

Is Jesus Yahweh?

by Servetus the Evangelical

Most Christians have believed that Jesus was and is God. One type of biblical evidence some of them cite for support is the supposed identification of Jesus as Yahweh, which is God's name. One of their major citations is in the Gospel of John.

The Gospel of John is unique in that it has several sayings of Jesus in which he said "I am." He often supplied a predicate, but sometimes not, leaving some ambiguity.

Once Jesus said, "I am the Light of the world" (John 8.12). His opponents objected and he replied, "unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins." So they were saying to Him, 'Who are You?' Jesus said to them, 'What have I been saying to you from the beginning?' (John 8.24-25). He was saying he was the Son of Man (3.13-14). (The New American Standard Bible adds "He," but it is not in the Greek text.)

Some traditionalists—those who believe Jesus was God—assert that Jesus' "I am" sayings without the predicate, especially in John 8, are an indirect claim to be Yahweh because of the miraculous burning bush incident recorded in the Old Testament (OT).

The angel of the LORD [Yahweh] appeared to Moses in a burning bush that was not consumed, and he spoke to Moses on behalf of Yahweh. God thereby told Moses that he would use him to deliver the Israelites from Egyptian bondage and bring them into the promised land (Exodus 3.1-10). Moses asked how he should answer the Israelites if they ask, "What is His name?" God answered, "I AM WHO I AM;" and He said, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you'" (v. 14). This "I am" translates *'ehyeh* in the Hebrew text, which means "the self-existent one."

The Johannine Jesus could not have implicitly identified himself as this "I AM," the Self-existent One, because he claimed the exact opposite about himself (John 5.19, 30). He disclosed his inadequacies by adding in John 8.28, "When you lift up the Son of Man [by crucifixion], then you will know that I am He, and I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught Me." Thus, Jesus admitted that he depended upon the Father for everything, including his words and works. And he makes it clear that what he means by the words "I am He" is that "I am the Son of Man."

Many recent traditionalist scholars have exchanged this Exodus 3 interpretation of Jesus' "I am He" sayings in John 8 for four "I am He" sayings of Yahweh in Isaiah 41.4; 43.10, 13; 48.12. Therein, Yahweh extolls himself as the only God by saying, "I am He."

Interpreting Jesus' three "I am" sayings without the predicate in John 8—vv. 24, 28, and 58—as an indirect claim to be Yahweh is most arbitrary, and many traditionalist scholars have rejected it. John Calvin did, saying of v. 24, "Some of the ancient writers have deduced from this passage the Divine essence of Christ; but this is a mistake." Besides, had Jesus' opponents thought he therein identified himself as Yahweh, they would have deemed it blasphemy and reached for the rocks to stone him.

The worst thing about this Exodus 3.14/Deutero-Isaiah interpretation of Jesus' "I am He" sayings in John 8 is that it presents him as saying that if people don't believe he is Yahweh, they will die in their sins and thus not be saved.

Some of Jesus' other "I am" sayings show he clearly didn't identify himself as Yahweh, suggesting that he didn't in John 8 either. For example, Mark records that Jesus said, "Many will come in My name, saying, 'I am He!' and will mislead many" (Mark

13.5). While Mark and Luke have “I am He,” Matthew has, “I am the Christ” (Matthew 24.5). It must be concluded that this “I am” saying without the predicate did not mean Jesus was Yahweh. Rudolf Bultmann explains of Jesus’ “I am” sayings in John 8.24, 28, “everything that he is can be referred to by the mysterious title ‘Son of Man.’”

Some traditionalists claim that the Apostle Paul’s occasional practice of applying OT passages about Yahweh to Jesus indicates that he believed Jesus was Yahweh. The most prominent examples are Paul’s quotation of Joel 2.32 in Romans 10.13 and Isaiah 45.23b in both Romans 14.11 and Philippians 2.10-11 (cf. Psalm 145.21). In Romans 10.13, Paul quotes the prophet Joel, “WHOEVER WILL CALL UPON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED” (Joel 2.32). “THE LORD” substitutes for “YHWH” (Yahweh), and Paul *seems* to apply it to Jesus. But in doing so, he does not mean Jesus is Yahweh but that calling upon Jesus is the same as calling upon Yahweh, who is God the Father, since access to the Father is attained through Jesus his agent. And by Paul applying Isaiah 45.23b twice to Jesus, bowing the knee to him and confessing his name is adoration directed to Jesus and the Father. For Jesus had taught that whoever receives, honors, beholds, and believes the Son does likewise to the Father (Matthew 10.40; John 5.23; 12.44-45; 13.20). Paul quotes Yahweh in Isaiah 40.13 by saying, “For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, THAT HE SHOULD INSTRUCT HIM? But we have the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2.16; cf. Romans 11.34). Paul only meant that the risen Christ and Yahweh think alike.

Some traditionalists also think calling Jesus “Lord” in the New Testament (NT) is an indirect identification of him as Yahweh due to the practice of translating “YHWH” as *kurios* (lord) in the Septuagint (LXX), the 3rd century BCE Greek OT. But how people translate Scripture proves nothing. Besides, during the latter half of the 20th century it was discovered that Jewish copies of the LXX retained YHWH, thus without translating it, whereas copies that translated it as *kurios* were produced by Christian scribes.

Some traditionalists also cite a few other OT texts about Yahweh that are applied to Jesus in the NT. For example, Yahweh says of the Jews, “they will look on Me whom they have pierced” (Zechariah 12.10), which is applied to Jesus in John 19.37 (cf. Revelation 1.7). But such texts only indicate that Jesus is Yahweh’s agent.

In sum, neither Jesus nor anyone else in the Bible ever identified him as Yahweh.