

On the Trail of the Trilemma

Choosing Your Path on the Identity of Jesus

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[[Modern Abuses of the Argument](#)] [[The Logic Behind the Trilemma](#)] [[Jesus the Liar?](#)] [[Jesus the Honestly Mistaken?](#)] [[Jesus the Lunatic?](#)]

The evidence is clear: Jesus did make claims to be divine; His followers did not create or misunderstand His claims. So now we have the natural question: Was Jesus who He claimed to be?

The so-called "trilemma" question has been grossly abused by all sides of the discussion. On the one hand, it is often presented without any consideration of the titles and claims of Jesus, merely assuming that a mere claim "Jesus said..." is enough. But it isn't: We have to give good reason to suppose that Jesus DID say what He did; otherwise, the argument goes nowhere. Craig [Crai.ApIn] rightly points out:

It is naive and outdated to simply trot out the dilemma "liar, lunatic or Lord" and adduce several proof texts where Jesus claims to be the Son of God...(If this apologetic is to work we must do the requisite spadework of sorting out those claims of Jesus that can be established as authentic, and then draw out their implications. This will involve not only mastering Greek but also the methods of modern criticism and the criteria of authenticity...

(The argument) is often more effective when used defensively than offensively...used offensively to convince someone that Jesus was divine, this apologetic can become derouted...Many people will say Jesus was a man from outer space...I think that it is more effective to argue that Jesus' claims provide the religio-historical context in which the resurrection becomes significant, as it confirms those claims...

On the other hand, attempts to "refute" it have tried to fuddle the argument by adding one or more options, or by saying that the options already stated are not clear enough - which is itself rather a poor methodology! To argue that the trilemma is refuted by showing the horns not to be clear-cut and distinct possibilities is correct ONLY if one can prove ALL of the horns to be such. But, for example, if only two of the horns are "fuzzy" but the third one "tight", then the trilemma has simply converted to a powerful dilemma and the problem is still in our faces. At the same time, arguing that the trilemma is refuted by showing that there are more than three possibilities simply turns it from a bothersome trilemma into a bothersome tetralemma. Skeptics who continually say that the trilemma is "refuted" whenever another option is added miss the point. Only the "tri" part is refuted - the "lemma" is still there, whether is a tri-, a quadra-, a quinto-, or whatever number you please! Of course, it is not surprising to find skeptics attempting to lump options onto the 'lemma - but we will see that the attempts put forward are fairly thin!

Let us forget, for a moment, the very word "trilemma" and make this consideration: Even without the formal structure of the trilemma argument, the possibilities break down thusly:

1. **Either Jesus claimed to be divine, or He did not.** If He did not, words were put in his mouth by someone else. We have already addressed this in [this essay](#). If He did make such claims, then:
2. **Either Jesus was right about those claims, or He was wrong.** If He was right, Christianity is true. If He was wrong, then -
3. **He either knew He was wrong, or did not know He was wrong.** The first phrase is the "liar" option of the trilemma. As for the second:
4. **If He did not know he was wrong, He lacked knowledge because of an error in judgment.** Errors in judgment have only two sources: A properly working mind, or an improperly working mind. The latter is the "lunatic" option. The former is the "honestly mistaken" option, the most common skeptical attempt to add to the trilemma.

Therefore, the basic formal logical structure of the argument remains sound - and the trilemma must be reckoned with one way or the other. To that matter, we now turn.

Jesus, the Noble Liar?

The idea that Jesus simply lied about His identity is not new. Craig [ibid.] cites these examples:

Karl Barhdht theorized that Jesus belonged to a secret order of the Essenes and wanted to get Israel to abandon the idea of a political Messiah in favor of a purely spiritual one. To this end, He claimed to be the Messiah, arranged His triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and planned to fake His death and resurrection. Luke the physician was on hand to administer drugs which would help Jesus survive the rigors of crucifixion.

Karl Venturini proposed a simpler version of Barhdht's theory. He posited that Jesus was a member of a "secret society" who wanted to shift attention from an anticipated political Messiah to the idea of a spiritual one. His plan backfired when He was crucified, but He was placed in a tomb alive. Fellow "secret society" members dressed in white scared off the guards at the tomb and rescued Jesus.

Others suggest Jesus may have felt that his teachings on behavior were so important as to validate falsely claiming special authority from (or at an extreme, as) God in order to persuade people to follow him. Jesus could have believed in all sincerity that following his teachings would lead people into the kingdom of God and/or eternal life, and said what he thought was necessary to get people to follow him. In doing so, to the extent that such a lie was against those teachings, he may have thought he was forfeiting his own eternal security.

But there are many problems with this explanation. If Jesus was so noble as it implies, why did He choose the ignoble method of trickery to get people to follow Him? Were not more noble methods available? If Jesus was so noble, but had no divine power, why did He claim to be able to heal people when He could not?

More importantly, where is there any historical precedent for such alleged actions as Jesus'? The true historical precedent for Jesus' actions - if we are to delineate any - is the Exodus and the miraculous signs at Sinai. God indicates that He displays His wonders so that His people would obey him, and realize that He truly was I AM. This, of course, is not lying to trick people into believing in a supernatural authority or to incite them to correct behavior; this is confirmation of

true authority. Similarly, in Jesus' case, miracles were used to prove His deity; then, and only then, could Jesus appeal to the people to follow His ways. This position fails to acknowledge that it would be much more difficult to get Jews to believe a human was God incarnate than it would be to get them to adopt morally superior principles - many of which, we should add, they would have agreed with anyway! Indeed, being that Jesus based his teachings on a true understanding of the OT, what need was there to go as far as trickery and blasphemy?

Finally, there is this question: Why would Jesus go to such great lengths for the sake of teachings that (other than His claims to divinity) were not that radical to first-century Jewish ears in the first place? There would be no point in dying for ethics that everyone already knew about!

There are two other considerations to the "liar" supposition. First, if Jesus' main concern was to get as many people into the Kingdom of God as possible, then this would have been the worst way to do it! If Jesus had lied like this, then everyone who followed Him would worship Him, rather than the true God of Israel. That's a one-way ticket to damnation in Jewish eyes!

Second, If Jesus were only a man and claimed to be God, was He an atheist himself? Did He think that the God of the Old Testament - who said, for example, "I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols," (Is 42.8) and "I will not yield my glory to another," (Is. 48.11) - would not judge Him according to these standards? Also, how is it that Jesus, if He was a liar, somehow passed on standards of truth to Paul ("...we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God." [2 Cor 4.2]; "For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you." [1 Thess. 2.3])? To have lied about being God, Jesus would have had to have had no fear of God whatsoever. He must have had some assurance that YHWH wasn't going to incinerate Him for claiming to be divine and accepting the worship of others. To not fear God, Jesus would have had to have been an atheist - or else have had it "in" with the Father, which is precisely what Christianity claims of Him!

Let us make it clear: By Jewish understanding, to have accepted someone as the divine who was not would have been idolatry. To claim that you were divine when you were not would therefore have been unspeakably evil! As proof of this fact, we only need recall that the Jewish reaction to claims by the Roman Emperor to deity was quite extreme - so much so that the mighty Romans granted the Jews leave of the requirement to accept the Emperor as a god. Romer notes [John Romer, *Testament*, 132] that Jewish commentaries during the Roman occupation of Judea presented the theme that "there was but one Temple and one God, and that he was not the emperor of Rome, and that even to pretend for a moment that he was a deep sin." If Jesus made false claims to be divine in this social context, He would have been perpetrating what was viewed as a "deep sin" - an unspeakable evil - upon others. By Jewish belief, He would have been risking His followers' damnation by having them violate the primary commandment against idolatry!

(Skeptics may counter this with a simple "But the Jews were simply mistaken--no one is damned at all, and for Jesus be REALLY evil, he must have caused greater 'damage' than just theological error! ALL OF THEM were misled, so what difference could Jesus' claims have made anyway?" Of course, evil cannot be correlated with mere error in belief or misplaced hope, unless it can be demonstrated that belief/hope structures were somehow very consequential in themselves, which is indeed the Christian position. Obviously, Jesus' deception would only 'misguided' if ALL of them were wrong (and it would be malicious in the extreme); if belief does affect eternity (a central tenet of Jesus) and if He is correct, THEN it would have been unspeakably evil for Jesus to act and speak as He did.

In summary, the whole idea of Jesus as a noble liar is intuitively fishy, highly speculative, and runs against the grain of every social and historical aspect of the situation as we know it. That is why the propositions of Barhdt and Venturini have been wafted away on the winds of history and are now only available in moldy textbooks or as citations in apologetics manuals: They are purely speculative and totally counter-evidentiary. Indeed, who in history has gone to their death for the

sake of something like this that they knew was a lie? Many have died for principles they believed were true and righteous - Socrates, for example, and the noble souls who hid Jews in their cellars to protect them from the Nazis - but where has there ever been someone so "noble" that they perpetrated the most outrageous possible lie, something they KNEW was a lie, and died for it, even a lie that was beneficial? The "noble liar" assertion is as hollow as it is speculative; it is groundless, baseless, and worthless.

"Whoops! I Thought I Was God..." - Jesus, the Honestly Mistaken?

And now there is this slight variation, one almost, but not quite, good enough to turn the trilemma into a quadrilemma: Was Jesus simply honestly mistaken about being who He was? And was it not really that crazy to claim to be a Savior or to be divine or to be Messiah? After all, weren't there a lot of Messianic pretenders in that time period?

As for the latter, I have seen no indication that ANY Messianic pretender of the time made the same type of claims. Outside of Judaism, we do have the word "savior" used in Greeco-Roman terms; indeed, there were "levels" of demi-gods and saviors in the polytheistic cultures. But this level of imprecision was not operative in 1st-century Jewry. Their problem was quite the opposite! Their rather precise monotheism was not to be compromised with "ambiguous" incarnations at all!

But now to the key question: Is it possible that Jesus was a "mistaken messiah"? I really doubt that this argument can be made to have any force. If one takes oneself to be messiah, and/or divine, then eventually one must ACT like a messiah - righting wrongs, coming to the rescue like Underdog, healing disease, raising the dead, trampling the military opposition, kicking Romans into oblivion, and so on. If one fails in said attempts, then eventually the rug is pulled out from underneath, and we must either face facts and find a job sorting laundry, or else drive ourselves to a frenzy trying to make ourselves be the messiah we want to be! I simply see no way for this option to hold water - if Jesus went about doing the things that He did, He would have been VERY lucky to get as far as the Crucifixion; and then we have the Resurrection appearances and the work of the Apostles to explain! Bottom line: The character and nature of the claims of Jesus are such that proof of being mistaken would all too easily come to pass!

By way of application, let's look at arguments from the skeptical side of this issue, first from the Secular Web's Mr. Friendly, Robert Price:

The Trilemma argument trades on the strangeness to modern ears of claims to saviorhood, messiahship, world-rule, etc. Such claims are so outrageous, it is implied, that the claimant must be either crazy or right. Who else would dare say such things? But in Jesus' day and culture such things were not at all outrageous. They were part of the inherited religious worldview and seemed as real and natural as "the Rapture" does to Evangelicals despite the incredulity of outsiders.

Price is not kind enough to provide us with specific examples here, so I really cannot perform an evaluation of these alleged other claims. But in order to make these claims even remotely problematic, Price must show that they were on the order of those of Jesus - and I have seen no indication that ANY Messianic pretender of the time made the same type of claims. (Price is *somewhat* correct when the issue of "savior" is used in Greeco-Roman terms. Indeed, there were "levels" of demi-gods and saviors in the polytheistic cultures. But, unfortunately, this level of imprecision was not operative in 1st century Jewry. Their problem was quite the opposite! Their rather precise monotheism was not to be compromised with "ambiguous" incarnations at all! The

whole concept of a God-man was MUCH stranger to "Jewish" ears than the Rapture would be to "outsiders" today!)

Continuing with Price:

What about other historical figures who have claimed to be a manifestation of God, the Messiah, or the eschatological Prophet? One may certainly point to some who may have been frauds, though the number might decline if we tried to penetrate hostile propaganda besmirching their reputations (cf. Mark 5:22.) Also, certainly some have been mentally ill, e.g., Jim Jones, Charles Manson, and Sabbatai Sevi, who seems to have been manic-depressive. But it is equally true that others such as Muhammad, the Bab, and modern eastern "god-men" like Meher Baba and Sai Baba were apparently neither charlatans nor paranoid psychotics. According to the Trilemma argument, shouldn't their claims also be accepted? I doubt that Evangelical apologists would welcome this prospect.

I am not sure what Price means by citing Mark 5:22 here; it is rather an innocuous verse: "Then one of the synagogue rulers, named Jairus, came there. Seeing Jesus, he fell at his feet..." At any rate, the Baba brothers make their claims within an entirely different view of reality -- not within the parameters of exclusivistic Jewish monotheism!

And now let us look at Mr. Still's version of the "honesty mistaken" routine:

...this argument is not valid if it can be shown that a situation exists where all of its premises are true and yet p is false. In analytic philosophy, this is commonly demonstrated by way of counterexample, so let me provide a thought experiment as a counterexample to Holding's argument. Joe claims that Sally was born in New York City. He makes this claim based upon what he considers to be justifiable evidence. Sally told him that she was born in New York City. Further, Sally has fond memories of growing up there and when asked, her mother supports Sally's claim. Sally even passes a lie-detector test when asked whether or not she was born in New York City. Joe is also convinced that Sally is a sane person and not prone to telling lies. Therefore, Joe's third-person claim to knowledge demonstrates that Sally is (1) telling the truth, (2) not purposefully lying, and it is clear that (3) he does not misunderstand Sally's assertion. Unfortunately, Sally was born in London rather than New York City. Sally was given up for adoption at birth and her legal mother does not want her to learn of her true origins. This counterexample demonstrates that at least one situation exists where all of the premises are true and yet the conclusion is false. I am sure that the clever reader can think of several others.

This invalidates Holding's modified version of the Trilemma.

Does it really? Unfortunately, Still commits a basic category mistake here. The fact of being "born in New York City" is not quite the same as "being God the Son" or "being God incarnate"! To demonstrate this, let us substitute words to see what Still's argument above requires:

Peter claims that Jesus was God incarnate. He makes this claim based upon what he considers to be justifiable evidence. Jesus told him that He was God incarnate. Further, Jesus has fond memories of being God and when asked, His mother supports Jesus's claim. Jesus even passes a lie-detector test when asked whether or not He is God. Peter is also convinced that Jesus is a sane person and not prone to telling lies. Therefore, Peter's third-person claim to knowledge demonstrates that Jesus is (1) telling the truth, (2) not purposefully lying, and it is clear that (3) he does not misunderstand Jesus's assertion. Unfortunately, Jesus was actually Zeus incarnate rather than God incarnate. Jesus was actually descended from Zeus and His mother does not want Him to learn of His true origins.

Thus the analogy does not hold, and the problem remains: How could one be mistaken about being God incarnate? The very thing that needs to be answered is not even touched upon! The character and nature of the claims of Jesus are such that proof of being mistaken would all too easily come to pass! Still's comparison is completely irrelevant.

Still then alludes to the problem of terminological confusion, but again, his argument is irrelevant. The claims of Jesus are far too clear-cut to suffer from such ambiguities as suggested, and at any rate, someone making such claims would certainly be asked for clarification if they were not understood - as, indeed, Jesus was often questioned by the religious authorities regarding His claims about Himself!

The section above recently (10/2001, and now 11/2001) was the subject of a response issued by a skeptic. As we will see the response consists mainly of vague generalization and "hurling the elephant" (a process whereby the critic throws summary arguments concerning complex issues, merely assuming the large complex of ideas behind their argument to be true without consideration of contrary data, usually because they have merely accepted the arguments uncritically from favored sources). This continues in a second response, in which our critic argues that this article "never discusses the possibility of Jesus' mental state evolving over the course of his brief ministry." Of course it doesn't -- there is no evidence that a condition as serious as the "Christ complex" is an evolving condition. Moreover, if it were, one would expect an increase in mental derangement resulting in a sliding scale of claims; yet this is not what we see at all -- the claims of Jesus are the same, and just as clear, from the beginning of his ministry to the end. The idea of a "growing delusion" is a fantasy that is unsupported by any of the data in the Gospels, and is also not supported by our critic in terms of providing a parallel in psychology. Now let's have a look at the other responses:

I said: "If one takes oneself to be messiah, and/or divine, then eventually one must ACT like a messiah..." The critic replied:

Yes, and Jesus did. He preached, prophesied imminent apocalypse, attracted devoted followers, performed faith healings and exorcisms, and even had a vision of the devil after fasting 40 days in the desert. All of these actions are consistent with Jesus being neither liar nor lunatic, but rather a preacher, faith-healer, and apocalyptic prophet who in the months leading up to his anticipated execution came to the deluded belief that he was the Jewish Messiah and even the divine savior of mankind.

The response here is superfluous, since my point is not developed here, but later on. However, I rather wonder about the equation of "faith healings" -- the healings described in the Gospels are of conditions that, for the most part, were quite visible and obvious -- we are not talking about AIDS being "cured" or legs being "lengthened" out of pant legs that are too long; we are talking about withered arms, men born blind, lepers, and so on. These "faith healings" would all to obviously have been able to be recognized as failures, which is more or less the point I am making. In response to this the critic now leans again on Carrier, and says:

Most of the afflictions Jesus is said to have cured are potentially psychological or psychosomatic (possession, hysterical blindness or paralysis) and thus subject to non-miraculous faith-healing. Others (fever, chronic bleeding) are subject to natural remission. The three people Jesus reanimates (Luke 7:15, Mark 5:39, John 11) in the gospels were only recently deceased (if even dead at all), and pronouncement of death was not an exact science in ancient times. Never in the gospels does Jesus raise anyone long since dead. Never does Jesus restore a missing eye or severed limb. Richard Carrier notes: "the closest the accounts come is: Jesus heals the severed ear of a man who came to arrest him (Lk. 22:51), but in all the other accounts Jesus does not heal the ear (Mt. 26:51, Mk. 14:47; and the most detailed account, Jn. 18:10), which any historian regards as sufficient grounds to reject a story as an embellishment."

Obviously the issue of "possession" is one that is a matter of faith either way; but what's this nonsense about "hysterical" blindness or paralysis? None of the subjects said to be blind or paralyzed show any evidence in the texts of having been "hysterical" -- this is strictly a supposition of the critic. In other words, they must yet again postulate additional data to make their thesis work; they must also denigrate ancient people and insult their intelligence (re the reanimations) and call a writer a liar outright. (Again, if reportage in just one source of any detail - - no matter how "spectacular" a critic thinks it is, based on their own subjective judgments -- is "sufficient grounds to reject" an element as an embellishment, then reams of material in parallel accounts across the board must likewise be "rejected." In my parallels of Lincoln biographies, one in particular contains much more detail than the other three bios do not report; some of this material left unreported, even concerning the same event, while not on the scale of a miracle, is of such "importance" that one could easily construct plausible arguments accusing the single writer of "embellishment." If this argument is going to be used, it needs to be applied and proven, not merely thrown in the air to the cheers of those who happen to like it!)

A few words are needed on some commentary from Carrier offered. It addresses leprosy and refers to the "unusual multitude of lepers that appear in the gospels," but this seems a mathematical miracle; the only lepers in the gospels are the group of ten in Luke 12:17 (living on a social group for the sake of survival as we might expect); the one man healed of leprosy (Luke 5:13 and parallels), and Simon the leper (Matthew 26), who wasn't even healed. That's only 12 lepers, which doesn't seem like much of an "unusual multitude"; Carrier's following comment about the disease being "a certain target for the subconscious to mimic" not only is not supported by the numerical data, but also seems to suggest that the ancients desired to be in this condition!

We have already agreed that certain healing miracles *could* fit a "psychosomatic" explanation, and yet, one is constrained to ask if it isn't rather too convenient to psychologize persons not personally known and removed from us by such a distance. At any rate I would not exclude the psychologically ill from Jesus' care, and there is still a real problem to be cared for, one which only the best-trained psychologists doing close experiments have dealt with today. Was Jesus trained to the level of these modern psychologists?

Carrier offers more "skeptical paradigm" solutions to other healings, mainly interpreting or explaining away as many of them as psychosomatic as possible, but also suspecting that the man born blind wasn't really that bad off, and that maybe his family was exaggerating his condition to make some dough. When you can't refute the evidence, character assassination is a handy tool, and easiest when the assassinated are already dead. We are told that the story in Luke 7 "is actually identical to various stories told about famous doctors to justify their renowned skill," which is very nice and what we would expect from a physician writing an account, but what does literary style have to do with historicity? In the case of Lazarus, Carrier is desperate enough to suggest: "...the witnesses anticipate a rotting smell (Jn. 11:39), but there is no evidence that such a smell was confirmed after the tomb was unsealed." Sure -- it was just the touch John needed to record everyone yelling, "PAYEEEEEEE-UUUUUU!"

I go on to say, "If one fails in said attempts, then eventually the rug is pulled out from underneath." The critic replies:

Right -- about a year into his ministry, Jesus was executed.

The term of Jesus' ministry was three years, not one -- the critic is here "hurling an elephant," the uncritically accepted argument that the Synoptics report the whole of Jesus' ministry within a year's time frame, when in fact they give no chronological markers at all to justify this conclusion. John's gospel gives markers that suggest a ministry of at least three years -- and the critic will need to deal with these arguments before he can just hum-drumly accept them for his purposes here. (The critic does no better in his second reply, saying that his "understanding is that secular scholarship prefers the Synoptic timeline" and quoting the Encyclopedia Britannica for support!

Yes, we shall not be expecting any critical analysis of the data at all! Well, if our critic won't do the research, [I will!](#)) That said -- if we want to speak of rugs in this context, I would reply, after the same "sound bite" fashion: "Right indeed! And three days after the execution, Jesus was resurrected and his divine status vindicated." But indeed, as I say, "if Jesus went about doing the things that He did, He would have been VERY lucky to get as far as the Crucifixion..." The critic replies with this undocumented sound bite:

*The gospels say that Jesus tended to consciously avoid dangerous places to preach because it wasn't "his time". When it *was* "his time", his "luck" didn't take last very long at all.*

Note well: The critic (in the first response) provides no citations here -- this is typical skeptical scholarship at work -- but is clearly only vaguely familiar with the NT text and that at some point Jesus did have a "time". But the documentation isn't on their side. I find only one reference to Jesus hiding himself (John 8:59) and passages that refer to "the time was come that he should be received up, he stedfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51). No connection is made indicating that Jesus was hiding out until it was "his time"! The critic needs to actually do some work and document his arguments before spitting them out; and he sure tried -- he comes up with four other cites, not *one* of them referring to "hiding":

Jn 7:1 "After this, Jesus went around in Galilee, purposely staying away from Judea because the Jews there were waiting to take his life."

Mt 12:14-15 "But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus. Aware of this, Jesus withdrew from that place"

Mk 3:6-7 "Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus. Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the lake"

Luke 13:31,33 "some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, 'Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you.' He replied, '[...] In any case, I must keep going today and tomorrow and the next day--for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!'

Oopsy! Our critic is either playing games here or still hasn't learned how to read. The cites from Matthew and Mark describe the *same event*, right after the healing of a withered arm in the synagogue. Do we have a major "skeeadddle" here? Hardly! Where did Jesus go? He left "that place" -- what place? Most likely the synagogue; he went, where? Mark says to the lake, the Sea of Galilee, which is what Capernaum (where the synagogue) is right on the shore of. Matthew doesn't get this specific, but he does have Jesus rapping with Pharisees in the very next set of pericopes! If this is "hiding out" then it wasn't done very well!

The cite from Luke is rather silly: After saying this, Jesus doesn't leave for Jerusalem until much later (17:11)! Either Jesus wasn't running, or the threat wasn't real! That leaves John 7:1, but then in the very next few verses, Jesus *does* go to Jerusalem! So, zero for four on the new guesses, folks, and still no concrete pattern of avoidance -- to the contrary, an overall tendency to *defy* the danger -- and still no connection to a "time" when things would be right! (And let's keep in mind, when I say, "if Jesus went about doing the things that He did, He would have been VERY lucky to get as far as the Crucifixion...", I'm not just talking about him being killed! The prospective actions of a would-be Messiah would involve a VERY high "attempt to failure ratio" if the claimant didn't actually have the goods! Enough failed healings, enough teachings offending the local Pharisees, enough of any risk, and you're Messianic campaign is doomed to mass failure of the sort that doesn't satisfy the problem of Christian origins! For more on this, see my reply to Robert Price [here](#) and the comparison to Sabbatai Sevi.)

Concerning the "sound bite" above, our critic shows his mettle by appealing yet again to "consensus of professional secular scholarship." Oh well, no critical analysis yet again...

I say: "The character and nature of the claims of Jesus are such that proof of being mistaken would all too easily come to pass!" The critic replies:

And indeed it did when he was executed, and his predictions [Mt 16:28, Lk 9:27, Mk 13:30, Lk 21:32, Mt 24:34] of an imminent Second Coming failed.

Hear that trumpeting sound? It isn't the Second Coming; it's the sound of an elephant flying by after being hurled. The critic is clearly still in the Dark Ages of critical analysis -- the passages referred to were fulfilled in 70 AD with the destruction of Jerusalem. Let them now follow *my* elephant! (We've developed a [larger set of articles](#) on this subject at this time. Our critic says: "It's not clear how an article of *any* size can equate the destruction of Jerusalem with seeing the Son of Man in clouds coming in his kingdom." Hey, that's the problem with people who don't do their homework!)

Here's the most amusing portion. I wrote: "I have seen no indication that ANY Messianic pretender of the time made the same type of claims." The critic answers:

Richard Carrier writes in "Why I Don't Buy The Resurrection Story" 4b: "we know for a fact that many individuals were claiming to be, or were proclaimed to be, messiahs of one form or another in Jesus' day (Josephus recounts several), and everyone in Judaea was looking for just this sort of thing: God made manifest to liberate Israel--physically or spiritually. The Danielic prophecy was likely on everyone's mind, and Josephus and Seuetonius report that the Jews were expecting a messiah to appear in these very decades."

Ha ha! There's someone else quoting Carrier to not answer again! Carrier doesn't show that anyone made the same sort of claims that Jesus did. We don't "know for a fact" *at all* that anyone came up saying, "I am the Messiah" or "I am the Son of Man" or any of that. None of the people recorded by Josephus are recorded as *saying* any of this. We have people who took some putative military action against Rome, and failed miserably, but no claimants or claims at all -- one suggests that they might well have made a claim to be Messiah had their little schemes succeeded, but it remains that Carrier's response offers no response at all. When one must appeal to what was "likely on everyone's mind" rather than to specifics that are documented, one is engaging a counsel of despair indeed! (Our critic doesn't provide examples in reply, but makes light of my alleged "lack of knowledge" above on Jesus "hiding," then says he's "not inclined to take [my] word for it that no passages in Josephus can substantiate Carrier's statement." That's it, don't do your own research -- but it's not Carrier vs. Holding, it's Carrier vs. J. C. O'Neill, author of *Who Did Jesus Think He Was?*, my source for the information. Let it be stressed here that there is no doubt that there were those who tried to instigate some eschatological sign, and may well have claimed divine power was in the offing from them, but the key words "I am Messiah!" are *never* recorded, and given the broad conceptions of the Messiah as one who was a political or religious leader, but not *necessarily* divine, we are talking about more than just "I am Messiah" here -- I am also referring to Jesus' other divine claims, such as those we list in Mark above, and the claim to be God's [Wisdom](#). Does Carrier have any candidates who made that claim?)

I say: "How could one be mistaken about being God incarnate? [...] A normal, healthy human psyche cannot sincerely hold the sincere conviction of its own Godhood!" The critic replies with a few more elephants:

Since Jesus left no known writings, we only have the second-hand word of evangelical Christian authors that Jesus fully held this conviction. Note that in the earliest gospel

(Mark), Jesus never calls himself Christ/Messiah, is reluctant for his special nature to be known, and (as he does in Matthew) despairs on the cross. It is possible that Jesus held a growing delusion of his own importance that became a belief in his divinity only after (or shortly before) the time of his (well-anticipated) execution.

It's easy enough to throw the implication of fabrication around, of course; actually *proving it out* is something I think is quite beyond this critic's capability. The average skeptical reader, already convinced that malfeasance is afoot, certainly wouldn't argue and would find such hand-waving adequate; but there are many issues to be resolved before this can be accepted: What proof is there that these second-hand claims are not accurate? (Merely, "because I don't think they are" is not adequate.) What is it about their "second-handedness" that makes them suspect, and how does this apply to secular works of history consistently (since they offer so much "second hand" info themselves)? What proof indeed is there that Matthew and John at least are not "first hand" (the critic merely assumes the standard lines about Gospel authorship)? If these claims were invented, why would they be invented, and what about the historical and social repercussions of such invention, which are not at all in evidence? Scholarship by sound bite may sound brilliant to the agreeable, but for those who critically think through and sift the arguments, they are woefully inadequate.

In answer to this our critic throws out a skeptical faith-spiel to bring tears to the eyes of Skeptics worldwide. I am said to be asking "an unreasonable burden of proof" because:

1. "Belief in 'fabrication' by the authors of the gospels is not strictly necessary to doubt their accuracy. The gospels are probably the result of some combination of misinterpretation, exaggeration, rationalization, delusion, deception (of, if not by, the authors' sources) -- i.e., the processes that typically drive the development of myths." In other words, let's throw another elephant in the ring, since the first one slipped and landed on top of us! Never mind proving any of these individually, or making critical comparisons; just throw out enough uncertainties to make the skeptical audience happy and be done with it! The same goes for this one:
2. "The near-impossible task of 'proving' fabrication is not necessary to consider it (along with these other processes) to be the most likely explanation for the gospel story." The scent of vague generalization hangs heavily here, intermixed heavily with elephant! We are told: "Holding seems to think that inconsistent second-hand religious proselytizations are to be taken as accurate merely because there is no 'proof' they are not." Inconsistent? By cracky, where's that study of variations among oral tradition, comparisons to other parallel accounts of the same event by ancient historians, the study of the principles of redaction criticism? Here's my little elephant: [the Lincoln bios](#). Explain to *me* why these works, inconsistent, second- and third-hand, attempts to make Lincoln look like a great guy, should be taken as accurate, or not, on that basis! (Our critic naively says, "Secular works of history typically are not 'written that you may believe' that somebody is divine 'and that by believing you may have life in his name' [Jn 20:31].") No, but they *are* always written with some sort of point of view to pose; John at least is straightforward in his intent! And may we ask, if indeed there was good news such as this to report, how would our critic expect John or others to report it *without* being accused of having an agenda to the point of fabrication?!? I smell the circular reasoning of a skeptic behind this complaint!
3. Regarding Matthew and John above, we are told: "Is any acceptance of professional secular scholarly consensus a 'mere assum[ption]'? Does Holding 'merely assume the standard line' that America declared independence in 1776?" I wouldn't, if I had investigated the arguments for independence in 1776 and found them full of holes. Our enterprising critic shows little propensity for engaging specifics (for he ignores completely the link in the paragraph below) but here's [another](#). I would be especially interested in any commentary on how the Gospels would have to be dated late, and

attributed to other than their stated authors, in light of the criteria applied to secular documents of the same period like Tacitus' *Annals*.

4. Regarding my comment about claims being invented, our critic responds: "I never said that Jesus' belief in his own divinity was an 'invention' by the gospel authors or their sources." Then what is the point of specifying that we only have second-hand word, and Jesus left no writings of his own? Our critic backpedals mightily to avoid a collision with specifics: "On the contrary, Jesus probably held a growing delusion of his own importance that led to a belief in his outright divinity only after (or shortly before) the time of his (well-anticipated) execution." This is a fanciful interpretation, but it finds no evidence in the consistent portrait across the board in the Gospels, much less is any relevant evidence given from the psychological field. I have my Rokeach; where is the reply? "It also seems likely that after the crucifixion, everything the disciples could remember Jesus saying was interpreted as supporting his divinity. Such misinterpretation and exaggeration are not the same thing as 'invention'." If that is the case, then our critic needs to do a systematic study of all of the claims of Jesus (as I analyze them [here](#)), and explain their "non-divinity" interpretation plausibly within the proper socio-religious context, and *then* explain how the misunderstandings came about. Of course our critic cannot and will not do this; see below.

In terms of Mark's Gospel, there are quite a few little elephants running around here. The idea that Mark is earliest is itself an elephant of some assumption; see [here](#) for our growing response, which I doubt of the critic has the ability to deal with, since it involves legwork rather than sound bites. The idea that "Jesus never calls himself Christ/Messiah" flounders on a few considerations: there are plenty of places where Jesus takes a prerogative indicating such a position, even prior to the triumphal entry, which is clearly a messianic act -- claiming to forgive sins (2:5); enacting the role of divine Wisdom by eating with sinners (2:15), claiming to be the Son of Man (2:28, 8:31, 9:9, etc.), walking on water, which the OT says that only God can do (4:35ff; cf. Job 9:8, Ps. 77:19); implicitly acknowledging Peter's identification by not rebuking it (8:29ff), saying that one's soul is dependent on one's reaction to him (8:35) and that God is his Father, and that he will come with God's angels (8:38), a self-reference to the Messiah (9:41), again saying belief in him is paramount to eternal life (9:42). Even in Mark's "action" gospel where Jesus says comparatively little about anything, let alone about himself, there are ample indications that he knew and proclaimed his own position. As for "is reluctant for his special nature to be known," the critic forgets, even as Price did, that in spite of this, the special nature did get known, and also isn't cognizant of the [social reasons](#) for circumspection in such claims. The critic is simply wrong about [despair on the cross](#).

In response to the above, our critic offers little substantive as usual. Instead, for the cites in Mark, he takes the path of least resistance, denial: "Does Holding really think that the Mark's reciting of such a fantastic claim should convince a skeptic that the historical Jesus, the carpenter from Nazareth, believed at any point in his life that he was divine?" So the critic is indeed claiming bald fabrication, and as before, begging the very question at issue. (Indeed, this is rather odd in light of complaints that Jesus nowhere says something like, "I am God/Messiah"! What's to stop our critic saying in such cases, "Does Holding really think that the Mark's reciting of such a fantastic statement should convince a skeptic that the historical Jesus, the carpenter from Nazareth, believed at any point in his life that he was divine?" In other words, what kind of proof *would* be acceptable, not shrugged off as fabrication and not taken as too miraculous to be believed?!?) Regarding my essay on the Son of Man title, our critic offers this crust of bread: "The fact that there is so much debate over how firmly Jesus claimed divinity makes it at least plausible that a) Jesus was not always convinced of his divinity, and b) some of his stronger claims of divinity in the gospels are later misinterpretations and interpolations." Ha ha! No, let's not study that data and weigh the arguments; let's just argue that the controversy and discussion equates with uncertainty! Does our critic really

think that his reciting of such generalizations should convince a surveyor of the relevant literature that he deserves any attention? Are we expected to listen to someone who says that they "lack the inclination to rehash what appears to be a settled conclusion of secular scholarly consensus"? And to think that all this time skeptics have been telling me, "Don't let others do your thinking for you!"

Regarding the comment about Price, our critic states: "Holding thus acknowledges Jesus' said reluctance, but seems unable to consider the possibility that it was due to his lack of conviction in his divinity. Holding's linked essay says there are 'at least three social reasons why Jesus had to be circumspect in His proclamations of divinity', but only gives two." The latter is an editing issue which I have now corrected; as for "acknowledging" it, yes I did, but as I showed, it *made no difference!* And again, our critic appeals to is as yet not even proven to be a psychological possibility: How could one "lack conviction" in one's divinity? If one "lacks conviction" of this, then one (if still sane) does not keep doing things to suggest one's divinity (within the Jewish context), or make claims about one's divinity; one gives up and gets on with life. If one is *not sane*, then it is not possible to have the cognitive ability to "lack conviction" in the first place! (I will respond to our critic's issue re the two reasons for circumspection, and the cry from the cross, within the respective essays, other than this point: "[Perhaps] Jesus really thought Lazarus was dead until it was later discovered that the historical Lazarus was in fact not dead." This is no more than that skeptical circular reasoning at work again, explaining things within the assumed paradigm without bothering with the details or issues that come as a result.)

I said: "They had only a few hundred followers, at most; Christianity gained thousands in just a few months!" Our critic replies with the same reasoning about "Christian sources" as above and plays the bigot about "gaining a few thousand followers in an age of superstition and ignorance" -- playing on the pride of skeptics who think they have the intellectual goods on the rest of the world as it is, is certainly an effective debate tactic, but it's hard to keep that pride from being swallowed when someone like our critic has shown this much ignorance of the background data and has spewed forth little more than uncritically-accepted sound bites! The fact is that ancient people were no more "superstitious" or "ignorant" than any of us -- they were just as capable of critical thinking, and just as capable of sifting evidence. Our critic makes much of my not "denying the characterization" of the ancients -- to which I say, there is no more need to deny it than there is to deny the characterization of Jews as usurers or the characterization of African-Americans as lazy and slothful!

Our critic replies further, but as importing the reply into this essay would be ungainly, we now place it [here](#).

Jesus, the Candidate for Psychiatric Medication?

The "lunatic" option is not quite as fishy as that of the "noble liar." As Moreland points out, it is "open to say, as Albert Schweitzer did, that Jesus was mentally deranged and had a mistaken view of himself," although such a claim would be difficult to prove, for Jesus "consistently behaves under pressure as one in complete possession of his faculties" [More.ScCy, 155]. The portrait of Jesus in the Gospels does not square with the lunacy theory, except by argument from silence. We may speculate, as Nikos Kazantzakis did, that Jesus was subject to periodic episodes of dysfunction that simply were not recorded in the Gospels. But as will be shown, if Jesus was mentally deranged, then He was surely

the most peculiar and unusual case of lunacy in general - and the "Messiah complex" in particular - in history.

Some may note, in support of this idea, that the Gospel of John records that some thought that Jesus was mad:

At these words the Jews were again divided. Many of them said, "He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?" But others said, "These are not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?"

How interesting that these verses (John 10:19-21) present a microcosm of the pro and con sides of the lunatic option! Now of course, none of the people present were licensed psychologists or psychiatrists, so when they said that Jesus was "raving mad," it was undoubtedly an emotive expression of their outrage at what Jesus said and how much it offended their sensibilities - not an actual psychological evaluation! Indeed, what mental health professional would today suggest demon-possession? Are we to accept that evaluation as competent also? And what of the contrary opinion that Jesus was not mad? So, this passage is hardly useful as evidence of Jesus being insane.

More broadly, it may be objected that even "crazy" people gain followers today - what about Manson, Jones, and Koresh? Their own followers would portray them in a positive light, so why could not the disciples of Jesus have merely presented the "best side" of their Master and covered up His problems? Could not someone with this sort of disorder appear perfectly "normal" at times?

This argument fails for two major reasons.

First, Manson, et al. did not achieve the sort of following that Jesus did and as quickly as He did. They had only a few hundred followers, at most; Christianity gained thousands in just a few months! Christianity did not grow up in a vacuum, or among people who had never seen or heard Jesus in person; it began in Jerusalem and flourished in Judea, places where Jesus spent a great deal of time and was known by many people. Christianity's rapid spread, and the full-blown Christology we have mentioned elsewhere, is testimony to this.

Second, this argument relies on a lack of knowledge of the nature of the psychological disorder in question. This is not a case of with rather simple beliefs in their alleged talents, attractiveness or inspiration; despite claims to the contrary, the data indicates that a normal, healthy human psyche cannot sincerely hold the sincere conviction of its own Godhood!

In response to these claims, this author interviewed a psychiatric doctor who has had a broad range of experience dealing with a variety of serious delusions, including the "Messiah complex" (the term is not used often now), or the belief that one is God, Jesus, or even Buddha or Mohammed. The psychiatrist was not told about the nature of this project, and is not known to be a Christian; the Messiah complex was discussed generically. The psychiatrist made several points which serve as rebuttals to the argument above. Further information and confirmation was gathered from one of the few case studies of the "Messiah complex" ever published, Milton Rokeach's book, *The Three Christs of Ypsilanti*. [Roke.3ChrY] Rokeach brought together three sufferers of this complex and had them interact with one another, to see what might happen if three "Christs" came together, and if logic would compel them to realize that they all could not be right! One comes to realize in reading this material that if Jesus truly had suffered this

sort of delusion, He was indeed a most unusual case - unlike none other ever recorded! Let's look at some of the aspects of this rare and peculiar disorder.

First, while many delusions, such as believing that the government is after you, do not keep their sufferers from leading an otherwise normal life, the delusion that one is divine represents another level of pathology entirely. The Messiah complex is consistent, does not lend itself to periods of lucidity, and does not (according to both the psychiatrist and the information in Rokeach) develop slowly over time. It is accompanied by other serious behavioral problems, none of which we have evidence Jesus exhibited.

Rokeach's three "Christs" illustrate this fact amply. Each had some problems before the Messiah complex set in, but none were as severe as the Messiah complex itself - they were no more than everyday problems, such as difficulty dealing with loved ones. Rokeach's attempt to get through to the Christs met with only marginal success, and in only one case, temporarily. They evidenced many other severe behavioral problems, and the citations below serve as exemplars. The three Christs were named Leon, Clyde, and Joseph.

Leon (5) identified himself with a Latin title that translated to "Lord of Lords, and King of Kings, Simple Christian Boy Psychiatrist." Among Leon's wise sayings were comments of an explicitly sexual nature which are too vulgar to reprint here.

A wise saying from Clyde (9): "Why, there's money coming from heaven and from the old country and from the sea of heaven. The carloads, trainloads, and boatloads...7700 cars a mile and that runs from upper Stock Lake...God marked eight of our trails himself."

Another morsel of wisdom from Leon (49): "Why see the mite in another man's eye when there is a bean in your own?"

The Christs were asked about the identities of their two companions. >From Joseph (50-1): "I'm the only God. Clyde and Rex (Leon) are patients in a mental hospital and their being patients proves that they are insane." From Leon (51): Joseph is a fallen angel and a reincarnation of Davy Jones; Clyde is a reincarnation of King Mathias. From Clyde (51): "The other two are just machines talking from inside human bodies."

Clyde (51) insisted that he was not a patient in the hospital, but the owner of the hospital and adjoining lands, and he was just there to check things out.

Wisdom from Leon, who was the most "Christlike" of the triad (55): "I believe in truthful bullsh*t. There are two types of bullsh*t. The genuine is truth and truth can be compared to dung. It looks like dung, smells like it, and acts like it. When you put it on top of soil, it makes it grow." To Clyde he later says (57): "My father was a white dove and so was my mother, and later she became a witch. But your foster father was a sandpiper."

Rokeach notes elsewhere incidences of physical violence. The above comments are typical of those found throughout the study.

Second point: a patient of a divinity complex is not likely to fool many people, and not for very long. That is, of course, assuming that they are not locked up in a mental ward somewhere and are only fooling their fellow patients! (Perhaps some would like to say that the Apostles were crazy, also?) The teachings of someone with a divinity complex may include sound morality, but that morality is obviously parroted from other sources, showing almost no creativity. The remainder of the subjects' teachings include

esoteric, obscure, or even nonsensical ideas, such as Manson's hateful racist rhetoric. (One particular proclaimed "Jesus" in a mental institution quoted from the Gospels, but also preached on the virtue of murder!) Manson, Jones and Koresh fooled only a few people; Jesus had thousands of followers, who would have been familiar with Him, within a few weeks after His death and resurrection! This would not have been likely to happen if He had had any peculiarities in His teaching or behavior, as the divinity complex requires - especially among pious Jews! Think, again, of our Ypsilanti Christs. Can we imagine the reaction if Jesus suddenly started making sexual allusions or started referring to "truthful bullsh*t" and different types of dung in the Sermon on the Mount or on the steps of the Temple? Wouldn't incidences like that be wondrous grist for the Pharisaic mill? How long would it be before Jesus' followers disappeared and He was sitting on a hillside preaching to ladybugs and blades of grass?

Third, subjects of the Messiah complex generally demand attention and are very egotistical. While they may also exhibit generosity and kindness, subjects of a divinity delusion will try to make themselves the center of attention and display extreme selfishness and self-promotion. Jesus does not exhibit this type of behavior in the Gospels, but as we see from the above, the Ypsilanti Christs did.

Consider, then, these questions in light of the above:

- The Ypsilanti Christs were imitating Jesus. If Jesus had a divinity complex, who was He imitating?
- How far would Jesus have gotten if He had acted like the Ypsilanti Christs at any time in His life or ministry? Would He have gained any following whatsoever?
- Even skeptics agree that Jesus was a good moral teacher. However, being a good moral teacher implies you know something about personal psychology as well. The irony, pointed out by many authors including C. S. Lewis, is that with this "lunatic" option, Jesus knew enough about reality (human nature) and psychology to prescribe morality to others so they could live the best possible life, but somehow was mistaken about his own psychology/nature. In other words, the expert of human nature who knew how to live the proper life did not understand himself properly!

In short, while we may argue that Jesus was deranged, it can not be in any way proven from the evidence that we have in the Gospels - and as the above shows, if He was deranged, then He was certainly the most unusual case of the Messiah complex ever recorded!

Conclusion

The trilemma, once the information is set before us, is well-nigh irrefutable. One can paste options to it, of course, and make it a "higher"-lemma; and one can also speculate until the cows come home. But I have yet to see a new option that is viable - the "honestly mistaken" routine has yet to cut the mustard.

Sources

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 6. Roke.3ChrY - Rokeach, Milton. *The Three Christs of Ypsilanti*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964.
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