

The Face of God

Who is Jesus? Is He just a man? The famous words often attributed to C. S. Lewis present a challenge that has echoed throughout history: Jesus Christ is either wrong, a lunatic, or exactly who He said He was, and there is no in between. Lewis argued that a man who claimed the things Jesus claimed could not honestly be reduced to a merely good moral teacher. Either His claims were false, and therefore He was deceived or deceptive, or His claims were true, and He is the Son of God (Lewis, 1952).

This much is historically clear: Jesus of Nazareth existed. The greater question is whether He is who He said He is. That is a conviction of the heart that each person must decide in faith, but our belief or disbelief does not change the truth. God's existence does not depend on our faith. On the contrary, it is the desire of God that we have faith in His existence by our own choice, because love is not forced.

To consider this question, we must evaluate historical and biblical context. The Bible contains 73 books written by approximately 40 human authors over many centuries, yet Christians have long seen one unified story within it: creation, fall, covenant, promise, sacrifice, redemption, and fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Within the Old Testament, Christian scholars and apologists have identified hundreds of prophecies, patterns, and foreshadowings that point toward the Messiah, with many commonly counting more than three hundred messianic references fulfilled in Christ (Stoner, 1958). But given that staggering number, let us actually look at a few to put this in perspective.

Long before Jesus was born, long before the Apostles preached, and long before the Church proclaimed the Gospel to the nations, Scripture presented the image of a father, a son, wood, sacrifice, and substitution. In Genesis 22, God tells Abraham to take Isaac, his beloved

son, and offer him as a sacrifice. Abraham obeys, and Isaac carries the wood for the offering. Yet at the final moment, God provides a ram in Isaac's place. Genesis says, "Abraham looked up and saw a single ram caught by its horns in the thicket. So Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son" (Genesis 22:13, New American Bible Revised Edition).

This scene becomes one of the earliest and most powerful foreshadowings of Christ. A father offers his beloved son. The son carries wood toward the place of sacrifice. A substitute is provided. Centuries later, Christ, the beloved Son, would carry the wood of the cross and offer Himself as the true sacrifice for the sins of the world.

But what does a prophecy or foreshadowing in an ancient book have to do with Jesus being any sort of God? The answer is not found in one verse alone, but in the whole pattern of Scripture. The Bible was not written by one man in one place at one time. It was written across many generations, across 73 books, by approximately 40 authors: prophets, kings, priests, fishermen, physicians, apostles, and evangelists. These writings came before the disciples, before the bishops and saints who would later teach and defend the faith, and before Christianity became known across the world. Yet throughout these writings, Christians see the same image returning again and again: man sins, God provides, sacrifice covers, and redemption comes through the one whom God sends.

So what, someone might say, could that be a coincidence? Let us take it a little further.

In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve take on the first sin when they disobey God's command not to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Through that act, sin enters the human story, and death follows. Genesis describes the rupture between humanity and God, the shame of man, and the beginning of the long story of redemption (Genesis 3:1-24). Yet immediately after

the fall, God speaks of a coming victory through the seed of the woman: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; they will strike at your head, while you strike at their heel” (Genesis 3:15, New American Bible Revised Edition). Christians have historically read this as the first promise of the Redeemer.

Even the earliest genealogy of Scripture has been interpreted by Christian apologists as carrying the shadow of the Gospel. Genesis 5 gives the names from Adam to Noah: Adam, Seth, Enosh, Kenan, Mahalalel, Jared, Enoch, Methuselah, Lamech, and Noah (Genesis 5:1-32). When those names are examined according to their Hebrew meanings, Christian writers have rendered them in a striking sequence: Adam means man; Seth means appointed; Enosh means mortal; Kenan has been associated with sorrow; Mahalalel points to the blessed God; Jared means shall come down; Enoch means teaching; Methuselah has been rendered his death shall bring; Lamech has been associated with despairing; and Noah means rest or comfort (Missler, 2000). When placed together, the message is often expressed this way: “Man appointed mortal sorrow; the Blessed God shall come down teaching. His death shall bring the despairing comfort and rest.”

That is not a separate Bible verse, but it is a powerful apologetic observation drawn from the names in Genesis 5. The first names of Scripture, when interpreted through this lens, point to the same Gospel pattern: man falls into sorrow, God comes down, His death brings comfort and rest.

But if we think this is still further coincidence, let us take a closer look at the more detailed prophecies.

The prophet Micah gives the place of the Messiah’s birth. “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, least among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel; whose origin is from of old, from ancient times” (Micah 5:2, New American Bible

Revised Edition). The Messiah would come from Bethlehem. According to the Gospel accounts, Jesus was born in Bethlehem, fulfilling the expectation that the ruler of Israel would come from that small town (Matthew 2:1-6; Luke 2:1-7).

The place of birth is one thing, but what about His death?

This is where Isaiah becomes unavoidable in Isaiah 53. Nearly seven centuries before Christ, Isaiah described the suffering servant in language that Christians have always recognized as astonishingly close to the Passion of Jesus. Isaiah writes, “He was spurned and avoided by men, a man of suffering, knowing pain” (Isaiah 53:3, New American Bible Revised Edition). He continues, “Yet it was our pain that he bore, our sufferings he endured” (Isaiah 53:4, New American Bible Revised Edition). Then comes one of the clearest lines in the chapter: “But he was pierced for our sins, crushed for our iniquity. He bore the punishment that makes us whole, by his wounds we were healed” (Isaiah 53:5, New American Bible Revised Edition).

Isaiah does not merely say the servant would suffer. He says the servant would suffer for others. He would bear sins that were not His own. He would be treated like the guilty while being innocent. Isaiah continues, “Though harshly treated, he submitted and did not open his mouth; like a lamb led to slaughter” (Isaiah 53:7, New American Bible Revised Edition). The connection to Jesus before His accusers is direct in Christian interpretation. Christ is silent before His condemnation, innocent before His executioners, and treated like the lamb who is led to slaughter.

Isaiah also says, “He was given a grave among the wicked, a burial place with evildoers, though he had done no wrong” (Isaiah 53:9, New American Bible Revised Edition). Jesus is crucified between criminals, yet buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, a rich man and member of the council (Matthew 27:57-60; Mark 15:27-28). The prophetic pattern continues:

suffering, innocence, substitution, silence, death, and burial.

Mathematician Peter Stoner famously examined the probability of one man fulfilling only eight messianic prophecies and estimated the odds at one in 10 to the seventeenth power (Stoner, 1958). His study is often cited in Christian apologetics because it attempts to show how staggering even a small number of fulfilled prophecies would be. Yet the Christian claim is not that Jesus fulfilled only eight. The claim is that His life, death, resurrection, and identity stand at the center of a prophetic and theological pattern spread across the entire Old Testament.

This is why the four Gospel accounts matter. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John do not present Jesus as a random religious teacher who was later forced into Old Testament categories. They present Him as the fulfillment of the Law, the Prophets, the sacrifices, the covenants, the priesthood, the kingdom, and the promise. Four authors wrote four accounts of one life, each showing from a different angle that the story of Israel reaches its fulfillment in Christ.

Then finally, if all of this is still coincidence, we must consider the missing analogy: the scapegoat.

In Leviticus 16, on the Day of Atonement, two goats were chosen. One goat was sacrificed as a sin offering. The other goat, the scapegoat, symbolically carried the sins of the people away. Scripture says, “Aaron shall lay both his hands on its head and confess over it all the iniquities of the Israelites and all their trespasses, including all their sins, and so put them on the goat’s head. He shall then have it led into the wilderness by an attendant. The goat will carry off all their iniquities to an isolated region” (Leviticus 16:21-22, New American Bible Revised Edition).

One goat dies. One goat is released. Sin is dealt with through sacrifice and substitution. Now look at the trial of Jesus.

Jesus stands before Pontius Pilate. Beside Him stands Barabbas. This is not simply a criminal being released instead of Jesus. It is deeper than that. Several ancient manuscripts of Matthew preserve Barabbas with the name “Jesus Barabbas,” making the scene even more striking (Moses, 2012). Barabbas comes from Bar Abbas, meaning “son of the father.” Therefore, before the crowd stand two figures: Jesus Barabbas, the son of the father, and Jesus Christ, the true Son of the Father.

The people choose one to be released and one to die.

Barabbas is set free.

Jesus is condemned.

The guilty man walks away.

The innocent Lamb is sent to the cross.

The Day of Atonement pattern becomes visible in the Passion narrative. One is released as the scapegoat; one is offered as the sacrifice. Jesus, the sinless Lamb, takes on the sins of humanity while Barabbas goes free. In that moment, the crowd does not realize that they are acting out one of the deepest sacrificial patterns of Israel’s worship. They choose the guilty and condemn the innocent, and yet through that injustice, God reveals the very purpose of the cross.

Prior to the pain of being betrayed by his own people who chose a criminal over him, he was lashed by Roman soldiers. He was clothed in a purple robe. A crown of thorns was pressed upon His head. Medical analysis of Roman scourging describes the flagrum as a whip with leather thongs that could include lead balls and pieces of bone, producing deep wounds and severe blood loss (Edwards et al., 1986). The mockery is deliberate. Purple is the color of royalty. The crown is meant to ridicule kingship. Yet in the very act of mocking Him, the soldiers unknowingly display the truth: Jesus is King.

After this, Jesus carries the cross. When His body is weakened, Simon of Cyrene is compelled to help Him carry it (Luke 23:26). Christ reaches Golgotha, and there He is nailed to the wood. Above Him, Pilate places an inscription. In Latin Christian tradition, it is remembered by the letters INRI: Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum, meaning Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. John's Gospel says that the inscription was written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek, so that the people could read it in the major languages of the region and empire (John 19:19-20).

Christian writers have also reflected on the Hebrew form of the inscription as a theological sign. In Hebrew, the phrase can be rendered as Yeshua HaNatzri V'Melech HaYehudim, which produces the initials YHWH. This is significant because YHWH is the sacred name of God revealed in the Old Testament. The theological image is staggering: above the crucified Christ is the declaration that the King of the Jews hangs upon the cross, and in the Hebrew rendering, the very name of God is echoed over Him.

This is why Saint Paul writes, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (Colossians 1:15, New American Bible Revised Edition). The invisible God becomes visible in Jesus Christ. Likewise, the Gospel according to Saint John says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1, New American Bible Revised Edition). John continues, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5, New American Bible Revised Edition). Jesus is not merely sent by God as one prophet among many. He is the Word who was with God and was God.

Even the fact that Jesus was known as a carpenter carries theological weight. Mark records the people asking, "Is he not the carpenter, the son of Mary?" (Mark 6:3, New American Bible Revised Edition). This is significant not merely because He was nailed to wood, but because the carpenter is one who shapes, fashions, and builds. The Son through whom all things

were created enters creation and works with His hands. The One through whom the universe was fashioned takes up wood, and later, that wood becomes the instrument of His sacrifice.

The pattern returns again to Eden. Adam and Eve took from the tree in disobedience, and sin entered the world. Christ is lifted up upon the tree of the cross in obedience, and redemption enters the world. Humanity took from the tree and brought death. Christ gives Himself upon the tree and brings life. When Jesus breathes His last and says, “It is finished” (John 19:30, New American Bible Revised Edition), the statement is not simply an announcement that suffering has ended. The Greek word *tetelestai* carries the sense of completion, fulfillment, and a finished work. In Christian reflection, it is also associated with the language of a debt being paid. The debt of sin is settled. The cost of man’s sin is answered in the death of Christ. Death loses its final victory, and glory belongs to God alone.

Beyond this, even one of the men responsible for some of the most bloodshed of humanity in his conquests, the great conqueror Napoleon, wrote:

“Alexander the Great, Caesar, Charlemagne, and myself have founded great empires, but upon what did these creations of our genius depend? Upon force. Jesus alone founded His empire upon love, and to this very day, millions would die for Him. I know men, and I tell you that all of these were men, and I am a man, but no one else is like Him. Jesus Christ is more than man. Superficial minds see resemblance between Christ and the founders of empires and gods of other religions. That resemblance does not exist. There is between Christianity and other religions the distance of infinity” (O’Meara, 1822).

Napoleon understood empire. He understood power. He understood force. Yet he recognized that Christ’s kingdom was unlike every empire built by conquest. Alexander conquered by the sword. Caesar conquered by Rome. Charlemagne built power through rule and

war. Napoleon himself reshaped nations through military force. But Christ conquered through love, sacrifice, mercy, and truth. His throne was a cross. His crown was thorns. His victory came through death.

So we return to the opening question.

Who is Jesus? Is He just a man?

The evidence of Scripture says more. Abraham and Isaac point toward Him. Genesis and the fall explain why man needs Him. The genealogy of Genesis 5 whispers the pattern of the Gospel. Micah names Bethlehem. Isaiah describes the suffering servant. Leviticus provides the image of the sacrifice and the scapegoat. Barabbas shows the guilty going free while the innocent is condemned. The inscription above the cross declares Him King. Paul calls Him the image of the invisible God. John calls Him the Word who was with God and was God.

The thesis remains the same: Jesus Christ is either wrong, a lunatic, or exactly who He said He was, and there is no in between. If He is not who He claimed to be, then Christianity collapses. But if He is who He claimed to be, then the face of God has been revealed to the world. That face is Jesus Christ.

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