

WAS JESUS MAD, BAD, OR GOD?...OR MERELY MISTAKEN?

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Abstract. A popular argument for the divinity of Jesus goes like this. Jesus claimed to be divine, but if his claim was false, then either he was insane (mad) or lying (bad), both of which are very unlikely; so, he was divine. I present two objections to this argument. The first, *the dwindling probabilities objection*, contends that even if we make generous probability assignments to the relevant pieces of evidence for Jesus' divinity, the probability calculus tell us to suspend judgement on the matter. The second, and more telling objection in my opinion, *the merely mistaken objection*, contends that it is no less plausible to suppose that Jesus was neither mad nor bad but merely mistaken than that he was divine.

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

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: MacMillan, 1952, revised ed), 55-56.

In this paper, I aim to assess the MBG argument. In section 1, I present a version of it that seems most conspicuous 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 Plantinga 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 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

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, 221-245. 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.

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 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.

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?,” 223 and 245. Presumably, Davis means by “the incarnation of Jesus” the *divinity* of Jesus.

- ~L. He was not lying.⁶
- ~I. He was not institutionalizable.
- ~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 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:

- $P(C/K)$
- $P(\sim L/K \& C)$
- $P(\sim I/K \& C \& \sim L)$
- $P(\sim M/K \& C \& \sim L \& \sim I)$

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,

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.

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 inbetween. 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 46-47.

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 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 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

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.

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

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

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*.

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 diagnosable

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 a 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,

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?*.

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

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.

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?

¹⁵ Peter Kreeft, *Between Heaven and Hell* (Downer’s Grove, Illinois: InterVarsityPress, 1982), 67.

- Kennedy: Sages, of course.
 Lewis: No, for they do not claim to be God, and he does.
 Kennedy: Hmm. 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?

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 Confucius 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

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.

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

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.

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 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 if Jesus

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

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

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 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-unless-incarnate; 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 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

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.

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."

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

²² Stephen Davis, "Was Jesus Mad, Bad, or God?," 224-25.

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.

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. 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*. It's 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 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. 1:26-27). 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 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 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 about 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 establishes for them the rationality of belief in the divinity of Jesus.²⁴

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