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Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement

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Was Jesus Mad, Bad, or God?*

Stephen T. Davis

I

The argument that Jesus was either ‘mad, bad, or God’ (let’s call it the MBG argument) is sometimes used by popular Christian apologists as a way of defending the incarnation. Since Jesus claimed to be the divine Son of God—so the argument goes—then if he was not in fact divine, he must have been either a lunatic or a moral monster. No sane and righteous person can wrongly claim to be divine. But since Jesus was evidently neither a lunatic nor a moral monster—so the argument concludes—he must indeed have been divine.

Occasionally one encounters this argument in serious Christian literature as well. For example, C. S. Lewis wrote:

Then comes the real shock. Among these Jews there suddenly turns up a man who goes about talking as if he was God. He claims to forgive sins. He says He has always existed. He says he is coming to judge the world at the end of time. . . . I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: ‘I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God.’ That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would be either a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil in Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse.¹

And even J. A. T. Robinson, in the midst of a discussion of the Fourth Gospel in which he argues for its early dating and the general historical reliability of its picture of Jesus, can say: ‘No sane person goes about saying “Before Abraham was I am” or “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood shall live forever.” These are theological interpretations, not literal utterances. Yet at the deepest level of

* From S. T. Davis, et al., eds., *The Incarnation: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Incarnation of the Son of God*. © 2002 Oxford University Press. Reprinted by Permission of the Publisher.

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960). 40–1. I have been unable to locate any published uses of the argument prior to the 20th cent. G. K. Chesterton does not state the argument as clearly or succinctly as does Lewis, but its premises can be found in *The Everlasting Man* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955 (1925)). 185–212.

faith they may indeed be the truth about the eternal Word of life, made flesh in this supremely individual and uniquely moral man of history.²

On the other hand, the MBG argument is often severely criticized, both by people who do and by people who do not believe in the divinity of Jesus. For example, Donald MacKinnon criticized the argument on the grounds that it presupposes that we know what it is like to be God.³ And John Hick makes critical reference to the MBG argument in *The Myth of God Incarnate*. He recalls that he was taught the argument in his childhood confirmation class and comments that it reflects a precritical attitude toward the Christian faith, one in which the idea of supernatural divine interventions in human history are acceptable and in which the Gospels are read as straightforward historical accounts of the life of Jesus.⁴ Others object to the MBG argument on the grounds that the statements made by Jesus about himself in the Gospels that form the basis of the argument are being misinterpreted; properly understood, they do not constitute 'claims to divinity'. Finally, and doubtless most importantly, some argue that the statements about himself that are attributed to Jesus in the Gospels were not really said by him: they express the views not of Jesus but of the Christian church forty to sixty years later.

It is odd that the MBG argument is subject to such differing evaluations—all the way from people who endorse and use it, presumably because they consider it a good argument,⁵ to people who dismiss it as unworthy of serious consideration.⁶ Is it a good argument, or not?⁷ Probably no central issue of Christian

² J. A. T. Robinson. *Can We Trust the New Testament?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1977). 91. See also R. H. Fuller and P. Perkins. *Who Is This Christ? Gospel Christology and Contemporary Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983). 24: 'Therefore, the question of Jesus' identity, role, or relationship to the divine forced itself on those who came in contact with him. Either he was blasphemous, a fool, or he spoke with divine authority.'

³ MacKinnon made this remark in a lecture attended by me at the Divinity School, Cambridge, in the Lent Term of 1978.

⁴ John Hick (ed.). *The Myth of God Incarnate* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), 4.

⁵ Two contemporary apologists who make use of the argument are W. L. Craig and P. Kreeft. See W. L. Craig. *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1984), 233–54, and P. Kreeft and R. K. Tacelli. *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994). 150–74. For a more extended discussion of the argument, see P. Kreeft, *Between Heaven and Hell: A Dialog Somewhere Beyond Death with John F. Kennedy, C. S. Lewis, and Aldous Huxley* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1982). See also J. M. Boice. *Foundations of Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 275–7.

⁶ One such person is John Beversluis, who strongly criticizes C. S. Lewis's version of the MBG argument in *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1985), 54–7. He calls the argument 'emotionally inflammatory' and claims it is based on a 'fallacious strategy', i.e. a 'false dilemma'. It is 'not a philosophical argument but a psychological spell'. Beversluis is correct that the truth and value of Jesus' moral teachings need not be affected by a judgement that he was mistaken in claiming to be divine: even if he was a lunatic, his moral teachings may still stand. But the major problem with Beversluis's critique is that he does not succeed in explaining how a sane person can be sincerely mistaken in claiming to be God. When Beversluis sets out to explain this point, he inexplicably switches from Jesus' claim to be divine to his claim to be the Messiah. These are two quite different things. Of course, there were sane people in ancient Judaism who mistakenly claimed to be the Messiah: indeed, that was almost commonplace. But how can a sane person—especially a 1st-cent. Jew—mistakenly claim to be *divine*?

⁷ I am presupposing here the discussion of the nature of argument, proof, validity, soundness, and success for an argument in *my God, Reason, and Theistic Proofs* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1997), 1–14, 188–93.

belief depends on the argument. Orthodox Christians could go on believing in the divinity of Jesus even if the argument fails. (On the other hand, if the argument succeeds, those who deny the incarnation at the very least have some explaining to do.) But the frequency with which the argument appears in popular defences of the divinity of Jesus, as well as its almost total absence from discussions about the status of Jesus by professional theologians and biblical scholars, makes one curious what to make of the argument.

The present paper constitutes a qualified defence of one version of the argument. I will claim that the MBG argument, properly understood, can establish the rationality of belief in the incarnation of Jesus. But a caveat is called for: I do not want to be interpreted as implying that any validation of Jesus' divinity must rest solely on what Jesus himself (explicitly or implicitly) claimed to be. Along with the memory of Jesus' sayings and doings, the post-Easter response to his death and resurrection (as well as the coming of the Holy Spirit) also played a crucial role in forming the early Christians' confession of Jesus as their divine Lord and Son of God. Even if it concentrates on what we know of Jesus' pre-Easter activity, the MBG argument should not be taken to belittle or ignore the post-Easter developments. I am definitely not suggesting that the MBG argument is the only or even the best argument Christians can give for the divinity of Jesus.

II

It will facilitate matters if I lay out the argument in what I take to be its logical form:

- (1) Jesus claimed, either explicitly or implicitly, to be divine.
- (2) Jesus was either right or wrong in claiming to be divine.
- (3) If Jesus was wrong in claiming to be divine, Jesus was either mad or bad.
- (4) Jesus was not bad.
- (5) Jesus was not mad.
- (6) Therefore, Jesus was not wrong in claiming to be divine.
- (7) Therefore Jesus was right in claiming to be divine.
- (8) Therefore, Jesus was divine.

Let me now comment on each premise. Some will require more extended discussion than others.

Premise (1) will turn out to be crucial—indeed, it is probably the crux of the argument—so let us postpone extended comment on it till later. Suffice it for now simply to define its crucial term. Let us say that someone is *divine* if that person is in some strong sense identical with or equivalent to the omnipotent, omniscient, and loving creator of the heavens and the earth.

Now if (1) is true (as I will argue), then premise (2) follows from a substitution-instance of a well-recognized law of logic, namely, the law of excluded middle. Some philosophers have raised questions about this law (which says that every proposition is either true or, if not true, then false), but it nevertheless seems about as secure as any premise of any argument can be. The vast majority of philosophers will agree that (2) is true. The claim, 'Jesus was correct in claiming to be divine', is either true or, if not true, then false. The MBG argument cannot be successfully challenged here.

But premise (3) *can* be questioned. Let us say that the statement, 'Jesus was mad', means that he was insane or mentally deluded, just like those confused and frequently institutionalized people today who sincerely believe themselves to be the Virgin Mary or Napoleon. Let us say that the statement, 'Jesus was bad', means that he was a liar, or was at least lying about who he was, just like someone today who intentionally deceives people by claiming to be someone else.

Perhaps Jesus claimed to be divine, was neither mad nor bad, but was merely *sincerely mistaken* about the matter, just as it is possible for a person to be sincerely mistaken about who her true parents are. Now the defender of the MBG argument will surely not want to claim that it is logically or even causally impossible⁸ that Jesus was sincerely mistaken in claiming to be divine. If we tried hard enough, we probably could cook up a scenario in which a sane and moral person mistakenly took himself to be divine. But is it *probable* that Jesus was both sane and sincerely mistaken? Is it probable that

(9) Any good person who mistakenly claims to be divine is mad is false? Or is it probable that

(10) Any sane person who mistakenly claims to be divine is bad⁹ is false?

These are obviously difficult questions. I am inclined to accept both (9) and (10) (and thus (3) as well), but I do not know how to prove them. Certainly a sane and good person could be sincerely mistaken about who her true parents are. Doubtless this very thing has occurred. But it is hard to see how a sane and good person could be sincerely mistaken in holding the extremely bizarre belief that she is divine (assuming she uses the word 'divine', as Christians normally do in this context, i.e. as indicating a robust identity with the omnipotent, omniscient, loving creator of the world). There *is* something extremely odd about the notion of a sincere, good, and sane person mistakenly claiming to be God. Nor do I consider it possible for an *otherwise* perfectly sane and good person mistakenly

⁸ Let us say that 'Jesus was sincerely mistaken in claiming to be divine' is logically impossible if the statement amounts to or entails a contradiction. Let us say that 'Jesus was sincerely mistaken in claiming to be divine' is causally impossible if its truth entails a violation of one or more of the laws of nature—gravity, thermodynamics, the speed of light, etc.

⁹ The Revd Jim Jones, whose cult followers committed mass suicide in Guyana in 1978, is reported to have said to them: 'I'm the closest thing to God you'll ever see.'

to consider herself to be God. Accordingly, (9) and (10) (and thus (3)). seem to have a high degree of plausibility. I conclude, then, that while (3) may be false, it is most probably true and can stand as a premise in a successful argument.

One suspects that few will want to dispute (4) and (5). It is possible, however, that someone might want to use them against each other, so to speak, and argue either that:

- (11) If Jesus mistakenly claimed to be divine and wasn't mad, then, improbable as it seems, he must have been bad.

or else:

- (12) If Jesus mistakenly claimed to be divine and wasn't bad, then, improbable as it seems, he must have been mad.

But, again, I believe there is good reason to accept both (4) and (5). Unless the most radical of Gospel critics are correct—those who claim we can know virtually nothing about the historical Jesus¹⁰—there is precious little in the Gospels to suggest that Jesus was either a lunatic or a liar, and much to suggest strongly that he was neither.

Virtually everyone who reads the Gospels—whether committed to Christianity or not—comes away with the conviction that Jesus was a wise and good man. He was loving, compassionate, and caring, hardly the sort who tells lies for self-interested reasons. During his lifetime Jesus was apparently accused by his enemies of being demon-possessed and 'out of his mind' (cf. John 10: 20). And Jesus is certainly quoted as making what can seem to be bizarre claims, especially when taken outside the context of his life and the rest of his teachings: for example: 'Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you' (John 6: 53).

But Peter Kreeft argues convincingly that Jesus shows none of the character traits usually associated with those who have delusions of grandeur or 'divinity complexes'. Such people are easily recognized by their egotism, narcissism, inflexibility, predictable behaviour, and inability to relate understandingly and lovingly to others.¹¹ Other seriously disturbed people show signs of extreme irritability, debilitating anxiety, or inappropriate beliefs and behaviour. This is not the sort of picture of Jesus that we form by reading the Gospels. We live in an age when all sorts of bizarre claims about the historical Jesus are confidently made. But few Scripture scholars of any theological stripe seriously entertain the possibility that Jesus was either a lunatic or a liar. When we return below to premise (1) we will have to enter more deeply into the question of the reliability

¹⁰ 'I do indeed think that we can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus', Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, trans. L. P. Smith and E. H. Lantero (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 8.

¹¹ Kreeft and Tacelli. *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, 159.

of the New Testament picture of Jesus. Suffice it to say here that there seems every good reason to accept both (4) and (5).¹²

Premise (6) is entailed by premises (2), (3), (4), and (5). It is impossible for them to be true and (6) false. Premise (7) is entailed by premises (2) and (6). If they are true, it is true. Finally, step (8), the conclusion of the MBG argument, is entailed by premise (7). If (7) is true, then (8) must be true as well. What we have in the MBG argument, then, is a *valid* argument. That is, there are no mistakes in logic in the argument; it is logically impossible for its premises (i.e. (1)–(7)) to be true and its conclusion (i.e. step (8)) false.

But is the argument also *sound*? Let us say that a sound argument is a valid argument whose premises are all true. It appears thus far that while premises (3), (4), and (5) can be criticized, a plausible case can be made for their truth. Clearly the premise that will seem most vulnerable to criticism is premise (1).

Is it true that Jesus claimed, either explicitly or implicitly, to be divine? Before addressing this question directly, it will be helpful to consider the notion of an 'implicit claim', since my argument in the present paper is that Jesus *implicitly* claimed to be divine. First, what is a 'claim'? Let's say that a claim is an assertion or statement, the kind of linguistic utterance that has a truth value. That is, according to the principle of excluded middle, it is true or if not true, then false. Now an *explicit* claim that a proposition *p* is true would be a statement like '*p* is true' or 'Not-*p* is false': or 'It is true that *p* is true' or even simply '*p*'.

What then is an *implicit* claim that *p* is true? Well, there appear to be several ways of implicitly claiming that *p* is true. (1) One might implicitly claim that *p* is true by explicitly asserting that *x*, *y*, and *z* are true, where *x*, *y*, and *z* logically entail *p*. If one were explicitly to assert 'R. E. Lee was a Confederate general' and 'R. E. Lee was a famous general' and 'R. E. Lee was a great general', that could be taken as an implicit claim to the effect that 'R. E. Lee was a great and famous Confederate general'. (2) Or one might implicitly claim that *p* is true by explicitly asserting *x*, *y*, and *z*, where only people who hold that *p* is true can hold that *x*, *y*, and *z* are true. If one were explicitly to assert that 'R. E. Lee was a Confederate general' and 'R. E. Lee was a famous general' and 'R. E. Lee was a great general', that could be taken as an implicit claim to the effect that 'R. E. Lee was a human being'.¹³ (3) Most importantly, one might implicitly claim that *p* is true by *doing* action *A*, where the only people, or the only sensible people, who do *A* are people who believe *p*. Suppose that Jones, tired and

¹² For a fascinating argument against any claim that Jesus was mad, written by a practising clinical psychiatrist, see O. Q. Hyder, 'On the Mental Health of Jesus Christ', *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 5: 1 (Winter 1977), 3–12. Hyder's argument falters at one or two places, but he skilfully shows that we find no convincing evidence in the biblical materials that Jesus was delusional, paranoid, schizoid, or manic depressive, and lots of convincing evidence that he was an emotionally sound and healthy person.

¹³ The difference between (1) and (2) is perhaps not very great. In the case of (2), it is quite possible that the one who is making the implicit claim has never consciously formulated the belief. 'R. E. Lee was a human being', while that seems less probable for the one who is making the implicit claim that 'R. E. Lee was a great and famous Confederate general' in (1).

perspiring at the end of a long run, bends over and drinks from a drinking fountain. This might be taken as an implicit claim on Jones's part to the effect that 'The liquid emanating from this drinking fountain is potable'.

We are now able to return to the question whether Jesus implicitly claimed to be divine. This is a good question, to say the least. Much ink has been spilled over it, especially in the past two centuries. (Before that it would have been taken as virtually axiomatic that the answer is yes—indeed, that he *explicitly* claimed as much.) What is clear, and I think is quite beyond dispute, is that a literalistic and ahistorical reading of the Gospels, and especially the Fourth Gospel, strongly supports premise (1). Notice, for example, the following statements that are attributed to Jesus there (as well as, in some cases, the reactions of those who heard him):

But Jesus answered them, 'My Father is still working, and I also am working.' For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God. (John 5: 17–18)

The Father judges no one but has given all judgement to the Son, so that all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father. (John 5: 22)

'Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.' So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple. (John 8: 58–9)

'The Father and I are one.' The Jews took up stones again to stone him. (John 10: 30–1)

'The Father is in me and I am in the Father.' Then they tried to arrest him again, but he escaped from their hands. (John 10: 38–9)

'Have I been with you all this time. Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father'. (John 14: 9)

Now there appear to be four main attitudes that might be taken towards claims such as these. First, perhaps Jesus explicitly taught his own divinity, that is, perhaps words such as these constitute the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus. Second, perhaps Jesus only implicitly taught his own divinity. Third, perhaps Jesus said the things, or some of them, that have been taken to imply his own divinity in John's Gospel and elsewhere, but this is not the proper interpretation of those sayings. Those who defend this option (which corresponds to the third objection to the MBG argument mentioned in Section I) might argue as follows: the words from Jesus like those just cited should be interpreted as indicating something less than robust identity with God: perhaps Jesus was only indicating unity of purpose or will with the Father, or something of that sort. What Jesus *really meant*, so it might be said, is that he had a very special place in God's redemptive plan, or he had an extraordinarily strong desire to do God's bidding, or he felt such an intimate closeness to God that it was almost as if God were his own father.¹⁴ Fourth, perhaps Jesus said nothing about the matter, and the relevant

¹⁴ This is certainly the route that must be taken by all those who, like Jehovah's Witnesses, claim to accept the full theological authority of the Bible but reject the idea that Jesus was God incarnate.

statements attributed to him in the Gospels are inauthentic; they represent the beliefs not of Jesus but of the Christian church at the time that the Gospels were being written.

In the present chapter, I do not intend to defend the first option, but rather the second; thus I must argue against options three and four.

III

As noted in Section I, there appear to be four main criticisms that can be raised against the MBG argument. First, it presupposes that we know what it is like to be God. Second, it presupposes a naive world-view, one that allows for special divine acts in history. Third (the same point as the third option just discussed), it misinterprets what Jesus meant by the statements about himself that we find in the Gospels. Fourth, it presupposes a precritical view of the Gospels (and especially John), one that views them (and it) as straightforward history. Let us consider these objections in turn. (When we get to the fourth objection, we will also be replying to the fourth option noted at the end of Section III—that the high christological statements attributed to Jesus in the Gospels are inauthentic.)

As to the first criticism, it is not easy to understand precisely what MacKinnon had in mind. What he said was that the MBG argument presupposes that we know what it is like to be God. Of course it is true that we do not know what it is like to be God. But it is hard to grasp exactly why the MBG arguer must presuppose that we have that knowledge. Let's make a distinction between *knowing what it is like to be God* and *knowing what God is like*. It is surely true that it would border on blasphemy for those who use the MBG argument—or anybody else, for that matter—to presuppose that they know what it is like to be God. In the fullest sense, we don't even know what it is like to be another human being, or what it is like to be a bat.¹⁵

But is it possible for human beings to know what God is like? The answer to this, at least from a Christian perspective, is surely yes. One of the defining ideas of the Christian faith (as well as other versions of theism) is that God has been revealed, God has chosen to show us and tell us what God is like. God is self-revealed. We learn in the Scriptures, for example, that God is the creator, that God is all-powerful, that God is all-knowing, that God is to be worshipped and obeyed, that God is loving, that God works for the salvation of humankind, that God forgives our sins, etc.

It is surely true that the MBG argument presupposes that we know something of what God is like. If a person is morally despicable, that person is not God. If a person makes insane claims, that person is not God. But, as noted, Christians

¹⁵ See Thomas Nagel's article, 'What is it Like to Be a Bat?', in Douglas Hofstadter and Daniel Dennett (eds.), *The Mind's I* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1981), 391–403.

hold that we *do* know what God is like (to the extent that it has been revealed to us by God),¹⁶ and there seems to be nothing blasphemous or otherwise theologically untoward here. For the MBG argument to work, our knowledge of God need not be comprehensive; we need to know only a little about God. So the partialness of our knowledge of God need not constitute a problem for the MBG argument. But does the MBG argument presuppose that we know what it is like to be God? Certainly not. Or at least, it is not easy to see how. I conclude that MacKinnon's criticism does not damage the MBG argument.

As to the second criticism. Hick argues that the MBG argument presupposes a pre-critical world view, one in which special divine acts in human history are allowable. But there is something slightly off-target about this criticism: Hick's objection appears to be directed more against the idea of incarnation as such than against the MBG argument in favour of the incarnation. Hick is right that the very idea of incarnation—of God becoming a human being—presupposes divine interventions in human history. This is why Deists must deny not only all miracles, epiphanies, visions from God, and prophetic messages from God, but all incarnations as well.

And it is true that if the very idea of incarnation is discredited, then the MBG argument can hardly constitute a successful argument in favour of incarnation. Still, since Hick's criticism is not directed against the MBG argument *per se*, and especially since many contemporary Christian philosophers have defended the adequacy of theism versus Deism (i.e. of the possibility of special divine acts),¹⁷ I will discuss this matter no further here. (An atheist could similarly argue that belief in incarnation is irrational because belief in *God* is outmoded, but again that would not count as an objection to the MBG argument itself.)

As to the third objection, the violent reactions of Jesus' enemies in the texts cited (and in many other texts where Jesus speaks about himself, some from the Synoptics) seem to preclude any such minimalist interpretation as, 'Jesus just meant that he felt extraordinarily close to God'. As well as the reactions mentioned in the above citations, note the argument of the chief priests at John's trial account: 'We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God' (John 19: 7). It would hardly have constituted an offence worthy of arrest and execution had Jesus simply been declaring his own unity of purpose or will with the Father, or claiming to have a special place in God's plan. Odd, maybe; egotistical, maybe; but hardly blasphemous. Notice further that Jesus did not step in to correct the impression his enemies apparently gained from hearing his words.

¹⁶ To avoid any hint of circularity (since Christians claim that the fullest revelation of God's nature is Christ), we could even limit our knowledge of God to what can be known about God apart from Christ. We could limit ourselves to what has been revealed about God in the natural order, or in the OT Law, or in the words of the prophets.

¹⁷ Including myself in ch. 1 of my *Risen Indeed: Making Sense of the Resurrection* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993).

As noted earlier, the fourth criticism—that the MBG argument presupposes a precritical view of the Gospels and especially John as straightforward history—is the really important one. This criticism amounts to a denial of premise (1) of the MBG argument. Is premise (1) true?

It is a commonplace of much contemporary New Testament scholarship that words such as those cited above from the Fourth Gospel do not constitute the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus. These statements, it is said, and the many other statements in the New Testament that imply or seem to imply the divinity of Jesus, tell us more about the faith of the early church at the time the Gospels were being written or were receiving final form than they do about the actual teachings of Jesus. Later Christians wrongly attributed these words to Jesus as part of their theological programme. Thus—so a critic of the MBG argument will argue—the MBG argument for the incarnation cannot even get going. Its first premise is false; Jesus never claimed—explicitly or implicitly—to be divine.

IV

Is this a good objection? Well, there is much in the neighbourhood that is beyond reproach. It is true that the Gospels are statements of faith with definite theological agendas rather than ‘facts-only’ biographies of Jesus. (The writer of John even admits as much—see John 20: 31.) It is also almost certainly true that John’s Gospel was the last canonical gospel written, and thus the furthest removed from the events it records. But it is a long way from these sensible admissions about the Gospels to the point that none of the sayings of Jesus that imply or seem to imply his own divinity can be authentic. Let us see what can be said on behalf of the historical reliability of some of the statements Jesus makes about himself in the Gospels, especially in the Synoptics. I will *not* presuppose the view that the evangelists were offering straightforward, theologically neutral history. Moreover, I take it as given that the church translated, edited, rearranged, recontextualised, paraphrased, abbreviated, and expanded the sayings of Jesus. Furthermore, since the NT was written in Greek, then assuming that Jesus spoke and taught in Aramaic, precisely *none* of the sayings attributed to Jesus in the Gospels constitute his *ipsissima verba* (except possibly those few sayings that are cited in Aramaic).

Again, premise (1) of the MBG argument says:

(1) Jesus claimed, either explicitly or implicitly, to be divine.

Is this true? I am going to argue that it is. But let me first note three things that I am not claiming. First, I am not claiming that Jesus went about saying ‘I am God’ or making any sort of *explicit* claim to status as deity. The radical monotheism to which first-century Judaism was committed, in all its various forms, made anything like that impossible. Second, I am not claiming that Jesus’

consciousness of his divinity was expressed by him in the language of later creedal orthodoxy: for example, 'truly divine and truly human', 'of one substance with the Father', 'Second Person of the Blessed Trinity', etc. Third, I am not claiming to be able to psychoanalyse Jesus. As N. T. Wright points out, historians are frequently concerned with the motivation and self-understanding of the figures they write about, especially as they find expression in what these figures can sensibly be concluded to have said and done, and that is what I am doing here.¹⁸

My claim is that by his words and deeds, Jesus implicitly saw or experienced himself as divine, as having a unique relationship of divine sonship to God. This does not necessarily mean that Jesus, throughout his life or even throughout his ministry, ever formulated or expressed the idea precisely in language, although I hold that at some point he was able to do so. I suspect his sense of mission and identity was shaped and confirmed by various crucial events during his ministry, for example, the baptism, temptation, transfiguration, and passion. It is possible to have a vague and inchoate awareness of something that one is able only later to capture in words. So the question, 'Did Jesus know that he was God?' is ill-formed. Jesus surely did not confuse himself with God the Father to whom he prayed. But did he implicitly claim to be divine or to have divine prerogatives? Did he implicitly claim to have a unique relationship to the Father which in effect placed him on a par with God? I believe the answer to these questions is yes. (Again, my argument will not presuppose a naive and ahistorical reading of the Gospels.)

How do we go about deciding what someone believes or implicitly claims? Well, the most obvious way to find out whether Jones believes *p* is to ask her or wait till she expresses some sort of epistemic attitude toward *p* (assertion, denial, certainty, doubt, uncertainty, etc.). And in cases where there is no good reason to doubt Jones's word, this will normally be convincing evidence. In other cases, we might have to listen to other things that Jones says or watch things that she does in order to see if any of them constitute convincing evidence that Jones implicitly claims that *p* (or not-*p*) is true. It is possible, as noted above, for a person to believe that *p* is true without ever having formulated '*p*' as a conscious belief. There are probably people who walk to work every day who believe, without ever having consciously formulated the belief, that 'the pavement will hold me up'.

I am going to present my argument in two stages. The first will presuppose the basic correctness of the methods and conclusions of some of the most radical of biblical critics.¹⁹ Its aim is to open the door to the *possibility* of showing, even on the methods of people like Bultmann, Perrin, and the members of the Jesus Seminar, that Jesus implicitly taught his own divinity. The second stage (which

¹⁸ N. T. Wright, 'Jesus and the Identity of God', *Ex Auditu* 14 (1998), 51.

¹⁹ Here I indicate my indebtedness to Royce Gordon Gruenler, who follows a similar methodology in his *New Approaches to Jesus and the Gospels: A Phenomenological and Exegetical Study of Synoptic Christology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1982), esp. 19–108.

contains five sub-arguments) will try to confirm the point that Jesus *actually did* this very thing. At this second stage, I will continue to eschew any naive or ahistorical view of the Gospels, but will no longer consider myself limited by the views of the radical critics.

In this first stage of my argument, I want simply (1) to point out a fact about early Christian history that is becoming clearer and clearer, even if radical methods of criticism are employed, namely, that *worship of Jesus* was a very ancient phenomenon in the Christian community; and (2) to ask why this fact is so. As to the fact that worship of Jesus was primitive in the Christian community, Richard Bauckham says: 'The prevalence and centrality of the worship of Jesus in early Christianity from an early date has frequently been underestimated. . . . In the earliest Christian community Jesus was already understood to be risen and exalted to God's right hand in heaven, active in the community by his Spirit, and coming in the future as ruler and judge of the world.'²⁰

Notice that prayers addressed to Jesus can be found from the earliest times. It is significant that Greek-speaking churches preserved in Aramaic the cry *Maranatha* ('Our Lord, come!') (1 Cor. 16: 22; Didache 10: 6); this shows its primitive origin. Personal prayers to Jesus seem to have been commonplace (2 Cor. 12: 8; 1 Thess. 3: 11–13; 2 Thess. 2: 16–17; 3: 5, 16; Acts 1: 24; 7: 59–60). There were also doxologies addressed to Christ, or to Christ and the Father together, although most appear in relatively late NT texts (2 Tim. 4: 18; 2 Pet. 3: 18; Rev. 1: 5–6, 13; cf. 7: 10). In earlier texts, doxologies with the phrase 'through Jesus Christ' appear (Rom. 16: 27; cf. 2 Cor. 1: 20). Hymns of praise to Christ were also common (Phil. 2: 6–11; 1 Tim. 3: 16; cf. Eph. 5: 19; Col. 3: 16).²¹

In a recent paper, L. W. Hurtado argues that a careful reading of Matthew and Mark reveals that there was vigorous Jewish opposition in the pre-70 period to Jewish-Christian worship of Jesus.²² Bauckham claims that the transition from prayers to Jesus, thanks-giving to Jesus, and reverence for Jesus to actual *worship* of Jesus (cf. Acts 13: 2) was a smooth and perhaps not even conscious process; there is no evidence, he says, of anybody in the earliest Christian community contesting it. He concludes that 'the role which Jesus played in the Christian religion from the beginning was such as to cause him to be treated as God in worship'.²³

²⁰ R. Bauckham, 'Jesus, Worship of', *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), iii. 812. See also L. W. Hurtado, 'Pre-70 C.E. Jewish Opposition to Christ Devotion', *JTS* 50: 1 (April 1999), 36.

²¹ The hymn from Phil. 2. in particular, witnesses to the way in which early Christians viewed the crucified and exalted Jesus as meriting the adoration of the universe. In *The Changing Faces of Jesus* (London: Penguin, 2000). Geza Vermes has recently suggested that a later, anonymous copyist inserted this hymn into the text of the letter (pp. 78–9)—a proposal which enjoys no support from the New Testament MS evidence.

²² Hurtado, 'Pre-70 C.E. Jewish Opposition', 5–6, 10.

²³ 'Jesus, Worship of', 815.

All this despite the fact that the earliest Christians were Jews, people whose rigid monotheism and antipathy to worship of any other gods besides the Lord was perhaps their defining religious characteristic. Indeed, the New Testament church did not see itself as backing away from monotheism; in 1 Corinthians 8: 4–6 Paul accepts the classic *Shema* of Judaism (Deut. 6: 4), but interprets the monotheism of the Christian community as including the lordship of Jesus. And in the Book of Revelation, Jesus is considered worthy of divine worship because worship of Jesus can be included in worship of the one God (Rev. 5: 8–12). Worship of Jesus *was* worship of (not a competitor to God but) God.

Next, a question: if Bauckham is correct that worship of Jesus was primitive in the Christian community, *why* is this the case? There appear to be two main possibilities. First, perhaps the early church worshipped Jesus because social, economic, liturgical, polemical, or other sorts of needs and pressures that the early Christians faced pushed them in that direction. That is, the early church made up the idea that Jesus was divine. Second, perhaps they worshipped Jesus at least in part because Jesus himself implicitly encouraged, instructed, or allowed them to do so.²⁴ That is, Jesus himself was conscious of being divine and implicitly communicated that fact, by his words and deeds, to his followers.

Interestingly, the Synoptic Gospels, and especially Matthew, opt for the second alternative. That does not settle the case, because for now we are accepting the methodology and conclusions of some of the radical critics, and many of them regard Matthew's Gospel as an unreliable guide to the life of Jesus. Still, Matthew commonly uses one or another form of the word *proskynesis* (obeisance, prostration before someone in worship) in relation to Jesus. Jesus is worshipped by the wise men from the East (2: 2, 11), by the disciples in the boat (14: 33), by Mary Magdalene and the other Mary after the resurrection (28: 9), and by the eleven disciples on the mountain (28: 17). Bauckham argues that 'Matthew's consistent use of the word *proskynein* and his emphasis on the point show that he intends a kind of reverence which, paid to any other human, he would have regarded as idolatrous'.²⁵

Let's now look at a few Synoptic texts that are accepted as authentic by people like Bultmann, Perrin, and the members of the Jesus Seminar. Even in limiting ourselves in that way, I believe a probable case can be made that Jesus implicitly taught his own divinity.

But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you. (Luke 11: 20: par. Matt. 12:28)

Bultmann enthusiastically accepted the authenticity of this statement from Jesus.²⁶ In it, Jesus is clearly claiming to be exhibiting in his exorcisms the

²⁴ I say 'at least in part' since Jesus' resurrection from the dead and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (both of which need, of course, to be independently investigated) also fed into the new faith and practice of early Christians.

²⁵ 'Jesus, Worship of', 813.

²⁶ R. Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, trans, John Marsh (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 162.

eschatological power of the finger of God. Note the parallel to Exodus 8: 19, where the Egyptian magicians confess their inability to duplicate the plague of gnats, and declare, 'This is the finger of God.' Jesus is claiming to be acting as the agent through which the reign of God, with all God's power, enters history.

On a different vein, notice:

Listen to me, all of you, and understand; there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile. (Mark 7: 14–15; par. Matt. 15: 10–11; Thomas 14: 5)

This text, which Perrin accepts as authentic²⁷ and which the Jesus Seminar rates pink ('Jesus probably said something like this'²⁸), is remarkable in the authority that Jesus is taking upon himself to relativize and de-emphasize Jewish dietary law. Jesus is in effect abolishing the divinely given food laws; that is, he is dismantling one of the major barriers between Jews and Gentiles that God was understood to have erected. Jesus is saying that in the light of his own presence in the world, a radically new attitude toward religion is required. Along the same lines, notice this statement (again coloured pink by the Jesus Seminar):

The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is Lord even of the sabbath. (Mark 2: 27–8; par. Matt. 12: 8; Luke 6: 5)

Here again Jesus is taking upon himself the authority to reinterpret the teachings of Moses in a radically new way. Even more dramatically, notice this text (accepted as authentic by Perrin and coloured pink by the Jesus Seminar):

Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead (Matt. 8: 22; par. Luke 9: 59)

where Jesus is clearly opposing and correcting the Mosaic Law. Proper burial, especially of one's relatives, was one of the most sacred duties in Palestinian Judaism (cf. Gen. 50: 5–6; Lev. 21: 2–3; Tobit 4: 3); this duty took precedence over study of the Torah, Temple service, circumcision rites, and even reciting the *Shema* (Megillah, 3b; Berakath 3: 1). Accordingly, Jesus was declaring that the need for people immediately and unconditionally to become his disciples took precedence even over the solemn responsibility to bury one's own father.

It would be helpful to ask at this point what sort of first-century Jew would take upon himself the authority to set aside requirements of the Mosaic law and replace them with his own teachings? It seems that Jesus' view of his own

²⁷ N. Perrin. *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (London: SCM Press; New York: Harper & Row, 1967). 149–50.

²⁸ Robert Funk *et al.*, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 36, 69. This work in collaboration came from the Jesus Seminar, a group of biblical scholars led by R. Funk and J. D. Crossan, who met mainly in Sonoma (California) and voted on the authenticity of the Gospel material: a red bead for what sounded to them 'Definitely from Jesus', a pink bead for 'May well be', a grey for 'Doubtful', and a black for 'Definitely not'.

authority was such that he took the duty to follow him as a far more urgent task than burying one's father. Gruenler pointedly asks, 'Who could possibly make such an offensive and insensitive statement except one who is absolutely convinced that following him is worth more than anything else in the world?'²⁹ In other words, it is probable that Jesus considered himself to be divinely authoritative.

Notice also the new attitude toward enemies, sins, and the forgiveness of sins that Jesus introduced. (I am not here speaking of Jesus' taking upon himself the authority to forgive sins; we shall discuss that point later.) Most famously, note:

You have heard that it was said, 'you shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you'. (Matt. 5: 43–4; par. Luke 6: 27, 35)

The 'love your enemies' piece of this text is coloured red by the Jesus Seminar; they are suspicious of the rest of it (it is either black or gray); but Perrin accepts the whole antithesis as authentic. The point is that those who were once considered unforgivable enemies (Gentiles, outcasts, sinners, etc.) are now, in the light of the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God in Jesus, seen as recipients of God's love and forgiveness, and as worthy participants in table-fellowship in the kingdom of God. Jesus is again apparently taking upon himself the authority to reorder religious life, in this case around the principles of love and forgiveness. We see this same point more fully and dramatically in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15: 11–32; coloured pink by the Jesus Seminar). Gruenler comments: 'Only one who is conscious of exercising divine privileges (or is mad) could assume the right to proclaim the eschatological presence of the forgiveness of sins with such authority. . . . [Jesus] is consciously speaking as the voice of God on matters that belong only to God, and accordingly is creating a new and decisive Christology which far exceeds in claim to authority the messianic models of Judaism.'³⁰ Jesus' idea seems to have been that salvation has arrived in his own person and ministry, that salvation for humans is to be understood in terms of his own person and mission, and that he can speak with divine authority. Jesus had an extraordinarily high opinion of himself and his mission.

Notice finally the parable of the wicked tenants in Mark 12: 1–9 (coloured gray by the Jesus Seminar but pink in the *Gospel of Thomas* (65: 1–7)).³¹ The owner of the vineyard unsuccessfully sends two employees to collect the harvest, and then finally sends his son, whom the tenants recognize as the son and heir, and then murder him. Clearly, the son in the parable allegorically stands

²⁹ *New Approaches to Jesus and the Gospels*. 61.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 46.

³¹ As they themselves admit in their commentary on this text, the members of the Seminar were bothered by the allegorical aspect of the parable in its Synoptic versions, with its obvious application to Jesus (= the son) himself. Funk *et al.* *Five Gospels*, 101.

for Jesus himself, who is different from and superior to God's previous emissaries (the prophets), and who is indeed God's son and heir.

Now I am not claiming that Bultmann, Perrin, Funk, Crossan, *et al.* accept my interpretations of these texts. Doubtless they do not. My claim is simply that they consider these statements from Jesus to be authentic or probably authentic, and that from these texts alone a very high Christology can be inferred.³² That is, a probable case can be made that Jesus implicitly taught his own divinity. Perhaps then one reason for the existence of worship of Jesus in the primitive Christian community is that Jesus himself expected and accepted it.

V

Let me now proceed to the second stage of my argument that premise (1) is true, that Jesus implicitly taught his own divinity. By the use of five sub-arguments, I will try to prove not just the possibility that Jesus implicitly taught his own divinity, but its actuality. Again, I will strive to avoid ahistorical use of the Gospel texts, but I will no longer limit myself to texts accepted as authentic by radical critics. Some of the sub-arguments will at this point sound familiar, but the slightly more relaxed methodology just mentioned will allow some new points to be made.

Let me then discuss five reasons why Jesus can be said to have implicitly claimed to be divine. No one reason constitutes, in and of itself, a convincing argument. There is no 'smoking gun' on this issue. What we do find are various considerations which together, and together with points already made, constitute a powerful cumulative case argument in favour of premise (1). The best interpretation of the five considerations that I am about to discuss—so I am arguing—is that Jesus did indeed implicitly view himself as divine.

First, Jesus assumed for himself the divine prerogative to forgive sins (see Mark 2: 5, 10; Luke 7: 48). Now, all human beings as moral agents own the prerogative to forgive sins *that have been committed against them*, but only God (or God incarnate) can *forgive sins*. Some have objected to this point. John Hick, for

³² Beyond question, the interpretation of all these texts, especially those that bear on the Jewish law, is controversial. Vermes for example interprets the sayings about the sabbath, the dietary laws, and the antitheses ('but I say to you . . .') as entailing no high claims for Jesus' personal identity; they are, he says, the kinds of statements that could have been made by Jewish teachers of his time (*Changing Faces of Jesus*, 196–7). Yet some of the evidence to which Vermes points comes from rabbis who lived one or two centuries later. Besides, the more one portrays Jesus as religiously 'normal' and not scandalously offensive, the more puzzling becomes the opposition that led to his crucifixion. The present chapter attempts to sketch the various steps in the MBG argument. For a full discussion of the key texts about Jesus and the Jewish law, see the work of such scholars as J. D. G. Dunn, E. P. Sanders, and the earlier Vermes, as well as the data supplied by commentaries on Matthew, Mark, and Luke from such writers as J. A. Fitzmyer, R. A. Guelich, D. Hagner, and J. Nolland.

example, argues that Jesus did not usurp God's prerogatives, but only 'pronounced forgiveness, which is not the prerogative of God, but of the priesthood'.³³ But this is hardly a convincing argument. For one thing, it concedes part of the point at issue, namely, that Jesus was usurping prerogatives that were not his. He was a layman, not of the priestly tribe, and was forgiving sins outside what were understood to be the divinely established means of obtaining forgiveness. More importantly, there are several texts that cannot be reconciled with Hick's argument. Note the story of the healing of the paralytic in Mark 2: 1–12. There is no evidence here on the part of the paralytic of any of the religious acts normally requisite for forgiveness—no sorrow for his sins, confession, repentance, sacrificial acts at the temple, etc. This is surely the reason the scribes were so incensed when Jesus said to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven'. They said: 'Why does this fellow speak in this way? Who can forgive sins but God alone?' In other words, the violent reaction of the scribes belies Hick's interpretation of such texts.

Second, the intimate, almost blasphemous way Jesus addressed God (usually translated 'Abba, Father!'—something analogous to our English expression 'Papa') indicates at least a uniquely close relationship to God. I suspect the amazement caused by this novel way of speaking to God—whose name was sacred to first-century Jews—was the reason that the church remembered and imitated it (Rom. 8: 15; Gal. 4: 6). Hick also objects to this point. 'Abba' was fairly commonly used of God in first-century Judaism, he claims, and simply meant 'father'; while Jesus certainly sensed that God was his Heavenly Father, this had nothing to do with incarnation.³⁴ But other scholars deny that there are any Jewish parallels to referring to God in prayer the way Jesus does; nobody has ever produced a convincing example of *Abba* being used of God in pre-Christian, first-century Judaism.³⁵ The argument that Jesus' use of *Abba* shows a consciousness on his part of a unique position in relation to God stands. Jesus very probably thought of himself as God's special son.³⁶

³³ J. Hick. *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* (London: SCM Press, 1993), 32. Here Hick quotes E. P. Sanders. *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 240.

³⁴ *Metaphor of God Incarnate*, 31, Hick is following the lead of James Barr at this point. See Barr's 'Abba Isn't "Daddy"', *JTS* 39 (1988), 28–47, and 'Abba, Father', *Theology* 91 (1988): 173–9. For a response to Barr, see G. D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995), 408–12.

³⁵ Thus Joachim Jeremias: 'Nowhere in the literature of the prayers of ancient Judaism . . . is this invocation of God as *Abba* to be found, neither in the liturgical nor in the informal prayers' J. Jeremias, *The Central Message of the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1965), 19. See also G. O'Collins. *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 60–2, and J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), ii. 358–9, both of whom support Jeremias's conclusion.

³⁶ Ben Witherington sensibly discusses all the arguments and evidence, and supports the notion that Jesus' use of *Abba* in prayer was unique and indicated a relationship of intimacy with the Father. See his *Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 215–21.

Third, Jesus spoke ‘with authority’, not citing sources or precedents of famous rabbis. He was no mere prophet or religious teacher (as is so often asserted about him today); no such person would have acted and spoken with such independence of the Mosaic law as Jesus did. Note the way he quotes, and then corrects, the Mosaic teaching about divorce in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt, 5: 31–2: cf, Mark 10: 2–12). Jesus spoke, not as if he were speaking *on behalf of God* (he did not say, as the prophets had done, ‘Thus says the Lord’), but *as if he were divine*, delivering the truth to human beings. As J. A. T. Robinson said, ‘This is epitomized in his characteristic and distinctive form of address, “Amen, I say to you” ... While a pious Jew concluded his prayer with an “Amen” ... Jesus prefaces his words with an “Amen”, thus identifying God with what he would say.’³⁷ As Raymond Brown points out, nowhere in the Gospels does it say anything like, ‘The word of God came to Jesus.’ The idea instead seems to have been that he already had or even (in John’s terminology) *was* the word.³⁸ His words are true and binding because of his own personal position and authority; he is in a position to give the Law’s true meaning, to reveal God’s will.

Ernst Käsemann argues that Jesus’ ‘but I say to you’ language ‘embodies a claim to an authority which rivals and challenges that of Moses’.³⁹ The fact that Jesus claimed Moses-like authority, an authority to supervene all other authorities, has been noticed, and reacted to negatively, by contemporary Jewish scholars who write about Jesus. For example, Schalom Ben-Chorin says: ‘The sense of the unique, absolute authority that is evident from [Jesus’] way of acting remains deeply problematic for the Jewish view of Jesus.’⁴⁰ And Jacob Neusner states⁴¹ that Jesus’ attitude toward the Torah makes him want to ask: ‘Who do you think you are? God?’⁴² It is highly significant that Jesus assumed for himself the authority to reinterpret and even overrule the OT Law (see Matt. 5: 21–48; Mark 2: 23–8), again something no mere human being could do. Jesus considered his words as permanent and indestructible (Mark 13: 31). In short, Jesus did not think of himself as just another prophetic spokesperson for God: he spoke as if he were divine.

Fourth, even in the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus said things that can sensibly be interpreted as implicit claims to divinity. I see no way of ruling out as inauthentic Jesus’ claim to be ‘the Christ, the Son of the Blessed’ (Mark 14: 61–2), which the high priest took to be blasphemy. Notice finally this claim, the so-called ‘Johannine thunderbolt’, which seems a kind of bridge from the Christology of the

³⁷ Robinson, *Can We Trust the New Testament?*, 104.

³⁸ R. Brown, ‘Did Jesus Know He Was God?’, *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 15 (1988): 77.

³⁹ E. Käsemann, ‘The Problem of the Historical Jesus’, in id., *Essays on New Testament Themes* (Naperville, Ill.: Allenson, 1964), 37.

⁴⁰ S. Ben-Chorin, *Jesus in Judaism* (Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus, 1970). 41. cited in Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 241.

⁴¹ In an interview about his book, *A Rabbi Talks With Jesus: An Intermillennial, Interfaith Exchange* (New York: Doubleday, 1993).

⁴² Cited in Wright, ‘Jesus and the Identity of God’, 22.

Synoptics to the Christology of the Fourth Gospel: 'All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him' (Matt. 11: 27).⁴³ Here Jesus seems to be claiming to be the Son of God in a unique and exclusive sense, the only true and authoritative revelation of the Father.

Fifth, Jesus, the coming 'Son of Man', implicitly made two dramatic claims: first, that our relationship to him would determine our final status before God; second, that he himself would be the judge of all human beings at the end of history.⁴⁴ Both seem clearly to be claims to be standing in a divine role.⁴⁵

So Jesus apparently saw himself as having the right to act as God and do what God appropriately does. The argument in favour of this point does not depend on ahistorical readings of the Gospels, nor on the claim that the sayings cited from the Fourth Gospel above come directly from Jesus (though I believe that in substance they do).⁴⁶ Jesus implicitly claimed divine status. That is the best interpretation of the four considerations I have been citing. Accordingly, a strong case can be made that premise (1) of the MBG argument is true.

VI

Where then do we stand? Is the MBG argument a successful argument, or not? Can it be used as a convincing piece of Christian apologetics (as Lewis clearly thought it could), or not? The conclusion we reached earlier is that the argument, as outlined in steps (1)–(8), is valid. But of course that does not show much. The argument:

- (13) Everybody in Tibet believes in Jesus;
- (14) Bertrand Russell lives in Tibet;
- (15) Therefore Bertrand Russell believes in Jesus

is also a valid argument, but is obviously a rhetorically useless device for providing rational support for its conclusion.

⁴³ Witherington argues convincingly that these words are authentic. See *Christology of Jesus*, 221–8.

⁴⁴ See O'Collins, *Christology*, 60–2.

⁴⁵ There is a curious tribute to this argument from an unexpected source in George W. E. Nickelsburg's entry, 'Son of Man', in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), vi. 149. He argues that Jesus could not have implied that he was the 'Son of Man', because that would mean (what Nickelsburg cannot accept) that he went around claiming to be the eschatological judge of all.

⁴⁶ A brief note about the Christology of the Fourth Gospel: it is often pointed out that alongside the texts such as those cited above that seem to indicate Jesus' oneness with God and equality with the Father, there are texts that point toward Jesus' dependence on the Father, who is greater than he (see 7: 16; 5: 19, 30–1; 14: 28). My only comment is that the best way to keep both sorts of texts theologically in view is the classic doctrine of the incarnation, where Jesus is both 'fully divine' and 'begotten of the Father'.

But is the argument *sound* (i.e. valid plus true premises)? Well, as we have seen, premise (2) is virtually beyond reproach; and while premises (3), (4), and (5) can be disputed, an excellent case can also be made for their truth. But premise (1), which I take to be the crux of the argument, not only can be but frequently is disputed, even by some who believe in the incarnation. I take it that the perceived weakness of premise (1) is the most important reason why the MBG argument has not often been used or defended by Christian theologians and exegetes (as opposed to a few apologists) since Lewis. But, as we have also seen, a strong (and, in my view, convincing) case can also be made in favour of premise (1), a case that does not depend on viewing the Gospels ahistorically. The MBG argument also seems immune to such informal fallacies as equivocation, question-begging, arguing in a circle, etc.

Whether the MBG argument is a successful argument accordingly depends on what 'success' for an argument amounts to. That is, it depends on what is taken to be the goal, purpose, or aim of the argument. And of course there are many quite different ways of envisioning the goal or purpose of the MBG argument (or indeed of any deductive argument). Suppose the goal of the MBG argument were *to convince all nonbelievers in the incarnation of Jesus to believe in it* or *to constitute an argument that rationally should convince all nonbelievers in the incarnation of Jesus to believe in it*. Then one must doubt that the MBG argument can count as successful. Few nonbelievers will be converted by it; no matter how hard we argue for the truth of premise (1) (or even premises (3), (4), or (5)), the nonbeliever can go on disputing it (or them). Indeed, it seems a nonbeliever in the incarnation can always say something like this: 'I do not know whether Jesus was mad, bad, honestly mistaken, or never said or implied that he was divine—after all, that was twenty centuries ago, and by now it's hard to tell—but one thing I do know is that he was not divine.'

But suppose the aim of the MBG argument is *to demonstrate the truth of the incarnation of Jesus* or (see the very end of Section I, above) *to demonstrate the rationality of belief in the incarnation of Jesus*. If one of these constitutes the true aim or goal of the MBG argument, then it will not matter whether nonbelievers in the incarnation can rationally reject one or another of the argument's premises.

My own view is that the last goal mentioned—to demonstrate the rationality of belief in the incarnation of Jesus—is the proper goal or aim of the MBG argument. And given what we have concluded in this chapter, I believe it succeeds in doing that very thing. Accordingly, the MBG argument can constitute a powerful piece of Christian apologetics.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ I would like to thank C. Stephen Evans, Daniel Howard-Snyder, Brian Leftow, Carey Newman, Gerald O'Collins, SJ, Alan Padgett, Dale Tuggy, and an anonymous referee from Oxford University Press for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this chapter.

9

Was Jesus Mad, Bad, or God? . . . or Merely Mistaken?*

Daniel Howard-Snyder

Apparently some of the Church Fathers argued for the divinity of Jesus on the grounds that if his claim to divinity was false, then he was a bad man; for if he was not divine, then either he was lying about who he was or he was mad, neither of which is true. This argument—sometimes called the *Mad, Bad, or God Argument*, or *MBG*, for short—is heard from contemporary Christian apologists in one form or another, perhaps most notably from C. S. Lewis:

I am trying to prevent anyone from saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: “I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.” That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. . . .

We are faced, then, with a frightening alternative. This man we are talking about either was (and is) just what He said or else a lunatic, or something worse. Now it seems to me obvious that He was neither a lunatic nor a fiend; and consequently, however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that He was and is God. God has landed on this enemy-occupied world in human form.¹

In this paper, I aim to assess the MBG argument. In section 1, I present a version of it that seems most perspicuous to me, followed by several stage-setting remarks, including two ground rules for assessing it. In section 2, I present the dwindling probabilities objection, a variation on an objection that Alvin Plan-

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¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: MacMillan, 1952, revised ed), 55–6.

tinga uses against traditional historical arguments for the great truths of the gospel.² In section 3, I drop the probabilistic machinery and grant every premise of the MBG argument but one, the premise that denies that Jesus was merely mistaken in his claim to divinity. I then assess the most compelling defenses of that denial and conclude that they fail. In section 4, I argue that we—or, at any rate, those who share my epistemic situation vis-à-vis that premise—should suspend judgment about it.

1. THE MBG ARGUMENT

The version of the MBG argument that I am interested in is this:

1. Jesus claimed, explicitly or implicitly, to be divine.³
2. Either Jesus was right or he was wrong.
3. If he was wrong, then either
 - (a.) he believed he was wrong and he was lying, or
 - (b.) he did not believe he was wrong but he was institutionalizable, or
 - (c.) he did not believe he was wrong and he was not institutionalizable; rather, he was merely mistaken.
4. He was not lying, i.e. a is false.
5. He was not institutionalizable, i.e. b is false.
6. He was not merely mistaken, i.e. c is false.
7. So, he was right, i.e. Jesus was, and presumably still is, divine.

Let me make four preliminary observations about this argument.

First, although the argument is deductively valid, its proponents affirm the main premises—1, 4, 5, and 6—on probabilistic grounds. In no small part, these grounds have to do with the New Testament texts, especially their reliability vis-à-vis the claims, character, and conduct of Jesus. The proponents of the MBG argument wisely avoid insisting on the divine authority of these texts in the context of defending its premises; if one would have to endorse their divine authority in order to accept the proffered grounds for affirming the main premises, the argument would lose much of its interest. And it certainly is not presented that way by its proponents. Rather, its proponents insist that, on

² See Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 268–80.

³ On the difference between explicitly claiming that *p* and implicitly claiming that *p* see Stephen Davis, “Was Jesus Mad, Bad, or God?” *The Incarnation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), eds S. Davis, D. Kendall, G. O’Collins, 221–45. Roughly, the idea is this. To explicitly claim that *p* is to sincerely assert ‘*p*’ or ‘*p* is true’ or ‘not-*p* is false’ and the like. One can implicitly claim that *p*, however, by explicitly claiming several things that entail *p*, or by explicitly claiming several things that only people who think *p* is true would explicitly claim, or by performing some action where the only people, or the only sensible people, who perform such actions believe *p*.

the basis of historical scholarship alone, the information gleaned from the New Testament, along with other relevant information, makes it likely that the main premises are true. So, the first ground rule is this: While considering what might be offered on behalf of the premises of the MBG argument (and while assessing objections to them, for that matter), we are not allowed to treat the biblical texts as divinely authoritative.

Second, premise 1 assumes that Jesus existed. I take it that the probability of this assumption, on the relevant information, is 1, or as close to 1 as to make no difference. I will also assume that *if* Jesus claimed to be divine, he claimed to be divine in a robust sense, one that a run-of-the-mill first-century orthodox Jew would attribute only to God. Those familiar with discussions of the MBG argument will notice that I have just ruled out the so-called *myth* and *guru* options.⁴ In doing so, I mean to display my prejudice that they are unworthy of serious consideration.

Third, most proponents of the argument present it as a trilemma: mad, bad, or God... Lord, liar, or lunatic. Hence the popular name of the argument, *the Trilemma*. My version is an explicit quadrilemma: mad, bad, God, or neither mad nor bad, but merely mistaken. By formulating the argument in this way I mean to display my conviction that the merely mistaken option has been unduly neglected by the proponents of the argument.

Fourth, consider the following claim by Stephen Davis, a proponent of the argument: “the MBG argument, properly understood, can establish the rationality of belief in the incarnation of Jesus”.⁵ Davis does not mean to suggest that the MBG argument is the only or even the best argument for the divinity of Jesus; indeed, he does not even mean to imply that the rationality of belief in His divinity must find its source in argument at all. Rather, I take it, Davis means to claim that the MBG argument, properly understood, can be an *independent* and *sufficient* evidential basis for rational belief in the divinity of Jesus. What do I mean by “independent” here? I mean this. There are several lines of evidence that might enter into an assessment of the claim that Jesus was divine. His pre-resurrection miracles, his fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, and his resurrection have, among other things, been emphasized by apologists. When I say that the MBG argument can be independent evidence for the divinity of Jesus, I mean that the MBG argument can be evidence for the divinity of Jesus *absent considerations such as these*. If we approach the argument in this way (as I shall), then we have a second ground rule for assessing it: While considering what might

⁴ The myth option is that Jesus never existed; the guru option is that Jesus claimed to be divine alright, but the divinity to which he laid claim was something every human being has in himself or herself, a “spark of the divine” or some such new-ageish thing.

⁵ Stephen Davis, “Was Jesus Mad, Bad, or God?” *The Incarnation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 223 and 245. Presumably, Davis means by “the incarnation of Jesus” the *divinity* of Jesus.

be offered on behalf of the premises of the MBG argument (and while assessing objections to them, for that matter), we are not allowed to appeal to independent evidence for Jesus' divinity.

At the outset, let me emphasize that even if the MBG argument fails to establish the rationality of belief in the divinity of Jesus, the considerations it points to might still play a part in a cumulative case for his divinity. In this paper, however, I am exclusively concerned with the argument as *independent* evidence that is *sufficient* to establish rational belief in the divinity of Jesus.

I turn now to the first objection. (Readers who have no interest in the probability calculus may turn directly to the second objection in section 3.)

2. DWINDLING PROBABILITIES

Suppose that the proper way to evaluate a probabilistic case for a proposition is to apply the probability calculus to our evidence for it. In the present case, that would involve determining the probability of

D. Jesus was (is) divine,

given our "background knowledge," which is what we take for granted, call it *K*. So the goal is to determine the probability of D given K, i.e. $P(D/K)$. Toward that end, the MBG argument offers us as evidence the conjunction of its four main premises:

C. Jesus claimed, explicitly or implicitly, to be divine.

\sim L. He was not lying.⁶

\sim I. He was not institutionalizable.

\sim M. He was not merely mistaken.

Let us call the conjunction of these premises *X*. I will assume that the $P(D/K \& X) = 1$, or so close to 1 as to make no difference. This assumption favors the proponent of the argument since it amounts to granting that if the main premises are true, then Jesus was divine.⁷ I will also assume that $P(D/K \& \sim X) = 0$, or so close to 0 as to make no difference. Although this assumption favors the critic of the argument, we must make it since to assume otherwise is to assume, among other things, that there is a significant chance—say, one in a thousand—that Jesus was divine even though he did not claim to be, or even though he was lying, or even though he was institutionalizable. Given

⁶ In this paper, I will use the symbol \sim , called *the tilde*, to abbreviate "it is false that"; the symbol $\&$, called *the ampersand*, to abbreviate "and"; the symbol $=$, called *the identity sign*, to abbreviate "is numerically identical with".

⁷ I will also assume that the four options are all-or-nothing categories and that they are mutually exclusive. This assumption favors the proponent of the argument since the more options there are, the more material there is to press the dwindling probabilities objection.

these two assumptions, the calculus tells us that to determine $P(D/K)$ we just need to determine the $P(X/K)$, and to do that, we just need to assign a value to each of these probabilities:

$$\begin{aligned} &P(C/K) \\ &P(\sim L/K \& C) \\ &P(\sim I/K \& C \& \sim L) \\ &P(\sim M/K \& C \& \sim L \& \sim I) \end{aligned}$$

To assign a value to $P(X/K)$, the calculus tells us to multiply these four values. That is,

$$P(X/K) = P(C/K) \times P(\sim L/K \& C) \times P(\sim I/K \& C \& \sim L) \times P(\sim M/K \& C \& \sim L \& \sim I).$$

Clearly enough, we cannot assign precise numerical values to these four probabilities; we can, however, assign rough numerical ranges which express that the probability of a proposition is very low, or low, or middling, or high, or very high, and the like. That is what I will do. Let us turn now to the first probability.

$P(C/K)$. What is the probability that Jesus claimed, either explicitly or implicitly, to be divine, given our background knowledge? Now, I am no expert on this matter and, unsurprisingly, the experts disagree. On one end of the spectrum, we have, for example, Craig Evans, who sums up a recent essay on Jesus' self-understanding in these words:

... [T]he belief in the deity of Jesus appears to be rooted in his teaching and activities and not simply in post-Easter ideas. This is probable, not only for reasons argued above [reasons having to do with Jesus' designation of Himself as 'the son of man'], but also because the affirmation of Jesus as Israel's Messiah required no confession of his divinity. That the awaited Messiah might possess divine attributes was a possibility, given what is said of him in I Enoch and his identification with the son of man figure in Daniel, but it was not a requirement. Popular expectation seems to have looked more for a Davidic-like figure who would drive the Romans from Israel and restore the kingdom along the lines of the classical period.

Had Jesus not claimed to be Israel's awaited Messiah, it is not likely that his disciples would have later said that he had. Easter alone would have provided no motivation to infuse the content of Jesus' teaching with messianism. ... [Furthermore, if] Jesus allowed his disciples to think of him as Israel's Messiah, but possessing no qualities of divinity or special relationship to God whereby divinity might reasonably be inferred, then why would the disciples introduce this element, when conventional messianism did not require it and strict, Jewish monotheism would not encourage it?

... In my judgement, the Gospels' presentation of Jesus' teaching and conduct as ultimately messianic and in places connoting divinity is compelling. The most plausible explanation of the Gospels as we have them and of the earliest Church's proclamation is that Jesus claimed to be Daniel's heavenly son of man figure through whom God would

defeat his enemies and bring about the everlasting kingdom. From this claim and from related teachings and actions the early Church rightly inferred Jesus' divinity. . . .⁸

What is important for my purposes about Evans' conclusion is not how he arrives at it but how he expresses it. Oversimplifying a bit, he concludes that Jesus *probably* regarded himself as divine, or that a *compelling case* can be made for this thesis, or that it is *the most plausible explanation* of the available data. These are not the words one would use if one thought it was virtually certain or even extremely likely that Jesus believed that he was divine. These are the words one would use if one thought there was a lot going for the thesis, that it was fairly likely, that its probability was in the range, say, of .7–.9.

I need not quote those who would scoff at Evans' judgement. Let's simply acknowledge that there are plenty of experts who are aware of all the historical material that Evans is aware of and yet who would say that the probability that Jesus claimed to be divine, either implicitly or explicitly, was virtually nil. And, of course, there are those in between. Let us be generous, however; let us suppose that Evans is right and that those who are glamorized by the popular media are wrong. Let us say that $P(C/K) = .7-.9$.

$P(\sim L/K\&C)$. What is the probability that Jesus was not lying, given our background knowledge and the proposition that he claimed, implicitly or explicitly, to be divine? While some readers of the Gospels are puzzled by some of the moral traits Jesus displays (e.g., in causing economic ruin by sending demons into a herd of swine or by threatening eternal punishment in a lake of fire), most come away with the impression that, on the whole, Jesus was compassionate and principled, not the sort of person who would lie for personal gain. Let us say, then, that it is very likely that Jesus did not lie about who he was, that $P(\sim L/K\&C) = .85-.95$.

$P(\sim I/K\&C\&\sim L)$. What is the probability that Jesus was not institutionalizable, given our background knowledge and the proposition that he claimed to be divine and was not lying? Albert Schweitzer famously defended the clinical sanity of Jesus from nineteenth-century detractors by arguing that they relied on material from the Gospels that was unhistorical and that they failed to acquaint themselves with the worldview in which Jesus and his Jewish contemporaries were embedded. Schweitzer concluded that

The only symptoms to be accepted as historical and possibly to be discussed from the psychiatric point of view—the high estimate which Jesus has of himself and perhaps also the hallucination at the baptism—fall far short of proving the existence of mental illness.⁹

⁸ Craig A. Evans, "Jesus' Self-Designation 'The Son of Man' and the Recognition of His Divinity," *The Trinity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), eds S. Davis, D. Kendall, G. O'Collins, 29–47. The quotation is from pages 46–7.

⁹ Albert Schweitzer, *The Psychiatric Study of Jesus* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1948 (1913)), translated by Charles R. Joy, 72.

Winfred Overholser, past president of the American Psychiatric Association, agrees with Schweitzer's overall conclusion but nevertheless suggests that the texts that Schweitzer deems historical are consonant with a diagnosis of paranoid psychosis, even if, as according to Schweitzer, Jesus did not develop ideas of injury and persecution and was able to modify his view of his vocation in a pragmatic and logical way.¹⁰

Others assume that the Gospels as they stand are historically accurate, at least to the extent of revealing Jesus' character and personality, and then argue, for example, as practicing psychiatrist O. Quentin Hyder does, that the "evidences from the gospel record, though far from complete, are sufficient to document that Jesus' patterns of thought, speech, behavior, and interpersonal relationships were not those of known patterns in people who are mentally ill," and that "any contention that Jesus was paranoid or delusional simply does not fit in with present day descriptions of such psychiatric disorders," and that "Jesus was not psychiatrically diagnosable as mentally ill".¹¹ Of particular importance to Hyder is the fact that the Gospels do not portray Jesus as exhibiting any of those symptoms that tend to accompany mental illnesses that involve delusions of grandeur. Indeed, quite the opposite is true. The Jesus of the Gospels, says Hyder, constitutes a paradigm of mental health.

Oddly enough, Hyder fails to mention, even in passing, textual evidence that works against his case. For example, the texts state that a great many eyewitnesses who were familiar with Jesus' teaching, activities, and reputation asserted that he was "raving mad" (John 10:19) and that he was "out of his mind" (Mark 3: 21). These included not only members of the common populace but members of his own family. If we take the Gospels at face value, such testimony must enter into the balance.

So, what should we say? Well, once more, let us be generous. Let us say that the probability that Jesus was not institutionalizable, given our background knowledge and the proposition that he claimed to be divine and was not lying, is very high; let us say that $P(\sim I/K \& C \& \sim L) = .85 - .95$.

$P(\sim M/K \& C \& \sim L \& \sim I)$. What is the probability that Jesus was not merely mistaken, given our background knowledge and the proposition that he claimed to be divine, was not lying, and was not institutionalizable? I will delve into this question more deeply in sections 3 and 4. For now, however, let's grant that it is very likely that Jesus was *not* merely mistaken, that $P(\sim M/K \& C \& \sim L \& \sim I) = .85 - .95$.

Given the above probability assignments, we are now in a position to determine the $P(X/K)$. It falls within the range .43-.77. Apprised of this fact, should we nevertheless say that the MBG argument establishes for us the rationality of

¹⁰ Winfred Overholser, "Foreword," *The Psychiatric Study of Jesus*, 15.

¹¹ O. Quentin Hyder, "On the Mental Health of Jesus Christ," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* (1977), 3-12. The quotations are from pages 8, 9, and 11. This article is replicated as chapter 6, "Delusions or Grandeur?," in Jon A. Buell and O. Quentin Hyder, *Jesus: God, Ghost or Guru?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1978), 87-102.

belief in the divinity of Jesus? Clearly not, since it would be arbitrary of us to affirm any point within the proffered range. Instead, we should profess ignorance and suspend judgment about the matter. This is *the dwindling probabilities objection*.

No doubt proponents of the MBG argument will say that I have loaded the dice. I would remind them, however, that our ground rules tell us to assess the probabilities in question while regarding the texts only as historical sources of information and not as divinely authoritative. Moreover, even if the historical evidence for the main premises is as good as or better than the evidence for any comparable set of claims about any other figure in ancient history, it is still only historical evidence about persons, times, and events far removed from us. The probability ranges that I have correlated with “fairly high” and “very high” are generous, not stingy. If we assign values significantly higher than these we will, in effect, be treating the historical evidence for the claims, conduct, and character of Jesus on a par with the historical evidence for much more recent events and persons. That would be unwise.

If I am even approximately right in the assignment of probability ranges, then the dwindling probabilities objection constitutes something of an obstacle to affirming the MBG argument, at least for those who think that the application of the probability calculus in this sort of historical context is fitting and that belief in a proposition should be guided by the results of applying the calculus to the evidence for it. In what follows, I will take a much simpler and less contentious approach to assessing the MBG argument.

3. THE MERELY MISTAKEN OPTION: ASSESSING THE REASONS AGAINST IT

Suppose we affirm that Jesus claimed to be divine, that he wasn't lying, and that he wasn't institutionalizable; and suppose we do this without violating our ground rules. Then everything hangs on the merely mistaken option. In this section, I begin my assessment of that option by evaluating some strategies that have been used against it.

3.1 The Subsumption Strategy

The first strategy attempts to subsume the merely mistaken option under the institutionalizable option; the former reduces to or is just a not so cleverly disguised instance of the latter.

3.1.1 *Merely Mistaken, So Mentally Bad, So Lunatic*

Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli say that

... if Jesus wasn't really God, then he was still a bad man, even though sincere. He was not morally bad (he did not deliberately deceive people); he was mentally bad (he was deceived himself). A lunatic may not be wicked, but he is not much more trustworthy than a liar.¹²

Put formally, the argument here is this:

1. If Jesus was merely mistaken, then he was mentally bad.
2. If he was mentally bad, then he was a lunatic.
3. He was not a lunatic.
4. So, Jesus was not merely mistaken. (1–3)

What should we make of this argument?

I suggest that it equivocates on the term “mentally bad”. There is a sense in which anybody who has a false belief is mentally bad, and the more important the belief is, the more mentally bad one is in this sense. For example, early on in his career Adolf Hitler was mentally bad in this *non-clinical* sense, as we might call it. Not only did he have a false belief about the superiority of those of Aryan blood, this false belief—and its corollary, that the Jews were radically inferior—turned out to be monumentally significant, leading as it did to Nazi propaganda and policy-making that culminated in the Final Solution. And this non-clinical sense of the term “mentally bad” was applicable to Jesus as well, if he was merely mistaken. Believing you are divine when you are not is believing something importantly false; mistaking yourself, a mere creature, for the Creator is a profound mistake. So premise 1 is true, if we take “mentally bad” in this non-clinical sense. But in this non-clinical sense, premise 2 is false. Merely being wrong about something important, even something as important as whether one is divine, neither implies nor makes it likely that one is a lunatic, insane, deranged, or otherwise fit to be institutionalized. So premise 2 is false, if we understand “mentally bad” in the non-clinical sense.

On the other hand, one might use the term “mentally bad” to denote a condition that *is* properly described by the terms “lunacy,” “insanity,” “derangement,” and the like. If Kreeft and Tacelli mean to use this *clinical* sense of the term “mentally bad,” then premise 2 is certainly true; indeed, it is true by definition. But in this clinical sense of the term, premise 1 is false. Being mistaken about something important, even something as important as whether one is divine, neither implies nor makes it likely that one is a lunatic, insane, deranged, fit to be institutionalized. Indeed, premise 1 is arguably necessarily false. It could not follow from Jesus’ being merely mistaken that he was mentally bad, in the clinical sense, since to be merely mistaken is, as I have defined that position, to be mistaken but neither lying *nor institutionalizable*.

¹² Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982), 159.

I conclude that there is no univocal sense of the phrase “mentally bad” which, if used uniformly in the premises of the argument under discussion, renders premises 1 and 2 both true.

3.1.2 *Merely Mistaken, So Deluded, So Diagnosible*

Another version of the subsumption strategy appears in the following line of thought:¹³

1. If Jesus was merely mistaken, then he was deluded.
2. If Jesus was deluded, then He was diagnosably psychotic, melancholic, manic depressive, schizophrenic, or paranoid (i.e. he was institutionalizable).
3. Jesus was not diagnosable in these ways (i.e. he was not institutionalizable).
4. So, Jesus was not merely mistaken. (1–3)

Well, what should we make of this argument?

I suggest that it equivocates on the term “deluded.” The term “delusion” and its cognates can be used in a colloquial sense to mean, quite simply, to suffer from false belief, or to suffer from a persistent error of perception occasioned by false belief. In this *colloquial sense* of the term “delusion,” premise 1 is true. For if Jesus was merely mistaken, then he had a false belief. Moreover, he persistently saw himself as properly carrying out divine prerogatives like retracting Levitical law, forgiving sins, and instituting a way to be properly related to God; and these perceptions were rooted in his false belief that he was divine. So on the merely mistaken option, Jesus was deluded in the colloquial sense of the term. But to be deluded in the colloquial sense neither implies nor makes it likely that one is psychotic, melancholic, manic depressive, schizophrenic, or paranoid. To be sure, if Jesus was deluded in the colloquial sense, then his contact with reality was impaired. Anybody with a false belief or a systematic misperception of things has some sort of impairment that affects their contact with reality. But it is false that if Jesus was deluded in the colloquial sense of the term, then he was mentally ill, a lunatic, institutionalizable. That is, if the argument above uses the colloquial sense of “deluded,” then premise 2 is false.

The term “delusion” and its cognates can be used, however, in a technical sense, a sense that, by definition, denotes a condition that almost invariably accompanies psychosis, melancholia, manic depression, schizophrenia, and paranoia. In this *clinical sense* of the term, if Jesus was deluded, then he was mentally ill, a lunatic, institutionalizable. In the clinical sense of the term “deluded,” premise 2 is true or, at any rate, highly likely to be true. But Jesus’ being deluded in the clinical sense does not follow from his being merely mistaken. In the context of the MBG argument, to say that Jesus was “merely mistaken” is just to

¹³ See O. Quentin Hyder, “On the Mental Health of Jesus Christ,” and Jon A. Buell and O. Quentin Hyder, *Jesus: God, Ghost, or Guru?*

say that Jesus was mistaken but neither lying *nor institutionalizable*; but if he was not institutionalizable, he was not deluded in the clinical sense. Therefore, in the clinical sense of “deluded,” premise 1 is false.

I conclude that there is no univocal sense of the term “deluded” which, if used uniformly in the premises of the argument under discussion, renders premises 1 and 2 both true.

3.2 The “What If Someone You Knew Claimed To Be Divine?” Strategy

The strategy that I want to consider next can be found in C. Stephen Evans’ endorsement of the MBG argument. He writes:

... Jesus clearly used titles for himself that conveyed divinity. He called himself *Lord* and *Son of God*. He even used for himself the personal name of God, revealed by God to Moses, which was regarded by devout Jews as too sacred even to be pronounced. He forgave sins, not just sins against himself, but sins in which other people had been wrong, as if *he* had been the one offended. This makes sense only if all sin is regarded as an offense against God and if Jesus saw himself as God.

It is not easy to grasp how profoundly shocking these claims must have been to his contemporaries. The best way to understand this is simply to imagine someone you know today making similar claims. Imagine a neighbor who goes around preaching that you ought to repent, claiming to be God, and offering to forgive your sins. You would almost certainly regard him as insane. If you did not think him insane, you would certainly find him evil, a fraud who was probably out for power or money or both. The fact is you would find it impossible to be neutral about such a person. If you believed him, you would become a devoted follower. If you did not believe him, you would be repulsed.

This is precisely how people reacted to Jesus, and these reactions continue to be the only sensible ones. It makes no sense to regard such a man as a “simple moral teacher”. Either he is who he claims to be or he is a lunatic or something worse than a lunatic.¹⁴

What, exactly, is the line of thought here?

It appears to be an argument by analogy. Consider my neighbor, an elderly woman by the name of ‘Florence’, in the counter-to-fact situation of her claiming to be divine, implicitly or explicitly. In that situation, if I did not regard her as divine (and, despite her many virtues, I assure you that I would not), I would most certainly regard her as insane or evil, and not merely mistaken. Similarly for Jesus. Given his claims to divinity, if I did not regard him as divine (I do, but suppose I didn’t), I would most certainly regard him as insane or evil, not merely mistaken. Thus, for me to regard him as merely mistaken is no more sensible

¹⁴ C. Stephen Evans, *Why Believe?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1996), 75. Evans is not alone in this line of thought. See, e.g., John W. Montgomery, *History and Christianity* (Downer’s Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1971), 64, and Josh McDowell, *More than a Carpenter* (Tyndale House Publishers: Carol Stream, Illinois, 1987). A former president of the Society of Christian Philosophers tenaciously defended it in conversation.

than it would be for me to regard Florence as merely mistaken—which is to say that it is not sensible at all.

What should we make of this argument? It seems to me to be much less telling than it is popularly thought to be. Suppose that Jesus was possessed of matchless sagacity, as the proponent of the MBG argument and I both insist. That is, suppose that if you had gotten to know Jesus really well, you would have learned not only that he was possessed of “intellectual distinction,” to borrow G.K. Chesterton’s phrase, you would also have discovered that he never ever clearly displayed a moral feature that was incompatible with divinity. Now, either my neighbor Florence possesses such sagacity or she does not. Let us explore each option. Suppose I am convinced that she lacks it, as in fact I am. Consequently, when I take up Evans’ advice to imagine Florence going around preaching that I ought to repent, claiming to be God, and offering to forgive my sins, I imagine myself regarding her as morally suspect or, more likely, insane. However, when I imagine *Jesus* claiming to be divine, I imagine one whom I regard as possessed of unrivaled sagacity making the claim, in which case when I add that he was mistaken, I do not imagine inferring that he is insane or evil; rather, I hold constant his unrivaled sagacity and imagine inferring that he is merely mistaken. On the other hand, suppose that I’m convinced that Florence possesses Christ-like sagacity. Then when I take up Evans’ advice to imagine her claiming to be God and the like, I imagine one whom I regard as possessed of “intellectual distinction” and moral flawlessness making the claim, in which case when I add that she is mistaken, I get the same result that I get with Jesus: I imagine inferring that she is merely mistaken.

The problem with the analogy is that it holds only in the case in which Jesus is regarded as an ordinary human, or at least unsage-like. For the only case in which we would regard Jesus’ claims to divinity in the way in which we would regard our neighbors’ comparable claims—namely, as indicative of insanity or worse—is the case in which we regarded him as intellectually and morally defective in the way in which we believe *they* are. But neither I nor the proponent of the MBG argument regard Jesus in this way. We hold him in much greater esteem than that. When we hold Jesus’ sagacity constant in our comparison of him with our neighbors, either we will regard the cases as relevantly disanalogous (he is sagacious and they are not), or else we will regard the cases as relevantly analogous (he is sagacious and they are too), in which case we will regard both him and them as merely mistaken.

3.3 The Sagacity Strategy

Peter Kreeft assesses the MBG argument by way of a fanciful post-mortem dialogue between three characters, all of whom died on the same day in 1963:

Aldous Huxley, John F. Kennedy, and C.S. Lewis. (The latter represents Kreeft's own viewpoint.) At one point, Kreeft presents the MBG argument like this:

Lewis: There are only four possibilities. He [Jesus] is either God, or a bad man (blasphemous or insane), or a good man (a mere sage), or an ordinary man. . . . And you can't classify Jesus in any one of the other three categories.¹⁵

That's a good start. At least a variation on the merely mistaken option is on the table (Jesus was a good man, a mere sage).

Our question, then, is this: exactly why can't we classify Jesus in the category of "a good man (a mere sage)"? Kreeft's only discernible answer is contained in this short passage:

Lewis: Into which of the following three classes would you put him? Ordinary people, sages or pseudogods?

Kennedy: Sages, of course.

Lewis: No, for they do not claim to be God, and he does.

Kennedy: Hmmm. Suppose we try pseudogods?

Lewis: No, because they lack the wisdom, compassion and creativity that he has.

Kennedy: And not ordinary people, because. . .

Lewis: For both reasons. There is only one possibility left. How can it be avoided?

Kennedy: And that is?

Lewis: He is a sage, therefore to be trusted. And he claims to be God, therefore he is not just another human sage.¹⁶

What reason is offered here for rejecting the merely mistaken option? I have two suggestions.

3.3.1 "He Is a Sage, Therefore To Be Trusted"

My first suggestion focuses on Lewis' last speech, which suggests this argument:

1. Jesus was a sage.
2. If Jesus was a sage, then he was trustworthy.
3. So, Jesus was trustworthy. (1,2)
4. Jesus claimed to be divine.
5. If Jesus was trustworthy and he claimed to be divine, then he was not mistaken.
6. So, Jesus was not mistaken, and hence not merely mistaken. (3-5)

What should we think of the argument here?

¹⁵ Peter Kreeft, *Between Heaven and Hell* (Downer's Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1982), 67.

¹⁶ *Between Heaven and Hell*, 64. Let us not be detained by the question of how the pseudogod option is supposed to fit into Kreeft's fourfold classification; and let us not fret over the consistency of Lewis' denying that Jesus is a sage, at the outset of the passage, and then affirming that he is a sage, at the end of the same passage.

I take it that we should be no more apt to accept premise 5 than to accept the proposition that if the Buddha was trustworthy and he claimed to be divine, then he was not mistaken, or that if Confucious was trustworthy and he claimed to be divine, then he was not mistaken, etc. But surely these other propositions are not reasonable to accept. That's because one can be trustworthy on many matters of the first importance and yet be mistaken about other equally weighty matters.

No doubt, many of us will insist that Jesus was not merely trustworthy, he was *perfectly* trustworthy; and, of course, if Jesus was perfectly trustworthy and he claimed to be divine, then he was indeed not mistaken. If we modify the argument accordingly, then, in order to retain validity, we will need to modify it like this:

- 1*. Jesus was a *perfect* sage.
- 2*. If Jesus was a *perfect* sage, then he was *perfectly* trustworthy.
- 3*. So, Jesus was *perfectly* trustworthy. (1*,2*)
4. Jesus claimed to be divine.
- 5*. If Jesus was *perfectly* trustworthy and he claimed to be divine, then he was not mistaken.
6. So, Jesus was not mistaken, and hence not merely mistaken. (3*–5*)

How should we assess this argument?

Well, first of all, notice that the phrase “perfect sage” in premise 1* means, in part, that one is perfectly trustworthy. Secondly, note that to be “perfectly trustworthy” means, in part, that one asserts only true things. Thus, premise 1* means, in part, that Jesus asserted only true things. But why should we suppose that Jesus asserted only true things? The only reason I know of is this: Jesus was divine. Now, I have no gripe against those who wish to assert that Jesus was divine. I do it routinely when I confess my faith in the words of the Nicene Creed. I do, however, have a gripe against those who use that assertion on behalf of a premise in the MBG argument.

3.3.2 “*The Last Man in the World to Suffer from that Intoxication*”

My second suggestion is that the passage from Kreeft contains the following argument:

1. If Jesus was a sage but not divine, then he did not claim to be divine.
2. Jesus claimed to be divine.
3. So, either Jesus was not a sage or he was divine. (1,2)
4. Jesus was a sage.
5. So, he was divine (and hence was not merely mistaken). (3,4)

The logic is impeccable and we are granting premise 2. Moreover, those considerations that (let us suppose) led us to reject the liar and lunatic options also lead us (let us suppose) to affirm premise 4. That leaves premise 1. Why should we accept it? Unfortunately, Kreeft is silent.

We might try to fill the gap by querying whether there is something about sagacity that is at odds with a *mere* (i.e. nondivine) sage claiming to be divine. The suggestion is common enough. G.K. Chesterton, for example, develops it at length when, after remarking on the subtlety and superiority of Christ's intellect as portrayed in the way he expressed his moral teaching, he writes:

... [T]his is the very last character that commonly goes with mere megalomania; especially such steep and staggering megalomania as might be involved in that claim [i.e. the claim to divinity]. This quality that can only be called intellectual distinction is not, of course, an evidence of divinity. But it is an evidence of a probable distaste for vulgar and vainglorious claims to divinity. A man of that sort, if he were only a man, would be the last man in the world to suffer from that intoxication by one notion from nowhere in particular, which is the mark of the self-deluding sensationalist in religion. . . .

... If Christ was simply a human character, he really was a highly complex and contradictory human character. For he combined exactly the two things that lie at the two extremes of human variation. He was exactly what the man with a delusion never is; he was wise; he was a good judge. What he said was always unexpected; but it was always unexpectedly magnanimous and often unexpectedly moderate. Take a thing like the point of the parable of the tares and the wheat. It has the quality that unites sanity and subtlety. It has not the simplicity of a madman. It has not even the simplicity of a fanatic. . . . Nothing could be less like this quality of seeing beyond and all round obvious things, than the condition of the egomaniac with the one sensitive spot on his brain. I really do not see how these two characters could be convincingly combined, except in the astonishing way in which the creed combines them. . . . Divinity is great enough to be divine; it is great enough to call itself divine. But as humanity grows greater, it grows less and less likely to do so. God is God, as the Moslems say; but a great man knows he is not God, and the greater he is the better he knows it.¹⁷

Philip Schaff, the eminent historian, joins Chesterton when he asks:

Is such an intellect—clear as the sky, bracing as the mountain air, sharp and penetrating as a sword, thoroughly healthy and vigorous, always ready and always self-possessed—liable to a radical and most serious delusion concerning his own character and mission?¹⁸

Schaff's answer: "Preposterous imagination!" C.S. Lewis, in a similar vein, writes:

The historical difficulty of giving for the life, sayings and influence of Jesus any explanation that is not harder than the Christian explanation, is very great. The discrepancy between the depth and sanity and (let me add) shrewdness of His moral teaching and the

¹⁷ G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1974), 247–49, a reprint of the edition published by Dodd, Mead & Company, New York, 1925.

¹⁸ Philip Schaff, *The Person of Christ* (New York: American Tract Society, 1918), 97.

rampant megalomania which must lie behind His theological teaching unless He is indeed God, has never been satisfactorily got over. Hence the non-Christian hypotheses succeed one another with the restless fertility of bewilderment.¹⁹

I think it is helpful to read Chesterton, Schaff, and Lewis as claiming that the merely mistaken option must combine two elements—first, a mistaken claim to divinity and, second, an unmatched sagacity—the combination of which is “preposterous” and “unconvincing.” For as Chesterton puts it, “Divinity is great enough to be divine; it is great enough to call itself divine. But as humanity grows greater, it grows less and less likely to do so.” The sage, of course, exemplifies humanity at its greatest; so the sage is “the last man in the world” to make a “vulgar and vainglorious claim to divinity.” He is “the last man in the world to suffer from that intoxication.”

What should we make of this argument for premise 1? Well, I do not know why we would need to impugn a mere sage with vulgarity and vanity just because he incorrectly claimed to be divine. Remember, we are assuming that the claim is fully sincere. So let us drop the rhetorical extravagance, in which case we can formulate the argument crisply like this:

- 1a. If Jesus was a sage but not divine, then he was wise enough to know that he was not divine.
- 1b. If Jesus was wise enough to know that he was not divine, then he did not claim to be divine.
- 1. So, if Jesus was a sage but not divine, then he did not claim to be divine. (1a, 1b)

The argument is valid and 1b is true; but 1a is no more plausible than its denial. Let me explain.

If Jesus was a non-divine sage, then either

- Jesus was a non-divine sage who *possessed* sufficient reason to think he was divine,

or

- Jesus was a non-divine sage who *lacked* sufficient reason to think he was divine.

To be sure, if Jesus was a non-divine sage who lacked sufficient reason to think he was divine, then he would be wise enough to know that he was not divine. It is false, however, that if Jesus was a non-divine sage who possessed sufficient reason to think he was divine, then he would be wise enough to know that he was not divine. Indeed, quite the opposite is true. If Jesus was a non-divine sage who possessed sufficient reason to think he was divine, then his “intellectual distinction” would naturally lead him to think he was divine. So, premise 1a is true only

¹⁹ C.S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 113.

if Jesus lacked sufficient reason to think he was divine. But why should we suppose that Jesus lacked sufficient reason to think he was divine?

Kreeft and Tacelli suggest that a merely human Jesus could not have believed himself divine since he was a Jew and “No Jew could sincerely think he was God”.²⁰ What should we make of this familiar idea? Would Jesus’ first-century orthodox Jewish theology have precluded his thinking that he was divine—if in fact he was *not* divine? Perhaps it would have, but, if so, I do not see why. Suppose he was who he claimed to be; suppose he *was* divine, as I believe he was (and is). In that case, he had sufficient reason to think he was divine. Whatever that reason was, why couldn’t it, or something similar to it in epistemically relevant respects, be duplicated for one who was *not* divine? I don’t see why it could not. But if it were duplicable, then a first-century orthodox Jew—even one as sagacious as I believe Jesus was—could mistakenly think he was divine.

Here is another reason to suppose that Jesus lacked sufficient reason to think that he was divine, if he was not divine yet sane: if Jesus was not divine yet sane, as the merely mistaken option holds, then he would believe that he was not omniscient; at any rate, at least he would have a doubt about it. But in that case, he would have a defeater for his belief in his own divinity, since divinity requires omniscience and omniscience is incompatible with doubt about omniscience. Thus, if Jesus was not divine yet sane, he could have no better than *defeated* reason for his belief in his own divinity, which is hardly *sufficient* reason. What should we make of this argument?²¹

My main worry about this argument is that *I* have to suspend judgment about at least one of its premises. That’s because I believe that Jesus was the Son incarnate, and the only two models for the Incarnation that I understand both imply that at least one of the premises is false. Of course, for all I know, those two models are false; but then again, for all I know, one of them is correct. It would be unwise for *me* to defend an argument for the divinity of Jesus at the cost of rejecting the only two models of the Incarnation that I understand. So I suspend judgment.

The two models I have in mind are the kenotic model and the two-minds model. Kenoticism denies the premise that divinity requires omniscience since, according to the model, Jesus was fully divine but not omniscient. He was, at best, omniscient; this latter property, not omniscience, is essential to divinity. If we adjust the argument under discussion so that it is compatible with kenoticism, it then has the false premise that omniscience-unless-incarnate is incompatible with doubt about omniscience-unless-incarnate. According to the two-minds model, Jesus was one person with two minds, one of which was divine and the

²⁰ Kreeft and Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, 161. Of course, Christians believe that at least one Jew could sincerely think he was God, i.e. Jesus. Presumably Kreeft and Tacelli meant, “No Jew *who wasn’t* God could sincerely think he was God”.

²¹ I am indebted to my student, Daniel Jeffery, for bringing this argument to my attention, and to Michael Murray for insisting that I address it.

other of which was human. While the divine mind had full access to the contents and experiences of the human mind, the human mind lacked access to the divine mind, except as the divine mind permitted it. One of the advantages of this model is supposed to be that it shows how one and the same person can be omniscient while genuinely engaging in human development, as Jesus is supposed to have done. Suppose that this advantage is real. Then, on the model and contrary to the argument under discussion, Jesus could have been omniscient even if he had doubts about it.

Those who are not committed to the Incarnation will not have the reason that I have for suspending judgment about the argument under discussion. Perhaps, however, they will have this reason: it is false that if Jesus mistakenly believed that he was divine and yet was sane, then he would believe that he was not omniscient or at least have a doubt about it. That's because his reasons for believing that he was divine could have been sufficiently compelling, given his cultural circumstances, that he would have had a doubt about it only if he had been insanely under-confident or pathologically skeptical, neither of which belongs to a picture of matchless sagacity. More judiciously, one might argue for suspension of judgment about the matter. For all we can say with any confidence, Jesus' reasons for believing that he was divine could have been sufficiently compelling, given his cultural circumstances, that he would have had a doubt about it only if he had been insanely under-confident or pathologically skeptical. I'll try to put more flesh on the bones of this line of thought in section 4 below.

3.4 The “It Is Hard to See How” Strategy

Consider the following words from Stephen Davis:

Perhaps Jesus claimed to be divine, was neither mad nor bad, but was *sincerely mistaken* about the matter. . . . Now the defender of the MBG argument will surely not want to claim that it is logically or even causally impossible that Jesus was sincerely mistaken in claiming to be divine. If we tried hard enough, we probably could cook up a scenario in which a sane and moral person mistakenly took himself to be divine. . . . But it is hard to see how a sane and good person could be sincerely mistaken in holding the extremely bizarre belief that she is divine (assuming she uses the word ‘divine’, as Christians normally do in this context, i.e. as indicating a robust identity with the omnipotent, omniscient, loving creator of the world). There *is* something extremely odd about the notion of a sincere, good, and sane person mistakenly claiming to be God.²²

The central idea here is that it is hard to see how Jesus could be sane and good but sincerely mistaken about who he claimed to be since, in general, “it is hard to see how a sane and good person could be sincerely mistaken in [believing] she is divine.”

²² Stephen Davis, “Was Jesus Mad, Bad, or God?” 224–5.

Let's try to get a bit clearer about what Davis is up to here. He says that we are faced with a certain sort of difficulty. We have a hard time seeing something. From this he infers, presumably, the implausibility or improbability of the merely mistaken option. But what, *exactly*, does Davis think we have a hard time seeing? A certain possibility, of course; specifically, *how* a good, sane, sincere person *could* mistakenly claim to be divine. But what *sort* of possibility does he have in mind? He says that he does "not want to claim that it is logically or even causally impossible that Jesus was sincerely mistaken in claiming to be divine." So he has neither physical nor logical possibility in mind. But then, what sort of possibility *does* he have in mind?

Perhaps *epistemic possibility*. A proposition or state of affairs p is epistemically possible just in case p is consistent²³ with what we take for granted (or most of us, or most of us in some specified context, e.g. most of us who are students of the MBG argument—I'll leave the qualification tacit from here on out). And, naturally enough, p is *not* epistemically possible just in case it is inconsistent with what we take for granted. Thus, the proposition that a sane and good person is sincerely mistaken in believing he is divine is epistemically possible just in case that proposition is consistent with what we take for granted. And, the proposition that a sane and good person is sincerely mistaken in believing he is divine is not epistemically possible just in case that proposition is inconsistent with what we take for granted.

Our question, then, is this: is it hard to see how it is epistemically possible for a good, sane, sincere person to mistakenly claim to be divine? Is it hard to see how the proposition that a good, sane, and sincere person mistakenly claims to be divine is consistent with what we take for granted? To be sure, seeing how this could be won't be like having a Cartesian "clear and distinct idea" about, say, the essence of body; and it won't be like discerning Locke's "bright aura," the numinous glow that attends reflective attention on $2 + 1 = 3$ and other obvious necessities. But to insist on such standards here would be unreasonable. Rather, to see how a good, sane, and sincere person might mistakenly claim to be divine it suffices to tell "just so" stories, stories that, on reflection, look to be consistent with what we take for granted and lack that "cooked up" quality that Davis detests.

4. THE MERELY MISTAKEN OPTION: HOW IT (EPISTEMICALLY) MIGHT HAVE BEEN

The merely mistaken option, at its best, has Jesus possessing sufficient reason (or, more broadly, grounds) for thinking that he was divine, or so I suggested above.

²³ A proposition p is *consistent* with a proposition q =_{df} an explicit contradiction cannot be derived from their conjunction, using first-order logic and synonyms alone.

In the present section, I will tell two “just so” stories that seem to have this feature. I don’t claim, however, that they are likely or more likely than not or, for that matter, even logically possible. I claim only that, on reflection, they are not silly and they seem to be consistent with what we properly take for granted in the context of assessing the MBG argument.

4.1 The Beelzebub Story

The first story I have in mind might be called *the Beelzebub Story*. Its main plot goes like this:

The one and only God, the almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things seen and unseen, created angels before He created humans. Those angels were created with astounding capacities, and both the power to exercise them for the sake of God’s glory and their own fulfillment as angels, and the power to refrain from exercising them toward that end. A great proportion of them refrained; they spurned their Creator and led by Satan, the Prince of Darkness, made it their goal to ruin God’s creatures. That goal remains intact to this day. One of the ways in which Satan tries to ruin God’s creatures is to deceive human beings, to trick them into worshipping not the one, true God, but a mere creature. He has discovered that one of the most effective ways to do this is to masquerade as an angel of light, as St. Paul observed; but the *most* effective deception involves getting a man to masquerade as God Himself. Toward that end, Satan duplicates for a mere man the good grounds that a man would or might have for believing he was divine, if he were divine. He then does his best to orchestrate things so that, well, something akin to the events of the New Testament unfold. This, in fact, is what happened to Jesus. The rest is history. Satan had no idea that things would work so well.

What should we make of this simple story? Is it consistent with what we take for granted? Does it shed some light on how a sane and good person—in this case Jesus—could be sincerely mistaken in believing that he is divine?

Well, at best, the Beelzebub Story is only of use to those who are, at a minimum, open to theism and the Satan tradition. I count myself as a member of this audience. In the present subsection (4.1), I will speak only to those who share this openness. In the next subsection (4.2), I will speak to a broader audience.

We might object that the Beelzebub Story is inconsistent with what we take for granted since God would not let such a horrible thing happen. Presumably, those words will make it only halfway out of our mouths. For although God might well impose some limits on the deceptive power of Satan, the way the world is strongly suggests that this isn’t one of them. God lets some pretty horrible things happen, in general; and among them is letting people be deceived about matters of fundamental importance for a proper relationship with Him, even through no fault of their own. The Beelzebub Story is simply an instance of this sort.

We might object that the Satan could not duplicate for a mere man the good but fallible grounds that a man would or might have for believing he was divine if he were indeed divine.

There are two questions here. First, what might such good grounds be like? Second, are they duplicable? I submit that *if* there are strong but fallible grounds for supposing that one is divine (something that is in this respect like, say, sensory experience), then there is no impediment to Satan duplicating them in a mere man. So what might strong but fallible grounds for a man to believe he is divine be like?

The Beelzebub Story can be developed to answer this question. Central to that development is the claim that Satan could make it look to Jesus and others that, e.g., Jesus raised a man from the dead and performed various other miracles of the sort we find in the pre-resurrection narratives. But perhaps that would not be good enough reason for a man to suppose that he was divine. Non-divine prophets, after all, could perform miracles, and even raise men from the dead! What more would be enough?

Here's one suggestion, call it the *What-It's-Like Addition* to the Beelzebub Story. There is such a thing as what it is like to be divinity incarnate, a distinctive way of experiencing the world. What it's like to be divinity incarnate is like what it's like to be a male person in that one could experience what it's like to be male, that is, have a distinctively male perspective on the world, and yet not be male, although if one experiences it, that is, has that perspective, that's adequate grounds to think that one is male. If what it's like to be divinity incarnate is like this, i.e. fallible but sufficient grounds for believing that one is divine, then, if one had it, it might well be sufficient reason to believe that one was divine, especially if it were backed up by (what appeared to be genuine but what were in fact satanically-produced) signs and wonders. I see no reason why Satan could not duplicate for a mere man such a perspective.

Here's a second suggestion, call it the *Abba Addition* to the Beelzebub Story. There is such a thing as having direct, close-up experiential contact with God. Moreover, there is such a thing as what it would or might be like if God *were* to vouchsafe, through a series of communications and confirmations in the context of such intimacy, that one was divine. Of course, on the Beelzebub Story, God does no such thing, but He permits satanic subterfuge of the relevant sort: He permits Satan, for example, to make it *seem abundantly clear* to Jesus that he enjoyed intimacy with God the Father, Abba; and He permits Satan to make it *seem abundantly clear* that, in and through that experience, Jesus bore a special relationship to God the Father, a relationship adequately expressed by the words "unique Son of God". Of course, this complex of experiential grounds is not infallible; one could have it and yet fail to be in the relationship it conveys. Nevertheless, like virtually any other experiential grounds, its fallibility does not preclude its being adequate grounds, especially if it were confirmed by the performance of "miracles," as the Beelzebub Story supposes that it was.

A third suggestion consists in the *combination* of the What-It's-Like and Abba Additions. (A fourth adds to the combination the main lines of the Messianic Story sketched below.)

Perhaps the reader will scoff at the Additions I have suggested. My experience has been that such a response is rooted in the thought that, as a matter of necessity, a sane and good man could have sufficient reason to believe that he is divine *only if* he *is* divine. Sufficient reason for believing in one's own divinity must be infallible. In the second part of section 3.2.2, I rejected two arguments for this claim and I am aware of no others that are more plausible than them. So I'm left wondering why we should suppose that sufficient reason for a sane and good man to believe that he is divine is, as a matter of necessity, infallible? It isn't just obvious that this is the case. Nor does it have the feel of something that we properly take for granted. So why?

Consider the matter like this. If we suppose that sufficient reason for a sane and good man to believe that he is divine must be infallible, are we not supposing that we are very well acquainted with what it's like to be divinity incarnate and what, on the Christian view of things, Jesus' experience of God the Father was like? In fact, aren't we supposing that we are so well acquainted with this perspective and experience that we properly regard it as infallible? It seems so. But does anybody *really* think that they are in a position to make that judgment? Proponents of the MBG argument who think that they are familiar with such matters have some explaining to do, to say the least.

4.2 The Messianic Story

Here's another way to cash out the merely mistaken option, this time in a way that's consistent with naturalism, and hence the views of a broader audience than that to which the Beelzebub Story might appeal. Call it *the Messianic Story*:

Jesus had sufficient reason, or at any rate, what counted as sufficient reason in first-century Palestine, to believe He was the Anointed One of the line of David, the King of the Jews, and, in this Davidic sense, the Messiah, Messiah ben David. Apparently, he wasn't alone. Plenty of others both before and after Jesus thought of themselves as Messiah, and many, many more agreed with them. When each of their bids to overthrow Rome failed, more candidates and their followers were waiting in the wings.

After Jesus came to believe he was Messiah, he continued his practice of reading the Jewish Scriptures closely, where he found hitherto undiscovered nuances and suggestions that led him to a fusion of ideas that was extraordinarily shocking. For example, he noticed that "the child" of Isaiah 9:6—who will be "born to us," that is, born to Israel, and upon whose shoulders the government will rest; the child whom every Second Temple Jew regarded as Messiah—is described as *el gibber*. Jesus recognized

the ambiguity—*el gibber* can be read “Mighty Warrior” as well as “Mighty God”—but he reasoned against the traditional view according to which it meant “Mighty Warrior”. After all, the child is also designated, in the same verse, “Prince of Peace,” and that title is more at odds with “Mighty Warrior” than “Mighty God”. Moreover, this interpretation made better sense of “Eternal Father,” which was applied to “the child” in the same verse, a reading the tradition had subjugated with remarks about its being merely honorific. No, thought Jesus; the child, the kingly Messiah, born to Israel, is quite literally “Mighty God” and “Eternal Father”. But the child could not be *these* things unless . . . (and here the shock of the fusion must have been great indeed) . . . unless Messiah *is divine*.

Once the association of Messiah and divinity had surfaced, Jesus saw it expressed elsewhere in the Scriptures, for example in Psalm 45. Although the explicit theme there is the exaltation of the particular king whom the psalmist is addressing, a broader theme was recognizably implicit. Implicitly, thought Jesus, God was gesturing through the psalmist’s exaltation of the king before him toward another king, one whose dominion *really would* endure, Messiah ben David. And how was the kingly Messiah addressed? Not only as one who was “set above” his “companions” among men (v.7), but also as one who was *el gibber* (v.3) and *no less than God Himself* (v.6). After all, speaking of and to the kingly Messiah the psalmist proclaims, “Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever.” To Jesus’ mind, this was Messiah and divinity fused again.

A third case: Jesus’ contemporaries took it that no human being was greater than David, the greatest of earthly kings. Jesus pointed out, however, that David himself declared, in Psalm 110:1, that “The LORD [Yahweh] said to *my* Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet’.” David here refers to *his own* Lord [Adonai], a term which Jesus and his contemporaries took to refer to Messiah. And Jesus saw that in calling Messiah his own Lord, David implied that he was Messiah’s inferior. What, then, is the best explanation of the twin fact that David is inferior to Messiah and yet no man is greater than David? The best explanation, Jesus inferred, was that Messiah was no mere man; he was divine as well. Again: Messiah and divinity fused.

A fourth, and final illustration. Like many of his contemporaries, Jesus took it that “the son of man” was commonly used in the Prophets to refer to Messiah. The son of man, Jesus saw in Daniel 7, was ushered into the presence of God Himself, the Ancient of Days, the Most High. But, as the LORD had told Moses: “No man shall see me and live” (Ex. 33:20). So the son of man, Messiah, sits on the LORD’s throne, and doubtless sees Him; but, no human can do that. Apparently, the son of man was no mere man, but divine as well. Fusion.

So Jesus thought that in some important sense the kingly Messiah was divine. But there is only one God, he reasoned. In some sense, then, there is one and only one God, yet, given the fusion of Messiah and divinity, there was some sense in which God was plural. Was there any precedence for this in non-messianic texts? *Of course*, Jesus thought to himself: “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness . . .’ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him” (Gen. 1:26–7). Divine plurality in divine unity was a well-known phenomenon in the Scriptures.

So it was: first, Jesus came to believe he himself was Messiah ben David. Then, given his reading of the Jewish Scriptures, he came to believe that Messiah was divine. He made the natural deduction.

That’s a sketch of the Messianic Story. We might embellish it with more alleged textual fusions of Messiah and divinity, but the basic idea, I hope, is clear. What should we make of it?

We might object to it on the grounds that it has Jesus coming to believe that he is Messiah without confirmation by miracles. Absent miracles, Jesus would have been an idiot if he believed he was Messiah. By way of response, while it is true that the Messianic Story does not specify how Jesus came to believe he was Messiah, I take it that he might well have had what was, in his cultural circumstances, considered to be sufficient reason to believe that one was Messiah without miraculous confirmation. After all, at the time, a lot of people claimed to be Messiah without such confirmation, and many thousands more believed them despite the lack of such confirmation.

Perhaps the objection is not that, absent miracles, Jesus would have been an idiot to believe that he was Messiah, but rather that, absent miracles, Jesus would have been an idiot to infer his divinity from his belief that he was Messiah. By way of response, even if the inference to divinity would have been significantly more reasonable in the light of miraculous confirmation, such confirmation does not seem necessary. At any rate, if I took it for granted, along with my peers, that the Old Testament was divinely authoritative, then, if I became convinced that I was Messiah and then, later, saw many of those texts fuse Messiah and divinity in the way depicted by the Messianic Story, I would think that I had superlative grounds to suppose that I was divine—especially if my interpretive skills had been repeatedly confirmed since my youth by acknowledged experts. Why would I *need* more evidence in those cultural circumstances?

5. CONCLUSION

Proponents of the MBG argument contend that the MBG argument, properly understood, can establish the rationality of belief in the divinity of Jesus. I suspect

that their contention is false. Perhaps a bit more circumspectly, it does not establish *for me* the rationality of belief in our Lord's divinity, and I am fairly sure that this is not due to a failure on my part to understand the argument properly. I understand it at least as well as its contemporary advocates, and yet it fails to establish the rationality of belief in Jesus' divinity for me.

It is important to remember the role of my just-so stories in my assessment of the MBG argument. I have not argued that they give us good reason to think that the merely mistaken option is true, likely to be true, more likely than the God option, or any thing of the kind. Neither story is more than a bit of imaginative speculation. Rather, my contention is this: even if we know with certainty all the other premises of the MBG argument, it can establish for us the rationality of belief in the divinity of Jesus only if, given ground rules, we are in a position to say that the merely mistaken option is significantly less likely or plausible than the God option. But we are in such a position only if, given the ground rules, we are in a position to say that competing options like the Beelzebub Story and the Messianic Story are significantly less likely or plausible than the God option. My contention is that we are in no such position. At any rate, I know that *I* am not. When I hold fast to the ground rules—suspending, as it were, my belief in the divine authority of the New Testament record and my belief in our Lord's miracles and His bodily resurrection from the dead, among other such things—the position I am in is characterized by doubt whether the God option is more likely or plausible than the merely mistaken option. No one in my position can go on to say that the MBG argument is sufficient to establish for them the rationality of belief in the divinity of Jesus, our Lord.²⁴

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