



Psalm 119.105

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Why Didn't Jesus Say, "I AM GOD" ...In So Many Words?

By Roderick Graciano



Muslim friends have asked me, "If Jesus was God, why didn't he ever say, 'I am God'?" Fair question. It's true that a search of the New Testament will not turn up any verse in which Jesus says "I am God" in so many words. Other people called Him "God" (John 20.28), New Testament writers ascribe deity to Him (John 1.1; Colossians 2.9), and He Himself claimed divine attributes (John 5.21; 17.5) and referred to Himself as "Lord" (John 13.13). Furthermore, He claimed unique oneness and sonship with the Father, a claim the Jews recognized as equivalent to calling Himself "God" (John 10.30-36). Jesus even applied the personal name of the eternal God, "I AM," to Himself, for which the Jews tried to stone Him (John 8.56-59). Still, He never in the New Testament record said, in so many words, "I am God." Why? I assure you, there are some very good reasons!

The Incarnation Cannot Be Explained in So Few Words

To begin with, for Jesus to have simply said, "I am God," would hardly have conveyed the full reality of the incarnation. If Jesus is God, He is obviously something besides (if not *other than*) God-in-His-infinite-essence." Everyone who saw Jesus with their own eyes knew that He was a man, whatever else He might be. A general claim to deity by Jesus would have jolted His audience with an immediate paradox: how can a man be God? Pagans in His audience may have accepted the possibility of Christ's "godhood," but would have wanted to know which god of the mythological pantheon He claimed to be. For Jews (as for Muslims today) the paradox presented a more difficult puzzle. People of the Bible knew that there is only one God and that the heavens cannot contain His glory, so how could a man claim to embody the infinite Creator of the universe without blaspheming? For Christ to announce, "I am God," too early in His ministry would have raised more questions than it answered.



Jesus Would Not Identify With Crackpots

Furthermore, how would *you* respond if one of your contemporaries on the street or behind a pulpit said, "I am God!" Wouldn't that raise red flags in your mind? I would be scandalized. We all know that claiming to be God does not make it so. On the contrary, when a person claims to be God it marks him as a lunatic or a liar attempting to defraud his audience. If Jesus had injudiciously claimed deity, using a generic title for God like *Elohim* (Hebrew) or *Theos* (Greek), nothing inherent in the pronouncement itself would have set him apart from

the countless crackpots who have claimed divinity throughout history. Talk is cheap and Christ did not wish people to take Him as a lunatic mouthing empty words.

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Jesus Knew That Actions Speak Louder than Words

On the other hand, Jesus knew that consistently acting like God—doing the things that one would expect God to do—would more effectively reveal His identity. When Jesus called God His father and said, "I and the Father are one," (John 10.30), the Jews picked up stones with which to put Him to death.

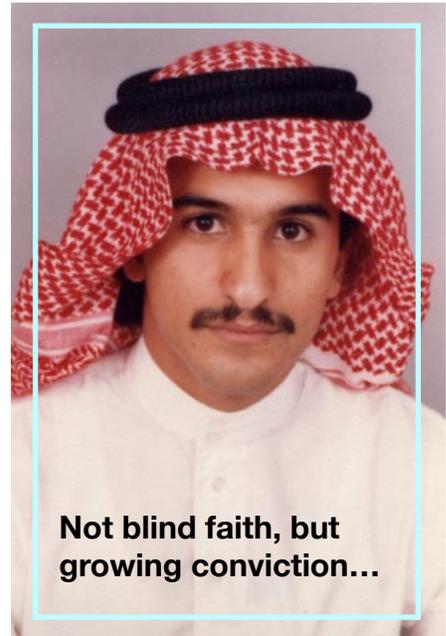
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They accused Jesus of blasphemy, saying, "you, a mere man, claim to be God." The sublime response of Jesus was: "Do not believe me unless I do what my Father does" (John 10.37). No answer could be fairer nor more rational—*Don't believe my claim to deity unless I can back it up!*

Conviction is Stronger When We Draw Our Own Conclusions

Not only was Christ's approach to His self-revelation fair and rational, it was also supremely wise. Jesus understood that people make better disciples when they draw their own conclusions about the truth, rather than blindly following what they're told to believe. Our convictions are deeper and stronger when formulated from deep within ourselves as we weigh the evidence. Many of us have stopped believing myths our parents told us, but our convictions have deepened regarding those truths for which we see mounting evidence over the course of time. This is what Jesus desired from His disciples — not blind faith, but growing conviction.

After all, much was at stake. Jesus was not calling people to a mere intellectual assent to some esoteric idea, but rather to a self-denying, all-risking allegiance to His own person. He could not afford to have people follow Him just because He told them to, or just because they blindly accepted an audacious claim to deity. Such converts fall away at the first sign of difficulty. Jesus sought followers who would take up their cross and follow Him.



A Subtle Self-Revelation Was Like the Parables

Jesus also wanted followers who already had a heart for God. When the disciples asked Jesus why he spoke to the crowds in parables, He replied, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them....In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah:...'this people's heart has become callused...'" (Matthew 13.10-17). In first-century Israel, a person had to deeply desire God before they would be willing to wrestle with the parables of Jesus. Many of the parables shattered the theological preconceptions of the day. Many of them cut across the fleshly desires of human nature. People interested only in fleshly things turned away from these teachings of Jesus. The parables served to weed out the complacent in Christ's audience and to draw in those with spiritually hungry hearts.

The subtle self-revelation of Christ served a similar purpose. Had He recklessly declared, "I am God," He would have drawn a mixed rabble of followers. On the other hand, the subtle and even metaphorical statements He made about Himself, drew only those people whose hearts had been prepared to recognize Messiah (see John 6.53-69). Those with prepared

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hearts, namely those committed to seeking and serving God, recognized His voice. As Jesus said, "If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own." (John 7.17). When people turned away from Jesus because of the metaphors He applied to Himself, they fulfilled the very purpose of those sayings.

Jesus Would Not Jeopardize His Mission (John 17.4)

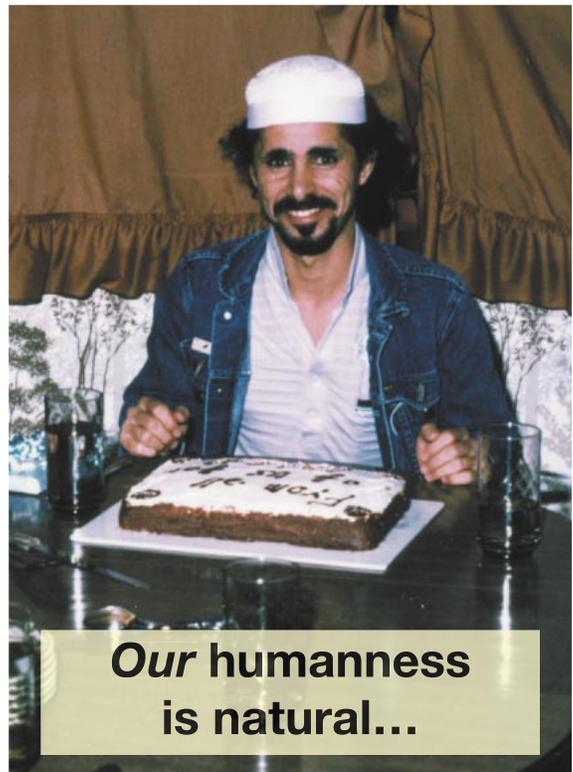
God's purposes in the incarnation were more profound and more complex than anyone at the time could have imagined. The gospel history, however, makes it very clear why Jesus did not more loudly broadcast His deity. In the words of B. F. Westcott:

"He veiled His own glory if it turned the eyes of men from the glory of the Father. He refused the homage which misinterpreted His mission. As He gave us the assurance of Sonship, He gave us also the example of Sonship."

Jesus *is* God, but His first coming was not to make a point of His deity, but rather to glorify the Father by completing a sacrificial work! Jesus came not only to give us life, but also to show us how to live, not as gods, but as sons of God. If Christ's priority had been to reveal His deity, there would have been no better time than when He fed the five thousand (John 6.1-15). The people who witnessed the miracle intended to "make him king by force." But Christ had not purposed to become an earthly king, and so He withdrew. He veiled His glory even then so as to not jeopardize His true mission of purchasing *an eternal kingdom* with His own blood. Those who complain of Jesus' lack of forthrightness with regard to His divinity show that they have not yet understood His mission.

Consider the Power of a "Superfluous" Title

Neither have skeptics understood the significance of the title *Son of Man*. Jesus often applied this title to Himself (Matthew 9:6; John 1:51). On the face of it, "son of man" simply means "human" (Numbers 23:19), but how would you respond if your pastor put his arm around your shoulder and whispered confidentially, "I'm human." You'd wonder if he was feeling all right. Why would he emphasize a superfluous point? If he went about saying it all the time you'd think he was a few books short of a full canon. So did Jesus have a mental problem? Hardly. Never was any man so in control of his faculties as Jesus was. Jesus was emphasizing, to those who had ears



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to hear, that humanity was *not* a superfluous claim for Him. For Jesus, as for no other man or woman in history, humanness *is* something special. Whereas our humanness is natural, His was supernaturally acquired. Jesus was something else and came from another place *before He was human* (John 1.1; 3:13; 6:62). On His lips, the title *Son of Man* was one of the most powerful statements He could have made about His preexistence, and therefore of His deity.

All the more so since *Son of Man* is the description of the divine redeemer in Daniel 7.13, 14. In an earlier century, Daniel had reported:

"I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven, One like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and men of every language might **serve** Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed." (NASB, emphasis mine.)

That someone "like a Son of Man" would come *from heaven*, the abode of God and angels, greatly surprised Daniel. That this man-like figure is divine is revealed by the fact that all people would "serve" Him, for the Aramaic term so translated means "pay reverence to, [or] serve *deity*," and is correctly translated "worship" in the NIV. The Son of Man in Daniel is a redeemer who is *with* God (the Ancient of Days) and who *is* God (Cf. John 1.1)!

Jesus had holy and wise reasons for de-emphasizing his divinity during His earthly ministry. In the final analysis, far from negating His divine nature, His subtle self-revelation served to set Him light-years apart from the many false messiahs who tried so hard and so futilely to prove that they were something they were not.

...with the clouds of heaven, One
like a Son of Man was coming...

Daniel 7.13