

Jesus' Riddle that stumped the Unitarian Pharisees

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It is evident from John's Gospel that the scribes and Pharisees had big problems with Jesus' claims about Himself. These included His statements that He came down from heaven¹ and that He was the Son of God (God was His Father), which they concluded made Him "equal with God" in essence.² Jesus affirmed this also by claiming to have "issued forth out of God."³

Yet, John is not alone among the Gospel narratives which quote Jesus' own words indicating His pre-human existence. While the following passage from Matthew does not have Jesus making an explicit statement about His pre-human existence, that conclusion is required by the riddle He posed to the unbelieving scribes and Pharisees who had a unitarian perspective, and believed that the Messiah would be a common Jewish man descended from king David whom God would choose to become the Messiah. (It should be noted that the term "Messiah" was the Hebrew term that means "Anointed one," its Greek equivalent is translated "Christ," and this term was used of both David and Solomon).⁴ So the term "Messiah" and "Christ" applied to the past kings of Israel as well as to the promised one who would fulfill all that was promised.

Matthew 22:41-46 (ESV) 41 Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, 42 saying, "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." 43 He said to them, "How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, 44 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"'? 45 If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?" 46 And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

Unitarians claim to hold to the Jewish understanding of the Messiah, and in part they are correct. While some of the common Jews expected the Messiah to have preexisted in heaven⁶ and to descend from heaven to reign,⁷ the scholarly Jewish leaders viewed Him

¹ John 6:41-42

² John 5:18 (cf. Phil. 2:6)

³ John 8:42 Gk.

⁴ 2 Sam. 22:51; 2 Sam. 23:1; 2 Chron. 6:42; Psalm 17:50;

⁵ Psalm 110:1

⁶ Based on Micah 5:2 see the following: https://4windsfellowships.net/articles/God/Logos_Judaism.pdf & https://4windsfellowships.net/articles/God/Micah_5_2.pdf

⁷ Based on Daniel 7:13-14

as a mere man originating in the womb of a woman, which is also the Unitarian view today.

While some Unitarians may suppose that they can answer the question posed by Jesus, it should not be passed over that these Unitarian scholars not only could not answer Jesus' riddle, but they were so stumped by it that they did not dare to question Him anymore.

The unanswerable question for these scholars was, "If then David calls him [the Messiah] 'Lord,' how is he his son?" The term "Lord" literally means "Master," and calling someone "master" indicates that person is one's superior. So by David calling his "son" his "Lord" (Master) means David viewed the Messiah as his superior.

The reason that this question completely stumped the scholars is because in the Bible and in Jewish thinking priority in rank (superiority) comes from priority in time, especially regarding genealogy. John the Baptist pointed out that Jesus ranked above him because He preceded him in origin.

*John 1:15 (ESV) 15 (John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, **because he was before me.**'")*

In other words, John the Baptist's claim that Jesus was his superior was based on the fact that He existed before John. Thus the Son originated before John even though His human birth occurred six months after John's. Yet this superiority in rank is even stronger when one is speaking about ancestry. The Jews traced their ancestry back to Abraham.

John 8:51-53 (ESV) 51 "Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death." 52 The Jews said to him, "Now we know that you have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, 'If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.' 53 Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?"

Abraham was the greatest of the Patriarchs. None of his descendants could out-rank him. Likewise, king David was known as the founder of the Davidic Dynasty, and his series of offspring who became king over Israel and Judah after him were said to sit upon the Throne of David. All of the Davidic kings, from Solomon onward, were considered inferior to David and all of his descendants who had previously occupied David's throne. Even Isaiah's prophecy about the Messiah being born indicated that He would sit upon the "Throne of David" not the "Throne of Messiah."

Isaiah 9:6-7 (LXX) 6 For a child is born to us, and a son is given to us, whose government is upon his shoulder: and his name is called the Messenger of great counsel: for I will bring

*peace upon the princes, and health to him. 7 His government shall be great, and of his peace there is no end: it shall be **upon the throne of David and upon his kingdom**, to establish it, and to support it with judgment and with righteousness, from henceforth and forever. The seal of the Lord of hosts shall perform this.*

Gabriel affirmed this when prophesying to Mary.

*Luke 1:31-33 (ESV) 31 And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And **the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David**, 33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."*

It was for these reasons that the Jewish Unitarian scholars could not solve Jesus' riddle. If the Messiah was to be David's son, then David outranked Him. Likewise, if God was going to give the Messiah "*the throne of His father David*," then He would be merely David's offspring and successor. The "throne" was still that of His father, David, who in Jewish thought is the one who is superior. One does not call his own son or descendant "Lord" or "Master."

The Jewish scholars were not incorrect that the Messiah must be a descendant of David. In the Davidic Covenant God promised David as much.⁸ But they failed to notice a very important prophecy from Isaiah.

*Isaiah 11:1-10 (ESV) 1 There shall come forth **a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit**. 2 And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. 3 And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, 4 but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. 5 Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins. 6 The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. 7 The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. 8 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. 9 They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters*

⁸ 1 Chron. 17:11-15; Heb. 1:5

*cover the sea. 10 In that day **the root of Jesse**, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples – of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious.*

David was the youngest son of Jesse, to whom God sent Nathan the prophet to anoint one of Jesse's sons as king.⁹ Isaiah's prophecy above refers to the Messiah as a "shoot" and "branch" that comes forth from the stump of Jesse, David's father. This is obviously a reference to a genealogical tree, with Jesse as the "root" from which David and then the Messiah would come. Yet verse 10 presents a seemingly impossible conundrum. The one who is a shoot and branch from the root which is Jesse is also called "the root of Jesse." This necessarily means that in the genealogical tree, he also preceded Jesse and David. This also implies that the Messiah was the cause of Jesse's own existence.

The book of Revelation is called "the Revelation of Jesus Christ," not only because it was delivered by Jesus to John, but because it also reveals Jesus' true identity. Twice in Revelation Jesus Himself solved the riddle that He had previously given to the Pharisees, which they could not reconcile with their presuppositions about the Messiah.

*Rev. 5:5 (ESV) 5 And one of the elders said to me, "Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, **the Root of David**, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals."*

*Rev. 22:16 (ESV) 16 "I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. **I am the root and the descendant of David**, the bright morning star."*

The very last "revelation" given by Jesus about Himself in the entire Bible is His claim to be both the "root" of David's genealogy as well as the "descendant," the "shoot" and the "root," both of which were prophesied by Isaiah in the same passage. This is answer to Jesus' riddle, "If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?" Indeed, David does call His own descendant "Lord" (Master) because before He became David's descendant via the virgin birth He was the Son of God who was God's Agent in creating all things, including man. And He was also the "Messenger of the Covenant"¹⁰ who confirmed both the Abrahamic and Davidic Covenants.

Modern Unitarians may try to resolve Jesus' answer in some other way. But they should take note of the fact that the Pharisees whom Jesus was addressing could not solve the riddle within their own Unitarian system. The solution requires stepping outside the

⁹ 1 Sam. 16

¹⁰ Mal. 3:1

constraints of the presuppositions which Unitarians hold in their denial of the Son's pre-human origin and existence.