IS JESUS GOD IN HUMAN FORM?

In chapter 7, the third evidence given for the existence of God is that there is a man who is God, namely Jesus Christ. If Jesus was indeed God in human form, then not only do we know that God exists, but we have a way to know him, for we can see what God is like by looking at Jesus, we can hear what God desires by listening to Jesus, and we can know God personally by believing in and following Jesus. Belief in the Deity of Christ, therefore, secures not only belief in God’s existence but also provides the key to knowing God. But how can we know whether Jesus was indeed God in human form?

Jesus Claimed to be God

Not many people have dared to say they are God. For a Jew (as for a Muslim), it is considered a serious offence (blasphemy) to claim to be God, for it is seen as detracting from the unique status belonging to God. Yet Jesus, a Jew, dared to say to the Jews: “The Father and I are one” (John 10:30). The Jews who heard him understood that he was claiming to be equal to God, meaning that he himself was God. They could not accept this and were so offended at his statement that they picked up stones to stone him (verse 31). When Jesus asked why they wanted to stone him they said, “… because you, a mere man, claim to be God” (verse 33, NIV). If Jesus did not mean to say that he was equal to God, then he would quickly have cleared up the misunderstanding to avoid being killed. But in responding to the crowd, Jesus did not deny that he was God, but rather challenged them about why they didn’t believe. He said, “Why do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, ‘I am God’s Son?’ Do not believe me unless I do what my Father does” (verses 36-37, NIV). Here he restates what he meant in a different way: “I am God’s Son,” and indicates that the people should believe him because he does what God does.

At this point it would be helpful to clarify the meaning of the term “Son of God.” We see from the above that Jesus equates being the Son of God with being God in human form. The Bible sometimes uses the term “son of God” in a different way of people who are followers of Christ. For example, John 1:12 says, “But as many as received him [Jesus], to them who believed in his name, he [God] gave the power to become sons of God” (KJV). Those who believe in Jesus are sons of God (plural) in that they have become part of God’s family through faith in Christ. But Jesus is the Son of God (singular) in a unique sense. He is called the “one and only Son” or the “only begotten Son of God” (John 3:16, KJV). He is uniquely the Son of God in the following ways.

First, he is the Son of God by birth. In Luke 1:35 the angel said to Mary concerning Jesus: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called *the Son of God*” (italics added). Jesus did not have a human father. His mother was Mary, who up until the time of Jesus’ birth was a virgin. She became pregnant, not through a sexual relationship with a man, but through the miraculous influence of God’s Spirit. Therefore Jesus’ father, with reference to his human birth, was not Joseph (who, by he time Jesus was born, was Mary’s husband) or any other man, but God. Jesus was by birth the Son of God (see also Matthew 1:18-23).

Jesus is also the Son of God in that he is the second Person of the Trinity, God the Son. The Bible indicates that God is a Trinity—a three-in-one Being consisting of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). Even before Jesus was born into this world, he existed in heaven as God the Son (not as a human being, but as an eternal Spirit). John chapter 1 describes him as “the Word,” and says, “In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He existed in the beginning with God” (John 1:1-2). Then at a point in history, “the Word became human and made his home among us” (John 1:14), meaning that he was born into this world as the man Jesus. Jesus, or “the Word,” was with God the Father, but he also was God, because he was God the Son, the Second Person of the Trinity.

Understanding, then, that for Jesus being the Son of God was equivalent to being God the Son in human form, we see further implicit claims of his Deity in the following encounter with his disciples. He asked his disciples: “Who do you say I am?” (Matthew 16:15). Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (v. 16). In response, Jesus said, “You are blessed, Simon son of John, because my Father in heaven has revealed this to you” (v. 17). By saying this, Jesus is implicitly claiming to be the Son of God, sent by God the Father yet equal in essence to the Father.

At his trial, Jesus also claimed to be the Son of God. The high priest said to him, “Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God” (Matthew 26:63). Jesus answered, “You have said it” (v. 64). The high priest then said, “Blasphemy! Why do we need other witnesses?” (vv. 65-66). The other religious leaders answered, “He deserves to die!”   
As in John 10, it is very clear that those present understood that Jesus was claiming to be God and that therefore he was worthy of death.

Why Some Did not Believe

In two of the three examples cited above (John 10, Matthew 16, and Matthew 26), those who heard Jesus claim to be the Son of God (and God in human flesh) did not believe in him and wanted to kill him. If Jesus really was the Son of God, why did many of his own contemporaries not believe in him? There are several reasons.

First, he looked like an ordinary man. They said, “you, a *mere man,* claim to be God” (John 10:33). We could say that Jesus was “God in disguise.” Outwardly he did not look like God because he temporarily laid aside his Glory (that is, his appearance of brilliance and greatness). The Bible says, “he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being” (Philippians 2:7). Jesus did not look like God because he limited himself so that he could be like us and experience life as we experience it. This was God’s plan and an example of Jesus’ humility and love, for he was willing to become an ordinary person like us, while still remaining in his essence God.

Second, some, especially the Jewish religious leaders, did not believe Jesus was the Son of God because they were unwilling to accept his critical analysis of their way of practicing religion. Jesus criticized them sharply for their pride and hypocrisy. They were more concerned about their status as spiritual leaders than they were about loving people or loving God. Jesus said of them: “Everything they do is for show. On their arms they wear extra wide prayer boxes with Scripture verses inside, and they wear robes with extra long tassles. And they love to sit at the head table at banquets and in the seats of honor in the synagogues” (Matthew 23:5-6). He went on to criticize them further:

What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs—beautiful on the outside but filled on the inside with dead people’s bones and all sorts of impurity. Outwardly you look like righteous people, but inwardly your hearts are filled with hypocrisy and lawlessness (Matthew 23:27-28).

If they believed Jesus was the Son of God, they would have to acknowledge that God was not impressed with their religious legalism and would have to repent of their pride and hypocrisy. This they were not prepared to do—it was easier to reject and kill Jesus in order to protect their own image, and that is what they did. They were jealous of Jesus’ popularity with the masses. After one of Jesus’ greatest miracles they said, “What are we going to do? This man certainly performs many miraculous signs. If we allow him go on like this, soon everyone will believe in him” (John 11:47-48). Either Jesus had to go or they would lose their power over the people.

It is not so different today. When people don’t believe in Jesus, lack of evidence is not necessarily the reason—it could be unwillingness to repent. For now, as then, if Jesus really is God in human form, then we must turn from our sins, stop living primarily for ourselves, and allow him to rule our lives. To admit that Jesus is God is an admission with practical and personal implications.

Although some of Jesus’ contemporaries rejected him, others, like Simon Peter, believed in him and confessed that he was the Christ, the Son of the living God. Let us consider some of the reasons why many in Jesus’ time as well as millions throughout history have believed that Jesus is God in human form.

Others Testified That Jesus was the Son of God

Jesus not only claimed to be the Son of God himself, but others testified on his behalf. Jesus said:

If I testify about myself, my testimony is not valid. There is another who testifies in my favor, and I know that his testimony about me is valid. You have sent to John and he has testified to the truth (John 5:31-33).

Jesus was referring to John the Baptist, another prophet well known in that time whose ministry preceded Jesus’ ministry by just a few months. John the Baptist gave this testimony about Jesus:

I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him, except the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ I have seen and testify that this is the Son of God (John 1:32-34, NIV).

Not only did John the Baptist, a great prophet, testify that Jesus was the Son of God, but God the Father himself gave verbal testimony on several occasions during Jesus’ ministry that Jesus was his Son. Jesus made reference to this when he said, “And the Father who sent me has testified about me himself” (John 5:37). The first time was when Jesus was baptized. The Bible says:

One day when the crowds were being baptized, Jesus himself was baptized. As he was praying, the heavens opened, and the Holy Spirit, in bodily form, descended on him like a dove. And a voice from heaven said, “You are my dearly loved Son, and you bring me great joy” (Luke 3:22).

The second time was at the transfiguration, when Jesus went up into a mountain to pray. The Bible says, “And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was transformed, and his clothes became dazzling white” (Luke 9:29). This was witnessed by Peter, James, and John, three of his disciples, who saw a cloud come over him. Then a voice came from the cloud saying, “This is my Son; my Chosen One. Listen to him” (Luke 9:35).

Jesus Verified His Claims to be God in Human Form

Jesus claimed to be the Son of God (and God in human form), and John the Baptist and God the Father testified that this was so. Jesus also verified his claims to be God by the things he did. Jesus said:

But I have a greater witness than John—my teachings and my miracles. The Father gave me these works to accomplish, and they prove that he sent me (John 5:36).

Jesus backed up his claims by the things he did, including his righteous manner of life, his teachings, and his miracles. Many have found this evidence so amazing and convincing that they have left everything to follow him. You can consider this evidence and judge for yourself.

By His Sinless Life

If Jesus really was God in human form, then his life should demonstrate the character of God. Since God is perfect, then Jesus also should be perfect. And it is the consensus of most people, both Christian and non-Christian, that he was, as the Bible also teaches and as Jesus himself also implied. Jesus said, “If any of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her” (John 8:7, NIV). One by one the people walked away, because they knew they were guilty of sin. But Jesus stayed there. Why?--because he alone was not guilty of sin. Then Jesus said, “Then neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin” (John 8:11, NIV). Another time Jesus challenged those who didn’t believe in him: “Which of you can truthfully accuse me of sin? And since I am telling you the truth, why don’t you believe me?” (John 8:46). No one responded to his challenge because no one could prove him guilty of sin.

Others also testified that Jesus was a sinless man. At his trial, the Roman judge Pilate said, “He is not guilty of any crime” (John 18:38). He only allowed Jesus to be crucified because of pressure from the Jewish leaders, but he could find no fault with Jesus. When Jesus was on the cross, one of the two criminals crucified with him said to the other: “We deserve to die for our crimes, but *this man hasn’t done anything wrong* (Luke 23:41, italics added). Jesus’ own disciples, who saw his life more closely than any others, never accused him of doing wrong, and Peter, the leader of the disciples, summarized his life by saying, “he went around doing good” (Acts 10:38).

In addition, several other statements in the New Testament clearly teach that Jesus was without sin. The Apostle Paul wrote, “For God made Christ, *who never sinned,* to be the offering for our sin …” (2 Corinthians 5:21, italics added). And the writer of Hebrews wrote of Jesus that he was tempted in every way, just as we are, yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15). It is not only Christians who acknowledge that Jesus was without sin. Muslims also recognize Jesus as a sinless prophet, and the Qur’an refers to Jesus as “a pure son” (Surah 19 (Maryam):19) and says of him that he is “held in honor in this world and the hereafter and of (the company of) those nearest to Allah” (Surah 3 (Al-Imran):45). Christians and Muslims together make up about one half of the world’s population, so clearly the belief that Jesus is sinless is quite prevalent. Mahatma Gandhi, a Hindu, also had this to say about Jesus: "The gentle figure of Christ, so patient, so kind, so loving, so full of forgiveness that he taught his followers not to retailate when abused or struck, but to turn the other cheek, I thought it was a beautiful example of the perfect man..."1 It is rare to find anyone who has something critical to say about Jesus Christ—Christianity, yes, but not Jesus. He is almost universally acknowledged as a good man, if not a perfect model of humanity. This very fact should give cause for thoughtful consideration about who he was. Was he just a man, or was he the perfect and holy God in human flesh? The centurion who supervised his crucifixion, even after observing his behavior during the time of his crucifixion, was so impressed that he concluded, “This man truly was the Son of God!” (Mark 15:39).

By His Teaching

Jesus not only backed up his claim to be God in human form by his sinless life, but by his remarkable teaching. His teaching alone did not prove that he was God, but it did give those who heard him cause to believe that he was for several reasons. First, there was the content of his teaching. If Jesus claimed to be God, but taught us to do things that were evil or against God, then certainly we would reject his claim. But everything Jesus taught was to promote holy and righteous living and faithfulness to God. Above all, he taught us to love God and to love one another (Matthew 22:37-40). His teaching, particularly the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), raised the moral standard higher than ever before. He said throughout the sermon, “You have heard . . . but I say . . .” (Matt. 5:27-28, 31-32, etc.). Using the teaching of the Old Testament or the standard of the religious teachers of his day as the moral base line, Jesus raised the standard yet higher. It was this sermon, particularly the teachings on non-retaliation (Matt. 5:38-42), that impressed Gandhi so much. The high moral standard that Jesus taught (and lived) is certainly consistent with Jesus’ claim to be God in human form.

Second, the authority of his teaching caught the attention of his listeners and made them wonder who he was. After Jesus finished the Sermon on the Mount, we read that “the crowds were amazed at his teaching, for he taught with real authority—quite unlike their teachers of religious law” (Matthew 7:28-29). Jesus didn’t quote other scholars or prophets, but said, “But I say to you . . .” Those who heard him wondered how he could speak with such authority. It wasn’t because of his family background, for he grew up in a poor family and lived in the “no-name” town of Nazareth. It wasn’t because of his education, for he hadn’t received any higher education in religious studies. It wasn’t because of his position, for he wasn’t a priest or Pharisee or any officially appointed religious leader. It wasn’t because of his age, for he was still a young man, only 30 years old. What was it? How could he speak with such authority? Could it be that his authority was from his own nature, inherent within himself because he was God in human form?

Third, there is the impact of his teaching. His teaching has inspired people to love God, to show compassion towards those in need, and to forgive those who have wronged them. His teachings have filled the hearts of his listeners with faith, hope, and peace. His teaching has encouraged the highest standards of integrity and purity. No man’s teaching impacted his initial hearers as well as people throughout history in the way that Jesus’ teachings have. When we consider the impact of his teaching, along with its content and authority, we find that the case in favor of Jesus’ claim to be God in human form continues to grow stronger.

By His Miracles

Perhaps the strongest evidence to support Jesus’ claim to be God in human form is his miracles: The Apostle John wrote:

The disciples saw Jesus do many other miraculous signs in addition to the ones recorded in this book. But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in him you will have life by the power of his name (John 20:30-31).

Jesus himself referred to his miracles to back up his claims. When he said, “I and the Father are One” (John 10:30) and the Jews wanted to kill him, he responded: “I have shown you many miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?” (John 10:32, NIV), and again, “But if I do his work, believe in the evidence of the miraculous works that I have done, even if you don’t believe me. Then you will know and understand that the Father is in me, and I am in the Father” (John 10:38).

Jesus was the greatest miracle-worker who ever lived. He turned water into wine at the wedding feast (John 2:1-11) and calmed a stormy sea instantly by his command (Luke 8:22-25). He fed 5,000 people with just five loaves of bread and two fish (Matthew 14:13-21) and later walked on the water on the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 14:22-33). He restored sight to the blind (Luke 18:35-43, John 9:1-12) and hearing to the deaf (Mark 7:31-37). He healed the mute so he could talk (Mark 7:31-37) and the lame so he could walk (Matthew 15:29-31, John 5:1-9). He cleansed lepers of their leprosy (Luke 17:11-19) and cast out evil spirits from the demon-possessed (Mark 9:14-27). On three occasions he even brought the dead back to life (Luke 7:11-17, Luke 8:40-56, John 11:1-44). These miracles were performed instantly, without the use of medicine or a long healing process. They happened by a simple word or touch from Jesus, and were witnessed by many eyewitnesses, sometimes even by thousands of people at once. They showed his power over the devil, disease, and death, and even over the powers of nature itself. His fame as a miracle-worker spread throughout Israel and Syria (Matthew 4:24-25), attracting large crowds to follow him. No one could deny that he did miracles, not even his enemies (Matthew 12:24).

Many did believe in Jesus because of his miracles. When Nathaniel realized that Jesus had supernatural knowledge about him, he said, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God—the King of Israel!” (John 1:49). After Jesus walked on the water and climbed into the boat with his disciples they said, “Truly you are the Son of God” (Matthew 14:33, NIV). When he calmed the storm his disciples said, “Who is this man? When he gives a command, even the wind and waves obey him!” (Luke 8:25). After Jesus raised Lazarus (the brother of Mary and Martha) from the dead, we read that “Many of the people who were with Mary believed in Jesus when they saw this happen” (John 11:45).

The fact that Jesus did great miracles does not in itself prove that he is the Son of God, for other prophets and apostles in the Bible have also done great miracles, such as Moses (Exodus 14, 17), Elijah (1 Kings 17), Elisha (2 Kings 4-5), Peter (Acts 3), and Paul (Acts 14, 19). These were ordinary men who received power from God to do miracles. Miracles validate the claim of the person doing them—since these men never claimed to be the Son of God, the miracles do not show them to be the Son of God. But these men did claim to be prophets or apostles, and so the miracles validate those claims. Since the claim to be the Son of God is a greater claim, then it should be validated by greater miracles, and this was indeed the case with Jesus.

Jesus’ enemies dared not deny Jesus’ miracles, for everyone knew that he did them, as his miracles were numerous and were witnessed by thousands of people. But his enemies claimed that Jesus did the miracles, not through the power of God, but through the power of Satan. When Jesus cast out demons and healed a man who was blind and mute, the Pharisees said, “No wonder he can cast out demons. He gets his power from Satan, the prince of demons” (Matthew 12:24). It is true that Satan also has power to do miracles (or at least to counterfeit them), for the Bible speaks of the sorcerers in Egypt who could duplicate some (but not all) of Moses’ miracles through their secret arts (Exodus 7:8-13, 8:16-18), and also predicts that in the last days the man of lawlessness (also called Antichrist) will have power from Satan to do counterfeit miracles which deceive the world into following him (2 Thessalonians 2:5-12, see also Revelation 13 and Matthew 24:23-24). In the case of Jesus, however, the evidence provided by his miracles is also supported by his sinless character and by the content and authority of his teaching. It addition, it would make no sense for Jesus to oppose Satan through the power of Satan, as he himself pointed out in his response to the charge. He said, “Every kingdom divided against itself will not stand. If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand?” (Matthew 12:25-26, NIV).

The greatest miracle of all supporting Jesus’ claim to be the Son of God was his own resurrection from the dead. The Bible says concerning Jesus that he “was shown to be the Son of God when he was raised from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Romans 1:4). Because this topic is of such key importance, a separate chapter will be devoted to it, discussing the importance of his resurrection in more detail, along with evidence to support it.

Conclusion

We have seen that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, and backed up his claims by his sinless life, his teaching, and his miracles. It seems incredible to believe that Jesus is actually the Son of God, conceived through the Holy Spirit, born without a human father, God the Son in human form. It is hard to believe such a thing, especially in our modern, scientific age with its skepticism of the miraculous. But yet, when one considers the evidence with an open mind, it is also hard to deny it. One faces a kind of dilemma, or rather “tri-lemma,” when trying to decide who Jesus is, because there are only three logical choices, and none of them is easy or comfortable to accept: either he was a liar, a lunatic, or the Lord (that is, God).2

Either of the first two choices is accompanied by difficulties. How can we say he was a liar when his reputation for integrity and perfection of character is unparalleled in human history? As has been mentioned, not only Christians, but also Muslims and even Hindus like Gandhi, acknowledge Jesus as a perfect man. And claiming he was a lunatic is no better. Could the man who spoke with such clarity, power, and wisdom have been crazy? Could the one who lived such a model life have been out of his mind? Could a crazy man have performed such miracles? Therefore, there seems no other sensible option but to conclude about Jesus as Peter did: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16).

You might prefer a different option—that Jesus was a good man and a great teacher, but not the Son of God. The problem is that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God. If he said this and was not who he claimed to be, then he was a liar and not a good man. C. S. Lewis makes the point well when he says:

I am trying to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about him: “I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God.” This is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse.3

What is your conclusion about Jesus? Was he a liar, or a lunatic, or the Son of God? None of those choices is easy, but you must choose. To make no choice is the same as choosing one of the first two options. The question is too important not to choose, for if Jesus is the Son of God, he has the power to give you eternal life. As John said, “These are written that you may believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31).

ENDNOTES

1. Fr. Benny Aguiar, “Gandhi’s View of Jesus Christ,” at <http://robtshepherd.tripod.com/gandhi.html>
2. Josh McDowell develops this argument in chapter 7 of his book Evidence that Demands a Verdict, vol. 1, Here’s Life Publishers, 1979. C. S. Lewis previously presented a similar argument in his well known book, Mere Christianity, New York: The Macmillian Company, 1952, pp. 40-41.
3. C.S. Lewis, quoted in Josh McDowell, Evidence That Demands a Verdict, p. 103.