truth is unfolded: Jesus, the man who walked the streets of Nazareth, sweated in Gethsemane and died on the cross at Calvary, is to be identified with Yahweh, the Creator-Redeemer God.”¹⁵



Support for the truth of Jesus’s claim of deity is found in such particulars as his matchless (and unchallenged claim of) moral perfection, his specific fulfillment of biblical prophecy, and his many miraculous works—culminating in his own bodily resurrection from the dead.

Appropriately so, Jesus’s superlative character and accomplishments are the focus of the next chapter.

Further Suggested Reading

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Discussion Questions

1. What sorts of identities have you heard non-Christians attribute to Jesus?

2. What are the one or two strongest pieces of evidence that Jesus viewed himself as having a divine nature?
3. How would you describe the relationship Jesus claimed to have with the Father?
4. What was it about Jesus that caused the Jewish religious leaders to respond so harshly?
5. How does Jesus's relationship with the Father affect your thinking about God?