

More by far, in a very low-key way Jesus let his understanding of his identity be known. He never was so crass as to stand on a soap box and announce “Listen up, I’m the Son of God!” but rather waited for those who knew him well to reach that conclusion for themselves. The most significant occasion appears in [Matthew 16:13 ff](#), where he asks his twelve disciples who they think he is. Peter is the one who answered “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God” and at once, Jesus replied “thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church.”

That exchange is central to understanding the identity of Jesus, yet is very controversial – as we’ll see below. It’s a play on words. They were of course speaking Aramaic, which has fallen out of use except in a few parts of Syria, so we don’t know exactly what was said – but we do have Matthew’s Greek version, and the play on words is clear there.

“Peter” was the disciple’s name, a proper noun, Πέτρος (Petros) - and “this rock” was a noun, πέτρα (petra.) To what did “this rock” refer? - Roman Catholics insist it referred to Peter as a person, and his successors as (eventually) the Bishop of Rome. Members of all the other denominations understand Jesus was referring to Peter’s declaration of belief that he was “the Christ, the Son of the living God.” The latter makes far better sense in my opinion; the reader must decide for himself. If I’m right, it means Jesus was quietly saying he was the creator of the universe in human form, and that his church (those human beings who would become his followers from then forward) would be built on the foundation of that belief.

Let’s pause to check the meaning of the term “Christ.” χριστός is the Greek (Xristos) and the Jewish equivalent is “Messiah.” It has a special significance; in Judaism the Messiah was (and is) a kind of savior or deliverer who is to come at some future time to rescue Jews from their allegedly inferior position; to justify their claim to be a special people, God’s chosen. There are numerous prophecies about the Messiah in the Old Testament, and for someone to claim to be that deliverer was a very big deal. So Peter’s declaration of faith had two huge components: he held Jesus to be both the promised Messiah and the incarnate creator. And by immediately stating that he would construct his church on the basis of that belief, Jesus endorsed the claim to both titles. Those few verses therefore make an explosive passage.

John’s Gospel endorses the view that Jesus was God in human form. Two examples:

(a) in its [first three verses](#) it says “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.” By “the Word” (ὁ λόγος or logos, the expression or communication of God) John is referring to Jesus; and by “in the beginning” he is using the same phrase as [begins](#) the Old Testament, the Jewish Bible: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” So he’s claiming that Jesus is the same creator as Jews have always worshipped; that he “was” - he existed – at that beginning of creation, that he “was with” God, and that he “was God.” Separate in one sense from God (“with”) but identical to him in another. This is the origin of the doctrine of the Trinity, which we’ll revisit in Chapters 2 and 3; here there are two persons or aspects, in one God. Yes, tough to grasp. And highly offensive to Jews, who were very strictly monotheistic.

(b) In [Chapter 19](#), John relates the exchange between Jesus and Pilate, the Roman