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# Lewis on the Gospels as True Myth

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**INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume IV**

A Collection of Essays Presented at  
The Fourth

FRANCES WHITE EW BANK COLLOQUIUM

ON

**C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS**

Taylor University 2004  
Upland, Indiana

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**Lewis on the Gospels as True Myth**

Bruce W. Young

## Lewis on the Gospels as True Myth

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From an early age onward C.S. Lewis had a profound love of myth. As he himself confessed, the great myths—especially the myths of “the dying and reviving god”—attracted and moved him “provided [he] met [them] anywhere *except* in the Gospels” (*Letters* 56). Oddly, what he later came to identify as the mythic element in the New Testament initially repelled him because he found it incomprehensible. Possibly also it jarred him to find in a historical document, one coming from an anti-mythic culture, glimpses of a mythic world that he had been accustomed to thinking of as being without historical or any other kind of factual or rational basis. In a letter to his friend Arthur Greeves in which he reveals that he is “*nearly* certain that [the events recounted in the Gospels] really happened,” Lewis explains the obstacle that remains to his accepting Christianity. The main obstacle is that he “couldn’t see . . . how the life and death of Someone Else (whoever he was) 2000 years ago could help us here and now—except in so far as his *example* helped us.” But though Christ’s example is important, at the center of Christianity seemed to be something else, something about Christ’s violent and unjust death—a death portrayed as a sacrifice—that Lewis found not only “very mysterious” but even “silly or shocking” (*Letters* 55-56).

The solution to this problem would be a deepened understanding of myth, which Lewis arrived at with the help of J.R.R. Tolkien. He came to accept the Gospels as, in a sense, myth—but true myth, myth that had actually happened. But the effect of this insight on his understanding of the Gospels was not quite as simple as this formulation makes it sound. What I hope to do here is to explore what Lewis meant when he thought of the Gospels as “true myth,” how this idea affected his reading of the Gospels, and how it might enrich the experience of others in similar ways. Lewis himself

argued that Christians *ought* to be aware of and be nourished by the mythical element in the New Testament. “It is the myth,” he wrote, “that gives life,” and therefore he rejected attempts to “demythologize” the Gospels (“Myth Became Fact” 65). In reading the accounts of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, Christians should “assent to the historical fact and also receive the myth (fact though it has become) with the same imaginative embrace which we accord to all myths. The one is hardly less necessary than the other” (67). Besides considering what Lewis meant by myth and what in the Gospels he identified as mythic, I hope to determine what it is about myth that Lewis considered nourishing, so much so that he held the nourishment of myth to be virtually essential for believers in Christ.

Lewis’s first genuine encounter with myth, as described in *Surprised by Joy*, came as he read about the Norse god Balder. From “an unrhymed translation of *Tegner’s Drapa*” he read:

*I heard a voice that cried,  
Balder the beautiful  
Is dead, is dead. (Surprised 17)*

This encounter with myth was connected with a longing for something transcendent, something which (though never fully accessible “in our present mode of subjective and spatio-temporal experience” [*Pilgrim’s Regress* 204-05]) he imagined to be ultimately fulfilling. Myth, along with nature and other earthly phenomena, aroused this longing, a spiritual hunger he described as “better than any other fullness” (*Pilgrim’s Regress* 202).<sup>1</sup> But, despite the value he placed on them, Lewis considered the mythic stories and figures he loved to be wholly imaginary. “Nearly all that [he] loved [he] believed to be imaginary; nearly all that [he]

believed to be real [he] thought grim and meaningless”; he “care[d] for nothing but the gods and heroes, the garden of the Hesperides, Launcelot and the Grail” but “believe[d] in nothing but atoms and evolution and military service” (*Surprised* 170, 174). At one point he even tried abandoning or avoiding this longing he called Joy—which would have meant taking a more detached view of myth—trying to convince himself that Joy was nothing but “aesthetic experience” or “romantic delusion” (205, 201). But soon, after rereading a play by Euripides, he found himself once again “overwhelmed . . . off once more into the land of longing, [his] heart at once broken and exalted” (217). Later, as he continued to work his way through philosophical idealism to something on the verge of theism, he connected Joy with “the Absolute”—the ultimate but inaccessible reality of which the world we know is a shadow. Joy, and thus the myths that arouse the longing, would be our closest link to what otherwise cannot be known or experienced at all (221-22). Finally, when he became a full-blown theist, he was aware mainly of God as the source of our moral sense—and God, from this point of view, is “as hard as nails” (*Mere Christianity* 30). Lewis had no confidence that God would even allow him to experience Joy, though he later saw that, since God is our “only comfort” as well as “the supreme terror,” to know God and be in his presence might well be the fulfillment of this longing he named Joy (*Mere Christianity* 31; *Surprised* 230-32).

But what of myth? For one thing, if he had found the fulfillment of his longing why would he need the pale substitutes that he thought he had loved through much of his life? Part of the problem was that, though at this point he saw God as a person, he did not yet believe in the specifically biblical God and certainly not in Jesus Christ as the Son of God. He was aware of two elements in the Christian understanding that he could not connect. One was that Jesus had actually lived, at a specific time and place, had died and then (according to reports he saw as probably reliable ones) returned to life. The other was the role of Christ as redeemer, propitiation, “Lamb of God”—what seemed to him a mythic and therefore non-historical role. As he wrote to Arthur Greeves, the New Testament seems to make Christ’s historical role as an example we should follow secondary to his role as redeemer. Our response to Christ includes following his example, but the impulse for that response comes from something deeper than an admiration for his moral excellence or the wisdom of his teachings. Humphrey Carpenter has constructed a plausible narrative for what may have happened the night Lewis talked with Tolkien and Hugo Dyson, when they went along Addison’s Walk near Lewis’s room at Magdalen College on September 19, 1931. Based on the hints given in Lewis’s letters and elsewhere, Carpenter describes a conversation in which Tolkien

argues for the importance of myth in understanding human language and perception—an importance that Lewis acknowledges though he still considers myths to be “lies though breathed through silver.” “No,” Tolkien responds, “they are not lies” (see Carpenter 42-43). Since, according to Tolkien, the human mythmaking capacity is—along with reason and our moral sense—a divine endowment, there is always an element of truth in myth. As Lewis later puts it, myths—especially “about a god who dies and comes to life again”—could be called “good dreams” sent by God into the minds of the poets (*Mere Christianity* 50). This is something like what Ransom discovers in *Perelandra*: because “[t]he universe is one,” because all minds are linked, and because “in the very matter of our world, traces of the celestial commonwealth are not quite lost,” the patterns and realities that govern the cosmos are available, at least in shadowy form, to all minds. Thus, “[o]ur mythology is based on a solid reality than we dream: but it is also at an almost infinite distance from that base.” This helps explain both the value of myth and its dangers, for in human myths, we find “gleams of celestial strength and beauty falling on a jungle of filth and imbecility” (*Perelandra* 201). And indeed, much ancient myth has a disturbingly amoral, often violent side, so much so that some students of myth have argued that the mythological mentality serves primarily to make violence sacred and cover over and justify scapegoating and persecution.<sup>2</sup>

But, that night at Magdalen College, Tolkien persisted: What if the Bible—especially the Gospels—recounted myth but, instead of myth coming as fragments of truth through darkened minds, myth presented by God himself? As Tolkien may have explained it then—certainly as Lewis himself came to understand—this most assuredly did not mean the Gospel writers were deliberately writing in the mythic mode. In fact, that mode was alien to their way of thinking. They were presenting straightforward accounts of events they had experienced, so that we can (in Lewis’s view) call much in the Gospels “reportage—though it may no doubt contain errors—pretty close up to the facts; nearly as close as Boswell” (“Modern Theology” 155). God (Lewis suggests) did not author the Gospels directly. What God had authored were the events themselves. As Tolkien is imagined by Carpenter to have explained: while pagan myths were in a sense “God expressing himself [indirectly] through the minds of poets,” in Christianity “the poet who invented . . . was God Himself, and the images He used were real men and actual history” (44).

What we have then in the Gospels is a human account—no doubt an inspired human account—of “myth” that has become “fact.” In Lewis’s own words: “The old myth of the Dying God, *without ceasing to be myth*, comes down from the heaven of legend and

imagination to the earth of history. It *happens*—at a particular date, in a particular place, followed by definable historical consequences. We pass from a Balder or an Osiris, dying nobody knows when or where, to a historical Person crucified . . . *under Pontius Pilate*” (“Myth Became Fact” 66-67).

The Gospels, then, have the peculiar quality of being straightforwardly, almost naively factual accounts but at the same time (because of the events being recounted) accounts imbued with a mythic dimension. Lewis would have acknowledged the shaping and interpreting hand of the Gospel writers—that is, they knew that these events had spiritual significance and deliberately aimed at conveying that significance to readers. But Lewis emphasizes the evidence that these are—or are based on—eyewitness accounts (see “What Are We to Make of Jesus Christ?” 158-59; “Modern Theology” 154-57). The apparent contrasts within Christ’s character, the odd specific details, the straightforward way narrative and dialogue are presented—all of this suggests to Lewis either that the Gospel writers are presenting eyewitness accounts or else have “without known predecessors or successors, suddenly anticipated the whole technique of modern, novelistic, realistic narrative” (“Modern Theology” 155). In making this argument, Lewis alludes to Erich Auerbach’s masterpiece of literary analysis *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* where Auerbach, though not a Christian, finds in the Gospel according to Mark a revolutionary literary mode in which the highest and most significant matters, certainly matters that for believers far outweigh the contents of any epic or tragedy, are conveyed in a style and setting so ordinary and socially and culturally unglamorous that pagan writers would have found them entirely unsuitable for serious literary presentation (see Auerbach 41-49). As Lewis also notes, the Jews had, under divine tutelage, acquired a strong hostility to the mythic mentality dominating most ancient cultures. Religious narrative, for Jews, was tied to specific historical times and places, and, though they certainly had a sense of transcendence, this transcendence belonged to God and was not transferred to stories about heroes or supernatural beings enacting adventures or suffering horrors in a mythic realm of fantasy. Another difference might be added: the Biblical sense of transcendence is always connected with God’s holiness—his moral perfection—rather than with amoral power, as in other ancient cultures.

The Gospels, then, for Lewis had something of this anti-mythic or at least non-mythic quality—the almost pedestrian focus on ordinary life lived out in a specific time and place and rendered in an “artless, historical fashion.” As Lewis puts it, “I was by now too experienced in literary criticism to regard the Gospels as myths. They had not the mythical taste.” Yet the

“matter” of the Gospels is “precisely the matter of the great myths.” And though Jesus, as depicted in the Gospels, is “as real, as recognizable . . . as Plato’s Socrates or Boswell’s Johnson,” he is “also numinous, lit by a light from beyond the world, a god” (*Surprised* 236). Lewis used the word “numinous” elsewhere on occasion, usually in connection with myth. “Numinous” means “divine, spiritual, revealing or suggesting the presence of a god; inspiring awe and reverence” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. ‘numinous’). In the chapter “On Myth” in *An Experiment in Criticism* Lewis uses “numinous” as essentially synonymous with “awe-inspiring” and lists it as one of the six characteristics of myth (44). In this chapter Lewis discusses myth in general—he does not even mention the Gospels—but he begins to give some sense as to why he considers the mythic element in the Gospels to be essential, why he believes Christians must “receive the myth” in the Gospels as well as assent to their historical validity.

For most myths, historical validity is not even a question. Myths are essentially fictional, even if they have some historical basis. According to Lewis, the essential characteristics of myth include (1) the fact that they are “extra-literary”—that is, they do not depend on a particular literary rendition but have a powerful effect as stories with a “simple narrative shape,” an effect that comes through in either simple summaries or more elaborate versions; (2) the related fact that they depend “hardly at all on such usual narrative attractions as suspense or surprise,” so that, even if we know the story, its mere shape will continue to affect us deeply; (3) the minimizing of human sympathy—by which, as I understand it, Lewis means that the figures in myth have a universal quality leading us, not to analyze their individual personalities or pity or identify with their individual circumstances, but rather to see their stories as being the stories of “all men”; (4) content made up of the “fantastic” or “preternatural,” things impossible in ordinary circumstances; (5) the fact that they are “grave”—serious, weighty, solemn—whether the events are joyful or sad; and finally (6) the fact that they are “numinous” or “awe-inspiring” (42-44).

Despite not being written in a mythic mode, the Gospels have, for Lewis, many of the characteristics of myth. The overall narrative of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection certainly has a “simple narrative shape” that comes through in a variety of renditions, and this narrative does not affect us mainly—or perhaps at all—by the usual narrative attractions of suspense and surprise. The mythic “minimizing of human sympathy” does not describe the Gospel narratives very well—in fact, I consider this to be one of the most marked differences between the Gospels and pure myth—for we are drawn in each of the Gospels to sympathize with specific people: Mary,

Martha, Lazarus, the apostles, the woman taken in adultery, the man born blind, parents whose children have died, the father who cries “with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief” (Mark 9:24), and many others.<sup>3</sup> We are even led to feel this way about Jesus himself: Jesus says, “The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head” (Matt. 8:20); as he enters Gethsemane, “he began to be sorrowful and very heavy” (Matt. 26:37)—Mark even says he was “amazed,” or as some translate it, “awe-struck, astonished”—and on the cross Jesus cries out, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). But though deep human sympathy is clearly invited by the Gospel accounts, still there is in these accounts a dimension of transcendence and universality that affects us in something like the mythic way—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that myths approach in a shadowy way the sense of genuine transcendence we find in the Gospels.

The Gospels certainly include the “preternatural,” things ordinarily impossible, most powerfully in the accounts of the transfiguration and resurrection but also in many of the smaller miracles. The Gospels are “grave,” certainly not “comic” in any shallow way. And, as I have already noted, the Gospels are “numinous,” not only in the events recounted but especially in the figure of Jesus himself. In several books and essays, it is this encounter with Jesus as a divine being that Lewis emphasizes. He is not merely “a great moral teacher,” Lewis reminds us in *Mere Christianity* and “What Are We to Make of Jesus Christ?” He forgives sins (the prerogative of God himself), uses the divine name “I am,” and has been sending prophets for centuries (see *Mere Christianity* 51-52; “What Are We to Make of Jesus Christ?” 156-58). What is remarkable here is not that Lewis suddenly was able to conceive of a divine being; he already believed in God some years before accepting Christianity. What is new is that he sees God present in a new way in the human world—in the concrete historical world of human experience. Each step in his conversion, “from the Absolute to ‘Spirit’ and from ‘Spirit’ to ‘God,’ had been a step toward the more concrete, the more imminent, the more compulsive”; to see God now incarnate, living among us, “was a further step in the same direction” (*Surprised* 237).

This connection between the transcendent and the concrete helps explain why it matters to Lewis that we receive the Gospel accounts as, in some sense, mythic. For one thing, as Lewis’s general discussion of myth indicates, myth affects us powerfully, by its simple, inevitable shape, by its gravity, by the awe that it inspires. In other words, to receive the Gospel accounts as myth means, among other things, being receptive to their “numinous” quality, feeling them as serious and

awe-inspiring accounts, discerning the simple shape that underlies the details. We will not read the Gospels lightly as either interesting but distant historical accounts or mere collections of reasonable advice or exemplary tales. There is something in the Gospels of profound and even cosmic importance, something woven into the fabric of our souls and underlying the very structure of the universe. The awe and reverence that myth inspires us to feel is properly directed toward God. Lewis reflects that, before his conversion, he had come “far nearer to feeling” religious awe “about the Norse gods whom [he] disbelieved in than [he] had ever done about the true God” in whom (as a child) he nominally believed (*Surprised* 77). If he can now receive the Gospels as myth, that feeling of awe and reverence can appropriately be transferred to the true God.

Furthermore, Lewis believed there is something about myth that empowers it to convey truth in an especially effective way. We normally think of “truth” as something abstract and universal; we do not experience it concretely in the same way we encounter pain or joy. In fact, Lewis suggests, we cannot at one and the same time experience something concretely and think about it abstractly. Yet, Lewis says, “[o]f this tragic dilemma myth is the partial solution. In the enjoyment of a great myth we come nearest to experiencing as a concrete what can otherwise be understood only as an abstraction.” It is as if the images and events of myth convey universal truths which we experience not so much intellectually as emotionally and imaginatively. Thus, “myth is the isthmus which connects the peninsular world of thought with that vast continent we really belong to”—namely the world of direct, concrete experience. Myth is “not, like truth, abstract; nor is it, like direct experience, bound to the particular” (“Myth Became Fact” 66).

In the Gospels—or rather in the events they recount—the connecting power of myth goes one step further. Rather than simply being stories that allow us to encounter universal truths through concrete images and events, the Gospels bear witness to the actual incarnation of truth: that is, to the fact that the highest truth is personal—a Person, who becomes flesh and dwells among us. Christ doesn’t simply teach us truth (as abstraction): He is himself “the way, the truth, the life” (John 14:6). In the incarnation, Lewis sees the beginning of a healing process that will eventually characterize the “New Creation,” the redeemed and glorified world into which the fallen world will some day be transformed. In *Perelandra*, Lewis suggests that the split “of truth from myth and of both from fact” is an unfortunate result of the Fall (143-44), and elsewhere he argues that in the New Creation that split will be overcome: “the dry bones [will be] clothed again with flesh, the fact and the myth [will be]

remarried” (*Miracles* 263). The transcendent reality hinted at in myth will actually be present in the “New Creation”; the longing that Lewis calls “Joy” will finally find its fulfillment.

In the meantime, the Gospels give us not only a preview of the glory God has in store for those who love him, but a key to the meaning of the world we now inhabit. For, though it is fallen, this world retains, according to Lewis, the main features of the divine meaning with which God endowed it as its creator. The Gospels help us see this divine meaning, especially if they are read mythically: like myth, they “[take] all the things we know and [restore] to them the rich significance which has been hidden by ‘the veil of familiarity’” (“Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*” 90). Lewis’s book *Miracles* explores various ways the Gospels illuminate the world we live in. The most concentrated exposition of this idea is the chapter on “The Grand Miracle,” the Grand Miracle being the incarnation itself—“grand” for Lewis in part because it encompasses all that the Gospels tell us about Christ, including the resurrection. According to Lewis, the incarnation encompasses four patterns—what might be called mythic or archetypal patterns—that illuminate the meaning of the world as a whole: (1) the uniting of apparently contrary or incommensurable elements—in the incarnation, the divine and the human, and, in our own experience, our spiritual and animal natures (176-78); (2) the pattern of descent and ascent or death and rebirth, found in the incarnation itself and in Christ’s death, resurrection, and ascension, and also found in various ways through all of nature (178-81); (3) selectivity, found in Christ’s status as the Only Begotten Son and Messiah, the chosen one born as a member of the “chosen people,” and found also even in apparently brutal ways in the selectivity of natural processes (187-90); and (4) vicariousness—Christ’s bearing of our sins and suffering and dying in our place along with a similar pattern found through all of nature, where everything is interdependent, where all lives through or from something other than itself (190-91).

To read the Gospels mythically would for Lewis be in part to read them with an eye to patterns such as these. In the “simple narrative shape” of the Gospel accounts we would see something of the shape of the universe as a whole, something of the pattern that runs through all of nature. But this does not mean—and Lewis is emphatic about this—that Christ is just another “Nature-God.” For one thing, rather than being an expression of natural powers and processes, Christ is the Creator; he has power over Nature. It is true that underlying the Gospel accounts is something very similar to the stories of “Dying Gods” found throughout mythology, in which life is restored or a land is redeemed by a god’s death, sometimes through the annual death and rebirth of a god (see *Miracles* 181-

87). But the unique and universal claims of Christianity—the “once for all” character of the incarnation and redemption—coupled with the straightforward rendition of events in the Gospels make of Christ something quite different from these imaginary figures from the myths. He is, as Lewis puts it, not a “Nature-God” but the “God of Nature” (184, 187).

What we learn from the Gospels if we read them mythically but also historically is thus something about the nature of reality. Here (in the incarnation), Lewis says, is “the comment which makes that crabbed text [i.e., Nature or reality] plain: or rather, proves itself to be the text on which Nature was only the commentary.” In other words, what the Gospels reveal is not only the meaning of nature—not only a sense of the patterns that govern the universe. What they reveal is that the story of the universe is in fact the story of God’s working to redeem human beings, and with them all of creation, with Christ as the “pioneer and perfecter” (Hebrews 12:2 NRSV), the one who leads the way and carries out the process. The patterns we see in nature, through everyday observation or scientific discovery, are, as it were, allusions to or secondary reflections of this central story about the universe. “In science we have been reading only the notes to a poem; in Christianity we find the poem itself” (*Miracles* 212).

In Lewis’s view it is crucial that we understand these realities not simply or primarily as mental abstractions. We must understand them with our imaginations and emotions. Hence, Lewis suggests, God speaks to us through events, through stories. These stories will have a symbolic or mythic dimension, for—as Lewis puts it in a discussion of the poet Edmund Spenser—“symbols are the natural speech of the soul” (“Edmund Spenser” 137). But it is also crucial that this symbolic dimension not be separated off into the never-never land of imagination. God speaks to us through actual people and events, things that actually happen. And the ethical element is also crucial, more crucial in fact (I believe) than Lewis sometimes seemed to make it when he was focusing on the Gospels as myth. Lewis was drawn to Christianity not just because it seemed to him a true myth, but also because it seemed to him the supreme expression of the God who is truly good. True religion will appeal to that in us which is rooted to the earth—our physical, emotional, and imaginative natures—but it will also appeal to the moral and rational faculties God has given us. In Lewis’s words, true religion must be both “Thick” and “Clear”—that is, both concrete and symbolic (we might say “mythic”), on the one hand, and “philosophical, ethical and universalizing,” on the other. Christianity “breaks down the middle wall of the partition” between these aspects of our natures, taking “a convert from central and African and tell[ing] him to obey an enlightened

universalist ethic” and taking “a twentieth-century academic prig like me” (Lewis says) and “tell[ing] me to go fasting to a Mystery, to drink the blood of the Lord” (“Christian Apologetics” 102-03).

Lewis’s point, I believe, is that Christianity not only contains both elements or appeals to both dimensions of our nature but that it unites them. It should be no surprise that the central myth of Christianity is not merely the incarnation; it is the atonement, a word that literally means “making things at one.” The significance of the incarnation itself lies not merely in the combining of the divine and human but (as Augustine points out) in the divine humility, a humility that Paul explicitly invites us to imitate: the divine condescension in which Christ willingly “makes himself of no reputation,” takes on him the form of a servant, and is obedient even unto death, in order to save us.<sup>4</sup> Lewis, though without referring to myth, offers something very like this as his attempt at understanding Christ’s atoning sacrifice—that Christ did for us, and enables us to do through him, what we cannot do on our own, namely, submit, repent (which for Lewis means a “willing submission to humiliation and a kind of death”), put ourselves in God’s hands, and allow him to transform us (see *Mere Christianity* 56-58). Though Lewis couldn’t initially see how Christ’s example could save us, what Lewis says about the atonement suggests, perhaps, that just as the incarnation combines myth and fact, so in the atonement Christ appeals to us and works in us through his example as well as through his power as a mythic figure; he affects our intellect and moral sense as well as our imaginations.

Though Lewis’s conversion involved his understanding the Gospels as “true myth,” it seems to me they took on an even more profound meaning for him as he came to see them as a divinely inspired revelation of the divine nature, of the love extended to us by the Father and the Son and of the promise that we might be partakers of the divine life revealed in Christ. Lewis’s own attempts at myth making—I am thinking especially of the *Chronicles of Narnia* and *Till We Have Faces*—have much the same aim, but of course Lewis would insist that they are in every way secondary to the Gospels. For the Gospels do not derive from the imagination of poets but instead report, and allow us to participate in, real and concrete encounters with the Son of God himself.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See also *Surprised* 7, 17-18, 72-73, 118-19, 166-70, 219-20, and throughout.

<sup>2</sup> See especially René Girard, “The Bible Is Not a Myth,” *The Girard Reader*, *Things Hidden*, and *Violence and the Sacred*.

<sup>3</sup> All Biblical quotations are from the King James Version unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>4</sup> See *Philippians* 2:5-8 and *Augustine* 152 (VII.18), 250-51 (X.43).

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