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Current Chalcedonian Christological Challenges

Norman L. Geisler

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Christology being the heart of Christian faith and life, the debates concerning it are perennially relevant in every situation. In this thought-provoking article, Dr. Geisler deals with five basic challenges in modern times to the age-old Chalcedonian formula: the logical, theistic, scientific, historical and soteriological contradictions. In a scholarly way he brings out the contradictions in the criticisms themselves, and gives the alternatives in a convincing manner. His missionary concern emerges clearly as he establishes the deity of Christ.

Editor

INTRODUCTION

Jesus' question is still fresh today: 'Who do men say that I am?' As of old, today's answers vary: a pure myth, a mere man, a great guru, are only a few. For orthodox Christians of all major confessions, Jesus of Nazareth is 'very God of very God'. He is the second person of the ontological Trinity. He is both God and man co-joined in one person without separation or confusion. This Chalcedonian confession has come in for hard times among contemporary scholars.

John Hick contends that to affirm 'that the historical Jesus of Nazareth was also God is as devoid of meaning as to say that this circle drawn with a pencil on paper is also a square.'¹ Frances Young agrees, claiming that 'to reduce all of God to a human incarnation is virtually inconceivable'.²

There are numerous reasons offered by contemporary writers for rejecting orthodox incarnationism. Most of them are reducible to five basic charges: a Chalcedonian view of Christ is:

1. Logically inconsistent;
2. Theistically unfounded;
3. Scientifically implausible; p. 308
4. Historically unjustified;
5. Soteriologically unacceptable.

Obviously an exhaustive treatment of all these attacks is not possible here. Our purpose is simply to set forth the problem areas and to sketch a brief response to them.

LOGICAL CONSISTENCY

It is true that orthodox Christology affirms that 'one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, [is] the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man ...'³ It is also true that Chalcedon confessed 'one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, *inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably*; ... not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son ...'⁴ Thus there are two different and distinct natures—one of deity and the other of humanity—cojoined in one and only one person, Jesus of Nazareth.

The logical problems with this can be exposed as follows:⁵

The Person Jesus Christ is

in his humanity:

in his deity:

finite

infinite

¹ John Hick, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977, 178.

² Frances Young, 'A Cloud of Witnesses', in John Hick, *ibid.*, 35.

³ Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes*, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2.62.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.62.

⁵ Normal L. Geisler and William Watkins, *Perspectives: Understanding and Evaluating Today's World Views*, San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life Publishers, 1984, 188.

caused to exist	uncaused existence
ontologically dependent	ontologically independent
mutable	immutable
spatial	nonspatial
temporal	nontemporal
complex	simple

It can be readily seen from this contrast that many of the human and divine attributes of this one person are mutually exclusive. There are, of course, many unorthodox alternatives to the apparent logical incoherence of this orthodox Christology.⁶ These come

⁶ The heterodox views on Christ can be classified as follows:

<i>Position</i>	<i>Christ's Humanity</i>	<i>Christ's Deity</i>	<i>No. of Persons</i>
Docetism	denied	affirmed	1
Ebionitism	affirmed	denied	1
Arianism	affirmed	diminished	1
Apollinarianism	diminished	affirmed	1
Nestorianism	affirmed	affirmed but separated	2
Eutychianism (or Monophysitism)	affirmed	affirmed but mixed	1
Adoptionism	affirmed	affirmed but separated	2

from either p.309 denying, separating or mixing his deity and humanity. But none of these options is acceptable to those who confess a Chalcedonian Christ of two natures—one divine and another human—cojoined but not confused in one and the same person of Jesus of Nazareth. But once we have rejected these positions, the question remains: Is orthodox Christology logically consistent?⁷

The answer emerges from a careful examination of the logical form of the argument against the coherence of the Chalcedonian confession, which goes as follows:

1. It is contradictory to affirm that one individual possesses mutually exclusive attributes at the same time.

2. But the claim that Jesus possessed both divine and human p.310 attributes (such as infinite and finite) is claiming one individual to possess mutually exclusive attributes at the same time.

3. Therefore, it is contradictory to affirm that Jesus is both God and man simultaneously.

Once the logical skeleton of this argument has been exposed it is not difficult to detect its flaw: it contains an incomplete statement of the law of non-contradiction (in premise 1). A sentence is not self-contradictory simply because it is affirmed of opposites at the same time. It must also be affirmed *in the same sense*. But this is precisely what the orthodox view of Christ does not do. Thus it avoids the charge of incoherence in the following way:

1. It is not contradictory to affirm opposing attributes of the same individual at the same time as long as it is *in a different sense*.

2. The mutually exclusive attributes (such as 'infinite' and 'finite') are not being attributed to Jesus in the same sense.

3. Therefore, it is not contradictory to affirm of Jesus the attributes of both deity and humanity.

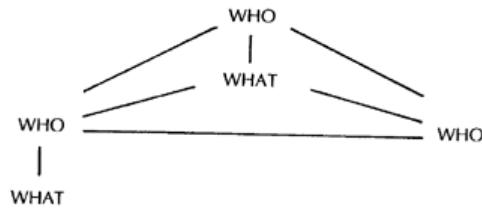
For example, the sense in which Jesus got tired and slept is not the same as the sense in which as God he 'never slumbers or sleeps' ([Ps. 121:3](#)). And the sense in which Jesus 'grew in wisdom' as a man was not the same sense in which he is the eternal Wisdom and Logos ([John 1:1](#)). For each case the first is true of his human nature and the second of his divine nature. A diagram will help illustrate the point.

(Geisler and Watkins, *ibid.*)

⁷ The rational discomfort of this doctrine is manifest even in orthodox circles. Vernon Grounds, former president of the Conservative Baptist Seminary in Denver, cited with approval the conclusion of Søren Kierkegaard, Benedict de Spinoza and Reinhold Niebuhr, all of whom he believed claimed that this view of the incarnation is logically absurd and nonsensical (Grounds, 'The Postulate of Paradox', *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 7 (1964) 13–14). Another conservative scholar, John V. Dahms asks:

... by what logic is it possible for a nature that cannot be tempted to be united with a nature than can be tempted, or for a nature that cannot grow weary to be united with one that can grow weary, or for a nature that is always in full and perfect favour with God to be united with a nature that can grow in favour with God? (Dahms, 'How Reliable is Logic?' *JETS* 21 (1978) 373).

One evangelical writer has gone so far as to argue that Jesus has only one nature. He is 'the one-natured God-man' (Ronald W. Leigh, 'Jesus: the One-natured God-man', *Christian Scholar's Review* 11:2 (1982) 124). From a strictly orthodox standpoint this is a kind of monophysite view which, to borrow Chalcedon's terminology 'confuses' the two natures. It fuses the two natures into one incoherent hybrid, a divine-human nature.



In the Trinity there are three persons (whos) in one Nature (what). in Jesus there is one person (who) in two Natures (whats). Hence, the mutually exclusive attributes of deity and humanity are not predicated of Christ in the same sense (that is, of the same nature). For the sense in which Jesus is infinite (viz., as God) is different than the sense in which he is finite (viz., as man). Thus, there is no contradiction involved because, for example, Jesus is infinite and eternal only in his divine [p. 311](#) nature and temporal and finite only in his human nature. These two natures are distinct (though not separate). And as long as there is a distinction between them, then there is no contradiction in the Incarnation.

It would be contradictory to affirm that there is only one nature in Christ which possesses mutually exclusive attributes (such as created and uncreated, changeable and unchangeable). But this contradiction is avoided when we affirm that there are *two* different natures in this one person. This is a mystery but not a contradiction. That is, it goes *beyond* our finite reason but not *against* it. We cannot comprehend how both natures are cojoined in one person, but we can consistently affirm that they are.⁸

THEISTIC GROUNDING

In addition to the charge of logical incoherence, it is necessary to respond to those who would wrench orthodox Christology from its traditional theistic orientation. Although this attack comes from several directions, the common element is a denial of Jesus' unique claim to be ontologically identical to the monotheistic God of orthodox Judaism and Christianity.

Some offer the implausible thesis that Jesus' claims were not qualitatively different from those made in pantheistic or polytheistic cultures. They have suggested Greek, Roman, Buddhist, or even Hindu parallels. The problem with these proposals was pinpointed by C. S. Lewis when he wrote:

Among these Jews there suddenly turns up a man who goes about talking as if He was God.⁹ He claims to forgive sins. He says He has always existed. He says He is coming to judge the world at the end of time. Now let us get this clear. Among pantheists, like the Indians, anyone might say that he was a part of God, or one with God: there would be nothing very odd about it. But this man, since He was Jew, could not mean that kind of God. God, in their language, meant the Being outside the world Who had made it and [p. 312](#) was infinitely different from anything else. And when you have grasped that, you will see that

⁸ The Incarnation (and Trinity) may be in some sense *unimaginable* but they are not *unintelligible*. Neither can we imagine (i.e. picture) a Euclidean point, since every representation of it has dimension, and a point is a dimensionless intersection of two lines. And yet we can meaningfully *state* (define) what it is. Likewise, whatever inadequacies there are to concepts, images, or pictures of the Trinity (and Incarnation) do not thereby render all statements (predications) about them as unintelligible. In short, all truth is *predictable*, but not all truth is *imaginable*.

⁹ See below for a discussion of Jesus's claims to be identical with God.

what this man said was, quite simply, the most shocking thing that has ever been uttered by human lips.¹⁰

In brief, if Jesus had said, 'I and the Father are one' ([John 10:30](#)) in Bombay, no Hindu would have batted an eyelash, but in Jerusalem the Jews took up stones to kill him, saying, 'because you, a mere man, claim to be God' (v.[33](#)).

John Hick offers the implausible thesis that the unique deity claims of Christ can be explained away because

Within Judaism itself the notion of a man being called son of God already had a long tradition behind it. The Messiah was to be an earthly king of the line of David, and the ancient kings of David's line had been adopted as son of God in being anointed to their office: the words of [Psalm 2:7](#), 'He said to me, You are my son, today I have begotten you', were probably originally spoken at the coronation ceremony.¹¹

This, however, overlooks several important facts. First, Jesus claimed to be identical with *Yahweh*, an Old Testament term reserved only for God.¹² Second, Jesus claimed to be the 'I Am' or self-existing God of [Exodus 3:14](#) (in [John 8:58](#)). Third, the fact that many Old Testament passages about the Messiah's deity (not cited by Hick) imply his clear identity with *Yahweh*. Hence, to admit the Old Testament origin of Jesus' claims to be the son of David is to acknowledge also that he is David's 'Lord' ([Ps. 110:1](#); [Mt. 22:44](#)). For example, the Messiah is identified with *Yahweh* or Deity in many passages. He is called 'mighty God' in [Isa. 9:6](#) and *Yahweh* in [Zech. 12:10](#) and again in [14:3-9](#). The Messiah is labelled 'Lord' (*Adonai*) in [Ps. 110:1](#) and 'God' (*elohim*) in [Ps. 45:6](#) (cf. [Heb. 1:8](#)).¹³ According to [Micah 5:2](#) he pre-existed before Bethlehem. And he is identifiable with the Old Testament angel of *Yahweh* ([Isa. 63:7-10](#)) who is the 'I Am' of [Exodus 3:14](#) (cf. vv. [3-5](#)).

In brief, on the one hand, to deny that Jesus made unique claims to be identical to the monotheistic God of orthodox Judaism is to rip it from the historical context in which Jesus lived and made his claims. p. 313 And on the other hand to admit the Jewish (Old Testament) roots of his claims is to acknowledge the full force of his claims to be ontologically one with the *Yahweh* of the Old Testament.¹⁴

HISTORICITY OF NEW TESTAMENT RECORD

Of course we have thus far assumed that Jesus actually claimed to be God.

In order to defend this claim two pivotal points need support:

1) The Gospel record presents Christ as claiming ontological identity with the monotheistic God of orthodox Judaism.

¹⁰ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, New York: The Macmillan Co., 1943, 54-55.

¹¹ John Hick, *ibid.*, 174.

¹² See discussion below.

¹³ While the word *elohim* does not always refer to deity in the Old Testament, yet both the context here and the decisive use of it in [Hebrews 1](#) to refer to God (o theos) support this conclusion. At any rate, it is a possible rendering of [Psalm 45:6](#), and together with the other clear Old Testament references to Messiah as God, it makes a strong case.

¹⁴ This is not to say that Jesus' claims to deity were always explicit and forthright. Given his monotheistic audience this is understandable. However, even though Jesus' claims were often covert, they were nevertheless very clear and his Jewish audience clearly understood them as claims to deity ([Mark 2:10](#); [John 10:33](#)).

2) The Gospel records reliably report the teachings of Jesus regarding his own identity.¹⁵

1. First, do the Gospels say Jesus claimed deity for himself?

There are at least eight different ways the Jesus of the Gospels claimed to be God.

First, Jesus explicitly claimed to be the Old Testament Messiah on many occasions ([Mt. 14:61-63](#); [16:15-17](#); [Ln. 4:25-26](#)). When the Jewish High Priest demanded of him, ‘ “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed one?” “I am,” said Jesus. “And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming in the clouds of heaven” ’ ([Mark 14:61-63](#)). But, as was shown earlier, the Old Testament Messiah was identical to Yahweh. So to claim to be Messiah is to claim to be one with Yahweh.

Second, Jesus directly claimed to be the Old Testament Yahweh in many New Testament passages, the most notable of which is [John 8:58](#), ‘Before Abraham was, I am.’¹⁶
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When Jesus made these claims his monotheistic audience responded with statements like these: ‘Why does this fellow talk like that? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?’ ([Mark 2:7](#)). ‘ “We are not stoning you for any of these,” replied the Jews, “but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God” ’ ([John 10:33](#)).

¹⁵ There are those who claim that history is not knowable because our knowledge of the past is fragmentary and world view dependent. But if this were so then neither would classical history nor historical geology be legitimate disciplines. (See N. L. Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 198, ch. 15.)

¹⁶ The following comparison shows that Jesus claimed to be Jehovah (Yahweh).

<i>Of Jehovah (Yahweh)</i>	<i>Mutual title or act</i>	<i>Of Jesus</i>
Isa. 45:22 ; 43:11	Saviour	John 4:42
1 Sam. 2:6	Raise dead	John 5:21
Joel 3:12	Judge	John 5:27 ; cf. Mt. 25:31 f.
Isa. 60:19-20	Light	John 8:12
Exodus 3:14	I Am	John 8:58 , cf. 18:5-6
Psalm 23:1	Shepherd	John 10:11
Isa. 42:8 , cf. 48:11	Glory of God	John 17:1 , 5
Isa. 41:4 ; 44:6	First and last	Rev. 1:17 ; 2:8
Isa. 62:5 (and Hosea 2:16)	Bridegroom	Rev. 21:2 , cf. Mt. 25:1 f.
Jer. 31:34	Forgiver of sins	Mark 2:7 , 10

Third, Jesus claimed to be one with God the Father.

“I and the Father are one.” Again the Jews picked up stones to stone him ...’ because, said they, ‘you, a mere man, claim to be God’ ([John 10:30-33](#)). He told Philip, ‘If you have seen me you have seen the Father’ ([John 14:9](#)). Certainly they would not have reacted in this way if Jesus was merely claiming to be of the same *purpose* as the Father and not of the same nature.

Fourth, Jesus claimed to possess the eternal glory of God.

Yahweh said to Isaiah, ‘I am the Lord; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another’ ([Isa. 42:8](#)). Yet Jesus prayed to the Father, ‘Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began’ ([John 17:4-5](#)). John records elsewhere that when Isaiah wrote in chapter six about the Lord high and lifted up that ‘he saw Jesus’ glory and spoke about him’ ([John 12:37-38, 41](#)).

Fifth, Jesus claimed to be equal with God.

Mark wrote that ‘when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, “Why does this fellow talk like that? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?”’ ([Mark 2:5-7](#)). In [John 5](#) Jesus said, ‘Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father. He who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father, who sent him ...’ ([John 5:22-23, 26-29](#)).

Sixth, on numerous occasions Jesus accepted worship that is due to God alone.

The Law declared: ‘Do not worship any other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God’ ([Ex. 34:14](#)). Yet ‘the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshipped him ...’ ([Mt. 28:16-17](#)). On another occasion when Jesus reached out his hand and caught a p. 315 drowning Peter, ‘then those who were in the boat worshipped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God”’ ([Mt. 14:31-33](#)).

Seventh, Jesus placed his name on the same level as that of God the Father.

This is evident from the fact that he asked the disciples to baptize in his name, along with the Father and the Holy Spirit ([Mt. 28:18-19](#)), thus placing himself on equal footing with the Father.

Eighth, Jesus asked his disciples to pray in his name.

‘And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it’ ([John 14:13-14](#)). Indeed, Stephen even prayed to Jesus, saying, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit’ ([Acts 7:59-60](#)).

Ninth, even in his parables Jesus claimed functions reserved only for Yahweh in the Old Testament, such as being Shepherd ([Luke 15](#)), Rock ([Mt. 7:24-27](#)), and Sower ([Mt. 13:24-30](#)).

Any Jew with a knowledge of the Old Testament imagery could discern that Jesus was placing himself on the level of Yahweh who was Israel’s Shepherd ([Ps. 23:1](#)), Rock ([Ps. 18](#)), and Sower ([Amos 9:15](#)).¹⁷

It is abundantly clear from this evidence that the Gospels and other New Testament records present Jesus as one who claims to be equal with the monotheistic God of first century orthodox Judaism.¹⁸ This leaves the one remaining and highly important

¹⁷ See Philip Payne, ‘Jesus’ Implicit Claim to Deity in His Parables’, *Trinity Journal* (1981):2:1:3-23.

¹⁸ When Jesus said, ‘The Father is greater than I’ ([John 14:28](#)), he referred to the office of the Father, not his nature. Whether human or divine, both Father and Son have the same nature. And when [Colossians 1:15](#) speaks of Christ as ‘Firstborn’ it refers to his being first *over* creation, not first *in* creation. After all, he cannot be a creature if he is the Creator of all things (v. [16](#), cf. [John 1:2](#)).

question: are the Gospel records creating or reporting the sayings of Jesus? Are they putting their words in Jesus' mouth, or did they get their words from Jesus' mouth?

There have been several obstacles to an acceptance of the historical reliability of the Gospel records. As we shall see, none of these is insurmountable.

It has been claimed that the New Testament records are in some non-historical sense legends, myths, or literary embellishments. From David Strauss to Rudolf Bultmann there is an unbroken tradition of negative biblical criticism which has perpetuated this attack on orthodox Christology. However, the foundations of such criticism are [p.316](#) crumbling. And indeed they should, for they are constituted of unjustified presuppositions.

First, it is often wrongly assumed that the basic New Testament documents were of late (even second century) origin. This view is more speculative and pre-archaeological and has now been largely discredited, even in circles which do not embrace Chalcedonian Christology. After decades of study the renowned paleontologist, William F. Albright, concluded that 'every book of the New Testament was written by a baptized Jew between the forties and the eighties of the first century AD (very probably sometime between about 50 and 75 AD)'.¹⁹

More recently the late radical theologian John A. T. Robinson redated the New Testament to 'the period between 40 and 70 [AD]'.²⁰ In response to contemporary critics who persist in holding late dates for the New Testament, Robinson castigates the 'almost wilful blindness of investigators to the seemingly obvious'.²¹

C. H. Dodd added:

You are certainly justified in questioning the whole structure of the accepted 'critical' chronology of the NT writings, which avoids putting anything earlier than 70, so that none of them are available for anything like first-generation testimony. I should agree with you that much of this late dating is quite arbitrary, even wanton, the off-spring not of any argument that can be presented, but rather of the critic's prejudice ...²²

Second, it is often incorrectly assumed that the New Testament record about Christ was not composed by contemporary or eyewitness writers.

In addition to being based on unjustified late dating, this unsubstantiated charge is contrary to the unequivocal claim of the New Testament documents themselves. The writer of the Gospel of John said of himself in his Gospel, 'This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true' ([John 21:24](#)). In his first epistle John declared, 'That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we [p.317](#) proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it ...' ([1 John 1:1-2](#)).

The apostle Peter insisted, 'We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty' ([1 Peter 1:16](#)).

In fact, of the four Gospel writers, three (Matthew, Mark and John) were eyewitness contemporaries of Christ, and Luke declared:

¹⁹ William F. Albright, 'Toward A More Conservative View', *Christianity Today* (Jan. 18, 1963) 359.

²⁰ John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976, 352.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 342.

²² C. H. Dodd, cited in *ibid.*, 360.

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account ... so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught ([Luke 1:1-4](#)).²³

The apostle Paul, whom even the begrudging critics grant four New Testament letters (Romans, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians), claimed to be an eyewitness contemporary of Christ (cf. [1 Cor. 15:8](#)). He even challenged his readers (AD 55) only 22 years after Christ's resurrection (AD 33)²³ to check with the eyewitnesses to verify what he said ([1 Cor. 15:6](#)).

Once it is admitted that the New Testament was composed in the first century (as both manuscript and archaeological evidence indicates), then it is unreasonable to deny apostolic claims to authorship. In fact, to dispute the authorship claims of the New Testament books is [p. 318](#) to impugn the integrity of the earliest disciples of Christ and thus the documentary foundation of the Christian church.

Third, it is sometimes mistakenly assumed by negative New Testament critics that the New Testament record shows signs of mythological embellishment.

This is, however, without basis in fact. First of all, there was not enough time between Jesus' death (AD 33) and the first written documents (AD 40-60) for a myth to develop.

²³ See Harold Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978.

There is substantial evidence for accepting the historical accuracy of John's report of Jesus' sayings.

1. John A. T. Robinson dated the Gospel of John at 40-65 AD. This date places it within two decades of the events recorded, much too early for typical embellishment to occur. Even late dates place it within the lifetime of the eyewitness writer, John the Apostle.

2. John's account of Jesus' sayings are not different from those found in the synoptic Gospels (cf. [Mt. 11:25-27](#)). Even the 'I am' statements have parallels (cf. [Mk. 14:62](#)).

3. The account of miracles that also occur in the Gospels does not show any more significant variation than occurs from one synoptic to another. This includes walking on water, feeding the five thousand, and the resurrection.

4. Strong deity claims, characteristic of John, are also found in the synoptics (cf. [Mark 2:7-10](#); [14:16-62](#)).

5. John is careful to distinguish what Jesus actually said and what the disciples later understood by it (cf. [John 2:17](#); [6:60](#)).

6. The distinction between Jesus' words and those of the writer of the Gospel is so clear that a 'red-letter' edition of John is easy to make.

7. The claim that John put his own words in Jesus' mouth cannot avoid the charge of deception.

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7. The claim that John put his own words in Jesus' mouth cannot avoid the charge of deception.

Myths are known to take at least two generations to develop.²⁴ Second, the New Testament is markedly different from the second- and third-century mythological embellishments known as the New Testament Apocrypha.²⁵ Third, this critical assumption is contrary to the very claim of the New Testament writers who said that they were not writing myths (cf. [2 Peter 1:16–17](#)). Fourth, the New Testament records do not possess the literary characteristics of unhistorical myths, legend, or *midrash*.²⁶ C. S. Lewis concludes of the Gospel stories: ‘I have been reading poems, romances, vision-literature, legends, myths all my life. I know what they are like. I know that not one of them is like this.’²⁷

Fourth, other critics have suggested that the New Testament writers did not distinguish between their words and those of Jesus. But this is untrue in the Gospels (*passim*), Acts ([20:35](#)), the Epistles ([1 Cor. 7:10](#), [12](#), [25](#)), and the book of Revelation (e.g. [1:8](#), [11](#), [17b–3:22](#)). Even without the aid of quotation marks, the ease with which a ‘red letter’ edition of the New Testament can be made demonstrates how clearly and consistently the New Testament writers distinguished their words from those of Jesus. At times the Gospel writers even take pains to distinguish what Jesus said at the time with what they later thought about it (cf. [John 2:17](#), [22](#)). This is not to say that the Gospel writers did not select, arrange, and even paraphrase Jesus’ words. It is only to affirm that they did not misrepresent, distort, or invent them.²⁸ p. 319

Fifth, some have suggested that the Gospel writers were not giving a historical narration of events but were really presenting a Jesus of their own literary creation.²⁹ But this is contrary to their own claims. John said, ‘That which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of Life’ ([1 John 1:1](#)). Peter wrote, ‘We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ’ ([2 Peter 1:16](#)).³⁰ And Luke explicitly claimed, ‘I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning’ in order to write ‘an orderly account’ ([Luke 1:3–4](#)). The

²⁴ William L. Craig, *The Son Rises: The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1981, 101.

²⁵ See Gospel of Peter 8:35–42.

²⁶ See Scott Cunningham and Daryl Bock, ‘Is Matthew Midrash?’ *Bibliotheca Sacra* (April–June, 1987): Vol. 144.

²⁷ C. S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections*, Walter Hooper, ed., Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1967, 155.

²⁸ It is also crucial to the historicity of the Gospels to recognize that, when they declare ‘Jesus said or did’ something on a given occasion, that Jesus did in fact say or do this on that occasion. Otherwise the writer is intentionally misrepresenting the facts. All of the Gospel data which seems to conflict with this can be accounted for by remembering that as an itinerant preacher Jesus said many of the same things on different occasions (like the Sermon the Mount); that he performed similar acts on different occasions (like cleansing the temple); and that sometimes events are recorded for topical reasons without really claiming they occurred in the stated order.

²⁹ By insisting that genre decisions are made ‘up front’, a subtle *a priori* methodological assumption is made which imposes meaning on the text, rather than discovering the meaning of the text. Genre decisions should be made only *after* the text is exegeted by the normal historical-grammatical method of interpretation which seeks to discover what the author meant, in the context in which it is expressed. Otherwise, alien genre choices made ‘up front’ can distort what the author really meant in the passage.

³⁰ The evidence for the authenticity of 2 Peter is substantial (see Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction: Hebrews to Revelation*, Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press, 1962, 151–171).

Gospel writers were not artificially creating a myth; they were accurately reporting the truth.

Finally, it is often wrongly assumed that the New Testament records about Christ are not historically reliable because of the presence of supernatural events.³¹ This unjustified presumption leads us to our next main point. [p. 320](#)

THE SUPERNATURAL NATURE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT ACCOUNTS

As early as 1670 the pantheist Benedict Spinoza concluded that nature 'keeps a fixed and immutable order'. Thus 'a miracle ... is a mere absurdity'.³² The effect of his view on the Christ of the Gospel is clear: no miracle recorded in the New Testament actually occurred. Jesus was merely a man. Thus Spinoza understood much of the Bible allegorically.

It was almost one hundred years before David Hume updated Spinoza's antisupernaturalism in his famous *Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748). Here Hume argued that 'a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined'.³³ Almost a hundred years later David Strauss wrote his famous *Life of Jesus* (1835–36)³⁴ which was based on Hume's antisupernatural presupposition. The devastating results have endured to the present, aided more recently by Rudolf Bultmann's *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (1958).³⁶ Bultmann's acceptance of such antisupernaturalism led him to conclude that 'man's knowledge and mastery of the world have advanced to such an extent through science and technology that it is not longer possible for anyone seriously to hold the New Testament view of the world—in fact, there is hardly anyone who does'.³⁷

The *Myth of God Incarnate* theologians reflect the same antisupernatural bias. Michael Goulder, for example, claims that although 'historical study does not disprove divine

³¹ There are at least ten different lines of evidence which converge to support the historicity of the New Testament. Briefly enumerated they include the following:

1. New Testament Books were quoted and collected as authentic by other New Testament writers ([Col. 4:16](#); [1 Th. 5:27](#); [2 Pet. 3:15–16](#)); 2. It is quoted as authoritative by other writers in apostolic times (for example, *The Epistle of Barnabas*, Clement of Rome); 3. The New Testament was considered apostolic by the disciples of the apostles (such as Polycarp); 4. Early fathers (from the second to the fourth century) quoted as authoritative the whole New Testament; 5. Early commentaries and harmonies were written on the New Testament (e.g. Tatian's *Diatessaron*, AD 170); 6. New Testament lists and collections were made at an early date (second century and following); 7. All the basic books (Gospels, Acts, Paul's Epistles) were included in virtually all the collections; 8. Even the early enemies of Christianity (Celsus, Porphyry, Julian) recognized the historical nature of the Gospels; 9. The apocryphal books (second and third century) are unlike the Gospels; 10. Archaeological discoveries confirm the historicity of the New Testament.

³² Benedict Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* in *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, Vol. 1, trans. by R. H. M. Elwes, London: George Bell and Sons, 1883.

³³ David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1955 (1748), 122.

³⁴ David Strauss wrote, 'For if the Gospels are really and truly historical, it is impossible to exclude miracles from the life of Jesus; if, on the other hand, miracles are incompatible with history, then the Gospels are not really historical records' (Strauss, *The Life of Jesus* 1.19).

³⁶ Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958.

³⁷ Rudolf Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology' in *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, Hans Werner, ed., London: Billing and Sons, Ltd., 1954, 4.

activity', it just 'renders the old inspiration model implausible'.³⁸ Since Ernst Troeltsch first wrote p. 321 on historiography,³⁹ a naturalistic bias has become ingrained in modern historical methodology. Troeltsch laid down his rule of analogy: the only way in which one can know the past is by inspecting analogies in the present. The unknown is arrived at only through the known. In his own words, 'on the analogy of the events known to us we seek by conjecture and sympathetic understanding to explain and reconstruct the past ...'⁴⁰ On the basis of this historical uniformitarianism some have argued that 'no amount of testimony is every permitted to establish as past reality a thing that cannot be found in present reality ...' Even if 'the witness may have a perfect character—all that goes for nothing ...'⁴¹

This predisposition to judge historicity 'up front' in terms of supernatural claims is unwarranted, as can be seen by an analysis of the basic argument against miracles, formulated by philosophers from David Hume to Anthony Flew.⁴² The argument runs like this:

1. A miracle is a singular event.
2. Natural laws are based on regular patterns of events.
3. But the evidence for the regular is always greater than evidence for the singular.
4. Therefore, the evidence against miracles is always greater than the evidence for miracles.⁴³

Even from a purely naturalistic viewpoint, the flaw in this argument is evident. For it is simply untrue that the evidence for a *regular* pattern of events is always greater than that for a *singularity*. If this were true, then no philosophical naturalist should accept the 'Big Bang' theory as most contemporary astronomers do. For this 'Big Bang' was a radical singular event which has not been repeated since. Yet most scientists in the field accept its occurrence.⁴⁴

Likewise, if it is true, as anti-supernaturalists insist it is, that the evidence is always greater against singularities, then why do all naturalistic biochemists accept the spontaneous generation of first life in some 'primordial soup' or elsewhere? As far as the actual evidence p. 322 goes this is an unrepeated singularity. The truth is that naturalists have their own set of singularities, even though they reject the Christian's. It underlines the fact that the real problem is not what the Hume-Flew argument suggests: that there cannot be good evidence for unrepeated singularities, past or present.

The contemporary agnostic, Carl Sagan, believes that a 'single message' on a radio telescope⁴⁵ can prove the existence of highly intelligent beings in outer space. Why then is a single communication (or activity) of the intelligent Creator of the Cosmos ruled

³⁸ Michael Goulder, 'The Two Roots of the Christian Myth', John Hick, *ibid.*, 84.

³⁹ Ernst Troeltsch, 'Historiography', *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*.

⁴⁰ Norman L. Geisler, *Miracles and Modern Thought*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1982, 88.

⁴¹ Carl Becker, 'Detachment and the Writing of History', *Detachment and the Writing of History*, Phil L. Snyder, ed., Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972, 12–13.

⁴² Antony Flew, 'Miracles', in *The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, Paul Edwards, ed., New York: The Macmillan Co., 1967, 346–353.

⁴³ Geisler, *ibid.*, chapters 3–5.

⁴⁴ See Norman L. Geisler and Kerby Anderson, *Origin Science: A Proposal for the Creation-Evolution Controversy*, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987.

⁴⁵ Carl Sagan, *Broca's Brain*, New York: Random House, 1979, 275.

unscientific? In fact, in a theistic context miracles are to be expected. As Lewis aptly noted, 'If we admit God, must we admit Miracle? Indeed, you have no security against it. That is the bargain. Theology says to you in effect, "Admit God and with Him the risk of a few miracles ..."' ⁴⁶

Jesus lived and acted in the context of a theistic world. Therefore, granting this theistic setting, miraculous claims of and about Christ should not be ruled out on any but evidential grounds. In short, a good historian does not legislate miracles out of existence; rather he looks for the evidence of their authenticity.

There is another objection against miracles that is more subtle than the first. It is identified with the Bultmannian view. It argues that miracle stories are not normal history: they are part of sacred or spiritual history. It claims that miracles are spiritual truths or myths. For example, the virgin birth of Jesus is not a biological event but a spiritual event. Likewise, the resurrection of Christ is not a medical event but a redemptive act. This argument can be formulated as follows.⁴⁷

1. Miracles are by nature more than objective, historical truths; they are transcendent truths of faith.

2. But what is more than the objective, space-time world cannot be known historically.

3. Therefore, miracle stories cannot be known historically.

It seems clear enough that miracles are more than purely empirical, historical events. They do have a transcendent, redemptive dimension to them. The resurrection, for example, is more than the resuscitation of the corpse of Jesus of Nazareth. It is an act of God by which redemption for mankind is secured ([Rom. 4:25](#); [1 Cor. 15:1-4](#)). However, the Bultmannian mistake is to assume that since miracles [p. 323](#) are *more* than historical that they are *less* than historical. The miraculous event is still part of the space-time world, and as such it is a legitimate object of historical enquiry. For even though there is a divine origin and significance to the virgin conception of Jesus (without a male sperm), nevertheless it resulted in an actual birth in Bethlehem of Judea about 2000 years ago.

Events such as the virgin birth of Jesus are subject to historical research. The same is true of the resurrection. Even though its cause (God) is *beyond* time, its occurrence was *within* time, and as such it too is the object of legitimate historical enquiry. In short, simply because miracles are not events *of* the natural world we may not say that they are not events *in* the natural world. Even if they are not merely events *of* history, they may yet be events *in* history.

SALVIFIC IMPLICATION

What is the most important implication of all this? If Jesus is not the Son of God, then he did not provide the means for us to become the sons of God. But if Jesus is the Son of God, then we must take seriously his claims to be the only way to God.⁴⁸ Maurice Wiles noted correctly that if one rejects the Incarnation of God in Jesus, then 'the most likely change would be towards a less exclusive insistence on Jesus as the way for all peoples and all cultures'.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*, New York: The Macmillan Co., 1947, 109–110.

⁴⁷ See Norman L. Geisler, *Miracles and Modern Thought*, 82.

⁴⁸ [John 10:9-10](#); [14:6](#); cf. [Acts 4:12](#) and [1 Tim. 2:5](#).

⁴⁹ Maurice Wiles, 'Christianity Without Incarnation?', John Hick, *ibid.*, 9.

John Hick outlines a universalist implication of rejecting the orthodox doctrine of the incarnation when he concludes that it would replace 'the attempt at the mass conversion of the adherents of one world religion to another'.⁵⁰ In brief, the choice is either Incarnationalism or Universalism (or Annihilationism). Conversely, Incarnationalism involves some form of exclusivism. If Jesus is the Son of God, then he is the only way to God. If he was right when he claimed, 'I and the Father are one' ([John 10:30](#)), then he should also be believed when he proclaims, 'No man comes to the Father except by me' ([John 14:6](#)).

Much of the steam universalists generate against the uniqueness of Jesus' claim is based on their own (challengeable) assumption that truth is relative. But the very claim that all truth is relative is either itself [p. 324](#) relative (and thus ineffective), or else absolute and self-defeating. Such thinkers are standing upon the pinnacle of their own absolute from which they relativize everything else. Thus, in attempting to avoid exclusivism, they become exclusivists themselves.

Christ's claims are admittedly narrow, but they are not thereby unfair. For even though no one can be saved apart from him, nevertheless no one will be turned away by him (see [John 6:37](#)). As C. S. Lewis put it,

There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done', and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done'. All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. To those who knock it is opened.⁵²

So it is fair to have only one door to heaven as long as it is open to all.

What about those who do not know where the door is? Again the words of Lewis are to the point: 'We do know that no man can be saved except through Christ'; but in the meantime, 'if you are worried about the people outside, the most unreasonable thing you can do is to remain outside yourself'.⁵³ Rather, the best expression of concern we can show is to take our place on the solid Rock from which we can throw out a life-line to others who are perishing.

SUMMARY

We have been able to present only the outline of some of the chief criticisms of orthodox Chalcedonian Christology. These central charges have been weighed and found wanting. The historic view of Christ is neither logically inconsistent nor theistically unfounded. And to deny the authenticity of the miracle stories is neither philosophically necessary nor factually justifiable. Thus the unique salvific claims of Christ should still motivate his disciples. He said, 'All authority in heaven and earth has been given me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations ... And surely I am with you always, [even] to the very end of the age' ([Mt. 28:18-20](#)). Amen.

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⁵⁰ John Hick, *ibid.*, 182.

⁵² C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, New York: The Macmillan Co., 1946, 69.

⁵³ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 65.