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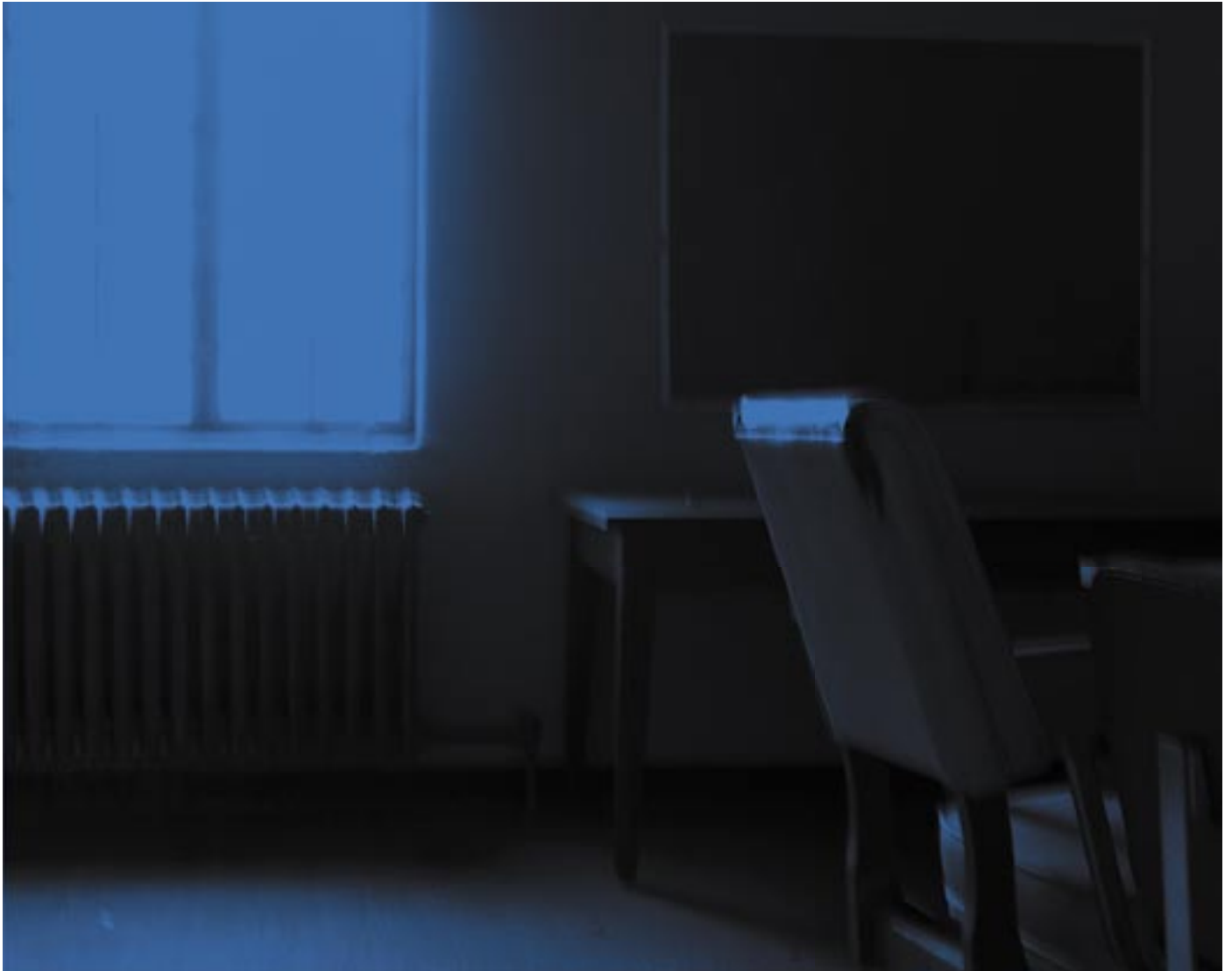
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Jesus Complex



WAS HE CRAZY, A
PATHOLOGICAL LIAR,
OR THE SON OF GOD?

“Then comes the real shock,” wrote Oxford professor C. S. Lewis. “Among these Jews there suddenly turns up a man who goes about talking as if He was God. He claims to forgive sins. He says He always existed. He says He is coming to judge the world at the end of time.”¹

Theologian and author R. C. Sproul randomly selected college students, asking about their opinion of Jesus Christ. Many considered Jesus’ profound influence on ethics, calling him a great moral teacher. Others, impressed by two billion people who call themselves Christians, responded that he was a great religious leader.

Yet, from the eyewitness accounts of Jesus to the present day, many of his two billion followers believe he is God, or the Son of God. So, who is right? Who really is Jesus Christ?

GREAT MORAL TEACHER?

Almost all scholars acknowledge that Jesus was a great moral teacher. In fact, his brilliant insight into human morality is an accomplishment recognized even by those of other religions. In his book *Jesus of Nazareth*, Jewish scholar Joseph Klausner wrote, “It is universally admitted ... that Christ taught the purest and sublimest ethics ... which throws the moral precepts and maxims of the wisest men of antiquity far into the shade.”²

Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount has been called the most superlative teaching of human ethics ever uttered by an individual. In fact, much of what we know today as “equal rights” actually is the result of Jesus’ teaching. Historian Will Durant said of Jesus that “he lived and struggled unremittingly for ‘equal rights’; in modern times he would have been sent to Siberia. ‘He

that is greatest among you, let him be your servant’—this is the inversion of all political wisdom, of all sanity.”³

Some have tried to separate Jesus’ teaching on ethics from his claims about himself, believing that he was simply a great man who taught lofty moral principles. This was the approach of one of America’s Founding Fathers.

President Thomas Jefferson, ever the enlightened rationalist, sat down in the White House with two identical copies of the New Testament, a straight-edge razor, and a sheaf of octavo-size paper. Over the course of a few nights, he made quick work of cutting and pasting his own Bible, a slim volume he called “The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth.” After slicing away every passage that suggested Jesus’ divine nature, Jefferson had a Jesus who was no more and no less than a good, ethical guide.⁴

Brimming with confidence after authoring the Declaration of Independence, apparently Jefferson thought he’d have a go at the Bible, cutting and pasting Jesus to conform to his own views. In other words, Jefferson liked Jesus’ teaching about ethics and morals, but he discarded the miracles and claims of divinity.

Ironically, Jefferson’s memorable words in the Declaration of Independence were rooted in Jesus’ teaching that each person is of immense and equal importance to God, regardless of sex, race, or social status. The famous document sets forth, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men



are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights ...”

There is in all of this a drastic logical contradiction. Jefferson was by all counts a genius, but he wasn't able to spot the key truth (most of us average mortals have missed it as well): if Jesus taught that he was God, could forgive sins, and was the co-creator of the universe, then he would not be a great moral teacher. It is hard to say what label we would give him, but it would best be given by a psychiatrist.

GREAT RELIGIOUS LEADER?

Did Jesus deserve the title of “great religious leader”? Surprisingly, Jesus never claimed to be a religious leader. He never got into religious politics or pushed an ambitious agenda, and he ministered almost entirely outside the established religious framework. When one compares Jesus with the other great religious leaders, a remarkable distinction emerges. Ravi Zacharias, who grew up in a Hindu culture, has studied world religions and observed a fundamental distinction between other religious founders and Jesus Christ.

Whatever we may make of their claims, one reality is inescapable. They are teachers who point to their teaching or show some particular way. In all of these, there emerges an instruction, a way of living. It is not Zoroaster to whom you turn; it is Zoroaster to whom you listen. It is not Buddha who

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C. S. Lewis, Oxford scholar

delivers you; it is his Noble Truths that instruct you. It is not Mohammad who transforms you; it is the beauty of the Koran that woos you. By contrast, Jesus did not only teach or expound His message. He was identical with His message.⁵

The truth of Zacharias's point is underscored by the number of times in the Gospels that Jesus' teaching message was simply “Come to me” or “Follow me” or “Obey me.”

But does that mean Jesus was a self-centered egoist? Certainly not. On the contrary, his entire life and ministry were focused on other people and their needs, especially those who were hurting and disenfranchised. The hallmarks of his ministry were humility, compassion, and forgiveness. Nevertheless, Jesus made it clear that he was sent from God and that he had the power to forgive sins—a claim that infuriated the religious leaders.

No other major religious leader ever claimed the power to forgive sins. But that is not the only claim Jesus made that separated him from the others. In *The World's Great Religions*, Huston Smith observed, “Only two people ever astounded their contemporaries so much that the question they evoked was not ‘Who is he?’ but ‘What

is he?’ They were Jesus and Buddha. The answers these two gave were exactly the opposite. Buddha said unequivocally that he was a mere man, not a god—almost as if he foresaw later attempts to worship him. Jesus, on the other hand, claimed ... to be divine.”⁶

DID JESUS CLAIM TO BE GOD?

Clearly, from the earliest years of the church, Jesus was called Lord and regarded by most Christians as God. Yet his divinity was a doctrine that was subjected to great debate (see “Mona Lisa's Smirk,” page 30). So the question—and it is *the* question—is this: Did Jesus really claim to be God (the Creator), or was his divinity something invented or assumed by the New Testament authors?

Some scholars believe Jesus was such a powerful teacher and compelling personality that his disciples just assumed he was God. Or maybe they just wanted to think he was God. John Dominic Crossan and the Jesus Seminar (a fringe group skeptical of scholars with presuppositions against miracles) are among those who believe Jesus was deified in error. Others who say he didn't claim to be God include Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian Scientists,

and a few other religious groups outside the borders of traditional Christianity.

Christians insist that Jesus did claim deity. As a Deist, Thomas Jefferson had no problem accepting Jesus' teachings on morals and ethics while denying his deity.⁷ But as we've said, and will explore further, if he was not who he claimed to be, then we must examine some other alternatives, none of which would make him a great moral teacher.

Familiarity can breed apathy. And familiar statements by and about Jesus within the Gospels, including descriptions of him as the Son of God, can wash over us without our realizing how bold, radical, and controversial they were. Even a superficial reading of the Gospels reveals that Jesus claimed to be someone more than a prophet like Moses or Daniel. But it is the nature of those claims that concern us. Two questions are worthy of attention.

- Did Jesus actually claim to be God?
- When he said "God," did Jesus really mean he was the Creator of the universe spoken of in the Hebrew Bible?

Strangely, the problem with answering these questions is not having too little data but having too much. But to see the answer more clearly, looking at a deluge of instances may be less helpful than exploring a few in more detail—and better understanding their contexts. Let's consider Jesus' words in Matthew 28:18: "I have been given complete authority in heaven and on earth."

What did Jesus mean when he claimed to have complete authority in heaven and on

earth? A danger of interpretation is to read into a historical document our definition—in this case, what we mean by "complete authority." But to locate meaning, context is everything.

"Authority" was a well-understood term in Roman-occupied Israel. At that time, Caesar was the supreme authority in the entire Roman world. His edict could instantly launch legions for war, condemn or exonerate criminals, and establish laws and rules of government. In fact, Caesar's authority was such that he himself claimed divinity. So, at the very least Jesus was claiming authority on a par with Caesar himself. But He didn't just say he had *more* authority than the Jewish leaders or Roman rulers; Jesus was claiming to be *the supreme authority* in the universe. To those he spoke to, it meant that he was God. Not a god—but *the* God.

DID JESUS CLAIM TO BE THE CREATOR?

But is it possible that Jesus was just reflecting God's authority and was not stating that he was the actual Creator? At first glance that seems plausible. Yet Jesus' claim to have all authority seems to make sense only if he is the Creator of the universe.

But this leads us to another point. Many sayings of Jesus, if isolated and parsed, could be made to say something other than what Jesus meant by them. Besides noting historical context (that is, the meaning of "authority" in first-century Palestine), we ascertain meaning by referencing with other statements. In other words, is this an isolated statement of Jesus, or is it augmented by other such claims?

Here is a partial list of similar statements found in the Gospels.

- "I am the resurrection and the life." (John 11:25)
- "I am the light of the world." (John 8:12)
- "I and my Father are one." (John 10:30)
- "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End." (Revelation 22:13)."
- "I am the way, the truth, and the life." (John 14:6)
- "I am the only way to the Father [God]." (John 14:6)
- "If you've seen me, you've seen the Father." (John 14:9)



Once again, we must go back to context. In the Hebrew Scriptures, when Moses asked God his name at the burning bush, God answered, "I AM." He was telling Moses that He is the only Creator, eternal and transcendent of time.

From that time on, no practicing Jew would ever refer to himself or anyone else by "I AM." As a result, Jesus' "I AM" claims infuriated the Jewish leaders. One time, for example, some leaders explained to Jesus why they were trying to kill him: "Because you, a mere man, have made yourself God" (John 10:33).

But the point here is not simply that such a phrase fumed the religious leaders. The point is that they knew exactly what he was saying—he was claiming to be God, the Creator of the universe. It is only this claim that would have brought the accusation of blasphemy. To read into the text that Jesus claimed to be God is clearly warranted, not simply by his words, but also by their reaction to those words.

WHAT KIND OF GOD?

The theory that Jesus may have believed in the divinity of all persons rests on what is most loathed in a movie like *The Kingdom of Heaven*. In revisionist historical movies, characters are plopped into the past, equipped with modern-day sensibilities and worldviews, immune to the prejudices, values, and beliefs of the world that the director has made them occupy. The result, in *The Kingdom of Heaven*, is that the medieval pilgrim, played by Orlando Bloom,



wonders why Christians and Muslims can't just all get along. (In the extended version, the final battle ends with a sing-along of "We Are the World.") Characters like this are able to perceive events with the 20/20 moral clarity that a century or a millennium of reflection has provided.

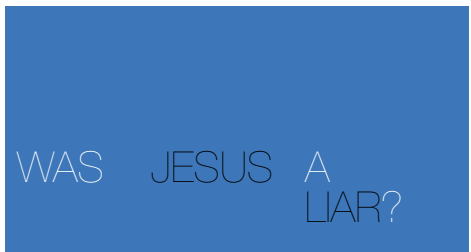
The idea that we are all part of God, and that within us is the seed of divinity, is simply not a possible meaning for Jesus' words and actions. Such thoughts are revisionist, foreign to his teaching, foreign to his stated beliefs, and foreign to his disciples' understanding of his teaching.

Jesus taught that he is God in the way the Jews understood God and the way the Hebrew Scriptures portrayed God, not in the way the New Age movement understands God. Neither Jesus nor his audience had been weaned on *Star Wars*, and so when they spoke of God, they were not speaking of cosmic forces. It's simply bad history to redefine what Jesus meant by the concept of God.

But if Jesus wasn't God, are we still okay

by calling him a great moral teacher? C. S. Lewis argued, "I am trying here to prevent anyone from 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."⁸

In his quest for truth, Lewis knew that he could not have it both ways with the identity of Jesus. Either Jesus was who he claimed to be—God in the flesh—or his claims were false. And if they were false, Jesus could not be a great moral teacher. He would either be lying intentionally or he would be a lunatic with a God complex.



One of the best-known and most influential political works of all time was written by Niccolò Machiavelli in 1532. In his classic, *The Prince*, Machiavelli exalts power, success, image, and efficiency above loyalty, faith, and honesty. According to Machiavelli, lying is okay if it accomplishes a political end.

Could Jesus Christ have been motivated by this Machiavellian principle? We have it on record that Muhammad lied, justifying his actions by the principle that the end justifies the means.⁹ Maybe Jesus also lied. In fact, the Jewish opponents of Jesus were constantly trying to expose him as a fraud and liar. They would barrage him with questions in attempts to trip him up and make him contradict himself. Yet Jesus responded with remarkable consistency.

The question we must deal with is, what could possibly motivate Jesus to live his entire life as a lie? He taught that God was opposed to lying and hypocrisy, so he wouldn't have been doing it to please his Father. He certainly didn't lie for his followers' benefit. (All but one were martyred.) And so we are left with only two other reasonable explanations, each of which is problematic.

BENEFIT

Many people have lied for personal gain. In fact, the motivation of most lies is some perceived benefit to oneself. What could Jesus have hoped to gain from lying about his identity? Power would be the most obvious answer. If people believed he was God, he would have tremendous power. (That is why many ancient leaders, such as the Caesars, claimed divine origin.)

The rub with this explanation is that Jesus shunned all attempts to move him in the direction of seated power, instead chastising those who abused such power and lived their lives pursuing it. He also chose to reach out to the outcasts (prostitutes and lepers), those without power, creating a network of people whose influence was less than zero. In a way that could only be described as bizarre, all that Jesus did and said moved diametrically in the other direction from power.

It would seem that if power was Jesus' motivation, he would have avoided the cross at all costs. Yet, on several occasions, he told his disciples that the cross was his destiny and mission. How would dying on a Roman cross bring one power?

Death, of course, brings all things into proper focus. And while many martyrs have died for a cause they believed in, few have been willing to die for a known lie. Certainly all hopes for Jesus' own personal gain would have ended on the cross. Yet, to his last breath, he would not relinquish his claim of being the unique Son of God.

A LEGACY

So if Jesus was above lying for personal benefit, perhaps his radical claims were falsified in order to leave a legacy. But the prospect of being beaten to a pulp and nailed to a cross would quickly dampen the enthusiasm of most would-be superstars.

Here is another haunting fact. If Jesus were to have simply dropped the claim of being God's Son, he never would have been condemned. It was his claim to be God and his unwillingness to recant of it that got him crucified.

If enhancing his credibility and historical reputation was what motivated Jesus to lie, one must explain how a carpenter from a poor Judean village could ever anticipate the events that would catapult his name to worldwide prominence. How would he

know his message would survive? Jesus' disciples had fled and Peter had denied him. Not exactly the formula for launching a religious legacy.

Do historians believe Jesus lied? Scholars have scrutinized Jesus' words and life to see if there is any evidence of a defect in his moral character. In fact, even the most ardent skeptics are stunned by Jesus' moral and ethical purity. One of those was skeptic and antagonist John Stuart Mill (1806–73), the philosopher. Mill wrote of Jesus,

About the life and sayings of Jesus there is a stamp of personal originality combined with profundity of insight in the very first rank of men of sublime genius of whom our species can boast. When this pre-eminent genius is combined with the qualities of probably the greatest moral reformer and martyr to that mission who ever existed on earth, religion cannot be said to have made a bad choice in pitching upon this man as the ideal representative and guide for humanity.¹⁰

According to historian Philip Schaff, there is no evidence, either in church history or

in secular history, that Jesus lied about anything. Schaff argued, "How, in the name of logic, common sense, and experience, could a deceitful, selfish, depraved man have invented, and consistently maintained from the beginning to end, the purest and noblest character known in history with the most perfect air of truth and reality?"¹¹

To go with the option of liar seems to swim upstream against everything Jesus taught, lived, and died for. To most scholars, it just doesn't make sense. Yet, to deny Jesus' claims, one must come up with some explanation. And if Jesus' claims are not true, and he wasn't lying, the only option remaining is that he must have been self-deceived.

WAS JESUS A LUNATIC?

Albert Schweitzer, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1952 for his humanitarian efforts, had his own views about Jesus. Schweitzer concluded that insanity was behind Jesus' claim to be God. In other words, Jesus was wrong about his claims but didn't intentionally lie. According to

this theory, Jesus was deluded into actually believing he was the Messiah.

C. S. Lewis considered this option carefully. Lewis deduced the insanity of Jesus' claims—if they are not true. He said that someone who claimed to be God 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."¹²

Even those most skeptical of Christianity rarely question Jesus' sanity. Social reformer William Channing (1780–1842), admittedly not a Christian, made the following observation about Jesus: "The charge of an extravagant, self-deluding enthusiasm is the last to be fastened on Jesus. Where can we find traces of it in history? Do we detect them in the calm authority of His precepts?"¹³

Although his own life was filled with immorality and personal skepticism, the renowned French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) acknowledged Jesus' superior character and presence of mind. "When Plato describes his imaginary righteous man, loaded with all the punishments of guilt, yet meriting the highest rewards of virtue, he describes exactly the character of Christ. ... What presence of mind. ... Yes,

if the life and death of Socrates are those of a philosopher, the life and death of Jesus Christ are those of a God."¹⁴

Schaff posed the question we must ask ourselves: "Is such an intellect—thoroughly healthy and vigorous, always ready and always self-possessed—liable to a radical and most serious delusion concerning his own character and mission?"¹⁵

So, was Jesus a liar or a lunatic, or was he the Son of God? Could Jefferson have been right by labeling Jesus "only a good moral teacher" while denying him deity? Interestingly, the audience who heard Jesus—both believers and enemies—never regarded him as a mere moral teacher. Jesus produced three primary effects in the people who met him: hatred, terror, or adoration.

There was no trace of apathy about Jesus and his message. No evidence of people expressing mild approval of him. Yet, two centuries after Jefferson, many still cut and paste their own version of Jesus to comfortably fit their lives, for a watered-down Jesus like Jefferson's makes no demands upon us. And we need not concern ourselves with what Jesus said about life and purpose when we can more easily delete his claims.

LUNATIC

But, if Lewis is right, then the claims of Jesus maintain their weight and press in around us, soliciting a response. As Lewis stated it:

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.¹⁶

ENDNOTES

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1972), 51.

² Quoted in Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Nelson, 1979), 127.

³ Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy* (New York: Washington Square, 1961), 428.

⁴ Linda Kulman and Jay Tolson, "The Jesus Code," *U. S. News & World Report*, December 22, 2003, 1.

⁵ Ravi Zacharias, *Jesus among Other Gods* (Nashville: Word, 2000), 89.

⁶ Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), 150.

⁷ A Deist is someone who believes in a standoffish God—a deity who created the world and then lets it run according to pre-established laws. Deism was a fad among intellectuals around the time of America's independence, and Jefferson bought into it.

⁸ Lewis, 52.

⁹ Norman L. Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 178–80.

¹⁰ Quoted in Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life, 1999), 159.

¹¹ Quoted in McDowell, *New Evidence*, 160.

¹² Lewis, 52.

¹³ Quoted in McDowell, *New Evidence*, 161, 162.

¹⁴ Quoted in McDowell, *New Evidence*, 122, 129.

¹⁵ Quoted in McDowell, *New Evidence*, 162.

¹⁶ Lewis, 52.

