

WHO IS YESHUA?

Part 1

YESHUA IS GOD

A comprehensive look at arguably the most controversial subject in history—the deity of Jesus

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Of all the questions that anyone could ever ask, I am convinced the most important one is a simple three word inquiry—who is Yeshua? Or as it is more commonly asked, who is Jesus?

The way that you answer this question will impact every aspect of your life. Your answer will shape your fundamental perception of God and how you practice spirituality. It will influence your behavior and personality, depending on whether or not you follow His example and teachings on love and forgiveness and so on. It will affect the way you view the world and all the events that surround us, especially in terms of Israel and the end times. And it will form the basis of your hope for what is to come after your life reaches an end.

Most Jews believe that Jesus was a real Jewish man who was faithful to the Law of Moses and died in Jerusalem, but was neither the Son of God nor the Messiah. It was his followers who elevated him to the status of deity.

Ask a Hindu who Jesus is and you will be told that he was just one of many sons of God who came to show the way to divine consciousness and that he traveled to India to learn yoga.

Mormons believe that Jesus was a man who became God and is the brother of Lucifer and the husband of both Mary and Martha and the father of many children.

Jehovah's Witnesses teach that Jesus was created by God and was the Archangel Michael before being born on earth and that his second coming occurred invisibly in 1914.

According to Islam, Jesus was not the Son of God, but just a great prophet. He was not crucified but his image was placed on another man who died on the cross. And when Jesus returns he will come as a Muslim and will abolish Christianity and will kill the Antichrist and all of his Jewish followers, but he will defer in subordination to the Mahdi, the Messiah-like figure of Islam.

Even within Christianity you will find varying opinions on some aspects of the identity of Jesus. For the great majority of Christians, Jesus is fully God yet fully man, who came as Messiah and became our atonement for sin. But liberal Christian theologians known as The Jesus Seminar deny the validity of much of the New Testament, proposing a Jesus who is not divine, not the worker of miracles, and not the Savior of the world. He was just a regular guy who lived in Nazareth.

With so much diversity of opinion, it seems reasonable, indeed imperative, that we consider what the original source—the Bible—has to say about who Yeshua is. It is there that we see four key themes about his identity:

1. Yeshua is God
2. Yeshua is Messiah
3. Yeshua is Jewish
4. Yeshua is Salvation

In this paper we will address the theme that is the most controversial one of all. Yet without it, nothing else about Him would matter—Yeshua is God.

The deity of Yeshua is really wrapped up in a more complex concept—the triunity of God (meaning three persons united as one), commonly expressed as the trinity. It is a word that is not found anywhere in the Bible, but describes a concept that is frequently depicted in Scripture, often in peculiar ways.

In order to consider New Testament declarations about the deity of Yeshua, we first have to determine their foundations in the message of the Old Testament. For if there was no evidence in the Torah or the Prophets to suggest multiple persons united as one God, it would be out of place for someone to come along later on and affirm his deity. The Old Testament must serve as the bedrock for the doctrine of God's triunity and then allow for further revelation to come in the New Testament.

How the Old Testament foreshadows Yeshua as God

God describes Himself with plural pronouns

There are some places in the Old Testament where God has a rather odd way of speaking about Himself:

- In the Creation account, God said:
“Let *us* make man in *our* image, in *our* likeness...” (Gen. 1:26).
- When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden:
“The LORD God said, ‘The man has now become like one of *us*, knowing good and evil’” (Gen. 3:22).
- When people erected the tower of Babel:
“The LORD said, ‘Come, let *us* go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other’” (Gen. 11:7).
- When God considered the need to send a prophet to Israel, Isaiah says:
“Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send? And who will go for *us*?’” (Isaiah 6:8).

It is claimed that these are plurals of majesty. These would be like the declarations made by the kings and queens of England who proclaim, “We hereby make the following decree...” In this usage, the “we” is the king or queen speaking alone. But this is a modern way of thinking, not the ancient Hebrew way. In the Bible, the kings of Israel and Judah always spoke in the singular. This claim is a false imposition of an element from a more recent culture upon an ancient one.

Based on this particular use of language, it is much more reasonable to draw the plain conclusion that there is something complex about the subject doing the speaking.

Common names for God are in plural form

Two of the most common names for God are *Elohim* (God) and *Adonai* (Lord). Both words are in plural, not singular form.

Consider the name *Elohim*. It is a Hebrew word that employs a masculine plural ending: *im*. In some cases, when referring to heathen deity, it is translated as “gods,” a conclusion that is rightly based on context. On the other hand, *Elohim* is translated as “God” when it refers to the true Lord, in spite of being in the plural. To justify this translation, the argument of the plural of majesty has also been applied to *Elohim*. But there is another way to look at this word in plural form that still allows for it to refer to the one true God of the universe.

The best way of understanding *Elohim* is to look at some other related words. For example, the words for water—*mayim*, and heaven—*shamayim*, are both in plural form. Linguistic experts call these “quantitative plurals.” Water can be thought of in terms of many drops making up a larger body. Heaven can be thought of as many stars in one sky.

Elohim is the same kind of word. It gives us the sense of more than one person within one Godhead. By itself, *Elohim* is not proof of the Trinity, but it certainly suggests a quantity within the whole.

God describes His unity within plurality

The cornerstone of faith in Judaism is called the *Shema*. From Deut. 6:4, it states, “*Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheynu, Adonai Echad*—Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” The key word here is the last one, *echad*. There are two Hebrew words that carry the meaning of oneness:

- *Yachid*—meaning absolute unity. An example where *yachid* is used is Genesis 22:2 where God instructs Abraham to “take your only one son.” Isaac was one person. He was not part of a whole.
- *Echad*—meaning composite unity. In Genesis 2:24 male and female are said to become *basar echad*, “one flesh” through marriage. They are two persons united as one couple. Num. 13:23 uses the phrase, *eshkol anavim echad*—“one cluster of grapes. There are many individual fruits within the whole cluster.

By using *echad*, God has revealed Himself as having two fundamental characteristics: that He is the only deity in the universe, and that He exists in the form of composite unity—more than one person united together in some manner.

So strong are the implications of this word, that Maimonides, the influential twelfth century rabbi, substituted *yachid* for *echad* when he wrote the second of his Thirteen Principles of Faith: “I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, blessed be his name, is absolute unity (*yachid*).”¹

These Thirteen Principles of Faith became the basis of the Jewish liturgical prayer called *Ani Ma’amin* (“I Believe”) that is included in the *siddur* (prayer book). Thus virtually every *siddur* in use today emphasizes the use of *yachid* over *echad* in the declaration about God’s nature. This practice leaves the false impression of God’s absolute unity, not composite unity, in

¹ Moshe ben Maimon (Maimonides), *Introduction to Perek Helek in Commentary on the Mishnah*, It has been claimed that Maimonides made this change when quoting the *Shema*, but that is inaccurate. In his actual quotations of Deuteronomy 6:4 throughout his writings, he invariably employed *echad*. The change was limited to his second principle.

the minds of worshipers in the synagogue.² But it is important to recognize that *yachid* is never used regarding God anywhere in the Bible. It is always *echad*. So rather than trusting in the unreliable evidence of tradition, by God's own declaration, He is a composite unity, meaning more than one person united together in some manner.

God identifies the persons of the triunity

All of these three elements—plural pronouns, the name of God in plural form, and His oneness in composite unity—do not tell us specifically how many persons are united as one. Nor do they tell us what the attributes or roles of those persons are. For that we have to look at the passages that use both the name of God and other terms that describe His identity.

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called *Pele Yoets, El Gibbor, Avi-Ad, Sar Shalom*—Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” (Isaiah 9:6)

There are others, but perhaps the best passage for this revelation is in Isaiah 63:7-16. In the midst of telling the relationship between God and Israel, Isaiah identifies God in these three ways:

- “He became their **Savior**.” (v. 8). The word for Savior comes from the verb *yasha*, from which we get the noun *yeshua*, meaning “salvation.”
- “Yet they rebelled and grieved his **Holy Spirit**....” (v. 10).
- “But you are our **Father**....” (v. 16).

God has revealed Himself through theophanies

Theophanies are Old Testament appearances of God in human form. These are special moments when God temporarily revealed Himself to people with the resemblance of man. Each time He is called *malach Adonai*, the “Angel of the Lord.” The Hebrew word, *malach* is commonly translated as “angel.” But the word literally means “messenger.” Consider the words expressed by people in the Old Testament after having an encounter with the Angel of the Lord:

- After wrestling with a man Jacob said, “I saw God face to face” (Gen. 32:30).
- The Angel of the Lord appears to Moses in the burning bush and declares, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Ex. 3:6).
- When the Angel of the Lord appears to Manoah and his wife, Manoah responds, “We have seen God” (Judges 13:22).
- Nebuchadnezzar saw a man in the fiery furnace and said, he “looks like [*bar Elohim*] a son of God” (Dan. 3:25).

Scholars have debated whether these appearances are actually Yeshua or another way of God interacting with humanity. But in light of these verses, as well as the other evidence in the

² *Ani Ma'amin* first appeared in the Ashkenazi prayer book, printed in Mantua in 1558, and has continued in all subsequent publications, so that it is now well-established in terms of familiarity.

Old Testament, we can draw the following conclusions:

First, since God has demonstrated that He is capable of manifesting Himself in human form, His ultimate incarnation as Yeshua is consistent with that principle.

Second, although there is no place in Scripture that uses the term Trinity, we have evidence in the Old Testament that God exists as more than one person linked in unity.

Third, because God has given us a glimpse of who He is in the first books of the Bible, we should not be surprised that He would reveal Himself in greater detail in the latter books of the Bible.

How the New Testament confirms that Yeshua is God

The New Testament clarifies the mysterious depiction of God in the Old Testament through more precise descriptions of Yeshua's deity:

- “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1).
- In Phil 2:6, Paul says that Yeshua has “equality with God.”
- The writer to the Hebrews declares that Yeshua is the one who “made the world” (1:2), and has “the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature” (1:3).

One of the best ways to understand the implications of what Yeshua said about Himself is to consider the reaction of those around Him. While they may have disagreed with His proclamations, very clearly they comprehended the meaning of His words.

- In John 8 Yeshua is engaged with some opponents regarding who He was. And at the end of this contentious exchange, Yeshua makes the ultimate declaration, saying, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am” (John 8:58) How did they react? “Therefore they picked up stones to throw at Him; but Yeshua hid Himself, and went out of the temple” (v. 59).
- Later, during the Feast of Hanukkah in John 10, Yeshua is confronted again by some opponents regarding His identity. And Yeshua once more makes the bold statement, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). The next verse tells us the people “took up stones again to stone Him.”
- In Mark 2:5 Yeshua heals a paralyzed man and then says, “your sins are forgiven.” The people around Him may have misunderstood who Yeshua really was. But at least they correctly identified who alone could forgive sins, when they said, “He is blaspheming; who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Mark 2:7).
- Lastly, after Yeshua had been crucified and rose from the grave, He spent 40 days with His disciples before ascending into heaven. When He first appeared to them, one of the disciples, Thomas, missed out on the encounter. Naturally they told him all about it and it's not surprising that Thomas was dubious about their story.

Eight days later Yeshua does indeed appear before the disciples again and He immediately directs His attention to Thomas, telling him, “Reach here your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand, and put it into My side; and be not unbelieving, but believing” (v. 27). “Thomas answered and said to Him, *ho Kurious mou kai ho Theos*

mou—‘My Lord and my God!’ ” (v. 28).

Here is the key point: Thomas was not saying, “O my God!” like the way people casually express excitement today. Thomas called Yeshua God directly to His face. Now if there ever was a time for Yeshua to deny the validity of such a claim and to declare it blasphemy and to pick up stones as the Law required for false claims, this was the time to do it. But how did Yeshua respond?

“Yeshua said to him, ‘Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed’ ” (v. 29). Instead of talking about blasphemy, Yeshua talks about acknowledging Yeshua as God as being a blessing.

He could do that because the claim was true, it was not blasphemy. It was true. Yeshua is God—God incarnate, God the Creator, God eternal and all powerful, God the Judge, Savior, Lord of the Universe. That’s what the Bible has to say about Him.

Why is it important that Yeshua is divine?

When we think about what others have to say about Yeshua, they don’t have very high expectations of Him. Yes, He can be a good role model, a good teacher, even an inspired prophet or spiritually enlightened. But they don’t have any heavy lifting for Him to do.

Unfortunately there are some enormous challenges in this universe and the only way to overcome them is with

- Omniscient wisdom.
- Omnipresent coverage over the entire universe so that nothing sneaks by.
- Omnipotent ability to overcome the limitations of time and space and spiritual dimensions and even the stubbornness of foolish human beings.

These are things that God alone can do. These are the things that Yeshua has already done for us. Now all we have to do is to believe. The implications are great. Since Yeshua is divine...

We had better take Him seriously

According to the song by Jim Croce, “You don’t tug on Superman’s cape, you don’t spit into the wind, you don’t pull the mask off the old Lone Ranger...”

I would add, “And you don’t mess around with Him.” He’s not giving us any other options (John 14:6). He’s not satisfied with us just being good or religious (Matt. 7:22-23). And He’s going to judge the world (Matt. 25:31-32).

He will be victorious in every way

- Over the Antichrist (Rev. 19:20)
- Over our separation from God (Col. 1:22)
- Over sin (Rom. 8:2)
- Over death (1 Cor. 15:54; Rev. 1:18)

We can count on His promises

The Torah reminds us:

“God is not a man, that He should lie,
Nor a son of man, that He should repent;
Has He said, and will He not do it?
Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good? (Num. 23:19)

So what has He promised us?

- To forgive our sins (Matt. 9:6)
- The promise of our own resurrection (John 6:54)
- Everlasting life (Matt. 19:29; 25:46)
- To be with us always (Matt. 28:20)
- Coming again to claim us and to be with Him (John 14:3)

It's all in the Book. But it's also something that is written in the hearts of those who believe in Him. And that is what He wants for all of us. Messianic believers today are the people Yeshua was speaking about when He said, “Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed” (John 20:29)□.

Believers in Yeshua today have not touched His hands where He was pierced through and placed on a cross. They haven't felt the place where the spear punctured His side. But they do believe.

It's all about believing that He came as Messiah and that He died for our sins. It means believing that He is God. And for that reason, we are blessed, even more than Thomas, because we believe by faith alone.

“These have been written that you may believe that Yeshua is the Messiah, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.” (Jn. 20:31).