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Dr. Bart Ehrman on Jesus' Claim to be God

Posted By [J. D. Greear](#) On March 6, 2009 @ 2:35 pm In [Books](#), [Public Square](#), [Theology](#) | [Comments Disabled](#)

Our church, the Summit Church, is in the backyard of the one of the nation's foremost skeptics, Dr. Bart Ehrman at UNC-Chapel Hill. Dr. Ehrman is a very agreeable, winsome person who teaches undergraduate classes at UNC about the New Testament. Dr. Ehrman, like most good teachers, likes to push his students to think for themselves. He also likes to challenge untested beliefs. These things I greatly appreciate about him. Though I have never met him, I have read several of his books.

I was recently disappointed, however, to learn how he dismissed the idea the Christian claim that Jesus repeatedly claimed to be God. According to Dr. Ehrman, Jesus' claims to be God are found only in one of the Gospels (John), not believed by many Christians in the time of the Apostles, and something which Christians most likely made up and attributed to Christ later. But what was disappointing was not that Ehrman disagrees with us that the other Gospels do indeed give uniform testament that Jesus claimed to be God, but how he treated the arguments in support of that claim. Namely, he didn't. According to those in the class, he set up a straw man and attacked it as if it was the best the other side had to offer.

(The following was reported to me by students in our church who are in his class. It is secondhand, I do admit.) Dr. Ehrman began by observing that Christians say that Jesus' claim to be God means that He must either be liar, lunatic or Lord (following C.S. Lewis' famous *Mere Christianity* argument). The idea that Jesus was the Son of God could also have been "legend," Ehrman observes. He then contends that only the Gospel of John claims that Jesus claimed divinity—Jesus' claims to deity are absent from the other Gospels, he says, and thus it is likely that Christians added this dimension to Christ later. Thus, Christ's deity is a legend. He never claimed it for himself.

He then points out that some Christians make what he deems to be weak arguments about Jesus claiming being God from the other Gospels. He cites as an example Jesus' forgiving of the lame man's sins in Mark 2. Christians conclude that since only God could forgive sins, Jesus was there claiming to be God. Ehrman gives another possible explanation here, one that is both plausible, possible and in some ways persuasive, and *viola*, he dismisses the idea that the other Gospels report a claim by Jesus to be God.

But surely Dr. Ehrman must realize that Bible scholars have demonstrated that Jesus' claim to deity in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) are MUCH more substantial than he suggests to his students. They are not as blatant as Jesus walking around saying "I am God," but just as significant. Ehrman does not address these more sophisticated arguments, ignoring them as if all Christianity had to offer were clever, anecdotal slights of hand.

Take, for instance this lengthy passage from N.T. Wright about Jesus' claims to be God from an appendix in the great book by Antony Flew, *There is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind*. Why doesn't Ehrman address this argument in class? Why pick on a weak argument as if that is all Christianity has to offer? To disagree with it would be one thing, to pretend it doesn't even exist and beat up something weak in its place is not responsible argumentation. (I quote Wright at length, but it is worth it...)

My faith in Jesus and the incarnate Son of God does not rest on the verses in the Gospels making this claim. It goes much deeper, in fact way back to the very important question about how first-century Jews understood God and God's action in the world. And, of course,

as Jews they went back to the Psalms, to Isaiah, to Deuteronomy, to Genesis, and so on. And we can see, in the Jewish traditions of Jesus's day, how they interpreted these. They talk about the one God who has made the world, who is also the God of Israel, and they talk about this God as active within the world, present and doing things within the world and within Israel. And they talk about this in five ways (nothing to do with Aquinas's Five Ways!).

They talk about the Word of God: God spoke and it was done; God said, "let there be light," and there was light. The Word of God is living and active, and in Isaiah we have the very powerful image of the Word coming down like rain or snow and doing things in the world.

They talk about the wisdom of God. We see this in Proverbs, of course, particularly, but in several other passages as well. Wisdom becomes almost a personification, world, dwelling in Israel, and doing things that help human beings themselves to be wise.

They talk about the glory of God dwelling in the Temple. We must never forget that for Jews in the first century the Temple was, so to speak, an incarnational symbol – they really did believe that the Creator of the universe had promised to come and make his home in this building just down the road in Jerusalem. Until you actually go to Jerusalem and think about that, you don't really realize it. But it's quite extraordinary.

Then, of course, they talk about the law of God, which is perfect and revives the soul (as in Psalm 19). The law, like wisdom, is not just written on law. It is an ontologically existing force and pressure through which God makes himself known.

And, then, finally they talk about the Spirit of God. The Spirit of God rushes upon Samson in the book of Judges; the Spirit of God enables the prophets to be prophets; the Spirit of God indwells humans so that they can do extraordinary things for God's glory.

These five ways of speaking about God's action in the world were all ways in which first-century Jews expressed their belief that the One they knew as Eternal God, the Creator of the world, was present and active within the world and particularly within Israel. And you can see this all over, not just in the OT, but in the footprint that the OT leaves in first-century Judaism, the rabbis, and the Dead Sea Scrolls and other similar texts.

Now when we come to the Gospels with those five ways of speaking in our heads, we discover Jesus behaving – not just talking, but behaving – as if somehow those five ways are coming true in a new manner in what he is doing. In particular, we see this in the parable of the sower. The sower sows the Word, and the Word does its own work. But, wait a minute, who is going around doing this teaching? It is Jesus himself.

And then likewise Jesus speaks in various ways about wisdom: the wisdom of God says, "I am doing this, I am doing that." And you can track the wisdom traditions of the OT in not just the individual sayings of Jesus, but in the way he went about doing what he was doing. His challenges about the wise man who built his house on the rock and the foolish man who built his house on the sand – that's a typical bit of wisdom teaching. But, wait a minute, the wise man is "the one who hears these words of mine and does them." So wisdom and Jesus are very closely bound together.

And then, particularly, the Temple. Jesus behaves as if he is the Temple in person. When he says, "Your sins are forgiven," that is a real shock, because forgiveness of sins is normally declared when you go to the Temple and offer sacrifice. And yet Jesus says you can have it right here on the street. When you're with Jesus, it's as though you're in the Temple, gazing upon God's glory.

When we come to the Jewish law, we discover something fascinating. **One of the great Jewish scholars of our day, Jacob Neusner, who's written several major books on Judaism, wrote a book about Jesus. In it he said that when he reads that Jesus said things like, "You have heard that it was said thus and so, but I say unto you this and this," he says, "I want to say to this Jesus: Who do you think you are? God?"**

Jesus is actually giving a new law, a radically fresh interpretation of the law, and is cleansing, in certain respects, to override the way the law was being understood and interpreted.

And, then, finally the Spirit. Jesus says, "If I by the Spirit of God cast out demons, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you."

*So what we see is not so much Jesus going around saying, "I am the Second Person of the Trinity. Either believe it or not." That really isn't the way to read the Gospels. Rather, reading them as first century historians, we can see that Jesus is behaving in ways that together way: this whole great story about a God who comes to be with his people is actually happening. Only it isn't through the Word of wisdom and the rest. It's in and as a person. The thing that draws all this together (I have spelled this out in the penultimate chapter of my book *Jesus and the Victory of God*) is that many Jews of Jesus's day believed that one day Yahweh, the God of Israel, would come back in person to live within the Temple. You find that in Ezekiel, Isaiah, Zechariah, and several of the later postbiblical texts.*

So they're hoping that one day God will come back. Because, of course, when God comes back, then he'll send the Romans packing. He will rebuild the Temple properly – not the way in which Herod had been doing it, and so on. There's a string of expectations associated with God's return. And then we find in the Gospels this extraordinary picture of Jesus making a final journey to Jerusalem, telling stories about the king who comes back.

I have argued, as others have, that Jesus, in telling those stories about the king who comes back to his people, the master who comes back to his servants, is not talking of some Second Coming way in the future. The disciples weren't up for that. They didn't even know that he was going to be crucified. He's telling stories about the significance of his own journey to Jerusalem, and he's inviting those who have ears to hear to take this OT picture of Yahweh returning to Zion and hold that in their heads as they see him as a young prophet riding into Jerusalem on a donkey.

I think Jesus staked his life – quite literally! – on his belief that he was called to embody the return of Yahweh to Zion. Now, embody is an English word. The Latin equivalent is incarnation, of course. But I prefer to say embody because, at least in the places where I preach, people can relate to this better than to a technical term. But it means the same thing.

I really do believe that Jesus believed that he was called to act on that assumption. And I think that was hugely scary for Jesus. I think he knew he might actually be wrong. After all, some people who believe that sort of thing might turn out to be like the man who believes he's a pot of tea. I think Jesus knew that that was his vocation, that he had to act in that way, to live and act on the basis of a vocation to embody, to incarnate, the return of Israel's God to his people. That's why I would say that Jesus, very quickly after his death and resurrection (that's a whole other story; we'll come to it presently), was recognized by his followers as being, all along, the embodiment of Israel's God. Faced with his resurrection, they then went back in their minds to all the things that they had seen, heard, and known about Jesus and, as it were, slapped themselves on the side of their heads and said, "Do you realize who we have been with all this time? We have been with the one who embodies Israel's God." And they then told and retold the stories of Jesus with awe and wonder as, with hindsight, they reflected on what had been happening all along.

This is a huge, extraordinary idea. Yet it makes deep and historically rooted sense that Jesus should think like that about himself. Now, of course, it would be perfectly open to anyone to say to me, "Well, maybe you're right. Maybe Jesus really did believe that about himself. Maybe the disciples did come to think in that way too. But clearly Jesus must have been wrong, either because we know a priori that if there was a God he could never become human, or because we know a priori that anyone who thinks like that about himself really must have been mad, deranged, or deluded."

To this I would say: okay, fine, but just hold those a prioris off for the moment, keep the dogs at the bay. And just hold in your mind the picture of a first-century Jew believing and doing all that I have said. And then ask the question about the resurrection. And then ask all the other questions about what we mean by the word God anyway. Because, of course, the early Christians said most emphatically that the word God remains systematically vague, and that it's only when we look at Jesus that we find it comes into focus. John says, "No one has seen God at any time; but the only begotten Son, who lives in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known." The Greek at this point means, literally, "He has provided an exegesis of him, he has shown us who God really is."

That's a long answer to a vital question, but I don't think I can make it any shorter. Most people, in my experience, don't think through the question of Jesus and God in this way. But this is how, I think, Jesus himself, the earliest Christians, and those who wrote the Gospels were thinking, and we do well to get our minds around it.

Dr. Ehrman did not deal with reasoning such as this. He took a rather weak argument used by middle school youth camp speakers and presented it as if it was "the best Christianity has to offer." He did not bring up what Christian scholars on his level actually have to say about it. This is known as "straw man argumentation." He has debated some of Christianity's best spokespeople, which means he knows these arguments. Why he chooses to ignore them is beyond me.

I do not know Dr. Ehrman's heart on this, and perhaps I am misrepresenting him (if so, I will happily be corrected)... but I think a man of his caliber should "pick on people his own size" and be honest about what Christian academics really say. Setting up weak arguments that do not represent the best of genuine Biblical argumentation and then knocking them down is not "fair" argumentation practice or good scholarship.

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