

The Synoptic Gospels

Week 10—Christ's Divinity in the Synoptics

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Outline

Words Demonstrating Jesus' Divine Self-Identity

- Used Titles

- Accepted Titles

- Direct Remarks

- Indirect Remarks

Actions Demonstrating Jesus' Divine Self-Identity

- Permission

- Words and Actions

Jesus' Self-Identity

The goal of tonight's lecture is to dismantle the claim that Jesus never claimed to be God in the (earlier) Synoptics. If taken ultra-literally, this is true and unremarkable. But Jesus left no doubt as to his identity as I hope to demonstrate below.

Here are a few qualifications:

- We are limited in offering an exhaustive treatment because Jesus' self-identity suffuses the entirety of the gospels. These are ones that I've noticed and I'm sure there are many others.
- Some of the evidence is stronger than others. The larger concern is the sheer volume of indications of Jesus' view of his own divine identity and authority.
- Nothing we observe today in itself guarantees that he's God. It shows us what he thought of himself. But! The resurrection shows that God certified Jesus' words. That is, Jesus' words *together with* his resurrection show that he was God.

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Son of Man

Son of Man is without a doubt Jesus' favored title. A clumsy reader of Scripture might assume that this means that Jesus is just a man.

Where does it come from?

*Daniel 7:13-14— I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven one like a **Son of Man** was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed.*

We can be sure that Jesus has this reference in mind based on Mk 14:62 and parallels (note the response too!)

What about this quote implies divinity?

Son of Man

What about this quote implies divinity?

- The Son of Man comes in the clouds of heaven. He is not walking on earth like an ordinary human.
- He was presented to the Ancient of Days without repercussion or consequence. Therefore, he's legally righteous before God.
- The Ancient of Days gives him dominion, glory and a kingdom over absolutely all men. In other words, he's highly exalted.
- Unlike all other men or kings before him, his kingdom will last forever (subtle prediction of resurrection?)

Further observations:

- He is *like* a Son of Man. He exhibits divine and human features.
- It is striking that the Hebrew term for 'God' is never used but two special phrases; indeed, 'Ancient of Days' is only used here. This would no doubt help avoid trouble with a budding trinitarian revelation.

One and the *Shema*

One of the most significant passages in the Old Testament is referred to as the *Shema* (meaning *Hear!*): Deut 6:4—*Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!*

Based on Jesus' usage, there seems to be a connection between One and God. Here are a few passages that demonstrate Jesus' view of this matter:

- Mt 19:16-17— And He said to him, "Why are you asking Me about what is good? There is only One who is good... (Cf. Parallel Mark 10:18b—No one is good except God alone!)
- Matt 23:8-10—But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. Do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ.

This last passage is particularly fascinating because he uses the One in parallel talking about both the Father and Christ. This gestures at the unique doctrine of trinitarian monotheism.

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Demonic Titles

The demons used highly elevated language when interacting with Jesus:

- *Mark 3:11-12* Whenever the unclean spirits saw Him, they would fall down before Him and shout, "You are the Son of God!" And He earnestly warned them not to tell who He was. \implies Jesus' warning indicates his agreement!
- *Luke 8:28,31* Seeing Jesus, he cried out and fell before Him, and said in a loud voice, "What business do we have with each other, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg You, do not torment me." . . . 31 They were imploring Him not to command them to go away into the abyss. (Cf. Mark 5:6-7) \implies Not only do they use a special title for Jesus, they also imply that he has the right to judge them!

Paradoxically, demons are probably better judges of Jesus' identity than the average observer. Given their special vantage point as spirits, they have extraordinary insight into Jesus' identity.

For other uses of *Son of God*, see Mt 14:33, 16:16; Mk 15:39; Lk 22:70.

Lord

The preponderance of uses of *Lord* are by others. Given how often its used, Jesus only uses *Lord* to refer to himself a few times. Here is what we find:

1. Jesus uses 'Lord' to refer to himself in a couple of types of contexts:
 - In direct ways. (E.g. Matt 24:42, Mark 11:3)
 - In parables where the analogue of Lord is either Jesus or the Father. (Mt 18:23ff, 25:37)
 - In ironic ways: there are many who might call him *Lord* who do not actually live in a way consistent with its usage. (E.g. Mt 7:21, 22; 25:11)
2. Jesus permits others to call him *Lord*, without denial or correction. *Lord* is frequently used by others when he is in the midst of a miracle. (E.g. Matt 14:28-33; Matt 17:14-18; Mark 7:24-30; Luke 12:41; Luke 18:41)
3. Luke as a narrator uses 'the Lord' simply as a way to refer to Jesus. (E.g. Luke 7:13, 10:39)

What can we learn from this?

Meaning of Lord

There are a number of difficulties in drawing too much from this phrase. Here is why:

- *Lord* in English translates *kyrios*. In LXX, this word translates Hebrew words *adonai* (signals authority or respect) and *yahweh* (covenant name of God). Most NT authors followed the LXX's lead. (Cf. John 8:58)
- Even though our English *Lord* tracks the Greek closely, we know that Greek was not the language spoken by Jesus or any of his conversation partners. Therefore, the ambiguity would not have been present between Jesus and his speakers.

In spite of this ambiguity, here are some details worthy of attention:

- Jesus uses *kyrios* when citing Scripture that refers to Yahweh (Mk 12:29)
- The authors of the Synoptics gospels are careful to avoid using Lord in any way other than to refer to Jesus or God.

A Few More Titles

Here are a couple more titles Jesus used or permitted. We won't look too deep into these because they've already come up. For both, Jesus rarely uses them of himself but does permit them.

1. *Christ*—Jesus uses 'Christ,' a few times but more often is it used of Him. *Christ* is the greek translation of *Messiah*, which simply means anointed. The term is generic in itself but was adapted to have strong eschatological connotations. (See also Luke 4:16-30 and his citation of Isaiah 61:1-2 and the function of Lord's anointed there.)
2. *Son of David*—Jesus uses this term a few times, but we find a number of people using it of him, especially in connection to miracles. This phrase is far more obviously connected to the eternal king. See especially Isaiah 9:6,7. See also II Sam 7:16; Isaiah 16:5, 40:11, Jeremiah 23:5; 33:15; Ezekiel 34:22-24; Ezekiel 37:24; Zech 12:6ff.

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The Son of David & Psalm 110

In all three synoptics Jesus argues that he is God using the blatantly messianic Psalm 110 (Mt 22:41ff; Mk 12:35-37; Lk 20:41-44).

He begins by saying, “Whose son is the Christ?” Or comparably, “Why do the scribes say the Christ is David’s son?” Afterwards he quotes:

*Psalm 110:1—The **Lord** says to my **Lord**: “Sit at My right hand Until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet.”*

In Hebrew, the first **Lord** is *Yahweh* and the second **Lord** is *Adonai*. Then he asks, how could he be David’s son if David calls him his *Adonai* (superior)?

- Crucially, if Jesus were merely a man, then David would be His undeniable superior as His ancestor. This implies that Jesus cannot be a mere man. (There are few options left in biblical cosmology for who he could be.)
- Collating the remainder of Psalm 110 with other messianic prophecies narrow the options down to One.
- Note: Jesus is not saying that David is not the physical father of the Christ but simply that his physical heritage is not central to his identity.

Unmistakable Remarks

In both of these episodes, Jesus is fighting over the Sabbath, a day holy enough that to desecrate it meant death (Numbers 15:32-36).

Mark 2:27-28—Jesus said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”

Matt 12:5—Or have you not read in the Law, that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath and are innocent? 6 But I say to you that something greater than the temple is here.

Only God is greater than the temple and there is only one Lord over the Sabbath! To even abrogate features of the Sabbath was risky in light of its value, but Jesus is declaring himself to have authority of it and the temple! Nothing short of a Lord-Liar-Lunatic interpretation offers itself for these passages.

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Self-Glorifying Jesus

What about these quotes imply elevated authority? Divinity?

- Mt 5:11—Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.
- Mt 23:34a—Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes . . .
- Mk 9:41—For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because of your name as followers of Christ, truly I say to you, he will not lose his reward.
- Mk 13:31— Everyone who comes to Me and hears My words and acts on them, I will show you whom he is like
- Luke 18:17—Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all.
- Luke 10:22—All things have been handed over to Me by My Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.

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Worship

There are a few places Jesus permits worship:

- Matt 14:33—And those who were in the boat worshiped Him, saying, “You are certainly God’s Son!”
- Matt 28:9, 17—And behold, Jesus met them and greeted them. And they came up and took hold of His feet and worshiped Him. . . . When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some were doubtful.

What makes this so striking is how Jesus refutes Satan!

Matt 4:10—Then Jesus said to him, “Go, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only.’” [Deut 6:13]

(Cf. Acts 10:52; Rev 22:8,9)

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Healing of the Paralytic

Mark 2:5-12— And Jesus seeing their faith said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” But some of the scribes were sitting there and reasoning in their hearts, “Why does this man speak that way? He is blaspheming; who can forgive sins but God alone?” Immediately Jesus, aware in His spirit that they were reasoning that way within themselves, said to them, “Why are you reasoning about these things in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven’; or to say, ‘Get up, and pick up your pallet and walk’? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—He said to the paralytic, “I say to you, get up, pick up your pallet and go home.” And he got up and immediately picked up the pallet and went out in the sight of everyone, so that they were all amazed and were glorifying God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this.”

Healing of the Paralytic

This whole episode is quite peculiar from the standpoint of its original audience:

- The guy is paralyzed—what does forgiveness have to do with it?
- This man hasn't done anything to Jesus, has he? How can Jesus forgive him?

The local leaders' response is spot on theologically:

- Only God may forgive "*sins*" (note pl.). Forgiveness in atonement comes through performing elaborate cultic rituals at the temple, *as prescribed by God for forgiveness*. (See Lev 4:20,26,31; Lev 16:29-30)
- Jesus is not only identifying himself with God, but signaling in nascent fashion the way that he'll supersede the Levitical system.

More than anything, if Jesus was going to clear the record about his divinity, this was his shot. Rather than deny the charge of blasphemy, he raises the stakes by healing the paralytic.

Passover & Supper

The text indicates clearly that Jesus was speaking about himself during the Passover celebration:

Mark 14:12,22-24—On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb was being sacrificed, His disciples said to Him, “Where do You want us to go and prepare for You to eat the Passover?” ... While they were eating, He took some bread, and after a blessing He broke it, and gave it to them, and said, “Take it; this is My body.” And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, and they all drank from it. And He said to them, “This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.”

There are two things worthy of note here:

1. No ordinary Israelite has the authority to link the Passover to the New Covenant (v.24, cf. Lk 22:20). This feature alone indicates Jesus ability to speak for God as a prophet.
2. Even more wildly, he signals that these two massive OT notions are fulfilled in Him and His work. This would be on the extreme end of narcissism and madness if He's is not divine. (Cf. Psalm 49:7-9;15)

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