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# An Approach to the Exegesis of John 10:34-36

By RICHARD JUNGKUNTZ

## I

In the interpretation of John 10:34-36 commentators have generally assumed that behind Jesus' words lies the intent by means of unanswerable formal argumentation to refute or at least to silence His opponents, the Pharisees, who have charged Him with blasphemy for claiming to be divine. A corollary of this assumption is the view that the statement "Scripture cannot be broken" means no more than "Scripture's statements are incontrovertible; if Scripture says something, that something is a fact." Acceptable as such a proposition in itself may be to Christian readers today, as well as to a Palestinian audience in Jesus' day, the exegetical question is whether this is an adequate expression of the primary sense of our Lord's assertion. In any event, this presupposition in approaching the passage has led to two main lines of interpretation in the history of its exegesis. For convenience we may call them the "modern" and the "traditional" interpretations,<sup>1</sup> remembering, however, that both have in common the presupposition mentioned above and that the line of distinction will sometimes be blurred in matters of detail.

With these qualifications we may describe the "modern" interpretation as follows: In His exegesis and in His argument based thereon, Jesus is employing a thoroughly rabbinical technique. By means of the exegetical principle known as *gezerah*

<sup>1</sup> No value judgment attaches to either adjective as used here.

*shawa*,<sup>2</sup> He fastens on an Old Testament passage (Ps. 82:6) which contains a word (אֱלֹהִים) involved in His dispute with the Pharisees and with the help of a literalistic understanding makes the passage serve as an argument from analogy supporting His right to claim the title of divinity even though He is a human being. On this view the logical structure of Jesus' argument would be the following:

Major premise: What Scripture says cannot be broken (= denied).

Minor premise: What cannot be denied cannot be blasphemy.

Conclusion: What Scripture says cannot be blasphemy.

This conclusion becomes the major premise of a further syllogism.

Major premise: What Scripture says cannot be blasphemy.

Minor premise: Scripture says that some human beings are called gods.

Conclusion: It cannot be blasphemy for some human beings to be called gods.

Two things become apparent when the argument is set forth in this way. One is that it may well be regarded as an *ad hominem* maneuver since it does not require Jesus to accept for Himself the literalistic exegesis to which His oppo-

<sup>2</sup> Cf. C. K. Barrett, *New Testament Background* (New York, 1961), p. 146.

nents subscribed. The other and more important fact is that, whether it is *ad hominem* or not, the argument is irrelevant and hence deceptive, since it does not meet the substance of the Jews' accusation against Him, namely, that He claimed to be God in the highest sense of the word, God by nature, not by grace, as Chrysostom puts it.

Among the modern commentators who interpret the passage in this way are Strachan, Hoskyns and Davey, Bultmann, Barrett, Strathmann, and Richardson. Bultmann even feels that such argumentation is so alien to what one would expect of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel that the passage should perhaps be regarded as a redactor's interpolation.<sup>3</sup> Richardson and Strachan regard it as a reflection of the kind of argument that took place after Pentecost between Jews and Jewish Christians.<sup>4</sup> Strathmann considers Jesus' words to be deliberately and strongly ironic, countering the Jews with their own weapons.<sup>5</sup> Barrett and Hoskyns maintain that to the *ad hominem* appeal, in itself invalid for proof, there is added an *a fortiori* argument, or movement *a minori ad maius*.<sup>6</sup> In this view, Jesus means: If even men to whom the Word of God merely *came* are entitled to the name "gods," how much more am I, who *am* the Word incarnate.

<sup>3</sup> R. Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes*, II (Göttingen, 1952), 295 ff.

<sup>4</sup> A. Richardson, *The Gospel According to Saint John* (London, 1959), p. 135; R. H. Strachan, *The Fourth Gospel* (London, 1941), p. 228.

<sup>5</sup> H. Strathmann, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes* (Göttingen, 1958), pp. 170 f.

<sup>6</sup> C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London, 1956), pp. 319 f.; E. C. Hoskyns and F. N. Davey, *The Fourth Gospel* (London, 1947), p. 392.

Since this claim to find an *a fortiori* or *a minori ad maius* mode of argument in Jesus' words is especially characteristic of the "traditional" interpretation, with which we shall deal presently, no more needs to be said here except that the text itself does not present the neat antithesis between "those to whom the Word came" and "He who is Himself the Word"; and even if it did, the argument would still be irrelevant insofar as it would prove only that Jesus could with more right than the judges of ancient Israel lay claim to the title *elohim* in its lower and derivative sense.

One of the clearest and fullest presentations of what we are calling the "traditional" interpretation is that offered by Lenski,<sup>7</sup> although the tradition itself reaches back as far as Chrysostom and includes among its proponents such names as Calvin, Bengel, Hengstenberg, Godet, Stoeckhardt, Lightfoot, and Tasker. Again, however, it should be pointed out that among these "traditionalists," as among the "moderns," there is considerable disagreement in matters of detail, and particularly noteworthy are the intimations to be found in Hengstenberg, Godet, and Tasker of a meaning in the text to which their approach lends little or no support but which finds considerable warrant once the old presuppositions are abandoned.<sup>8</sup> But this is to get ahead of our investigation.

According to Lenski, whom we are tak-

<sup>7</sup> R. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of Saint John's Gospel* (Columbus, 1942), pp. 764 ff.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John* (Edinburgh, 1865), I, 537, 540; F. L. Godet, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, trans. M. D. Cusin (Grand Rapids, Mich., n. d.), II, 165; R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London, 1960), p. 135.

ing as spokesman for the "traditional" interpretation, Jesus is in this passage not merely silencing the Pharisees, and not merely repeating His original claim, but He is actually *proving* by syllogistic argument that He is rightly called God in the highest sense.<sup>9</sup>

The syllogism is set forth in elliptical form by Lenski.

Major premise: The Scripture cannot be broken (= denied).

Minor premise: Scripture calls men commissioned by God gods.

Conclusion: Jesus, sanctified and sent by the Father, is rightly called God.

The ellipsis in the syllogistic chain lies in the conclusion, which from the given premises ought to be: whoever is commissioned (resp. sanctified and/or sent) by God the Father is rightly called god. This conclusion then becomes the major premise of a second syllogism, as follows:

Major premise: Whoever is commissioned (resp. sanctified and/or sent) by God is rightly called god.

Minor premise: Jesus is sanctified and sent by God.

Conclusion: Jesus is rightly called god.

It is apparent at once that on this showing, if Jesus means to *prove* that He is true God, in the sense of the Second Person of the Trinity, the argument as just outlined is invalid. It is invalid because it commits the logical fallacy of equivocation or em-

ploying a fourth term as though it were the same as one of the three proper terms, in this case making god = God.

Lenski attempts to avoid this embarrassment by asserting that Jesus is arguing *a minori ad maius*, i. e., to the degree that "being sanctified" is greater than having the Word of God "come" to one. Jesus is God in a "higher" sense than the men of the Old Testament. The trouble with this claim, however, is that either it introduces another equivocation, or else it begs the question and thus constitutes a *petitio principii*. Distinguishing between "receiving the Word" and "being sanctified" introduces an equivocation because the validity of the syllogism requires these two terms (the middle term) to be identical. This is possible, to be sure, if it is granted that everyone who is sanctified is one to whom the Word of God comes; but this assumption would rule out any movement *a minori ad maius*. On the other hand, if it is granted that "being sanctified and sent by the Father" is infinitely superior to "receiving the Word of God," we have in the argument a *petitio*, because it was precisely this fact which the Jews were calling blasphemy, namely, that Jesus came from the Father in an infinitely superior and unique sense.

We may summarize our findings thus far in this way. The interpretations of John 10:34-36 that are usually offered leave us on the horns of a dilemma: Either (a) Jesus is arguing in rabbinic fashion, *ad hominem* and irrelevantly; or (b) He is guilty of equivocation or begging the question. Piety, we think, finds a choice between such alternatives distasteful at the least, if not completely unacceptable.

<sup>9</sup> This is also Calvin's view; cf. *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, trans. Wm. Pringle (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1949), I, 419 ff.

## II

Hence we naturally ask if there is not some other approach that may lead to an exposition of the text which is both hermeneutically justifiable and textually defensible. We believe there is such an approach and that it begins with a more adequate understanding of the clause "the Scripture cannot be broken," οὐ δύναται λυθῆναι ἢ γραφή.

For both the modern and traditional interpretations this statement is equivalent to "Scripture cannot be denied; if Scripture says something, that something is a fact."<sup>10</sup> What seems to have been overlooked is the natural sense of λύω, both etymologically and in its New Testament *usus loquendi*. The familiar translation, "break," has apparently tended to obscure that meaning. Etymologically λύω means "loosen, unbind, unfasten"; hence "undo." Secondary and derived uses of the word still reflect this basic denotation. Thus, for example, when in Eph. 2:14 Christ is said to have "broken down" (λύσας) the middle wall of partition, the word is appropriate because He has "unbound" or "undone" that which held it together, the Law of commandments and ordinances. Similarly in John 2:19 "destroy (λύσατε) this temple" means "loosen" whatever holds it together and makes it to stand, and so dismantle it. Examples of this kind can easily be multiplied from both secular and New Testament literature.

But it is when we examine passages in which λύω is used with reference to the Law or the Word of God that we observe an especially significant fact. In John 7:23 Jesus says: "If a man receives circumcision

on the Sabbath *in order* that the Law of Moses should *not be broken* (μὴ λυθῆ), are you angry with Me because I have made a man completely well on the Sabbath?" The point to be observed is that Jesus is here suggesting that circumcision is performed on the Sabbath, despite the apparent formal violation of the code, in order that the real intent of the Law of Moses may *not be undone*, but *be fulfilled*, as in fact it is fulfilled by Himself.

Again, in Matt. 5:17, 18 Jesus uses an emphatic compound of λύω when He says: "Think not that I am come to destroy (καταλῦσαι) the Law or the Prophets (!); I have not come to destroy, but to fulfill (πληρῶσαι). Verily, I say unto you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one jot or tittle shall pass away from the Law until all things *come to pass* (γένηται)." <sup>11</sup>

Here it becomes altogether apparent that in contexts such as these, where the Law or the Old Testament Scriptures are under consideration, the antonym to λύω, "undo," is πληρῶω, "fulfill." Consequently, in such contexts the meaning of λύω must be "to undo" in the sense of "render incapable of fulfillment," "keep from being fulfilled,"

<sup>11</sup> Here the objection might suggest itself that we have made an unsupported identification in meaning between λύω and καταλύω. Friedrich Büchsel concludes that the compound verb καταλύω generally has the same meaning as the simple form (Gerhard Kittel, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, IV, 339). McNeile says that in Matt. 5:19 λύση is used with almost the same meaning as καταλῦσαι is in v. 17 (A. H. McNeile, *The Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, New York, 1957, pp. 57 f.). See also Theodor Zahn, *Das Evangelium des Matthäus*, Leipzig, 1903, s. v. It is true that in St. John's record our Lord uses a form of λύω when He speaks of the destruction of the temple in John 2, whereas in the Synoptics the compound form is always used in our Lord's references to this act.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Lenski, p. 767; Strathmann, p. 171.

"prevent attainment of the goal or intention."

Acts 5:38 f. corroborates this understanding and connotation of *λύω*. There Gamaliel says: "If this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought (*καταλυθήσεται*), but if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it (*καταλύσαι*)." This plainly means: If the Christian movement is of human origin, it will never attain its goal or fruition, while if it has its origin in God, nothing can keep it from being successful.

Further support for understanding *λύω* in this way is the fact that in rabbinic usage the Hebrew and Aramaic equivalents of *λύω* as used in reference to the Law or Word of God are *לַטַּל* and *לַטַּל* respectively, meaning "nullify," "render futile, ineffective, or without result, and thus unfulfilled or unfulfillable." In fact, the same antithesis of *λύω* and *πληρώω* is reproduced in rabbinic literature by *לַטַּל* and *קַיִם*.<sup>12</sup>

It would seem therefore that the statement "Scripture cannot be broken" may best be interpreted to mean: "Scripture cannot be undone, cannot be kept from going into fulfillment."

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Otto Michel, *Der Brief an die Römer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1955), in his treatment of Rom. 3:21-31. In a footnote, p. 97, Michel indicates that *νόμον καταργεῖν* and *νόμον ιστάνειν* are common formulae in rabbinic literature. He refers to Pirke Aboth 4, 9 (apparently the reference should be changed to 4, 11), where both *קַיִם* and *לַטַּל*, the Hebrew equivalents, appear in participial forms in a discussion of fulfilling or making void the Torah. Cf. also Gustaf Dalman, *Aramäisches-Neuhebräisches Handwörterbuch zu Targum, Talmud und Midrasch*. 3d ed. (Göttingen; 1938), and Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi and the Midrashic Literature*. (New York, 1943), s. v. *בטל* and *קיים*.

### III

If, then, this correctly represents the meaning of *λύω* in the expression "Scripture cannot be broken," what relevance, we may ask, does the statement have with regard to the rest of the passage in which it stands? What does the statement that Scripture cannot be kept from fulfillment have to do with Jesus' answer to those who accuse Him of blasphemy?

Fulfillment implies a prior promise or prophecy. In Scripture, however, prophecy is not limited only to those men or those books that are prophetic in a formal sense. Rather there was sound and profound reason for the Jews and the Scriptures themselves to call also their historical books "prophets," — "the earlier prophets," to be exact.<sup>13</sup> For in the Biblical view the entire history of Israel was prophetic in that through this particular history, both its occurrence and its narration, God was proclaiming for all time His saving Word. Indeed, as Wilhelm Vischer observes, history and the writing of it in the Old Testament are prophetic for the very reason that it is God's Word which creates history.<sup>14</sup> Thus Ps. 33:9 says: "For He spake, and it was done." It is, moreover, the essence of this history, Vischer goes on to say, that it cannot be understood merely as past event or fact. It remains for all time God's Word, His Law and His Gospel, the command and the promise of the Lord for all generations of His people. In the Old Testament, therefore, history is designated prophecy, that is to say, prophetic history, advent history, al-

<sup>13</sup> Cf. G. Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1954), p. 208.

<sup>14</sup> *Das Christuszeugnis des Alten Testaments*, II (Zurich, 1942), 7.

ways moving and tending toward the goal, the revelation of the coming of God's kingdom in Christ Jesus.

This is the history to which Jesus Himself appeals in our text. In His reply to the Jews who accuse Him of blasphemy for being a man and yet claiming to be God, He quotes Ps. 82:6. This psalm is addressed to the unjust judges and rulers of Israel.<sup>15</sup> Because they are judges, they are, says God, אֱלֹהִים ("gods"); because they are unjust, they shall die like men. The point to be noted, however, is this: God Himself called the historical judges of Israel gods. It does not matter when this was done or where it was recorded. Jewish tradition said it took place on Mount Sinai when God gave Moses the two tables of the Law. However, Ex. 21:6 and 22:8 f. seem more likely to have been in the psalmist's mind; although it is also possible that the only occasion meant is that which occurs in Ps. 82 itself.<sup>16</sup> In any case, it is to the divinely instituted office of the judges that we must next look for a clue in our interpretation. The judges in Israel's history are called אֱלֹהִים, gods. The Scripture which records this history is prophetic, it cannot be broken, cannot be kept from fulfillment.

The inspired record of the judges is found in the books of Joshua, Judges, and 1 Samuel. The very first thing we notice is the significant fact that he whose name is given to the book recording Israel's entry into the Promised Land, who himself led the people into that land of hope and

promise, bears the very name that is given by divine command to the Savior Himself in Matt. 1:21: "Thou shalt call His name Jesus (יְהוֹשֻׁעַ or יֵשׁוּעַ), for He shall save (כִּי הוּא יוֹשִׁיעַ) His people." The prophetic connection is echoed again in Heb. 4:8, 14 where the two Jesuses or Joshuas are set side by side as type and fulfillment.<sup>17</sup>

Then, in the famous Messianic prophecy of Is. 9:4-6, we find an unmistakable allusion to Judges 6-7 and the record there of the deliverance from the Midianites under Gideon, manifestly understood as a type of the coming deliverance to be effected by the Messiah: "For thou hast broken the yoke of his burden and the staff of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, as in the day of Midian. . . . For unto us a Child is born, etc."

We notice also how the individual judges are particularly said to be endowed with the Holy Spirit. In fact, the judge is appointed to his task by this gift of the Holy Spirit, and in this gift of the Holy Spirit he achieves what he is to do (cf. Judges 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 13:25; 14:6-19; 15:14). Completely unlike the *suffetes* (the Latin transliteration of the Punic root), the judges, of that other great Semitic nation of antiquity, Carthage, the שֹׁפְטִים of Israel are not an "institution"; their office is not to be passed on from one to another, nor can it be inherited; it is entirely a charismatic ministry.

On the other hand, the judges as a group are forerunners of David, the king, himself the Lord's anointed and in turn the greatest type of the Messiah. David, not Saul, the rejected king, is the man after the Lord's own heart. It is with him that

<sup>15</sup> This is conceded also by such men as Strachan and Strathmann, apparently also by Bultmann.

<sup>16</sup> But cf. also Ex. 7:1, where God applies the term to Moses.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. 1 Macc. 2:55, "Jesus [Joshua] for fulfilling the word was made a *judge* in Israel."

He makes His Messianic covenant. The judges in their office concretely illustrate the sole dominion of God over His people (cf. Judg. 8:23). But this is too much for faithless Israel. God's chosen people prefer the kingship of a visible sovereign to the kingship of the Lord Himself. Therefore He says to Samuel, the last of the judges: "They have not rejected thee, but they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them" (1 Sam. 8:7). Yet to this very people He gives His own Anointed One, a "Messiah," to be their king. Thus the judges who precede King David are themselves forerunners of the Lord's Messiah and so also of the Christ (Anointed One) of the eschaton. They bear witness for all time that the Lord in His own person is the kingly head of Israel.

This same intimate connection between the judges of ancient Israel and the Christ of the New Testament by way of the Messianic house of David is reflected also in the Christmas prophecy of Micah 5:1 f.: "They shall smite the *judge* of Israel with a rod upon the cheek; but thou Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall He come forth unto Me that is to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting."

#### IV

The question that still remains, however, is whether this typical and prophetic character of the judges in their Old Testament office and function has any bearing upon the proper understanding of our passage in John 10. So we turn finally to a consideration of the context in which the passage stands.

Taking the Fourth Gospel as a whole,

we notice first of all the significant fact that the theme of "judgment" is exceptionally prominent throughout. A check of a Greek concordance will reveal that the verb κρίνειν is found 19 times in John, as compared with Matthew and Luke, where it is found six times, and Mark, where the verb form never occurs. Typical of this emphasis are passages like the following:

"The Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment to the Son." (5:22)

"Ye judge after the flesh; I judge no man. And yet if I judge, My judgment is true; for I am not alone, but I and the Father that sent Me." (8:15 f.)

"I came not to judge the world, but to save the world. He that rejecteth Me and receiveth not My words, hath one that judgeth him. The Word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the Last Day." (12:47 f.)

There is an evident paradox here, of course, in the several assertions that Christ on the one hand judges no man and did not come to judge, while on the other hand it is He alone to whom the Father has given authority to judge and when He judges, His judgment is true. Yet this is curiously parallel to the even greater paradox inherent in His claim to be true God as well as man, the paradox about which the argument in our text revolves.

Particularly important is the fact that the emphasis on "judging" and on the contrast between false judging and true judging is a salient feature of the immediate context of our passage. Chapter 9 of the Gospel relates the story of the healing of the man born blind, the climax of which is the dramatic judgment of Jesus



pronounced upon the Pharisees, who in unwitting blindness have presumed to pass judgment on the enlightened. To these false judges and misleaders of the people Jesus says: "For judgment am I come into the world, that those who see may become blind. . . . If ye were blind, ye should have no sin; but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth." (9:39-41)

Upon this judicial pronouncement of Jesus there immediately follows what apparently, but only apparently, is a new theme, the discourse on the Good Shepherd in Ch. 10 which in turn is followed at once by the dialog with the Jews that leads directly into our text. That the Good Shepherd discourse is in fact not the introduction of a new theme, but the continuation and development of the judgment theme of Ch. 9, becomes evident as soon as one looks at the Old Testament parallels to this association of ideas.

The relation among the concepts "judge," "king," and "shepherd" is extremely close in Biblical thought. David was himself a shepherd boy when God told Samuel, the last of the judges (cf. 1 Sam. 12:11), to anoint him king in place of Saul (1 Sam. 16). Years later, when David proposed to build a house for the Lord, God sent him word through the prophet Nathan: "In all places where I have moved with all Israel, did I speak a word with any of the *judges* of Israel, whom I commanded to *shepherd* My people, saying, 'Why have you not built Me a house of cedar?' . . . I took you from the pasture from following the sheep, that you should be prince over My people Israel. . . . Moreover, I declare to you that the Lord will build you a house. . . . I will raise up your offspring after you, one of your own

sons, and I will establish his *kingdom*. He shall build a house for Me, and I will establish his throne forever. I will be his Father, and he shall be My son." (1 Chron. 17:6-13)

To Solomon, David's son and successor, the queen of Sheba said: "Because thy God loved Israel, to establish them forever, therefore made He thee *king* over them, to do *judgment* and justice" (2 Chron. 9:8). But the subsequent history of the kings of Judah and Israel is in the Biblical writers' eyes an increasingly sorry record of their failure to "do judgment and justice." Only occasionally is there a break in the dismal pattern, and then only briefly, as in the case of Jehoshaphat ("the Lord judges"), who instructed his subordinates: "Consider what you do, for you judge not for man, but for the Lord; He is with you in giving judgment." (2 Chron. 19:6)

But this fundamental principle of Israel's polity is soon forgotten and becomes honored — by judges and their kings alike — more in the breach than the observance. Against this background Jeremiah's denunciatory oracles on the last kings of Judah are pregnant with meaning: "Hear the word of the Lord, O *king* of Judah, that sittest upon the throne of David, thou and thy servants, and thy people that enter in by these gates. Thus saith the Lord: Execute ye *judgment* and righteousness. . . . Woe be unto the *shepherds* that destroy and scatter the sheep of My pasture, saith the Lord. . . . I will set up *shepherds* over them which shall feed them; and they shall fear no more. . . . Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a *King* shall reign and prosper and shall execute *judgment* and justice in the earth. . . . And this is

His name whereby He shall be called, 'The Lord our Righteousness.'" (Jer. 22:2, 3; 23:1-6)

The same associated ideas reappear in the Book of Zechariah. The Lord complains: "Therefore the people wander like sheep; they are afflicted for want of a shepherd. My anger is hot against the shepherds, and I will punish the leaders; for the Lord of hosts cares for His flock, the house of Judah" (Zech. 10:2 f.). He describes a good "shepherd" whom the people despise and reject, paying him off with "thirty shekels of silver" (11:4-14). Vividly He portrays the ruthless, wicked shepherds who exploit and ravage the flock for their own gain (11:15-17). But finally He also promises the coming of a day when all this will be changed, and He "will put a shield about the inhabitants of Jerusalem so that the feeblest among them on that day shall be like David and the house of David shall be like God [!], like the angel of the Lord, at their head" (12:8). The relevance to the Johannine passage is apparent.

More striking still is the famous 34th chapter of Ezekiel. It opens with a fierce denunciation of Israel's corrupt rulers as false shepherds who viciously tyrannize the flock (vv. 1-10). But God will depose these shepherds and Himself seek out His flock and feed them and give them rest (vv. 11-16). More than that, He will "judge between sheep and sheep, rams and he-goats"; and "will set up over them one shepherd," namely, David (vv. 17-24). Then they will know that they are the Lord's own and that He is their God. (Vv. 25-31)

The parallel to John 9—10 is so close as scarcely to require explication. The

unworthy leaders of the people have merited God's own severest judgment. Having failed to "judge righteously" (cf. Deut. 1:16; 16:18; Lev. 19:15), they are themselves judged by the Lord. But with His judgment on the false shepherds comes at once the deliverance of the flock through the good shepherd who will "feed [shepherd, אֶרְעֶנָּה] them with judgment." (Ezek. 34:16)

Since the "shepherd" of Ezekiel who will be the agent of God's judgment is the Messianic David figure (cf. Ezek. 37: 24), it is only natural that the Jews should respond to Jesus' discourse on the Good Shepherd with the question: "Are you the Messiah?" As Jesus in His answer goes beyond the literal scope of the question to lay claim also to unity with the Father, the Jews, incensed, hurl their charge of blasphemy. Now the appropriateness of Jesus' citation from Ps. 82 stands out in boldest clarity. For Ps. 82 strongly underscores the two chief elements in John's 10th chapter: the stern divine judgment on the unworthy judges of God's people and the implicit prophecy that God Himself would in human nature become His people's Judge and Deliverer.

God standeth in the congregation of the mighty;

He judgeth among the gods.

How long will ye judge unjustly,

And accept the persons of the wicked?

Defend the poor and fatherless:

Do justice to the afflicted and needy.

Deliver the poor and needy:

Rid them out of the hand of the wicked.

They know not, neither will they understand;  
they walk on in darkness:

All the foundations of the earth are out  
of course.

I have said, Ye are gods;

And all of you are children of the Most  
High.  
But ye shall die like men  
And fall like one of the princes.  
Arise, O God, judge the earth;  
For Thou shalt inherit all nations.

## V

To sum up: The usual interpretations of John 10:34-36 are unsatisfactory (1) because they represent Jesus as arguing *ad hominem*, irrelevantly, equivocally, or by begging the question; and (2) because they fail to deal adequately with the clause "Scripture cannot be broken." The key to understanding this clause properly is the word *λυθῆναι*, "be broken." The Biblical *usus loquendi* indicates that it should be taken as an antonym to *πληρῶω*, "fulfill." The statement is therefore equivalent to: "Scripture cannot be kept from fulfillment." The appropriateness of this assertion in Jesus' reply to His accusers is evident (1) from a consideration of the prophetic and typical character of the Old Testament judges of whom the "Scripture" in question, Ps. 82, speaks; and (2) from a consideration of the Johannine context and its emphasis on Christ's role as Judge.

Viewed in this light the meaning of the passage may be expressed as follows: In answer to His accusers Jesus again asserts His claim to divine Sonship even though He is a man, pointing out that God Himself had foreshadowed the coming of One who would be the Judge par excellence; the One who would judge righteously, would shepherd His people, and finally deliver them forever; the One who would in fact be both God and man in one person, as Ps. 82 suggests. This claim He further supports by the reminder that the Old Testament Scripture has a prophetic

content, it cannot be undone, it must be fulfilled.

Finally, it may be noted again that for the unbeliever this reply of Jesus does not *prove* His deity. But neither is it intended to. It is a preachment of God's Word. It is Law or it is Gospel. It is Law in that Jesus says: The Scriptures told you the Judge would come; in rejecting Me you reject God and His Word. It is Gospel, however, in that Jesus says: The Scriptures told you the Judge would come; here I am, hear what I say, see what I do — and believe.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> As mentioned above (p. 559, note 8), a similar understanding of the passage has been approximated by some commentators whose approach to the text otherwise offers scant exegetical warrant for this interpretation. Cf. Hengstenberg, p. 537: "[Jesus' answer] was intended [to show] that a rigid dualism between God and man . . . was not supported by Scripture, but opposed by it; in fact, that the incarnation of God was in Scripture already pre-typified"; p. 540: "The argument was pertinently adapted to overthrow that naked dualism between God and man in which the Pharisaic opposition would obviously seek its argument against the god-man who now confronted them and was so hateful to their minds." Godet, p. 165: "Every theocratic function, exercised in the name of Jehovah, who has conferred it, places its depositary in living connection with the Most High, makes him participate in His inspiration and constitutes him His agent. Thereby the man, king, judge, or prophet, becomes relatively a manifestation of God Himself. 'At that time the house of David shall be as Elohim, as the angel of the Lord,' Zech. xii, 8. The Old Testament is, in its deepest tendency, in a constant advancing progress towards the incarnation, the crowning-point of the increasing approximation between God and man. This is the true basis of the reasoning of Jesus: If this entire course has nothing in it of blasphemy, the end in which it issues, the appearance of a man who declares Himself *one with God*, has in itself nothing in contempt of the majesty of God."