C. S. Lewis’s Use of Scripture in the ‘Liar, Lunatic, Lord’ Argument

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ABSTRACT:
C. S. Lewis’s ‘Liar, Lunatic, Lord’ argument elicits important questions about Jesus and scriptural interpretation that need addressing, not least because of its immense popularity in some Christian circles. Did Jesus really go about saying that he was God, or the Son of God, or that he had always existed? After examining the biblical record, must one conclude that Jesus was either a liar, a lunatic, or God? Are there really no alternatives? The point of this paper is most emphatically not to attempt to disprove Jesus’ divinity, but rather to demonstrate that Lewis’s use of the gospels is insufficient to prove it. The paper argues that even without deeming the gospels ‘legends,’ but rather accepting them as a reliable portrayal of the words of Jesus, Lewis’s argument falls short because he fails to put the gospels into their first-century context. He instead reads post-Nicene Christology into Hellenistic Judeo-Christian documents.

C. S. Lewis makes his best known argument about Jesus repeatedly in the Lewisian corpus.2 The Problem of Pain presents it in its most

1 This paper has benefitted enormously from the comments, suggestions, and critiques of several attendees of the 2012 annual meeting of the Catholic Biblical Association, including Amy-Jill Levine, Geoffrey Miller, Pheme Perkins, and Peter S. Williamson, who heard it in a much shorter version. Thanks also go to my Missouri State colleagues Mark Given and Charlie Hedrick, and especially to Edith Humphrey, who did me the honor of challenging my thinking at every turn. All errors are most definitely my own.

2 Lewis did not invent this argument, but rather restated it in his own inimitable way. P. H. Brazier outlines the history of the argument prior to Lewis in his article ‘“God … or a Bad, or Mad, Man”: C. S. Lewis’s Argument for Christ—A Systematic Theological, Historical and Philosophical Analysis of Aut Deus aut Malus Homo,’ Heythrop Journal, 55.1 (2014), pp. 1-30.
succinct form as a dilemma:

There was a man born among [the] Jews who claimed to be, or to be the son of, or to be ‘one with’, the Something which is at once the awful haunter of nature and the giver of the moral law. The claim is so shocking ... that only two views of this man are possible. Either he was a raving lunatic of an unusually abominable type, or else He was, and is, precisely what He said. There is no middle way. If the records make the first hypothesis unacceptable, you must submit to the second.³

He uses different terms—to be [God], to be the son of [God], and to be one with [God]—but here and elsewhere he clearly understands each to be synonymous with the others.

He applies the same basic argument to Lucy in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, but there it is a trilemma rather than the stark dilemma that he sets out in *The Problem of Pain*. When Lucy insists on the reality of her time in Narnia, she is either crazy, or she is lying, or she is telling the truth, Professor Kirke tells her worried siblings. These are the only possible options. ‘Logic! Why don’t they teach logic at these schools?’ he exclaims in exasperation.⁴

*Mere Christianity* also presents a trilemma. Lewis builds his argument like this: Among the 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.’ But such views, Lewis notes, are problematic in monotheistic Judaism, which has no room for two powers in heaven.⁵

In both *Mere Christianity* and a relatively obscure but important essay, ‘What Are We to Make of Jesus Christ?’, Lewis emphasizes the idea of Jesus’ forgiveness of sins. Jesus claimed to forgive sins not only against himself, which any person can do, but anyone’s sins

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: Scholastic, 1995), p. 48. In this case the trilemma works.
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against any other person. ‘This makes sense,’ he writes, ‘only if He was the God whose laws are broken.’ Anyone else who claims to do so must be 1) silly or conceited, to the point of being a lunatic, ‘on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg’ (surely one of the best turns of phrase in twentieth-century apologetics); 2) as evil as ‘the Devil of Hell,’ or 3) who he says he is, the Son of God (which Lewis takes to mean ontologically equal to God). In other words, Jesus is either a liar, a lunatic, or the Lord, or, alternatively, mad, bad, or God. 6

Despite Peter Kreeft’s assertion that this argument is so ‘logically tight’ that there is ‘simply no way out,’ some philosophers have indeed taken issue with it. 7 My primary case here, however, does not concern the trilemma’s formal logic, but rather its use of scripture. An argument is only as strong as its premises, and its premises as Lewis sets it out come from the gospels. As a Christian, Lewis read the New Testament, and as a long-time student of the language, he could and did read it in Greek. 8 But as a scholar, his expertise

6 C. S. Lewis, Mere Christianity (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), pp. 51-52. Lewis goes on to claim that if Jesus says he is God but is not, he cannot be a good man/legitimate moral teacher, but that facet of the argument is outside the scope of this paper. The essay ‘What Are We to Make of Jesus Christ?’ appears in C. S. Lewis Essay Collection: Faith, Christianity, and the Church, (ed. Leslie Walmsley; NY: HarperCollins, 2002), pp. 38-41.


8 David Lyle Jeffrey, ‘C. S. Lewis, the Bible, and Its Literary Critics’, Christianity and Literature 50:1 (2000), p. 99, claims that after his conversion, Lewis read the Gospel of John in Greek every day.
lay neither in theology nor in biblical studies, a fact he was always quick to volunteer. While he was familiar with some works in those areas, he had not immersed himself in them as a specialist would. He critiqued professional biblical scholarship from his own field of English literature, from his common sense, and from his native wit, convincing a good number of his readers that he had effectively debunked the alleged debunkers. Like many who venture beyond their native waters, however, he sometimes underestimates and at other times is simply unaware of the depths and dangers outside his ken. There be dragons in those waters eager to swallow the unwary, and Lewis falls prey to them again and again in his simplistic use of both the synoptic gospels and the Gospel of John in the ‘Liar, Lunatic, Lord’ argument. With him go down all hands on deck. Biblical scholar N. T. Wright, a great admirer of Lewis, notes that Lewis’s readers ‘who never moved on or grew up theologically or historically, would be in a dangerous position when faced even with proper, non-skeptical historical investigation, let alone the regular improper, skeptical sort’, because ‘Lewis didn’t give such a person sufficient grounding in who Jesus really was.’ What is at stake, then, is nothing less than the confusion of Christians who, thinking that they can rely on a water-tight argument, may instead discover that they are listing.

Before we look more closely at Lewis’s use of the gospels in the ‘Liar, Lunatic, Lord’ argument, a word on ‘skepticism,’ biblical and


10 A better exposition of the argument, especially in its analysis and assessment of scripture and biblical scholarship, comes from John Redford, Bad, Mad, or God? Proving the Divinity of Christ from St. John’s Gospel (London: St Pauls, 2004). Fr. Redford, who died in November 2013, had an impressive grasp of scripture and modern scriptural scholarship. He searched out opposing arguments and addressed them fairly.

otherwise, is in order. Lewis stated clearly and emphatically that ‘My own position [on the Bible] is not Fundamentalist,’\textsuperscript{12} by which he meant literalist/inerrantist, and he was right. Many of his firmly held convictions about scripture disturb real Fundamentalist Lewis-philes to this day.\textsuperscript{13} For instance, he called the Bible ‘an untidy and leaky vehicle,’ containing naiveté, error, and contradiction.\textsuperscript{14} He regularly noted that books like Esther, Jonah, and Job ‘pretty well proclaim themselves to be sacred fiction’ and that God intended them as such.\textsuperscript{15} He believed that Jesus not only could be, but actually was on occasion wrong.\textsuperscript{16} Some conservative Christians might well count Lewis as a skeptic. Indeed, his writings clearly demonstrate that he valued some level of general intellectual skepticism. One of the most formative influences on his intellectual development, his tutor William Kirkpatrick, was a relentlessly logical atheist, and forty years later Lewis eulogized him in terms of high praise: ‘My debt to him is very great, my reverence to this day undiminished.’\textsuperscript{17} A Kirkpatrick-esque character lives on not only in the Chronicles of Narnia, thinly veiled as Professor ‘Kirke,’ but also in the


\textsuperscript{13} Michael Christensen, \textit{C. S. Lewis on Scripture} (London: Hodder &Stoughton, 1979), passim.

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Reflections on the Psalms}, pp. 111-12.

\textsuperscript{15} Letter to Janet Wise, 5-10-55, pp. 652-53, emphasis in original; cf. letters to Carnell and Kilby as noted above.

\textsuperscript{16} C. S. Lewis, ‘The World’s Last Night’, in \textit{C. S. Lewis Essay Collection}, p. 45. Notably, Lewis uses Jesus’ ignorance as an example to argue that the New Testament is in fact historically reliable. Why would the evangelist include incidents that reflect so poorly upon Jesus unless they were true? In this argument he anticipates the ‘criterion of embarrassment’ employed by historical Jesus scholars to evaluate the historicity of the gospels. See for instance John P. Meier, \textit{A Marginal Jew}, vol. 1 (Anchor Bible Reference Library; New York: Doubleday, 1991), pp. 168-71.

novel *That Hideous Strength* as MacPhee. Even after personally participating in marvelous supernatural wonders, MacPhee accepts none of them, but is still loved and respected, as well as laughed at, by the believing company of St. Anne’s. ‘He is our skeptic; a very important office,’ Ransom tells Jane.18 Although his opinions of real-life and fictitious characters alike attest to Lewis’s respect for skepticism, even if it excluded the divine, he did not appreciate the brand of skepticism New Testament scholars of his day leveled upon their texts, and especially the gospels. ‘The undermining of the old orthodoxy,’ he believed, ‘has been mainly the work of divines engaged in New Testament criticism.’19 Many of them, in turn, have had little regard for him, surely in part because he took the gospels quite seriously as straightforward history. A sort of amphibian in reverse, Lewis was at home neither on the hard dry land of Fundamentalism nor navigating the ever-shifting currents of biblical scholarship. The lack of a worthy sparring partner in the field was to Lewis’s detriment. If he had had a biblical counterpart to the role philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe played in the process of conceptualizing his book *Miracles*, this paper might have had no raison d’être.20 I would like to think that Lewis would appreciate this article’s engagement with his ideas. As Jerry Root writes, if Lewis were one’s own teacher, he would ‘ask the tough questions. He’d make you wrestle with Scripture. He wouldn’t let you get off easy.’21 In my response to Lewis’s work, I return the compliment—and it is indeed a compliment to have one’s ideas taken seriously enough for someone to want to wrestle with them.

20 For a number of articles about the Miracles controversy, see *The Journal of Inklings Studies* 1:2 (October 2011).
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Liar, Lunatic, Lord, or Legend?

Lewis once observed that ‘If the first step in an argument is wrong, everything that follows will be wrong.’ The first step in the ‘mad, bad, or God’ argument, whether presented as a dilemma in *The Problem of Pain* or a trilemma in *Mere Christianity*, is the assertion that Jesus claimed to be God, or the Son of God, or to have always existed (all of which are synonymous to Lewis). With this point we immediately run up against major issues significant both in biblical studies and in Lewis’s work. First, did Jesus actually claim to be God, or the Son of God, or pre-existent? Second, if he did, what did that mean in the first century? Are such titles understood differently today?

It is important to emphasize that Jesus calling himself God is a different thing entirely than other people calling him God. Lewis’s argument clearly necessitates that he must do so himself. Jesus is the potential liar or lunatic, not his followers. One way to address the first question is from the standpoint of what Lewis regards as unacceptable skepticism: that there is in fact a fourth alternative to the ‘Liar, Lunatic, Lord’ trilemma, and that is ‘legend.’ He does not broach this alternative in *The Problem of Pain* or *Mere Christianity*, but he does in ‘What Are We to Make of Jesus Christ?’ Describing his

24 Lewis defines the Jewish God, the one he argues Jesus claimed to be, as ‘the Being outside the world, who had made it and was infinitely different from anything else’, *Mere Christianity*, p. 51. It appears that he understands ‘Son of God’ and ‘preexistent’ (or, to use Lewis’s exact words in *Mere Christianity*, ‘always existed’) to be synonymous with ‘God’ as per Nicene definitions.
25 So, for instance, I am not concerned with the question of whether early Christians worshipped Jesus, or, for the most part, with what Paul and other New Testament authors outside the gospels wrote about Jesus. To investigate these topics, see Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2003).
26 C. S. Lewis, ‘What Are We to Make of Jesus Christ?’, pp. 38-41. The article was first published in 1950, after the BBC broadcasts but before their
opponents’ viewpoint, he writes, ‘The Man did not really say these things, but … His followers exaggerated the story, and so the legend grew up that he had said them.’ Variations on this theme were and still are standard explanations in the academic biblical guild, although the concept requires much more exposition than Lewis grants it here. Its blunt and abbreviated articulation is sure to shock readers coming upon it for first time. His refutations of it, too, are correspondingly inadequate. He notes that one reason ‘legend’ is an illegitimate way out of the problem is because monotheistic Jews are ‘the one people in the whole earth least likely to make such a mistake’ (that is, to turn a man into God). As it turns out, Lewis was not completely correct on this point, to which we shall return shortly.

His second refutation of the ‘legend’ argument in the essay concerns literary genre. As a scholar of English literature, not to mention a naturally voracious reader, Lewis insists that the gospels simply are not legends. They are too clumsy, and they would have had more to say about the life of Jesus before he began his public ministry. Here Lewis is playing with the idea of ‘legend’ as a specific literary genre versus ‘legend’ as a type of fictitious narrative. Both literary and biblical scholars denote specific conceptions of the former, and it is unclear if Lewis completely understood the viewpoint of the biblical scholars. For instance, Martin Dibelius defines legend as ‘A narrative about some sainted person. The term “legend” does not in itself raise the question of historicity.’

publication in toto as Mere Christianity. It repeats many of the scriptural and other arguments that Lewis puts forth in Mere Christianity pp. 51-52, but it also employs new ones.

27 Lewis, ‘What are We to Make of Jesus Christ?’, p. 40.
29 Lewis, ‘What are We to Make of Jesus Christ?’, p. 40.
His third refutation is that the gospels contain details like Jesus doodling in the presence of the woman caught in adultery: 'Nothing comes of this. No one has ever based any doctrine on it. And the art of inventing little irrelevant details to make an imaginary scene more convincing is a purely modern art. Surely the only explanation of this passage is that the thing really happened? The author put it in simply because he had seen it.' How ironic that Lewis would choose of all things the Pericope Adulterae as a premier example of the historicity of the gospels, especially when he noted in an otherwise scathing critique of modern biblical studies that he appreciated textual criticism! For textual critics unanimously agree that the story was not original to the gospels.

Testament and Early Christian Literature and Rhetoric (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), pp. 204-206, for a brief explanation of how biblical scholars have used the term ‘legend’. In Lewis’s essay ‘Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism’, p. 154, he also rejects the classification of the gospels into the genre ‘romance’. In this, too, he misunderstands biblical scholarship. Lewis found the word ‘romance’ as a descriptor of the gospels in a commentary that quoted a book by James Drummond. T. Francis Glasson notes in ‘a correction and a protest’ that ‘although the conclusion drawn by Lewis [from the commentary that called the gospels a ‘romance’] is a natural one … it is, however, a travesty of Drummond’s teaching’. The fault is not Lewis’s (‘one can exonerate Lewis’), but it is still important to correct his mistake, since Lewis uses it as a key point in his case against biblical scholarship on the gospels. See Glasson, ‘C. S. Lewis on St John’s Gospel’, Theology 71:576 (1968), pp. 267-69.


33 Lewis, ‘Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism’, p. 163.

34 Bruce Metzger, A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft/German Bible Society, 1994), pp. 187-89; idem, The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 3rd ed. 1992), pp. 23-24. At the same time, Metzger notes that while the story is not original to the gospels, it is still ancient and even has ‘all the earmarks of historical veracity’. But as it does not appear in the gospel of John, it is highly unlikely that the author saw the incident. Metzger, A Textual Commentary, p. 188.
Therefore it is unlikely the author saw it. More importantly, ancient authors did precisely what he says they did not, invent gratuitous details to enliven their writing, for a variety of reasons. Discussing Achilles Tatius, a second-century novelist, Charles Hedrick notes multiple decorative elements Tatius and others employ that ‘play no immediately obvious role in furthering the story.’\(^{35}\) Within the Bible itself one need only consider the little dog in Tobit, trotting companionably alongside Tobias to no readily apparent authorial purpose, as one example among many such details.\(^{36}\)

So Lewis neither explains why biblical scholars do not always take the gospels as completely historical, nor does he succeed in refuting their work on the topic.\(^{37}\) As Alasdair I. C. Heron rightly notes, ‘Lewis’s strictures upon the historical-critical study of biblical material do less than justice either to the integrity of the enterprise as seriously undertaken or to the insights it offers into the history of the emergence of biblical documents.’\(^{38}\)

If I were to insist that the gospels are entirely fictitious, this paper would end here since Lewis holds the opposite position, and we would have no common ground for further discussion. However, almost all biblical scholars believe that the gospels contain some amount of accurate material about Jesus; they argue among themselves regarding exactly what and how much. From this point forward, then, for the sake of a more interesting argument, let us grant to Lewis that the gospels are not legends and accept what they say about Jesus at face value, as many of his


\(^{36}\) Tobit 6:2, 11:4.

\(^{37}\) He does go into more detail in the essay ‘Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism’, but there he only addresses Bultmann, who was by no means the last word on the subject, even in his heyday.

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readers would. In other words, for the purposes of this paper we will work under the assumption that the man who walked the earth is reliably represented in the four canonical gospels. We will not call the gospels legend (however one defines it), and we will eschew historical Jesus work: that is, examining each action and statement of Jesus to try to determine its historicity.

Lewis’s views on the quest of the historical Jesus are worth a short digression here. He so disdained the quest that he literally demonized it. In *The Screwtape Letters*, the title character, a mid-level manager in the bureaucracy of hell, advises the junior tempter under his tutelage always to encourage the search for the historical Jesus, since ultimately it substitutes enjoyment of the real presence of God for a simulacrum constructed by exaggerating the gospels at one point and suppressing them at another.

Even taking the gospels at face value, Lewis’s arguments about the Son of God encounter difficulties. First, Lewis obviously reads back post-Nicene definitions of Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, ‘God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, one in being with the Father’ into the New Testament and his arguments about it. This is clear in everything Lewis writes about Jesus as well as what he does not say. Of course, among the tribe of orthodox Christians he is far from


41 See for instance *Mere Christianity* p. 52: ‘This makes sense only if He really was the God whose laws are broken and whose love is wounded in every sin. In the mouth of any speaker who is not God, these words would imply what I can only regard as a silliness and conceit unrivalled by any other character in history.’ It is also clear throughout *Mere Christianity* Book Four, ‘Beyond Personality: Or First Steps in the Doctrine of the Trinity’. Lewis appears completely uninterested in exploring how the concepts of God, Son of God, and related terms were understood in their first-century historical context.
unique in this respect.\textsuperscript{42} Rendel Harris, a well-known and influential Cambridge biblical scholar of the generation immediately prior to Lewis, could even write of British theologians in particular, ‘they are always more at home in the fourth century than in the first!’\textsuperscript{43} But Lewis was more aware than most that words change meaning over time (see for instance his treatment of the word ‘gentleman’ in the preface to \textit{Mere Christianity}),\textsuperscript{44} and thus he could and should have investigated what the phrase ‘Son of God’ meant within first-century Hellenistic Judaism, which was the religious and cultural world of Jesus.

Second, Lewis harmonizes the diverse ways that the gospels portray Jesus. The problem with harmonization is that it flattens the gospels into one unified witness, suppressing ambiguous, divergent, and difficult passages, and thus misrepresenting what each individual evangelist actually said. The debates about Jesus roiling the earliest church disappear. When Christians harmonize, they invariably interpret the first three gospels through the lens of the fourth, the Gospel of John. Lewis is no exception to this rule, and as we shall see, he does it even more intensively and creatively than the average scripture reader.

Since Lewis relies solely on the gospels for his biblical arguments in the ‘Liar, Lunatic, Lord’ argument, we will begin with them and then proceed to the understanding of the concept ‘Son of God’ in Hellenistic Judaism.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are deemed the synoptic gospels because they often look the same, setting forth many of the same


\textsuperscript{43} Rendel Harris, \textit{The Origin of the Prologue to St John’s Gospel} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1917), p. v.

Stories do not reproduce their species like mice. They are told by men. Each re-teller either repeats exactly what his predecessor had told him or else changes it. He may change it unknowingly or deliberately. If he changes it deliberately, his invention, his sense of form, his ethics, his ideas of what is fit, or edifying, or merely interesting, all come in.


46 The closest thing I can find to Lewis acknowledging the synoptic problem in a positive way is this: ‘And of course we agree that passages almost verbally identical cannot be independent.’ Lewis, ‘Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism’, p. 163. According to the Two-Source Hypothesis, the most widely accepted hypothesis regarding the synoptic problem, Matthew and Luke used not only Mark, but also an otherwise unknown source called Q, short for the German *Quelle* = source, and special material unique to each of them (M and L). Q, M, and L will not concern us in this paper. Lewis apparently rejects placing any importance on noting differences among the gospels in his response to Norman Pittenger (discussed below).

If unknowingly, then his unconscious (which is so largely responsible for our forgettings) has been at work. Thus at every step in what is called—a little misleadingly—the ‘evolution’ of a story, a man, all he is and all his attitudes, are involved. 

These words will have a surprising resonance later in the paper when we apply them to Lewis and his use of scripture. For now, I conclude this section by noting a procedural point: when Lewis cites a synoptic passage without specifying an exact reference, I will begin by evaluating it in its Markan form. I will note any relevant synoptic parallels and then move to John, which is not a synoptic gospel because it differs from the synoptics so greatly.

**Jesus’ Divine Disclosure in the Synoptics**

Does Jesus ‘go about’ (by this Lewis clearly means publicly) claiming that he is the Son of God, or God, or that he is pre-existent, in the Gospel of Mark? Even taking everything in that gospel as the actual words of Jesus, we may answer with an unambiguous ‘no.’ Jesus does not call himself the Son of God in Mark. Others do, however. God calls Jesus his son twice (Mark 1:11, 9:7) and the demons he exorcises recognize his sonship (3:11, 5:7). During his trial before the Sanhedrin, the high priest asks him if he is ‘the Son of the Blessed One,’ and Jesus agrees, but this is to a small group in the middle of the night. The first person to confess Jesus as the Son of God in Mark is the Roman centurion at the foot of the cross after Jesus dies (15:39).

A vitally important characteristic of Mark’s gospel that the

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49 A hastily-convened event (cf. Mark 14:2), the trial takes place only in front of the Sanhedrin in the middle of the night on a major Jewish feast. In fact, from a historical standpoint the Markan trial is so problematic that rivers of scholarly ink have been devoted to it. See for example Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah* (2 vols.; NY: Doubleday, 1994).
other two synoptics variously adapt is Jesus’ silencing of beings (human and demonic) who recognize his status. Readers see this immediately in his first exorcism (1:21-25). The theme so pervades the gospel that it has garnered a name, the messianic secret.\textsuperscript{50} Far from going about proclaiming himself Son of God, Jesus does quite the opposite in Mark: he never calls himself Son of God or God, and when others do, he almost always tells them to be quiet.\textsuperscript{51}

Jesus calls God ‘father’ twice in Mark (8:38, 14:36), but his father is also the father of his disciples (11:25) and thus not uniquely paternal to Jesus. As Raymond Brown asks, ‘What right has the exegete prima facie to assume that “my Father” implies a more intimate relationship to God than “your Father”?\textsuperscript{52} Nonetheless, from every indication in his work, Mark’s author does believe that Jesus is God’s son, a person of great authority, and he wants his readers to believe it, too. But the ‘lunatic’ required of Lewis’s argument, the megalomaniac who proclaims himself the pre-existent equal of God, is not present there. Even more, in Mark, as he does in every other gospel (including John, which has by far the highest Christology of the four), Jesus differentiates himself from God.\textsuperscript{53} To the best of my knowledge, Lewis never cites any of the biblical passages that would challenge his argument and reveal to his audience an inkling of the complexities of first-century Christology.


\textsuperscript{51} One exception to this aspect of the messianic secret is Mark’s trial scene in 14:61-62, as noted above; a possible exception is Mark 5:19.


\textsuperscript{53} For instance, ‘The father is greater than I’ (John 14:28).
In this he might be considered ‘more Catholic than the pope,’ since orthodox pre- and post-Nicene fathers readily acknowledged those passages. They were fully aware of the ambiguities inherent in the scriptures, and they needed to treat them in great detail in order to make their case among multiple competing viewpoints. I am sure that Lewis never intended to suppress scriptural evidence or to deceive; I think instead that, like many other Christians, he read the gospels through an obscuring post-Nicene lens. As Albert Schweitzer famously observed, what we see in the gospels reflects who we are.\(^5^4\)

Jesus actively differentiates himself from God at least twice in Mark. In one instance, a man approaches Jesus and asks, ‘Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ Jesus responds, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone’ (Mark 10:17-18). Matthew, evidently struck by the implications of this exchange for the person of Jesus, revises both question and answer, as we can determine via redaction criticism: ‘What good deed must I do have eternal life?’ the man asks, and he receives the response, ‘Why do you ask me about what is good?’ (Matthew 19:16-17). Thus Matthew retains the Markan vocabulary of ‘goodness’ but takes the onus off Jesus.

Secondly, in his eschatological discourse Jesus tells his disciples, ‘But of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father’ (Mark 13:32). Once again Matthew may have had a problem with this, since many manuscripts of that gospel do not attest ‘nor the Son,’\(^5^5\) removing with that phrase the possibility of Jesus’ ignorance. Mark and Matthew demonstrate differing Christologies; they are not univocal. Readers of Lewis’s work alone would never know this.

Jesus does not name himself specifically as ‘Son of God’ in Matthew or Luke, either, although in Matthew (as opposed to Mark) several human beings hail him as such in his earthly life (his

\(^{54}\) Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, p. 4.

disciples, Matt 14:33, and Peter, Matt 16:16). Satan does so as well in the temptation scene. Regardless, Jesus’ sonship in Matthew and Luke ‘is everywhere presupposed.’\textsuperscript{56} Presupposed, but not exposed, to borrow John A. T. Robinson’s felicitous phrase,\textsuperscript{57} and in this instance as well as many others, Matthew and Luke mimic their predecessor Mark. There is one exception, however: the so-called ‘thunderbolt fallen from the Johannine sky,’\textsuperscript{58} Matthew 11:27 and its parallel passage Luke 10:22: ‘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). With this example my own audience may accuse me of being Jesuical, and they may be right: I say that Jesus never calls himself the ‘Son of God’ in Matthew and Luke, but here he calls himself the Son, and this clearly in close relation to God the Father. Is that not putting too fine a point on it? Nonetheless, seeing that it is the only place in the synoptics where Jesus uses such language, I think it is still safe to say that Jesus does not ‘go about’ proclaiming himself Son of God in the synoptics. One swallow does not make a summer. It does, however, fly us with some velocity to the shore of deep Johannine waters, where our swallow will join a flock and take on more weight.

\textbf{Gradients of Divinity in Hellenistic Judaism}

Before reading the Gospel of John, it is essential to ground ourselves in an understanding of what the phrase ‘Son of God’ meant in the first century, especially in Judaism. In our modern Western world, someone calling him or herself a ‘Son of God’ would be, just as

\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Ibid}, p. 559.
\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Ibid}, p. 559.
Lewis said it was regarding Jesus, utterly shocking. Such is the long reach of the ecumenical councils, extending even to those who have never heard of them. In Jesus’ world, the claim was dull as ditchwater, and most of the time apparently attracted just about as much attention. But as G. K. Chesterton observed, even ditchwater may teem with quiet fun, and we’ll find that to be true as we put the concept ‘son of God’ under the microscope.59

‘It is well to remind ourselves calling someone “son” in relation to God is ambiguous,’ Brown writes. ‘It need not mean divine filiation in the proper sense of having one’s origin from God so that one has God’s own nature, but may connote only a special relationship to God.’60 Thus it seems that any good person could be a Son of God in Hellenistic Judaism. In Wisdom 2:18, being righteous pairs with being God’s son. In Sirach 4:10, someone who takes care of widows and orphans ‘will be like a son of the Most High’ (who, Sirach continues, will then love him more than his mother does).61 Philo of Alexandria, the great Jewish philosopher and contemporary of Jesus, writes, ‘those who do what is virtuous and pleasing to nature are sons of God’ (*De specialibus legibus* 1.318; cf. *De confusione linguarum* 145: ‘those who live in the knowledge of the One are rightly called sons of God’). Whole groups of ordinary people, including the nation of Israel indiscriminate of its moral state, may also be sons and daughters of God (Wisdom 9:7, with daughters explicitly stated in the Greek), and most particularly, that

61 Lewis knew the so-called Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha (even 1 Enoch), as evidenced in his essay ‘The World’s Last Night’, in *C. S. Lewis Essay Collection*, p. 43. I use these books to illustrate the concept ‘Son of God’ first of all because they represent the same Second Temple/Hellenistic Judaism as the gospels, and secondly because they are part of the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek Bible that was the scripture of the early church, including the authors of the gospels. See Timothy Michael Law, *When God Spoke Greek: The Septuagint and the Making of the Christian Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
nation’s kings (see Psalms 2, 89, and 110 LXX). Adela Yarbro Collins explains, ‘In Jewish tradition ... the two ideas, king of Israel and Son of God, are equivalent.’ Jews shared this last idea, rulers as God’s sons, in common with their pagan neighbors, but in Judaism, the royal son was definitely not divine. By far the most famous son of God in Jesus’ lifetime was the Roman emperor. Surprisingly, early Christian apologists did not usually dispute his right to the title, perhaps because ‘that epithet could be applied to any virtuous human being, both in Jewish and Greek tradition.’ Jews such as Philo apparently supported divine honors given to the Roman Emperor Augustus, if we may judge from his comments in *Legatio ad Gaium* 143-51. Therefore, as James D. G. Dunn sums it up, ‘In the first century AD “son of God” and “God” were used much more widely in reference to particular individuals than is the case today.’

We have not yet examined the application of the word ‘God’ to Jesus, but we must do so as we approach the Prologue to St. John’s gospel. Lewis wrote that Jesus went about ‘talking as if He was God.’ Again, this would be very odd in our time, but it may have been less so in Jesus’s, even if we confine ourselves to Judaism. There were gradients of divinity in the ancient world rather than the stark dualism Lewis assumes (‘only two views of this man are possible ... there is no middle way’), not only in Greco-Roman polytheism but also among monotheistic Jews. To illustrate, I return to Philo, who applies the word God (θεός) to human beings while at the same time maintaining a strict ontological monotheism. In *Legatio*...

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65 Dunn, *Christology*, p. 18.

ad Gaium 118 Philo bristles at the Roman emperor Gaius Caligula’s claims to divinity, writing ‘Sooner could God change into a man than a man into God.’ Nonetheless, as he reads Exodus 7:1, he must agree that God appointed Moses God (εἰς θεόν; De sacrificiis Abelis et Caini 9) and notes that Moses was called ‘God and king of the whole nation’ (De vita Moses 1.158). Nor did Philo reserve the designation ‘God’ only for Moses, one of the most important personages in his religious community. It could apply to anyone. According to Philo, Moses was bold enough to say ‘the man who is wholly possessed with the love of God and who serves the living God alone (τὸ ὅν μόνον) is no longer man, but God (θεός).’ Philo qualifies what this godhood means, however, continuing: ‘That said, he [i.e., the man who is God] is the God of people, not of nature, so that he may leave to the father of all to be the king and God of gods’ (Quod omnis probus liber sit 43). That is, the superior person is to humanity what God is to the cosmos. In much the same way Philo notes in De sacrificiis 9 that Moses is God of his own body and the passions of his soul, all of which he subjects to himself. He explains even more clearly in Quod deterius potiori insidiari soleat 160-62 that Moses does not truly (πρὸς ἀλήθειαν) become God any more than a counterfeit coin is genuine.

Nonetheless, Philo also acknowledges levels of divinity. For instance, Abraham has become ‘one with the angels’ (De sacrificiis 5). Both Abraham and Moses become immortal, and Moses’s soul becomes divine. The high priest Aaron is also exalted in a complicated exegesis of scripture. In De somniis 2.230-34, Philo reads LXX Leviticus 16:17 as ‘every man will not be (a man) in the tent of meeting.’ If the high priest is not a man in the tent of meeting, Philo notes, neither is he God, because he serves God.

67 The difference in Philo’s treatment of the two emperors, Augustus and Caligula, seems to be that Philo considered the former a great benefactor, while the latter was quite the opposite.

68 It is important always to keep in mind that Philo and the early Christians shared the same scriptures, the Greek Septuagint, which sometimes differs significantly from the Hebrew.
Therefore he is neither God nor man, but something else entirely, high and far away in the rarified air between both. Nor is this lofty status reserved to the deceased high priest. Any refined person, too (ὁ ἀστεῖος), is legitimately (κυρίως) neither God nor human because of his great virtue, a point Philo takes care to repeat twice.⁶⁹ In spite of all this nuanced thinking about levels of divinity, however, Philo can still write,

For when the prophetic mind becomes divinely inspired and filled with God, it becomes like the monad, not being at all mixed with any of those things associated with duality. But he who is resolved into the nature of unity is said to come near God in a kind of family relation, for having given up and left behind all mortal kinds, he is changed into the divine, so that such men become kin to God and truly divine (Questions on Exodus 2.29).⁷⁰

The works of Philo are notoriously complex, and scholars continue to debate what they mean, but I think it safe to say that they demonstrate several important points relevant to the argument here: first, at least one devout, influential first-century Jew exactly contemporary with Jesus conceived of various gradients of divinity; second, any human might attain one of those levels and be called God (although Philo clearly thinks that few in fact will), and third, such beliefs were apparently quite consistent with strict monotheism.


What Judean leaders thought of Philo’s ideas is lost to history, but we do know that he was not unique in identifying Moses with God. The second-century B.C.E. Jewish playwright Ezekiel the Tragedian beat him to it. In Ezekiel’s *Exagōgē* Moses dreams that he is on Mt. Sinai. God on his throne beckons him, hands him his scepter and crown, and exits the scene. The stars fall on their knees before the enthroned Moses, and he awakes. Moses has taken the place of God and holds all power. Nor is Philo the only Jew to allow the title God to be given to a living human being. Isaiah 9:6 calls a newborn *El gibbor*, mighty God. Within the original context of Isaiah, the child may have been Hezekiah. Christians have claimed Jesus as the referent, and as much as that may be so, Isaiah surely had some human person in mind when he wrote it.

These observations on the use of the word ‘God’ lead us to the first verse of the Gospel of John: ‘In the beginning was the Logos, and the Logos was with God and the Logos was God.’ Since the concept of ‘God’ applied to human beings has already been addressed, we may move directly to consider the pre-existence of the Logos (usually translated ‘word’). In *Mere Christianity*’s rendition of the ‘Liar, Lunatic, Lord’ argument, Lewis obviously understands pre-existence as a condition that was limited strictly to the one God of Israel. However, this is not the case in the Judaism prior to and contemporary with Jesus; the situation is rather more complicated than that. Preexistence is not limited to God, and possessing it does not make someone God. The figure of Wisdom is key here, as is Philo’s theology of the Logos.

Proverbs personifies Wisdom (Greek σοφία, a grammatically feminine noun) as a female figure pre-existent with God in a beautiful hymn:

The Lord created me at the beginning of his work,

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the first of his acts of long ago. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. (Prov. 8:22-23)

Later in the hymn, Wisdom says of herself that ‘whoever finds me finds life’ (8:35), a clear parallel to the Johannine Prologue’s ‘in him was life’ (1:4). Sirach 24:9 also presents Wisdom as pre-existent and living forever (‘Before the ages, in the beginning, he created me, and for all the ages I shall not cease to be’), and the book named for her ‘implies that she is eternal’ (Wis 7:26).

Philo calls Wisdom ‘the first-born mother of all things’ twice (Questiones in Genesin 4.97, De ebrietate 30), and Philo’s Logos is also pre-existent, called God’s first-born at least three times (πρωτόγονος υἱός, De agricultura 51; πρωτόγονος, De somniis 1.215 and De confusione 146). In Legum allegoriae 1.65 he identifies Wisdom with the Logos: ‘Wisdom is the Logos of God,’ and in Questiones in Genesin 2.62 the Logos is a second God (δεύτερος θεός) without further qualification or explanation.

Lewis should have been aware of the Jewish material underlying the Johannine Prologue, especially concerning the connections of Jesus and the Logos with Wisdom. Rendel Harris had expounded upon it early in the twentieth century. Lewis does unconsciously tap into Wisdom/Logos Christology at least once, however, or he would have if he had taken one critical step further in his exegesis of the scriptures. In ‘What Are We to Make of Jesus Christ?’ he cites Matthew 23:34 as an example of Jesus taking over the prerogatives of God:

On one occasion this Man is sitting looking down on Jerusalem ... and suddenly comes an extraordinary remark—

74 But, as Runia notes, see Legum allegoriae 3.82 on ‘the most high God’. Runia, ‘God and Man in Philo of Alexandria’, p. 62 n. 59.
‘I keep on sending you prophets and wise men.’ Nobody comments on it. And yet, quite suddenly, almost incidentally, He is claiming to be the power that all through the centuries is sending wise men … into the world.76

If Lewis had engaged in a little redaction criticism at this juncture and looked up the Lukan parallel to the verse, it might have transformed his thinking, for in Luke 11:49 Wisdom sends prophets and wise men into the world.77 Harris pointed this out in 1917,78 and another British scholar, James Dunn, notes in the twenty-first century, ‘What pre-Christian Judaism said of Wisdom and Philo also of the Logos, Paul and others say of Jesus. The role that Proverbs, ben Sira [=Sirach], etc. ascribe to Wisdom, these earliest Christians ascribe to Jesus. That is to say … Jesus was being identified as Wisdom.’ Jesus was being identified in Matthew 23:34/Luke 11:49 not with God, but with Wisdom. We see this identification happening in the earliest stages of Christianity. For example, in 1 Cor 1:24 Paul proclaims ‘Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.’79 Lewis did not have to read Dunn, who wrote decades after his death, to make these connections. All of the primary texts were available in his time, as well as the work of experts such as Harris to interpret them, had Lewis immersed himself in the field.

Scholars have long wondered and argued about exactly what Wisdom and the Logos are.80 Certainly both are connected to God, but whatever else they may be, they are not human beings, as Jesus was. Jewish literature contemporary with Jesus did identify at least two people as pre-existent, however, and another who may

76 Lewis, ‘What Are We to Make of Jesus Christ?’, p. 38.
78 Harris, The Origin of the Prologue to St John’s Gospel, pp. 3-4.
79 Dunn, Christology, p. 167.
be some sort of person. We have already seen above not only that Philo and Ezekiel the Tragedian identified Moses with God, but also that Philo was not alone in exalting the Jewish law-giver. At least one other text, the Testament of Moses, which probably dates to the first century C.E., indicates Moses’ preexistence. Moses says about himself, ‘He designed and devised me, and he prepared me from the foundation of the world that I should be the mediator of his covenant’ (1:14). Another example, Septuagint Psalm 109:3, concerns a kingly figure whom God brought forth ‘before the morning star.’ The third pre-existent figure appears in the Parables of 1 Enoch, dated to around the turn of the modern era, prior to the advent of Christianity. This is the Enochic Son of Man: ‘In that hour that Son of Man was named in the presence of the Lord of Spirits, and his name, before the Head of Days. Even before the sun and the constellations were made, his name was named before the Lord of Spirits … he was chosen and hidden in his presence before the world was created and forever’ (1 Enoch 48:2-3, 6). At the end of the book, Enoch learns that he himself is that Son of Man. We will return to the phrase ‘Son of Man,’ a most important one to Jesus, and a vexed one in biblical scholarship, below. In

85 The identification of Enoch, seventh in descent from Adam (Gen 5:18-23), as the Son of Man is rather extraordinary. For an entrée into the topic, see J. C. VanderKam, ‘Righteous One, Messiah, Chosen One, and Son of Man in 1 Enoch 37-71’, pages 169-91 in The Messiah: Developments in Earliest Judaism and Christianity, ed. J. H. Charlesworth (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).
concluding this section, however, it is important to note that 1 Enoch’s pre-existent Son of Man, like the Logos in John’s Prologue, is also closely identified with Wisdom (cf. 1 Enoch 49:1).

Claims to Divinity from the Gospel of John

C. S. Lewis’s strongest scriptural support for the ‘Liar, Lunatic, Lord’ argument does not appear in his full-length works of apologetics, but rather in the essay ‘What Are We to Make of Jesus Christ?’ Even this includes some problematic elements, however. He writes, ‘[Jesus] says again, “I am the begotten of the One God; before Abraham was, I am,” and remember what the words “I am” were in Hebrew. They were the name of God, which must not be spoken by any human being, the name which it was death to utter.’ There are two important things to note about Lewis’s citation. First, the second half of it, ‘Before Abraham was, I am,’ comes from John 8:58, to which we shall return shortly. This is the best element of his argument. But the first half of the citation, ‘I am the begotten of the One God,’ is something of a mystery. Jesus never says anything like this, either immediately before John 8:58 as Lewis sets it up, or anywhere else in the Gospel of John as a whole, despite the Authorized Version’s incorrect translation of the Greek monogenēs as ‘begotten.’ The word actually means ‘unique’ or ‘only,’ and it has nothing to do with being begotten, an idea that began with Jerome’s apparently purposeful mistranslation of the Greek into Latin in his Vulgate. Interestingly, English-speaking scholars have been aware of this at least since 1886. Interestingly, Lewis advises against reading the Authorized Version and recommends instead Moffatt, which translates monogenēs correctly as ‘only’ in John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18, the

86 Lewis, ‘What Are We to Make of Jesus Christ?’, p. 39.
88 Ibid, p. 213.
only places in the gospels where it refers to Jesus. Lewis shows awareness of the correct denotation of the word elsewhere.

Lewis’s phantom verse amplifies an important point in this paper. A crucial element of his rendition of the ‘Liar, Lunatic, Lord’ argument is that Jesus ‘goes about’ claiming to be God. As we have seen, so far he does not. But Lewis may be convinced that he does this more than the evidence indicates because Lewis has innocently concocted or conflated material that he then mistakenly attributes to Jesus. Creative imagination is one of Lewis’s strengths, but biblical precision is not. He does more of the same, though not as egregiously, in the same essay when he uses the following as a specific example of Jesus calling himself Son of God: “The moment at which the High Priest said to Him, ‘Who are you?’ “I am the Anointed, the Son of the uncreated God, and you shall see Me at the end of all history as the judge of the universe.” Although certain elements of this appear in Jesus’ trial before the high priest, Jesus never says any of it in any gospel. The conversations (plural, because they vary significantly in each narrative) proceed quite differently. Lewis gives another example: ‘He says, “If you are ashamed of Me, if, when you hear this call, you turn the other way, I also will look the other way when I come again as God without disguise’ (cf. Mark 8:38, Luke 9:26). And another: ‘If anything whatever is keeping you from God and from Me, whatever it is, throw it away. If it is your eye, pull it out’ (cf. Matt 5:29 and parallels). Both of these are very free paraphrases, parts of which are recognizable as scripture. However, the italicized portions, the ones where Jesus claims to be God, are not. Nothing resembling them occurs in these passages or in the synoptic gospels as a whole.

90 Lewis, ‘Rejoinder to Dr Pittenger’; in God in the Dock, p. 178.
91 Lewis, ‘What Are We to Make of Jesus Christ?’, p. 38.
92 Compare and contrast what Lewis writes with Jesus’ trial scene in a gospel synopsis, a tool that was readily available in Lewis’s time.
Lewis has sometimes misled himself about what Jesus says. This is not a simple matter of faulty memory: he misconstrues Jesus’ self-presentation, and he makes it a cornerstone of his argument. Here we may remember what he wrote about stories not reproducing their kind like mice. Believing sincerely that he recalls the Bible, Lewis’ unconscious has been at work, and we, outside his mind at some critical distance, recognize that his ‘scripture’ instead incorporates Nicene concepts of Christology intermixed with his own insistence that Jesus went about proclaiming himself God. This does not necessarily invalidate his main point, that Jesus is God, but it does eliminate a fair number of scriptural ‘proofs’ to which Lewis appeals.

Happily for Lewis, the second half of the quotation, ‘before Abraham was, I am’ (John 8:58), supports his argument better than anything else he submits as evidence, even though it, too, may not be quite as clear as he supposes. ‘I am’ has multiple meanings in the gospels. In John 9:9 the man born blind uses it in its most simple form as the affirmative ‘It is I.’ Jesus does the same thing in Mark 14:62, his response to the high priest in the night trial (the same scene Lewis mangles above). In John 18:5, with classic Johannine double entendre, Jesus employs it both in this way and also with divine implications: he simultaneously affirms his identity as Jesus of Nazareth and proclaims the sacred name YHWH in its Greek form, ἐγώ εἰμι (I am), as indicated by the soldiers’ involuntary prostration. He may or may not be using it in both senses in John 8:58. Within the context of the passage Jesus is claiming preexistence, but as we have seen, that in itself does not make him ontologically equal to God. Since his interlocutors pick up stones to throw at him, however, the author probably wants to portray

93 Nor are these two citations the only times he does it. There are other examples at the end of the essay.

Leslie Baynes, C. S. Lewis’s Use of Scripture in the ‘Liar, Lunatic, Lord’ Argument

Jesus as applying the name of God to himself, and his audience hearing it that way. If this is the case, as I think it is, Jesus claims divinity here, and Lewis has presented real scriptural warrant for the argument.

Lewis alludes to another Johannine passage that initially appears to make a stronger case than it actually does, John 10:30, “The Father and I are one.”

Read through a post-Nicene lens, the passage seems quite unambiguous. Nonetheless, both Arians and Monarchians were able to put it to effective and differing use, the Arians arguing unity of will and the Monarchians unity of person. As these ancient examples demonstrate, the verse is not self-interpreting, and it is surprisingly open to eisegesis. It certainly associates Jesus closely with God but at the same time leaves much latitude for determining exactly how. ‘Although the Johannine description and acceptance of the divinity of Jesus has ontological implications (as Nicaea recognized in confessing that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is himself true God),’ Brown writes, ‘in itself this description remains primarily functional.’

Interestingly, the larger context of John 10:30 underscores what this paper has argued regarding ‘son of God’ and ‘God.’ When ‘the Jews’ say they wish to stone Jesus because he is making himself God, Jesus responds, ‘Is it not written in your law, “I said, you are gods”? If those to whom the word of God came were called gods—and scripture cannot be annulled—can you say that the one whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world is blaspheming because I said, “I am God’s Son”? (10:34-36). Here Jesus reveals his own knowledge of the Hebrew scriptures, in that human beings were called sons of God, and sometimes even God, there.

95 Lewis, The Problem of Pain, p. 11.
97 Ibid, p. 408.
98 Ibid, p. 408. For an opposing view, see Ball, ‘I Am’, pp. 278-79.
99 As we have seen above regarding Isaiah 9:6’s El gibbor. Cf. 1 Samuel 28:13, where the shade of Samuel is described as elohim (God).
To sum up this section, we have seen that a being could be called pre-existent and yet not be God, be called the son of God and not be God, and even be called God and not be God. This is not to say that those words cannot indicate divinity in first-century Hellenistic Judaism, but only that they don’t have to—or, more exactly, that in the first century they may indicate a level of divinity, but not ontological union with God per later Nicene definitions. Any righteous person may be a Son of God, some righteous people may be called God, and a few share with the Johannine Jesus pre-existent status. None of these make the person so designated ontologically equal to God. Thus the high Christology of John’s Prologue is, in the words of Daniel Boyarin, ‘a piece of perfectly unexceptional non-Christian Jewish thought.’ There are indeed many alternatives outside the box that Lewis attempted to construct around his ‘Liar, Lunatic, Lord’ argument without ever resorting to calling the gospels ‘legend.’

The most convincing verse Lewis cites (and since I am evaluating his work specifically rather than the ‘Liar, Lunatic, Lord’ argument in general, I am not going to look at verses that he could have used but did not) is John 8:58. If we take the Gospel of John as accurately reflecting the words of Jesus, and we take John 8:58 as Jesus claiming to be equal with God, then Jesus does claim to be God. The problem is that John’s gospel differs drastically from the portrayal of Jesus in the synoptics, and not just in Christology, but in other areas as well, several of them irreconcilable. As we have

100 Pagan writers could do this as well. See for instance E. Badian, ‘Alexander the Great between Two Thrones and Heaven: Variations on an Old Theme’, in Subject and Ruler: The Cult of the Ruling Power in Classical Antiquity (Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series 17; Ann Arbor, MI: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 1996), p. 22, who notes that for the Greeks, ‘the king was ἰσόθεος [equal to God], which was far from divine’. Whenever the word ἰσόθεος appears, it always implies that ‘the man thus described is in fact not a god’ (p. 15).
101 Boyarin, Border Lines, p. 111.
102 While I respect Redford’s Bad, Mad, or God?, I am not convinced by his argument for attempting to resolve the differences between John and the synoptics. To
seen, the synoptics and John express very different Christologies, and one of the serious problems in Lewis’s apologetics is that he rarely recognizes and never acknowledges the importance of those differences. Even if Jesus claims divine status in John 8:58, Lewis needed to deal with the competing (sometimes even opposing) Christologies of the other three gospels, which he did not do. Instead, he harmonizes them.

Before returning to the synoptics to consider Lewis’s treatment of how Jesus forgives sins, we need to look at another example of that harmonizing blind spot. In a letter to Mrs. Frank L. Jones in 1947 about the relationship of God and Jesus, Lewis quotes a verse from Jesus’ prayer the night before his crucifixion in the synoptics:

> The human soul in Him was unswervingly united to the God in Him in that which makes a personality one, namely Will. But it had the feelings of any normal man: hence could be tempted, cd. fear etc. Because of these feelings it could pray ‘If it be possible, let this cup pass from me’: because of its perfect union with His Divine Nature, it unswervingly answered, ‘Nevertheless, not as I will but as thou wilt.’ The Matthew passage and the John passage both make clear this unity of will. The Matthew one gives in addition the human feelings.103

Here, of course, Lewis makes a mistake: Jesus never prays for the removal of the cup in the Gospel of John—quite the opposite, in fact. Before the Johannine Jesus enters the garden, he muses, ‘Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour’ (John 12:27). In the garden itself, he asks Peter, ‘Am I not to drink the cup

explain why would take another paper, and I would be evaluating Redford, not Lewis. Briefly, the two most formidable examples are Jesus’ cleansing the Temple at the very end of his ministry in the synoptics, and at the very beginning of it in John, and Jesus’ crucifixion on the day of Passover in the synoptics, and the day before in John. Harmonizers have tried to reconcile these incidents, but they have not succeeded.

that the Father has given me?’ with the obvious assumption of an affirmative answer (John 18:11). Here, as above, Lewis remembers scripture that does not exist.

It may be churlish to fault poor beleaguered Lewis for this confusion, staggering as he was under a hateful amount of daily correspondence, all of which he answered. If he were a Roman Catholic under consideration for sainthood, Lewis’s martyrdom-by-letters might be a significant item in the pro-canonization column. But it is a telling mistake nonetheless, and one that helps explain why he constructed the ‘Liar, Lunatic, Lord’ argument the way he did. He continues in the letter:

God cd., had He pleased, have been incarnate in a man of iron nerves, the Stoic sort who lets no sigh escape Him. Of His great humility He chose to be incarnate in a man of delicate sensibilities who … sweated blood at Gethsemane. Otherwise we should have missed the great lesson that it is by his will alone that a man is good or bad, and that feelings are not, in themselves, of any importance. We should also have missed the all important help of knowing that He has faced all that the weakest of us face, has shared not only the strength of our nature but every weakness of it except sin. If He had been incarnate in a man of immense natural courage, that wd. have been for many of us almost the same as His not being incarnate at all.

A piece of writing may have profoundly beneficial effects in one area even if it is faulty in another. As spiritual counsel, one hopes this helped Mrs. Jones, but as an exposition of scripture, it is deficient. First Lewis makes the mistake about Jesus’ intense agony

104 See Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, p. 143, for one articulation of how he detested answering letters.
106 I have experienced this in grading student writing. The facts may be wrong and the logic flawed, but other parts of the paper may be deeply meaningful, even to the point of changing my thinking in a lasting way. Nevertheless, the student will not receive high marks for the work.
the night before his death, which simply never occurs in John. Then he imagines what is to him a distasteful image of Jesus, a ‘Stoic sort’ who would bear up bravely under the prospect of crucifixion, an ideal man to whom it would be difficult to relate. In contrast to this man, Lewis quotes Luke 22:44, Jesus’ sweating blood. By the time Lewis reaches this point, he has bottled himself up in an unfortunate exegetical pickle. Jesus’ prayer to the Father to remove the cup appears in all three synoptic gospels, but Luke drastically abbreviates his version, eliminating Jesus’ negative emotion. For this reason and others, most textual critics are convinced that the Lukan report of sweating blood is not original to the gospel.\textsuperscript{107}

Much more serious than the textual issue, however, is the fact that the Jesus Lewis imagines and rejects actually is the Jesus of John’s gospel, precisely the figure Lewis hypothesized, a courageous man who, albeit mildly troubled, never prays that the cup be taken away. As we have seen, in John’s gospel he explicitly refutes the idea. Jesus’ Stoic control of himself in John’s passion narrative is evident and universally acknowledged. That Lewis does not recognize this is nothing short of astounding, especially given his reputed capacity for sensitive, nuanced reading in his own field.\textsuperscript{108}

This is an especially revealing moment in our study. The differences between the synoptics and John are staring him directly in the face, and he does not see them. I am not the first person to point this out. In 1958 another Christian apologist, Norman Pittenger, took Lewis to task for conflating the synoptics and John in attempting to support the ‘Liar, Lunatic, Lord’ argument. I

\textsuperscript{107} Metzger, \textit{A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament}, p. 151. For more information, see Claire Clivaz, \textit{L’ange et la sueur de sang (Lc 22,43-44) ou comment on pourrait bien encore écrire l’histoire} (Biblical Tools and Studies 7; Leuven: Peeters, 2010).

\textsuperscript{108} Lewis is often lauded for this and for his prodigious memory. Having analyzed his use of scripture, however, I find myself wondering if he reads material in his own academic area in the same way he does the Bible. Not being a specialist in his field, I will never be able to address, much less answer, that question. I leave it to someone with the expertise and interest to investigate.
obviously agree with Pittenger on this point (though not on many others he levels against Lewis). Pittenger also observes, as any attentive reader of the gospels might, that Jesus never claims to be God in the synoptics. In his ‘Rejoinder to Dr Pittenger’ Lewis notes that ‘I could never see how one escaped the dilemma of aut deus aut malus homo by confining oneself to the synoptics.’ He addresses the discrepancies between them by citing one example only, the audacity of Jesus forgiving sins not against himself but against others, a favorite of his that appears not only here, but also in the renditions of the ‘Liar, Lunatic, Lord’ argument in Mere Christianity and ‘What Are We to Make of Jesus Christ?’ An analysis of those scriptural passages will conclude the paper.

Jesus’ Claim to Forgive Sins as the Son of Man

Once again we must begin with Mark. In Mark 2 Jesus heals a paralytic and forgives his sins. Observing this, some scribes say to themselves, ‘Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?’ (Mark 2:7). To use the words of Nicholas Perrin, Lewis’s line of thought on the passage proceeds like this: ‘Jesus forgives, no one can forgive but God alone, therefore Jesus must be God’. However, the Matthean parallel to the Markan passage omits the words ‘Who can forgive sins but God alone?’ Matthew might have done so because he realized it was wrong. In both Mark and Matthew, another human being contemporary to Jesus had already been forgiving sins quite energetically: John the Baptist, whose baptism was for precisely that purpose (Mark 1:4). Matthew also makes a revealing addition to

110 ‘Either God or a bad man.’
112 Nicholas Perrin, Jesus the Temple (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), p. 140.
Mark’s pericope: he writes that the crowds ‘glorified God, who had given such authority to human beings’ (Matt 9:8). Even the Gospel of John highlights human forgiveness of sins when Jesus grants that power to his disciples (John 20:23).

The most important group of human beings who forgave sins in first-century Judaism, however, were the priests, who did it for a living. This fact may be the impulse behind the scribes’ dismay: Jesus was taking on himself the role of the priests, and thus threatening the status quo of the Temple cult.\(^\text{113}\) As Matthew realized, it was odd to remark that no one could forgive sins but God alone. The scribes were upset not because Jesus was usurping the privilege of God, but that of the priests, making himself, in N. T. Wright’s words, ‘a one-person Temple substitute.’\(^\text{114}\)

In response to his critics, Jesus does not say that he has authority to forgive sins because he is the Son of God. He uses instead another phrase: ‘So that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins …’ (Mark 2:10). Son of Man is Jesus’ favorite self-designation. Generations of scholars have debated whether Jesus actually called himself by it, but those debates do not concern us here, since the self-imposed parameters of this paper limit us to understanding the gospels as an accurate portrayal of Jesus. Over time the phrase developed different meanings in early Judaism, and sometimes it can be hard to tell which is intended at any given moment. The first is simply ‘human being,’ as seen multiple times in the book of Ezekiel. Jesus probably uses ‘Son of Man’ in this sense in Mark 2:10,\(^\text{115}\) and especially in Matthew’s parallel passage, in light of that evangelist’s comment about God giving such authority to human beings. The phrase may take on additional meaning in Second Temple Judaism, particularly in Daniel 7:13 and the Parables of 1 Enoch, where ‘one like a Son of Man’ appears as

113 Dunn, Partings, pp. 59-61.
115 Dunn, Partings, p. 60.
a highly exalted heavenly figure (in 1 Enoch also pre-existent, as we saw above).\textsuperscript{116} Jesus clearly uses it in this sense in his trial before the Sanhedrin in Mark 14:61-64. They ask him, ‘Are you the messiah, the son of the Blessed One?’ and Jesus responds, ‘I am; and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power!’ At this point the high priest, like the scribes in Mark 2, accuses Jesus of blasphemy. But here, as opposed to Mark 2, he may have a point. Not because Jesus agrees he is messiah,\textsuperscript{117} not because he uses the words ‘I am’, and not because he acquiesces to the title Son of the Blessed One (a circumlocution for God), but because he applies ‘Son of Man’ to himself \textit{in its heavenly Danielic sense.}\textsuperscript{118} Ironically to a modern eye, ‘Son of Man’ may indicate a higher Christology than ‘Son of God.’ We see this even in the gospel of John. Nathaniel lauds Jesus with terms that build to a crescendo: ‘Rabbi, you are the \textit{Son of God!} You are the \textit{King of Israel!}’ But in response Jesus marks the apex of the series himself: ‘You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the \textit{Son of Man}’ (1:49-51, emphasis mine). The titles progress from lesser to greater: son of God, king of Israel (who is also a son of God, but one of much greater rank than the average son), and finally Son of Man.\textsuperscript{119} If Lewis had said, ‘Jesus went about calling himself the

\textsuperscript{116}For much more on this topic, see Gabriele Boccaccini (ed.), \textit{Enoch and the Messiah Son of Man} (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans), 2007.


\textsuperscript{118}Collins, ‘The Charge of Blasphemy in Mark 14.64’, pp. 399-400.

Son of Man,’ and then explained why this phrase was sometimes so potent, he may have made a stronger case, although it is important to note that ‘Son of Man’ never means ‘equal to God,’ either. Again, in Judaism there were grades of divinity. As Andrew Chester writes, Christological titles ‘can be understood as representing an exalted or high Christology, but not necessarily as seeing Christ as divine.’\footnote{Andrew Chester, ‘High Christology—Whence, When, and Why?’, \textit{Early Christianity} 2 (2011), p. 33.} But Lewis did not do so, perhaps because early in the second century, ‘Son of Man’ began its trajectory downward to indicate Jesus’ humanity, while ‘Son of God’ crisscrossed it on its way up to indicating Jesus’ divinity, and Lewis never investigated the meaning of these phrases in their first-century contexts.\footnote{Collins and Collins, ‘Jesus as Son of Man’, in \textit{King and Messiah as Son of God}, pp. 150-51.}

Not including such complex material in the wartime radio broadcasts that became \textit{Mere Christianity} is understandable, but one might think he could have expounded upon it further in print, making it more nuanced and sophisticated especially in his full-length works. In this critique, too, I was anticipated by Norman Pittenger and rebutted by Lewis, who says forcefully that such a tactic would be ‘worse than useless. It would not only have failed to enlighten the common reader’s understanding; it would have aroused his suspicion. He would have thought, poor soul, that I was facing both ways, sitting on the fence, offering at one moment what I withdrew the next.’\footnote{Lewis, ‘Rejoinder to Dr Pittenger’, 183.} One can certainly acknowledge some wisdom in this response. A non-specialist audience can only take so much theological and historical detail. At the same time, apologists must interpret and transmit basic data as accurately and carefully as they can within such limitations. Wearing his apologist hat, Lewis calls himself a ‘translator’ of Christianity to the unscholarly.\footnote{\textit{Ibid}, 183.} He rightly wants to address his audience in their own language, but he did not always interpret his base text correctly. His readers may

\begin{footnotes}
\item[121] Collins and Collins, ‘Jesus as Son of Man’, in \textit{King and Messiah as Son of God}, pp. 150-51.
\item[122] Lewis, ‘Rejoinder to Dr Pittenger’, 183.
\item[123] \textit{Ibid}, 183.
\end{footnotes}
understand him easily enough, but the translation is sometimes inaccurate.

**Conclusion**

Lewis succeeded admirably in delighting and inspiring readers with his apologetics, as evidenced by their status as beloved classics in the genre and their effects on people’s lives. With this he accomplished great good. But he did not adequately represent the multifaceted portraits of Jesus in the four gospels, and thus leaves the validity of his ‘Liar, Lunatic, Lord’ argument open to legitimate debate. In saying this, I have not been trying to challenge, much less reject, Nicene and Chalcedonian definitions of Jesus. As Paul would say, μὴ γένοιτο, or God forbid, as the Authorized Version translates it. The fact that Jesus almost never went about calling himself God, Son of God, or pre-existent in three out of four gospels says little one way or the other about Jesus’ divine nature. To offer an analogy to illustrate the point: I may be a good cook, but my failure to go about publicly proclaiming that fact does not negate the truth of my culinary expertise.

All I have attempted to do here is to demonstrate that Lewis’s case from scripture is not the infallible proof of Jesus’ divinity that he thought it was. There are reasons to believe in the divinity of Christ, but Lewis’s form of the ‘Liar, Lunatic, Lord’ argument is not among them.

One alternate candidate would be Jesus’ resurrection, but not the resurrection taken by itself, for neither raising nor being raised from the dead makes someone divine in the Bible. If that were the case, Elijah, Elisha, the boys they raised, the widow of Nain’s son, Jairus’s daughter, Lazarus, Tabitha, Eutyches, Peter, and Paul would be divine, too. Jesus’ resurrection, on the other hand, achieved ‘trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life,’ as the great Paschal troparion of the Eastern
church proclaims. The church’s reflection upon the scriptures and the person of Christ, that is, Tradition, is an indispensable part of the doctrinal process in this case, just as it is in proclaiming Jesus ‘begotten’ (gennethenta, not monogenēs) and ‘one in being (homoousios) with the Father.’ In my opinion, relying on Tradition for one’s beliefs is not a problem. Reading Tradition back into scripture where it does not appear is.

Even if one overlooks the composition of new verses that he puts into the mouth of Jesus, Lewis ignores too many disconcerting realities in the scriptural record, which is the only significant account of Jesus’ earthly life available to us. Neither does Lewis ever put scripture into its historical context, so that when Jesus does call himself ‘Son of God’ or implies that he is God or preexistent, the meaning of those titles is never questioned, but only assumed, and then according to anachronistic definitions. If Jesus’ relationship to God the Father had been as clear in the four canonical gospels as Lewis argued it was, the Christological controversies of the first five hundred years of Christianity need never have been fought. Thus the ‘Liar, Lunatic, Lord’ argument should trouble even Christians who faithfully accept the creeds because it oversimplifies history and scripture, first-century Hellenistic Judaism and the Christologies of the gospels, especially regarding the differences between the synoptics and John. It sets them up poorly to discuss the issues with knowledgeable interlocutors. I do dare to hope this paper may help my fellow Trinitarian Christians remedy the situation, despite the fact that it, like Lewis’s work, falls lamentably short of a full treatment of very complex material.

While Lewis seemed quite certain about the soundness of his ‘Liar, Lunatic, Lord’ argument, he did not think it encompassed a full understanding of the person of Jesus. He writes,

124 Acceptance of miracles such as the resurrection requires a different epistemology altogether than the linguistic and historical skills involved in analyzing scripture. I do not consider it incongruous to accept the one while debating the other.
The first real work of the Gospels on a fresh reader is, and ought to be, to raise very acutely the question, ‘Who or What is this?’ For there is a good deal in the character which, unless He really is what He says he is, is not lovable or even tolerable. If He is, then of course it is another matter; nor will it then be surprising if much remains puzzling to the end. For if there is anything in Christianity, we are now approaching something which will never be fully comprehensible.\textsuperscript{125}

On this last point, Lewis and biblical scholars can surely agree.