

I Am He

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[0 : 00] Who does Jesus of Nazareth think He is? He asks you and me, who do people say that I am and who do you say that I am? But the really significant question is, who does He say that He is?

In fact, I cannot answer His question until He answers mine. Who does Jesus of Nazareth think He is?

Jesus. The question first began to haunt me a little over 25 years ago now, in the week just before Easter of 1968. I was studying physics at the time at the University of California at San Diego.

I had freshly fallen in love with Jesus and was wrestling with a tug to enter the preaching ministry. As I ventured out to share this fresh love and this sense of call, my fellow physics students and some of my professors began to press me.

What's so special about Jesus, they asked. What makes Jesus any more important than any other religious figure? Why would you throw away your brains to preach Jesus?

[1 : 08] The questions have come at me in different forms everywhere I have gone since 1968. Why this preoccupation with Jesus? Why so many hymns about Jesus?

Are we always going to hear about Jesus from the pulpit? Even then, I knew there were a number of things that set Him apart. But thanks to my mentor at the time, I knew there was one thing that put Jesus in a class all by Himself.

Jesus of Nazareth is the living God in human form. At least, that's what the church claims. For centuries, the church has proclaimed that the God who made the world has come down into the world to live in the world as one of us.

That claim is what generated the intense theological debates of the first four centuries of church history. That claim and the attempt to unpack it lays at the heart of all the so-called ecumenical creeds.

The Nicene Creed, for instance, says of Jesus that He is God of God, light of light, very God of very God. The first assembly of the World Council of Churches, meeting in Amsterdam in 1948, found its unity in the confession, Jesus Christ is Savior and God.

[2 : 27] But the question still haunted me. Did Jesus of Nazareth Himself ever make such a claim? Does He think He is God?

As I read my New Testament, it appeared to me that the various writers of the documents believed that He was divinity in human form. The Apostle John says so right up front.

In the beginning was the Word, the Word was with God, and the Word was God, and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. The Apostle Paul is just as forthright. As a physics student, I was particularly drawn to his letter to the Colossians.

In that letter, he says things like, Christ is the image of the invisible God. By Him and for Him all things were created. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.

In Him all the fullness of deity dwells in bodily form. I was further taken by the fact that the New Testament gives names and titles to the Nazarene, which only the God of the Old Testament is to have.

[3 : 31] For instance, Jesus is called Holy One and Lord. As I read the New Testament, I saw that Jesus performs deeds and functions, which only the living God is supposed to perform.

Jesus forgives sins. Jesus raises the dead. Jesus stills the raging waters on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus makes people's response to Him the basis of their eternal destination.

Furthermore, I noticed that Jesus was worshipped, that He was given the kind of praise and adoration which only God deserves. I was especially impressed by the fact that when doubting Thomas fell at the feet of the resurrected Jesus and cried out, My Lord and my God, Jesus did not rebuke him.

Jesus welcomed that worship. But the question still haunted me. Did Jesus of Nazareth, Son of Mary, the carpenter from Galilee, the historical flesh and blood man whom other historical flesh and blood men and women touched, did He Himself ever remotely say anything like, I am the living God in human flesh?

The question was intensified for me by the rock opera Jesus Christ Superstar. The question now sang in my mind. Jesus Christ Superstar, who are you?

[4 : 54] What do you say you are? Jesus Christ Superstar, who are you? What do you say you are? So crucial did all of this seem to me that I decided to read and reread the Gospels with this one question in mind.

Now, to my good fortune, I began with the Gospel according to John. I had learned in Sunday school classes that whereas Mark primarily emphasized the deeds of Jesus, and whereas Matthew primarily emphasized Jesus' teaching, especially on the kingdom of God, and whereas Luke primarily emphasized the historicity of the Jesus story and how Jesus did what He did and taught what He taught, answer, He did it by the power of the Holy Spirit and through prayer, John's primary concern was Jesus' own self-understanding.

So as I read and reread the Gospel of John, I became more intrigued with chapters 7 and 8 of John. And I felt then and I feel now that whenever I've worked in those chapters, I ought to take off my shoes because I'm standing on holy ground.

In these chapters, John records Jesus making enormously audacious claims about Himself, claims which caused the religious authorities to finally ask Jesus, Who are you?

Whom do you make yourself out to be? I notice that John is careful to tell us, his readers, that these enormous claims were made during the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles.

[6 : 32] The Feast of Tabernacles. And so over a period of years, I tried to get my hand on all the resources I could to better understand this feast. And when I did, Jesus' words in John 7 and 8 came alive in me, or as I should say, they exploded in me.

His words took on new meaning, and I found an answer to my question, which I now give to you. There were three feasts which every male adult living within 15 miles of Jerusalem was obligated to attend.

They were Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. Tabernacles was by far the most joyous of all the events. Jerusalem overflowed with people who were very, very happy.

Those who came to the Feast of Tabernacles would live in little tents or huts made of tree branches, which in Hebrew were called Succoth. Thus, this feast is often called by that name, Succoth.

Now, the worshipers lived like this as a way to recall that during the days when their ancestors crossed the Sinai Desert, the ancestors lived in little tents or huts.

[7 : 37] The Feast of Tabernacles is extremely rich in symbolism, in ritual, and theology, and there are three major components to this feast.

There is a water ceremony, a light ceremony, and a fundamental theological affirmation, which is celebrated in the festival liturgy. The water ceremony, very, very dramatic, and I'll tell you about it another time, recalls the fact that while traveling through the desert, the ancestors often found themselves without water.

You will recall that on one occasion, God commanded Moses to go over to a rock to speak to it, promising that water would flow out of this rock. When Moses commanded and did, as God said, water in abundance flowed out of that rock.

And this feast celebrated that miracle, and then celebrated the fact that the miracle was the sign of a greater miracle to come when God would pour out His Spirit upon His people, giving them the water of life.

It's during that very dramatic water ceremony that Jesus stands up, cries out, if anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink, for Scripture says, out of your innermost being will flow rivers of living water.

[8 : 46] The light ceremony, very impressive, and I'll tell you about it another time, recalls the fact that while traveling through the desert, the ancestors did not lose their way.

They did not lose their way because God guided them with a pillar of fire at night and a cloud by day. And this light ceremony celebrates the God who guides, and the God who guides because He's the God who is light.

It's during that dramatic ceremony that Jesus stands up and says, I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you will never walk in darkness. What I want you to hear today, though, is the way Jesus speaks for Himself in relation to the fundamental theological affirmation embedded in the festival liturgy.

As I said, those who came to the Feast of Tabernacles would live in little tents or huts made of tree branches. And I said, the worshipers did this as a way to recall the days when the ancestors lived in tents or huts as they made their way to the Promised Land.

But the worshipers also did this to recall the fact that during those days, the living God chose to live in a tent called the Tabernacle. Hence the name of the Feast, Tabernacles.

[9 : 59] You'll remember that God commanded Moses to take an offering from the people. And they were to use this offering saying, Let them construct a sanctuary for me that I may dwell among them.

That I may dwell among them. That I may dwell among them. That I may dwell among them. This tent or tabernacle was to be the place where the living God would meet the redeemed people.

And as Israel traveled across the desert, there was this glorious and abiding sense of the presence of God surrounding this tent tabernacle. Thus, the central focus of the Feast of Tabernacles is the presence of the living God.

The central focus of this feast is the presence of the living God. The feast celebrates God's gracious decision to dwell among His people and to manifest His own glory to His people.

Are you with me so far? If you say no, I don't have the facility to repeat it. Now, this basic fact is celebrated in the festival liturgy.

[11 : 07] And a number of Old Testament texts played significant roles in the liturgy. Think of it this way. You know that if you go to a worship service on Christmas Eve, someone is going to read Isaiah 9.

Behold, a child has been given to us. Someone's going to read Matthew. Well, if you went to the Feast of Tabernacles, you could count on certain texts that would be read. Let me read just a few of them. And I want you to listen very carefully to the way God is spoken of and to the way God speaks.

Listen carefully. Deuteronomy 6.4. The fundamental creed of Israel. Hear, O Israel, Yahweh is one. Yahweh is one. Psalm 115, verses 9 to 11.

O Israel, trust in Yahweh. He is their help and shield. O house of Aaron, trust in Yahweh. He is their help and shield. You who fear Yahweh, trust in Yahweh.

He is their help and shield. Did you hear that recurring pronoun, he? Three times. He, he, he. Psalm 51, 81, and 46 were also read during this feast.

[12 : 13] And I want you to particularly note Psalm 46. It starts, there is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy dwelling places of the Most High. God is in the midst of her.

She shall not be moved. And then God says, be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth. Did you hear that recurring pronoun, I?

Three times. I, I, I. Now, also during the feast, sections of Isaiah 40 to 55 were read. Isaiah 41, 4.

I, Yahweh, am the first and the last. I am He. Isaiah 43, verses 10 to 11. You are my witnesses and my servant whom I have chosen in order that you may know and believe and understand that I am He.

Isaiah 46, 4. Even to your old age, I am He, and I will bear you. Did you hear the recurring combination of the pronouns I and He in the phrase I am He?

[13 : 15] I am He, I am He, I am He. I want to now give you just a little grammar lesson, okay? The Hebrew for the word I is ani. The Hebrew for the word he is who.

The Hebrew for I am He is ani. Will you say those words with me? Ani. Who. Again, please. Ani. Who. When the Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Greek, the translators uniformly rendered ani.

Who with the Greek words ego, a me. Will you say those words with me? Ego, a me. Again, please. Ego, a me. Because of this ani, or the ego, a me can ordinarily be translated I, I am, or simply I am.

But because of this ani, who, ego, a me connection, translators render ego, a me as I am He. Now, here's the point of all of this data.

It is the single most important piece of information I can ever give any human being. When we grasp this little piece of information, we finally understand who Jesus thinks He is.

[14 : 31] On the Sabbath of the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, the Levitical priest would sing the so-called Song of Moses, recorded in Deuteronomy 32. And the high point of Deuteronomy 32 is verse 39, where we hear God say, See now that I, I am He, and there is no God beside me.

It is I who give life and put to death. The Hebrew for I, I am He, is ani, ani, who, and the Greek is ego, a me. Now, according to the German scholar, Ethelbert Stauffer, by the first century, those little pronouns, ani, who, had become, quote, the all-inclusive summary of God's self-revelatory declaration in the ritual of the Feast of Tabernacles.

I'm going to say that again. By the first century, those little pronouns, ani, who, had become the all-inclusive summary of God's self-revelatory declarations in the ritual of the Feast of Tabernacles.

The great Rabbi Hillel the Great used to say, in reference to this feast, When ani is here, all is here. When ani is not here, who then is here? At one point during the feast, a choir of priests would sing at the altar, God is in His temple.

Then a priest, speaking for God, would reply, Be still and know that I am God. And then the other priest would chant, Ani, ani, who, ani, ani, who, ani, ani, who.

[16 : 05] At the Feast of Tabernacles, then, along with this image of water and light, the words ani, ani, ani, who, ani, ani, ani, who, ani, ani, ani, am he, were reverberating in the minds and hearts of the Jewish worshipers.

Now we're ready to hear Jesus of Nazareth speak for Himself. Will you open your Bibles to John, chapter 8? Oh, this is good stuff.

John tells us in John 8, 12, that after Jesus claimed, I am the light of the world, the religious authorities engaged him in a very intense debate.

Jesus says that he will soon be going away, that they'll look for him, that they will not find him, and they'll end up dying in their sins. And this discussion goes on about what all of this means. And then Jesus says to them in verse 23 of John 8, You are from below.

I am from above. You are of this world. I am not of this world. That's a startling enough thing to say in and of itself. Then Jesus says, listen, verse 24, I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he.

[17 : 21] Did you hear him? Did you hear him? The authorities heard it loud and clear. The carpenter had just uttered the sacred pronouns of God's self-revolatory declaration and uttered them in reference to himself.

That's why they go on to say, Who are you? They ask the question in white-hot anger. Who are you, Jesus? You can't leave it at I am he. Come on, you've got to finish that sentence.

More debate ensues. And then Jesus says, in verse 28, Listen, listen. When you have lifted up the Son of Man, Son of Man was Jesus' favorite way of referring to himself.

Lifted up was his way of talking about his death on the cross. When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he. Anihu, ego eimi.

The very words by which Yahweh the Almighty, Yahweh the one and only, chooses to be known to Israel. And the man from Galilee, the Son of Mary, dares to say that unless you believe that I am he, you will die in your sins.

[18 : 27] When you have lifted me up on the cross, then you will know that I am he. Oh my. The debate understandably intensifies.

Jesus is even accused of being possessed by demons. Toward the end of the argument, Jesus says in John 8, 56, Your ancestor Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day, and he saw it.

The authorities, probably with a cynical chuckle, say, You're not yet 50 years old. How could you have seen Abraham? And then Jesus drives home the magnitude of his festival claim in verse 58.

Listen. Very truly I tell you, before Abraham was, I am. Before Abraham came into being, I am. Not I used to be, not I was, I am.

Ego eimi, anihu. And John tells us that immediately the religious authorities took up stones to throw at Jesus. Why? Why throw stones at the gentle Galilean?

[19 : 23] They had to. They had to. Right in the middle of the feast, which celebrates the living God speaking of himself as anihu, Jesus dares to use those pronouns in reference to himself.

A few months later, at the Jewish feast of dedication, or Hanukkah, the authorities again took up stones to throw at Jesus.

And we read in John 10, verses 31 to 32, Jesus responds by saying, I showed you many good works for my Father. For which good work are you stoning me? They answer, For a good work we do not stone you, but because you, being a human being, make yourself out to be God.

That's exactly what the carpenter had done. I, he. Well, once I discovered this, my eyes and my ears were open to all the other places where Jesus uses these pronouns.

And let me just show you three that are also in the Gospel of John. There's a whole lot more in the Gospel of John, but just let me show you three. In the fourth chapter of John, Jesus is talking with the Samaritan woman.

[20 : 33] They're discussing worship. She wants to know, where's the proper place to worship? In Samaria or in Jerusalem? Jesus tells her that the place is not the issue. Verse 21, An hour is coming, and now is, he says to her, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.

The woman likes what she's hearing, but she's not too sure about this guy. So she says in verse 25, I know that Messiah is coming. When Messiah comes, he will make everything clear to us. Then Jesus says to her in verse 26, I am he, ego eimi, the one who is speaking to you.

Is Jesus simply saying to her, oh, I'm the Messiah? I don't think so. I think he's saying to her, woman, you need not go any other place. I am he, the very one you seek to worship.

In the sixth chapter of John, we find Jesus, after feeding the five thousand, walking on the water. When the disciples first spot him, they become very frightened, and they say, then Jesus says to them, verse 20, John 6, verse 20, he says to them, I am he, ego eimi, do not be afraid.

Is Jesus simply saying, hey guys, it's okay, it's me, Jesus? I don't think so. They could see, it was the man they knew. John is careful to tell us, that this event took place, during the feast of Passover.

[21 : 55] Now, one of the texts of scripture, read during Passover, is Isaiah 51. And there, Isaiah recalls, God drying up the Red Sea, so that the people, could pass through it, or pass over it, as he puts it.

The Isaiah text, exalts Yahweh, the great I am he, as the maker, and Lord over the sea. You can see then, that Jesus is saying, so much more than, it's me guys.

He is saying, you do not need to be afraid, I can control the sea, I am he. Who is this, that even wind and waves obey him?

And then, in the 18th chapter of John, we find those little pronouns again. This time, in the very solemn scene, in the garden of Gethsemane. John 18, Judas has come with the Roman battalion, and with the officers of the temple.

John writes, verse 4, Jesus therefore, knowing all things that were coming upon him, went forth, and said to him, whom do you seek? They answered him, Jesus the Nazarene.

[23 : 02] He said to them, I am he, ego eimi. Again, is Jesus simply saying, you found the Nazarene? No.

And John makes this very clear in the next sentence, John 18, verse 6, when therefore he said to them, I am he, they withdrew and fell to the ground.

Why? Why draw back? Why fall to the ground before the man they'd come to arrest? Were they struck by his courage? Were they taken by the moral excellence of this man?

that they were supposed to arrest? Or were those Jews so accustomed to immediately prostrating themselves when they heard the pronoun, Ani, who, that they didn't know what they were doing?

I think it's important to take just a moment to tell you that the Gospel of John is not the only Gospel to record Jesus doing this. The Gospel of Mark also records this.

[24 : 02] You know that many people say Mark has a very low view of Jesus. I don't think so. Two times in the Gospel of Mark we find these pronouns. One is in Mark 6.50. That's the walking on the water scene which we saw in John 6.

The other is Mark 14.62. In Mark 14.62, we are in the trial of Jesus before the Sanhedrin. The high priests ask, Are you Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?

And Jesus replies, Listen, I am. The words there are ego eimi, the words we've been translating, I am he. And Mark tells us that when the high priest heard those pronouns, he rent his clothes, and he said, What further proof do we need?

You've heard the blasphemy. What is your decision? And Mark tells us that the vote is unanimous. Jesus was guilty of using the divine pronouns in reference to himself. Given the strict monotheism of those first disciples and of all the writers of the New Testament, you can imagine the theological struggle this precipitated.

John and Peter and Paul, the writer of the book of Hebrews, they strained the Greek language. They grasped for analogies. They searched for philosophical categories to express this totally unprecedented and unexpected.

[25 : 16] And the wrestling continued well beyond the New Testament period. Counsel after counsel, met to come to terms with Jesus. And out of all of that wrestling came the two mysteries at the center of the Christian faith.

The mystery of the plurality of persons within the Godhead leading to the doctrine of the Trinity, and the mystery of the union of human and divine and the one person leading to the fully God, fully man clause.

You know, we can dismiss all of that as theological jargon if we'd like. But the fact remains, the fact of Jesus' bold tabernacle claim. Here I simply have to read a paragraph from C.S. Lewis, which I read last week.

It comes from his essay, What Are We to Make of Jesus Christ? Lewis writes, If we had gone to Buddha and asked him, Are you the son of Brahma? He would have said, My son, you are still in the veil of illusion.

If you had gone to Socrates and asked, Are you Zeus? He would have laughed at you. If you had gone to Mohammed and asked, Are you Allah? He would have first rent his clothes and then cut your head off.

[26 : 23] If you had gone to Confucius and asked, Are you heaven? I think he would have probably replied, Remarks which are not in accordance with nature are in bad taste. But when the temple authorities went to Jesus of Nazareth during the Feast of Tabernacles in October of AD 32 and asked him, Whom do you make yourself out to be?

Jesus responded, Very truly I say to you, before Abraham was, I am. When you lift me up on the cross, then you will know that I am he, unless you believe that I am he, you will die in your sins.

Well, the implications of all of this are endless. They're staggering. Let me spin just three. First, in light of Jesus' tabernacle claim, we now understand why he makes all the other claims he makes.

If he is, I am he, then of course he can say, I am the bread of life. I am the resurrection and the life. I am the way, the truth, and the life. Of course he can claim, Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink, and out of your innermost being will flow rivers of living water.

Of course he can claim, I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you'll not walk in darkness. Of course he can claim, I am the vine, you are the branches. Live in me and I in you, for apart from me you can do nothing. Of course he can claim that.

[27 : 51] He is the very ground of our being. So he can say to us, I am that without which you simply cannot leave. Of course. Of course he can say that. Second, in light of Jesus' tabernacle claim, we now understand why the New Testament keeps putting him at center stage.

And we understand how crucial it is that we decide what we're going to do with him. To walk away from Jesus is to walk away from the only source of life there is.

Given who he thinks he is, he has the right to walk into any of our lives and command us, follow me, come to me, eat of me, be yoked to me. We need to know that those words, follow me in the Greek language, are in the imperative.

They're not friendly invitations. Oh, won't you follow me? They're commands. Given who he thinks he is, he has the right to interfere in any human being's life and say, you, now, follow me.

Given who he thinks he is, we see how foolish it is not to obey. It's foolish not to follow and not to come to him. Given who he thinks he is, we now see how silly it is, how absolutely silly it is that governments and institutions and schools and hospitals and corporations operate without reference to Jesus.

[29 : 16] I don't know anything more silly than to operate anything without reference to Jesus. In light of his great claim, you can see why life is so miserable when we do not do it his way.

The only sensible thing to do is to surrender to him and center all of life around him. It's the only sensible thing to do. In the essay from which I quoted, C.S. Lewis observes what I shared with you before, namely that Jesus produced only three effects on those he met, hatred, terror, and adoration.

There is no record of anyone expressing mild approval. Would you agree with me? That's the bane of the modern church. Mild approval for Jesus.

Goodness gracious. God deliver me for mild approval. I don't want to live another day with mild approval.

Given who he is, he is worthy of our impassioned praise and impassioned love and impassioned allegiance in every sector of life. Third, in light of Jesus' tabernacle claims, we now understand why the gospel of Jesus Christ is the greatest news anyone will ever hear.

[30 : 42] There's a poster in which someone asks Jesus, How much do you love me? And Jesus responds by saying, This much. And stretches out his arms and dies on the cross.

But who is Jesus? Whose arms are stretched out on the cross? Whose hands are nailed to the cross? Whose blood is dripping to the ground?

Dare I use the scandalous phrase, The crucified God? Yes. Those arms are the arms of God. Those hands are the hands of God.

Those bleeding wounds are the wounds of God. It is God who suffers there. It is I am He who becomes sin that we might become the ones of God. It is the great I am who takes upon Himself the just punishment for the sins of the world.

When He cries out, It is finished! It is finished! I am forgiven. There is no condemnation for those who are in Jesus and I will be made whole. In light of Jesus' tabernacle claim, you can understand why one of my favorite hymns is Charles Wesley's And Can It Be.

[31 : 55] And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Savior's blood? Died He for me who caused His pain, for me who Him to death pursued? Amazing love, how can it be that Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

Thou, my God, shouldst die for me? God, God dies for me? Yes, yes, yes, yes! That's the gospel! The question leads us to the very center of the Christian faith.

Who does Jesus think He is? During one of the most sacred moments in the life of Israel, during the Feast of Tabernacles when people were celebrating the presence of the God who speaks of Himself saying, Ani, who?

I, He. Jesus says, Unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins. When you have lifted me up on the cross, then you will know that I am He.

Before Abraham was born, I am. That's why Thomas was not guilty of the sin of idolatry when he worshipped Jesus saying, My Lord and my God.

[33 : 12] And that's why I have not thrown away my brains to preach Him. All honor and glory be unto Him who with His Father and His Spirit lives and reigns now and forevermore.

Amen. Amen. Amen.