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Stephen T. Davis

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THE MAD/BAD/GOD TRILEMMA: A REPLY TO DANIEL HOWARD-SNYDER

Stephen T. Davis

The present paper is a response to Daniel Howard-Snyder's essay, "Was Jesus Mad, Bad, or God?...Or Merely Mistaken?" I reply to two of Howard-Snyder's arguments, one based on the notion of "dwindling probabilities" and the other based on the stories he tells to rationalize the possibility that Jesus was "merely mistaken." Since neither argument accomplishes its purpose, I conclude that Howard-Snyder has failed to refute the Mad/Bad/God argument in favor of the incarnation.

I

Many Christians are familiar with a popular apologetic argument in favor of the divinity of Christ called "the Trilemma" or "the Mad/Bad/God argument." (I will call it the MBG argument.) It has been defended most famously by C.S. Lewis,¹ but also by other Christian apologists since Lewis. I have recently argued that the MBG argument can be used to establish the rationality of belief in the incarnation of Jesus.²

But now Professor Daniel Howard-Snyder has subjected the MBG argument to a rigorous critique.³ He summarizes the argument as follows:

1. Jesus claimed, explicitly or implicitly, to be divine.
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 and 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.

Interestingly, Howard-Snyder is prepared to grant the truth of premise (1), which many people would consider the most controversial premise of the



argument, as well as the truth of (4), and (5). It is premise (6) that he questions. That is, Howard-Snyder denies that the MBG arguer can sensibly rule out the possibility that Jesus was “merely mistaken” in believing himself to be divine.

II

Let us then consider the case that Howard-Snyder makes. I will focus on just two of his arguments: (1) his use of the “dwindling probabilities” argument (the DPA); and (2) the stories he uses to rationalize the possibility that Jesus was neither mad nor bad but merely mistaken in claiming to be divine.

The DPA is a strategy that Howard-Snyder borrows from Alvin Plantinga. In his *Warranted Christian Belief*,⁴ Plantinga argues that a faithful acceptance of the Christian gospel must be a gift of God. It is not something that human beings can, so to speak, recognize and accept quite on their own. Nor can a convincing natural theological argument show that the Christian gospel is true or even probably true. It involves crucial and controversial claims about (among other things) God, revelation, sin, incarnation, resurrection, atonement, and the church. So any rational argument in favor of the claim that the Christian gospel is probable is going to face this damaging fact—even if you show that one crucial point in it has a certain fairly high degree of probability, that probability will be reduced when you try to argue for the high probability of the next crucial point, and the one after that, and etc. Each time a new point is added, the relevant probabilities have to be multiplied. So there is no way that the entire package will end up with anything like a high degree of probability.

Let me make two main points in response to Howard-Snyder’s use of the DPA. The first has to do with the form and application of the argument. The second has to do with the actual probability numbers that he supplies to the premises of the MBG argument.

(1) *The form and application of the DPA.* I should point out first that Howard-Snyder apparently is not deeply committed to the DPA. I read him as saying that *if* the proper way to assess the MBG argument is in terms of the probability calculus, then the DPA can be raised against it. In other words, Howard-Snyder is not asserting that this is indeed the proper way to evaluate the MBG argument, but he suspects that many people will hold that it is. Still, just in case those people are correct, I need to reply to Howard-Snyder’s (so to speak) hypothetical use of the argument.

The DPA is relevant to any inductive argument that amounts to a chain of probabilistic inferences. Suppose we are trying to argue on behalf of a hypothesis *H*. And suppose we argue as follows: “*P*, therefore very probably *Q*; *Q*, therefore very probably *R*; *R*, therefore very probably *S*; and *S*, therefore very probably *H*.” In such a case, the dwindling probabilities objection can ruin the argument. This is because the probability numbers (once actual values are supplied) have to be multiplied at each step, and accordingly may well result in *H* having a value of less than 0.5.

Plantinga’s argument works against a certain way of doing natural theology. For example, a natural theologian might first try to argue on the basis of our background knowledge that it is probable that *God exists*, and then try to argue on the basis of our background knowledge plus the probability of the

claim that God exists that it is probable that *God reveals things to human beings*, and then try to argue on the basis of our background knowledge plus the probability of the claim that God exists plus the probability of the claim that God reveals things to human beings that it is probable that *human beings are sinners*, etc. At each new point, the probabilities will diminish.

Now there is some reason to think that Howard-Snyder holds that the MBG argument takes this form. On this interpretation, the MBG arguer must first show that the probability of premise (1), on our background knowledge, is high; and then show, on the basis of our background knowledge and the probability of (1), that the probability of (4) is high; and then show, on the basis of our background knowledge and the probability of (1) and the probability of (4), that the probability of (5) is high; and finally show, on the basis of our background knowledge and the probability of (1) and the probability of (4) and the probability of (5), that the probability of (6) is high. Now if MBG arguers must present their case in this way, then the probabilities that will emerge at the end might well dwindle to the point of being unimpressive.

However, this is not the logic of the MBG argument. What then *is* that logic? Using Howard-Snyder's version of it as a rough outline (but supplying new numbers for the premises), it is more like this:

8. It is highly probable that (1) is true.
9. Now if (1) is true, Jesus' claim was either true or false.
10. If it was false, then either he was mad, bad, or merely mistaken.
 - 10a. It is highly improbable that he was bad.
 - 10b. It is highly improbable that he was mad.
 - 10c. It is highly improbable that he was merely mistaken.
11. Accordingly, it is highly improbable that Jesus' claim was false.
12. Accordingly, it is highly probable that Jesus' claim was true.

Note that the arguments for any one of steps (10a), (10b), or (10c) do not depend probabilistically on the arguments for the other two. For example, the probability of the case that Jesus was not mad does not depend on the probability of the case that he was not bad, etc.

This is the proper strategy of MBG arguers. First they try to show that it is highly probable on our background knowledge that Jesus claimed to be divine. Then they try to show that it is highly improbable on our background knowledge that Jesus was lying in claiming to be divine. Then they try to show that it is highly improbable on our background knowledge that Jesus was mad in claiming to be divine. Finally, they try to show that it is highly improbable on our background knowledge that Jesus was "merely mistaken" in claiming to be divine. If they can succeed in doing those things, then the probability will be high that Jesus was right in claiming to be divine.

This creates a different logical situation. By the disjunctive axiom of the probability calculus, we add, rather than multiply, exclusive alternatives like Howard-Snyder's (3a), (3b), and (3c). Accordingly, the probability of the disjunction [(3a) v (3b) v (3c)] is the sum of the probabilities of each disjunct. (If they overlap—which I do not believe that they do, in this case⁵—it will be less than that, but still cannot be less than the probability of the most

probable disjunct.) So the cogency of the MBG argument will in the end depend on just how improbable the disjuncts are. And I hold that they are highly improbable, somewhere (I would estimate) around 0.1 each. If I am right about that, and if the probability (on our background knowledge) that Jesus claimed to be divine is about 0.9, then the probability of [$\sim(3a) \& \sim(3b) \& \sim(3c)$], which is the proposition that the MBG arguer needs, is somewhere near 0.7, and the probability of (7) somewhere near .63.

In other words, there is a difference between these two probabilistic ways of arguing for a hypothesis *H*. *Method A*: *Very probably P; P, therefore very probably Q; Q, therefore very probably R; R, therefore very probably H. Method B*: *Either P or Q or R or H; P is very probably false; R is very probably false; Q is very probably false; therefore H is very probably true.* I say that the DPA applies only to arguments like Method A, not to arguments like method B.⁶ And Howard-Snyder seems to me to hold that the MGB argument must use something like Method A in establishing the probability of [$\sim(3a) \& \sim(3b) \& \sim(3c)$]. (See his formal statement of the probabilities on page 6 of his paper, where the previously arrived at value for “not lying” has to be multiplied in order to get the right value for “not institutionalizable,” and both have to be multiplied in order to get the right value for “not merely mistaken.”)

I say, on the other hand, that the MBG argument is best understood as using something like Method B in establishing the probability of [$\sim(3a) \& \sim(3b) \& \sim(3c)$]. It is quite true that the MBG arguer needs a high probability for that conjunction. But I do not think the probability that we assign to any of the three conjuncts need have anything to do with the probabilities that we assign to the others. There is no need in this case to multiply probabilities.

Let me make the point in a slightly more formal way.⁷ If *k* is our background knowledge, let:

- d = Jesus was divine
- jd = Jesus claimed to be divine
- b = Jesus was bad
- ma = Jesus was mad
- mi = Jesus was mistaken

Now given that $P(d/k) = p(jd \& \sim b \& \sim ma \& \sim mi/k)$, Howard-Snyder claims that $P(d/k) = P(jd/k) P(\sim b/jd \& k) P(\sim ma/jd \& k \& \sim b) P(\sim mi/jd \& k \& \sim b \& \sim ma)$. But I deny that this is the correct way to read the MBG argument. In effect, I am using the following formula: $P(d/k) = P(jd/k) P(\sim[b \vee ma \vee mi]/k \& jd)$. Now suppose we read (3a), (3b), and (3c) of Howard-Snyder’s summary of the MBG argument as follows:

- (3a) $jd \& \sim d \& b$
- (3b) $jd \& \sim d \& ma$
- (3c) $jd \& \sim d \& mi$.

Now since *b*, *ma*, and *mi* are exclusive (as noted, we can provide suitable definitions of the terms “mad,” “bad,” and “mistaken” which ensure that),

and given my assumption that each of (3a), (3b), and (3c) has a probability of about 0.1, then the value of $P(3a \vee 3b \vee 3c/k)$ will equal about 0.3. Accordingly, $P(jd \ \& \ \sim d \ \& \ b/k) + P(jd \ \& \ \sim d \ \& \ ma/k) + P(jd \ \& \ \sim d \ \& \ mi/k) = 0.3 = P(jd \ \& \ \sim d/k)$. Now both Howard-Snyder and I assume that the $P(jd/k)$ is high, let's say 0.9. Thus $P(jd/k) = P(jd \ \& \ d/k) + P(jd \ \& \ \sim d/k)$. So $P(jd \ \& \ d/k) =$ about 0.6. Accordingly, $P(d/k) =$ about 0.6.⁸

I am not arguing that the dwindling probabilities objection is wholly irrelevant to the MBG argument. This is because undeniably there are four different probabilities at work in the argument, viz., the probabilities of (1), (4), (5), and (6). So Howard-Snyder is not off-base in raising the objection. Again, the MBG argument in essence says:

Jesus probably claimed to be divine. But if he was wrong, then either (3a), (3b), or (3c) must be true. Now (3a) is highly improbable; (3b) is highly improbable; and (3c) is highly improbable. Therefore, probably, he was right.

So in the end you do have to multiply two probabilities, viz. the probability that (1) is true and the probability that $[(3a) \vee (3b) \vee (3c)]$ is false.

But if the probabilities of these two sub-points are both high enough, then the probability of the conclusion will still be impressive.⁹ And this is just what I claim. Belief in (7) is rational because its probability is considerably greater than .5. In the light of the MBG argument, it is more probable than not (I actually believe it is *much* more probable than not) that Jesus was correct in claiming to be divine.

(2) *Probability numbers.* It will not go without notice that Howard-Snyder and I have supplied slightly different numbers for the probabilities of some of the propositions in question. As noted, I am inclined to assign a probability of about .9 to (1) and to each of $\sim(3a)$, $\sim(3b)$, and $\sim(3c)$. Howard-Snyder gives a range of .7 - .9 for (1), and a range of .85 - .95 for $\sim(3a)$, $\sim(3b)$, and $\sim(3c)$. I do not wish to argue about that point; obviously, these are all estimates, and sensible people can sensibly disagree about such matters.

But there are two points where I do wish to differ. First, suppose that the probability that Howard-Snyder assigns to (7)—that is, between .43 and .77—is correct (and I do not agree that it is). Even if so (or so I would argue), that range is high enough that it can be rational to affirm (7), i.e., to believe in Christ's divinity. Notice that the mid-point between .43 and .77 is .6, and I see no compelling reason to insist that we must suspend judgment on propositions that are this probable. Certainly we *may* suspend judgment in such cases; that certainly would be allowed, depending perhaps on other circumstances.¹⁰ But it does not seem sensible to hold that we *must* do so. And of course that it is *rational* to believe (7) in the light of the MBG argument is all that I have been arguing for.

This leads directly to the second issue.¹¹ I disagree with Howard-Snyder's claim that we can never justifiably believe that the final probability of a proposition is higher than the lowest estimate in the range of probabilities assigned to it. That is, he argues that since we cannot justifiably be confident that the probability of (7) is greater than is arrived at when we work from the *lowest* estimate of each of the separate probabilities that pre-

cede it in the argument (which he computes as .43), “we should profess ignorance and suspend judgment.” This epistemic principle of Howard-Snyder’s turns a slight difference in original probability estimate between the two of us (.9 versus .85-.95) into a truly significant difference in the end.

But surely this is misleading. The probability that we assign to a proposition represents our degree of uncertainty of the proposition’s truth. When instead of assigning a specific number we assign a range, we are in effect assigning a probability to our uncertainty *about how uncertain we are* about the probabilities in question. There are, then, two uncertainties in the neighborhood: (1) uncertainty about the truth of a proposition itself, and (2) uncertainty about our assigned probability of that truth (which we express by giving a range of numbers). But it is important to note that the second uncertainty—uncertainty about how certain we really are—is quite independent of the first uncertainty. If I am uncertain about whether the probability that I assign to *p* is, say, .55 or .66, this type-(2) uncertainty *neither raises nor lowers* the probability of *p* itself. Howard-Snyder seems to assume in effect that this type-(2) uncertainty lowers our type-(1) uncertainty, and that seems to me to be mistaken.

III

Let us go on to the second main point. Obviously, since Howard-Snyder holds that the MBG argument fails at premise (6), it is incumbent upon him to render plausible the supposition that Jesus could have been (neither mad nor bad but) “merely mistaken” in claiming to be divine. He tells two stories to try to rationalize that possibility. But before turning to them, we must consider some preliminary points.

Howard-Snyder argues against this claim: *if Jesus was mistaken, then he had a false belief, and if he had a false belief, then he was deluded, and if he was deluded, then he was mentally ill or a lunatic.* Howard-Snyder correctly points out that the conclusion does not follow from what precedes it; it is perfectly possible to be deluded in the sense of having a persistent false belief without being insane.

But sensible MBG arguers would never urge that just *any* persistent false belief held by someone would render that person mentally ill. Possibly we are all deluded in that sense at some points. MBG arguers are concerned only with cases where somebody is deluded in *believing himself to be God*. Now I suspect that Howard-Snyder is prepared to grant that you or I could not be “merely mistaken” if we were to claim to be divine. If we did so, we would have to be considered “bad” or “mad.” I believe he holds this opinion because everybody knows that you and I have displayed on numerous occasions features that are incompatible with divinity. But Jesus—so I suspect he holds—was unlike us in this regards.

But notice that Jesus did indeed display on numerous occasions features that would quite sensibly have been taken by his contemporaries as being incompatible with divinity. Unlike God (Psalm 90:1-4), he was born, for example (Matthew 1:18). Unlike God (John 4:24), he had a human body (John 20:27). Unlike God (Psalm 139), he was not omnipresent (Mark 1:12-13). Unlike God (Matthew 19:26), he was not all-powerful (Matthew 26:53).

Unlike God (I John 3:20), he was not all-knowing (Mark 13:32).

What exactly is it to be “merely mistaken” about something? What criteria must be satisfied before someone can be considered “merely mistaken” in believing a false proposition p ? I would suggest that there are four such criteria. It seems that in order to be “merely mistaken” in believing a false proposition p , a person A must:

- believe p ;
- not be insane;
- not be lying; and
- be in an epistemic and psychological state where it is possible for A , while in that state, to be shown that p is false; for A sincerely to say something like, “I guess I was wrong” or “I stand corrected”; and for A to give up belief in p .

Now if this analysis is even approximately correct, it seems that there are plenty of false propositions about which we can easily see how someone might be “merely mistaken” in believing them:

- Caesar’s crucial decision was to cross the river Arno.
- $P = 2.14159$.
- Abraham Lincoln was the eighteenth president of the United States.

That is, it is easy to see how someone, through ignorance or confusion or forgetfulness, might be “merely mistaken” in believing these false claims. It is equally easy to imagine someone who mistakenly believes one of these claims being corrected and then saying, “Oops, I was wrong.”

There are other false claims where it is much more difficult for us to imagine that A could be “merely mistaken” in believing them but where, if we try hard enough, we can such imagine scenarios:

- This year is 1950.
- I am now in Thailand.
- My name is Ebenezer.
- My mother hates me.

In order to make sense of somebody being “merely mistaken” about false beliefs like this, you would have to tell a pretty convincing story. And questions about the probable truth of the story could well be raised. These are simply not the sorts of things about which people are normally “merely mistaken.” But with these beliefs, we can at least *imagine* scenarios in which all four of our criteria for being “merely mistaken” are satisfied.

But notice how hard it would be to come up with such a scenario for someone who is not Napoleon Bonaparte and mistakenly believes:

- I am Napoleon Bonaparte.

Can we realistically imagine someone who has this belief being presented

with evidence for its falsity and then sincerely saying: "Gosh, I guess I was wrong, I'm not Napoleon after all"? And if the answer to this question is no, imagine *a fortiori* the case of somebody who mistakenly believes:

- I am God.

Here we see, prior to considering the scenarios that Howard-Snyder actually suggests, why I hold that that premise (6) of the MBG argument is highly probable.

IV

So then how does Howard-Snyder try to argue that Jesus might have been "merely mistaken" in believing himself to be divine? His main point is that Jesus might well have been mistaken about being divine despite *having sufficient reason to consider himself divine*. That is why Jesus might have been "merely mistaken" rather than bad or mad.

Now I am not prepared to allow that anybody other than God ever has sufficient reason to consider himself divine. But Howard-Snyder argues as follows:

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.' 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.¹²

Is this a convincing argument?

I do not think so. Consider this argument: "Napoleon had sufficient reason to consider himself Emperor of France; ergo, I could have sufficient reason to consider myself Emperor of France." Unless we are doing some tricky things with the word "could" (e.g., using it as a way of talking about mere imaginability or perhaps logical possibility), the argument is hardly convincing. Can a person ever have sufficient reason to believe a falsehood? Of course. But not something (so to speak) *this* false.

It has never been my view that it is impossible to cook up scenarios in which a sane and moral person could mistakenly consider himself divine.¹³ But even for someone other than Jesus, it seems to me extremely difficult to make such a scenario plausible. And when we turn to Jesus—a person about whom we know a great deal (surely more than anyone else in the ancient world)—it seems to me that the difficulty increases geometrically.

It is hard to see how such possibilities could be actual (assuming we are using the word "divine" as Christians normally do in this context, viz., as indicating a robust identity with the omnipotent, omniscient, and loving creator of the world). That is, such scenarios will be very highly improbable. The probability that Jesus was in such a scenario, i.e., was deluded to such a degree, will be so low as to be unworthy of serious scholarly consideration. It comes nowhere near squaring with the Jesus about whom we read in the New Testament.¹⁴

But let us go on to consider the two scenarios that Howard-Snyder suggests. He does not consider them actual, or even in themselves plausible; but he does hold them to be consistent with what we take for granted, and not silly. They are, he says, not significantly less plausible than the God option, as they would need to be if the MBG argument were to succeed. His view is that they accordingly shed significant doubt on premise (6), and thus ruin the MBG argument.

Howard-Snyder tells two stories. The first, which he admits will only be of use to those who are open to theism and to the existence of the devil, he calls "the Beelzebub Story." Here it is:

The one and only God...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 out so well.¹⁵

There are two points to be made about this story. First, it is surely plausible for Christian theists to suppose that Satan could fool some person into believing of himself that he is God. Perhaps that very thing has occurred. But what we have to ask is whether it is plausible to suppose that that is precisely what happened, not to some abstract human person, but to Jesus. To argue convincingly that such a scenario is plausible on the evidence that we have seems to me to be an impossibly tall order.

Second, again, Satan could delude somebody into thinking he was divine, but could Satan "duplicate" the good grounds for that belief had by a person who really *is* divine? I believe the answer to that question is clearly and obviously "no." Howard-Snyder raises this very objection to

the Beelzebub Story, and argues 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."¹⁶ Howard-Snyder has in mind grounds like performing miracles and (specifically) raising people from the dead. But then we must ask: *Can Satan perform miracles?* Well, I do not profess to know the answer to that question, but perhaps he can. That point can certainly be debated. But *can Satan raise people from the dead?* Surely not.¹⁷

Howard-Snyder also considers three additions to the Beelzebub Story, emendations that he believes strengthen his case. (1) Maybe the devil knows "what it is like to be divinity incarnate," and allows some human being to share that knowledge and thus believe herself to be God. (2) Or maybe God allows Satan to endow some non-divine human being with the same sense of "direct, close-up experiential contact with God" that Christians believe Jesus had, thus endowing that human being with the belief that he is God. (3) Or maybe God does both (1) and (2).

As for addition (1), we must ask whether the devil can "know what it is like to be divinity incarnate," know (as Howard-Snyder puts it) God's "distinctive way of experiencing the world." And the answer is: surely not. Does anyone but God know that? Of course not. It is puzzling to me how Howard-Snyder, believer in divine transcendence that he surely is, could hold otherwise. Referring to God's complete knowledge of his own thoughts, words, and actions (i.e., the thoughts, words, and actions of the Psalmist), Psalm 139:6 says: "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it." In other words, even God's knowledge of *our* thoughts and ways is unattainable for human beings, let alone God's knowledge of *God*.

Moreover, God is love and beauty and truth, and Satan is hate and the father of lies. If Satan knew what it is like to be love and beauty and truth, surely he would never have fallen. My own view is that love and beauty and truth are things that Satan never has understood, not certainly as God understands them, and never will. They are alien to him. Envy and pride and pain and despair—those are the things Satan understands.

As for addition (2), we must ask how Satan knows what it is like to have the "direct, close-up experiential contact with God" that Christians believe Jesus had. And even if somehow Satan does have this kind of knowledge (which I deny), Howard-Snyder bears the burden of explaining why God would allow such a scenario to be actual, and he offers no such explanation.

V

Howard-Snyder's second scenario is called "the Messianic Story." The idea is this: Jesus had good reason to believe that he was the messiah, and through a careful and innovative study of certain Old Testament texts (passages like Isaiah 9:6; Psalm 45; Psalm 110:1; and Daniel 7) he came to the conclusion that the messiah must be divine, and that accordingly *he* was divine. Thus Howard-Snyder says: "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."¹⁸

The “Messiah = God” argument has come up before in discussions of the MBG argument, e.g., in John Beversluis’ critique of the argument¹⁹ (to which I earlier replied).²⁰ Beversluis, responding to C. S. Lewis’ version of the MBG argument, sought to explain how Jesus could be simply mistaken in claiming to be *divine*. But in mid-argument, he suddenly switched to the question of how Jesus could be simply mistaken in claiming to be *the messiah*. And of course those are two totally different questions. Several people in ancient Judaism sincerely but mistakenly claimed to be the messiah,²¹ but I am aware of no such figure who sincerely but mistakenly claimed to be God. Indeed, it seems to me quite impossible for any observant first century Jew who was not divine to have done so. Jesus is not a counter-example to that strong claim because—as Howard-Snyder and I both hold—he was *not* mistaken in claiming to be divine.

But quite apart from Beversluis, I regard the Messianic Story as implausible in the extreme. Suppose I am right that it is not easy to see how any sane religious first-century Jew could sincerely but mistakenly hold the belief, *I am divine*.²² Then it is no easier to see how such a person could similarly hold the more complex belief, *I am the messiah; the messiah is divine; therefore, I am divine*. No observant Jew, of whatever period, is ever going to condone idolatry. The issue is the belief itself, not how one arrives at it. And on that point, the Messianic Story is no better than the Beelzebub Story.

Moreover, there is no evidence in the New Testament itself that the Messianic Story applies to Jesus. Indeed, the very idea that the Messiah was divine would have been shocking to first century Jews. There were, of course, multiple views of the Messiah in the air during that time. But the belief that the Messiah was divine is a Christian idea—implicitly taught (so I believe) by Jesus—not a Jewish one.²³

VI

I conclude that the “merely mistaken” option is highly improbable. But since the “mad” and “bad” options are also highly improbable (as Howard-Snyder admits), it follows that the MBG argument still stands. It looks to be a successful piece of Christian apologetics. I still hold that it can establish the rationality of Christian belief in the divinity of Jesus.

It is important to note that I have been arguing only for this last relatively modest conclusion. I have not argued that the MBG argument establishes the *irrationality* of unbelief in the divinity of Jesus. My argument is limited in this way in part because the various probabilities, once multiplied, will surely not be so high as to render unbelief in (7) irrational. And one reason for that fact—as I have admitted all along—is that it is possible to imagine (very highly improbable) scenarios in which Jesus was either bad, or mad, or merely mistaken.

Accordingly, I only claim that the MBG argument can be used to render belief in (7) rational.²⁴

NOTES

1. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), pp. 55-56.
2. Stephen T. Davis, "Was Jesus Mad, Bad, or God?," *The Incarnation*, ed. by Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, S.J., and Gerald O'Collins, S.J. (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002), pp. 221-245.
3. Daniel Howard-Snyder, "Was Jesus Mad, Bad, or God...Or Merely Mistaken." This journal.
4. Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 268-280.
5. If Jesus was merely mistaken, he was hardly mad or bad. If he was mad, he was hardly bad (any badness was due to his madness, so to speak, not to moral culpability) or merely mistaken. If he was bad, he was hardly merely mistaken or mad (although some bad people probably have a degree of madness).
6. If the applicability of the DPA is not limited in some such way as this, it seems to me that it will have rather daunting epistemic implications for many of the things that we think we know in science, history, or even ordinary life.
7. I was assisted in making this point by Richard Swinburne.
8. I recognize that a critic of the MBG argument might claim that the probability we assign to (3a), (3b), and (3c) must be affected, i.e., lowered, by our granting that Jesus made the highly unusual claim expressed in (1). But I do not think the value will be affected significantly.
9. This is a point that Swinburne himself makes in a brief response to Plantinga on pp. 215-216 of his *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
10. These would be circumstances like: how important the proposition is, whether it makes any real difference in one's life, whether there is significant risk involved in being mistaken about it, how many people in the community I am addressing already accept it, how strongly they accept it, etc.
11. I owe this point to William Hasker.
12. Howard-Snyder, p. 25.
13. I said as much in "Was Jesus Mad, Bad, or God?" See pp. 224-225.
14. I say that because, as everyone knows, there is no end to the bizarre hypotheses that are being foisted on the public these days about Jesus.
15. Howard-Snyder, pp. 29-30.
16. Howard-Snyder, p. 31.
17. I doubt very much that Howard-Snyder considers Satan as having anything like omnipotence, and I am positive that he does not consider Satan omniscient. See the concluding sentence of the Beelzebub Story (Howard-Snyder, p. 30).
18. Howard-Snyder, p. 36.
19. See John Beversluis, *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), pp. 544-557.
20. "Was Jesus Mad, Bad, or God?," p. 223, fn. 6. One crucial point is that there is nothing in Beversluis' argument of Howard-Snyder's OT-plus-elementary-logic argument.
21. For example, Bar Kokhba, Abu Isa al-Isfahani, Severus, and an anonymous Jew from third century Crete.
22. To answer a question Howard-Snyder raised in his essay, by the sentence, "It is not easy for me to see how p could be true" I just mean something like, "Based on what I know or firmly believe, p is highly improbable."
23. The closest thing to a divine messiah in Jewish literature is in I Enoch,

where the Messiah seems to have a kind of heavenly co-regency with God. But even in this text, there is no thought of the Messiah's actually *being* God.

24. I would like to thank William Hasker, Daniel Howard-Snyder, Alvin Plantinga, Susan Peppers-Bates, and Richard Swinburne for their helpful comments.