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A table of contents for *Irish Biblical Studies* can be found here:

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**'MAKING HIMSELF EQUAL WITH GOD' (JOHN 5.17-18): THE ALLEGED CHALLENGE TO JEWISH MONOTHEISM IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL**

*Rev. Professor J.C. O'Neill*

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Professor Dunn and Dr Casey are united in putting around again the old story that John's Gospel marks a deep and irreconcilable break with Jewish monotheism. Dunn: "...it was precisely the language of pre-existence and conception of incarnation in reference to Jesus which was seen by Jewish opposition as a threat to the unity of God and so as the first real breach (perceived as such) with the Jewish monotheistic axiom."<sup>1</sup> Casey: "In the fourth Gospel, this final step of confessing the deity of Jesus is verifiable at the point where members of the Johannine community were thrown out of the synagogue... Jewish people who remained in the Jewish community could not hail Jesus as God because this would infringe Jewish monotheism."<sup>2</sup> Casey, while insisting that "'the Jews' ... were bound to perceive the [Johannine] community's faith as not monotheistic",<sup>3</sup> does concede that the Johannine community "could perceive itself as having transformed Jewish belief" and

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<sup>1</sup> James D.G. Dunn, "Why 'Incarnation'?: A Review of Recent New Testament Scholarship", in *Crossing the Boundaries: Essays in Biblical Interpretation in Honour of Michael D. Goulder*, ed. Stanley E. Porter, Paul Joyce and David E. Orton, (Leiden, Brill, 1994), pp. 235-256 at p. 253.

<sup>2</sup> P.M. Casey, *From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God: The Origins and Development of New Testament Christology*. The Edward Cadbury Lectures at the University of Birmingham, 1985-86. (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co; Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1991), p. 158.

<sup>3</sup> Casey, *From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God*, p. 37.

draws attention to a "subordinationist trend" (John 5.19,22-23,30).<sup>4</sup>

My purpose is to show that there is no good evidence in John's Gospel itself that Jesus' opponents thought that he was infringing Jewish monotheism. Jews who were excluded from the synagogue were excluded because they confessed that Jesus was the Messiah, not because they were seen to infringe monotheism, according to the gloss to John 9.22, and that late gloss is an accurate account of the matter at issue, although, as we shall see, there were excellent reasons, according to Jewish law, why the verdict seemed just.

I begin with the verses that are supposed to offer the greatest support to the argument I am questioning, John 5.17-18.

In John 5.18 we seem to have an explicit statement that Jesus had infringed Jewish monotheism. We must begin by asking to what extent the words of Jesus in John 5.17 justify the charge reported as having been made by "the Jews" in John 5.18 that Jesus had made himself equal with God. The charge does not obviously rest on the claim that God was his Father, although we must return to that claim later. The charge fairly clearly rests on the claim to act in the present hour, presumably an hour during the sabbath, because the Father had acted first up to this very hour on the sabbath. Jesus is justifying his action because it is following the action of the Father. The trouble is that his justification of the crime, if it be a crime, does not obviously fall under the criminal heading of making oneself equal with God. Of course Jesus is claiming God's authority for what he has done; he claims that he has acted as he did act because God acted in the same way first. But how does that make him equal with God? If anyone does a good deed which invites the rather superficial condemnation of their neighbours and they then justify that good deed, not only on the ground that God commanded the doing of that good deed but also on the ground that God suggested that good deed to their conscience and empowered them with the necessary courage and skill to do

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<sup>4</sup> Casey, *From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God*, pp. 37-38; see also pp. 23-25, 34-38, 156-159.

the good deed, how does that justification fall foul of the accusation that they are making themselves equal with God? Are they not being humble in acknowledging their dependence on God's grace and God's empowering? There is no contradiction between issuing the command, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" and following that command with the information that "it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure" (Phil 2.12-13). Bultmann rightly points out, referring to Odeberg, that John 5.19, which emphasises the dependence of the Son on the Father, follows on happily from John 5.17. Bultmann nevertheless reads John 5.18 as showing a crass misunderstanding of John 5.17 on the side of "the Jews": "They are only able to understand being equal with God as being independent of God, while for Jesus being equal with God means just the opposite, as 5.19 immediately brings out."<sup>5</sup> The trouble is that John 5.17 provides not the slightest basis for saying that Jesus claimed to be independent of God. The words in 5.17 are not the words of someone who complacently speaks as God and not man, who refuses to give God the glory (cf. Acts 12.21-23). On the contrary, in 5.17 Jesus ascribes all glory to the Father. John 5.17 does not obviously fall foul of the prohibition against making oneself equal with God, whatever that prohibition may mean.

Verse 17 contains the cause of another offence in the eyes of "the Jews" as reported in verse 18: the offence of saying that God was his own Father. Clearly John 5.17 provides good evidence that Jesus did do what he was charged with doing; by saying "my" Father he was plainly going beyond the limits of what any Jew could do who joined with his fellow-Jews in calling the Lord "My father" and in not turning away from him (Jer 3.19; cf. 3.4; Isa 63.16). Jesus must have been claiming to be the

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<sup>5</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes*, Fascicle 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1938); English trans. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971); Odeberg, *The Fourth Gospel* (Uppsala, 1929), pp. 203-4.

special Son of the Father, the Messiah, as Bultmann sees.<sup>6</sup> Bultmann thought that the very use of the term Son of God showed that the words came from the later Hellenistic Church and could not refer to controversies anchored in the time of Jesus<sup>7</sup>. We now have good evidence that "Son of God" was a contemporary title for the Messiah, based on 2 Sam 7.14 and Psalm 2 (4Q 246; 1QSa 2.11).<sup>8</sup> But if "Son of God" was an accepted title for the Messiah, the use of the term in itself could

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<sup>6</sup> Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes*.

<sup>7</sup> Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes*, p.64 note 3; note to John 1.34.

<sup>8</sup> See R.H. Eisenman and M.O.Wise, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Uncovered: The First Complete Translation and Interpretation of 50 Key Documents Withheld for Over 35 Years* (Shaftesbury: Element, 1992), p.70; J.A. Fitzmyer, *A Wandering Aramean: Collected Aramaic Essays*, SBLMS 25 (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979), pp. 85-113; *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, AB (Garden City: Doubleday, 1981), 347-8; "4Q246: The 'Son of God' Document from Qumran", *Bib* 74 (1993), 153-174; É. Puech, "Fragment d'une Apocalypse en Araméen (4Q246 = pseudo-Dan) et le 'Royaume de Dieu'", *RB* 99 (1992), 98-131; J.J. Collins, "The *Son of God* Text from Qumran", in *From Jesus to John: Essays on Jesus and New Testament Christology in Honour of Marinus de Jonge* ed. M.C. De Boer, JSNTSup 84 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), pp. 65-82; Craig A. Evans, "The Recently Published Dead Sea Scrolls and the Historical Jesus", Appendix, *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research*, ed. Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans, New Testament Tools and Studies XIX (Leiden: Brill), pp.547-565 at pp. 549-551.

not be an offence. A Jew would be able to say without offence that no one knows the Father save the Son; this would be to affirm that the only way to approach God in true worship would be by turning to the Messiah as mediator of prayers and requests ("Kiss the Son [Aramaic] lest he be angry" [Ps 2.12]).

What can Jesus' offence in making God his own Father have consisted of? If the offence was not in employing the terminology, the offence must rest in the claim that God was his Father in this special sense and that he was the Messiah.

This conclusion is strengthened when we turn to two other passages in John's Gospel that employ similar terminology. In John 19.7 the Jewish authorities say to Pilate, "We have a law, and by our law he ought to die, because he made himself the Son of God". Once again, the charge cannot lie in the bare use of the terminology "Son of God", for that was acceptable as a way of describing the Messiah. The law in question must hinge on the self-ascription of the title. In John 19.21 the chief priests said to Pilate, "Write not, The King of the Jews; but that he said, I am King of the Jews". This is hardly a realistic scene, since Pilate no more than the highpriests thought that Jesus really was King of the Jews. It must be that the compiler of our narrative had a tradition that the charge against Jesus in the eyes of the Jewish authorities was that he had stated that he was the Son of God. This tradition has found an imaginative, but unreal, setting in a message to Pilate. The offence consisted in his having claimed in so many words to be King of the Jews or Messiah (for the Davidic Messiah is obviously a King).

If the charge that Jesus made God his own Father in the messianic sense hinged on the ascription of that honour to himself, what light does that conclusion throw on the meaning of the last clause, "making himself equal with God"? We are now in a position to see that Jesus is not being charged with being equal with God in all respects but with making himself equal with God in the one respect, in respect of claiming that he was the Messiah. That was a prerogative that the Father had reserved to himself. The Father, it was assumed, did have a Son, the Messiah. Human beings were allowed to speculate about whether John the Baptist or Jesus was that Messiah, but no

human being was allowed to say that he was himself the Messiah. To do so would be to usurp the Father's prerogative and to arrogate to oneself equality with the Father in a prohibited respect.

We may paraphrase John 5.18 as follows: "Therefore the Jewish authorities sought all the more to put him to death as an offender against the Law, not only because he broke the sabbath, a sign in a messianic pretender that he was an agent of the Man of Sin, despite all the positive things like healing that he did in parody of the true Messiah (2 Thess 2.3,9,10), but also because he claimed to be the Son of God by saying that God was his own Father, so making himself equal with God by doing what God had reserved for himself to do and would not allow to the Messiah." Just as no one knows and therefore no one may claim to speak with absolute authority of the day or of the hour of the coming judgment, not even the angels in heaven nor even the Son, so no one may claim to know and to speak with absolute authority about the identity of the Messiah, not even the angels in heaven nor even the Messiah himself (Matt 24.36; Mark 13.32). Prophets like John the Baptist and all lesser mortals may have a shot at identifying the Messiah from among possible candidates because they are always subject to the possibility that they are false prophets, and they also know that they could be wrong, but the Messiah would be arrogating such great power to himself if he were allowed to disclose what he knew, and the danger of imposters would be so high, that God has reserved the power to himself alone. This, at least, is the legal ruling that would explain the otherwise dark saying in John 5.18, and much else about the story of Jesus.

In John 10 Jesus is portrayed as making a statement that prompts his hearers to stone him for blasphemy. In 10.30 he says, "I and the Father are one". This statement is no more a claim to independence of God than John 5.17. It simply asserts the speaker's complete unity of purpose with the Father. This again is more than a general claim anyone who served God could make, and the explicit mention of The Father seems to imply that the speaker is The Son. The reference is possibly to Psalm 40.6, from a Psalm of David, read in a messianic sense (cf. Heb 10.9).

We are now in a position to know that the terminology was current in the days of Jesus where Son of God was a description of the Messiah. That means that the Jewish justification for the impulse to stone Jesus as a blasphemer cannot rest on the bare use of the terminology: anyone who was the Messiah would, ipso facto, be the Son of God. Yet they charge him with blasphemy on the grounds that "You, being a man, make yourself God" (John 10.33). What can that mean?

Jesus is next shown as accepting the charge that he has made himself God but as justifying himself on two grounds: that God himself called human beings "gods" (Ps 81.6-7) and that, if God has sanctified someone and sent him into the world, that person cannot be blaspheming to say, I am God's Son (John 10.34-36).

The first defence in John 10.34 must have originally been based on a messianic reading of Psalm 82: The Messiah who judges the gods is spoken of as "God". This meaning has been obscured by a gloss in 10.35 which tries to link 10.34 with 10.36. The words in 10.35, "If God so spoke to those (men in Psalm 81) to whom the word of God came", explicitly reads Psalm 86 in the quite traditional way as concerning the judgment of human beings in authority. The argument then becomes, If God can call lots of people "gods", what is blasphemous about anyone calling himself God? This argument is no defence, and neither Jesus' opponents nor Jesus himself could have thought it bore on the case in hand. The words that produce this nonsense (but serve to link 10.34 and 10.36) are omitted in the Syriac Sinaiticus and should be regarded as the failed attempt of a scribe to link up two originally distinct sayings. Note that the Chester Beatty Papyrus and Cyprian omit some of the words in question cited above.

Taken by itself, John 10.34 is a proof-text for the argument that the Son of God is rightly called "God". It does not bear more than indirectly on the matter in hand, which is whether or not Jesus made a claim that was blasphemous. A collector had 10.34 to hand, and inserted it where (in a very general sense) it belonged. The original argument was as follows. The Messiah will judge the nations, called "gods" in Psalm 82.6. But if the



speaker is the Messiah, that speaker is called "God" earlier in the Psalm: "God standeth in the congregation of the mighty; he judgeth among the gods". The messianic import of the psalm is made clear by the last verse: "Arise, O God, judge the earth: for thou shalt inherit all nations [according the messianic prophecy, Ps 2.8]." This exegesis of the Psalm might appear fantastic to us, did we not have a precisely similar use of the Psalm in 11QMelch. In line 10, David is said to have spoken about Melchizedek in the opening words of Psalm 82. Then in line 11 the words of Psalm 7.7b,8 are applied to Melchizedek: "Return thou on high; God shall judge the nations." Finally in line 18 he is called the Messiah of the Spirit.<sup>9</sup> But, I repeat, the thoroughly Jewish argument of John 10.34 did not originally bear on the matter in hand, Jesus' defence against the charge of blasphemy. The argument proved that the Messiah could, according to scripture, be called "God", not that Jesus was committing blasphemy by calling himself the Messiah.

By removing the senseless gloss from the beginning of John 10.35, we are now in a position to take John 10.36 on its own. There are small signs here, too, that later scribes have tailored a saying more neatly into its present setting than was originally the case. Our texts read: "You [Jews] say that you [Jesus] blaspheme because I [Jesus] said, I am the Son of God". The less personal readings of "*he* blasphemes" (Tatian; Old Latin a b ff<sup>2</sup> l r) and "*he* said" (472) are more likely to be original. So we translate: "The one whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, you say that he blasphemes because he says, I am the Son of God" (John 10.36).

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<sup>9</sup> See J.A. Emerton, "Some New Testament Notes. 1. The interpretation of Psalm lxxxii in John x", *JTS* n.s. 11 (1960), 329-32; M. de Jonge and A.S. van der Woude, "11Q Melchizedek and the New Testament, *NTS* 12 (1965-66), 301-326 at 312-4; J.A. Emerton, "Melchizedek and the Gods: Fresh Evidence for the Jewish Background of John X. 34-36", *JTS* n.s. 17 (1966), 399-401.

This is a curious defence. Jesus as defendant assumes that the case against him is that he said, "I am the Son of God". As I have already argued, that is a plausible interpretation of the statement in 10.30, "I and the Father are one". Jesus then goes on to argue that the Jews are not justified in making this charge if the speaker is in fact the one sanctified and sent by the Father. We can see how this might have been an argument that appealed to the compiler of the Gospel, but it does nothing to meet the case here, because here the dispute is precisely over whether or not Jesus is truly sanctified and sent into the world by the Father. The charge against him must be that, because he has dared to say that he is the Messiah, he cannot be. I suppose the defence could be that the one truly sanctified and sent into the world by the Father can say what he likes; but then there would be little point in Jesus' bothering to offer any defence if he, by definition, could not be tried. Our earlier investigations have made it likely that the charge of saying in so many words that he was the Messiah was the Jewish charge of blasphemy which Jesus had to face. John 10.36 turns out to be an accurate statement of what Jesus was tried for, made by a believer in his status as the one sanctified and sent into the world by God. It can hardly have been part of Jesus' own defence against the charge of blasphemy.

John's Gospel, on close examination, does not offer any evidence that the bone of contention between Christians and Jews was the abstract issue of monotheism. The Gospel does state that Jesus was the Word of God incarnate, and that this Word was God. Jesus appears as making statements such as "Before Abraham was, I am" (John 8.58) and "I and the Father are one" (John 10.30), but the theology of God expressed by such statements is not the subject of dispute; the dispute is always about whether Jesus committed blasphemy by claiming to be the Son of God, the Messiah. Our defective knowledge of Judaism tricked us into thinking that the theology was something made up by the church, but we now know better and need to adjust our understanding of John's Gospel accordingly. John's Gospel shows us Jews disputing with one another about whether or not Jesus was the Messiah, but John's Gospel assumes that whoever is the Messiah would be called God's Son, would have existed

before Abraham did, would be at one with the Father, and could be called "Lord" and "God".

If the charge of blasphemy depended on the messianic claimant's saying "I am the Messiah", the Jesus of John's Gospel is guilty. However, ever since the pioneering work of Christian Hermann Weisse,<sup>10</sup> we have known that the revelatory discourses in John's Gospel, from which the clear claims to be the Son of God are drawn, are not the words of the historical Jesus. The historical Jesus was curiously silent about whom he was, and Origen noted that even John's Gospel itself bears witness to that fact. In answering Celsus, Origen wrote, "We may also notice that it was a habit of Jesus everywhere to avoid speaking about himself. That is why he said: 'If I speak of myself, my witness is not true' (John 5.31). And since he avoided speaking about himself, and wanted to show that he was Christ rather by his deeds than by his talk, on this account the Jews say to him: 'If thou art the Christ tell us plainly' (John 10.24)."<sup>11</sup> Bultmann rightly saw the origin of the revelatory discourses as lying behind the birth of Jesus, but he nevertheless ascribes some revelatory sayings to the compiler of the Gospel. All attempts to distinguish stylistically between the work of the compiler and the revelatory discourse source have failed.<sup>12</sup> On the contrary, close

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<sup>10</sup> *Die Evangelienfrage in ihrem gegenwärtigen Stadium*, (Leipzig, 1856). He argued that John's Gospel was based on a similar historical foundation to the other Gospels, but it contained also a series of discourses from a source: John 1:1-5, 9-14, 16, 18; 3:13-21, 31-36; 5:19-27 minus part of 19:20 and the whole of 24. Since Jesus and John the Baptist and the Evangelist adopt the same style, this material is separate and distinctive.

<sup>11</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.48, trans. H. Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), p. 45.

<sup>12</sup> See Eugen Ruckstuhl, *Die literarische Einheit des Johannesevangeliums. Der gegenwärtige Stand der*

examination of the verses that are claimed to be the work of the evangelist as a creative theologian reveals that the alleged creative material is drawn from the ancient traditions. For example, John 3:31-36 is a series of revelatory statements, in the style of the Prologue and of discourses of Jesus, here ascribed to John the Baptist. That series of statements is only superficially related to the words of John the Baptist that are cited immediately before. Had the revelatory material of 3.31-36 been specially written by the alleged theologian, we should expect to find a close fit between text and commentary. On examination we cannot but observe that the spatial metaphor of John 3.30, "He must increase and I must decrease", which implies that John sees himself as the forerunner of the Messiah, is in no way related to the spatial imagery of John 3.31-36, where the one from above is opposed to the one from the earth: "He who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth is of the earth and speaks from the earth". This argues for a compiler, not a creative author; the compiler possessed traditions about John the Baptist and a superficially similar tradition, also using spatial imagery, about the opposition between the heavenly man and the man from the earth. He simply put them down, side by side. The compilers of the great "scenes" in John's Gospel (like the Woman at the Well, the Man Born Blind, the Raising of Lazarus) did not lack artistic ability, but it was artistic ability governed by the strict rule that the revelatory words, whatever their source, had to be respected as revelation and used as they stood.<sup>132</sup> The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which contain more examples of the same sort of material, and

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*einschlägigen Forschungen*, Studia Friburgensia, new series, 3 (Freiburg in der Schweiz: Paulus Verlag, 1951).

<sup>13</sup> See J.C. O'Neill, "John 13.10 Again", *Revue Biblique* 101 (1994), where I argue that John 13.6-11 is made up of four sayings plus incidents that were originally independent of one another, and a comment.

the growing recognition that the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs and the Syriac Odes of Solomon are almost totally free of Christian glosses and interpolations enable us to be more confident in ascribing the whole of the revelatory discourse material to Jewish sectaries before Jesus. The origin of much of the material must have been in the mystical experiences of men who went to lonely places, like John of Patmos, and saw the heavenly Son of Man sitting on his throne and saying things like, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last" (Rev 1:8; 21:6; 22:13).

John's Gospel assumes a living Jewish tradition in which the Messiah is God, alongside the Father, a tradition in no way challenging or affecting the fundamental dogma that "God is one". The disputes about blasphemy in that Gospel are not disputes about a supposed Christian threat to monotheism but are disputes about whether or not Jesus was guilty of the blasphemy of calling himself the Messiah. The curious conclusion to which we are driven is that, according to the text of the Gospel, he was guilty, but according to the historical records, some of which are preserved in the Gospel itself, he was not guilty, because he steadfastly refused to claim in so many words to be the Son of God.

J. C. O'Neill.