

Psalm 82 in the Fourth Gospel

By Paul Wyns

Introduction

A previous article investigated the use of Psalm 89 in the Fourth Gospel and briefly noted that both Psalm 89 and Psalm 82 make use of the “divine council” motif. It concluded that psalm 89’s relevance to the Fourth Gospel can only be appreciated by correctly understanding the “Hezekiah” background that led to its composition. When commenting on Jesus’ use of the Psalm, James F. McGrath states that, “It is clear that an appeal is being made to Scripture, but the precise force that the argument is likely to have had has been the subject of considerable debate. The key to understanding John’s apologetic argument here is his use of Psalm 82.6”.¹

The charge of blasphemy in John 10

"The Jews answered Him, saying, "For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy, and because You, being a Man, make Yourself God." Jesus answered them, "Is it not 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'? " (John 10:33-36).

¹ "You *are* gods, And all of you *are* children of the Most High (Ps82:6). James F. McGrath, *John's Apologetic Christology: Legitimation and Development in Johannine Christology*, (Cambridge University Press, 2001),121

Lindars has already noted that the direct question placed by “the Jews” in John 10:24 concerning whether Jesus is the Christ (*tell us plainly*) reminds one of the synoptic trial narratives (cf. Matt. 26:23, Mk.14:61; Luke 22:67).² Although some scholars view the Fourth Gospel as an extended trial narrative that replaces the traditional synoptic trials, it is virtually certain that the trial itself was an intensification of the challenges that Christ faced during his public ministry. As Talbert has observed,³ the apologetic themes in John 10 are a repeat of those in John 5, this indicates an ongoing discourse on Christ’s authority with at the core the charge; *'You are blaspheming.'*

“Now it was the Feast of Dedication in Jerusalem, and it was winter” (10:22).

Significantly although **χειμῶν** (*cheimōn*) is the Greek for winter, to the Semitic mind it would suggest “blasphemy”.⁴ The theme of blasphemy is pertinent to the Feast of Dedication (otherwise known as Hanukkah or, the “Feast of Lights”) as it was indelibly linked with Antiochus Epiphanes and his blasphemous acts of sacrilege. The feast of “Lights” is originally thought to have been a pagan feast introduced by Antiochus Epiphanes⁵ and adopted by the Maccabees and reformed

² Lindars, Gospel of John, 368

³ Jesus claims Unity with God (5:17, 19-21//10:25-30, 37-8) the Jews accuse him of seeking “equality” with God (5:18//10:33) they seek to kill him (5:18//10:31) evoking an apologetic response appealing to Scripture (5:39-40; 46-7//10:34-5). Talbert, *Reading John*,169-70

⁴ The Hebrew **רָחַץ** charaph carries a dual meaning: **1.** reproach, taunt, blaspheme or, **2.** (Qal) to winter; see H.A. Whittaker, *Studies in the Gospels*, (Biblia, 1989),455

⁵ On Chislev 15 Antiochus instituted the pagan festival of "light", which celebrated the rebirth of the sun, and had a Greek altar erected upon the old altar in the temple court (Dnl.11:31; cf.

for the rededication of the Sanctuary (2 Mac 10:1-9). The pedigree of the Feast is however far more ancient, as Edersheim notes; “From the hesitating language of Josephus we infer that even in his time the real origin of illuminating the Temple was unknown”.⁶ It is suggested that “Hanukkah” originated with the dedication of the post-exilic sanctuary in the time of Zechariah and associations with the winter solstice were demythologized and replaced by enactment of the vision of the two “lamps” in Zechariah 4, which is incidentally also the haphtarah reading⁷ for the feast and certainly the inspiration for the two “lights” in the Johannine prologue (1:7-9). Nevertheless, regardless of the origins of the feast, the profanation and blasphemy perpetrated by Antiochus are primary to understanding the charge of blasphemy brought against Christ.

James F. McGrath (2001:120-121) observes that over one third of all the occurrences of blasphemy are found in the book of Maccabees. Further, in 2 Maccabees 9.12 which describes Antiochus on his deathbed, Antiochus is depicted as repenting and asserting that **‘no mortal should think that he is equal to God’**, a phrase which is not unlike the accusation here, ‘You, although you are a human being, make yourself God’ (see also John 5.18 where it is equality to God that is specifically mentioned). It thus seems highly plausible to suggest that John does

Josephus Ant.xii.5.4); the first victim was sacrificed to Jupiter Olympius on the twenty-fifth (Dec. 16,167 B.C.) of the same month, since that date was celebrated as his birthday. All this was a serious error on Antiochus part. Instead of consolidating his empire around Hellenistic culture and religion, he sparked the Maccabean revolution. B. K .Waltke , Antiochus IV EPIPHANES in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*,(ed., Geoffery William Bromiley, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing 1995), Vol.1, 145-6

⁶ A. Edersheim, *The Temple :Its ministry and services at the time of Jesus Christ*, (Printer A. Wheaton:Exeter,1959),335

⁷ Numbers 7 is read over the eight feast days supplemented with Zech. 2:14-4:7 on the first Sabbath in Hanukkah.

intend his readers to recall something of the overtones and significance of this feast and of the scriptural texts that recount its origins”.

On Coins Antiochus Epiphanes was Theos Epiphan(e)s, which is, “God manifest” and this is crucial to understanding the polemical background to the use of Psalm 82 but also to much of the trial and pre-trial narrative. Particularly the desire of Antiochus to change the Jewish customs and laws, a charge also levelled at Christ and Stephen.⁸ Even the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, although linked by the Gospels with the Zechariah oracle, is also evocative of the Maccabaeen triumph over Antiochus IV Epiphanes (John 12:12-13; cf. 1 Macc 10:7; cf. Suetonius *Gaius Caligula* 32). This demonstrates that opinion was divided – was Jesus the Messiah, come to liberate the temple from foreign domination (*cf.* the Maccabaeen liberation), or was he the antichrist (like Antiochus) who came to destroy the sanctuary? The question is not necessarily one of Jesus’ divinity, but rather whether he was a legitimate agent or a self-appointed one. McGrath notes; “It is the unity of action between Jesus and the Father, including the carrying out of divine prerogatives by the former, is what is in mind here (2001:120).....It would seem that the Evangelist is arguing that those who receive God’s commission to serve as his agent and/or vice regent are rightly called by the name of him who sent or appointed him.”(2001:126)

⁸ The *prosecution charges* brought in the trial of Christ (and Stephen) drew their theological warrant from Danielic Apocalyptic – which in turn evoked a Danielic response from Christ (and Stephen). P. Wyns, *Christadelphian EJournal of Biblical Interpretation*, (Ed., A. Perry and P. Wyns, Willow Publications,2007), 148-163

'I said, "You are gods"'

The traditional explanation is that Psalm 82 refers to human judges in Israel, but this encounters problems in verse 7, where the “god(s)” is condemned to die like a man (adam). Modern scholarship considers Psalm 82 to be based on Ugaritic mythology. Many of the Biblical themes find their counterpart in ancient Canaanite and Ugaritic mythopoetic texts, where the ‘Sons of God’ form a pantheon of ‘gods’ under the auspices of a ‘high god.’ In Ugaritic mythology there were 70 sons of El (KTU 1.4: VI 46). El was “the highest king of a series of kings over various aspects of the universe,” while Asherah was a “Queen Mother” figure. The second tier included the “royal children,” the seventy sons of Athirat and El. These offspring (*bn ‘il / ‘ilm*) were recognised as gods (*‘ilm*) but their authority was granted them by the level of highest authority. In 1939 Julian Morgenstern issued a seminal study arguing for a myth of divine rebellion behind Psalm 82.⁹ Although Biblical correspondence with Ugaritic mythopoetic material¹⁰ is undeniable, one cannot speak of dependence. The Israelite version was demythologized; the alternative was a theocracy with 70 appointed judges.¹¹ These “seventy” judges formed the Sanhedrin (seventy) who traditionally traced their authority back to Moses at Sinai.

Christological interpretation of Psalm 82

Although Psalm 82:7 is exegetically difficult (“gods” but nonetheless dying like men) it is obvious that when Christ refers to these “gods” he is speaking of human

⁹ Morgenstern, *"The Mythological Background of Psalm 82"* (1939)

¹⁰ There was a large common “pool” of culture and cultural metaphors.

¹¹ A sister article, *"The Old Testament setting of Psalm 82"*, investigates the Ugaritic question in more depth.

judges. As Dunn remarks; “Rather more striking is that the king or judges in Israel seem on one or two occasions to be called ‘gods’ even within the OT itself (Ps.45.6; 82.6; cf. Ex.21.6; 22.8;Isa.9.6f.), a significant factor when we recall how these Psalms passages are used in reference to Jesus in Heb 1.8 and John 10.34f.”¹² It has been noted by scholars that these “gods” to whom the “word” of God came – must have been Israel receiving the *Torah* at Sinai. The Fourth Evangelist is drawing a typological parallel with Israel under the law, in this he deliberately draws from Deuteronomy:

John	Deuteronomy
<p>6:35 I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger</p> <p>1:14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us</p> <p>10:35 If He called them gods, to whom the word of God came (cf. 10:36...whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world)</p>	<p>8:3 That He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every <i>word</i> that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD.</p>
<p>10:18 This command I have received</p>	<p>6:1 Now this <i>is</i> the commandment</p>
<p>10:30 I and <i>My</i> Father are one</p>	<p>6:4 The LORD our God, the LORD <i>is</i> one!</p>
<p>10:32 Many good works I have shown you from My Father.</p>	<p>6:18 And you shall do <i>what is</i> right and good in the sight of the LORD</p>
<p>10:38believe the works</p>	<p>6:22 And the LORD showed signs and wonders before our eyes</p>

The Fourth Evangelist intends the reader to associate the sending of the word to Israel in the prologue (1:14) with the receiving of the word by the ‘gods’ in 10:35: “*gods, to whom the word of God came*”. An analogy is drawn between the revelation of the *torah* at Sinai under Moses with the manifestation of the fullness of grace in Christ (1:16), who was the one prefigured by Moses; “*a Prophet like me from your*

¹² James D.G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making*,(SCM Press, 1989), 15-16

midst, from your brethren” (Deut 18:15). Jewish Midrashic literature recognises parallels between Adam in Eden and Israel at Sinai.¹³ As McGrath observes, “A fundamental connection thus appears to exist between the traditional interpretation within Judaism of Psalm 82 in terms of Israel/Adam typology, and aspects of the Christology which portrayed Jesus as exalted to heaven, serving as God’s vice-regent and bearing his name, which were important issues in the Johannine conflict with ‘the Jews’” (2001:125). Interestingly, the fourth Gospel employs ‘the Jews’ 71 times, usually in a pejorative sense. The term represents the ruling elite – the 70 members of the Sanhedrin and the high priest. The Septuagint version of Psalm 82 has a different flavour – ‘*God stands in the assembly (συναγωγή, ἡς ἡ συναγωγή) of gods’ (θεοῦς), (82:1) or in 82:7....‘But ye die as men, and fall as one of the princes’ (ἄρχων, οὐτος m ruler or ; official, authority; judge (Lk 12.58); ἄ. τῶν Ἰουδαίων member of the Sanhedrin in John 3:1). It is significant that Exodus 22:28 employs the same root forms; “Thou shalt not revile the gods (θεοῦς), nor speak ill of the ruler (ἄρχων) of thy people”(LXE), with Moses and the Sanhedrin as referents – a passage cited by Paul during his interrogation before the Sanhedrin and the high priest (Acts 23:5).*

¹³ Neyrey comments: Whoever, then, is called "god" is so named because "the word of God came" to them. Scholars have long argued that this refers to Israel at Sinai when God gave it the Torah, which I think is absolutely correct..... in Jewish literature, there is a clear sense that Ps 82:6-7 was understood in terms of Israel at the Sinai theophany. A second-century midrash goes as follows: If it were possible to do away with the Angel of Death I would. But the decree has long ago been decreed. R. Jose says: It was upon this condition that the Israelites stood up before Mount Sinai, on the condition that the Angel of Death should have not power over them. For it is said: “*I SAID: YE ARE GODS*” (Ps 82:6). But you have corrupted your conduct. “*SURELY YE SHALL DIE LIKE MEN*” (Ps 82:7) *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Tractate Bahodesh 9* (trans. Jacob Lauterbach; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1933) 2. 272. Jerome H. Neyrey, SJ, *I SAID: YOU ARE GODS”: PSALM 82:6 AND JOHN 10* <http://www.nd.edu/~jneyrey1/Gods.html> [cited June 2008]

The controversy commences with Jesus walking in Solomon’s Porch. Josephus notes that it was the only part of Solomon’s temple that had survived (*Ant.* 20.9.7). The setting is appropriate for it was the “porch of judgement” where the throne was placed when important juridical decisions were required (1 Kings 7:7). The King represented God in the judgement process.¹⁴ The theme of Psalm 82 is God judging the “gods.” The following schema draws out the parallels that the Fourth Evangelist wishes to establish:

Psalm 82	John 10
82:1 God stands in the congregation of the mighty; He judges among the gods .	10:23 And Jesus walked in the temple, in Solomon's porch. 10:24 Then the Jews surrounded Him.....
82:2 Do justice to the afflicted and needy	10:25, 32, 37 works of the Father (healing the blind man in the previous chapter)
82:5 They walk on in darkness	9:41 Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you say, 'We see.' Therefore your sin remains. (cf. John 11:10)
82:8 ARISE, O GOD , judge the earth	10:18 I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. (cf. John 20:28)
82:8 You shall inherit all nations	10:16 And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock <i>and</i> one shepherd. (cf. John 12:20,32)

¹⁴ "The word of my lord the king will now be comforting; for as the angel of God, so *is* my lord the king in discerning good and evil. And may the LORD your God be with you." **2 Samuel 14:17**

Conclusion

The argument is not (as is usually thought) a *minori ad maius* (from the lesser to the greater) – if you (the Sanhedrin) can be called “gods”, how much more can I. Nor is the argument a *maiori ad minus* (from the greater to the lesser) – if you (the Sanhedrin) can be called “gods” then what is wrong with my lesser claim to be God’s son? The argument is of a different nature altogether. The 70 elders had received the authority (the spirit) to operate as judges of Israel and therefore as divine agents of the law at Sinai. They may well have been appointed “gods” at Sinai but Christ’s claim of sonship was of a different order of magnitude. Christ did not lay claim to the position of Moses¹⁵, who was in charge of the Sanhedrin – Christ’s claim was far superior – his status parallels that of the *Yahweh* angel in the wilderness. Moses and the Sanhedrin (70 judges/princes) answered to the angel who bore the divine *Yahweh* name and who had functional equality with God.¹⁶ Just as his Father was incomparable (who is like God) amongst the “gods” of Egypt (cf. Psalm 89:6-7, ‘*God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints....*’), so Jesus was incomparable amongst the “gods” (Sanhedrin) of Israel. Jesus’ authority was superlative – here was no Antiochus, making blasphemous claims of God manifestation, changing their customs and profaning their temple. In contrast Jesus Christ was a legitimate agent sent by God, one who claimed legitimate

¹⁵ The fact is that although Moses was “faithful in all His house” (Heb.3:2) and was a “prince” of Egypt and made a “god” to Pharaoh (Ex.7:1) – he rebelled and failed and was therefore not allowed entry into the land (Deut.1:37, 32:51). Although a “god” he died like Adam and fell like one of the princes (Ps 82:7) – and for the same reason as Adam – exceeding his legitimate authority (Num 20:10-13). The same theme is found in the Korah rebellion (Num 16).

¹⁶ Beware of Him and obey His voice; do not provoke Him, for He will not pardon your transgressions; for My name is in Him.(Ex.23:21)

prerogatives (forgiving sin, judging, giving life) normally associated with God. His resurrection would set the seal to his authority. Not only was he Israel's Judge and Lord he *was also* the Lord of the Gentiles. Well might Thomas exclaim (when he saw the resurrected Christ), "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28) John Carter remarks, "We do not recommend the use in ordinary speech of the word "God" in reference to Jesus; but it is well not to lose sight of such a use occasionally in Scripture, and by so doing fail to grasp the claims made for Jesus Christ our Lord, who has been 'highly exalted' by the Father, and 'given a Name that is above every name' (Phil.2:9)".¹⁷

This investigation has only briefly touched on Psalm 82 and the Christological use made of it by the Fourth Evangelist. It has correctly pointed to the Sinai experience as the generic setting for the Psalm – but the Psalm has a more specific setting – the rebellion of the Sanhedrin in the time of Hezekiah. A sister article, "Psalm 82 and its Ancient Near Eastern setting", will explore the Ugaritic question and the Hezekiah *Sitz im Leben* will be examined in "Psalm 82 and its Old Testament setting."

¹⁷ John Carter, *Romans*, p.102