

Was Jesus Mad, Bad, or God?

Stephen T. Davis

p. 221

I

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

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

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

And even J. A. T. Robinson, in the midst of a discussion of the Fourth Gospel in which he argues for its early dating and the

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

p. 222

general historical reliability of its picture of Jesus, can say: ‘No sane person goes about saying “Before Abraham was I am” or “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood shall

live forever.” These are theological interpretations, not literal utterances. Yet at the deepest level of faith they may indeed be the truth about the eternal Word of life, made flesh in this supremely individual and uniquely moral man of history.²

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

It is odd that the MBG argument is subject to such differing evaluations—all the way from people who endorse and use it, presumably because they consider it a good argument,⁵ to people

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

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

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

⁵ Two contemporary apologists who make use of the argument are W. L. Craig and P. Kreeft. See W. L. Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1984), 233-54, and P. Kreeft and R. K. Tracelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 150-74. For a

who dismiss it as unworthy of serious consideration.⁶ Is it a good argument, or not?⁷ Probably no central issue of Christian belief depends on the argument. Orthodox Christians could go on believing in the divinity of Jesus even if the argument fails. (On the other hand, if the argument succeeds, those who deny the incarnation at the very least have some explaining to do.) But the frequency with which the argument appears in the popular defences of the divinity of Jesus, as well as its almost total absence from discussions about the status of Jesus by professional theologians and biblical scholars, makes one curious what to make of the argument.

The present paper constitutes a qualified defence of one version of the argument. I will claim that the MBG argument, properly understood, can establish the rationality of belief

in the incarnation of Jesus. But a caveat is called for: I do not want to be interpreted as implying that any validation of Jesus' divinity must rest solely on what Jesus himself (explicitly or implicitly) claimed to be. Along with the memory of Jesus' sayings and doings, the post-Easter response to his death and resurrection (as well as the coming of the Holy Spirit) also played a crucial role in forming the early Christians' confession of Jesus as their divine Lord and Son of God. Even if it concentrates on what we know of Jesus' pre-Easter activity, the MBG argument should not be taken to belittle or

more extended discussion of the argument, see P. Kreeft, *Between Heaven and Hell: A Dialog Somewhere Beyond Death* with John F. Kennedy, C. S. Lewis, and Aldous Huxley (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1982). See also J. M. Boice, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 275-7.

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

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

p. 224

ignore the post-Easter developments. I am definitely not suggesting that the MBG argument is the only or even the best argument Christians can give for the divinity of Jesus.

II

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

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

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

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

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

But premise (3) *can* be questioned. Let us say that the statement, ‘Jesus was mad’, means that he was insane or mentally deluded, just like those confused and frequently institutionalized people today who sincerely believe themselves to be the Virgin Mary or Napoleon.

p. 225

Let us say that the statement, ‘Jesus was bad’, means that he was a liar, or was at least lying about who he was, just like someone today who intentionally deceives people by claiming to be someone else.

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

(9) Any good person who mistakenly claims to be divine is mad

is false? Or is it probable that

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

is false?

These are obviously difficult questions. I am inclined to accept both (9) and (10) (and thus (3) as well), but I do not know how to prove them. Certainly a sane and good person could be sincerely mistaken in holding the extremely bizarre belief that she is divine (assuming she uses the word ‘divine’, as Christians normally do in this context, i.e. as indicating a robust identity with the omnipotent, omniscient, loving creator of the world).

There *is* something extremely odd about the notion of a sincere, good, and sane person mistakenly claiming to be God. Nor do I consider it possible for an *otherwise* perfectly sane and good person mistakenly to consider herself to be God. Accordingly, (9) and (10) (and thus (3)), seem to have a high degree of plausibility. I conclude, then, that while (3) may be false, it is most probably true and can stand as a premise in a successful argument.

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

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

p. 226

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

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

Or else:

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

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

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

But Peter Kreeft argues convincingly that Jesus shows none of the character traits usually associated with those who have delusions of grandeur or ‘divinity complexes’. Such people are easily recognized by their egotism, narcissism, inflexibility, predictable behaviour, and inability to relate understandingly and lovingly to others.¹¹ Other seriously disturbed people show signs of extreme irritability, debilitating anxiety, or

inappropriate beliefs and behaviour. This is not the sort of picture of Jesus that we form by reading the Gospels. We live in an age when all sorts of bizarre claims about the historical Jesus are confidently made. But few Scripture scholars of any theological stripe

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

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

p. 227

seriously entertain the possibility that Jesus was either a lunatic or a liar. When we return below to premise (1) we will have to enter more deeply into the question of the reliability of the New Testament picture of Jesus. Suffice it to say here that there seems every good reason to accept both (4) and (5).¹²

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

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

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

What then is an *implicit* claim that p is true? Well, there appear to be several ways of implicitly claiming that p is true. (1) One might implicitly claim that p is true by explicitly asserting that x, y, and z are true, where x, y, and z logically entail p. If one were explicitly assert 'R. E. Lee was a Confederate general' and 'R. E. Lee was a famous general' and 'R. E. Lee was a great general', that could be

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

taken as an implicit claim to the effect that ‘R. E. Lee was a great and famous Confederate general’. (2) Or one might implicitly claim that p is true by explicitly asserting x, y, and z, where only people who hold that p is true can hold that x, y, and z are true. If one were explicitly to assert that ‘R. E. Lee was a great general’, that could be taken as an implicit claim to the effect that ‘R. E. Lee was a human being’.¹³ (3) Most importantly, one might implicitly claim that p is true by *doing* action A, where the only people, or the only sensible people, who do A are people who believe p. Suppose that Jones, tired and perspiring at the end of a long run, bends over and drinks from a drinking fountain. This might be taken as an implicit claim on Jones’s part to the effect that ‘The liquid emanating from this drinking fountain is potable’.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

III

As noted in Section I, there appear to be four main criticisms that can be raised against the MBG argument. First, it presupposes that we know what it is like to be God. Second, it presupposes a naïve world-view, one that allows for special divine acts in history. Third (the same point as the third option just discussed), it misinterprets

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

p. 230

what Jesus meant by the statements about himself that we find in the Gospels. Fourth, it presupposes a precritical view of the Gospels (and especially John), one that views them (and it) as straightforward history. Let us consider these objections in turn. (When we get to the fourth objection, we will also be replying to the fourth option noted at the end of Section III---that the high Christological statements attributed to Jesus in the Gospels are authentic.)

As to the first criticism, it is not easy to understand precisely what MacKinnon had in mind. What he said was that the MBG argument presupposes that we know what it is like to be God. Of course it is true that we do not know what it is like to be God. But it is hard to grasp exactly why the MBG arguer must presuppose that we have that knowledge. Let's make a distinction between *knowing what it is like to be God* and *knowing what God is like*. It is surely true that it would border on blasphemy for those who use the

MBG argument—or anybody else, for that matter—to presuppose that they know what it is like to be God. In the fullest sense, we don't even know what it is like to be another human being, or what it is like to be a bat.¹⁵

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

It is surely true that the MBG argument presupposes that we know something of what God is like. If a person is morally despicable, that person is not God. If a person makes insane claims, that person is not God. But, as noted, Christians hold that we do know what God is like (to the extent that it has been revealed to us by God),¹⁶ and there seems to be nothing blasphemous or otherwise theologically untoward here. For the MBG argument to

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

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

p. 231

work, our knowledge of God need not be comprehensive; we need to know only a little about God. So the partialness of our knowledge of God need not constitute a problem for the MBG argument.

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

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

As to the third objection, the violent reactions of Jesus' enemies in texts cited (and in many other texts where Jesus speaks about himself, some from the Synoptics) seem to preclude any such minimalist interpretation as, 'Jesus just meant that he felt extraordinarily close to God'. As well as the reactions in the above citations, note the argument of the chief priests at John's trial account: 'We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God' (John 19:7). It would hardly have constituted an offence worthy of arrest and execution had Jesus simply been declaring his own unity of purpose or will with the Father, or claiming to have a special place in God's plan. Odd, maybe; egotistical, maybe; but hardly blasphemous. Notice

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

p. 232

further that Jesus did not step in to correct the impression his enemies apparently gained from hearing his words.

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

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

I V

Is this a good objection? Well, there is much in the neighborhood that is beyond reproach. It is true that the Gospels are statements of faith with definite theological agendas rather than 'facts-only' biographies of Jesus. (The writer of John even admits as much—see John 20:31.) It is also almost certainly true that John's Gospel was the last canonical gospel written, and thus the furthest removed from the events it records. But it is a long way from these sensible admissions about the Gospels to the point that none of the sayings of Jesus that imply or seem to imply his own divinity can be authentic. Let us see what can be said on behalf of the historical reliability of some of the statements Jesus makes about himself in the Gospel, especially in the Synoptics. I will *not* presuppose the

view that the evangelists were offering straightforward, theologically neutral history. Moreover, I take it as given that the church translated, edited, rearranged, recontextualised, paraphrased, abbreviated, and expanded the sayings of Jesus. Furthermore, since the NT was written in Greek, then assuming that Jesus spoke and taught in

p. 233

Aramaic, precisely none of the sayings attributed to Jesus in the Gospels constitute his *ipsissima verba* (except possibly those few sayings that are cited in Aramaic).

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

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

Is this true? I am going to argue that it is. But let me first note three things that I am not claiming. First, I am not claiming that Jesus went about saying ‘I am God’ or making any sort of *explicit* claim to status as deity. The radical monotheism to which first-century Judaism was committed, in all its various forms, made anything like that impossible. Second, I am not claiming that Jesus’ consciousness of his divinity was expressed by him in the language of later creedal orthodoxy: for example, ‘truly divine and truly human’, ‘of one substance with the Father’, ‘Second Person of the Blessed Trinity’, etc. Third, I am not claiming to be able to psychoanalyse Jesus. As N. T. Wright points out, historians are frequently concerned with the motivation and self-understanding of these figures they write about, especially as they find expression in what these figures can sensibly be concluded to have said and done, and that is what I am doing here.¹⁸

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

How do we go about deciding what someone believes or implicitly

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

p. 234

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

I am going to present my argument in two stages. The first will presuppose the basic correctness of the methods and conclusions of some of the most radical of biblical critics.¹⁹ Its aim is to open the door to the possibility of *showing*, even on the methods of people like Bultmann, Perrin, and the members of the Jesus Seminar, that Jesus implicitly taught his own divinity. The second stage (which contains five sub-arguments) will try to confirm the point that Jesus *actually did* this very thing. At this second stage, I will continue to eschew any naïve or ahistorical view of the Gospels, but will no longer consider myself limited by the views of the radical critics.

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

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

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

p. 235

Notice that prayers addressed to Jesus can be found from the earliest times. It is significant that Greek-speaking churches preserved in Aramaic the cry *Maranatha* ('Our Lord, come!') (1 Cor. 16:22; Didache 10:6); this shows its primitive origin. Personal prayers to Jesus seem to have been commonplace (2 Cor. 12:8; 1 Thess. 3:11-13; 2 Thess. 2:16-17; 3:5, 16; Acts 1:24; 7:59-60). There were also doxologies addressed to Christ, or to Christ and the Father together, although most appear in relatively late NT texts (2 Tim.

4:18; 2 Pet. 3:18; Rev. 1:5-6, 13; cf. 7:10). In earlier texts, doxologies with the phrase ‘through Jesus Christ’ appear (Rom. 16:27; cf. 2 Cor. 1:20). Hymns of praise to Christ were also common (Phil. 2:6-11; 1 Tim. 3:16; cf. Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16).²¹

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

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

²¹ The hymn from Phil. 2, in particular, witnesses to the way in which early Christians viewed the crucified and exalted Jesus as meriting the adoration of the universe. In *The Changing Faces of Jesus* (London: Penguin, 2000), Geza Vermes has recently suggested that a later, anonymous copyist inserted this hymn into the text of the letter (pp. 78-79)—a proposal which enjoys no support from the New Testament MS evidence.

²² Hurtado, ‘Pre-70 C.E. Jewish Opposition’, 5-6, 10.

²³ ‘Jesus, Worship of’, 815.

p. 236

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

Interestingly, the Synoptic Gospels, and especially Matthew, opt for the second alternative. That does not settle the case, because for now we are accepting the methodology and conclusions of some of the radical critics, and many of them regard Matthew’s Gospel as an unreliable guide to the life of Jesus. Still, Matthew commonly uses one or another form of the word *proskynesis* (obeisance, prostration before someone in worship) in relation to Jesus. Jesus is worshipped by the wise men from the East (2:2,

11), by the disciples in the boat (14:33), by Mary Magdalene and the other Mary after the resurrection (28:9), and by the eleven disciples on the mountain (28:17). Bauckham argues that 'Matthew's consistent use of the word *proskynein* and his emphasis on the point show that he intends a kind of reverence which, paid to any other human, he would have regarded as idolatrous'.²⁵

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

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

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

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

²⁵ 'Jesus, Worship of', 813.

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

p. 237

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

On a different vein, notice:

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

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

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

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

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

where Jesus is clearly opposing and correcting the Mosaic Law. Proper burial, especially of one's relatives, was one of the most sacred duties in Palestinian Judaism (cf. Gen. 50:5-6; Lev. 21:2-3;

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

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

p. 238

Tobit 4:3); this duty took precedence over the study of Torah, Temple service, circumcision rites, and even reciting the *Shema* (Megillah, 3b; Berakath 3:1). Accordingly, Jesus was declaring that the need for people immediately and unconditionally to become his disciples took precedence even over the solemn responsibility to bury one's own father.

It would be helpful to ask at this point what sort of first-century Jew would take upon himself the authority to set aside requirements of the Mosaic law and replace them with his own teachings? It seems that Jesus' view of his own authority was such that he took the duty to follow him as a far more urgent task than burying one's father. Gruenler pointedly asks, 'Who could possibly make such an offensive and insensitive statement except one who is absolutely convinced that following him is worth more than anything else in the world?'²⁹ In other words, it is probable that Jesus considered himself to be divinely authoritative.

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

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

The 'love your enemies' piece of this text is coloured red by the Jesus Seminar; they are suspicious of the rest of it (it is either black or grey); but Perrin accepts the whole antithesis as authentic. The point is that those who were once considered unforgivable enemies (Gentiles, outcasts, sinners, etc.) are now, in the light of the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God in Jesus, seen as recipients of God's love and forgiveness, and as

worthy participants in table-fellowship in the kingdom of God. Jesus is again apparently taking upon himself the authority to reorder religious life, in this case around the principles of love and forgiveness. We see this same point more fully and dramatically in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32; coloured pink by the Jesus Seminar). Gruenler comments: 'Only one who is conscious of exercising divine privileges (or is mad) could assume the right to proclaim the eschatological presence of the forgiveness of sins with such authority....[Jesus]

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

p. 239

is consciously speaking as the voice of God on matters that belong only to God, and accordingly is creating a new and decisive Christology which far exceeds in claim to authority the messianic models of Judaism.³⁰ Jesus' idea seems to have been that salvation has arrived in his own person and ministry, that salvation for humans is to be understood in terms of his own person and mission, and that he can speak with divine authority. Jesus had an extraordinarily high opinion of himself and his mission.

Notice finally the parable of the wicked tenants in Mark 12:1-9 (coloured gray by the Jesus Seminar but pink in the Gospel of Thomas (65:1-7)).³¹ The owner of the vineyard unsuccessfully sends two employees to collect the harvest, and then finally sends his son, whom the tenants recognize as the son and heir, and then murder him. Clearly, the son in the parable allegorically stands for Jesus himself, who is different from and superior to God's previous emissaries (the prophets), and who is indeed God's son and heir.

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

³⁰ *Ibid.* 46.

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

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

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

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

First, Jesus assumed for himself the divine prerogative to forgive sins (see Mark 2:5, 10; Luke 7:48). Now, all human beings as moral agents own the prerogative to forgive sins *that have been committed against them*, but only God (or God incarnate) can *forgive sins*. Some have objected to this point. John Hick, for example, argues that Jesus did not usurp God’s prerogatives, but only ‘pronounced forgiveness, which is not the prerogative of God, but of the priesthood’.³³ But this is hardly a convincing argument. For one thing, it concedes part of the point at issue, namely that Jesus was usurping prerogatives that were not his. He was a layman, not of the priestly tribe, and was forgiving sins outside what were understood to be the divinely established means of obtaining forgiveness. More importantly, there are several texts that cannot be reconciled with Hick’s argument. Note the story of the healing of the paralytic in Mark 2:1-12. There is no evidence here on the part of the paralytic or any of the religious acts normally requisite for forgiveness—no sorrow for his sins, confession, repentance, sacrifi-

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

cal acts as the temple, etc. This is surely the reason the scribes were so incensed when Jesus said to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven’. They said ‘Why does this fellow speak in this way? Who can forgive sins but God alone?’ In other words, the violent reaction of the scribes belies Hick’s interpretation of such texts.

Second, the intimate, almost blasphemous way Jesus addressed God (usually translated ‘*Abba*, Father!’—something analogous to our English expression ‘Papa’) indicates at least a uniquely close relationship to God. I suspect the amazement caused by this novel way of speaking to God—whose name was sacred to first-century Jews—was the reason

that the church remembered and imitated it (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6). Hick also objects to this point. ‘*Abba*’ was fairly commonly used of God in first-century Judaism, he claims, and simply meant ‘father’; while Jesus certainly sensed that God was his Heavenly Father, this had nothing to do with incarnation.³⁴ But other scholars deny that there are any Jewish parallels to referring to God in prayer the way Jesus does; nobody has ever produced a convincing example of *Abba* being used of God in pre-Christian, first-century Judaism.³⁵ The argument that Jesus’ use of *Abba* shows a consciousness on his part of a unique position in relation to God stands. Jesus very probably thought of himself as God’s special son.³⁶

Third, Jesus spoke ‘with authority’, not citing sources or precedents of famous rabbis. He was no mere prophet or religious teacher (as is so often asserted about him today); no such person would have acted and spoken with such independence of the Mosaic law as Jesus did. Note the way he quotes, and then corrects, the Mosaic teaching about divorce in the Sermon on the Mount

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

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

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

p. 242

(Matt. 5:31-32; cf. Mark 10:2-12). Jesus spoke, not as if he were speaking on *behalf of God* (he did not say, as the prophets had done, ‘Thus says the Lord’), but *as if he were divine*, delivering the truth to human beings. As J. A. T. Robinson said, ‘his is epitomized in his characteristic and distinctive form of address, “Amen, I say to you”... While a pious Jew concluded his prayer with an “Amen”, ...Jesus prefaces his words with an “Amen”, thus identifying God with what he would say.’³⁷ As Raymond Brown points out, nowhere in the Gospels does it say anything like, ‘The word of God came to Jesus.’ The idea instead seems to have been that he already had or even (in John’s terminology) *was* the word.³⁸ His words are true and binding because of his own personal position and authority; he is in a position to give the Law’s true meaning, to reveal God’s will.

Ernst Kasemann argues that Jesus’ ‘but I say to you’ language ‘embodies a claim to an authority which rivals and challenges that of Moses’.³⁹ The fact that Jesus claimed Moses-like authority, an authority to supersede all other authorities, has been noticed, and reacted to negatively, by contemporary Jewish scholars who write about Jesus. For example, Shalom Ben-Chorin says: ‘The sense of the unique, absolute authority that is evident from [Jesus’] way of acting remains deeply problematic for the Jewish view of

Jesus.³⁷ And Jacob Neusner states⁴¹ that Jesus' attitude toward the Torah makes him want to ask: 'Who do you think you are? God?'⁴² It is highly significant that Jesus assumed for himself the authority to reinterpret and even overrule the OT Law (see Matt. 5:21-48; Mark 2:23-8), again something no mere human being could do. Jesus considered his words as permanent and indestructible (Mark 13:31). In short, Jesus did not think of himself as just another prophetic spokesperson for God; he spoke as if he were divine.

Fourth, even in the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus said things that can sensibly be interpreted as implicit claims to divinity. I see no way of

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

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

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

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

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

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

p. 243

ruling out as inauthentic Jesus' claim to be 'the Christ, the Son of the Blessed' (Mark 14:61-2), which the high priest took to be blasphemy. Notice finally this claim, the so-called 'Johannine thunderbolt', which seems a kind of bridge from the Christology of the Synoptics to the Christology of the Fourth Gospel: 'All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him' (Matt. 11:27).⁴³ Here Jesus seems to be claiming to be the Son of God in a unique and exclusive sense, the only true and authoritative revelation of the Father.

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

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

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

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

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

⁴⁶ A Brief note about the Christology of the Fourth Gospel: it is often pointed out that alongside the texts such as those cited above that seem to indicate Jesus' oneness with God and equality with the Father, there are texts that point toward Jesus' dependence on the Father, who is greater than he (see 7:16; 5:19, 30-31; 14:28). My only comment is that the best way to keep both sorts of texts theologically in view is the classic doctrine of the incarnation, where Jesus is both 'fully divine' and 'begotten of the Father'.

p. 244

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

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

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

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

Whether the MBG argument is a successful argument accordingly depends on what 'success' for an argument amounts to. That is, it depends on what is taken to be the goal, purpose, or aim of the argument. And of course there are many quite different ways of envisioning the goal or purpose of the MBG argument (or indeed of any deductive argument). Suppose the goal of the MBG argument were *to convince all nonbelievers in the incarnation of Jesus to believe in it or to constitute an argument that rationally should convince all nonbelievers in the incarnation of Jesus to believe in it*. Then one must doubt that the MBG argument can count as successful. Few nonbelievers will be converted by it; no matter how hard we argue

p. 245

for the truth of premise (1) (or even premises (3), (4), or (5)), the nonbeliever can go on disputing it (or them). Indeed, it seems a nonbeliever in the incarnation can always say something like this: ‘I do not know whether Jesus was mad, bad, honestly mistaken, or never said or implied that he was divine—after all, that was twenty centuries ago, and by now it’s hard to tell—but one thing I do know is that he was not divine.’

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

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

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