

more forceful, make them conform to expectations, or to address current societal issues.

- *Jesus was fictional.* Jesus may never have existed.
- *Jesus was wrong.* Although he was honest and sane, Jesus may have relied on apparent fulfilment of Biblical prophecy and concluded that he was indeed the son of God, even though that was not the case.

Any of these possibilities might be debated, but the fact that they exist at all shows that Lewis was not being thorough in his argument, rendering it invalid.

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- *Jesus was misrepresented.* Those who wrote about Jesus may have written what they “knew” he meant, as opposed to what he really said.
  - *The story of Jesus was badly reported.* Those who wrote down Jesus’ words may have misremembered what Jesus said, due to bias, social factors, or simply the passage of time.
  - *Jesus’ life was fictionalized.* Accounts of Jesus’ life may have been intentionally embellished to make them
- If Jesus is lying about his divinity, then he is not moral. If he is insane, then perhaps he is not great. Beyond this, the argument is also invalid because it presents a false dilemma: Lord, liar, and lunatic aren’t the only possible solutions to the question of why Jesus would say that he is the son of God. Other possibilities include:



# LORD, LIAR, OR LUNATIC?

A Question of Moral Atheism

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IN *MERE CHRISTIANITY*, C. S. Lewis wrote: “A man who said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic ... 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.”

This argument for the divinity of Jesus is sometimes referred to as the “Lord, Liar, or Lunatic” argument. In essence, Lewis is saying that Jesus either really was the son of God, he was pretending to be, or he was insane. And since Lewis considers the last two possibilities unthinkable (because he’s taking it as given that Jesus was a great moral teacher), he concludes that Jesus must indeed be divine.

There are many problems with this argument. The most obvious problem, from an atheist perspective, is that an unbiased person might not conclude that “great and moral” are necessary characteristics of Jesus.

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The most obvious problem, from an atheist perspective, is that an unbiased person might not conclude that “great and moral” are necessary characteristics of Jesus.

If Jesus is lying about his divinity, then he is not moral. If he is insane, then perhaps he is not great.

Beyond this, the argument is also invalid because it presents a false dilemma: Lord, liar, and lunatic aren’t the only possible solutions to the question of why Jesus would say that he is the son of God.

Other possibilities include:

- *Jesus was misunderstood.* Perhaps, for example, Jesus made statements that he intended as words *from* God, which were misunderstood (and misrecorded) as words from Jesus *as* God.
- *Jesus was misrepresented.* Those who wrote about Jesus may have written what they “knew” he meant, as opposed to what he really said.
- *The story of Jesus was badly reported.* Those who wrote down Jesus’ words may have misremembered what Jesus said, due to bias, social factors, or simply the passage of time.
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# QUESTIONS OF MORAL ATHEISM: INSTRUCTIONS

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1. Print pages one and two of this document, one on each side of the same piece of paper (if you don't have access to a duplex printer, print page one, put the page back in the paper tray upside down, and print page two — depending on the type of printer, you may have to experiment a bit).
2. Cut the printout in two, using the thin rules across the middle of the page as a guide.
3. Fold the two pieces of paper in half, making a pair of small pamphlets.
4. Keep one of the pamphlets to read, and give the other away to an interested friend or stranger.

That's it! If you have any questions, suggestions, or comments, we invite you to share them by leaving a comment on [blog.iamanatheist.org](http://blog.iamanatheist.org). Thanks!

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