JETS 32/4 (December 1989) 485-491

"YOU ARE GODS"? SPIRITUALITY AND A DIFFICULT TEXT

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e. e. cummings wrote: "No man, if men are gods; but if gods must be men, the sometimes only man is this . . . a fiend, if fiends speak truth."[1] The idea that men could be gods appears in the first few chapters of the Bible, and in that setting indeed it was fiends that the serpent sought to create with his enticement.

Yet in the near vicinity of the text we find that man was created in God's image (Gen 1:27). In 1:26 God says, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." The NT reinforces this teaching. Man is the "image and glory of God" according to 1 Cor 11:7, and Jas 3:9 affirms that people "have been made in God's likeness." So far so good. Although lively theological discussion concerning the nature and implications of the *imago Dei* continues,[2] the Biblical understanding that man bears the image of God is an accepted fact among evangelicals.

In John 10:34-36, however, a related but more problematic issue surfaces:

> Jesus answered them, "Is it not written in your Law, 'I have said you are gods'? If he called them 'gods' to whom the word of God came—and the Scripture cannot be broken—what about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world? Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, 'I am God's Son'?"

The address "you are gods" on the lips of Jesus raises a new question: Does this indicate that human beings in general, or Christians in particular, are in some sense "gods"? A recent popular-level response to the controversial *Seduction of Christianity* claims that "according to this scripture [John 10:34-36], believers are gods."[3] This is by no means an isolated opinion; it represents a growing consensus in some circles of the evangelical community. In view of this kind of mishandling of the text,

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[1] e. e. cummings, "No Man If Men are Gods," in *The New Pocket Anthology of American Verse* (ed. O. Williams; rev. ed.; New York: Washington Square, 1972) 97.

[2] See e.g. H. F. Lazenby, "The Image of God: Masculine, Feminine, or Neuter?", *JETS* 30 (1987) 63-70.

[3] T. Reid *et al.*, *Seduction? A Biblical Response* (New Wilmington: SonRise, 1986) 26. See D. Hunt and T. A. McMahon, *The Seduction of Christianity* (Eugene: Harvest House, 1985).

careful exegesis of John 10:34-36 with special consideration of the "you are gods" citation is warranted.

I. CHRIST AND MAN IN JOHN'S GOSPEL

We will begin by briefly contrasting some aspects of the nature of Christ and the nature of man as presented in the fourth gospel in order to set the message of 10:34-36 in a broader framework of Johannine thought.

John's first verse points to the divine nature of the *Logos*: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." All that follows in the gospel helps to explain how the invisible God is encountered by men and women in and through the one whom he has sent. No one has ever seen God (1:18), for God is spirit (4:24). Yet Jesus says, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (14:9b), and "When [anyone] looks at me, he sees the one who sent me" (12:45). Furthermore Jesus tells his disciples: "The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father living in me, who is doing his work" (14:10b). C. K. Barrett correctly perceives that in the fourth gospel "the term *God* may point either to the invisible Father who is revealed, or to the visible Son who reveals him, for John is at pains to point out that the revealer is himself God."[4] No man but Jesus could ever fulfill this role as the revealer of God. He, and only he, is God made known among men.[5]

John 1:1 also points to Jesus' preexistence as the *Logos*: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God." While he became (*egeneto*) "flesh" at a specific point in time (1:14), the Word already was (*ēn*) in the beginning of time as we know it. Along the same lines Jesus makes an astounding claim to his Jewish antagonists in 8:58: "Before Abraham came into existence, I am." The sacred name of the God of Israel seems to underlie this claim, and in any case the attribute of preexistence is clearly emphasized. But even more is implied here. The contrast between the verbs *genesthai* (aorist) as applied to Abraham and *eimi* (present) as applied to Christ is striking. C. H. Dodd puts it this way:

> The implication is that Jesus does not stand within the temporal series of great men, beginning with Abraham and continuing through the succession of the prophets, so as to be compared with them. His claim is not that He is the greatest of the prophets, or even greater than Abraham himself. *He belongs to a different order of being.* The verb *genesthai* is not applicable to the Son of God at all. He stands outside the range of temporal relations.[6]

As great as Abraham was in God's purposes, he was only human and thus inferior to the eternal Son of God.

[4] C. K. Barrett, "Christocentric or Theocentric? Observations on the Theological Method of the Fourth Gospel," in *Essays on John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982) 8.

[5] With a different point in mind, Barrett (ibid. 12) says of Jesus, "He is *Deus revelatus*; not the whole abyss of Godhead, but God known."

[6] C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1985 [1953]) 261 (italics mine).

And who but the sinless Son of God could issue the challenge of John 8:46, in which Jesus asks his accusers: "Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?" Throughout the fourth gospel human beings are viewed as darkness-dwellers in desperate need of the light of Christ so that they might not remain condemned to God's wrath because of their sinful deeds (3:18-21). Jesus did not entrust himself to anyone, according to 2:24-25, because he knew what was in man, and it was not good. Through faith in the Messiah a person may gain his spiritual sight, but only as he acknowledges his sinful condition. The Messiah himself says, "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your sin remains" (9:41). Jesus' challenge to those who would stone the woman caught in adultery went unanswered then as it would today. The world has yet to see a human hand unstained by the blood of sin to cast that first stone.

In faith-relationship with Christ, human beings may share his life, his light, and even his glory (17:22). But all these flow from him to them, as vital nutrients from the vine to the branches (15:1-17). As the branch cannot sustain itself apart from the vine, neither can anyone sustain his spiritual life apart from the life-giving Savior. Although the Father "has granted the Son to have life in himself" (5:26), sinful people are not autonomous but eternally dependent on Christ for their very life.

We might picture the relationship of the Father, Jesus, and Jesus' disciples in the fourth gospel as three circles positioned one under the other.[7] The top circle represents the Father's nature and intersects the circle directly underneath, which represents Jesus' nature. That area of intersection is the basis for Jesus' statement in 10:30 ("I and the Father are one") and his other claims to deity in the gospel. The bottom circle represents the disciples' nature. The disciples' circle intersects Jesus' circle without intersecting the top circle. "I know my sheep and my sheep know me," proclaims the Good Shepherd, "just as the Father knows me and I know the Father" (10:14-15). This is not to say that the sheep do not know the Father, but they only know him through the one whom he has sent. Jesus (or *allos paraklētos*, the Holy Spirit) will be "in" the disciples and they "in him" (14:20; 15:4). He is the mediator between the Father and the disciples. Apart from Jesus they can do nothing (15:5).

Thus if this somewhat crude representation be accepted the disciples do not partake of the nature of the Father in the same way Jesus does. His nature uniquely intersects the Father's in a way that no man's ever could. The disciples' nature "intersects" that of Jesus, the God-man, and thereby they partake of the life of the Father through the Son. Along the same lines James Dunn states:

> There is still a sense that the Son's relationship with the Father is something that can be shared by his disciples. They too can be said to be "sent into the world" (17.18; 20.21); they too can abide in the Father and he in

[7] R. Kysar has a similar diagram in *John: The Maverick Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1976) 101.

> them (14.23; 17.21; I John 2.24; 4.15; 5.20). But here too *a clear qualitative distinction* is present in the Johannine writings as nowhere else: for one thing Jesus is the "only begotten," the "unique" Son of God . . . and for another the Johannines make a consistent distinction between Jesus the Son (*huios*) and believers who are exclusively "children of God." . . . Unlike other NT writers John cannot think of Jesus as elder brother, first-born in the eschatological family; . . . his sonship is of a wholly different order.[8]

II. CHRIST AND "THE JEWS" IN JOHN 10

"The Jews" is a slippery and controversial term as employed in John's gospel. At the risk of cutting too simply through the red tape of much scholarly discussion,[9] we take this expression to mean those Jews (especially leaders) who consistently and (eventually) vehemently opposed Jesus' ministry. John 10:22–39 deals with the unbelief of "the Jews" and their increasing antagonism toward Jesus. This section is tied to 10:1–21 through the continued use of the shepherd/sheep metaphor: "The Jews" do not believe because they are not among his sheep and therefore do not hear his voice. He has already told them what they want to know if only they have ears to hear (vv. 24–26). What they do hear clearly enough are Jesus' claims concerning his relationship to the Father. He does miracles in the Father's name (v. 25), and the sheep are secure in Jesus' hand because they are secure in the Father's hand (vv. 28–29). The last straw for Jesus' audience is the explicit statement of what is implied in these claims: "I and the Father are one" (v. 30).

The reply of "the Jews" indicates that they consider this statement tantamount to a claim of deity. It follows (in the gospel account, though not necessarily according to rabbinic sources[10]) that Jesus is guilty of blasphemy and worthy of death by stoning. Jesus does not then seek to deny the basis of the charge but rather to legitimize his right to such a claim based on the law[11] of his accusers. His quotation of Ps 82:6 (LXX 81:6) focuses on the term "gods." If the unjust judges addressed in the Psalm can be called "gods" because they received the word of God, how much more can the title "Son of God" (with its implications of divinity) be legitimately applied to the one who is the Word of God incarnate? Can we possibly miss the theological import of *Logos* in v. 35 at this point in view of its function in John's gospel as a whole?

[8] J. D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980) 57–58 (italics his).

[9] On which see e.g. R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John, I–XII* (AB 29; Garden City: Doubleday, 1966) lxx–lxxv; *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist, 1979) 40–43. Certainly "the Jews" are to some extent stereotypical for John of all who refuse to come to Jesus by faith, as Brown and others point out.

[10] *m. Sanh.* 7:5 deals with those who blaspheme: They are to be stoned if they use "the Name" (*haššēm*).

[11] Here *nomos* is broad enough to encompass the Writings, which begin with the Psalms.

III. EXEGETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Three exegetical considerations especially warrant our attention in this passage.

First, Jesus is quoting from Ps 82:6 in which unjust judges of Israel are reprimanded for their irresponsible, less-than-godly conduct. Ancient and recent investigations of Psalm 82 have made us aware that *ʾĕlōhîm* in vv. 1, 6 may not refer to human judges at all. Pagan gods,[12] angels,[13] and other suggestions have been defended as better referents for the term. For our purposes, however, it is sufficient to note that the context in John 10 involves a contrast between man and God (especially evident in v. 33) and that Jesus, as John presents him here, puts the quote from Psalm 82 into service in this context. Thus it seems certain that, as employed in John 10, the term *theoi* quoted from Psalm 82 refers to men. This would accord well with the majority rabbinic view that the Psalm was addressed to Israel just after they had received the law,[14] which is most likely behind its use in John 10 as A. T. Hanson has suggested.[15]

In what sense then are these unjust judges addressed as "gods" in the Psalm? According to Jesus in John 10:35, the judges were those to whom *ho logos tou theou egeneto*—that is, they had been entrusted with the oracles of God as part of a divine call to judge Israel.[16] This terminology has its roots in the narrative of Exod 21:6; 22:8-9, in which the judges (*ʾĕlōhîm*) of Israel have authority to render decisions in civil law cases. Clearly, authority and responsibility concerning God's revealed purposes are at stake when *ʾĕlōhîm* is used of these leaders. It is the former of these that men are most eager to attain but the latter that God prizes more highly.

Psalm 82 expresses the failure of Israel's judges to wield their authority in keeping with God's standards of justice. They have been especially lax in the area of God's greatest concern, the welfare of the poor and needy. "How long will you defend the unjust and show partiality to the wicked? Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed. Rescue the weak and needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked" (vv. 2-4). By their actions they have proven themselves to be only human after all. The rebuke they receive is well founded: "I said, 'You are "gods"; you are all sons of the Most High.' But you will die like mere men; you will fall like any other ruler" (vv. 6-7). In fact the Psalm concludes by affirming that only God can truly judge by

[12] See e.g. R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971) 389 n. 2.

[13] See e.g. J. A. Emerton, "Some New Testament Notes," *JTS* 11 (1960) 329-332; "Melchizedek and the Gods: Fresh Evidence for the Jewish Background of John X.34-36," *JTS* 17 (1966) 399-401.

[14] Str-B, 2. 543.

[15] A. T. Hanson, "John's Citation of Psalm LXXXII," *NTS* 11 (1964-65) 160.

[16] Cf. Brown, *Gospel* 403.

his righteous standards. The lessons of Israel's history teach us that men prove unworthy bearers of the title "god."

It is worth noting that the quote in John 10:34 does not continue so as to include vv. 6b-7 of the Psalm. Dodd has correctly emphasized that the whole of v. 6 is essential to Jesus' argument.[17] We would argue that v. 7 should also be seen lurking behind Jesus' words here. It is linked with v. 6 in the Hebrew text (v. 7 begins with *ʾākēn*) and is part and parcel of the message of the Psalm. If Jesus' hearers were familiar with Psalm 82 it seems likely that their thoughts would have continued through v. 7, even though the quote in John does not.

Second, Jesus is addressing antagonistic "Jews" and answering the charge that he, "a mere man," claims to be God. If the preceding analysis is correct, Psalm 82 presents an inviting text for Jesus' answer to his antagonists. They suppose themselves heirs to the sacred authority and responsibility to guard and interpret the same law given to the judges of Israel. Yet they also have failed to act righteously in using this authority. In Matthew 23 Jesus says that the teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in "Moses' seat" but fail to administer justice fairly. Furthermore, he adds, they love the title "rabbi" for themselves. But men should not seek out titles like "master," "father" and "teacher," for such seeking demonstrates pride. Instead they should serve in humility: "For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted" (Matt 23:12).

"The Jews" confronting Jesus in John 10 are hardly candidates for the title *ʾĕlōhîm* any more than the unjust judges of Psalm 82 proved to be. In fact Jesus does not direct the "you are gods" address to his audience. Instead he refers them back to the Psalm and reminds them that their Scriptures, which cannot be broken, contain this address to (mere) men.

Christ is more than a man and has so demonstrated through his words and deeds. In this same passage in John he appeals to his miracles as signs of his identity, saying that "even if you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father" (10:38). Since miracles have not convinced his opponents he appeals to the law (i.e. the Scriptures) they regard as sacred. In pointing out the address to men as *ʾĕlōhîm*, Jesus sets up his *qal wāḥōmer* argument without commenting further on Psalm 82. It is sufficient for him to cite a passage familiar to his hearers that ties in with the issue at hand and to move on to his main point.

Third, Jesus' argumentation is *qal wāḥōmer*: He cites Ps 82:6 as applied to (mere) men in order to drive home the "how much more" end of the argument regarding his legitimate claim to deity. From John's perspective the Word of God that had come to Israel and made them worthy of the designation *ʾĕlōhîm* was supremely manifested in the flesh in Christ (John 1:14; cf. Heb 1:1-2), who existed with the Father as the

[17] Dodd, *Interpretation* 271 n. 3.

Logos in the beginning. In this sense Hanson is correct when he expresses the argument in these terms:

> If to be addressed by the pre-existent Word justifies men in being called gods, indirect and mediated though that address was . . . , far more are we justified in applying the title Son of God to the human bearer of the pre-existent Word, sanctified and sent by the Father as he was, in unmediated and direct presence.[18]

The reason Jesus cites Psalm 82 is not to demonstrate that men are "gods." As we have seen above, this Psalm provides no support for such a claim. Instead he is answering the charge put to him concerning his own identity. He is not expounding on the nature of man but on the nature of God's Son, who is both God and man. He alone among men is worthy to bear the titles of deity and the names of the God of Israel.

IV. CONCLUSION

John 10:34-36 cannot be used to support the claim that believers or any human beings are gods. It is clear that the intent of this passage is to teach about the person of Christ. Only Jesus' deity is emphasized, and the "you are gods" citation is simply part of the means to that end. Jesus' audience in this setting consists of men who do not believe the Son and who therefore do not know the Father. Far from being themselves "gods," they actively oppose the one true God and his purposes.

e. e. cummings perceived the more universal problem that misappropriation of the "you are gods" citation presents: If men are "gods," then "man" has ceased to be. Indeed, man has in that case become what the deceiver intended in the garden: "a fiend, if fiends speak truth."

[18] Hanson, "John's Citation" 161.