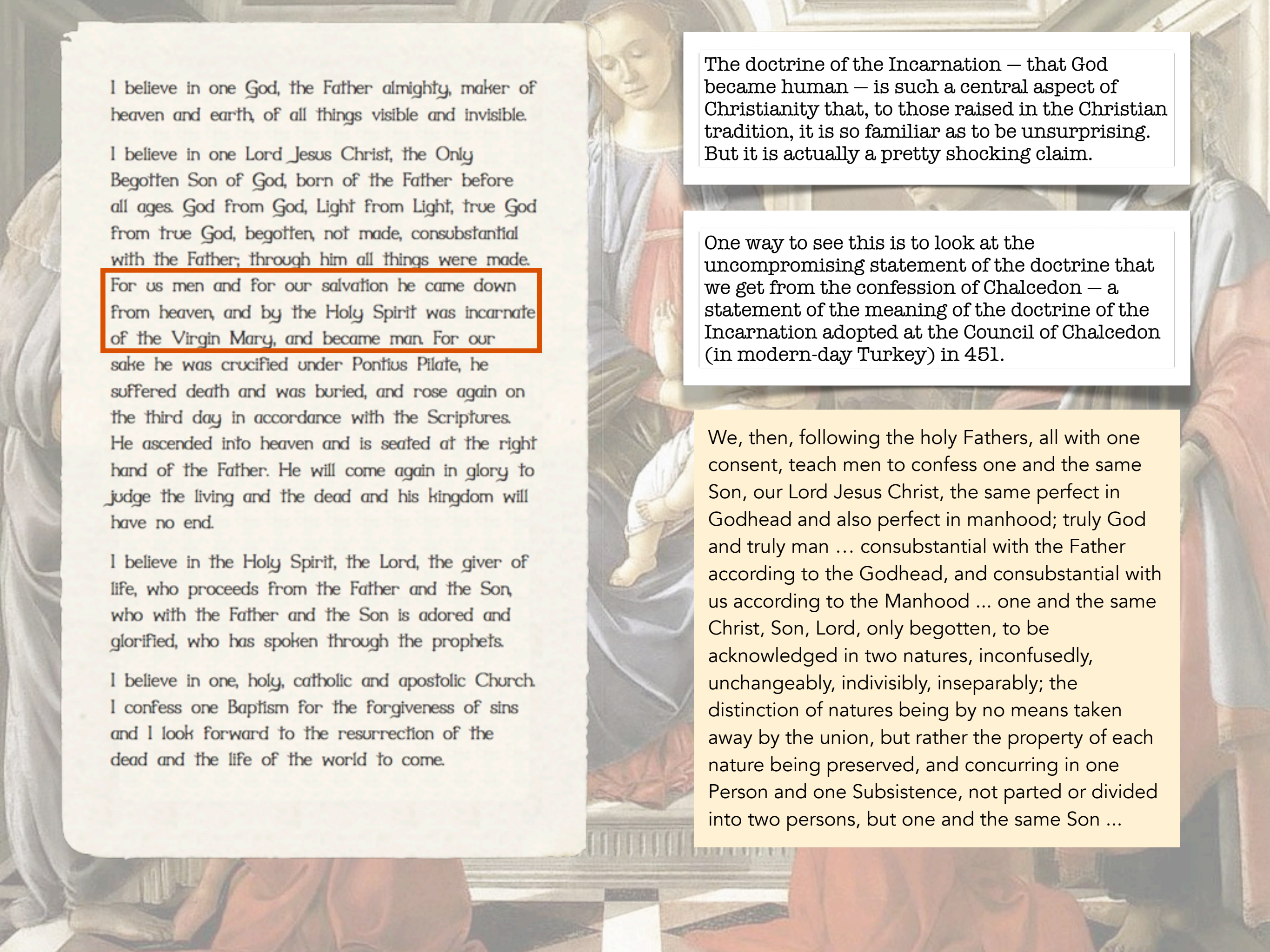
A Renaissance painting depicting the Virgin Mary seated in the center, holding the Christ Child on her lap. Mary is dressed in a blue mantle over a red gown. The Christ Child is seated on her lap, looking towards the viewer. To the left, a woman in a dark blue and gold robe holds a small golden vessel. Behind her, a man in a black and red robe looks on. To the right, a man in a grey robe with a cross on his chest stands next to a woman in a black and red robe. In the foreground, two figures in red robes are kneeling in prayer, one facing the Virgin and Child, the other facing the man with the cross. The background features architectural elements like door frames and a cross on the wall.

The epistemology & metaphysics of the Incarnation



I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made.

For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man. For our

sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.

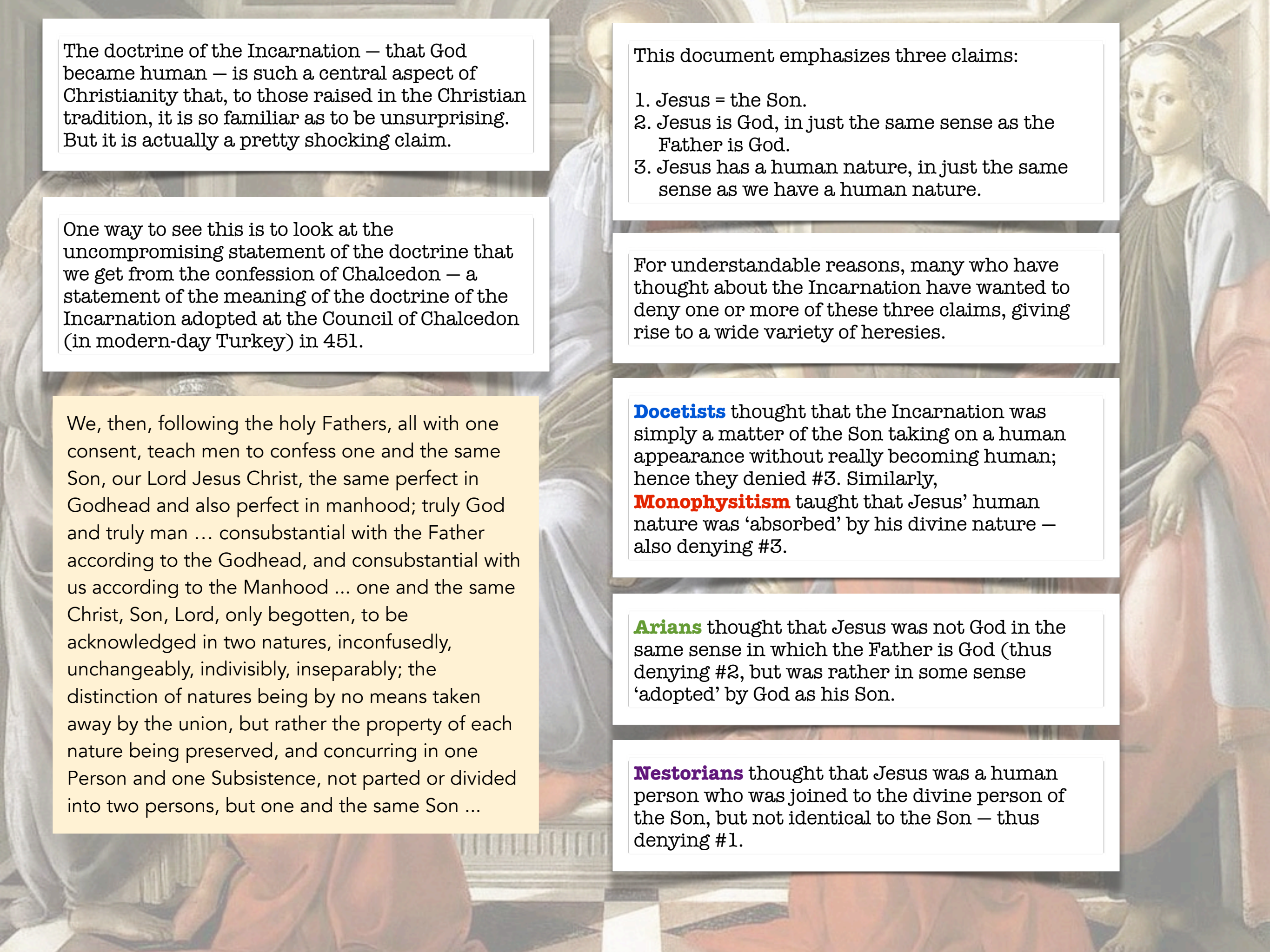
I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.

I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

The doctrine of the Incarnation — that God became human — is such a central aspect of Christianity that, to those raised in the Christian tradition, it is so familiar as to be unsurprising. But it is actually a pretty shocking claim.

One way to see this is to look at the uncompromising statement of the doctrine that we get from the confession of Chalcedon — a statement of the meaning of the doctrine of the Incarnation adopted at the Council of Chalcedon (in modern-day Turkey) in 451.

We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man ... consubstantial with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood ... one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son ...



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This document emphasizes three claims:

1. Jesus = the Son.
2. Jesus is God, in just the same sense as the Father is God.
3. Jesus has a human nature, in just the same sense as we have a human nature.

For understandable reasons, many who have thought about the Incarnation have wanted to deny one or more of these three claims, giving rise to a wide variety of heresies.

**Docetists** thought that the Incarnation was simply a matter of the Son taking on a human appearance without really becoming human; hence they denied #3. Similarly, **Monophysitism** taught that Jesus' human nature was 'absorbed' by his divine nature — also denying #3.

**Arians** thought that Jesus was not God in the same sense in which the Father is God (thus denying #2, but was rather in some sense 'adopted' by God as his Son.

**Nestorians** thought that Jesus was a human person who was joined to the divine person of the Son, but not identical to the Son — thus denying #1.



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It is no accident that the doctrine of the Incarnation — like the doctrine of the Trinity — has been such a fertile ground for heresies. In both cases the doctrine looks not only surprising, but contradictory; and the easiest way to resolve the contradiction is to give up part of the doctrine.

The main problem here arises from the claim that Jesus both has a genuinely human and a genuinely divine nature. Compare that to the claim that some animal has both a genuinely bovine and a genuinely porcine nature. Is this possible?

The reason why it does not seem possible is that being bovine and being porcine seem to essentially involve incompatible properties. (Maybe each essentially involves having certain DNA, and it's impossible to have both.)

The same might be said of being human and being divine.



## The doctrine of the Incarnation

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One way to focus the problem is to think about certain specific claims that are made about Jesus in the Gospels, and which seem to conflict with claim #2.

A related problem (as Mike Rea has pointed out) arises from descriptions we get of the temptations of Christ. In the Letter to the Hebrews, Paul writes

“And Jesus advanced in wisdom, and age, and grace with God and men.” (Luke 2:52)

“... we don't have a high priest who can't be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but one who has been in all points tempted like we are, yet without sin.”

If Jesus advanced in wisdom, then he had more wisdom at some later time than he did at some earlier time. But then at some earlier time Jesus was less than perfectly wise, and hence was less than omniscient.

But if this is to be taken literally, it seems that Jesus must have had some desire to give in to temptation — after all, one can't be genuinely tempted to do something that one has no desire at all to do.

But omniscience is one of the divine attributes; if God is, as Anselm says, the greatest conceivable being, and if it is greater to have perfect knowledge than not to, then if Jesus had less than perfect knowledge at some time then Jesus was not God at that time, which contradicts #2.

But it might well seem that having some desire to give in to temptation is a kind of moral imperfection — which is inconsistent with the pair of claims that Jesus is God, and that perfect goodness is one of the divine attributes.

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One way of handling these problems takes its cue from the Letter to the Philippians:

“Make your own the mind of Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped. But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are; and being in every way like a human being, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross.”

One way of understanding this passage – in particular the claim that Jesus “emptied himself” – is as saying that Jesus gave up some of his divine attributes in becoming human. On this view, then, there is no contradiction in saying that Jesus lacked perfect wisdom or knowledge, or even perfect goodness; in the Incarnation, Jesus emptied himself of these qualities.

This is standardly called the **kenotic** theory of the Incarnation, after the Greek word ‘kenosis’, which means ‘to empty.’

“And Jesus advanced in wisdom, and age, and grace with God and men.” (Luke 2:52)

“... we don’t have a high priest who can’t be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but one who has been in all points tempted like we are, yet without sin.”

Some passages in the Catechism suggest the kenotic view:

§472 This human soul that the Son of God assumed is endowed with a true human knowledge. As such, this knowledge could not in itself be unlimited: it was exercised in the historical conditions of his existence in space and time. This is why the Son of God could, when he became man, “increase in wisdom and in stature, and in favour with God and man”,<sup>101</sup> and would even have to inquire for himself about what one in the human condition can learn only from experience. This corresponded to the reality of his voluntary emptying of himself, taking “the form of a slave.”

One might object, though, that this view doesn’t solve our problem, but rather just gives it a name. The divine attributes were supposed to be the properties which are required of any being for that being to be God; if Jesus gave up these qualities, then doesn’t this imply that Jesus ceased to be God?

There are a few different things that the defender of the kenotic view can say here.

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There are a few different things that the defender of the kenotic view can say here.

One is to simply deny that omniscience, perfect goodness, etc. really are essential attributes of God.

“Make your own the mind of Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped. But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are; and being in every way like a human being, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross.”

But this just leads to a question: if these are not the essential properties of God, what are?

One possibility is that the divine attributes are properties like the following: **being omniscient unless freely and temporarily choosing not to be.**

Is this consistent with the conception of God as essentially the greatest possible being?

Let's suppose that this sort of 'qualified' account of the divine attributes is acceptable. The kenotic account still faces a further problem, and that is the problem of explaining **why** the Son decided to empty himself of these properties for a time.

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Let's suppose that this sort of 'qualified' account of the divine attributes is acceptable. The kenotic account still faces a further problem, and that is the problem of explaining **why** the Son decided to empty himself of these properties for a time.

One might think that the answer here is obvious: the Son did this because it was required for his assuming a human nature.

But this obvious answer faces an equally obvious problem. The standard view is that Jesus still has a human nature. But presumably Jesus is now omniscient, and not limited in the ways that (according to the kenotic theory) Jesus was in his life on earth. But if Jesus is now fully human and omniscient, it could not have been necessary for him to give up these properties to become human in the first place — which leaves our original question unanswered.

“Make your own the mind of Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped. But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are; and being in every way like a human being, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross.”

A better solution to the problem is to say that the Son gave up these properties not because doing so was required by his becoming human, but rather that it was required for him to do part of what he wanted to do by becoming human.

On this sort of view (which is defended by Peter Forrest in one of the optional readings), if the Son had decided to become human without freely giving up omniscience, omnipotence, etc., then Jesus would have been unable to be genuinely tempted or to experience suffering in the complete absence of any consoling joy. And, so the idea continues, Jesus doing these things was essential to his purpose of conveying God's love for humanity.





## The doctrine of the Incarnation

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But a puzzle for the kenotic account remains. Even if this view of the Incarnation does an excellent job of explaining the parts of the Gospels in which Jesus seems most human, it fits less well with the parts in which he seems most super-human.

Consider, for example, the miracles performed by Jesus in the Gospels. How could Jesus have done these things, if he had abdicated his divine power?

It seems that the best answer that the kenotic theory can give is that these miracles are not, strictly speaking, performed by Jesus; rather, they are miracles of the Father done in response to Jesus' prayers. And at least some of the descriptions of the miracles in the Gospels fit this rather well.

So Jesus, perturbed again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay across it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." ... So they took away the stone. And Jesus raised his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you for hearing me. I know that you always hear me; but because of the crowd here I have said this, that they may believe that you sent me."

And when he had said this, he cried out in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"

The dead man came out, tied hand and foot with burial bands, and his face was wrapped in a cloth. So Jesus said to them, "Untie him and let him go."

(John 11)



## The doctrine of the Incarnation

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Can we make sense of Jesus' apparent limitations without joining the kenotic theory in saying that, while on earth, Jesus was not omnipotent?

One suggestion about how this might work is the 'two minds' theory of the Incarnation. On this view, the Son acquired a second, human mind, or center of consciousness, in the Incarnation, while not losing his divine mind.

Moreover, on one way of developing this view, Jesus' human mind was contained within his divine mind – so that his divine mind could 'see' everything in his human mind – but that the reverse was not true, so that Jesus' human mind did not have access to the contents of his divine mind, and instead was limited to the resources available to a first century Palestinian Jewish man.

Some evidence that there is no incoherence in this hypothesis is provided by cases of multiple personality disorder which exhibit this sort of 'asymmetric access.'

One worry about this sort of view is that it turns out to be a version of the Nestorian heresy, according to which Jesus is a human person who is joined to the Son.

One way to press this worry is to recall that we also tried to use something like the 'multiple minds' view as a model for the Trinity. But we can't have it both ways; Jesus' human and divine natures are not supposed to be separate 'things' in the way that the persons of the Trinity are.

Here's a tough question for the 'two minds' theorist: what unifies the Son with Jesus' human mind?

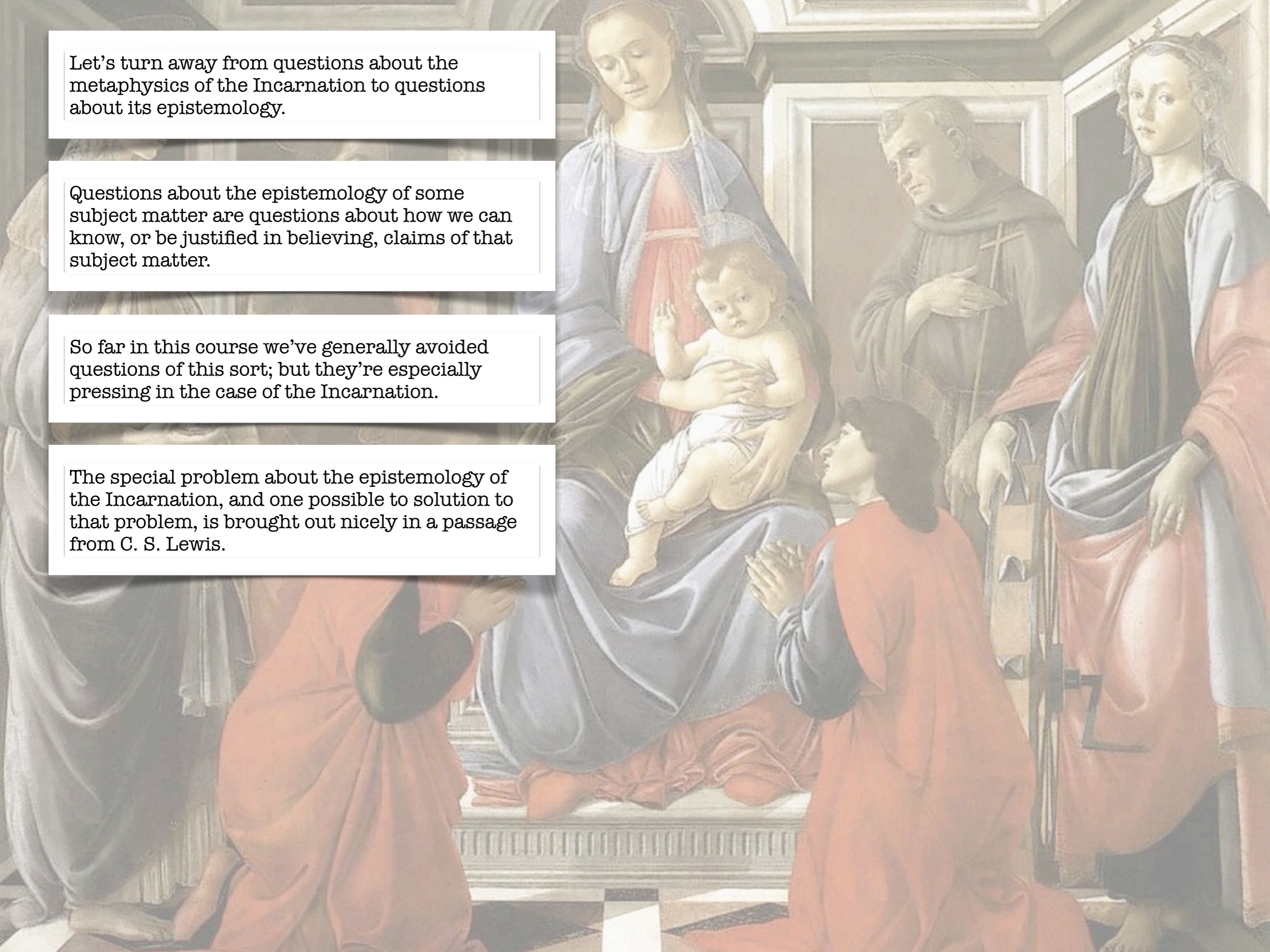
It is tempting to say that they are unified by the fact that the Son has complete access to the contents of Jesus' human mind. But remember: the Son is omniscient, and hence has complete access to the contents of **everyone's** mind.

Let's turn away from questions about the metaphysics of the Incarnation to questions about its epistemology.

Questions about the epistemology of some subject matter are questions about how we can know, or be justified in believing, claims of that subject matter.

So far in this course we've generally avoided questions of this sort; but they're especially pressing in the case of the Incarnation.

The special problem about the epistemology of the Incarnation, and one possible solution to that problem, is brought out nicely in a passage from C. S. Lewis.



Then comes the real shock. 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 has always existed. He says He is coming to judge the world at the end of time. ... what this man said was, quite simply, the most shocking thing that has ever been uttered by human lips.

One part of the claim tends to slip past us unnoticed because we have heard it so often that we no longer see what it amounts to. I mean the claim to forgive sins: any sins. Now unless the speaker is God, this is really so preposterous as to be comic. We can all understand how a man forgives offences against himself. You tread on my toe and I forgive you, you steal my money and I forgive you. But what should we make of a man, himself unrobbed and untrodden on, who announced that he forgave you for treading on other men's toes and stealing other men's money? Asinine fatuity is the kindest description we should give of his conduct. Yet this is what Jesus did. He told people that their sins were forgiven, and never waited to consult all the other people whom their sins had undoubtedly injured. He unhesitatingly behaved as if He was the party chiefly concerned, ... This makes sense only if He really was the God whose laws are broken and whose love is wounded in every sin. In the mouth of any speaker who is not God, these words would imply what I can only regard as a silliness and conceit unrivalled by any other character in history.

Yet (and this is the strange, significant thing) even His enemies, when they read the Gospels, do not usually get the impression of silliness and conceit. Still less do unprejudiced readers. Christ says that He is "humble and meek" and we believe Him; not noticing that, if He were merely a man, humility and meekness are the very last characteristics we could attribute to some of His sayings.



I am trying here to prevent anyone 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. 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 a 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.

We are faced, then, with a frightening alternative. This man ... either was (and is) just what He said or else a lunatic, or something worse. Now it seems to me obvious that He was neither a lunatic nor a fiend: and consequently, however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that He was and is God.

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This passage suggests a rather simple argument for the divinity of Jesus:

1. Either Jesus was God or Jesus was a lunatic or Jesus was evil.
  2. Jesus was not a lunatic.
  3. Jesus was not evil.
- 
- C. Jesus was God. (1,2,3)

This argument is often summed up with the slogan that Jesus was either “mad, bad, or God.”

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The argument is obviously valid. Most criticism of the argument has focused on premise 1; how might one defend premise 1?

The line of defense implicit in the passage from Lewis is something like this: Jesus made claims which would only make sense if he were God. By making these claims, he in effect claimed to be God. Either he believed that he was God, or he did not. If he did not, then he was a liar on a grand scale, and hence evil. If he did, then this belief was either true or false. If it was false, then he was a lunatic; no sane person could mistakenly believe themselves to be God. But if it was true, then he was God. Hence the only possibilities are that Jesus was mad, bad, or God.

There are two main claims made in this informal line of argument which one might question.

(A) Jesus made claims about himself which would only make sense if he were God, and hence in effect claimed to be God.

(B) If someone mistakenly believes himself to be God, he is a lunatic.

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(B) If someone mistakenly believes himself to be God, he is a lunatic.

Let's focus first on (A). Did Jesus really claim to be God?

It is a notable fact about the Gospels that Jesus never says anything nearly so straightforward as "I am God." But the Gospels do report Jesus as saying things which would make sense only if he were God. For example:

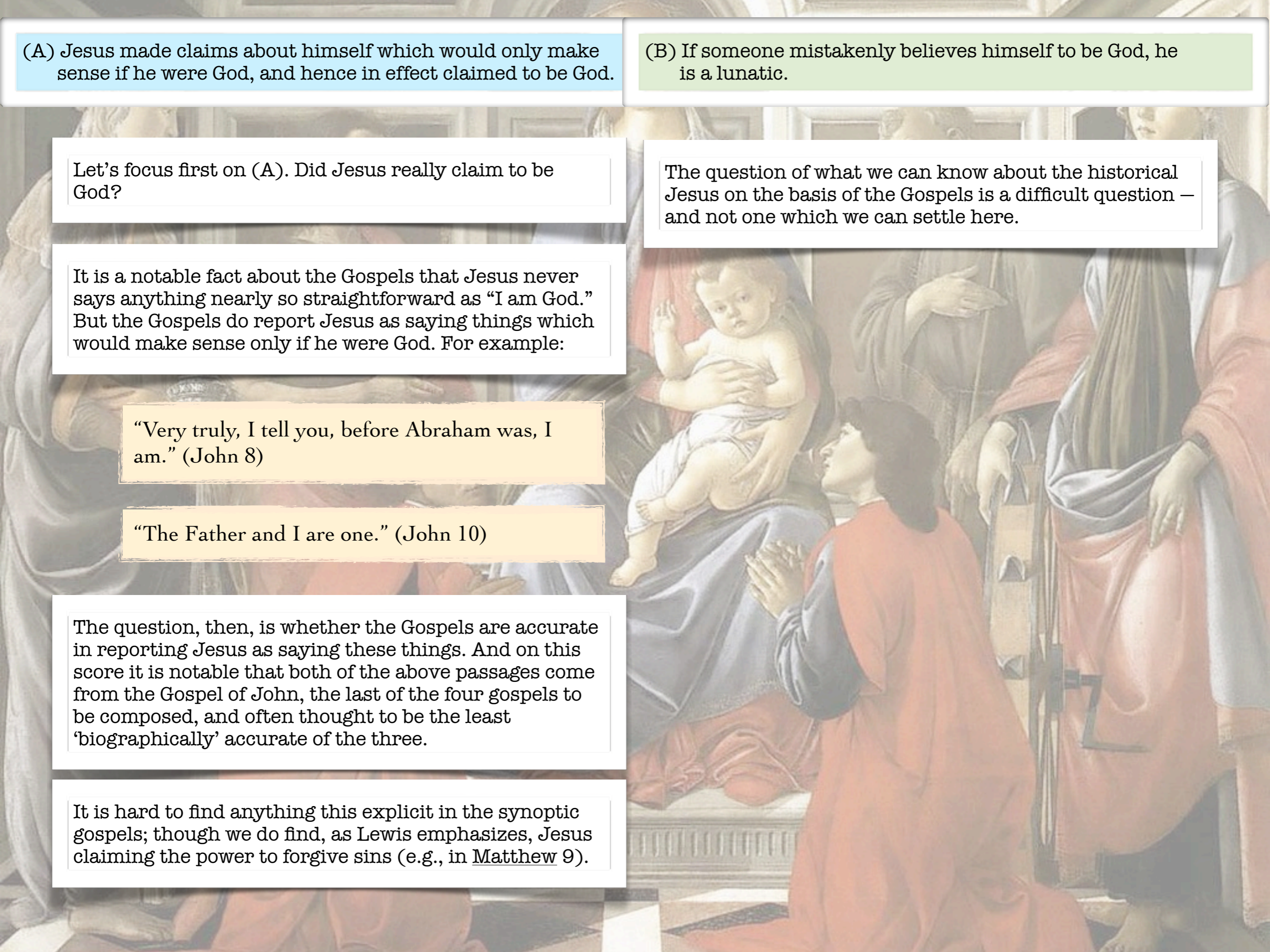
"Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am." (John 8)

"The Father and I are one." (John 10)

The question, then, is whether the Gospels are accurate in reporting Jesus as saying these things. And on this score it is notable that both of the above passages come from the Gospel of John, the last of the four gospels to be composed, and often thought to be the least 'biographically' accurate of the three.

It is hard to find anything this explicit in the synoptic gospels; though we do find, as Lewis emphasizes, Jesus claiming the power to forgive sins (e.g., in Matthew 9).

The question of what we can know about the historical Jesus on the basis of the Gospels is a difficult question — and not one which we can settle here.



(A) Jesus made claims about himself which would only make sense if he were God, and hence in effect claimed to be God.

(B) If someone mistakenly believes himself to be God, he is a lunatic.

Let's turn instead to (B). Might one deny (B) on the grounds that it is possible for someone to be sincerely mistaken about whether he is God?

One might think not, for something like the following reason: one could reasonably come to believe that one was God only on the basis of clear and immediate knowledge that one has divine attributes like omniscience, omnipotence, and eternity, which no mere person could ever have. But surely no one could reasonably be mistaken about whether they have properties of this sort.

In response to this line of argument, recall the two models of the Incarnation discussed above, and note that one neither the kenotic nor the 'two minds' model will Jesus have clear and immediate knowledge of his possession of, e.g., omniscience. On the kenotic model, he simply lacks this property; and on the two minds model, Jesus' human mind lacks full access to the contents of his divine mind.

Still, one might wonder: how could one come to reasonably but mistakenly believe that one is God?

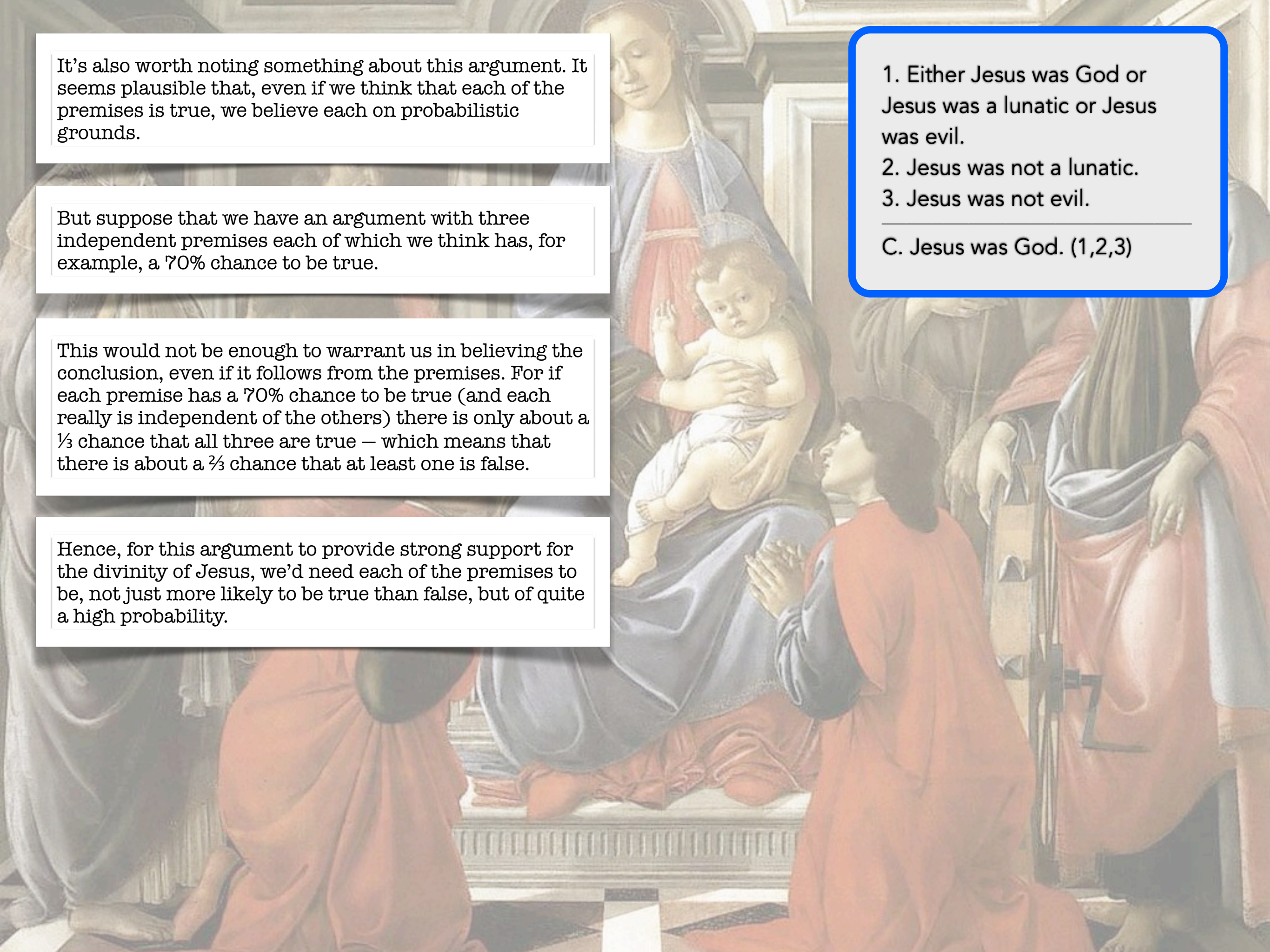
In one of the optional readings, we get two suggestions:

1. Satan (or some 'evil demon') exactly replicated the internal impressions which God would have provided to Jesus, were he in fact God.
2. Jesus came to reasonably believe that he was the Messiah – in the sense that he was the person designated to lead the Jews out of Roman rule. Then, on the basis of study of certain passages in the Old Testament, in particular the Book of Daniel, he came to believe that whoever was the Messiah would be God, and hence inferred that he was God.

To these we might add a variant on #1:

3. Jesus came to believe that he was God on the basis of a very convincing series of hallucinations or illusions.





It's also worth noting something about this argument. It seems plausible that, even if we think that each of the premises is true, we believe each on probabilistic grounds.

But suppose that we have an argument with three independent premises each of which we think has, for example, a 70% chance to be true.

This would not be enough to warrant us in believing the conclusion, even if it follows from the premises. For if each premise has a 70% chance to be true (and each really is independent of the others) there is only about a  $\frac{1}{3}$  chance that all three are true — which means that there is about a  $\frac{2}{3}$  chance that at least one is false.

Hence, for this argument to provide strong support for the divinity of Jesus, we'd need each of the premises to be, not just more likely to be true than false, but of quite a high probability.

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Is there any other way in which we might explain how one could come to know, or be justified in believing, that Jesus was God?

A natural answer is: 'Yes; we come to know that Jesus is God by learning about the miracles that Jesus performed.'

After spring break, we'll begin with the question of whether we could ever have good reason to believe in miracles – and whether they could ever give us good reason to believe that Jesus is God.

