

Who Do You Say That I Am?

Authority, Obedience, and Exaltation in Early Christology

Samuel Vincent

Introduction — Why This Question Cannot Be Answered Quickly

Modern Christianity often treats agency language as a warm-up exercise—useful, but ultimately disposable once we arrive at what is considered “real theology.” The New Testament does not.

If we ignore *sheliah* (שליח)—the Jewish grammar of authorized representation—we do not merely miss nuance. We misread how first-century Jews would have heard Jesus at all. This study argues a simple but weighty claim:

Sheliah theology is not an interpretive detour. It is the operating logic through which Jesus’ authority, obedience, and eventual exaltation first made sense.

Recovering that logic does not diminish Christ. It restores precision—and with it, true reverence.

The modern question “*Is Jesus God?*” is not illegitimate. But it is often answered too quickly, with categories foreign to the narrative world of Scripture. The New Testament reveals identity narratively: through **sending, obedience, authority, vindication, and exaltation**—not through abstract metaphysical claims delivered in advance.

This study follows the order Scripture itself insists upon:

authority before ontology, obedience before exaltation, resurrection before
universal confession

Any reading that reverses that order risks flattening both the humanity of Jesus and the testimony of the text.

Part I — The Grammar Jesus Speaks

1. Sheliah: The Native Logic of Divine Agency

The foundational principle of agency in Second Temple Judaism is well attested:

“The one sent is as the one who sends him.”

This does not imply ontological sameness. It describes **functional identity within an authorized role**.

Key features of sheliah include:

- Authority that is real, not symbolic
- Speech that may occur in the first person of the sender
- Honor and obligation transferred without merging beings
- Obedience as the condition of legitimacy
- Appointment that governs scope and duration

This logic explains how:

- Prophets speak as YHWH
- Angels bear the divine Name
- Wisdom is personified without becoming a second god
- Judges execute divine judgment
- Kings rule *in God's name*

And crucially—this is the same logic governing how Jesus speaks and acts throughout the Gospels. First-century Jewish hearers would not have lacked categories for this. They already had them.

2. What Agency Explains—and Where It Stops

Agency explains how a representative can act with divine authority without collapsing into divine identity. To reject the agent is to reject the sender. To obey the agent is to obey the one whose authority he bears.

This is not a downgrade. It is the covenantal mechanism by which God governs, judges, and reveals—without multiplying gods.

Within this framework, Jesus' language is not evasive or misleading. He speaks as one sent. He acts with authority received, not assumed. He consistently distinguishes His will from the Father's while remaining perfectly obedient to it.

At the same time, **agency alone does not exhaust New Testament Christology**. It explains Jesus' *mission phase*—the language of sending, obedience, and authorized authority.

What it does not, by itself, explain is the **post-resurrection intensification**: universal lordship, cosmic rule, and early Christian devotion centered on Jesus.

So this must be said clearly and early:

Shelīah is not the conclusion of Christology. It is the starting grammar.

Nothing in what follows is an attempt to reduce Jesus. The question is not whether Christ is exalted, but **how Scripture says He arrives there**.

Part II — Jesus Before the Cross

3. Authority Without Ontological Collapse

Nothing Jesus does during His earthly ministry requires ontological divinity to explain it.

He forgives sins.

He commands unclean spirits.

He reinterprets Torah.

He speaks with final authority.

He acts as the decisive agent of God's reign.

All of this fits cleanly within Jewish agency logic.

Just as importantly, Jesus repeatedly locates His authority **outside Himself**:

“The Son can do nothing of Himself...”

“I do not seek My own will...”

“The Father who sent Me...”

These statements are not humility formulas masking hidden metaphysics. They are the explanatory framework Jesus Himself uses.

In Jewish thought, miracles do not prove ontology. They prove authorization. Moses could be called “god” to Pharaoh without being divine. Prophets could speak God's words without being God. Miracle is commissioning on display.

If Jesus intended to reveal metaphysical identity during His ministry, the texts chosen to do so are remarkably ill-suited for that purpose—and consistently framed instead around **authority received**, not essence possessed.

4. Blasphemy, Authority, and Category Error

Accusations of blasphemy are often treated as decisive proof that Jesus' contemporaries understood Him to be claiming divine essence. That reasoning moves too quickly.

Reaction does not define meaning. Opposition reveals how claims were *received*, not necessarily what was *asserted*. The Gospels frequently depict misunderstanding by crowds, leaders, and even disciples.

In Second Temple Judaism, blasphemy accusations did not require metaphysical claims. They could arise when divine authority was exercised outside recognized institutional channels. Jesus bypasses those channels. He speaks authoritatively over Torah. He declares forgiveness. He challenges temple-centered control of holiness. The threat was not ontology. It was **unauthorized authority**.

Significantly, Jesus does not respond to blasphemy charges by clarifying essence. He appeals to Scripture, to commissioning, and to the Father's work through Him. Authority—not metaphysics—is the flashpoint.

5. Gethsemane and the Cost of Obedience

Nowhere is Jesus' genuine humanity more visible than in Gethsemane. "Not My will, but Yours" only carries meaning if obedience is costly and failure is possible. A mission guaranteed by ontology alone would empty the scene of its gravity. Here we encounter not divine theater, but real submission.

Jesus prays.

He fears.

He obeys.

Any Christology that renders this moment inevitable rather than costly does violence to the narrative itself.

Part III — The Turning Point

6. Resurrection as Vindication, Not Invention

Up to this point, agency has read Jesus faithfully within Jewish categories. But the New Testament does not stop there. Something decisive happens.

The resurrection is consistently framed as **God's act and God's verdict**.

God raises Him

God vindicates Him

God exalts Him

God installs Him into expanded authority

Resurrection does not make Jesus faithful. It **reveals what His faithfulness means**.

Exaltation is confirmation, not creation—vindication, not invention. This is the moment where language about Jesus intensifies—not because metaphysics suddenly appear, but because **God has acted publicly**.

7. Exaltation, Name, and Universal Lordship

Post-resurrection texts speak of Jesus in the New Testament's highest register.

Authority becomes universal.

Judgment is entrusted to Him.

Allegiance is globally demanded.

And consistently, this elevation is described as **received**.

“The Name” is bestowed.

Authority is given.

Lordship is conferred.

Early Christian confession intensifies after resurrection because something has happened—not because hidden ontology has finally been disclosed. This preserves Jewish monotheistic grammar while accounting for the boldness of post-Easter devotion.

Part IV — Confession Without Collapse

8. “Who Do You Say That I Am?”

Peter’s confession is not metaphysical precision. It is Spirit-enabled recognition.

“Flesh and blood did not reveal this to you...”

John the Baptist identifies Jesus by the Spirit remaining. Demons react to the authority encountered. Recognition precedes definition.

The “rock” is not philosophical clarity, but **faithful perception of God’s decisive agent at work.**

9. Answering the Question Honestly

So—is Jesus God?

Scripture answers in sequence, not slogans.

Jesus is fully human—persistently and unapologetically. He obeys, prays, submits, suffers, and trusts.

Jesus is also God’s uniquely authorized Son—bearing divine authority, speaking God’s words, executing God’s purposes.

After resurrection, God vindicates Him and exalts Him to universal lordship.

Therefore:

Yes, in that Jesus participates in God’s rule and bears divine authority by God’s act.

No, if “God” means collapsing Father and Son into the same acting subject.

And no, Scripture does not require us to answer faster than it speaks.

Part V — History Without Anxiety

10. Nicaea and Narrative Discipline

The councils addressed real dangers. Their goal was to safeguard confession, not erase narrative sequence. The error comes when later solutions are read backward, flattening the Jewish grammar that makes the New Testament intelligible. Respecting the Fathers does not require abandoning text-first discipline.

Conclusion — Truth Does Not Need Protection

Jesus is revealed through obedience before exaltation, authority before abstraction, and resurrection before universal confession.

This order is not a problem to be solved. It is the means by which God reveals His Son.

Faith that fears examination was never anchored in Him.

Endnotes

1. Sheliah and Jewish Agency Grammar

On the agency principle summarized as “the one sent is as the one who sends him,” see later rabbinic formulations such as *Mishnah Berakhot* 5:5. While the technical halakhic maxim postdates the New Testament, the functional logic of authorized representation is already operative throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and Second Temple literature, where divine authority is mediated without ontological collapse.

2. Agency as Covenant Mechanism, Not Ontological Claim

For representative authority functioning without identity confusion, see Exodus 7:1 (Moses as “god” to Pharaoh), Judges’ exercise of divine judgment, and prophetic first-person speech. Miraculous activity in Jewish thought attests authorization rather than essence.

3. Blasphemy in Second Temple Context

Accusations of blasphemy need not imply claims to divine essence. In Second Temple Judaism, blasphemy may arise from unauthorized exercise of divine prerogatives, particularly forgiveness, judgment, and authority over Torah and temple structures.

4. Resurrection as Vindication

New Testament resurrection language consistently frames the event as God’s act and verdict

(Acts 2:32–36; Philippians 2:9–11). Resurrection reveals the meaning of Jesus’ obedience rather than inventing His status.

5. Exaltation and the Bestowal of Authority

Post-resurrection confession intensifies because authority, lordship, and the divine Name are bestowed, not seized. See especially Psalm 110’s reception history and its application in early Christian proclamation.

6. Spirit Recognition Prior to Definition

Recognition of Jesus’ identity in the Gospels is consistently mediated through the Spirit (John 1:32–34; Matthew 16:17), indicating discernment rather than philosophical formulation. Demon recognition likewise reflects encounter with authority, not metaphysical analysis.

7. “Two Powers” Boundary Disputes

Later rabbinic controversy concerning “Two Powers in Heaven” reflects policing of conceptual boundaries rather than the absence of earlier intermediary traditions. These debates suggest contested theological territory, not settled silence.

8. Nicaea and Narrative Preservation

Conciliar formulations sought to safeguard apostolic confession against distortion rather than to erase narrative sequence. Methodological caution is required when later ontological language is read backward into earlier narrative contexts.

Selected Bibliography

Primary Sources

- The Hebrew Bible / Old Testament (MT and LXX where relevant)
- The New Testament (NA28 / UBS5; English citations NASB 1995)
- *Mishnah*, esp. Berakhot
- *Dead Sea Scrolls* (select texts relevant to agency and authority themes)

Jewish and Second Temple Studies

- Segal, Alan F. *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism*.
- Hurtado, Larry. *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*.
- Bauckham, Richard. *Jesus and the God of Israel*.
- Fletcher-Louis, Crispin. *All the Glory of Adam*.

New Testament and Early Christology

- Dunn, James D. G. *Christology in the Making*.
- Wright, N. T. *The Resurrection of the Son of God*.
- Hengel, Martin. *The Son of God*.
- McGrath, James F. *The Only True God*.

Patristic and Conciliar Context

- Athanasius. *On the Incarnation*.
- Irenaeus. *Against Heresies*.
- *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series.

Methodological and Hermeneutical Works

- Childs, Brevard. *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*.
- Barr, James. *The Semantics of Biblical Language*.
- Sanders, E. P. *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*.