CON: LEWIS’S TRILEMMA: CASE NOT PROVEN

Adam Barkman

Donald Williams, whom I personally know and respect, is, like me, an unashamed admirer of C. S. Lewis. Yet for all our shared admiration, I suspect that Williams and I do not always admire all the same things about Lewis. Williams, for instance, begins his chapter noting, “It is curious that an argument that has become a staple of popular Christian apologetics should be rejected as fallacious by many who presumably accept its conclusion.” I am not sure what Williams finds “curious” about this, but certainly a Christian who is interested in the truth of the matter could find the Trilemma Argument problematic. Indeed, the thing I myself admire most in Lewis is his passion for truth and his willingness to pay the price in pursuit of it (cf. Lewis, 1999, p. 331). Williams, however, seems to suggest that Christian thinkers should simply accept an argument—never mind its validity—if its conclusion is something that we agree with. This is not the spirit of Lewis even if Lewis is the very person who articulated the Trilemma.

Nevertheless, Williams has done us all a service by helpfully pointed out that not enough philosophers who have examined Lewis’s Trilemma Argument have properly appreciated what was in the culture at the time Lewis articulated this argument and to whom Lewis was speaking. If not brilliant, Lewis’s Trilemma Argument is fairly compelling if (1) we grant Lewis’s assumption that Jesus claimed to be God, and (2) we take into account Lewis’s intended audience (namely, ordinary BBC listeners during World War II). Williams is right that when Lewis is understood to be concerned with the same things that a modern analytic philosopher like Daniel Howard-Snyder (Howard-Snyder, 2004) wrestles with, Lewis is misrepresented and made to look a fool (when he was no such thing). But, admitting this, our discussion neither should assume (as Lewis did) that Jesus claimed to be God nor forget that what we are primarily interested in is not the Trilemma as a piece of popular apologetics, but its soundness as an argument directed at informed believers and nonbelievers today. In this extended philosophical discussion, we want to go further than Lewis could, and this means unpacking some of his assumptions.

My claim is that taken as a rigorous piece of philosophy or theology, the Trilemma ends in a False Dilemma, fallaciously asserting that Jesus is either “liar, lunatic, or LORD (as in God).” Both prominent expanded versions of
the Trilemma Argument—(1) either liar, lunatic, legend, or Lord, or (2) either liar, lunatic, innocently mistaken, or Lord—add real possibilities to the argument, and thus make the argument better and stronger, even if the conclusion—Jesus is Lord—is no longer obvious. Yet my aim is not to rehash an old, or create a new, “Quadrilemma” (or something even more fanciful). If one simply wants a wide-ranging rehash, go with the much-discussed Howard-Snyder/Davis debate (Howard-Snyder, 2004; Davis, 2004). My take on the argument is a bit different; I think the Trilemma primarily fails because the argument wrongly assumes—that is, it assumes without argumentation where argumentation is needed—that Jesus claimed to be God (or “LORD”).

To undercut the Trilemma Argument, all I really need to do is to show that reasonable doubt can be cast upon the claim that Jesus thought himself God. This can be done, but my larger intention in all this remains one with Lewis’s—first, to seek the truth, and second, to use the truth to show why people should become followers of Jesus.

1. A Failure of Imagination?

Unlike a few critics of the Trilemma, I side with biblical scholars like Craig Evans, Mark Strauss, Ben Witherington III, and N. T. Wright in asserting that there are good reasons to think the Gospel reports about Jesus are generally reliable, and so I have no particular interest in challenging the reliability of the reports themselves. My interest, rather, is in what is and is not reported. In particular, I want to begin by noting how often people, including Christians, demonstrate a notable failure to imagine new possibilities when new possibilities would be justified. Many Bible readers, whether they be ancient Hebrews or contemporary Christians, want to put difficult-to-classify entities into easily identifiable boxes—a tendency that is often responsible for asserting False Dilemmas. To make my point, consider two examples.

A number of Christians have assumed that the “living creatures” or “cherubs” in Genesis, Exodus, Isaiah, Ezekiel and Revelation are simply really powerful angels; that they essentially belong to the same group (“angel” or “archangel”) as, say, Gabriel and Michael. While this is certainly a possibility, it is not much stronger than this. Yet the degree to which people embrace this connection between living creatures and angels shows a certain failure of imagination, in my opinion. Why not entertain the possibility of a new category of created being? Bats are not the same thing as birds.

Or again, many Christians who read the Bible without a proper imagination as to real possibilities simply assert that there will be no marriages in Heaven or the New Earth, largely because Jesus said, “there will be no giving or taking of marriage, you will be like the angels” (Matt. 22:30). These Christians narrowly assert that there is only one way to enjoy marriage—here on this Earth. But note that although Jesus does indeed deny