

How to Convince Biblical Skeptics of Jesus'

Divine Self-Understanding

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Introduction

I am a firm believer in biblical inerrancy. However, I frequently deal with students at the colleges where I teach and with Muslim acquaintances who do not believe in biblical inerrancy. ¹ (I live in a suburb of Chicago with a heavily Muslim population.) For my students and my Muslim acquaintances, the Bible is guilty until proven innocent, and no biblical statement may be accepted as historically reliable unless independent evidence can be adduced to establish its historicity beyond a reasonable doubt. So how can one convince people who disbelieve in inerrancy that the historical Jesus thought of himself as not only human but also divine? I have found that the best

strategy for dialoging with my students and Muslim acquaintances is to take the approach of critical, mainstream biblical scholarship and employ it to prove that Jesus possessed a divine self-understanding. The present article will demonstrate how to effectively carry out this strategy.

In my conversations, I explain that within the academic discipline of religious studies there exists a professional guild of biblical scholarship made up of researchers from both secular and religious institutions of higher education. These scholars include atheists, agnostics, Jews, Christians, Muslims, and persons of other religious and non-religious persuasions. I inform them that, according to all such scholars, the writings which now make up the New Testament of the Bible were originally separate documents which circulated independently of each

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other during the first century AD. Between the mid-second century and the mid-fourth century AD, these documents were gradually collected into a group and finally placed between two covers to form “the New Testament.” As a result, I gently draw the conclusion that we cannot reject the entire Bible out of hand, since this would be analogous to rejecting in one fell swoop all the books in an entire library. Such a move is absurd, because each book is obviously separate from the others and stands or falls on its own merits. So even if a person disagrees with something in one book of the Bible, this simply has no impact on what is said in other books of the Bible. I then describe—without necessarily endorsing—the consensus that exists among the broad mainstream of biblical scholars concerning the literary relationship between the Gospels and their pre-Gospel sources. Accordingly, the Gospel of Mark, Q (a written sayings source containing around 250 of the best-memorable *logia Jesu*), M (a stream of oral

tradition known to Matthew), L (a stream of oral tradition known to Luke), and the Gospel of John originally constituted independent sources. (The Gospel of Matthew is said to have utilized Mark, Q, and M as sources, while the Gospel of Luke is said to have utilized Mark, Q, and L as sources.)

I proceed to emphasize that in researching the historical Jesus, we must avoid the temptation to look for Jesus down the long well of history only to see our own reflections or the reflections of our own belief systems in the bottom.² To eliminate this possibility, we can use several historical tests, collectively known as the criteria of authenticity, for determining beyond a reasonable doubt whether any allegedly factual item is indeed factual.³ These criteria have the advantage of not presupposing

² George Tyrell, *Christianity at the Crossroads* (London: Longman, Green, and Company, 1909), 44.

³ A comprehensive list of such criteria is furnished by John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, 4 vols. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991-2009), 1:168-84.

anything about the reliability of the source reporting the item. So even if the source is almost totally unreliable with only a nugget of truth, these criteria enable us to mine that nugget. Hence I explain that, for the sake of argument, if a particular New Testament document were almost entirely fictional with only a few authentic sayings of Jesus here and there, the criteria of authenticity enable us to find those sayings. I then invite my students and my Muslim acquaintances to put themselves in the shoes of the historian, who like a trial lawyer carefully examines the evidence to reconstruct the most probable course of events. I point out that the criteria of authenticity are quite closely akin to the rules of evidence in a court of law: if an item passes any one of these criteria, its factuality surpasses reasonable doubt, and the item is termed “demonstrably authentic.” I delineate five of these criteria as follows:

1. *Multiple independent attestation*: An item found in at least two independent sources which are in

a position to report accurate history⁴ should be judged authentic. This is because it is highly unlikely for two witnesses who have no contact with each other to both fabricate the same point. To illustrate, if two newspaper reporters, one from the Houston Chronicle and one from the Boston Globe, attended a conference at the White House without consulting each other and, upon returning to their home cities, both reported that President Obama made a particular remark, then it is beyond reasonable doubt that Obama actually said what they claimed.

2. *Dissimilarity*: An item reported by a source in a position to report accurate history that is totally dissimilar from what happened before, during,

⁴ By “in a position to report accurate history,” I mean geographically and chronologically. So in the case of the Gospels, they would need to be written in the Mediterranean basin during the first century AD, which is granted by virtually all scholars (including the Jesus Seminar).

and after the item allegedly occurred should be deemed historical. This is because, in the words of the old adage “truth is sometimes stranger than fiction,” the event is so strange that there is no material out of which the event could have been fabricated. For instance, the 1890 report of the German chemist Freidrich August Kekulé that he discovered the ring shape of the benzene molecule through a dream in 1862 of a snake seizing its own tail should be taken as factual, since it could not have been invented on the basis of how any other scientific discovery occurred before 1862, in the year 1862, or in the period between 1862 and 1890.⁵ That no other scientific discovery occurred via dream before, contemporaneous with, or after the discovery of

⁵ Freidrich August Kekulé, “Benzolfest: Rede,” *Berichte der Deutschen Chemischen Gesellschaft* 23.1 (1890), 1302-11.

the benzene structure shows that Kekulé's claim is too unusual to be fiction.

3. *Embarrassment*: An item which is embarrassing or counterproductive to the source in which it is found should be considered factual if that source is in a position to report accurate history. This is why Tiger Woods' December 11, 2009 written admission of "infidelity" on his website is undoubtedly true, since Woods would never have confessed to such a damaging offense if he had not actually committed adultery.⁶
4. *Form criticism*: An item contained in a memorizable oral tradition tightly constrained by mnemonic devices to prevent information loss and which is formulated shortly after the item allegedly occurred should be regarded

⁶ Tiger Woods, "Tiger Woods taking hiatus from golf," <http://web.tigerwoods.com/news/article/200912117801012/news/> (December 11, 2009).

authentic.⁷ A memorizable oral tradition is the polar opposite of the game of telephone, where the original message is so altered and corrupted as it is passed along from person to person that, at the end of the chain, little if any of the original remains. Rather, in the ancient world, transmission of large tracts of material via memorizable oral tradition was a very developed and highly prized skill; in first-century Palestine, children were taught from the earliest age in their homes, compulsory synagogue schools (akin to elementary schools today), and services of worship how to

⁷ What I claim here is style the criterion of form criticism is a simplified conflation of Meier's criteria of traces of Aramaic and Palestinian environment, Birger Gerhardsson's rules for distinguishing the transmission of *ho logos tou kyriou* (the word of the Lord), and Oscar Cullmann's principles for determining pre-New Testament creedal formulae. See Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript with Tradition and Transmission in Early Christianity* (trans. Eric J. Sharpe; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 214-61, 274-80 and Cullmann, *The Earliest Christian Confessions* (trans. J. K. S. Reid; London: Lutterworth, 1949), 32-64.

formulate memorizable oral traditions. Such oral traditions, known as forms, contain such mnemonic devices as meter, alliteration, repetition, parallelism, and rhyme scheme which ensure that as long as the tradition remains, the information contained therein cannot be changed.⁸ These are the same devices used by contemporary musicians to ensure that people subconsciously memorize the lyrics to their songs after hearing them only a few times on the radio. Some examples of forms are parables, hymns, and creeds; a form composed just after an event it describes provides strong evidence for the historicity of that event. Thus a parable attributed by an ancient source to Jesus that can

⁸ Rainer Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer*, 7th ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 246-76.

be traced back to the time of Jesus should be regarded as actually uttered by Jesus.

5. *Coherence*: An item reported in a contemporaneous source which is logically implied by a previously established historical fact or facts is also factual. In other words, the known fact or facts only make sense if the item under consideration really occurred. For instance, that Richard Nixon actually participated in the Watergate conspiracy is implied by his resignation of the United States Presidency on August 9, 1974. By this criterion, the authenticity of Nixon's participation is guaranteed.

After explaining these criteria, I state that one of the strongest inferences which can be drawn from the demonstrably authentic sayings of Jesus—namely, sayings

which pass one or more criteria—is Jesus’ divine self-understanding.

“The Son of Man”

I begin with the designation “the Son of Man,” which, with the solitary exception of some Jesus Seminar members, is universally regarded as belonging to the historical Jesus. This is because it passes three criteria of authenticity. First, it is verified by multiple independent attestation, as it is found on Jesus’ lips in all the Gospel strata (Mark 2:10 *et passim*; Q = Matt. 12:32/Luke 12:10; M = Matt. 10:23; L = Luke 6:22; John 1:51 *et passim*). Second, it is verified by dissimilarity, as “the Son of Man” was not used as a title in either late antique Judaism, the early church, or Greco-Roman religions. In the Judaism of Jesus’ day, the phrase “son of man” (Hebrew *ben adam*; Aramaic *bar enash*) was a generic expression that simply meant “a human being,” and it was not used with the

definite article. Moreover, the early church almost never referred to Jesus as “the Son of Man,” describing him with the title “the Son of God” instead.⁹ Third, Jesus’ use of “the Son of Man” is verified by form criticism, as it is contained in several memorable oral traditions, like parables (*e.g.*, Matt. 25:31; Luke 18:8) and pronouncement stories (Mark 3:28 *et pars.*; Matt. 13:40), which were formulated prior to the composition of any New Testament document (*i.e.*, between AD 30–45). As even conceded by John Dominic Crossan, the original co-chairman of the Jesus Seminar, fifteen years after the events in question is too short a time span for legend to have developed.¹⁰ Hence it is indisputable that Jesus referred to himself as “the Son of Man.” But what is the significance of this self-designation? Contrary to popular belief, this title does not

⁹ C. K. Barrett, *Jesus and the Gospel Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), 67.

¹⁰ John Dominic Crossan, “The Historical Jesus in Earliest Christianity,” in *Jesus and Faith* (ed. Jeffrey Carlson and Robert A. Ludwig; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994), 19.

refer to Jesus' humanity. Were Jesus simply referring to his humanity, he would have omitted the definite article, calling himself "son of man." But the definite article (the *ho* in *ho huios tou anthropou*) meant that Jesus was identifying himself with a particular "son of man" that would be recognizable to his Jewish audience. In the Hebrew Bible, there are several times when "son of man" is used generically to denote a human being (e.g., Num. 23:19; Ezek. 2:1 *et passim*), but only once when it is used to denote a particular individual.

That solitary instance is Daniel 7:13-14, which reads: "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory, and sovereign power; all peoples, nations, and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one

that will never be destroyed.” Here the Son of Man is a divine figure who will come at the end of the world to establish the kingdom of God and judge humanity. Such was recently observed by the editors of the Q Project, who point out that “the saying in question suggests a superhuman person...in analogy to the capitalization of ‘God’ and ‘Father.’”¹¹ “The Son of Man” was Jesus’ favorite self-description, which he used some eighty times. Therefore, by calling himself “the Son of Man,” Jesus was referring to himself as the divine end-time figure of Daniel 7. It may well be, as Robert Gundry suggests, that Jesus preferred this title to “Messiah,” because the latter title had become so overlaid with political and temporal considerations in Jewish thinking that to claim to

¹¹ James M. Robinson, Paul Hoffmann, and John S. Kloppenborg, *The Critical Edition of Q* (Hermeneia Supplements; Fortress, 2000), lxx.

be the Messiah would obscure rather than elucidate the true character of his mission.¹²

Perhaps the most famous and best authenticated Son of Man saying comes from Jesus' trial: "Again the high priest was questioning him, and he said to him, 'Are you yourself the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?' And Jesus said, 'I am, and you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven.' But the high priest, having torn his tunic, said, 'What further need do we have of witnesses? You heard the blasphemy; how does it seem to you?' And they all condemned him to be deserving of death" (Mark 14:60-64). It should be noted that grammatical, linguistic, and textual analysis reveal this particular saying, as regarded by most Markan commentators, to belong to an earlier oral Aramaic source that Mark used, upon translation, in writing

¹² Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 118-20.

his gospel.¹³ The foremost German critic of Mark, Rudolf Pesch, has definitively shown that this source, commonly referred to as the pre-Markan passion narrative, can be dated no later than AD 37.¹⁴ For the sake of space, we will allow one of the many pieces of evidence Pesch offers for this date to suffice. The pre-Markan passion narrative is situated in Jerusalem with Galilee as a horizon (thus indicating a Jerusalem provenance), and it refers to Caiaphas as simply “the high priest” without mentioning his name (14:46, 54, 60, 61, 63, 66). This implies that Caiaphas was still the high priest when the pre-Markan passion narrative was formulated, as there would be no need to mention his name. I give my students and Muslim acquaintances this parallel from American historiography to illustrate the point. Suppose we found a source referring

¹³ Maurice Casey, *Aramaic Sources of Mark's Gospel* (Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 102; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 253-5.

¹⁴ Rudolf Pesch, *Das Markusevangelium* (2 vols.; Freiburg: Herder, 1977), 2:21, 364-77.

to something “the President” had done (whom the author and his readers naturally took to mean the man contemporaneously in office), and the actions described were carried out by James K. Polk. Obviously, we would conclude that the source must have been formulated between 1845–1849. By the same token, since Caiaphas was high priest from AD 18–37, the latest possible date for the pre-Markan passion narrative is AD 37. On any scholar’s reckoning, this is far too early for its contents to be a creation of the primitive church. Thus Mark 14:62 goes directly back to the lips of Jesus.

In this quote, Jesus quotes verbatim from Daniel 7:13-14 and Psalm 110:1; the latter text reads, “Yahweh says to my Adonai, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’” Hence this saying contains two unmistakable claims to deity. On the one hand, Jesus claims to be the divine Son of Man in Daniel 7. On the other hand, Jesus asserts not only that he would be

seated at the Father's right hand, but also that he was the preexistent one whom David worshiped as his *Adonai* or Lord. This leads to an absolutely stunning conclusion: even if, for the sake of argument, Mark 14:60-64 were the only historically authentic saying of Jesus in the entire New Testament, it alone proves the conclusion that Jesus claimed to be a divine person alongside of and equal to God the Father.

On a similar note, other independently well-attested Son of Man sayings include the Son of Man forgiving sins (Mark 2:9-11)¹⁵ and determining people's eternal destiny before God (Luke 12:8-9).¹⁶ In Mark 2:9-11, Jesus again quotes verbatim from Daniel 7:13-14 (which I have parenthesized): "Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand and pick up your

¹⁵ For specific evidence supporting the authenticity of Mark 2:9-11 see Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1987), 157.

mattress and walk?’ But in order that you may know that *the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins on earth...* ‘I say to you, stand, pick up your mattress and go to your home.’” Since ancient Jewish theology stipulated that only God could forgive sins, either directly or indirectly through Temple sacrifice, and Jesus was doing neither, Jesus is doubly asserting his divine self-understanding: he is both Danielic Son of Man and the authoritative forgiver of earthly sins. Royce Gordon Gruenler rightly explains that Jesus is “consciously speaking as the voice of God on matters that belong only to God....The evidence clearly leads us to affirm that Jesus implicitly claims to do what only God can do: to forgive sins....The religious authorities correctly understood his claim to divine authority to forgive sinners, but they interpreted his claims as blasphemous and

¹⁶ For specific evidence supporting the authenticity of Luke 12:8-9 see Wolhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man* (trans. L. L. Wilkins and D. A. Priebe; London: SCM, 1968), 58-60.

sought his execution.”¹⁷ In Luke 12:8-9 (a Q text), Jesus goes one step further: “But I say to you, everyone who confesses me before men, the Son of Man will also confess him before the angels of God; but the one having denied me before men will be denied before the angels of God.” Here Jesus claims that people’s salvation is determined before him on the basis of their response to him. I point out to my students and my Muslim acquaintances that here we can make no mistake: if Jesus did not believe himself to be deity, then, in the words of William Lane Craig, “this claim could only be regarded as the most narrow and objectionable dogmatism.”¹⁸ For Jesus is asserting that each person’s salvation (or damnation) depends on his or her confession (or lack thereof) to Jesus himself.

¹⁷ Royce Gordon Gruenler, *New Approaches to Jesus and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 46, 59, 49.

¹⁸ William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith* (3rd ed.; Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 326.

Jesus highlights his self-consciousness as a divine person alongside of and equal to God the Father in Mark 12:35-37 by explicitly spelling out the conclusion he implied at his trial before the Sanhedrin. Since Mark 12:35-37 meets the specifications for a pre-New Testament pronouncement story, this text is authenticated by the criterion of form criticism.¹⁹ It reads: “While Jesus was teaching in the Temple, he was saying, ‘How can the scribes say that the Messiah is the son of David? David himself said by the Holy Spirit, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet.”’ David himself calls him ‘Lord’; so how can he be his son?’” In this remarkable pericope Jesus denies that he is merely a human being, or physical descendant of David, but rather affirms that he is the divine person whom David called Lord 1,000 years prior to his day.

¹⁹ Ben Witherington III, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 189-91.

The Sermon on the Mount

I then turn with my students and my Muslim acquaintances to the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7). Although not often realized by Christian expositors of the Sermon on the Mount, Jewish authorities and scholars who work in the Judaism of late antiquity (200 BC–AD 200) are quick to realize the diametric opposition between the teaching styles of Jesus and the rabbis contemporaneous with him. The typical rabbinic style of teaching was to either quote extensively from the Hebrew Bible or from learned teachers, who provided the basis of authority for one’s own teaching. We find in the Talmud, for example, numerous examples of biblical expositions proceeding as follows: “You have heard that it was said (the passive “it was said” was a circumlocution for “Yahweh said” to avoid uttering the divine name) to the ancients: [insert biblical text]. Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Here is how you shall do what it says: [list life

applications].” But Jesus did exactly the opposite—he first listed what Yahweh said to the ancients and then, on his own authority, proceeded to add to what Yahweh said. In other words, Jesus places his own personal authority on a par with Yahweh.²⁰ To put it colloquially, one doesn’t mess with the Ten Commandments unless one has the authority to mess with the Ten Commandments! Most New Testament scholars regard the Sermon on the Mount as authentic to Jesus, since it comes from the allegedly earliest written source (namely Q) and contains several form critical earmarks of authenticity.²¹

So that it was impossible for his audience to misunderstand his intention, Jesus began: “You have heard that it was said to the ancients,” even quoting two of the Ten Commandments (number six on murder immediately followed by number seven on adultery) back to back, and

²⁰ Robert Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Waco: Word, 1982), 185.

²¹ Dale C. Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount* (New York:

then juxtaposed them with his own authority: “But I myself am saying to you,” and gave his own teaching (Matt. 5:21-30). Regarding divorce, in both the Sermon on the Mount and its independent Markan parallel (Mark 10:2-12) Jesus explicitly quotes Torah (Deut. 24:1-4) and modifies it with his teaching. In Mark 10:5-8 Jesus even goes so far as to declare that Moses did not represent the perfect will of God on this matter and presumes to alter Torah on his own authority as to what really is the will of God: “It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law. But from the beginning of creation God ‘made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united with his wife, and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let humans not separate.” But no human being, whether prophet or teacher or charismatic, has that kind of authority over

Crossroad, 1999), 7-10.

Torah. Hence Ben Witherington III comments: “Jesus seems to assume an authority over Torah that no Pharisee or Old Testament prophet assumed—the authority to set it aside.”²²

In his illuminating dialogue *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus*, Jacob Neusner, the leading Jewish scholar of late antiquity, reveals that it is exactly on this score that, as a Jew, he would not have believed in Jesus if he had lived in first-century Israel:

Jews believe in the Torah of Moses...and that belief requires faithful Jews to enter a dissent at the teachings of Jesus, on the grounds that those teachings at important points contradict the Torah....And therefore, because [Jesus’] specific teaching was so broadly out of phase with the Torah and covenant of Sinai, I could not then follow him and do not now either. This is not because I am stubborn or unbelieving. It is because I believe God has given a different Torah from the one that Jesus teaches; and that Torah, the one Moses got at Sinai, stands in judgment of the torah of Jesus, as it dictates true and false for all other torahs

²² Witherington, *Christology*, 65.

that people want to teach in God's name....Jesus speaks not as a sage or a prophet. At many points in this protracted account of Jesus' specific teachings, we now recognize that at issue is the figure of Jesus, not the teachings at all...by the criterion of the Torah, Jesus has asked for what the Torah does not accord to anyone but God....So if I could respond, in the quiet of a long evening, out of the shouting mobs, and if Jesus cared to listen, what would I say to him? I turn to him and look him right in the eye: 'Who do you think you are—God?'"²³

But since Jesus' juxtaposition of his personal teaching to the Torah is an authentic facet of the historical Jesus—as even the Jesus Seminar admits—it is historically inescapable that Jesus did assume for himself the authority of God.²⁴

²³ Jacob Neusner, *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000), xii, 46-47, 88, 152.

²⁴ Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 321.

“*Amēn*, I say unto you”

That Jesus claimed divine status for himself is corroborated by his use of *Amēn*, as the expression “*Amēn*, I say unto you” meets both the criteria of multiple attestation (*e.g.*, Mark 3:28 *et passim*; Q = Matt. 24:47/Luke 12:44; M = Matt. 6:2; L = Luke 23:43; John 1:51 *et passim*) and dissimilarity (it is unique to Jesus, with no parallels in prior Judaism, later Christianity, or contemporaneous Greco-Roman religion). All critics therefore acknowledge it to have been utilized by Jesus to preface his teaching. To explain the meaning of “*Amēn*, I say unto you” we can do no better than quote from Witherington’s celebrated study on the Christology of Jesus:

It is insufficient to compare it to “thus says the Lord,” although that is the closest parallel. Jesus is not merely speaking for Yahweh, but for himself and on his own authority....This strongly suggests that he considered himself to be a person of authority above and beyond what prophets claimed to be. He could attest to his own truthfulness and speak on his own behalf, and yet his words were to be taken as having

the same or greater authority than the divine words of the prophets. Here was someone who thought he possessed not only divine inspiration...but also divine authority and the power of direct divine utterance.²⁵

By beginning his teachings with “*Amēn*, I say unto you,” Jesus swore in advance and on his own authority to the truthfulness of what he was going to say. In the Hebrew Bible, this was a prerogative reserved only for Yahweh (Gen. 22:16; Isa. 45:23; Jer. 22:5; Jer. 44:26).

**“I am the shepherd, the good one” with
“No one is good but God alone”**

Since the Gospels of Mark and John were, in the opinion of most scholars, written independently of each other, we may employ the criterion of coherence to chronologically reconstruct the full course of various historically authentic events which are recorded partially in each Gospel.

Through this criterion, it can be shown that the events of

²⁵ Witherington, *Christology*, 188.

Mark 10:17-31 almost directly followed the sermon recorded in John 10:1-18.²⁶ Both of these pericopes are pronouncement stories which are established by form criticism as having come from the historical Jesus.²⁷ I lay out for my students and Muslim acquaintances the historical sequence of events. First, Jesus gives a sermon in which he twice says: “I am the shepherd, the good one” (John 10:11, 14; literal translation of Greek *Egō eimi ho poimēn ho kalos*—the conflation “good shepherd” obscures the point). After hearing this sermon and before “Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. ‘Good teacher,’ he asked, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ Jesus answered, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone” (Mark 10:17-18). Now certainly the young man would have

²⁶ Kurt Aland, ed., *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1982), 213-8.

²⁷ Gundry, *Mark*, 559-69; Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2002), 158-60.

immediately thought, “Wait a minute, Jesus—you were the one who called yourself good!” Placed in its context, we see that Jesus was denying neither that he was good nor that he was God. Rather, Jesus was indirectly yet powerfully proclaiming that he was deity, as he could not be “the good one” without also being God. As John D. Grassmick puts it, “Jesus’ response did not deny his own deity but was a veiled claim to it.”²⁸ Norman Geisler concurs: “The young man did not realize the implications of what he was saying. Thus Jesus was forcing him into a very uncomfortable dilemma. Either Jesus was good and God, or else he was bad and man. A good God or a bad man, but not merely a good man. Those are the real alternatives with regard to Jesus, for no good man would claim to be God when he was not.”²⁹ Piecing together the

²⁸ John D. Grassmick, “Mark,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* (ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck; Colorado Springs: Victor, 1983), 150.

²⁹ Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe, *When Critics Ask: A Popular Handbook of Bible Difficulties* (Colorado Springs: Victor,

historical evidence, we may summarize Jesus' statement to the young ruler this way: "You have given me a title which belongs only to God, a title I claimed for myself. Do you also understand and mean it?"

The Power Jesus Believed He Wielded as an Exorcist

Finally, I tell my students and my Muslim acquaintances that, regardless of whether someone holds to the existence of demons or thinks that Jesus exorcised them, it is historically certain that both Jesus and his opponents at least believed he had the power to cast out demons. In a saying which meets the criterion of embarrassment (since Jesus' opponents were accusing him of casting out demons by the power of Satan), Jesus declared: "But if I myself by the finger of God cast out demons, then the kingdom of God came upon you" (Luke 11:20). This saying is

1992), 350.

noteworthy for two reasons. It proves that Jesus claimed divine authority over the spiritual powers of evil, and it proves that Jesus believed that in himself the kingdom of God had come.³⁰ According to ancient Jewish hermeneutics, the coming of God's kingdom was a reverential circumlocution for the coming of Yahweh himself.³¹ But by affirming that in himself the kingdom of God had already arrived, as illustrated by events which he and his contemporaries regarded as exorcisms, Jesus was declaring that in himself God had arrived, thereby putting himself in the place of God.

Conclusion

I conclude by telling my students and my Muslim acquaintances that, taken together, the aforementioned evidence constitutes a broad cross-section of the reasons

³⁰ Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 322.

leading to the conclusion that Jesus possessed a self-understanding according to which he was a divine person equal in nature and authority to God the Father. Since this evidence is verified by the criteria of authenticity, I emphasize to my listeners that it stands as factual beyond a reasonable doubt, regardless of what one thinks of anything or everything else in the Bible. As Gruenler observes: “It is a striking fact of modern New Testament research that the essential clues for correctly reading the implicit christological self-understanding of Jesus are abundantly clear.”³² Because of the “absolutely convincing evidence” (in Gruenler’s words)³³ that Jesus intended to stand in God’s place, James D. G. Dunn is driven to ask: “One last question cannot be ignored: Was Jesus mad?”³⁴ This question clearly indicates the only two possible

³¹ Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1979), 155-6.

³² Gruenler, *New Approaches*, 74.

³³ *Ibid.*

alternatives: either Jesus was deity or he was a lunatic.³⁵

Because an honest assessment of the life of Jesus makes his sanity difficult to indict, I have found that biblical skeptics are forced by the evidence to personally wrestle with the significance of Jesus' claims for their own lives.

³⁴ James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (London: SCM, 1975), 86.

³⁵ C. S. Lewis' option that Jesus was a liar in his famous trilemma (Lord, liar, or lunatic) is vitiated by our demonstration that Jesus really believed he was divine, so reducing the trilemma to a dilemma.