

## 4. "YOU ARE BLASPHEMING!"

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The Jews answered him, "For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy; and because You, being a man, make Yourself out to be God (John 10: 33 NASB).

"We are not stoning you for any of these," replied the Jews, "but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God" (John 10: 33 NIV).

**So**, will we side with those unbelieving and wilfully blind Jews who accused Jesus of blasphemy (John 9: 40-41)? Will we build our theology on the basis of their accusation that Jesus was making the outrageous claim that, he who was **a mere man** was actually claiming **to be God**?

I, for one, want to exercise extreme caution in siding with those stubborn Jews. <sup>1</sup> Especially, when this very passage makes it clear that some went so far as to say that Jesus was a demoniac and that he was insane (John 10: 20)! This is not the first time in John's Gospel they have made such shocking insults (John 7: 20; 8: 48, 52).

It's on record that these folks consistently misunderstood Jesus. Jesus had not long before told them they were wilfully blind and that their sin remained (9: 40-41). Anyone wishing to side with their blindness, and quote **verse 33** as a proof-text that Jesus really was claiming to be God Almighty in the flesh, should, at the very least, tread cautiously.

### MEETING VIOLENCE WITH ARGUMENT.

Before we venture forth, it's worth noting that Jesus does not meet violence with violence, nor should his disciples. It's the nature of the wolf to snap, and bite, and tear, and kill. Sheep don't persecute sheep. It's the nature of sheep to suffer violence, not to perpetrate it. According to Jesus the only 'sheep' who persecute the sheep are wolves disguised in sheep's wool (Matt. 7: 15). By this we can know who belongs to the good Shepherd and his flock!

Yes, the only weapons Jesus used to defend himself were those of the Spirit --- the persuasive truth of God's word and the appealing power of his godly life. "**The sword of the Spirit**" is the only offensive (i.e. attacking) instrument we must wield (Eph. 6: 17).

So, Jesus showed no fear before the mob. He didn't run. He stood. He faced his accusers. He believed his own recent confession of faith: "**My Father is greater than all**". He believed his life was in His Father's Sovereign Hand. This mob could not **snatch** him before his time had come nor his mission had been completed.

I ask myself: How may I face the crises of life **in the evil day** (Eph. 6: 13)? It would be a great idea to ask my Father for His mission for my life and to stand in that calling no matter what! I shall not depart this present scene until my work, His work, **which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them**, is fully done (Eph. 2: 10).

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<sup>1</sup> I am not saying that all those Jews were wicked, nor was the writer of John's Gospel. He makes it quite clear that many Jews believed on Messiah Jesus, and were his "sheep". John uses the term "the Jews" in a limited and rather technical sense, to cover the religious establishment which was rejecting Christ's claims to be their God-sent Saviour. There is no anti-Semitism here whatsoever.

## THE DEFENCE

So, those Jews picked up their rocks and were about to stone Jesus (v. 31). Jesus meets their hostility with three main *arguments*. Jesus met the physical by employing spiritual weapons (cf. 2 Cor. 10: 3-5).

1. **For which good work are they stoning him?** Jesus answered them, "I showed you many good works from my Father; for which of them are you stoning me" (v. 32)?

They could not, of course, deny his lovely deeds full of grace and truth. That Jesus had powerfully delivered and healed was evident. But they could and did question the *source* of Jesus' authority to do these miracles.

Recall the immediate context concerns the man born blind whom Jesus had just healed on the Sabbath day (9: 16). When confronted by those skeptics who attributed this miracle to a **sinner**, the healed man logically answered Jesus' critics, "We know that God does not hear sinners ..." (9: 31).

The Jews answered Jesus' first argument by denying they were stoning him for what he was doing. Rather, they were stoning him because of his alleged outrageous claim: "For a good work we do not stone you, but for blasphemy; and because you, being a man, make yourself out to be God" (v. 33).

Jesus answered this charge by using two more arguments.

2. **The Scripture calls those whom God commissions "gods"**. Jesus answered them, "Has it not been written in your Law, 'I said, you are gods'? "If He called them gods, to whom the word of God came (and the Scripture cannot be broken), do you say of him, whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'" (vs. 34-36)?

Jesus' second line of defence is rather opaque. It comes from another worldview, another mindset that is totally Middle Eastern and in particular, First Century Jewish.

Jesus quotes a warning from their own Scriptures --- from **Psalm 82: 6**. There, God warns unjust officials who had been commissioned by Him, that they should cease from their unjust ways and give justice to the poor and to the innocent. God's appeal to those judges concludes: "I said, You are gods; and all of you are the children of the most High."

Since the judges were authorised by God to administer His judgments to the people, *they were functionally in the very place of God Himself before men!* This is an astounding truth and perfectly illustrates the Hebrew **Law of Agency**. In effect, God tells His commissioned judges, "You are in My place before the people."

## TRANSLATION CHALLENGE

The distinction between God and His commissioned agents is sometimes impossible for the Bible translator to distinguish. To the Hebrew mind, the agent is as the principal himself. Take for instance, **Exodus 21: 6**:

The KJV and the NIV say, **Then his master must take him before the judges.**

But, the NASB and the RV have it, **Then his master shall bring him to God.**

Does the servant stand before the judges or before God? The difficulty arises because the Hebrew word translated "judges" is the word "*elohim*" which is the word for "gods". The idea is that when a servant (slave) stands before the judge(s) to give his or her vow of allegiance to their master, they

were in fact making their binding oath, not just before men, but to God Himself. The judges, as God's agents, were indeed as God Himself! <sup>2</sup>

This, of course, is the very point Jesus uses in his defence before his accusers. And it comes right out of their own Scriptures which cannot be broken! (Yes, Jesus has a high view of the "verbal inspiration" of the Scriptures!) Which is to say, "If Scripture speaks this way by calling men who are specially commissioned by God "gods", why should I not speak this way about myself since the Father has called me to a greater task?"

Jesus claims to be specially **sanctified** by his Father for a unique mission in the world. The word Jesus used for his special commission is the Greek word *hagiazen*. It is the verb form of the adjective *hagios* from which our word "holy" comes. The essential idea is that a person or a thing that is holy is set aside unto God for a special purpose or task.

When Jesus says he has been **sanctified** he is saying God has consecrated him, made him holy, different and set apart from other men. Jesus was always very conscious of his unique status and calling.

There is also another aspect to Jesus' claim here. He says his Father has **sent him into the world**. The word here is the word used for sending an ambassador and or an official envoy on behalf of a Sovereign or Superior. <sup>3</sup> **William Barclay** here translates it *despatched*. <sup>4</sup>

Jesus was very conscious that his arrival in this world was by God's act and determination.

3. **Conclusion: My works back up my claim.** "If I do not do the works of my Father, do not believe me: but if I do them, though you do not believe me [i.e. the claims I make for myself] believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father" (vs. 37-38).

Thus, Jesus sums up his argument for the Defence! "Your Scriptures teach that judges commissioned by God for their special task of representing Him to the people were "gods". Why do you object to my claim to being set apart and authorised by the Most High when my works proclaim that I am **the Son of God?**"

This argument should have been sufficient for those Jewish authorities. Theological claims and talk can be cheap. We've all heard the expression, "He can talk the talk, but can he walk the walk?" Or, "Your actions are so loud that I can't hear what you are saying!" Does your life back up your lip?

The acid test is always whether the fruit agrees with the toot! Or, in today's social twitter atmosphere: Does the deed agree with the tweet! Those of us who make the claim to being Jesus' followers must walk worthy of our calling. How about you and me? Can we invite this acid test? Look at what I am doing?

## SOME TRANSLATION ISSUES

Our question still remains. What exactly did the Jews mean when they charged Jesus with **blasphemy (v. 33)?** Many today are of the opinion that it was **because you, being a man, make yourself out to be God**. Or, even more graphically, as the **New International Version** reads, **because you, a mere man, claim to be God**.

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<sup>2</sup> This same translation dilemma appears in various OT Scriptures. See, for instance **Exodus 22: 9,28**.

<sup>3</sup> *Apesteilen*. The Bible says many prophets and messengers were **sent into the world** by God for their particular tasks. For instance, in this very Gospel, John the Baptist was **sent from God (John 1: 6)**. It is **not** referring to one's personal pre-existence in heaven prior to birth!

<sup>4</sup> *Op Cit.* p 88

Most of the difficulty must be laid at the feet of our translators. There are many hundreds of times in the NT where “God” has the definite article when referring to God the Father, Who is of course, the God of Israel, the God the OT Scriptures, indeed the God and Father of our Lord Jesus himself. The one true God is “the God” in the New Testament. He nearly always gets the definite article --- over a thousand times! *But John 10: 33 is one of those places where the definite article is missing.*

So, if we literally translate the text, it reads, **because you, a man, claim to be (a) god**. The translators understand this principle very well. For example, in **Acts 12:22** where King Herod is called **(a) god (theos)**, without the definite article. Nobody for a moment thinks Herod was being called [the] God!

The same is true in **Acts 28: 6** when the apostle Paul is bitten by a dangerous snake. The islanders thought he would swell up and die. When he didn't, they proclaimed Paul to be **(a) god (theos)**. There is no definite article and the translators know that nobody was saying Paul was [the] God.

All Greek scholars understand that the general principle is that the anarthrous (i.e. without the definite article) *theos* should be translated as “a god” or if the context fits it better, “divine” --- as exhibiting divine qualities.

All of this is to say, that one has to have very solid reasons for thinking that First Century strict monotheistic Jews who recited the *Shema* of **Deuteronomy 6: 4** numerous times every day of their lives, suddenly were thinking Jesus was claiming to be the God Himself standing there as a man!?

No way. It took centuries of furious church debates and councils by *Gentile* theologians to hammer that one out! None of the so-called Church Fathers (all Gentiles) of the Second and Third Centuries --- i.e. before the Council of Nicea --- was a trinitarian! That's an historical accurate fact.

There is absolutely no hint in this passage --- or any other for that matter --- that Jesus was teaching he was somehow Yehovah God. On the other hand, we have Jesus' clear and plain teaching that he is doing God's work as His **consecrated and sent** Son, the Anointed One, the Messiah, the Christ.

### **“I AM THE SON OF GOD”**

Responding to their charge of blasphemy and threatened stoning, Jesus plainly says what he is claiming to be --- **“I said I am the Son of God”** (v. 36).

At his interrogation before Pilate --- roughly four months after this incident --- these same religious leaders would say, **“We have a law, and by that law he ought to die because he made himself out to be the Son of God”** (John 19: 7). They then explain what they understood the term **Son of God** to mean ... **“Every one who makes himself out to be a king opposes Caesar”** (19: 12).

For First Century Jews, the expression **Son of God** did not mean “God the Son” (a term you don't read in your Bible!). It was a claim to being in a special relationship with God, to being His kingly representative upon earth. To be “the Son of God” was to claim Royal and Messianic status. It was **not** a claim to **be** the God.

### **THE PURPOSE OF JOHN'S GOSPEL**

John wrote his Gospel to answer the very question, “Is Jesus the Messiah, the promised Son of God?” In the very first chapter, John the Baptist confesses, **“And I have seen, and have borne witness that this is the Son of God”** (John 1: 34). This is precisely defined for us a couple of verses later, when Andrew joyfully declares, **“We have found the Messiah (which translated means the Christ)”** (John 1: 41).

And to leave us in no doubt as to how the term “Son of God” is to be defined, a few verses later we find Nathaniel putting the two terms together, **“You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel”** (John

1: 49). And to finish that first chapter off, Jesus himself combines all these Messianic terms into his own favourite self-description, “the Son of Man” (John 1: 51)!

## JOHN'S INVARIABLE FORMULA

These are all terms of equivalence:-

The Son of God = the King of Israel = the Messiah = the Son of man.

John's Gospel never deviates from this formula. (It's the formula, by the way, found in the OT in such well known Messianic Psalms as Psalm 2 where God's Son is defined as God's King and God's Anointed [Messiah].)

When he sums up and gives his grand conclusion, John says his stated purpose in putting stylus to parchment is that, this has **been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name**” (John 20: 31).

This is precisely what Jesus is claiming in the incident before us in chapter 10, surely? He is not breaking all the consistent story-line and suddenly claiming, “I really am making myself out to be (the) God!” He is not saying, “Look, I am more than a man. I am the Eternal God, Second Person in the Trinity, and while you're at it, understand that I possess two natures because I am fully God and fully man!”

How out of context, how anachronistic, how grammatically and theologically problematic! However, if you wish to continue to cast your lot in with the blind Jews, of whom Jesus said, “**You are not of my sheep**” (v. 26), then do so against all the patent evidence to the contrary. Some minds are just like cement --- all mixed up and firmly set in their ways.

## 'A MERE MAN'?

This brings us to another unfortunate tampering with our text already alluded to. You will have noticed at the start of this article that I quoted **verse 33** from the NIV translation,

“We are stoning you for ... blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God” (v. 33).

The Greek word for “man” (*anthropos*) occurs around 550 times in the Greek New Testament. The NIV in every other single case correctly translates it as “man” or “a man”. Yet, for some strange reason the NIV makes an exception in **John 10:33** making it say a mere man. Hmm. Where, pray tell, does the word “mere” come from? It's been roped in, lassoed, to tie theological bias to the post of Nicean (i.e. Roman Catholic) orthodoxy!

The Jews would never have called Jesus “a mere man”. But they were incensed that Jesus was claiming divine status, that he was God's royal Son, that he was their promised Messiah, with all of heaven's backing behind him. Don't forget they had already agreed that Jesus was not to be confessed as the Christ (God's Anointed One) or they were to be driven out of the Temple community (**John 9: 22**).

Why do modern readers of the Bible think that a charge of “**blasphemy**” automatically equates to a claim to being God Himself in human flesh? A simple word-study on the meaning and use of a charge of blasphemy in the NT will show it simply means to revile, to insult. <sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For starters try **Luke 22: 65** where the Roman soldiers had blindfolded Jesus and were punching him, and saying, “Prophecy, who is the one who hit you?” And they were saying many other things against him, blaspheming”. Or, Acts

## IS JESUS THE GOD OF THE OLD TESTAMENT BECAUSE HE IS 'THE GOOD SHEPHERD'?

When I first came to the knowledge that the God of the Bible is One Person, One God, and not a so-called mystery of Three Persons in one essence (even though one of the Persons has two natures!?! ) someone tried to turn me back from my 'heresy' with an argument of comparison.

Since Yahweh God in the OT calls Himself the Shepherd of Israel, and since Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd in the NT, then *ipso facto* Jesus must be God. Initially that threw me. For, sure enough, the O.T. says many times that,

The LORD (Yahweh-Roi is the Hebrew ) is my Shepherd, I shall not want (Ps. 23: 1).

For thus says the LORD God, "Behold, I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out ... I will feed My flock and I will lead them to rest," declares the LORD God (Ezekiel 34: 11,13,15).

Since Jesus is doing the work God is doing, and since both God and Jesus are said to be Good Shepherds, the argument goes, surely they must both be God? Same titles, identical descriptions! Wow. How was I going to answer that?

As always, it's staring us in the face. Jesus is called the Good Shepherd because he **lays down his life for the Sheep**. The Bible is adamant that the Eternal God does not, cannot die. God is immortal, incorruptible. Yet Jesus the Son of God died (Romans 5:10). It wasn't just the human nature of Jesus that died. Scripture is adamant: **We were reconciled to God through the death of His Son (Rom. 5: 10). The Son died!**

Jesus' testimony is, "I was dead" (Rev. 1: 18). **I (Me, Myself) was dead**. He does not say, "My human nature died. The God-part of me that is immortal survived and continued to live on in Hades." No. No.

William Barclay gets it right,

God's Anointed one, the Messiah, was also pictured as the Shepherd of the sheep. He shall feed His flock like a shepherd: He shall gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and shall gently lead those that are young." (Isaiah 40: 11). "He will be shepherding the flock of the Lord faithfully and righteously, and will suffer none of them to stumble in their pasture. He will lead them all aright" (Psalms of Solomon 17: 45). <sup>6</sup>

As the Son of God, Jesus is perfectly walking in the works of God His Father. He has already said, "I and the Father are one [in purpose]" (John 10:30). <sup>7</sup>

### FULL CIRCLE

We are now in a much better position to be able to answer our original question. Will we side with those unbelieving, stubborn, wilfully blind Jews (John 9: 40-41) who accused Jesus of blasphemy? Will we build our theology on the basis of their charge that Jesus was making the outrageous **claim to be God?**

The obvious answer should be, no, not at all. Jesus' word is clear: "I said I am the Son of God"! Thus, when Jesus asserts, "I and my Father are one" he is surely claiming essential unity of purpose with his

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<sup>13:45</sup> makes the point equally well. To blaspheme is to revile, to insult. It does not carry the later idea of claiming to be God Himself in human flesh!

<sup>6</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of John: The Daily Study Bible*, Volume 2, The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, Third Impression, 1958, p62

<sup>7</sup> For a fuller exposition of this verse and its context see my previous article [3. I and The Father Are One.](#)

Father, not identity of metaphysical “essence” in the Being of God”. Jesus, the Messiah is identified with His Father as no other man, for he carries the authority to do the works of God like no other.

Thus, Jesus is functionally God to us, without being God Himself. This explains the OT background from **Ezekiel 34** we discussed at the beginning in the first article of this little series. In Christ, God has kept His covenant-word and in due course has appointed His very own representative shepherd;

Then I will set over them one shepherd, My servant David, and he will feed them; he will feed them himself and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and My servant David will be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken. And I will make a covenant of peace with them and eliminate harmful beasts from the land ... Then they will know that I, the LORD their God, am with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are My people,” declares the LORD God ... (Ez. 34:23f).

In contrast to the evil shepherds who had abused God’s flock and who had sought **their own good rather than the good of the flock**, God sent His **servant David** to be their ‘good Shepherd’.

You get the same idea in **Micah 5**. Now, you know **Micah 5** well, I am sure, for it contains that great prophecy about the future birth of Messiah who would be born in **Bethlehem Ephrathah**. But most of us don’t read the next few verses which continue the prophecy that is still yet to be fulfilled --- the bit that says,

Then the remainder of his brethren will return to the sons of Israel. And he will arise and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will remain, because at that time he will be great to the ends of the earth (Mic. 5: 3-4).

Jesus is God’s authorised, *bone fide* son of David who will shepherd God’s flock in the name and power of the LORD his God! Jesus is ever **the man of God’s right hand ... the Son of Man whom God did make strong for Himself (Ps. 80: 17)!**

However, instead of recognising the day of their visitation in **John 9 & 10**, the Jews revile him, they blaspheme and insult him, indeed they pick up stones to hurl at him.

Yet, as the gentle, good and caring Shepherd, Jesus will voluntarily lay down his life for them soon. But not quite yet. His hour has not arrived yet. For the moment, Jesus will **elude their grasp (v. 39)**. He will go **away again beyond the Jordan (v. 40)**, to the place where his ministry all began. It was there that John had baptized Jesus. It was there the Spirit of God had descended upon Jesus. It was there the Father had declared, **“This is My Son, the Beloved one in whom I am well pleased.”**

#### THE FINAL CONTRAST BETWEEN “THEIR HAND’ AND “THE FATHER’S HAND”

We are not told exactly how Jesus **eluded their grasp (v. 39)**. Was it by a miracle? To speculate is futile. But we know that just as the mob and their authorities were trying to **seize (or arrest)** Jesus that he **went forth out of their hand (v. 39)**.

Is it not beyond fascinating to see the contrast drawn for us here? The enemy’s hand was impotent to arrest, but the Hand of the Father is mighty to protect His beloved Son. The Father **is greater than all**. On this occasion He kept His Son out of their hand.

No one was able to snatch the good Shepherd out of the safe-keeping of His heavenly Father. And nobody, whether supernatural or human can snatch out of His hand the sheep who are in Christ and who continually look to him for safe keeping. He is after all, the Son of the Most High God, our Good Shepherd!