

Lord, Liar or Lunatic?

DARRIN YEAGER

APRIL 2006

Abstract

Examining C.S. Lewis' argument against Jesus being a good moral teacher — but not God. Lewis believed only three possibilities exist for Jesus given His claim to be God. The popular option of Jesus being a good teacher, but not God is illogical in light of the claims of Jesus.

One of the arguments skeptics like to disprove is C.S. Lewis' logical conclusion from the claims of Jesus. Commonly called "The Trilemma" or "Lord liar or lunatic" (although Lewis didn't use exactly those words), although one wonders why it becomes so important to discredit a philosophical argument having little bearing on the facts involving the diety of Jesus.

But enough speculation, allow Lewis himself to explain.

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 either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.¹

That's Lewis' original argument appearing in his book. Some people add or modify it, but we're going to use Lewis' original text (it's only fair, after all it's his idea). What could logically be wrong with such an argument? What problems do the skeptic point

out? I'm going to use *one* article refuting Lewis' discussion (appearing on infidels.org by Jim Perry²). His is certainly not the only one, but I believe it summarizes common objections (all the following quotations being from his article). The first problem with Lewis' argument Mr. Perry notes, is he doesn't agree Jesus ever claimed to be diety.

First, it relies for impact on a premise which is both ambiguous and controversial, which is the question of just what "Jesus' claims" were . . . Exactly what Jesus claimed is not known. The gospels are the closest thing we have to an account of his claims, and there is no explicit claim of divinity by Jesus in the gospels, let alone an unambiguous theological statement of what precisely it might mean for a man to claim to be God.

So the question is, did Jesus claim to be God? If Jesus didn't claim to be God, Lewis' argument is rendered moot and you need read no further. Jesus is then just a man or any of the other thousands of spiritual leaders (who never claim to be God) walking the earth since the beginning of time. Since it's Jesus' claim to diety unique to Him, it's *critical* to understand the claims of Jesus. Is Jesus' claim ambiguous?

In John's Gospel Jesus states "I and my Father are one" (John 10:30 KJV). That may appear an ambiguous statement, but the Pharisees certainly understood the meaning; they immediately pick up stones to stone Him. A capital crime deserves an explanation, and Jesus asks for one; in verse 33 the Pharisees answer "because that thou, being a man, mak-

¹C.S. Lewis "Mere Christianity" tenth printing 1969 Macmillan Company page 55-56

²http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/jim_perry/trilemma.html

est thyself God". The Pharisees were no friends of Jesus, yet they understood what He *claimed* to be. They rejected it of course, but understood the claim nonetheless. Jesus said He was God in the flesh.

In another encounter earlier in John 8, Jesus says "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I AM". Again, they pick up stones to kill Him. Why? If you recall back in Exodus 3 as God called Moses he wanted to know who to tell the people sent him. God replies "I AM THAT I AM . . . Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you." In John 8 the Pharisees understand Jesus claims to be the voice of the burning bush — God Himself (another capital offense). Neither situation in John was ambiguous for the Pharisees. As they did not believe Jesus to be God, they rightfully wanted to execute Him for blasphemy.

Finally, in Luke 19 (what we call Palm Sunday), as Jesus rides in to Jerusalem the crowd begins to sing one of the Psalms. Something you might miss (but the Pharisees didn't) is this Psalm speaks of the Jewish Messiah. Certainly Jesus doesn't want the people misled to believe He is the Messiah they wait for does He? Jesus responds "I tell you that, if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out.". He doesn't say the crowd is in error or incorrect in applying a messianic psalm to Him, but affirms the correct interpretation.

These three events (among others) establish a lack of ambiguity in the people listening to Jesus and interacting with Him, clearly understanding His claim to divinity. They rejected it, and eventually devised a scheme to kill Him, but for all the problems with the Pharisees they at least understood what Jesus *claimed* to be. So Jesus' claim to be God is established and unambiguous (although just as controversial today as in 30AD) — what other problems does Lewis' argument hold for Mr. Perry?

Second, it makes unwarranted extrapolations from the general idea of saying something known not to be literally true to the worst sort of malicious lying, and from believing something which is not true to raving lunacy. . . . Addressing this argument requires some degree of caution: the basic criticism lies in the fact that none of the three horns of the "trilemma" actually represent a single possibility, but rather a broad spectrum of possibilities. . . . the extremes of "lunatic" or "fiend" are not justified as the sole alternatives. In particular, it is still quite possible to consider Jesus a sound moral teacher even if one doesn't accept the claim of divinity.

The idea of three possibilities (Lord, liar or lunatic) are deduced from the boolean logic arising from

Lewis' argument. Simply put, Jesus either told the truth or not (pick one). If He spoke falsely, He either knew he spoke falsely or didn't (pick one). Lewis provides three possibilities from the simple outcome of analyzing the statement.

1. Jesus spoke the truth. If so, He must be acknowledged as God.
2. Jesus spoke falsely, but didn't know it was false.
3. Jesus spoke falsely, and knew it to be false.

If Jesus spoke falsely, but didn't know, I'll call that whole realm "lunatic". It could be delusion, mental illness, drug-induced or a host of other possibilities. However, they all boil down to one conclusion — He didn't know what He said was untrue. In that case, we can attribute His claims to sincere desire, but some error He was unaware of. Jesus was sincere, but sincerely wrong. He believed He was the path to salvation, but was unaware His statements were wrong. Naturally, if He taught falsely He's not a good teacher under any reasonable interpretation of those words, no matter how sincere He was.

If Jesus spoke falsely, but did know, I'll call that whole realm "liar". For some reason, Jesus was aware of His untrue statements, but didn't care. Lewis says this makes Jesus the "Devil of Hell"; for some reason He deliberately misled people. If someone claims to be the way to heaven and eternal happiness, yet knows what they say is false, what else can you say about them? They're deliberately deceiving you for some reason. Perhaps they want to hide the true path so you won't find it, or maybe just try to give you a hope of something that doesn't really exist. The motive is irrelevant — the fact remains He's a liar and deceiver. The skeptic raises a possibility for Jesus knowing He lied, but as we have established, motive is irrelevant to the discussion.

Another, separate, possibility is that of the "noble lie". Jesus may have felt that his teachings on behavior were so important as to validate falsely claiming special authority from (or at an extreme, as) God in order to persuade people to follow them.

A good teacher won't lie or attempt to trick you to believe his teaching. If Jesus claimed to be God (as previously shown), would a good teacher deliberately deceive you when dealing with such an important issue as eternal life? I don't think so. This possibility is inconsistent with any spiritual instruction — if you need to be tricked into believing it, is it really moral? Do we really want to follow a God who tricks us into believing Him? I don't think so, and this argument is completely without merit. In any event, if Jesus lied, He lied. Motive is irrelevant, although interesting to speculate on.

One thing I will agree is a “broad spectrum of possibilities” exist. Certainly we’re not reduced to the specifics of lunatic or liar. As already mentioned, many possibilities exist for His motives if He lied. Interesting debate, but not relevant to Lewis’ discussion, and certainly doesn’t eliminate the need to choose one of three possibilities. The “broad spectrum” simply represent categories of either not knowing you speak falsely or knowing you speak falsely. Only three possibilities exist. Lewis’ argument is perfect, as even the article hints at.

If, when Jesus made his claims, they were false but he believed them to be true, was he insane? If, as we have stipulated in this section, his claims include being God in some sense, then this would probably be considered a delusion. To what degree it was pathological would depend on just exactly what he understood by “being God”. If he understood something akin to what is believed by the Christian faith, then it would be a quite major delusion. If he believed he was the prophesied Messiah as expected by the Jews of his time, then he might have

been honestly mistaken.

To sum up the argument is the following.

As has been shown above, it is not the case that there are three and only three precisely-defined choices to be made here, but rather a vast continuum of possibilities.

Correct. More than three narrow possibilities exist but unfortunately the vast continuum of possibilities all boil down to one of three general categories: Lord, liar or lunatic. Many shades exist in the last two choices, but either Jesus knew He spoke untruth, or He didn’t. If He wasn’t God you’re left with trying to deduce *why* he lied or why he didn’t *know* He lied, but that doesn’t avoid the fact He told untruths — and as such can’t be a good moral teacher. Thus, you still only have three choices. As Lewis states, you must choose.

You don’t have to accept Jesus as Lord and He won’t make you. You are a free agent able to choose Jesus as God or not. However, you *must* make a choice. The popular idea of Jesus as a good teacher but not God is illogical and inconsistent. From simple logical analysis, who is Jesus? Lord? Liar? or Lunatic?

COPYRIGHT © 2006 DARRIN YEAGER. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.
 HTTP://WWW.DYEAGER.ORG

This article was typeset using $\text{\LaTeX}2\epsilon$.