Jesus: Mad, Bad or God

Adam Hellyer 5 July 2018



> '**Christ either deceived mankind by conscious fraud, or He was himself deluded and self-deceived, or He was Divine. There is no getting out of this trilemma. It is inexorable.**' ~ John Duncan (1796-1870)

Jesus.I.Am

Our understanding of Jesus starts with who He claimed to be. Jesus, a carpenter's stepson from a backwater town in Palestine, came to prominence because of His teaching and His signs and wonders. While He never said, 'I am God, worship me', His teaching was controversial enough to get Him killed for blasphemy.

In John 10:30, Jesus says, 'I and the Father are one.' The Jews who heard Him understood fully what He was saying. They picked up stones to stone Him, saying, 'It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because You, being a man, make Yourself God.' (John 10:33).

> Jesus was claiming to have existed, as God, before Abraham.

And Jesus didn't claim He had only been God from birth. Talking to some Jews who hit Him with racial slurs and accusations of demon possession, Jesus said, 'Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad … Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am' (John 8:56,58). Jesus was claiming to have existed, as God, before Abraham. The Jews who heard Him knew what He meant. Again, they responded by taking up stones to kill Him for blasphemy.

'I Am' is a name for God used in the Old Testament. John records how Jesus used it for Himself when He said: I am the bread of life (John 6:35), I am the light of the world (John 8:12), I am the sheep gate (John 10:7), I am the good shepherd (John 10:11), I am the resurrection and the life (John 11:25), I am the true vine (John 15:1).

But it was not only Jesus who called Himself God. The name Emmanuel, given to Jesus, literally means 'God with us' (Matthew 1:23). In Titus 2:13, Paul calls Jesus our 'great God and Saviour'. Peter, who walked with Jesus during His ministry on earth, also calls Him, 'our God and Saviour Jesus Christ' (2 Peter 1:1).

In Hebrews 1:8, we are told that God the Father declares of Jesus, 'Your throne, O God, will last forever and ever…'. He is placed alongside God in Jesus' commanded to baptise 'in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (Matthew 28:19). Acts 20:28 tells us, 'Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.'

Finally, John tells us, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God … And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us' (John 1:1,2,14).

Just A Great Moral Teacher?

In light of the plain claim of Scripture that Jesus was God, and the fact that Jesus made these claims Himself, and did not contradict these claims when made by others, many have come to the same conclusion as Gaius Marius Victorinus, who wrote in 385AD, 'Saying these things He was God, if He did not lie; if however He lied, He was not the work of God'.

Sir Thomas More, an English lawyer and councillor to King Henry VIII, writing in opposition to the Islamic claim that Jesus is only a noble prophet or good teacher, wrote in 1534AD, 'For surely, if He Christ were not God, He would be no good man either, since He plainly said He was God'.

> 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 patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher.

This idea, that the Man Jesus could not have said what He said and still be good, was most famously developed by C. S. Lewis in his seminal work, 'Mere Christianity'. Lewis was writing to those who say, 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God'. To them he says,

'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 the 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 patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.'
(C. S. Lewis, Mere Christianity, 1960)

The Trilemma of Jesus

Lewis' argument uses a form of abductive reasoning, meaning what we know is used to infer what we do not know for sure. For this argument to work, we need to test the accuracy of the observations and then test the logic of the inference.

The observations used in the argument are:

- If Jesus claims to be God, not knowing He isn't, He is not rationally reliable.
- If Jesus claims to be God, knowing He isn't, He is not morally reliable.
- Jesus does not present as rationally or morally unreliable.

The inference of Lewis' statement is that, once we have eliminated rational or moral unreliability, we must accept the truth of Jesus' claims.

Lewis overlooked another possibility, the hypothesis that Jesus did not exist, or that His words are not accurately recorded. Perhaps he does this because he knows that the historicity of Jesus and reliability of Scripture are not really in dispute. So, once we have eliminated the Legend hypothesis, we are left with mad, bad or God.

Mad

The Bible does not dodge the claim that Jesus might have been mad. In fact, the claim is first spoken by His own family. ‘Then He went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat. And when His family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, “He is out of His mind”’ (Mark 3:20,21)

These words were spoken by His brothers, blood relatives, who did not believe in Him at that time (John 7:3-5). But the testimony of those brothers changed once Jesus rose again. James and Jude both ended up contributing books to the New Testament after converting to belief in Jesus. They no longer considered Him mad, because He had proven He was God.

Atheist agnostic Bart Ehrman, when answering the question, ‘Was Jesus a Great Moral Teacher?’, says, ‘The short answer, of course, is that Yes, Jesus was a great moral teacher. The complicating factor is that Jesus was not a great moral teacher in the sense that people today think of great moral teachers. That’s because the basis for morality for Jesus – the very heart of why he taught morals – is completely different from what people today think of as the basis of morality.’

> Jesus taught in such a brilliant way that a madness hypothesis is madness itself.

Jesus taught morality from a God-first perspective, others second, me last. His identity as God was the authority with which He taught. He was a law-giver like Moses, but greater than Moses, because what Moses had given, He amended. Jesus taught in such a brilliant way that a madness hypothesis is madness itself.

In 1925, wrestling with the same issue in his book ‘The Everlasting Man’, Chesterton said, ‘…this is exactly where the argument becomes intensely interesting; because the argument proves too much. For nobody supposes that Jesus of Nazareth was that sort of person. No modem critic in his five wits thinks that the preacher of the Sermon on the Mount was a horrible, half-witted imbecile that might be scrawling stars on the walls of a cell. No atheist or blasphemer believes that the author of the Parable of the Prodigal Son was a monster with one mad idea, like a Cyclops with one eye. Upon any possible historical criticism, he must be put higher in the scale of human beings than that. Yet by all analogy we have really to put him there or else in the highest place of all.’

The only hint at madness we find is that He claimed to be God. But if true, then there is nothing weird left. All that remains is some of the best teaching ever given.

Bad

Like the challenge to Jesus' sanity, the challenge to Christ's moral integrity is met head-on by Scripture. During His earthy ministry, the Jews came down from Jerusalem, saying, 'He is possessed by Beelzebul,' and 'by the prince of demons he casts out the demons.' Jesus' response was, 'How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand' (Mark 3:22-25).

Jesus shows that the claim that He was bad is illogical in the light of His self-proclaimed mission to eradicate all that is bad and bring freedom and light. We know He could be angry (Mark 3:5), violent (Matthew 21:12-13) and insulting (Matthew 23:27), but in each case it was justified, IF He told the truth about being God.

> 'Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth.'

God

Sherlock Holmes once said, 'Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth.' If the Jesus of the Bible existed and said the things He did, He was mad, bad or the Lord God. We know the Jesus of the Bible did exist, we know He did not present as a liar or a lunatic, as a bad man or a madman. We are only left with one other option. As Thomas said on seeing his friend Jesus, resurrected from the dead, 'My Lord and my God' (John 20:28).