

THE BLASPHEMY OF JESUS

The popular belief that Jesus was crucified for blasphemy because he was claiming to be co-equal with “God” needs re-evaluation. Before agreeing with this interpretation we must fully comprehend the implications that Jesus was condemned and executed on the basis of *false* accusations made by *false* witnesses. Do we unwittingly find ourselves in the camp of the hostile high priest Ananias and the Sanhedrin who, according to the popular belief, accused Jesus of claiming to be God? Even if this was their charge will we unreservedly believe the enemies of Christ who again and again completely misunderstood Jesus and his message? Caution should be our rule here, surely?

Matthew states the matter with clarity:- “The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for *false* evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. But they did not find any, though many *false* witnesses came forward” (Matt. 26:59-60).

In fact, Luke tells us that it was not Jesus who was blaspheming, but his enemies! “And *they* were saying many other things against Him, *blaspheming*” (Luke 22:65). So, it was *they* who blasphemed, not Jesus. The NT witness is that it was the Jewish High Priest, the chief priests, the Jewish Sanhedrin and the ones who were holding him in custody by their false allegations who were the ones guilty of blasphemy. This is the exact opposite of what we are urged to believe! Just because *they* said he blasphemed did not make it so. If language means anything Jesus was not the one guilty of blasphemy. “They” --- that is, the enemies

of Jesus ---were the blasphemers! One of the criminals crucified next to Jesus also is said to have blasphemed when he hurled abuse at Jesus (*eblasphemei*, Lk. 23:39). Were these blasphemers guilty of denying Christ was God? Hardly.

Before looking closer at the trial of Jesus and his alleged blasphemy, let's take a brief excursus and note that there are other occasions in the NT where blasphemy occurred. By looking at these references we will discover how the NT writers understood blasphemy in their own culture and day. Always a good place to begin when seeking sound exegesis!

The first occasion in the Gospels where Jesus is accused of blasphemy is in Mark 2 where he heals the paralytic who was let down through the roof. When Jesus pronounces the paralytic healed and forgiven the scribes begin to reason, "Why does this man speak that way? He is blaspheming; who can forgive sins but God alone" (Mk. 2:7)? If Mark's Greek tense conveys accurately the force of Jesus' words, he was saying that *at that very moment* the paralytic man's sins were being forgiven. Naturally these words sent a wave a shock through that audience of theologians. In their minds this amounted to blasphemy for Jesus was usurping an authority that was God's prerogative alone. Modern theologians by and large tend to agree that here Jesus was claiming equality with God which would amount to blasphemy were he not in fact co-equal with God.

However, a little attention to the detail of the story will reveal that Jesus is not claiming Deity. He is rather claiming

“authority”. He says, “But that you may know that *the Son of Man has authority* on earth to forgive sins ...”(v.10).

Matthew’s parallel account is that once the people saw Jesus heal the paralytic, “they were filled with awe, and glorified God, Who *had given such authority to men*” (Matt. 9:8). We note that Jesus is claiming to be “the Son of Man”, that is, the human Messiah with a God-given authority to pronounce forgiveness of sins. We recall that not too much later Jesus invests other men --- his apostles --- with the same authority to forgive sins: “If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained.” (John 20:23). If only God can forgive sins, then God and Jesus *and the apostles* are on the same logic all God! (In Ephesians 4:32 and Colossians 3:13 Christians themselves are commanded to forgive one another.) Rather than siding with the scribes who misunderstood Jesus and his Kingdom mission, and rather than siding with the hostile Pharisees in their hasty criticism of Jesus, I think it would be wise to consider Jesus’ own response to their charge of blasphemy.

Which point leads to our next consideration. I have noted that nearly all cases of blasphemy in the NT concern the haters, the enemies, and the revilers of God. Paul calls himself a blasphemmer before he became a Christian (1 Tim. 1:13). Even though he was a strict Pharisee who kept the Law and thought he loved God, he says he was “a persecutor and a violent aggressor” against God and His Christ. In this case blasphemy certainly did not mean Paul had been denying that Christ was the Second Person in a Divine Trinity before he was converted to Christ. No NT

scholar has ever suggested so.

In Acts 13 the Jews were enraged with jealousy when they saw “the whole city assembled to hear the word of God” being preached by Paul. Luke states it was these enemies of Paul, these Jewish antagonists to Paul’s gospel preaching, who “were blaspheming” (Acts 13:45). The meaning is the enemies of the Gospel were reviling the Christian message before sympathetic Jews and Gentiles, trying to get these prospective Gospel converts to turn away from it in disgust. It is absolutely certain these enemies of the Gospel were not guilty of blasphemy because they did not believe Jesus was God the Son, Second Member of a Trinity. No NT scholar has ever said so.

A little further in the book of Acts whilst Paul and Silas and Timothy were preaching in the synagogue at Corinth the Jews again “resisted and blasphemed” (Acts 18:6). Nobody here suggests these hostile Jews were denying the Deity of Christ. They were however opposing the preaching “that Jesus was the Messiah” (v. 5), the anointed and promised one.

In James 2:7 it is the rich enemies of the Christians who drag the believers before the civil courts who are said to blaspheme “the fair name by which you have been called” (James 2:7). Again, no-one imagines these rich unbelieving heathen were denying that Jesus was the Second Person in a Divine Trinity. The meaning is simply that they were guilty of irreverence towards the Christian gospel and shamefully treating the believers.

A number of references in the book of The Revelation (Rev.

13:6; 16:9, 21) indicate again that it is the enemies of God (both the Anti-Christ Beast and unrepentant sinners) who blaspheme His holy Name. The meaning is they are impiously irreverent and guilty of insults that vilify “God and His tabernacle”. There is no suggestion by any NT commentator these enemies of God are guilty of denying “the full Deity of Christ”.

Indeed, in every example of blasphemy in the NT it is the enemies of God who are the ones guilty of blasphemy. The only possible exception is the case of Hymenaeus and Alexander who apparently once were committed Christian believers, but whom Paul must now deliver over to Satan “so that they may be taught not to blaspheme” (I Tim. 1:20). Were these two suddenly guilty of denying that Jesus was a co-equal member of the Trinity, the so-called God the Son? Again, no NT scholar has suggested such a thing for the context will not entertain such an anachronous idea. It seems these two believers had sinned against their conscience in some way so badly as to bring shipwreck upon their faith. By their sin Hymenaeus and Alexander were guilty of bringing disrepute upon the Christian gospel and injuring the good reputation of the church before the outside world. Their behaviour was inconsistent with their profession. This is termed blasphemy.

Thus, it may be fairly said that in the NT blasphemy is almost exclusively committed by the enemies of God and the Gospel. According to its Bible use-age, blasphemy occurs when (mostly unbelievers) oppose, insult, vilify, curse God and slander the Gospel. In one case for sure, blasphemy occurs when two supposed Christian believers bring shame

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and contempt upon the gospel and the church by their sin. In no case does blasphemy occur when anybody denies that Jesus is God in the flesh.

To accuse Jesus of ever being guilty of this kind of blasphemy is a thought too insulting and foreign to the NT account. But his enemies did not shrink from such calumny. Could it be we have been blind-sided by the strong hand of popular tradition as to completely turn the evidence on its head? Could it be we have so misread the account as to find ourselves on the side of these enemies of Christ? Let's take a deeper look.

When the High Priest tore his clothes saying to the Jewish Sanhedrin, "He has blasphemed!" did he and the Jewish Council really think Jesus was claiming to be God the Son, the Second Person in the Blessed Trinity as later determined by the Councils of Nicea and Chalcedon? Or is there a more logical, reasonable and better contextual and cultural explanation that fits the First Century setting?

It should be obvious that if at his trial Jesus was claiming to be the Almighty God of the OT, God the Son, the Second Person in the Blessed Trinity, there would have been no need for false evidence and false witnesses. The case would have been shut and closed. After all, the Jewish Creed (which Jesus himself endorsed and agreed with as in Mark 12: 28ff) was the fundamental tenet of the OT faith. Their creed stated that YHWH was their God and that He was one Yahweh. Yahweh is the personal Name of this one God. But Jesus was not on trial for not believing this creed. He was not on trial for claiming to be Yahweh.

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Try as they might, they could not concoct a convincing case against Jesus. Therefore it ought to be obvious that Jesus never made such a claim to be the one God YHWH. What they were able to finally succeed in however, was to find a valid case against Jesus by charging him with blasphemy for claiming to be *the Messiah*. The high priest asked Jesus to testify under oath before “the Living God” to “tell us whether you are the Messiah, the Son of God...” (Matt. 26:63).

So, Jesus was asked under oath to declare if he was “the Christ”, that is, the Messiah. Throughout the entire Bible account, both OT & NT, to be the Christ is to be the Anointed One. God needs no-one to anoint Him. God is always the One Who does the anointing.

A careful reading of each of the Gospel accounts will reveal the inter-changeability (that is, the equivalence) of the terms, the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of Man, the King of Israel, and the Son of God. The entire NT testimony is that each of these descriptions of Jesus means the same thing. But let’s just stick to the story of the trial to prove this.

Matthew says that Jesus kept silent before his accusers:

“And the high priest said to him, “I adjure you by the Living God that you tell us whether you are **the Christ, the Son of God**. Jesus said to him, “You have said it yourself; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you shall see **the Son of Man** sitting at the right Hand of Power and coming on the clouds of Heaven.” *Then* the high priest tore his robes, saying, “He has blasphemed! What further need do we have of

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witnesses? Behold, you have heard the blasphemy; what do you think?" They answered and said, "He is deserving of death!" (Matt. 26: 63-66).

In this brief article I am assuming the reader has a fair knowledge of the rich OT background to Israel's hope in the arrival of the prophesied Messiah. I will here only refer to the summary prophecy by Daniel. Remember Daniel is written against the background of the great world empires which one after another conquered and ruled Israel.

Throughout that book a number of prophetic dreams and inspired interpretations reveal the political future of Israel.

In Daniel chapter 7 the prophet sees an evil person "uttering great boasts" against the God of Heaven. As the prophet continues to look, he sees the heavenly Court being set up. The God of Israel (here called the Ancient of Days) sits on His throne. He is surrounded by "clouds" that is, myriads of the heavenly hosts. Books are opened. And the court is in session.

Next, Daniel sees "one like a Son of Man" coming up to the Ancient of Days and this person stands before the God of Heaven. Judgement is passed in favour of this Son of Man and he is given "dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and men of every language might serve him. And his dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and his kingdom is one which will not be destroyed" (Dan. 7: 13-14).

Note that the name Jesus used most to refer to himself, "the Son of Man" occurs in this passage together with the language of the Kingdom over all the nations of the earth.

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The prophecy states “the Son of Man” will be given the whole world. No wonder Jesus loved to call himself “the Son of Man”. It was a Messianic description with rich prophetic pedigree. Messiah will rule over a united world so that through him the glory of God will cover the earth.

With this picture in mind, let’s return to the man who is on trial before the Jewish Council. He is bound. He is bruised. He is humbled. He is mocked. He is spit upon. The High Priest challenges him under oath to answer “by the Living God” if he is the Christ. Jesus answers in the affirmative and uses a term of equivalence, “I tell you, hereafter you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right Hand of Power and coming on the clouds of Heaven”. Jesus claims Daniel’s prophecy refers to himself! Jesus is the Son of Man who is given Israel’s glory, and ultimately rulership over the entire globe. Jesus is *that* Messiah. He is the Son of God before whom God will make the kings of the earth to bow and kiss (Psalm 2). The Ancient of Days bequeaths the entire world to this man, the very same “Son of Man” standing before their very eyes.

So the dramatic moment has arrived. “*Then*” the high priest tore his robe. Shock. Horror. Christ’s accusers say he is a blasphemer for taking the prophecies and all of Israel’s hope upon himself. *This is our Messiah?* All had forsaken him. A King without a people is a joke. They at least understood the prophecies that Messiah would rule over a restored Israel delivered from all enemies and oppression. They at least did understand God’s promised Messiah would rule over every nation, every tribe, and every

language. But this bedraggled and beaten man before them, you are kidding, right? He is an imposter. He blasphemes because he treats the Scripture and the God of Israel with contempt. Where is the glory of God on the world stage in this “Son of Man” here? Besides, if true, Jesus’ outrageous claim to be their Messiah would make *them* subject to *him!* Their court was the most important and highest ‘religious’ Council in the Land and would not stand for this.

Have you ever wondered why at this point they began to spit on him and to cover his face and to strike him, with their taunting challenge, “Prophecy! Who was it who struck you on the head?” This taunt to “prophecy!” is recorded in all three synoptic Gospels ((Matt. 26:64; Mk. 14:62; Lk. 22:64). It has an important OT connection, for the Jews understood the Messiah to be the Prophet foretold by Moses, “Yahweh your God will raise up a prophet like me” (Deut. 18:15). Indeed, there are several passages in the Gospels where this expectation surfaces. John the Baptist denies he is “the Prophet” (John 1:21,25). When the people saw the sign that Jesus performed, they exclaimed, “This is the Prophet who is to come into the world!” (John 6:14). On another occasion after hearing his words, some of the people said, “This really is the Prophet” (John 7:40). All of which confirms the First Century expectation that Messiah would be the prophet predicted by their Scriptures. It proves the word “blasphemy” was not limited to our Western meaning that Jesus was claiming to be God.

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So, well may we ask: Where in this story is there any suggestion that Jesus is claiming to be “God in the flesh”, the Second Person of the Trinity? It is incongruous, unnatural, and unwarranted eisegesis, which is to say, unwarranted reading into the text and not out of the text. This idea must be read into the text after Nicea and many generations of enforced tradition.

The text itself speaks from a First Century context with all the attendant Messianic hopes of Jesus and of Israel. And given that every other case of blasphemy in the entire NT comes from the enemies of the Gospel of Christ or from two men who brought disrepute on the church because of their sinning, we must conclude the modern idea that Jesus was guilty of claiming to be God, the Second Person of a Triune Godhead, is quite concocted and very contrived. According to the sacred record it was the enemies of Jesus who blasphemed at his trial. Scripture never intimates that the Son of Man claimed to be anything other than just that ... God’s anointed man destined to rule the world’s nations ... their Christ.