

On Bauckham's Bargain

Abstract: Richard Bauckham argues that every book in the New Testament contains a "christology of divine identity," according to which Jesus is "included in the divine identity." He also argues that traditional Christians may avoid or dissolve a large number of theoretical problems by embracing this thesis. Here I clarify the concepts of personal identity, numerical identity, and identifying features, and critically examine Bauckham's thesis and his arguments for it in light of these analyses. Of central importance is the self-evident truth that a thing can't at one time differ from itself (the indiscernibility of identicals). It is argued that Bauckham's thesis is unclear, and that on one interpretation it is manifestly self-inconsistent, while on the other it is too thin in content to do the work Bauckham assigns it, which is expressing "the highest possible christology." I thus argue that the theoretical costs of Bauckham's theory outweigh its theoretical benefits. Section I summarizes the touted benefits. Section II clarifies the aforementioned concepts. Section III applies these analyses to Bauckham's work. In Section IV I weigh some reasons for thinking that the interpretation of section III is mistaken. Section V continues the interpretive struggle, and VI draws a negative conclusion.

I. The Deal

In widely read books, several papers, and in a promised forthcoming magnum opus, New Testament scholar and theologian Richard Bauckham offers Christians a bargain.¹ The price? Accept that the New Testament teaches that "Jesus is included in the identity of God," thus presenting us with "the highest possible christology" right from the start – not only the start of the New Testament, but of Christianity, for if this is in all the New Testament writings, we must suppose that this view of Christ preceded the earliest book in it.

The benefits? This relieves numerous intellectual pressures on broadly conservative or traditional twenty-first century thinking Christians. First, we have no need to worry about whether there is substantial christological development within the New Testament. Second, the whole idea that these authors held to fundamentally different christologies must be wrong-headed. If Bauckham is correct, then all New Testament christologies are equally "high," and also, incapable of being "higher." Third, we can dismiss the paradigm, fairly popular in twentieth century theology, that there was a shift from a "functional" to an "ontic" christology (roughly, from viewing Christ as a man performing functions on behalf of and at the behest of God, to viewing Christ as himself divine). Instead, we should view the New Testament's christology as ontic from start to finish, though not expressed in a Greek manner. Fourth, speaking of Greeks, we have

¹ I shall concentrate here on his *Jesus and the God of Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008) which includes his earlier *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999).

no need to worry about any alleged corrupting influences on early christology by the heirs of Plato. Fifth, we need feel no pressure at all to read what the New Testament says about Jesus in a “low” way, simply because it is said in a Jewish monotheistic context. Sixth, we can ignore recent complex debates about the status of supposedly divine or semi-divine “intermediaries” between God and humankind in the period of Second Temple Judaism. There need have been no such precedent for Jews like Paul, Peter, and John to exalt Christ, since, Bauckham argues, their distinctively Jewish way of thinking about the one God allowed them to “include Jesus in his identity.” Seventh, there is no need to think of catholic/mainstream christology as really developing in higher direction after the composition of the New Testament. High christology didn’t finally emerge circa 180, 210, 325, 381, or 450 CE; no, Bauckham urges, it lies fairly obviously on the surface of the New Testament, for all faithful eyes to see, and the catholic tradition has always recognized this. Eighth, we can view the ecumenical creeds as simply recognizing Jesus’ inclusion in the divine identity, and expressing it in a more Greek idiom, in metaphysical terms (nature, being, essence, person). Ninth, it is not hard for us, then, to confess orthodox/catholic belief (i.e. the content of the ecumenical creeds, rightly understood). We needn’t fuss over the processes which led to the creeds, their metaphysical language, or their foreignness to our ways of thinking. They indeed say, or imply, that Jesus is included in the divine identity – and that is what we, following Bauckham, say. And this *doesn’t* seem arcane, outdated, metaphysics-laden, or particularly hard to understand. Tenth, we can dismiss as wrongheaded most of the questing (past or current) for a “historical Jesus” which supposedly differs from the “Christ of faith.” What we know about Jesus is nearly all in the New Testament, which is packed with non-subtle clues to Christ’s inclusion in the identity of the one God.²

This is quite a windfall, and a number of others have availed themselves of the bargain.³ Should those of us who are interested in reaping some or all of the above benefits accept it?

II. Identity

What is this “identity of God”? It is “who God is.” But this is ambiguous. The point may be easier to see if we consider a man, say, George W. Bush. Suppose someone wants to know who he is. In one sense, the answer would be to simply refer to him - the individual, the self, the human being. Who is Bush? “Here I am!” he calls out from across the room. “There he is,” we say, pointing at him.

But someone inquiring about Bush’s “identity” may instead by wondering what sort of person he is. Here, Bush’s “identity” consists of a set of features (properties, qualities) possessed by Bush. In reply, one could cite his height and weight, his

2 This paragraph is my paraphrase of the benefits touted by Bauckham in his 2002 online essay “Orthodoxy in Christology,” <http://richardbauckham.co.uk/uploads/Accessible/Orthodoxy%20in%20Christology.pdf>.

3 Ten years after its publication, Bauckham himself observes, about his *God Crucified*, that “For a small book it seems to have made a large impact.” (2008, ix)

ethnicity, his beliefs, his intelligence, his taste in pretzels, and so on. One reason we're interested in such features, is that by perceiving them, we distinguish persons from one another. When you're familiar with Bush's features, and you encounter a woman, a Democrat party member, a very large person, a native New Yorker – you know that whoever this person before you is, he or she *isn't* George W. Bush.

But not all sets of features are adequate to help us distinguish him from all others. If all you knew about Bush was that he is a Caucasian, male, Texan, Republican, those features wouldn't distinguish Bush from tens of thousands of other people. Thus, sometimes a query about "identity" is a request is for *identifying features* – features which *are* adequate, in some context, to help us distinguish a person from all others.⁴ In some contexts this is easy; if Bush happens to be the only Caucasian in the room, *being a Caucasian* will be an identifying feature. But whether the domain in view is people in a certain room at a certain time, or all the things in reality at any time, an identifying feature must be one which, of all the items in the domain, only the thing in question possesses.⁵

Imagine a person who has long been out of touch with current events – say, a recently lapsed hermit, returned from the desert – call him "Herman." If Herman inquires who "George W. Bush" is, usually we can't simply point at the ex-president. Herman would be asking, then, to be told some of Bush's features. And the best answer would be features which *only* he has – ones sufficient to pick him out in distinction from all others. For example, "Caucasian American man" is a feature he has, but not an "identifying" one. But *Son of George H.W. Bush who became president of the USA in 2000* – that complex feature would be "identifying." Or, we could hold up a portrait of Bush: "He's the guy who looks like this." Each of these features is such that of all the things in the cosmos, only the man we call "George W. Bush" has it. Either of these would inform our friend who Bush is. We could say, in Bauckham's idiom, that either of

4 In a recent essay Bauckham says that theology needs "a richer concept of personal identity," by which he seems to mean simply, a richer understanding of selves/persons, and specifically of Jesus. ("Review Article: Seeking the Identity of Jesus," [review of Beverly Gaventa and Richard Hays, eds., *Seeking the Identity of Jesus*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2008)] *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 32 (2010): 337-46, 343) He follows other recent theologians and continental philosophers such as Ricoeur in talking abstractly about selves in terms of features of their "identity." (343) If I understand Bauckham, then, "aspects of identity" are simply intrinsic and relational features of selves, defining ones, or at any rate important or central ones. Thus, people seeking to understand the man Jesus "seek his identity." (346) Talk of human relationships or stances towards one another is cast in some cases as someone "identifying with" the other, and people may even be said to "participate in each other's identity." (344) I would urge that nearly all of this identity-talk could be paraphrased in clearer terms, but laying aside this aesthetic judgment, the reader should take note that I'm using "identity" in this paper to mean *only* numerical identity, i.e. being numerically the same thing as – a relation which a thing may only bear to itself, and which as it were obeys the law of the indiscernibility of identicals, as explained at the end of section II below.

5 There's a complication: a context includes the epistemic abilities of the one *to whom* one is attempting to point out the individual. Thus, suppose you are talking to a legally blind friend, in a room with Bush, another Caucasian man with somewhat darker skin tone than Bush, and a crowd of people with very dark skin. Your legally blind friend can make out a light patch where Bush is, but not where the other Caucasian is. In such a context, you *could* identify Bush to your legally blind friend by describing him as "the white guy," even though there is in fact another Caucasian man present.

these features is “part of the identity of” Bush.

Suppose Herman overhears some Texans talking about “Dubya,” saying that he kicked Saddam Hussein in some body part or other, and that he’s the only recent president whose daddy was a president. Herman asks us who this “Dubya” is. We could tell Herman that these Texans “included Dubya in the identity of George W. Bush.” That is, Dubya has both the aforementioned features which only George W. Bush has. More straightforwardly, we could inform our friend that Dubya *just is* Bush, and vice-versa. They are one and the same, in philosophical terms: numerically identical. The names “George W. Bush” and “Dubya” refer to one and the same being. Again, Bush and Dubya are related as I am to myself, and as you are to yourself.

But Herman may be confused, replying “Yes, I’ve heard of this man. He was defeated in an election in 1980 by Ronald Reagan.” It will be easy to disabuse Herman of the notion that Jimmy Carter and George W. Bush are one and the same, even if we can’t stand them side by side and just urge him to look. All we need do is point out *one* feature of Carter which is not also a feature Bush, or one feature of Bush which Carter lacks. For instance, we could point out that Carter loves peanuts, while Bush does not. If we know this, we know that Bush and Carter are not one in the way that Bush and Dubya are one. Proving that things are not numerically one is easy; it requires no more than showing one or more respect in which they have differed, do differ, will differ, or just *could possibly* differ.

Proving that things *are* numerically one can be more difficult. Suppose that Herman stubbornly persists in his presidential confusion, insisting that Carter is Bush. After all, they share these features: *male, Caucasian, married man, southerner, book author, former president of the USA, antagonist of Iran*, and so on. But we can let him continue till the end of time, citing billions of shared features, and this will not make us *one iota* less sure that Bush and Carter are two, so long as we know them to (actually or possibly) differ in *just one* way, no matter how trivial. So long as they differ in just one way, let them be as similar as you please – we still *know* they are not numerically one, for it is impossible that a thing, at any given time, should differ from itself. Lives literally hang on this principle, for this is how we exonerate criminals. If you’re accused of being the Edinburgh Strangler, you will be let off as soon as the courts know you to differ from said Strangler in but one way, even though *nothing* else is known of that person. For example, if we know the Strangler had at the time of his last crime a size 12 foot, and you then had a size 8 foot, this *proves* that you are not the Strangler.

In making this inference, we’re applying a general principle which we instinctively know, but which we usually don’t explicitly formulate. This is what philosophers call the indiscernibility of identicals. It says that necessarily, for any *x* and *y*, they are numerically identical only if they don’t differ.⁶ This principle seems obviously true, and it seems to be

6 This principle is sometimes called “Leibniz’s Law.” It is commonly expressed in standard logical symbols like this: $\Box(x)(y)(x = y \rightarrow (F)(Fx \leftrightarrow Fy))$. (Necessarily, for any *x* and any *y*, *x* is identical to *y* only if for any *F*, *x* is *F* if and only if *y* is *F*.) Roughly: it is impossible for numerically identical things to differ. In my view, this principle should be explicitly complicated so as to allow that a thing may intrinsically change through time. (On this, see my [“A formulation of Leibniz’s Law / the indiscernibility](#)

necessarily true – something which is true, and absolutely couldn't be false. It is comparable in epistemic status to, say, the transitivity of the relation *bigger than*, in other words, necessarily, for any x, y, and z, if x is bigger than y, and y is bigger than z, then x is bigger than z.

III. Bauckham's Thesis

But enough of hermits, stranglers, and logic - what does this have to do with Bauckham's christology? He urges, plausibly, that ancient Jews weren't as interested in metaphysics as some of the Greek philosophers. Yet the Jews held the one god, Israel's god Yahweh, to be unique. They were, at least by Jesus' time, monotheists – people who believed in exactly one god. But how to identify this god? Who was it? Not being enthusiastic metaphysicians, they didn't do it by saying that he's the one being with "the divine nature," or that he's the one being which is absolutely simple. Instead, in a more feet-on-the-ground fashion, they characterized him as the being who (1) is the only, unilateral creator of the cosmos, and (2) is provident over, in some sense in control over what occurs in the cosmos. In short, the one god is the Creator and (we might put it) the Lord of History. And because he, and only he has these features, he and only he is (3) worthy of worship.⁷ Bauckham's view, then, is that according to the first century Jew, and so according to the author of any New Testament book, this is "who God is." In other words, each of the three features just named is an identifying feature, one which only God has.

What then of this man Jesus? The New Testament authors, according to Bauckham, "include Jesus in the identity of God." This is an abstract way of saying that Jesus has some features which they assumed only God, only Yahweh, to have. It of course follows that Jesus and God are one and the same. Bauckham is implicitly, but clearly, offering us this sort of three step argument:

1. Only God has F.
2. Jesus has F.

of identicals", <http://trinitities.org/blog/archives/3011>) I focus on intrinsic (as opposed to relational) features or ways of being, because I think the principle so restricted is more clearly true, and because in this way we may simply set aside certain alleged counterexamples involving mental states of conscious beings. (On this, see my "[On an alleged counterexample to Leibniz's Law](http://trinitities.org/blog/archives/3061)," <http://trinitities.org/blog/archives/3061>) Thus, my preferred formulation of the indiscernibility of identicals is $\Box(x)(y)(x = y \rightarrow (w)(z)(M(w, x, z) \leftrightarrow M(w, y, z)))$. Roughly put: necessarily, if x just is y, then x and y can't ever differ. More literally: necessarily, for any x and y, x is numerically identical to y only if for any w and any z, w is a mode of x at z if and only if w is a mode of y at z. "z" here can be a point in time, a stretch of time (even all of time), or even a timeless eternity. Not believing in properties, I think of modes as primitive ways-of-being, particulars, but not substantial particulars, whose existence depends upon a substantial particular, i.e. a concrete entity/being/thing. Those holding a theory of properties will prefer to interpret modes as property-instances, tropes, or instantiations of universal properties. However one understands these, I claim that the principle is self-evidently true – a single thing can't intrinsically differ from itself at any given time, or eternally.

⁷ Bauckham has expanded these identifying features of God to a list of at least seven. (*Jesus and the God of Israel*, 233-4), but I leave these aside here for the sake of brevity.

3. Therefore, Jesus is God.⁸

For “F” here, just substitute any of the aforementioned identifying features of God. Thus, he’s urging us to accept at least three arguments for the same conclusion. That Jesus is God is shown by his being the only creator, by his being provident over history, and by his being worthy of worship. This is indeed “the highest possible christology” - Jesus just is (i.e. is numerically identical to) God himself.

The first thing to note is that these arguments are what logicians and philosophers call “valid.”⁹ This is to say that *if* both 1 and 2 are true, then 3 must be true as well. It is inconsistent to accept 1 and 2 while denying 3. But why should we accept the two premises? The justification for 2 is what the New Testament authors say about Jesus. The justification for 1 is what the Bible says about God, backed up by Bauckham’s analysis of how Second Temple Jewish thought distinguished the one God from all else. These arguments seem to be at the heart of Bauckham’s Bargain. If you accept these arguments as what philosophers call “sound” - that is, not only valid, but also featuring only *true* premises, which of course implies (given its validity) that the conclusion must be true as well – you have made the deal, and can enjoy the many benefits thereof.

IV. An Uncharitable Misreading?

But can this really be what Bauckham is urging? There are two weighty reasons to doubt it. First, the thesis can’t consistently be held by anyone who believes that Jesus and God have ever differed in but one way. Surely, whether by “God” we mean the Trinity or the Father, Bauckham would hold there to be features of God which are not features of Jesus, and vice versa, for example: having sent his only Son, being triune, being the Son of God, having said to God “yet not my will, but yours be done.”¹⁰ Isn’t it uncharitable to read an accomplished scholar as putting forth an implicitly contradictory thesis?¹¹ On the reading advanced in section III above, Bauckham holds that Jesus and

8 For those familiar with elementary formal logic, using standard symbols, and the letters “g” for God and “j” for Jesus, the argument is:

1. (x) (Fx → x=g) premise
2. Fj premise
3. j=g (1,2)

9 Also note that each argument will be invalid if we delete the “Only” in premise 1. That is, if we talk about God’s features rather than his *identifying* features, the conclusion will not follow.

10 James Dunn recognizes that in the New Testament, and surely for Bauckham as well, some things are true of God (that is, the Father) which are not true of Jesus, and vice versa. This is why, in discussing Bauckham’s theory, Dunn insists that “The identity [i.e. the sameness/similarity of God and Jesus] is partial.” (James D. G. Dunn, *Did the First Christians Worship Jesus? The New Testament Evidence* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 144.) Noting that the New Testament assumes the non-identity of Jesus and Yahweh, Dunn suggests, in effect, that they should be seen not as numerically identical, but rather as to a high degree qualitatively identical, that is, very similar. (144-6)

11 On the concept of an implicit contradiction, consider the following claim: Paul is a legitimate Roman Catholic Pope but is not himself a Roman Catholic. This claim doesn’t explicitly assert and deny some one proposition, so it is not *explicitly* contradictory. But when we consider it in light of the obvious truth that any legitimate Roman Catholic Pope is a Roman Catholic, we see that the original claim implies

God are one and the same, yet they have (simultaneously – whether in time or eternity) differed. But a single thing can't differ from itself at one time (or eternally). Thus, the account also clearly implies that Jesus and God are *not* identical.

Second, Bauckham is a long time admirer and student of the theology of Jürgen Moltmann. In particular, he seems sympathetic to Moltmann's radical "social" trinitarianism.¹² On this theory, the Trinity amounts to three divine selves which eternally and it would seem necessarily enjoy "perichoresis."¹³ On this theory, God – that is, the Trinity – is no more (literally) a self than a football team or a family is a self, and so if Bauckham agrees, then he surely isn't saying that Jesus is the same self as God, for God, not being a self, can't be *the same self as* anyone.¹⁴

It seems to me that Bauckham employs a consistent, carefully calibrated ambiguity. Here's a typical example, from his exposition of 1 Corinthians 8:6.¹⁵

Paul is not adding to the one God of the Shema a 'Lord' the Shema does not mention. He is identifying Jesus as the 'Lord' whom the Shema affirms to be one.¹⁶ In other words, Jesus is who God is and vice-versa – "they" are really one Lord, one god, *the* God, on Bauckham's reading of Paul here. But Bauckham continues,

Thus, in Paul's quite unprecedented reformulation of the Shema, the unique identity of the one God *consists of* the one God, the Father, *and* the one Lord, his Messiah.¹⁷ "Consists of"? This *suggests* that God is a whole, one with at least two proper parts – the Father, and the Son. But nothing can be identical to one of its proper parts, so this implies that Jesus and God are *not* numerically identical, but instead bear a part-whole relation (or something analogous to that) to one another.¹⁸ Moreover, it is consistent with and requires their being *two* selves, since they differ; one (God) has Jesus as a proper

that Paul is *not* a legitimate Roman Catholic Pope, so it is *implicitly* contradictory.

12 See Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann* (New York: T & T Clark, 1995), 15-7, 24-6.

13 See, e.g. Richard Bauckham, "Monotheism and Christology in the Gospel of John," in *Contours of Christology in the New Testament*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 148-66, p. 164.

14 In previous publications I've highlighted a number of philosophical, religious, and biblical problems for "social" Trinity theories on which the Trinity is a group of divine selves. See my "[Hasker's Quests for a Viable Social Theory](#)" (*Faith and Philosophy* 30:2, 171-87, 2013) "Deception and Monotheism" (unpublished); "[Divine deception, identity, and Social Trinitarianism](#)," *Religious Studies* 40: 269-87, 2004; "[Tradition and Believability: Edward Wierenga's Social Trinitarianism](#)," *Philosophia Christi* 5:2, 447-56, 2003; "[The unfinished business of Trinitarian theorizing](#)," *Religious Studies* 39:165-83, 2003.

15 "Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that 'no idol in the world really exists', and that 'there is no God but one.' Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth - as in fact there are many gods and many lords - yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist." (1 Corinthians 8:4-6, NRSV)

16 *Jesus and the God of Israel*, 28.

17 *Ibid.* Original emphases.

18 And in another essay: "Jesus is not saying [in John 10:30, 'I and the Father are one'] that he and the Father are a single person, but that together they are one God." Because of the word "together" here, this last "are" can't mean identity, but must rather be an "is" of membership or parthood – Father and Son "are" the one God somewhat in the way that these five players are the Dallas Mavericks basketball team, or the way the parts of my body are one body.

part, and the other (Jesus) doesn't have Jesus as a proper part. His language *suggests* all of this, but all these claims which are incompatible with his thesis as I've expounded it. What is going on here?

If one adopts the reading I suggested in section III above, one may take him to be instinctively softening the blow. To assert that Jesus just is God himself sounds and is very bold, and I've argued too bold. It is better to refer abstractly to this claim as "christological monotheism" or "a christology of divine identity" or "the christological identity of God" or Jesus being "intrinsic to the unique identity of God," and to balance it out with talk of Jesus being as it were "included in" ("in" is a perfect word here – very ambiguous) God's identity – making it sound as if you're not *identifying* him with God, but only in some vague but close way, *associating* him, presumably in *some* sort of trinitarian way, with God.

Against the two worries above, and so in defense of the reading proposed in section III, in many passages Bauckham seems clearly to identify God and Jesus, that is, not merely to associate them closely somehow, but to assert their numerical sameness, that is, their identity. For example, he says that for first century Jews,

...the unique sovereignty of God was not a mere 'function' which God could delegate to someone else.¹⁹

Thus, in his view any sovereign being must be God himself, and Jesus was held to be sovereign. Thus, they thought Jesus was God himself. Or consider this passage,

...when the New Testament portrays the pre-existent Christ participating in God's work of Creation, there could be no clearer way, in Jewish theological terms, of claiming that Jesus belongs - eternally - to the unique identity of the one God, the God of Israel, the Creator and Ruler of all things. This is why early Christians worshiped Jesus without supposing that they were abandoning Jewish monotheism. In terms of the definition of Jewish monotheism, the worship of Jesus as included in the unique divine identity made sense, whereas the worship of Jesus as someone other than God, to whom God merely delegated divine functions, would have been idolatry and effectively polytheism.²⁰

Note the contrast at the end – Bauckham is urging that for the early Christians, Jesus is *not* someone other than God, which is to say, they held Jesus to be God himself. Thus he elsewhere describes the Gospel of John "as the story of God's own human obedience."²¹ Again, Bauckham glosses "including Jesus in the unique identity of this one God" as "identifying Jesus directly with the one God of Israel" - and I take him to mean not merely associating Jesus with God in some lesser way, but rather asserting them to be numerically one.²²

19 *Jesus and the God of Israel*, 30. Cf. "Monotheism and Christology in the Gospel of John," 159.

20 "Orthodoxy," 6. Compare with *Jesus and the God of Israel*, 12.

21 *Jesus and the God of Israel*, 53.

22 *Jesus and the God of Israel*, 3. Cf. "Monotheism and Christology in the Gospel of John," 163.

However, in contrast to the passages just quoted, in another essay Bauckham argues that in Hebrews, since Jesus exercises divine functions, this shows that for the author "he must belong to the identity of the one God. Jesus cannot function as God without being God." ("The Divinity of Jesus Christ in the Epistle to the Hebrews" in *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology*, eds. Richard

Only this reading of Bauckham makes sense of his whole strategy of arguing, as we saw above, that since only God has certain features,²³ and Jesus has those, Jesus must be (numerically the same as) God. That is, any argument like the one in section III above wouldn't be clearly valid if the conclusion weren't the numerical identity of Jesus and God, but rather some sort of close relationship between Jesus and God.

We should pause to think through this important point. If the conclusion were simply "Jesus is closely related to God," i.e. that Jesus is somehow *associated with* God, this wouldn't be clearly compatible with premises 1 and 2, for some sorts of relation allow, and some don't allow the numerical identity of the relata. (E.g. a literal Father-Son, or cause-effect relationship can only obtain between two selves.) But Bauckham could retool the argument for this vague conclusion, making it valid by eliminating the concept of identity from premise 1. The retooled argument could go something like this:

1. Anything which is F is closely related to God.
2. Jesus is F.
3. Therefore, Jesus is closely related to God.²⁴

But here, we no longer have what is clearly a "high" christology, much less the "highest possible" christology. Someone holding Jesus to be a man without a divine nature, but the Messiah, could wholly agree that that New Testament writers closely associate Jesus with God, or that they hold Jesus and God are closely related, for the first is the Son of and Messiah sent by the second. I take it that Bauckham has no interest in a conclusion compatible with "humanitarian" unitarian christologies (on which Jesus is human but not literally divine), and so I conclude that he doesn't intend this sort of argument.

Suppose we clarify out the relation in some social trinitarian way.

1. Anything which is F is a part (or member) of God.
2. Jesus is F.
3. Therefore, Jesus is is part (or member) of God.

Again, we have a valid argument here, or rather two of them, with different and incompatible conclusions.²⁵ But which trinitarian will agree that to be a member of the

Bauckham, Daniel Driver, Trevor Hart, and Nathan McDonald (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 15-36, p. 17. Evidently, the idea here is that only a member or part of God could do such things, not that only God himself could do such things.

23 Bauckham argues that "early Judaism had clear and consistent ways of characterizing the unique identity of the one God and, thus, distinguishing the one God absolutely from all other reality." (*Jesus and the God of Israel*, ix.)

24 Again, in the interest of clarity:

1. $(x) (Fx \rightarrow R(x,g))$	premise
2. Fj	premise
3. R(j,g)	(1, 2)

25 I presuppose that if x is a part of y, then y is a real, composite substance/entity, and if x is a member of y, then y is not a substance/entity but rather a mere group or logical construction out of

Trinity is to be a *part* of it? Will it count as orthodox, for example, to say that Jesus is one third of God? Again, who will accept that to be a person in the Trinity is to be a member of it, the Trinity being a group and not a thing, and so not a self?²⁶

Depending on what property F is, premise 1 may be difficult to justify. Consider a subordinationist unitarian theory like that of the catholic “father” Origen. Let F be “participated in the creation of the cosmos.” In Origen’s view, this feature is had by the Son, who in some mysterious manner is eternally generated by the Father. Thus interpreted, 2 would be true. But for Origen, this Son is neither a part nor a member of God, that is, the Father. Thus he’d deny 1. And Origen would deny premise 1 for another reason; in his view, the Father participated in creation and yet for him the Father is neither a proper part nor a member of the one true God, i.e. the Father himself.²⁷

In any case, I don’t see Bauckham arguing that, for example, creating requires *being a part or member of* God; he normally says that it requires *being God*. In my view correctly, he holds that Isaiah 40-55 teaches that the one true God himself is the only creator, and that all the New Testament authors assumed this.²⁸

Moreover, Bauckham says the kind of identity (sameness) he means is personal identity, in other words, *being the same person/self as*. This, however, entails numerical identity, that is, *being the same entity*.²⁹ And this rules out the weaker relations between Jesus and God just considered.

Finally, it seems that Bauckham usually thinks of God as a self.

The God of Israel has a unique identity... Since the biblical God has a name and a character, since this God acts, speaks, relates, can be addressed and, in some sense, known, the analogy of human personal identity suggests itself as the category with which to synthesize the biblical and Jewish understanding of God. ...in biblical and Jewish literature... God acts as a character in the story, identifiable in ways similar to those in which human characters in the story are identifiable...³⁰
Later in the book, however, the analogy is heavily qualified.

substances/entities. Thus, no x could be both a part and a member of some y, as nothing can both be and not be an entity.

26 Some prominent Christian philosophers – including Richard Swinburne, William Lane Craig, and William Hasker - have defended claims that the members of the Trinity are parts of a whole, or members of a group which is not itself a self. They have argued with great sophistication that such views should be considered within the catholic mainstream, and that they are all things considered the best way to construe the creedal Trinity formulas. For sources and summaries, see my “Trinity,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/trinity/>, sections 3.2, 3.3. For criticism see the sources in note 14 above and Brian Leftow, “Anti Social Trinitarianism” in *The Trinity : An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity*, S. T. Davis, D. Kendall and G. O’Collins (eds.) (New York: Oxford University Press), 203–49, and Daniel Howard-Snyder, “Trinity Monotheism,” *Philosophia Christi*, 5(2): 375-403.

27 *Contra Celsum* I.8.12-5; *De Principiis* Preface section 4, I.3.3-5; IV.4.1,8.

28 “Monotheism and Christology in the Gospel of John,” 158.

29 *Jesus and the God of Israel*, 6, fn. 5. To say of any x and y that they are “numerically the same person” means that x is a person, y is a person, and x = y (that x and y are numerically one).

30 *Jesus and the God of Israel*, 6.

...the inclusion of Jesus in the identity of God means the inclusion in God of the interpersonal relationship between Jesus and his Father. No longer can the divine identity be purely and simply portrayed by analogy with a single human subject.

...While human identity may be the common analogy for thinking about the divine identity, the God of Israel clearly transcends the categories of human identity.³¹

As I read this, the claim is that in light of the life of Jesus, it turns out that it is a mistake to think of God as literally a self, or as very much like a single human person. Well, if so, then it is a mistake to think of God as having a *personal* identity at all. Yet, creation and governance of creation are thought of, by Bauckham and the rest of us, as intentional actions – as a self acting for one or more reasons, in order to bring about certain effects. And worship, for Bauckham and for the most of us, is conceived of as an interaction between human and divine persons. Moreover, “God” throughout Bauckham’s writings continues to be a “he” and never an “it,” and for Bauckham “the cross is God’s action of self-identification with all people.”³² That is, by being crucified, God expresses sympathy for and solidarity with suffering human beings, as it were bringing himself alongside them. Again, these are actions only a self, an intelligent agent, may perform.

In the end, I’m unable to come up with a consistent reading of Bauckham on Jesus and God. His frequent apparent implications that Jesus is the same self as God don’t cohere with his apparent but unclear “social” trinitarianism, on which, we assume, the one God is not a self, but rather *somehow* consists of or contains three divine selves. Still, it seems to me that his *main* or dominant thrust is what I describe in section III above.

V. Apologetics, Exegesis, and Inconsistency

What, finally, is the cost of the bargain? Perhaps if the seller will not clearly tell us, we can look at what those who would say they’ve accepted his “christology of divine identity” think they’ve paid. In a work of popular evangelical apologetics which Bauckham endorses,³³ the authors say,

...we take for granted that Jesus is not God the Father. ...The New Testament makes a distinction between the two, sometimes as the Father and the Son and sometimes as God and the Son of God. Although it’s hard to understand, the New Testament both distinguishes Jesus from God and identifies him as God – sometimes in the same breath (e.g. John 1:1; 20:28-31; Heb. 1:8-9; 2 Peter 1:1-2).³⁴

As these authors read the New Testament, it is riddled with self-contradictions on the subjects of God and Jesus, saying or clearly implying both that they’re numerically the

31 *Jesus and the God of Israel*, 55, 56.

32 *Jesus and the God of Israel*, 267.

33 He says, in part: “Bowman and Komoszewski do a splendid job of showing that the divine identity of Jesus is not confined to a few key texts, but presented throughout the New Testament in a wide variety of ways.” (Robert M. Bowman, Jr. and J. Ed Komoszewski, *Putting Jesus in His Place* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 2007), 1.

34 *Putting Jesus in His Place*, 21.

same, and that they are not. But this, they urge, is not problem – either for the New Testament, or for their interpretations of it – for they urge that God is “incomprehensible” and thus we should “expect paradoxes or mysteries, all down the line, with respect to [God’s] attributes.”³⁵ As they claim to base their beliefs about Jesus firmly on the New Testament, one would then expect them, based on this reading, to affirm both that Jesus is God, and that Jesus is *not* God. But in fact, they strenuously assert only that he is. At the climax of their book, they claim to have proven “beyond a reasonable doubt that Jesus Christ is God.”³⁶

Is this, then, Bauckham’s bargain, that we should (1) construct a patently incoherent reading of the New Testament, (2) believe that interpretation, and (3) choose to loudly say only the positive side of the contradiction in order to stick it to the Jesus-seminar types of the world? If so, then serious shoppers can be forgiven for continuing to shop. There are, after all, a number of accounts of the relation between Jesus and God (again, whether “God” refers to the Trinity or the Father) which are *arguably* self-consistent (and so, possibly true, and not manifestly impossible).³⁷ And on the face of it, (1) seems uncharitable, (2) seems unreasonable, and (3) seems to manifest some lack of intellectual integrity.

Perhaps, however, these apologists have misread Bauckham. As we’ve seen, he compares the Trinity both to one self, and to three selves. His idea could be that both analogies are apt, though either alone could mislead. *Perhaps* then his understanding of the Trinity doctrine is that God is in some ways like a self, and in some ways like a group of selves. I doubt that this vague theory should count as creedally trinitarian at all. But suppose that something similar is going on with the christology here. Suppose that the intended view is that Jesus is something like the same self as God, but also something like a member of God. (If God is somewhat like a self and somewhat like a group of selves, then perhaps Jesus’ relation to God can be both like personal identity and like membership in a group of friends.)

I’m not confident that this is his considered view, though, for it it seems compatible with the view that Jesus was a man with no divine nature, who was *as if* *were* one self with God, in that their wills aligned and they acted in a coordinated fashion. And God here, the Father, is like a community in that he has three aspects which the scriptures personify. One of these, his eternal Word, he has bestowed upon

35 *Putting Jesus in His Place*, 122-3. On these pages the authors list nine pairs of contrary attributes had by this one “paradoxical person,” God/Jesus, such as knowing all, and not knowing the day or hour of Jesus’ second coming. I presuppose here that apparent contradictions constitute *prima facie* evidence against a theory which asserts or implies them. On the prospects for reasonably believing apparent theological contradictions, see my “[On Positive Mysterianism](#),” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 69:3, 205-26, 2011.

36 *Putting Jesus in His Place*, 274.

37 For a survey of incarnation theories like this, see David Werther, “Incarnation,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/incarnat/>, accessed June 14, 2011) or Richard Cross, “The Incarnation,” in Thomas P. Flint and Michael C. Rea, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 452-75. For a survey of apparently consistent Trinity theories, see my “Trinity,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/trinity/>.

the man Jesus – it as it were “lives through him.” If Bauckham’s theory doesn’t rule out this, it’s hard to see how it could be understood as “the highest possible” christology, or even a high one.

At this point, one may object:

*You are misconstruing what Bauckham is doing. He isn’t offering some newfangled piece of systematic christology; he’s merely giving an up to date exegetical defense of the divinity of Christ. He shows that the New Testament writers all held Christ to be divine, and surely, this is, as he promises, the “highest possible christology.” Is this problematic, in that implies that Jesus is numerically identical to God? Possibly – but this problem is hardly unique to Bauckham, and he can’t be criticized for failing to solve it. Why can’t he show that the New Testament writers assert Jesus to be divine, and leave it to others to theologize about this, to try to understand it in a way consistent with monotheism?*³⁸

In reply, I take Bauckham to be offering “a truly contemporary understanding of what orthodoxy means here and now”.³⁹ It is unclear to me in what way he considers the traditional formulas of “two natures” in Christ or of Christ’s being “one substance with” the Father to be inadequate. But he does think that in these latter days they need supplementing with his “christology of divine identity.” This does not seem to be merely a defensive apologetic or exegesis. He’s also doing theology. Attempting to build on the Bible, he proposes a positive thesis for Christian belief, as one which is somehow better than older formulations. I take it that “the divinity of Christ” is just shorthand for the old creedal claims. Thus, Bauckham does not prefer such language; in his view, he has better to offer. I’ve argued here, though, that the replacement suffers from crippling ambiguity.

For the sake of argument, let’s grant that Bauckham’s thesis means the same thing as, or is at least logically equivalent to, the thesis that Jesus is divine.⁴⁰ This claim too is ambiguous. Does it mean that Jesus is a god, or only that he’s related in some important way to a god? (We talk of the divine scriptures, the church as a divine institution, and the Mosaic law as a divine covenant.) If the latter, then we do not clearly have any “high” or traditional Christology.⁴¹ If the former, we indeed have a “high” or exalted christology. But since, we’re all assuming, there’s exactly one god, then the suggestion is that Jesus just is that one god, i.e. is God himself, numerically one with him, even though we all also assume and assert the two of them to have differed.

38 I have paraphrased this objection from comments by an anonymous reviewer for this journal.

39 “Orthodoxy in Christology,” 1.

40 Some of his remarks seem to imply some such claim. (e.g. *Jesus and the God of Israel*, x, 58-9) A claim is logically equivalent to another just in case they have the same truth conditions, i.e. it is true just in the case the other is true, and false just in case the other is false. In other words, they never differ in truth-value, whether or not they differ in meaning.

41 In this connection, see the trenchantly argued anonymous tract *The Divinity of Jesus Christ*, 2nd ed. (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1830) reprinted in [Sixteen American Unitarian Tracts](#) (Morrisville, NC: Lulu.com, 2007).

This is, to be sure, a problematic claim, for the reason explained at the start of section IV above. In short, it strongly seems (to anyone who carefully considers it) to be false. For this very reason, we should be wary of attributing it to the New Testament authors.⁴² Should we really take them to be asserting or assuming what is obviously false? *Perhaps* we should, *if* after all relevant considerations, this best explains what they say and don't say. But we should leave no stone unturned in considering seemingly self-consistent readings. There is no way, in doing exegesis, to postpone these considerations for some later theological stage; inconsistency is an indispensable tool of interpretation, specifically, for ruling out proposed interpretations.

To illustrate, suppose that someone suggested that the author of Mark thought, like at least a few ancients, that Jesus and John the Baptist were one and the same.⁴³ We can immediately rule this interpretation out, because the author of Mark thought them to have differed; this author asserts that John baptized Jesus, and clearly assumes that Jesus didn't, at that time, baptize himself.⁴⁴ Just so, we can ask whether a given author assumes or asserts there to be actual or possible differences between Jesus and God. If so, we cannot, unless we uncharitably read that author as self-inconsistent, take him to think that Jesus and God are numerically identical. For instance, the author of Mark assumes that only Jesus died and was raised by God, and that only God said to Jesus "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."⁴⁵ This is simple and unavoidable reasoning, and it leaves open whether or not these authors believe that Jesus is divine in some sense which doesn't imply being numerically identical to God.

Self-consistency, and consistency with obvious truths, are important not only for theology, but also for interpretation. So is vagueness. A good interpretation of a text should fit well with and *explain* what the text says and does not say. If someone offers a very vague thesis, we won't be able to judge its fit with the text, nor its explanatory power, and so we won't be able to reasonably read the text in that way. Suppose that someone suggested that according to the Gospel of John, Jesus "had it." It is unclear what this means, and so unclear whether it fits the text of John. And as it stands, it is unqualified to explain what that text says about Jesus and God. Likewise, if we were decide on the content-thin reading of Bauckham's "christology of divine identity" sketched at the end of section IV above, we would have a problematic interpretation of any given New Testament text, for it would be too vague for us to judge its fit or explanatory power. I conclude that construing the "christology of divine identity" as mere exegesis does not exempt it from problems of consistency and unclarity.

42 I am assuming that a primary task of an interpreter is determining the author's intent – what he or she meant to assert by the text in question. I am *not* assuming that this is the only legitimate interpretation of a biblical text.

43 Matthew 14:1-2, 16:14.

44 Mark 1. Our assumption in making this inference is the indiscernibility of identicals, as explained in section II above.

45 Mark 16; Mark 1:11. My own view is that all New Testament authors held Jesus and the one God to be numerically distinct. On Paul and the gospel of John, see my online screencast lecture, "God and his Son: the logic of the New Testament" (<http://trinitities.org/blog/archives/4054>).

In the spirit of the objection above, some readers will reflect that Bauckham's difficulties are parallel to those asserting the divinity of Christ. And perhaps those are familiar difficulties, problems one is used to living with rather than solving. *Perhaps* those difficulties derive immediately from the texts themselves (and not from the text plus assumptions we bring to them). But let us recall that Bauckham is attempting to construct for us a *better* way of understanding Jesus, a more contemporary way, lest we lapse "into fossilized traditionalism."⁴⁶ But his claims, we have seen, are either too thin in content to do the work assigned them, or patently incompatible with truths to any Christian is committed. In sum, even if we grant that Bauckham does no worse than those who in a more familiar idiom assert "the divinity" of Jesus, we must still conclude that he does no better. Yet, that is the task he sets for himself.

VI. Conclusion

A smart buyer examines not only the goods offered, but also the price. I understand the value of most of the goods noted in section I above. But what is the price? As best I can tell, it is one of two things. First, it may be that one must accept an evident contradiction, either that Jesus is and is not God himself, or that Jesus is God himself and yet the two of them have qualitatively differed. This last is an implicit rather than an explicit contradiction, but it is just as obviously a contradiction, for the reason explained in sections II and III above. The problem with either an explicit or implicit contradiction is that what strongly appears contradictory, for that very reason, strongly appears to be false, as it is self-evident that no contradiction is true.⁴⁷ Second, it could be that Bauckham is really saying something very subtle, yet very thin on content, that Jesus and God are somehow like a single self, and yet somehow also not. There's no appearance of contradiction here, but the price is that we scarcely grasp what it could mean, and at any rate it seems too minimal in content to accomplish Bauckham's intention of giving a "high" christology reading of the New Testament which in effect says the same thing as the ecumenical creeds. In sum, the cost is either obvious self-contradiction or saying something so vague that it can't really suffice for most of the benefits outline in section I above. *Caveat emptor.*

46 "Orthodoxy," p. 1.

47 Some Protestant theologians would appeal here to the distinction between a merely apparent and a genuine contradiction, and urge that it can be reasonable to accept an apparent contradiction as merely that. For a pessimistic evaluation of this strategy of defending apparently inconsistent claims, see my ["On Positive Mysticism."](#)