

Jesus, the Greater Moses: Prophetic Authority, Not Ontological Deity

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Abstract

Jesus's miracles, authority, and foreknowledge are often cited as proof of his deity—"truly God and truly man" (*vere Deus, vere homo*), as stated in the AD 451 Chalcedonian formulation. This paper argues that the New Testament consistently depicts God's Son, instead, as truly human and truly imitable, and that Jesus, as the greater Moses, acted with divine agency within Israel's prophetic tradition. As Peter noted in his speech at Pentecost, Jesus, the unique Son of God authorized by Yahweh, was "a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know" (Acts 2:22 NRSV), a description that fit the prophetic office. A close reading of the Hebrew Scriptures discloses Yahweh's empowerment of his prophets, showing that miracles and supernatural knowledge do not entail ontological deification. Jesus's uniqueness, along with his exaltation and resurrection, confirms his role as the final prophet—a role that is representative and relational, not indicative of a god-man endowed with two natures, one divine, one human.

1.1 Introduction

In pre-Christian times, Yahweh, the Creator, chose to convey his will and purposes, and demonstrate his power, to his chosen people, Israel, and the surrounding nations through human prophets whom he raised up. Jeremiah tells us, "From the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt to this day, I have persistently sent all my servants the prophets to them, day after day" (Jer 7:25). We read in Hebrews 1:1–2a: "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son."¹ This Son, Jesus, is confirmed by Bible writers to be the prophet "greater than Moses," whom Moses himself foretold would one day appear "from among your brothers" (Deut 18:15; Heb 3:1–6; Acts 3:22–23). This prophet would be known not by his unusual ontology—for he would be supplied "from among your own people"—but by his obedience to his prophetic office. Yahweh told Moses, "I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command" (v. 18). Nothing in Scripture indicates this prophet would be greater in an ontological sense; Jewish messianic expectations seem to exclude any such concept of a god-man or of Yahweh somehow coming into the world Himself as a human. The criteria for true prophets presuppose divine empowerment, not divine identity.

The Old Testament prophets were a defining part of the Jewish and Christian heritage of the first century. They were characterized by distinctive dress and were chiefly recognized as being divinely inspired spokesmen for God. "A prophet to them was just a prophet, to be represented by Elijah or any other. As they would hear the great prophets read in the synagogue service, they would be aware of the strong ethical tones in their message, the prediction of doom and the promise of restoration, and persistently the note of protest against established religion."²

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture verses are taken from the NRSVUE Bible.

² Paul Davies, "Jesus and the Role," 245.

As the prophet greater than Moses, Jesus fulfilled all these roles of the prophetic office. Of course, there is no denying Jesus's authority, exaltation, or uniqueness. However, his exceptionality and salvific importance are not the result of the incarnation as a god-man, one "person" of a trinity coming into the world in human flesh while retaining all divinity. Rather, drawing on Scripture and biblical scholarship, we find that Jesus, operating fully within the prophetic economy Yahweh established, is fully imitable—which is what Christians are told he is. And for that, he must be fully and only human.

1.2 Moses—the Great Prophet

To understand how Jesus fit within Jewish expectations, we need to examine Moses's prophetic office and his relationship with Yahweh, who appointed him to this position. Yahweh told Aaron and Miriam plainly: "When there are prophets among you, I the Lord make myself known to them in visions; I speak to them in dreams. Not so with my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face—clearly, not in riddles, and he beholds the form of the Lord" (Num 12:6–8). The writer of Hebrews frames Jesus's ministry in comparison to Moses's this way:

Consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, who was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses also "was faithful in all God's house." Yet Jesus is worthy of more glory than Moses.... Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that would be spoken later. Christ, however, was faithful over God's house as a son." (Heb 3:1–3, 5)

Moses, thus, is the template for measuring all faithful prophets of God, with the Mosaic Law assuming an ongoing role in prophetic mediation.³ When Moses died, Scripture records this of him:

And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, none like him for all the signs and the wonders that the Lord sent him to do in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, and for all the mighty power and all the great deeds of terror that Moses did in the sight of all Israel. (Deut 34:10–12 ESV)

A primary role of the Messiah was that of a mediator. Yahweh chose Moses to mediate between Himself and the nation of Israel, and when the people expressed their terror at facing their Creator, Yahweh promised that a prophet like Moses would arise from among Israel to speak His words to the people (Deut 18:15–18). Many of the appointed Hebrew prophets were intercessors who spoke to the people on Yahweh's behalf, mediating His word, and often calling the nation back to a relationship with Him by exhorting them to turn from sin and remain faithful to the covenant relationship. As Jesus preached throughout the countryside of Judea, this is precisely what he did.

The letter to the Hebrews develops the comparison between Moses and Jesus in covenantal terms. Moses mediated the covenant established at Sinai, through which Israel was consecrated to God and called to serve as a priestly kingdom (Exod 19:5–6). This covenant was divinely established and fully effective for its appointed historical purpose within God's redemptive plan. Jesus, likewise, is presented as a mediator but of a better covenant enacted on better promises (Heb 8:6–8; 9:15). His "more excellent ministry,"⁴ therefore, concerns the superior covenantal work entrusted to him, not a different ontological nature. The *λειτουργία* word group (which includes "minister" and "to minister")—describes assigned sacred service in Hebrews and elsewhere in the New Testament. It

³ Deut 18:15–22.

⁴ *Λειτουργίας* (*leitourgias*), the genitive form of *λειτουργία* (*leitourgia*).

emphasizes what a person is appointed to do, not what that person is by nature.⁵ The Mosaic covenant was preparatory and provisional in relation to the covenant promised through Jeremiah and fulfilled in Christ. Jesus is greater than Moses because he mediates this promised covenant in its fuller and universal realization, extending God's saving purposes beyond the boundaries of national Israel—but not because he is God Himself.

While the nation of Israel didn't "worship" Moses as some Judeans did, on occasion, Jesus,⁶ there is no denying that Yahweh greatly exalted him and empowered him to perform astonishing miracles. Yahweh wanted the people to hear when He spoke to Moses so that "they may believe [him] forever" (Exod 19:9). Yahweh told Moses that when they grumbled against him, they were really grumbling against God (Exod 16:8), emphasizing Moses's role as Yahweh's agent or representative. Moses's face shone so brightly after meeting with God that the people "were afraid to come near him" (Exod 34:29–35), not unlike the glory Jesus manifested in the transfiguration vision (Matt 17:2). Moses served as judge (Exod 18:13–16) and mediator (Deut 5:5), roles that Jesus embodies in greater capacity. God also demanded that the people show respect and reverence for Moses (Num 12:6–8). Yet, Moses was not deity.

How then are we to fit Jesus into this prophetic framework? "Jesus isn't a prophet of our own making, as liberal scholars would have him; or a prophet like the other prophets, as the Qur'an presents him—he's a prophet like Moses, and One whose ministry is unlike any other," says David Schrock.⁷ He notes that Moses was unique in his roles as deliverer (Exod 3:7–10), covenant mediator (Exod 34:27), priest (Ps 99:6), and ruler (Exod 2:13–14; Acts 7:27). Peter's words in Acts 2 reveal that, just as Moses offered words of life and was used to provide salvation to an entire people, Jesus, in a similar role, surpasses Moses by offering salvation to all humanity—not because he is God but as the perfect agent of God's grace.

Moses, as noted, enjoyed a special intimacy with Yahweh, the only one invited to speak face-to-face with his creator. He was empowered to perform miraculous signs and wonders unmatched by any prophets after him, though the Hebrew Scriptures record dozens of miracles performed by other divinely appointed prophets. Moses was given foreknowledge of future events,⁸ as was Jesus, and numerous other Hebrew prophets were likewise endowed—such as when the King of Aram repeatedly plotted to ambush Israel, but the prophet Elisha kept warning the king of Israel, revealing the Aramean plans, even knowing what the Aramean king said in his private bedroom, much to that

⁵ Hebrews employs the *leitourgia* (leitourgia) word group consistently to denote assigned sacred service or official ministry. In Hebrews 8:6, Christ has "obtained a more excellent ministry" (*leitourgias*—leitourgias, the genitive form of *leitourgia*); in 8:2, he is called a *leitourgos* (leitourgos, "minister") in the true tabernacle; and in 9:21, *leitourgia* describes the sacred service associated with the tabernacle vessels. This usage appears throughout the New Testament: Luke 1:23 applies related language to Zechariah's priestly service in the temple, and Romans 15:16 extends the cultic imagery to Paul's apostolic work. The vocabulary specifically emphasizes function, office, and commission rather than ontological nature, supporting a functional and covenantal understanding of Jesus's mediation. This vocabulary by itself does not settle the question of Christ's nature, but it does show that Hebrews grounds Jesus's superiority in appointed ministry and sacred service rather than explicitly in ontological identity with God.

⁶ The scope of this paper does not allow for a thorough explanation of the Greek and Hebrew words used for worship and how Jesus, as with other kingly figures like Solomon, were rightly worshipped as Yahweh's appointed king (1 Chron 29:20; "worship" was synonymous with showing respect and deference—see 1 Sam 25:23; 2 Sam 14:22). Much scholarship has been written to show that relative worship (obedience) in Scripture is done to the glory of God, the Father, and is not a form of idolatry. Still, many trinitarians claim that because Jesus accepted "worship" at times, he had to be God Almighty.

⁷ Schrock, "How is Jesus?"

⁸ Foretelling Israel's future apostasy in Deut 31:14–29. After a long tirade about their rebellion and hard hearts, Moses says in verse 29, "For I know that after my death you are sure to become utterly corrupt and to turn from the way I have commanded you. In days to come, disaster will fall on you because you will do evil in the sight of the Lord and arouse his anger by what your hands have made."

king's frustration (2 Kings 6:28–33).⁹ Of all the roles attributed to the Messiah, the prophetic office—prefigured supremely in Moses—most accurately describes him.

1.3 The Theological Problem: Must Jesus Be God?

Trinitarians have argued for centuries that only a god-man can mediate salvation. They contend that Jesus's miracles and foreknowledge prove that he was divine and possessed “divine consciousness.” For example, James White argues that Jesus's statement in John 10:28–29 that he is one with the Father proves his deity.

Since redemption is a divine act, here we have the testimony to the deity of Christ, for no apostle, no prophet, can be said to be “one” with the Father in saving believers in the way announced here. No mere creature can have this kind of perfect unity of purpose and action. No, Jesus Christ must be perfect deity to be able to say of himself in reference to redemption, “I and the Father are one.”¹⁰

However, an examination of Scripture shows that the “greater Moses” framework accounts for all of Jesus's supposed divinity. In fact, nothing Jesus does or says requires us to posit a type of divine empowerment outside of Israel's prophetic tradition. The Gospels show Jesus referring to himself (or accepting others' designation of him) as a prophet on numerous occasions, without embellishing the role to imply that he must be deity to do the things he does.¹¹ James Dunn explains that by Jesus applying Isaiah 61:1–2 to himself, he was clearly announcing his prophetic office¹²: “We are not surprised to find ... that Jesus spoke of himself explicitly as a prophet.” By expressing an awareness of his prophetic vocation similar to Jeremiah's (Jer 49:14),¹³ by seeing himself as commissioned to proclaim God's final message to Israel, and by teaching God's will with authority, pitting himself against the established interpretation of the Law (Matt 5:21–48), Jesus demonstrates the “nearest parallels in the prophets' conviction that they spoke words from God.”¹⁴

The traditional Christian response to this prophetic understanding of Jesus is the Chalcedonian two-natures doctrine, which holds that Jesus Christ is one person possessing two complete natures—divine and human. Although this doctrine explicitly affirms Jesus's humanity, it defines that humanity as united to a divine nature possessing attributes unavailable to ordinary human beings, creating a fundamental difference between Jesus and those called to imitate him. The disagreement therefore has both a biblical and a theological-practical dimension. Biblically, the question is whether the New Testament presents Jesus as an ontologically divine person or as a human servant, prophet, and mediator appointed and empowered by God. The practical question is whether a human united to an additional divine nature can serve as a genuine example for imitation.

⁹ Some other (but not exhaustive by any means) instances of prophets having divine foreknowledge include 1 Sam 9:5–20 (Samuel is told Saul's future reign as king, and that the people will regret demanding a king); 1 Sam 10:2–7 (Samuel predicts a sequence of events that Saul will experience); 2 Sam 7:4–17 (Nathan foretells David's dynastic future and the building of the temple); 1 Kings 11:29–39 (Ahijah foretells the division of the twelve tribes into two nations and Jeroboam's kingship); Isa 37: 6, 7, 33–38 (Isaiah foretells Sennacherib's withdrawal from Jerusalem and death by assassination in his own land); and, most powerful, Isa 45:1 (predicting centuries ahead that God will raise up a ruler named Cyrus).

¹⁰ White, *Forgotten Trinity*, 175.

¹¹ Matt 13:57; Mark 6:4; Luke 7:16, 13:33, 24:19; John 4:19, 9:17.

¹² Dunn, “Jesus the Prophet,” 489.

¹³ Dustin Smith observes that Matthew's Gospel gives notable parallels of Jesus's prophetic office to that of Jeremiah's. Matthew's depiction of Jesus in terms of Jeremiah reassures a post-70 AD Jewish Christian community that Jesus's fulfilled prophecy of the temple's destruction confirms him as a legitimate prophet and covenant mediator, not a failed messianic claimant. By aligning Jesus with a rejected prophet of judgment, Matthew frames both Jesus's ministry and the community's suffering within Israel's prophetic tradition, presenting Jesus as a human agent of divine authority rather than an ontologically divine figure. See Biblical Unitarian Podcast #356.

¹⁴ Dunn, 490.

Yet, this prophetic and functional account does not satisfy trinitarians. Many insist that Jesus had to embody two natures—one fully human and the other fully divine—to mediate salvation. John Stott argues that a mere human could never adequately represent humanity or act as a mediator.

Was he just a man? If so, how could one human being possibly—or justly—stand in for other human beings? Was he then simply God, seeming to be a man, but not actually being the man he seemed? If so, how could he represent humankind? Besides this, how could he have died? In that case, are we to think of Christ neither as man alone, nor as God alone, but rather as the one and only God-man who because of his uniquely constituted person was uniquely qualified to mediate between God and man?¹⁵

B. B. Warfield insists that the two-natures theory “underlies all the New Testament writings ... and [was] commended to us by the combined authority of all those primitive followers of Christ who left written records of their faith.” He concludes that this belief “is the only alternative to a non-existent Christ; we must choose between a two-natured Christ and a simply mythical Christ.... No doubt he lived as man, his life adorned with all the gracious characteristics of a man of God. But he cannot be stripped of his divine claims.”¹⁶ However, Warfield admits that the belief that Jesus was a “mere man” bounded by human limitations developed out of “an earlier tradition.”¹⁷ And note what he says next:

It is assumed to be precisely the task of criticism to identify and draw out these elements of earlier tradition, that we may recover from them the idea formed of Jesus by his real contemporaries and, therefore, presumably, the true conception of him before he was transformed by the reverent thought of his followers into an exalted Being, *to be which he himself made no claim.* (emphasis added)

Is it really the “task” of Christians through the centuries after Jesus’s death to “transform” the Jesus of Scripture—a Hebrew prophet like, but greater than, Moses—into a divine being, specifically God Himself? Warfield admits that Jesus himself never made the claim of deity. And John Knox makes a succinct point—that the early church would not have found Jesus’s humanity a problem. Jesus “would have been thought of simply as the human being he was. It would not have occurred to anyone to affirm that Jesus was human, for the obvious reason that it would not have occurred to anyone that he might have been anything else.”¹⁸ If that was the case for the early church, why should it not be the same for us?

Warfield speaks for many trinitarians when he concludes,

If he was not both God and man in two distinct natures combined in one person, the mystery of his personality passes over into a mere mass of crass contradictions which cannot all be believed; which, therefore, invite arbitrary denial on the one side or the other; and which will inevitably lead to each man creating for himself an artificial Jesus, reduced in the traits allowed to him to more credible consistency—if indeed, it does not directly tempt to his entire sublimation into a highly composite

¹⁵ Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 149. Note, though, Stott’s casual remark that this “qualified person” to mediate does so between God and man, differentiating Jesus from God.

¹⁶ Warfield, “Two Natures,” 562.

¹⁷ Warfield, 561. John Knox, in *The Humanity and Divinity of Christ*, speaks of how the later preoccupation of the church with Jesus’s two natures “represented a continuation of a process of reflection which began surely as early as Paul’s time, however strange the terms of later discussions would have seemed to him.... Christology in the distinctively Christian sense must, almost by definition, be thought of as a post-resurrection development, an aspect of the Church’s thought about how, and through whom, it came to be” (pp. viii–vix).

¹⁸ Knox, *The Humanity*, 5.

ideal.... The doctrine of the Two Natures supplies, in a word, *the only possible solution* of the enigmas of the life-manifestation of the historical Jesus.¹⁹

But could there be a different, scriptural solution to Jesus's God-consciousness? Something as simple as what Michael Bird describes?: "The offices of prophet, priest, and king are climatically fulfilled in the ministry of the one who would reveal, redeem, and reign on God's behalf.... Jesus is the witness who makes God known (prophet), the one who mediates adoption into God's family (priest), and the one who rules over the creation that he coauthored (king)."²⁰ Bird, a staunch trinitarian, admits that everything Jesus did on earth and since his exaltation is done on *God's behalf*. He refers to Jesus's glorified state as evidence of his "enduring human character" and as proof that it is a "human being who is enthroned *beside God*" (emphasis added, indicating Jesus is not God but sits beside the one true God). Millard Erickson acknowledges that

to the Jesus of Jesus' time the word *God* applied to the Father in heaven. It was only later, in the last third of the first century, that the necessity of giving proper honor to Jesus *forced believers* to broaden the concept of God. It is certain that Jesus did not think of himself as being the Father in heaven to whom he prayed. He had, however, *an intuitive knowledge of himself and his unique status and role*.²¹

Why couldn't it simply be that Jesus, a human, understood his unique status and role as the great and final prophet sent into the world by God, his Father? As John Hick puts it: "Jesus saw himself as God's last messenger before the establishment of the kingdom.... He was fulfilling the unique role of the final prophet, come to proclaim a New Age, the divine kingdom that God was shortly to inaugurate on earth."²² When we look at Jesus's own words in the Gospels, we clearly see that he did not teach that he had two natures, one human and one divine—as Hick says, "The idea of divine incarnation is better understood as metaphorical than as literal—Jesus embodied, or incarnated, the ideal of human life lived in faithful response to God, so that God was able to act through him."²³ It seems evident that the church's understanding of Jesus's prophetic role was replaced by something that Hick describes as "more able to endure in the pluralistic world of the Roman empire": an eschatological prophet transformed into God the Son, who came from heaven to live as a human and save us by dying.²⁴

1.4 Jesus's "God-Consciousness"

Scripture foretold that the Messiah would be a divinely appointed human agent. From the messianic psalms to the "suffering servant" passages in Isaiah, we read of a messiah divinely anointed to proclaim the kingdom of God.²⁵ Like Moses, the Messiah would be a prophet who acted in full dependence on the Father. This "oneness" that White claims incontrovertibly proves the deity of Christ, while to the highest level, is nonetheless something that "many men and women have

¹⁹ Warfield, 564, 567. Emphasis mine.

²⁰ Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, §4.7.4

²¹ Erickson, *Word Became Flesh*, 433. Emphasis mine.

²² Hick, *Metaphor of God*, 3. Lucius Miller gives a sound suggestion: "Why may we not go back to the Synoptic Gospels and content ourselves with the thought of Jesus as the introducer of the kingdom of God among men and its divine head? ... Jesus clearly taught that he was the Messiah; and, to the first disciples, this was the true and final word by which to describe him. This term did not mean then what later Christian theologians, saturated with philosophic conceptions, considered it to mean. It meant merely that member of the Jewish race who was divinely 'anointed' to introduce and head the 'kingdom of God'" (Miller, 299–300).

²³ Hick, ix.

²⁴ Hick, 5.

²⁵ Miller, *Divinity of Christ*, 299. Some of the many verses indicating this: Ps 2:7; Isa 42:1–7, 49:6, 52:13; Dan 7:13–14.

participated in varying degrees”—a person who is conscious of God’s presence, speaks to God, hears from God (whether inwardly or outwardly), and is aware of and does God’s will.²⁶ “One can rule,” Hick says, “that a man who is consciously God is still to be counted as fully human. But such a one would nevertheless *not be one of us*, sharing our human condition.”²⁷ Simply: if Jesus isn’t fully human, he isn’t fully imitable.

Here we slip into difficult waters: defining what it means to have “God-consciousness,” and how or in what ways Jesus’s awareness of God may have differed from that of others. The trinitarian view holds that Jesus, being God Himself in human form or flesh, was somehow aware that he was God (or at least the divine part of him was assumed to be omniscient). This, predictably, creates rather than eliminates (as Warfield claimed) “a mass of crass contradictions which cannot all be believed.” Volumes have been written arguing for, and attempting to explain, how Jesus must have had two natures to perform the miraculous deeds he did and to know things no human could have known. Yet, as we have already noted, many of the prophets of old, and particularly Moses, were empowered accordingly. Jesus told his disciples—mere humans!—that they would do even greater works than he did (John 14:12). Indeed, we might say that the only thing Jesus did as the “greatest prophet” that might be singled out as distinctive is his death, which enables eternal salvation (redemption from sin).

However, Scripture foretold that this suffering servant would be a human, not a god-man (who is supposedly 100% human but also 100% God—as if there is any mathematics that can explain a 200% being), and that Yahweh would reward him for his faithfulness by restoring his life and exalting him.²⁸ It does *not* tell us that the “human part” of Jesus died, while the “God part” remained immortal, but that *Jesus* died.²⁹ And it is a fully human man who was required to die to atone for Adam’s sin—one man for one man—to balance the scales of justice.³⁰ Knox aptly sums up what results from embracing a god-man explanation for Jesus’s power and abilities:

The consequence is that innumerable Christians, loyal to the Church and its traditions, find themselves utterly perplexed as to what they are expected to think—being told, as they understand it, that Jesus was ignorant as a man must be but at the same time omniscient as only God is; that he was both limited in power (as he would have to be in order to be human) and also omnipotent; that he was divinely impregnable and serene in goodness but was also tried and tested and tempted as a man must be and only a man can be. Explanations of differences between us and the Fathers in the understanding of certain words (like ‘person’) may help a bit; but they hardly make things clear.³¹

The two-natures doctrine is intended to resolve these tensions by explaining Jesus’s apparently contradictory attributes through his distinct human and divine natures. Yet, this explanation leaves an important issue unresolved. If Jesus’s divine nature remained omniscient and omnipotent while his human consciousness was limited and vulnerable, then the Jesus Christians are commanded to imitate is not simply a human being operating through divine empowerment. He is a unique person whose human experience coexists with attributes belonging exclusively to deity. Pannenberg expresses the doctrine this way: “The man Jesus indirectly shows himself to be identical with the existence of the Son of God. His humanity is not synthesized with a divine essence, but it involves two complementary total aspects of his existence.” The question, then, is whether Jesus had

²⁶ Hick, 52.

²⁷ Hick, 54.

²⁸ Isa 53: 5, 8, 10–12.

²⁹ 1 Pet 3:18; Heb 2:9; Rev 1:18.

³⁰ Paul makes a succinct argument in Romans 5 that shows Jesus had to be a perfect human being just like Adam was to qualify as a substitutionary sacrifice (*cf.* 1 Cor 15:20–22, 42–49).

³¹ Knox, 100.

to possess a unique awareness of himself as “truly God and truly man.” On the two-natures account, Jesus as a human could have limited foreknowledge, as did other human prophets, while “God the Son,” being wholly God and omniscient, knew everything. Hick presents the kernel of the dilemma that all Christians should consider:

Assuming for the moment, and for the sake of argument, that the idea of an incarnate God who is ignorant of his own deity can be made intelligible and its implications made acceptable, the next question will be: how is it possible for the church to know something so important about Jesus that he did not know himself?³²

God, as omniscient, is aware at every moment of all the thoughts in every stream of human consciousness. To imagine Jesus as so aware while also being limited in knowledge (asymmetrical cognitive accessing) could not constitute divine incarnation in any religious sense. “For if this consists of God’s full one-way awareness of human consciousness, then God is incarnate in everyone,” Hick points out.³³ The Gospels’ portrayal of Jesus’s full dependence on the Father for knowledge, authority, and power shows not that he was God but God’s faithful prophet. Greater than any other prophet, yes, but wholly within the parameters of the established prophetic office.

This asymmetry in Jesus’s God-consciousness (that the “God” part of Jesus was omniscient and fully aware of his true nature as God the Son, while the “human” part of Jesus was unaware of his deity—except at random times when he glimpsed his “godness”) is neither taught implicitly nor explicitly in Scripture. None of the apostles or other New Testament writers describe Jesus’s nature as anything other than fully normal human; his sinlessness is attributed not to an altered ontology but to his divine begetting and faithful obedience. Even after his resurrection and exaltation, they repeatedly called Jesus “a man,” never a god-man, nor did they offer any ontological account of him as deity. We should accept Jesus’s own explanation of his extraordinary God-consciousness: “The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own, but the Father who dwells in me does his works” (John 14:10). Truly, God was *in* Jesus (not *as* Jesus), reconciling the world to Himself (2 Cor 5:19).

We can infer, then, that perfect “God-consciousness” is not about being aware that one is God but about being perfectly aligned with God’s will. It is not merely heightened awareness or awareness of self-divinity. Moses and other prophets were partially aligned, speaking for God at appointed times on specific matters. Jesus’s alignment with and awareness of God’s presence and omnipotence were complete—the entirety of his mission, from his baptism to his death, was to speak and do everything the Father gave him to do. His intimacy with the Father had nothing to do with ontology (mysteriously being God without knowing it) but with fulfilling his calling as a prophet and messiah.

The issue at the heart of the matter, then, is whether affirming that Jesus possessed a human nature means that he lived as a human being under the same conditions as those he came to save and instruct. With our present analysis, it does not. The two-natures doctrine, while preserving the language of Jesus’s humanity, makes that humanity ontologically exceptional through its union with a divine nature. In contrast, the prophetic model tells us simply that Jesus was fully human, empowered by God, and therefore capable of serving as a genuine pattern for human discipleship.

³² Hick, 30. He also says there is “broad agreement among New Testament scholars that the historical Jesus did not make the claim to deity that later Christian thought was to make for him: he did not understand himself to be God, or God the Son, incarnate.... It is extremely unlikely that the historical Jesus thought of himself in any such way. Indeed he would probably have rejected the idea as blasphemous” (p. 27).

³³ Hick, 51.

1.5 Jesus's Imitability

This type of God-consciousness, to some degree, is imitable. The apostle Paul affirms this in conceivable terms when he says believers have the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16). He is not saying we share Christ's metaphysical nature. If Christ's consciousness were intrinsically divine in the Chalcedonian sense (omniscient, eternal self-awareness), Paul's statement would be unintelligible or misleading. Instead, Paul states that we are presently being "transformed into the *same image* [of Christ] from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor 3:18) so that Christ "might be the firstborn within a large family" (Rom 8:29).³⁴ The apostle Peter presses this logic even further, declaring that, by means of Yahweh's great power, believers "may escape from the corruption that is in the world ... and may become participants of the divine nature" (2 Pet 1:3–4). Such language clearly denotes shared nature.

James White may insist that Jesus's claim to be "one" with the Father proves ontological deity, yet he fails to reckon with the fact that later in John's Gospel, Jesus prays on behalf of all who believe in him "that they may *all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us*" (John 17:21, emphasis mine). Jesus thus defines his own union with God in terms that are explicitly extensible to his followers. If having God "in us" entailed ontological deity, then Jesus's prayer would imply the eventual deification of all believers—a conclusion John does not reach and one that White is unlikely to affirm. It takes extensive linguistic gymnastics to argue that away.

Simply: believers share Christ's mind because the Spirit that empowered Jesus now instructs believers. James Whiton puts it this way:

If in any point, either by excess or by defect, Jesus were not normally human throughout, not wholly as subject as we to human conditions in the ability to draw upon divine resources of knowledge and power, then, of course, he could not be entirely imitable. The question of his entire imitableness is therefore more than a problem of theology; it is also a fundamental question of practical discipleship to him.³⁵ ... Evidently the self-realization of Jesus, attained through consciousness of the embosoming, indwelling, and inworking Father, is of the human type, and therefore not hopelessly and forever beyond human attainment."³⁶

With this perspective, the hypostatic union creates a fundamental distinction between Jesus and the rest of humanity. It therefore undermines the full imitability assumed in Paul's commands to be imitators of Christ (Eph 5:1; Phil 2:5) and in Hebrews' affirmation that Jesus was made like us in *every way* (Heb 2:17).

Devotion to Jesus (which God commands of both believers and angels)³⁷ is justified not because of a shared divine essence but due to Jesus's complete, uninterrupted devotion to God and his willingness to sacrifice himself to redeem humanity. His God-consciousness shows no divergence between divine will and human obedience.

³⁴ Jesus, being "the firstborn," or "the firstfruits" of "those who have fallen asleep," implies that all who come after him will be just like him (1 Cor 15:20).

³⁵ Whiton, "God Consciousness," 263.

³⁶ Whiton, "God Consciousness," 273. He also notes that many would say regarding Jesus's consciousness that it is "simply the revelation of an exceptional being, who comes to us from a higher world. Nevertheless, a mystery, a problem, is apparent still. For the extraordinary consciousness of God which is discovered in Jesus is the product of a mind admitted to be genuinely and thoroughly human, well poised and sane. As a phenomenon of such a mind there is at least no *prima facie* ground for denying it to be essentially reproducible. This, then, is the present question: Is there any limit to the imitableness of Jesus? ... Imitableness that goes no deeper than conduct is not worth effort or consideration. Unless Jesus be fully imitable in consciousness, it does not appear how he can be fully imitable in conduct?" (Whiton, 264).

³⁷ Revelation chapter 5; Phil 2:9–11.

1.6 Conclusion

Trinitarian theology has traditionally explained miracles, authority, exaltation, and the devotion directed to Jesus by appealing to an ontological explanation—namely, incarnation—rather than a scriptural one grounded in Israel’s prophetic tradition. This paper has argued that the New Testament consistently situates Jesus within that prophetic tradition of Israel as the foretold prophet “greater than Moses,” the final eschatological prophet empowered by Yahweh to announce the coming kingdom and a call to repentance and reconciliation rather than an ontologically unique god-man, fully God and fully human, according to the 451 Chalcedon Creed. The New Testament confirms Jesus’s role as prophet, as did Jesus himself, alluding to a familiar scriptural pattern in which Yahweh empowers human agents to mediate covenant, judgment, and redemption without collapsing the identities of God and prophet into an ontological union—something never presented anywhere in Scripture.

Jesus is greater than Moses not due to deity but by embodying the prophetic vocation in its fullest and final form. The Hebrew Scriptures confirm that Yahweh’s chosen prophets were empowered to perform miracles and endowed with foreknowledge of events they couldn’t possibly have known. These identifying attributes of a prophet were indicators of Yahweh’s appointment, not ontological deity. They were empowered *by God*; they were *not God*. Devotion and worship (obeisance) given to Jesus cannot be used as proof of his divinity because kings and prophets (and others) were also rightly given such (relative) honor. Jesus is spoken of as being worshipped “to the glory of God the Father,” not as God Almighty.

Jesus’s full humanity as the prophet like Moses, along with his subsequent resurrection and exaltation, demonstrate the prophetic empowerment perfected in Jesus, not ontological escalation. Jesus, according to Scripture, is still a man—greatly elevated, to Yahweh’s right hand in heaven to rule the kingdom, now a “new creation,” which sets the pattern for all his followers, who will one day “be like he is” and share in all his glory (Col 3:2–4). Because of his continued humanity, his roles as priest,³⁸ mediator, intercessor, and exemplar make him imitable. This is what Christians can be comforted by and aspire to imitate. Wright says:

The life and character of Jesus correspond closely to the life and character which we have imagined a person would have who should thus *experience* divinity. His mind was dominated by a sense of God’s presence in the world and the nearness of the Divine Spirit to the human soul. His communion with God through prayer and meditation was continuous and seems to have become steadily more perfect.³⁹

Wright’s language describes perfect human receptivity to God rather than transformation of humanity into deity. Since we now have the mind of Christ, we can look to Jesus’s life of faithful obedience as one we can truly imitate, experiencing a similar (though not as comprehensive) “God-consciousness.”

Jesus stands at the climax of Israel’s great prophetic history as the prophet greater than Moses, the one through whom God finally spoke, greater than angels, and able to mediate the new covenant that will bring God’s children to glory and eternal life. Friedrich Schleiermacher rightly argues that Jesus’s redemptive power depends on both his unique God-consciousness and his essential likeness to all other humans:

³⁸ To this point, the writer of Hebrews emphasizes that Jesus is a priest *forever*, indicating that this role of his will never come to an end (Heb 7:20–21).

³⁹ Wright, “Can the Human Character,” 291.

If Christ is to be the Redeemer, i.e. the real origin of constant living unhindered evocation of the God-consciousness, so that the participation of all others in it is mediated through Him alone, it is, on the one hand, necessary that He should enjoy an exclusive and peculiar superiority over all others, and, on the other hand, *there must also be an essential likeness between Him and all men*, because otherwise what He has to impart could not be the same as what they need.... If the difference between Christ and those who are in need of redemption is made so unlimited that an essential likeness is incompatible with it, then His participation in human nature vanishes into a mere appearance; and consequently our God-consciousness, being something essentially different, cannot be derived from His, and redemption also is only an appearance.⁴⁰

If Christ were ontologically different from us, his consciousness of God could not be communicated to humanity. If Jesus saves because he was ontologically unlike us—if he were a “god-man”—then his obedience cannot be a true example for us to follow and his trust in God becomes a theological abstraction. Thankfully, this is not what Scripture teaches about Jesus’s nature. We have in Jesus an understanding high priest who can sympathize with our weaknesses precisely because, as a human being, he was tested as we are, yet without sin (Heb 4:15–16).

What was foretold about the Messiah thus finds its fullest expression not in ontological escalation with a being that is “truly God and truly human” but in Jesus’s perfect human faithfulness and complete unity of purpose with Yahweh, his and our Father. As the greater Moses, Jesus is truly human and truly imitable, as he is not only our savior but the prophet who mediates the New Covenant and intercedes for us—like us in every way and able to bring us to perfection and glory, so that “when Christ appears, we shall be like him” (1 John 3:2). Far from diminishing Christ, this framework exalts him as the culmination of Israel’s prophetic hope: the prophet greater than Moses, through whom God’s will and saving purposes are finally and fully made known.

⁴⁰ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 99. Emphasis mine.

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