

DID JESUS MAKE HIMSELF EQUAL WITH GOD?

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“For this cause the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God” (John 5: 18).

A correspondent recently used this verse as a proof-text that Jesus claimed to be “equal with God”. He went so far as to say that it was because of this bold claim to Deity that the Jews finally crucified Jesus for what they considered was blasphemy. Many believers today are convinced this is the case. And what is more, they can fall back onto the vast majority of Christendom which confesses Jesus is “co-equal” with the Father and with the third ‘Member’ in the trio, the Holy Spirit.

I am perfectly aware that to question such entrenched dogma, is to invite loud howls of protest ... but, at the risk of being burned alive (thankfully these days it’s only on a metaphorical BBQ!) permit me to make some relevant, if not inconvenient truths, to assist us in a better reading of this verse and ultimately, to a better understanding of Jesus. In this case a cursory or a surface reading of one verse will not do.

The Context.

Unfortunately for my correspondent, he overlooks some vital background information. Context as always is critical. Indeed, in this case context is “an inconvenient truth” (to quote Al Gore speaking in another context about “climate change”). However, the well-known dictum that a text out of context is just a pretext is well and truly proved in the verse before us.

In **John chapter 5** Jesus has just healed a cripple on the Sabbath. He told that lame man, **“Take up your pallet and walk” (v. 11)**. This offended the religious establishment,

And for this reason the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath” (v. 16).

Jesus’ response to this charge that he was breaking the Sabbath was to say, **“My Father is working until now, and I myself am working” (v. 17).**

The point Jesus makes is that he did not heal the cripple out of his own authority or power. Jesus gives all the glory and credit for this Sabbath miracle to his heavenly Father. Jesus was simply watching His Father, and “moving in the Spirit”, or “flowing in the anointing”, so to speak, and so was working alongside his Father. If His Father was willing to heal on the Sabbath, why could he also not be a part of this out-working of God, especially since God sent him to do His work?

Thus, the subject under discussion with the Jews in **John 5** is the matter of agreement between the Father's works and Jesus' ministry. Note the number of times the words "working" and "doing" are mentioned ... **Verses 17-20**: Jesus answered them,

"My Father is working until now, and I myself am working." For this cause therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God. Jesus therefore answered and was saying to them, "Truly, truly I say to you, the Son can do nothing of himself, unless it is something he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son does in like manner. For the Father loves the Son, and shows him all things that He Himself is doing; and greater works than these will He show him, that you may marvel."

So, it is in the matter of "**works**" that Jesus is putting himself on par or equality with God his Father. Jesus is doing what His Father is doing! Is the Father working on the Sabbath to save men? Then so is Jesus.

Thus, Jesus enjoys a unique relationship with God that allows him to heal on the Sabbath day because his ministry perfectly agrees with, and is 'in tune' with, what his Father is willing and doing. Jesus and his Father are 'on the same page'; to use a colloquial expression, they "are singing from the same hymn book"!

"Isos"

My correspondent went on to tell me that the Greek word for "equal" here (*isos*) is the word from which we get our isosceles triangle, which is a triangle where all three angles are equal. Therefore, I was assured, Jesus was crucified because he claimed to be equal with the two other Persons in the 'Godhead triangle' (!?).

As far as the word isos goes, my correspondent who reads NT Greek fluently should have known it is elsewhere translated as "consistent" or to be in "agreement" or to "correspond". For example, at the trial of Jesus,

"Many were giving false testimony against him, and yet their testimony was not consistent" (*isos* i.e. equal) (Mark 14: 56).

Not even in their reporting that they had heard Jesus say he would raise the temple in 3 days, "**was their testimony consistent (*isos*)**" (v. 59). Context demands that *isos* twice here means "consistent", or to be "in agreement".

The Greek scholar **Heinrich Meyer** correctly says it is "equality of will and procedure", and speaks of the "coincidence of action between the Father and the Son: "the inner and immediate intuition which the Son perpetually has of the Father's work." **(1)**.

The Jews in **John 5** are outraged not because Jesus is claiming equality of Being (Nicene's "consubstantiality") with God, but equality/consistency/agreement/correspondence with

the way His Father was working, even to the point of healing on the Sabbath (in their eyes he was breaking the Sabbath). That is the point of their offence. That is the context.

In fact, just read on in John 5. Is the Father in the business of raising the dead? Then don't marvel when the Son in perfect correspondence with the Father will also raise the dead (v.21). The Father "has given all judgment to the Son" (v. 22). The Father has "sent me" says Jesus (v. 24). Does the Father have life "in Himself"? Then in perfect agreement with God's commission to him, the Father "gave to the Son also to have life in himself" (v. 26). The Father also "gave" Jesus "authority to execute judgment" (v. 27). And then to underline it all, Jesus admits, "I can do nothing on my own initiative" (v. 30).

Don't rush over these explanatory verses. They are a running commentary on our "proof text" **verse 18**. If Jesus is co-equal with God, how incongruous that he should say, "I am equal with God, but I do what I am told. I am equal with God, but I am sent. I am equal with God but I am shown all things. I am equal with God but I am given my life and my authority to do these things. I am equal with God but I can do nothing on my own!"

What sort of God does this make Jesus? It does not sound like he is the God of Israel. Imagine. God Almighty doing what He is told, going where He is sent, being shown all things He needs to know, being given His life and authority, and doing not one thing by His own initiative. This position is intolerable! For the God of the Bible needs nothing, can be given nothing, is dependent on nothing or nobody, is not sent by any higher authority. Period. The one true God of the Bible is fully Self-sufficient. The Father is. Jesus is not.

No. Jesus claims equality with his Father in the contextual sense of being in perfect harmony and accord with all God has given him to do. Jesus' whole ministry is in perfect agreement with the commission his Father God gave him to perform. Everything Jesus does and has is a gift from his Father. The Father gives. The Son receives. The Son is subordinate.

It ought to be patently obvious that Jesus is putting himself on the same level with God in the matter of works/ministry ... definitely not in His Nature or Essence or Being! The subject under discussion is not ontology (questions of 'being'). Such questions of "Being" are out of context. There is nothing in the text itself to suggest Jesus is claiming to be God Himself. That is to read into the text later Nicene Christology which confesses Jesus as being "co-equal" with the Father God, a claim Jesus himself rejected numerable times ... "My Father is greater than I."

Should We Listen to the Enemies of Jesus?

Let's play a little game of make-believe for the purpose of argument. For a moment let's assume these Jews did believe that because Jesus called God his Father they really thought he was claiming to be the God of Israel (something inconceivable to Jews in that culture).

Some of these folks also said Jesus was a glutton and an alcoholic (**Matt. 11:19**). They said

Jesus was in cahoots with Beelzebub (Mk.3:22), was a demon-possessed Samaritan (John 8:48), and was out of his cotton-pickin' little mind (Mk. 3:21). Such opinions do not prove their conclusion that Jesus was claiming equality with God right or wrong. But surely it should at least cause us to critically examine their thinking before adopting their views as our own views? (Other times in John's Gospel the Jews misunderstood Jesus include John 2:18-21; 6:48-52; 10:20.)

In John 5 these Jews had already lost credibility by claiming Jesus broke the Sabbath. Were they correct to charge Jesus with doing a good work on the Sabbath? Not unless we want to directly contradict Jesus himself who pronounced, "It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath" (Matt. 12:10-12)! Being wrong on the Sabbath-question, what chance did they have of being right on the second, by saying Jesus was claiming "equality with God"?

Well, perhaps the words, "making himself equal with God" are John's inserted commentary, and not the words of the Jews? This also does not work because Jesus perceives their wrong conclusions by immediately correcting their erroneous allegations by saying, "The Son can do nothing by his own initiative." So Jesus corrects the Jews (not John!) by saying he does all things in dependence on God his Father.

The salient lesson is that we should be cautious of building a Christology based on the words of Jesus' traducers. These leaders of the nation were using all conceivable means trying to trump up false charges against Jesus to "persecute him" and to "kill him" (John 5: 16,18).

Now ask yourself this: Should we construct a doctrine based on the testimony of people of such shady character? Should we believe the testimony of people who so spurned and misunderstood Jesus? Or should we not rather build our belief on what Jesus himself and his apostles say? Common logic dictates the second answer.

Philippians 2: 6

Aha! But what about Philippians 2:6? Doesn't the word 'isos' also appear there? And doesn't that text surely say Jesus was 'equal' with God? The KJV reads, "Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God".

This translation gives the impression that Jesus had no qualms at all about claiming to be co-equal with God, because he pre-existed as God before becoming a man. The popular NIV version leaves us in no doubt this is what the text says,

"Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped".

Translation is the subtlest form of commentary, and the NIV takes massive liberties with the text here. The NIV translators want us to believe that because Jesus existed "in very nature (a thought nowhere stated in the original Greek text) God" from all eternity, that

during his earthly ministry it was perfectly natural for him to say he was co-equal with God. Jesus, according to this translation, is God.

I have written a fair amount on this passage in my book and so I will not repeat myself in this brief article. Except to reiterate the brilliant exegete Karl- Josef Kuschel's point that ...

"The phrase 'being like God' may not be translated with terms like 'equality to God,' 'being like God,' as often happens. That would require the form *isos theos*. What we have in the text is the adverb *isa* and that merely means 'as God,' 'like God.' So there is no statement about Christ being equal to God, and this in turn tells against an interpretation in terms of pre-existence...There is no justification for interpreting the phrase of the hymn in terms of [the] being of Christ." (1).

Kuschel's technical point is that even in this supposed 'proof text' for Jesus being co-equal with God, the accurate translation of the adverb *isa* is that Jesus' attitude ('mind' as per Phil. 2:5) was God-like. Which is to say, Jesus' attitude was in full agreement, consistency, and harmony with his Father's ... which is precisely the point of Jesus' discourse in John 5!

The only other point I will add is something I did not mention in my book. It is something so obvious that I wonder how I missed it in my first treatment of this Philippians 'hymn'. I owe this point to Uriel ben- Mordechai. (2).

Mordechai says Philippians 2:6 "is perhaps the most butchered and therefore the most problematic" verse in the NT. In English "it supposedly describes what motivated Yeshua (Uriel is a Hebrew-speaking Jewish Christian believer and calls Jesus by his Hebrew name), under the presumption that he thought himself to be God, to remove his god-hat, change form and become a man."

The Greek sentence of **Philippians 2:6** attaches the negative (*ouX*) to the noun and not to the verb. Modern translations reverse the order. So, instead of reading, "who, being in the form of God did not consider it robbery to be equal with God" (KJV, NKJV, NIV where *ouX* is attached to the verb *egeomai*), the sentence should read, "**who, being in the form of God considered equality not to be grasped**".

The distinction is subtle but obvious. Jesus saw equality with God as something not to be grasped! The text really is saying that Jesus considered something (noun) was unattainable and not to be seized. That something is the status of existing as God's co-equal. Jesus counted the status of being equal with God as an objective that was simply not up for grabs. He knew this was a status he could not and should not by force try to attain.

As **Mordechai** observes,

“What becomes embarrassingly evident is that translators of the ‘kenosis’ passage have deliberately reversed the noun/verb succession in translation ...The difference is huge but subtle. The Trinitarian rendering suggests Yeshua did NOT consider [verb] being equal to G-d as robbery [noun], against Him. What does that tell us? It tells us that in Yeshua’s mind, it was OK to consider himself as G-d’s equal. Yeshua then, according to (this) position, had a god-complex, and that was perfectly acceptable to him, to those around him, even to G-d Himself! ... And yet, the most accurate and honest rendering of this verse stipulates that Yeshua did consider [verb] being equal to God as something [noun] Unattainable, by force or otherwise.”

God gave Jesus as His Messiah-designate incredible authority and status. Jesus could have paraded himself around the nation of Israel with amazing displays of his kingly status. But he deliberately humbled himself before the very ones who should have acknowledged him as their king and Messiah. But he chose rather to remain largely unrecognised. That is the whole point of the Philippians hymn, not that Jesus was ‘co-equal’ with God, but that as God’s fully accredited Messianic Lord, Jesus chose the pathway of a servant, not grasping at what was not his. As a result of such obedience God raised Jesus up and exalted him to a new position of authority he had never before had, even the position at God’s Right Hand (**Phil. 2:9-11**).

The modern and popular belief is that Jesus had always existed as God and was simply going back to what he had previously known. This is the exact opposite of what the passage teaches! If there is any doubt over this technicality, just go back and read **John 5** again:- **John 5 and Philippians 2:6 are in agreement (isos!), surprise, surprise.**

The Son Will Forever Be Subjected To God!

Much more could be written, but let’s turn to the very end of story, what may be termed in chess parlance as “the end game”.

I Corinthians 15 is commonly called the resurrection chapter. It is a chapter appealed to for belief in the physical resurrection of Jesus and therefore for the certainty that we too will live again. Blessed gospel assurance! But what is often overlooked is the bigger picture, the cosmic context of Jesus’ resurrection, where it fits into ‘the end game’.

The apostle tells us there is a universal purpose to Jesus’ resurrection. Christ was raised first, then when he comes back all his people will be raised “at his coming [parousia] (**v.23**). Then comes the end, when he delivers up the kingdom to the God and Father, when he abolishes (puts down) all enemies of every kind (**v.24**).

Finally, the critical cosmic context of the resurrection is presented in full force...

“The last enemy that will be abolished is death. For the Scriptures say, ‘God has given him authority over all things’ [quoting Psalm 8: 6]. Of course, when it says ‘authority

over all things', it does not include God Himself, Who gave Christ his authority. Then, when he has conquered all things, the Son will present himself to God, so that God, who gave his Son authority over all things, will be utterly supreme over everything everywhere [quite literally, the Son himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to him, that God may be all in all]" (vs.26- 28).

So, God the Father has put all things in subjection under Christ's feet! The resurrection is proof this is so. As **Hebrews 2:8** says, "In putting everything under him (i.e. the Son), God left nothing that is not subject to him". Christ's authority is bequeathed to him.

Nothing could be clearer. God the Father remains exempt from all subjection. God the Father is not subject to anybody at any time, ever! He alone is the One Supreme God who even subjects the Son to Himself!

The end game is this: God has given His Son Jesus all rule and authority with the view to bringing the entire cosmos into subjection to God. On that day when the last enemy is abolished, the Son will present Himself and the entirety of redeemed creation to his God and Father. In this way God will "be all in all".

Jesus' subordination is not limited to his earthly ministry. His subordination to God the Father is ultimate and absolute ... forever and ever, age upon age! As **William Barclay** comments,

"Here Paul clearly and deliberately subordinates the Son to the Father ... God gave to Jesus a task to do, to defeat sin and death and to liberate man. The day will come when that task will be fully and finally accomplished, and then, to put it in pictorial terms, the Son will return to the Father like a victor coming home and the triumph of God will be complete...It is a case of one who, having accomplished the work that was given him to do, returns with the glory of complete obedience as his crown. As God sent forth his Son to redeem the world, so in the end he will receive back a world redeemed ..." **(4)**.

The Son in this way is "equal" with God, for his work is in perfect alignment and agreement with Father God's purpose for the eons.

Jesus' equality is never presented in terms of 'Being' or 'Essence' or 'Nature' (ontology) but of work and ministry. In **John 5, in Philipians 2, in I Corinthians 15** Jesus' ministry perfectly reflects God his Father's purpose and work in reconciling all things to Himself. In this sense alone Jesus claimed equality with God for his whole desire was to do His Father's work. His confession then and now is, "the Son can do nothing of his own initiative" (**John 5: 30**).

The only sense in which Jesus claimed "equality" with God His Father is that he only ever and always does His Father's will. With that will he was and will always be in perfect agreement (equality). What a wonderful Saviour.

FOOTNOTES

1. Quoted by M.R. Vincent in *Word Studies in the New Testament*, MacDonald Publishing Co., Mac Dill AFB, Florida, p. 434.
2. Kuschel, Karl-Josef, *Born Before All Time? The Dispute over Christ's Origin*. New York. Crossroad, 1992. p. 251 (Bold type my emphasis.)
3. Uriel ben-Mordechai, *If? The End of a Messianic Lie*. Volume 1. Above and Beyond, Ltd. Jerusalem, Israel, 2011. p. 428-430. (Emphasis original.)
4. Barclay, William. *The Letters to the Corinthians, Revised Edition, The Daily Bible Series*. Philadelphia. The Westminster Press, 1975, p. 151- 152.