

The Radical Jesus – Son of God¹

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Introduction

We are all probably used to hearing at one time or another that Jesus was radical. But exactly how radical was He? It has surprised me to see how little is made of one of Jesus' biggest claims He made while He was here on earth. At a very early age, prior to the commencement of His ministry, Jesus made the radical claim that God was His *Father* (Luke 2:49). This meant that He asserted that He was the son of God. This is of great importance because since the late 1700s in liberal Christian academic circles Jesus' divinity and His conscious claim of being divine have not only been questioned, but often dismissed. In fact there has been an attempt to 'de-mythologize' Jesus on the basis that Jesus' divinity was a later teaching of the fourth century C.E. Church. More recently, liberal theologians and biblical scholars attached to the 'Jesus Seminar'ⁱ have questioned whether the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) make a claim for Jesus' divinity. Generally they have deduced that Jesus' claim to being divine came much later with the fourth gospel – a distinct shift from the synoptic gospels that was introduced by the Johannine School. Thus, they reject Jesus' divinity. Secondly, and also of importance is the fact that we need to appreciate Jesus within His own historic context of first century Palestine amongst Jews. It was within this context that He made the self-conscious claim to being both human and divine. When you consider that all four gospels record the words of Jesus in which He constantly calls God His 'Father', there is no doubt that He makes a parallel in identity between Himself as Son with God as Father. Clearly, the gospels distinctly claim Jesus, as the Son of God, is divine. This is nothing other than the radicalness of Jesus!

Father and Son

First, the fact that Jesus largely used the title of 'Father' to address God in all four gospels is significant. Of all the titles that the Israelites used for God, from the Old Testament and into the first century C.E., 'father' was not one generally used. The use of 'father' in the Old Testament for God appears on fourteen occasions. There was a reason for this reluctance. God's relationship with Israel was expressed in intimate terms such as 'husband' and on the rare occasion as 'father'. When 'father' was used it was in the context of God as founder of His chosen covenant people.ⁱⁱ Within rabbinical writings the term 'father' is seen as a

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metaphor and not a title. From the Old Testament down to the time of Christ the term was not normally used by individuals to address God.ⁱⁱⁱ

Jesus' use of 'Father' in addressing God must have been jarring at the least. In reality it was beyond presumptuous – it was blasphemous to the Jews! Why was it blasphemous? From a Jewish perspective, when you claimed to be the son of someone it wasn't a claim of inferiority. Also, it was more than claiming a connection. For the Jew to claim to be the son of someone was to assert equality – this was understood in relation to the same nature.^{iv} Across the four gospels Jesus refers to God as 'Father' 142 times. When Jesus uses the term, 'Father' it is relational and intimate. Directly attached to the use of 'Father' by Jesus is the appellation of 'Son' used for and by Jesus.^v Jesus thereby connects Himself specifically and uniquely to God the Father. In addition the gospel writers record the Father's intimate and authoritative declarations of Jesus as His 'beloved' and 'unique' Son (Matthew 3:16-17; 17:5; Mark 1:11; 9:7; Luke 3:22; 9:35). As a reader of the gospel you are left without a doubt concerning the deeply personal relationship that exists between the Father and the Son. Jesus goes so far as to use the term, 'abba', a close, familiar and informal Aramaic word in place of 'father', (Mark 14:36). In Jesus' case it was a claim of divinity!

The radical nature of Jesus' calling God 'Father' did not escape the attention of the religious Jews. In John chapter 5 Jesus heals a paralyzed man at the pool of Bethesda on the Sabbath:

16 And this is why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. 17 But Jesus answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I am working." 18 This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.^{vi}

In a second separate incident in John chapter 10 at the Temple in Jerusalem Jesus was asked if He was the Christ. This time the question came from 'the Jews' – the people:

25 Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me,²⁶ but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep . . . ³⁰ I and the Father are one."

31 The Jews picked up stones again to stone him. ³² Jesus answered them, "I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you going to stone me?" ³³ The Jews answered him, "It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God . . . ³⁶ (Jesus replied) . . . do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'?" ³⁷ If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; ³⁸ but if I do them, even though

you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.”³⁹ Again they sought to arrest him, but he escaped from their hands.^{vii}

This passage makes it clear that Jesus made the essential and substantive claim to divinity in calling God His Father. In fact Jesus further supports His claim by stating that, *I and the Father are one . . . the Father is in me and I am in the Father* (John 10: 30, 38b). The unity being discussed is not unity in the human sense, of vision, or being of one mind, or a kind of voluntary union of the will, but this is a union of identity that closes the distinction between creator and created. Again, this incident highlights Jesus’ radical claim. The gospels are in no doubt about Jesus’ divinity.

Finally, and conclusively, in all three synoptic gospels Jesus at His trial before the Sanhedrin is asked whether He is the Son of God. Jesus gives a clear response in the affirmative. The response of the high priest was to tear his own garments and proclaim Jesus guilty of blasphemy and He was promptly sentenced to death (Matthew 26: 62-66; Mark 14: 60-64; Luke 22: 66-71). The gospels are unambiguous - Jesus’ claim of being the Son of God and addressing God as His Father was radical in the extreme and was a crucial factor in leading to His crucifixion!

The writings of early rabbinical Judaism contain references to Jesus and there is no dispute over Jesus’ radical claim, as Professor Rabbi Michael Cook concludes:

They (early rabbinical writings) also took for granted that Jesus had proclaimed himself divine; accordingly, any Jew worshiping him was compromising monotheism. . . Mindful that some Jews had indeed been lured into Christian ranks, the rabbis denounced Jesus himself for having attempted to "entice and lead Israel astray," i.e., into apostasy and idolatry. All told, accordingly, the rabbis could deem fully credible Gospel renditions of Jesus' Sanhedrin trial. The Gospels said the Sanhedrin tried Jesus and condemned him for blasphemy.^{viii}

Believers - Children of the Father by Adoption

Jesus’ radicalness did not stop there. Through His unique person and work as the Incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ has broken down the barrier of sin and has reconciled to God the Father those who place their faith and lives in Him. Through Jesus Christ believers enter into an intimate relationship with the Father through the Holy Spirit and are able to call Him ‘abba’, (Romans 8:14-17; Galatians 4:6-7). As any good rabbi with his disciples, it was expected that Jesus would provide His intimate followers with a model prayer; Jesus upon request furnished his disciples with what we now know as the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:1-4). Radically Jesus directs His followers to address God as ‘Father’! We have

become so accustomed to the Prayer that we do not appreciate the importance of the Son of God giving us access to address God as Father.^{ix} Unlike Jesus we enter into the filial relationship with God the Father through the spirit of adoption that comes in and through Christ Jesus. The privilege of addressing God as Father was new and revolutionary. It went well beyond the close covenant relationship experienced by the Israelites of the Old Testament. Both on a corporate and individual level we have been the recipients of grace beyond measure when we call on God as our Father. This blessing is solely because of the one and only unique Son of God, Jesus Christ. Interestingly, in *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old & New Testament Words* it points out that: 'Christ never associated Himself with them (the disciples in directing them to use Father for God) by using the personal pronoun "our"; He always used the singular, "My Father," His relationship being unoriginated and essential, whereas theirs (believers) is by grace and regeneration. . .'^x

Conclusion

Although we are familiar with Jesus 'meek and mild' we must not lose sight of the fact that Jesus, within His first century Jewish context, was confrontational and radical. As bold as this might sound it was natural and essential since it was authentically who He was as the God-Man, the Incarnate Second Person of the Trinity. As we read through the gospels we should have confidence in Jesus Christ our Saviour. There is no question about how Jesus understood Himself and His relationship with the Father. The radical Jesus reassures us that He knew His Father, His Father's will and His divine mission of redemption. In an age where many question authority and the basis of authority – the Christian has Jesus Christ- just as He is revealed in God's written Word - as Immanuel, God with us. According to C. S. Lewis' trilemma,^{xi} the only way you can assess Jesus as He is presented in the gospels is either as 'a lunatic, a liar or Lord.' In a world of shifting sand Jesus needs to be responded to as He authoritatively claims Himself to be – the Lord of Lords, the Son of God, the Son of Man, the Way, the Truth and the Life. This is the Radical Jesus!

ⁱ The Jesus Seminar was organized by Westar Institute, Farmington Minnesota and sessions were held among liberal theologians and biblical scholars between 1985 -1998, and published their findings on Jesus – His Sayings; His Deeds; His Profile.

The conclusion made on Jesus' profile included:

1. Jesus of Nazareth did not refer to himself as the Messiah, nor did he claim to be a divine being who descended to earth from heaven in order to die as a sacrifice for the sins of the world.
2. At the heart of Jesus' teaching and actions was a vision of a life under the reign of God (or, in the empire of God) in which God's generosity and goodness is regarded as the model and measure of human life.
3. Jesus did not hold an apocalyptic view of the reign (or kingdom) of God—that by direct intervention God was about to bring history to an end and bring a new, perfect order of life into being. Rather, in Jesus' teaching the reign of God is a vision of what life in this world could be, not a vision of life in a future world that would soon be brought into being by a miraculous act of God.

<http://www.westarinstitute.org/projects/the-jesus-seminar/jesus-seminar-phase-3-profiles-of-jesus/>

The Jesus Seminar through Westar Institute continues to propagate its views on 'the historic Jesus'.

ⁱⁱ See Joachim Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus*, (Augsburg Press; 1979), 18-19.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Alon Goshen-Gottstein, "God the Father in Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity: Transformed Background or Common Ground?" *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*; Fall 2001, Vol. 38 Issue 4: 470.

^{iv} According to the Jews they would have understood Jesus' claim of being son and God being His Father was both a claim of having the same nature as God (an ontological claim) and a connection of identity.

^v The title 'Son of God' is used 30 times across all four gospels for Jesus. The term 'Son' for Jesus in relation to God is used 61 times over the four gospels.

^{vi} John 5:16-18 *English Standard Version* (ESV).

^{vii} John 10:25-39 *English Standard Version* (ESV).

^{viii} Prof. Rabbi Michael J. Cook, "References to Jesus in Early Rabbinic Literature (200-500 c.e.)" [adapted from "Evolving Views of Jesus," in B. Bruteau, ed., *Jesus Through Jewish Eyes* (Orbis, 2001): 1-24] https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research_sites/cjl/texts/cjrelations/resources/articles/cook_rabbis_and_Jesus.htm

^{ix} Interestingly, in Islam Allah (God) has ninety-nine names/titles in the Quran. Yet unlike Christianity 'Father' is not one of the titles for Allah. This highlights the gulf of difference between Islam and Christianity. In Christianity God is both transcendent (beyond) and imminent (near). Further, in Christ the believer enters into an intimately familial relationship with God. In Islam Allah is supremely transcendent and the concept of family is not applicable to a Muslim's approach to Allah.

^x W. E. Vine, M. F. Unger & William White, *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old & New Testament Words*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1996), 228.

^{xi} The Lewis trilemma is based on a passage in C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (Yekaterinburg, Canada: Samizdat, 2014), 32.