

The Uniqueness of Jesus

Pat Zukeran

Liar, Lunatic, or Lord?

A serious study of the Gospels leads a person to one of three conclusions about Jesus: He was (1) an evil lying villain, (2) a preposterously deluded madman, or (3) the Messiah, the Son of God. It is ludicrous for anyone who has studied His life to take the position that He was simply a good teacher. Only one of the three conclusions is a logical possibility.

Jesus made some outrageous claims that no ordinary person would dare to make. First, He claimed to be God. His statements of equality with God meant He believed that He possessed the authority, attributes, and adoration belonging to God. He proclaimed authority over creation, forgiveness of sins, and life and death. He declared to possess the attributes of God. He emphatically stated that He was the source of truth and the only way to eternal life. Among the significant leaders of history, only Jesus made such claims.

Here are a few of His outrageous claims. When Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father," Jesus answered, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:8-9). We also read in John 10, when the Pharisees disparaged Jesus and challenged Him, He responded, "I and the Father are one" (v. 30) The text continues:

Again the Jews picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus said to them, "I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?" "We are not stoning you for any of these," replied the Jews, "but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God." (vv. 31-33)

It is clear in these two statements, Jesus claimed to be God. His opponents clearly understood His declaration of equality with God.

When scholars challenged Him regarding His authority over Abraham, the father of the Jews, Jesus replied, "Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad." The Jews said to Him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and you have seen Abraham!" "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!" (John 8:56-58). Jesus clearly claimed to have existed two thousand years earlier and to have known Abraham. Moreover, His use of the statement, "I am," is an obvious reference to God's revelation of His name to Moses in Exodus 3:14. The audience to whom Jesus spoke clearly understood this, hence their desire to stone Him for blasphemy.

On the issue of life and death Jesus stated, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies" (John 11:25). Here, He states His authority over life and death.

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Finally, Jesus accepted and encouraged others to worship Him. Throughout the Gospels the disciples worshiped Jesus, as seen in Matthew 14:33 and John 9:38. Jesus stated in John 5:22-23, “Moreover, the Father judges no one but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him.” Jesus knew the Old Testament command “Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only” (Matt. 4:10). Despite this, Jesus encouraged others to worship Him. Either He was mad (insane), or He was who He claimed to be and deserves our worship as God incarnate.

After reading such claims, it is impossible for anyone to say He was merely a good teacher. A man making claims like these must either be a diabolical liar, insane, or God incarnate. For the remainder of this essay we discuss which of these conclusions is most plausible.

A Villain, A Madman, or God Incarnate?

We have established at this point that Jesus made some astounding claims about Himself. He presumed to be God, claimed the authority and attributes of God, and encouraged others to worship Him as God. If, however, Jesus was a liar, then He knew His message was false but was willing to deceive thousands with claims He knew were untrue. That is, Jesus knew that He was not God, He did not know the way to eternal life, and He died and sent thousands to their deaths for a message He knew was a lie. This would make Jesus history’s greatest villain (and perhaps, a demon) for teaching this wicked lie. He would have also been history’s greatest fool for it was these claims that lead Him to His death.

Few, if any, seriously hold to this position. Even the skeptics unanimously agree that He was at least a great moral teacher. William Lecky, one of Britain’s most respected historians and an opponent of Christianity writes, “It was reserved for Christianity to present the world an ideal character which through all the changes of eighteen centuries has inspired the hearts of men with an impassioned love.”¹¹

However, it would be inconsistent and illogical to believe that Jesus was a great moral teacher if some of those teachings contained immoral lies about Himself. He would have to be a stupendous hypocrite to teach others honesty and virtue and all the while preach the lie that He was God. It is inconceivable to think that such deceitful, selfish, and depraved acts could have issued forth from the same One who otherwise maintained from beginning to end the purest and noblest character known in history.

Since the liar conclusion is not logical, let us assume He really believed He was God, but was mistaken. If He truly believed He had created the world, had seen Abraham two thousand years before, and had authority over death, and yet none of this was true, we can only conclude that He was insane.

However, when you study the life of Jesus, He clearly does not display the characteristics of insanity. The abnormality and imbalance we find in a deranged person are not there. His teachings, such as the Sermon on the Mount, remain some of the greatest ever recorded. Jesus was continually challenged by the Pharisees and lawyers, highly educated men whose modern day equivalent would be our university professors. They were fluent in several languages and were known for their scholarship of the Old Testament and Jewish law. They challenged Jesus with some of the most profound questions of their day and Jesus’ quick answers amazed and silenced them. In the face of tremendous pressure, we find He exemplified the greatest composure.

For these reasons, the lunatic argument is not consistent. If both the liar and the lunatic options are not consistent with the facts, we must take a serious look at the third option: that Jesus was really God. The next question is, Does He prove to have the credentials of God? Let’s investigate this possibility.

¹ William Lecky, *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1903), 8.

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Messianic Prophecy

Thus far we have learned that Jesus is unique among all men for the profound statements He made about His divinity. We concluded that it is impossible to state He was simply a good moral teacher. From His amazing statements, He must be a liar, a lunatic, or God. Since the first two were not conceivable, we will begin looking at the third alternative, that He really is God. First, we must see if He had the credentials for these claims.

One of the most incredible types of evidence is the testimony of prophecy. The Old Testament contains a number of messianic prophecies made centuries before Christ appeared on the earth. The fact that He fulfilled each one is powerful testimony that He was no ordinary man. Allow me to illustrate this point using eight prophecies.

1. Genesis 12:1-3 states the Messiah would come from the seed of Abraham.
2. Genesis 49:10 states that He would be of the tribe of Judah.
3. 2 Samuel 7:12 states that Messiah would be of the line of King David.
4. Micah 5:2 states that He would be born in the city of Bethlehem.
5. Daniel 9:24-27 states He would die or be “cut off” exactly 483 years after the declaration to reconstruct the temple in 444 B.C.
6. Isaiah 53 states that the Messiah would die with wicked men and be buried in a rich man’s tomb.
7. Psalm 22:16 states upon His death His hands and His feet would be pierced. This is quite significant since Roman crucifixion had not been invented at the time the psalmist was writing.
8. Isaiah 49:7 states that Messiah would be known and hated by the entire nation. Not many men become known by their entire nation, and even less are despised by the entire nation.

Now calculate the possibility of someone fulfilling these by coincidence. Let us suppose you estimate there is a one in a hundred chance a man could fulfill just one of these prophecies by chance. That would mean when all eight are put together there is a 1/10 to the sixteenth power probability that they were fulfilled by chance. Mathematician Peter Stoner estimates 1/10 to the seventeenth power possibility that these prophecies were fulfilled by chance.² Mathematicians have estimated that the possibility of sixteen of these prophecies being fulfilled by chance are about 1/10 to the forty-fifth power.³ That’s a decimal point followed by forty-four zeroes and a one! These figures show it is extremely improbable that these prophecies could have been fulfilled by accident. The figures for fulfillment of the 109 major prophecies are staggering.⁴

Skeptics have objected to the testimony of prophecy, stating they were written after the times of Jesus and therefore fulfill themselves. However, the evidence overwhelmingly shows these prophecies were clearly written centuries before Christ. It is an established fact even by liberal scholars that the Old Testament canon was completed by 450 B.C. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, was completed in the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus in 250 B.C. The Dead Sea Scrolls discovered in 1948 contained the books of the Old Testament. Prophetic books like Isaiah were dated by paleographers to be

² Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (San Bernadino, CA: Here’s Life Publishers, 1979), 167.

³ Norman Geisler, *When Skeptics Ask* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Press, 1990), 116.

⁴ Tim LaHaye, *Jesus, Who is He?* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1996), 176.

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written in 100 B.C.⁵ Once again, these prophecies were confirmed to have been written centuries before Christ, and no religious leader has fulfilled anything close to the number of prophecies Jesus has fulfilled.

Confirmation of Miracles

Jesus made some profound statements about His divinity. We concluded that it is impossible to state He was simply a good moral teacher. From His amazing statements we must conclude Him to be a liar, a lunatic, or God. Since the first two were not conceivable, we began looking at the third alternative. If this is true, we must see if He has the credentials for His claims.

If a person claimed to be God, we would expect supernatural confirmations. We've already discovered the phenomenal record of prophecy. We would also expect Him to demonstrate authority over nature, sickness, truth, sin, and death. Jesus demonstrated such authority. One line of evidence is seen in His miraculous deeds.

Jesus' miracles demonstrated His power over creation, sickness, and death. He demonstrated His authority over nature in such miracles as walking on water (Matt. 14:25), multiplying bread (Matt. 14:15-21), and calming the storm (Mark 4:35-41). He demonstrated authority over sickness with His healings of terminal diseases. Moreover, His healings did not take weeks or days but were instantaneous. He healed blindness (John 9), paralysis (Mark 2), leprosy (Luke 17), and deafness (Mark 7). Such miracles cannot be attributed to psychosomatic healing, but to One who rules over creation.

Some people doubt whether these miracles occurred, viewing the miracle accounts as fictitious legends developed after the death of Christ. Philosopher David Hume argued that human nature tends to gossip and exaggerate the truth. Others argue that the miracle accounts were propagated in distant lands by the followers of Christ well after the events so that the miracle accounts could not have been verified due to distance and time.

There are several defenses against these attacks. First, the Bible has proven to be a historically reliable document. For more information on this, see the Probe article *Authority of the Bible* (at www.probe.org). Second, legends and exaggerations develop when followers travel to distant lands well after the time of the events and tell of stories which cannot be confirmed. Legends usually develop generations after the death of the figure at which time it is impossible to verify any of the accounts since all available witnesses are not available. However, the miracle accounts of Jesus were being told in the very cities in which they occurred during the lifetime of Jesus and to those who witnessed the event(s). Those who witnessed the miracles were both followers of Christ and His enemies. These eyewitnesses were questioned carefully by those in authority. If any claims were exaggerated or distorted, it could have easily been refuted. The New Testament with its miracle accounts could not have survived had the accounts not been true.

There is strong evidence that supports the conclusion that the Gospels are written within the First Century A.D. There is a growing acceptance of earlier New Testament dates, even among some critical scholars. Former liberal William F. Albright wrote, "We can already say emphatically that there is no longer any solid basis for dating any book of the New Testament after about A.D. 80, two full generations before the date between 130 and 150 given by the more radical New Testament critics of today" (*Recent Discoveries in Bible Lands*, 136). Elsewhere Albright said, "In my opinion, every book of the New Testament was written by a baptized Jew between the forties and the eighties of the first century (very probably sometime between about A.D. 50 and 75)" ("Toward a More Conservative View," 3).⁶

⁵ Norman Geisler and William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 365-66.

⁶ Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*. Grand Rapids, Mich. : Baker Books, 1999 (Baker Reference Library), 529.

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Radical scholar John A. T. Robinson, leader of the “Death of God” movement wrote a book titled *Redating the New Testament*, in which he concluded that the New Testament books were written earlier than even most conservative scholars believed. He placed Matthew at 40 to after 60, Mark at about 45 to 60, Luke at before 57 to after 60, and John at from before 40 to after 65. This would mean that one or two Gospels could have been written as early as seven years after the crucifixion. This means that they were all composed within the lifetimes of eyewitnesses and contemporaries of the events. Assuming the basic integrity and reasonable accuracy of the writers, this would place the reliability of the New Testament documents beyond reasonable doubt.⁷

There are also thousands of ancient manuscripts that confirm this first century dating of the Gospels as well as their accurate recording and transmission. For example, a well known document is the Ryland’s Papyri that was found in Egypt that contains a portion of John, and dates to A.D. 120. From this fragment we can conclude that John was completed well before A.D. 120 because, not only did the gospel have to be written, it had to be hand copied and make its way down from Asia Minor to Egypt. Since the vast majority of scholars agree that John is the last gospel written, we can affirm its first century date along with the other three with greater assurance.

Another line of evidence is the writings of the Church Fathers. Clement of Rome sent a letter to the Corinthian church in A.D. 95 in which he quoted from the Gospels and other portions of the N.T. Other Church Fathers from the early Second century such as Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, Polycarp, and Justin Martyr quote the Gospels and other New Testament books. Church Fathers of the early second century were familiar with the apostle’s writings and quoted them as inspired Scripture.

We can conclude that the Gospels were written in the First Century, in the lifetime of the eyewitnesses who could attest to the accuracy of the events recorded in the Gospels. Unlike other religious literature First Century eyewitnesses attest to the miracles of Jesus and these events are recorded and circulated in the lifetime of the eyewitnesses assuring us, the miracles of Jesus did indeed occur as recorded in the Gospels. For more on the historical accuracy of the Gospels, read the article, “The Historical Reliability of the Gospels.”

Authority Over Death

A study of the claims of Jesus make it clear that He was professing to be God. It is then impossible to conclude that He was merely a good teacher. In light of these claims, one must conclude that He is a liar, a lunatic, or He is Lord. We investigated to see if His claim to be God was substantiated. Clearly the record of prophecy proved there was something unique about Him. The miracles He performed remain unequalled by anyone, but Jesus’ greatest demonstration of authority is revealed in His power over sin and death.

There are many religions and religious leaders who claim to know what lies beyond the grave. The problem is that no one has demonstrated authority over the grave or confirmed their belief of what happens after death. Only Jesus demonstrated authority over death. All men have died, but Jesus is alive!

During His three-year ministry, Jesus exercised His authority over death by raising several people from the grave (Matt. 9; Luke 7). Most notable is the account of Lazarus found in John 11. Here even in the face of His enemies, Jesus raised Lazarus from the grave. If this were not a historical account, this story would not have survived since it was recorded and propagated in the very city where it occurred, in the lifetime of the witnesses who include both followers and enemies of Christ. The enemies of Christianity could have easily refuted the account if it were not true. The fact is they could not refute it.

⁷ Geisler, Norman L.: *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*. Grand Rapids, Mich. : Baker Books, 1999 (Baker Reference Library), S. 529

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In regard to His own death and resurrection, the Old Testament predicted the death of the Messiah in Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53. However, it also predicts the resurrection in Psalm 16:8-11 and refers to the eternal reign of the Messiah. The only way to reconcile these verses is a resurrected Messiah.

Jesus Himself made these predictions in regard to His resurrection: “Destroy this temple and in three days, I will raise it up” (John 2:19). In Mark 8:31 Jesus taught “that the Son of Man must suffer many things . . . and be killed, and after three days rise again.” In John 10:18 Jesus states, “I have authority to lay it [His life] down, and I have authority to take it up again.” In these passages, Jesus predicts His own death and resurrection. Either Jesus was mad, or He really had the authority over death.

Jesus’ resurrection proved His authority over sin and death. For a more detailed defense of the historicity of the Resurrection, check the Probe article on the Resurrection titled, *Resurrection: Fact or Fiction?* (available at www.probe.org).

At the beginning of this study we examined the claims of Christ. We realized only three conclusions were possible: liar, lunatic, or Lord. Since the first two were inconceivable, we needed to see if Christ could further confirm His credentials of being God. We discovered that His claims were confirmed by the record of prophecy, His miracles, and the Resurrection.

Jesus proves Himself to be unique among all men.

Nineteen centuries have come and gone, and today He is the central figure for much of the human race. All the armies that ever marched, and all the navies that ever sailed, and all the parliaments that ever sat, and all the kings that ever reigned, put together have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as this “One Solitary Life.”⁸

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About the Author

⁸ Anonymous, “One Solitary Life,” quoted in Tim LaHaye, *Jesus Who is He?*, (Sisters, OR.: Multnomah Books, 1996), 68.

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Patrick Zukeran is an associate speaker for Probe Ministries. He graduated from Point Loma Nazarene College in San Diego, California, and holds a Th.M. from Dallas Theological Seminary. He can be reached via e-mail at pzukeran@probe.org.

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