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SHORT STUDY

A REBELLIOUS SON?

HUGO ODEBERG AND THE INTERPRETATION OF JOHN 5.18

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A solution to the difficult question of how to interpret John 5.18 appeared to have been provided with the publication of Hugo Odeberg's monumental work, *The Fourth Gospel*, published in 1929.¹ Odeberg cited a rabbinic expression which characterized a rebellious son as one who 'makes himself equal with his father' (Hebrew: *בַּשָּׂה עֲצַמִּי לְאָבִי*), and thus suggested that 'the Jews' are here making a similar accusation: they regard Jesus as rebelling against the divine authority. Subsequent scholarship for a long time cited Odeberg as a definitive demonstration of the background and meaning of John 5.18, and thus of the entire passage.²

However, a turning point seems to have come when C. H. Dodd, writing his own major work on the Fourth Gospel, could not locate the sources which Odeberg cited.³ That Dodd was unable to trace Odeberg's reference is not surprising, given that the abbreviations used in Odeberg's footnote do not correspond to any used by him elsewhere in the book.⁴ Attempts to find the phrase even through the use of computer technology have yielded no fruit.⁵ Nevertheless, there is no reason to think that Odeberg 'fabricated' a non-existent reference in order to support his case. Nor does it seem likely that

¹ Hugo Odeberg, *The Fourth Gospel Interpreted in its Relation to Contemporaneous Religious Currents in Palestine and the Hellenistic-Oriental World* (Chicago: Argonaut, 1929).

² So e.g. R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971) 245 n. 2; E. K. Lee, *The Religious Thought of St John* (London: SPCK, 1950) 67; W. F. Howard, *Christianity According to St John* (London: Duckworth, 1943) 71. These scholars all refer to Odeberg, but do not mention his source(s). Howard also cites A. Schlatter as another scholar who has demonstrated this point, but while Schlatter, *Der Evangelist Johannes* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1930) 147, does in fact take a similar view to Odeberg, he may perhaps be dependent on him, and does not in fact cite any rabbinic reference or secondary source in support of his view.

³ C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: University, 1953) 326 n. 3, notes that Odeberg's view 'would fit the present passage admirably, but I have not been able to confirm the quotation'. More recent scholars, such as R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John. I–XII* (New York: Doubleday, 1966) 218 and C. H. Talbert, *Reading John* (London: SPCK, 1992) 124, also appear to follow Odeberg's interpretation, although without citing him explicitly, perhaps due to Dodd's cautionary remarks.

⁴ Odeberg's footnote is as follows: 'GrR. 76 SH 28b O.a.s. p. 136' (Odeberg, *Fourth Gospel*, 203 n. 2).

⁵ The author is extremely grateful to Prof. E. Segal and Dr Joel Marcus for undertaking searches on the Davka CD-Rom to verify that the phrase is not used in the rabbinic corpus.

Odeberg simply remembered a text incorrectly, since he provides a footnote, albeit an inadequate one. Perhaps a plausible explanation is that Odeberg himself was dependent on a secondary source for his information, just as so many subsequent scholars were dependent on him. This would explain why the footnote differs from all other abbreviations in Odeberg's book – they themselves are derived from another work. It is not impossible that Odeberg's source misquoted a text such as *Genesis Rabbah* 65.1 or *b.Sanh.* 71a, both of which use similar phrases, although not in the sense Odeberg appeals to.⁶ At any rate, whatever combination of misreading(s) and/or typographical errors led to the present confusion, it seems quite certain that the phrase Odeberg cites is *not* to be found in any ancient rabbinic source.

Yet even if the expression which Odeberg cites in support of his position does not exist, he nonetheless appears to have been accurate to a large extent in his intuition about the significance which such a phrase would have had in an ancient context, when used in connection with the imagery of father-son relationships. Many other texts from this period can be appealed to as evidence that sonship and equality were not corollaries, but rather incompatible. The following may be cited as examples:

Epictetus, the first century Stoic philosopher, wrote:

Bear in mind that you are a son. A son's profession is to treat everything that is his as belonging to his father, to be obedient to him in all things, never to speak ill of him to anyone else, not to say or do anything that will harm him, to give way to him in everything and yield him precedence, helping him to the utmost of his power.⁷

Similarly Ben Sira says, 'Whoever glorifies his father will have long life . . . he will serve his parents as his masters . . . Do not glorify yourself by dishonouring your father, for your father's dishonour is no glory to you . . . Whoever forsakes his father is like a blasphemer.'⁸

Philo asserted that

men who neglect their parents should cover their faces in shame . . . for the children have nothing of their own which does not belong to the parents, who have either bestowed it upon them from their own substance, or have enabled them to acquire it by supplying them with the means.⁹

And Syriac Menander wrote, 'Listen every day to the words of your father and mother, and seek not to offend and dishonour them; for the son who dishonours and offends his father and mother, God ponders his death and his misfortune. Honour your father in the proper way . . .'¹⁰ Later he has Homer's companions ask, 'whosoever will smite his father, what will happen to him?'

⁶ *Genesis Rabbah* 65.1 says of Esau, 'So for forty years Esau used to ensnare married women and violate them, yet when he attained forty years he compared himself to his father (ד'ימה עצמו לאביו), saying, "As my father was forty years old when he married, so I will marry at the age of forty." In *b. Sanhedrin* 71a R. Judah is cited as saying, 'If his mother is not like his father (שמה לאביו) in voice, appearance and stature, he does not become a rebellious son.' The author is indebted to Prof. E. Segal and Dr M. Frankel for pointing out these references.

⁷ *Dissertations* 2.7; quoted by Margaret Davies, *Rhetoric and Reference in the Fourth Gospel* (JSNTSup 69; JSOT/ Sheffield Academic, 1992) 130.

⁸ Sir 3.6–16.

⁹ Philo *Dec.* 118. The similarity between what is asserted here and John 5.19, 30 is also significant.

¹⁰ Sentences of the Syriac Menander 2.20–4.

to which Homer replies: 'This has not happened, and so it cannot be taken into account, for a son who beats his father does not exist.'¹¹ He also denounces as a bad son one who 'prays for your [i.e. his father's] death, since through your death he will receive honour, and will occupy your position, and will live on your goods at will'.¹²

The Hebrew Scriptures share similar assumptions concerning sonship, as we see in Deut 21.18, where 'a rebellious son' is one 'who will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother'.¹³

The texts which we have cited demonstrate that the subordination of sons to fathers was generally accepted in first-century Mediterranean cultures. It thus seems safe to conclude that to make oneself equal to one's father, in the sense of claiming for oneself the unique prerogatives or honour which belonged to one's father, would have been understood as making oneself a rebellious son, one who was behaving in a way inappropriate to a son. While the exact language of equality does not appear in ancient literature in the way Odeberg claimed, the phrase as used in John would nonetheless still appear to have been correctly interpreted by him: If Jesus was making himself equal with his Father, then he is a rebellious son. This further suggests that the traditional translation of v. 18 is very probably incorrect. It is usually rendered along these lines: 'He claimed that God was his own father, *thereby* making himself equal with God', equality being understood as a corollary of sonship. However, in view of the evidence we have surveyed, it appears better to take the participle *ποιῶν* as a concessive participle, which would mean that the phrase as a whole be given a sense something like, 'He claimed that God was his¹⁴ Father, yet at the same time made himself equal with God.' Jesus has claimed to be God's son; the Jews are accusing him of not behaving in a way appropriate to sonship, because he is claiming for himself his father's unique prerogatives. That is to say, 'the Jews' are accusing Jesus of behaving in a way that discredits or tells against his spoken claims, of saying one thing but doing another, of contradicting his claims through his behaviour.¹⁵ This interpretation not only fits with the cultural background of the time, but also with the response which the Johannine Jesus goes on to give.

¹¹ Sentences of the Syriac Menander 2.87-92. In the immediate context (vv. 94f.) he adds, 'More than everything love your father, you shall fear him and honour him.'

¹² Sentences of the Syriac Menander 2.198-201. Here we see clearly that, as long as the father lived, the son was subordinate. We may perhaps follow the logic of the saying in reverse and conclude that 'making oneself equal to one's father' was akin to wishing the father were dead. In connection with this see also Kenneth E. Bailey's interpretation of the parable of the prodigal son in *Poet and Peasant* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 161-8.

¹³ See also Bruce J. Malina, *Windows on the World of Jesus* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1993) 2-4.

¹⁴ There is no reason that *ἰδίου* should be regarded as emphatic, since in Koine Greek it was often used in a reduced sense to mean simply 'his'. Cf. J. N. Sanders, *The Gospel according to St. John* (ed. B. A. Mastin; London: A. & C. Black, 1968) 99 n. 3; 164 n. 3. Nonetheless, even if it is given its fuller sense this does not in any way affect the argument put forward in this paper.

¹⁵ Similar accusations, which appeal to the actions of Jesus in order to discount his claims, can be found elsewhere in John: cf. e.g. 8.13; 9.16, 24; 10.33; note also 7.27, 41f., 52, where accusations based on a contrast between what seems to be implied by Jesus' actions/words and his background are made in a similar fashion.

The response which the Johannine Jesus gives to the accusation made by 'the Jews' makes excellent sense in light of the interpretation of v. 18 we have just suggested. In vv. 19-30, Jesus is presented as emphasizing that the Son can do nothing by himself, but only what he sees his Father doing. The Fourth Evangelist is appealing to the widely accepted principle in contemporary culture that an obedient son will imitate his father.¹⁶ Thus, by doing what his Father does, Jesus shows himself to be not a rebellious or disobedient son, but an obedient one. Only if Jesus did *not* do what his Father does would he be a disrespectful, disobedient son. And because the Son has been appointed as the agent of his Father, he is to be honoured as if he were the one who sent him, as if he were the Father himself.¹⁷

Thus it would seem that the author wishes to emphasize that, on the one hand, Jesus was *not* a rebellious son: he did not *make himself* equal with God.¹⁸ By doing what his Father does he demonstrates his obedience rather than disobedience. And as the agent of the Father, the Son *functions* equally with God: he bears the full authority of the Father, so that to honour or dishonour him is to honour or dishonour the Father, to obey or disobey him is to obey or disobey the Father who sent him. We may thus conclude that, although Odeberg based his interpretation on a non-existent rabbinic citation, he nonetheless came very close to the meaning of the text: the Jews accuse Jesus of being a rebellious son, and the Johannine Jesus denies the charge.¹⁹

¹⁶ See the parallels from the Oxyrhynchus Papyri cited by Dodd, 'A Hidden Parable in the Fourth Gospel', *More New Testament Studies* (Manchester: Manchester University, 1968) 32-8; also see Philo *Conf. Ling.* 63, which bears witness to the same cultural assumption, and is of even greater interest because of its use in connection with the Logos.

¹⁷ On agency in the Fourth Gospel and in particular John 5 see Peder Borgen, 'God's Agent in the Fourth Gospel', *The Interpretation of John* (ed. John Ashton; Philadelphia: Fortress/London: SPCK, 1986) 67-78; A. E. Harvey, 'Christ as Agent', *The Glory of Christ in the New Testament* (ed. L. D. Hurst and N. T. Wright; Oxford: Clarendon, 1987) 239-50; M. M. Thompson, 'John, Gospel of', *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, I. Howard Marshall; Leicester: IVP, 1992) 377-9; B. Witherington, *John's Wisdom* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 141. As Harvey notes, 'the Son as the Father's agent *par excellence* . . . was empirically the case in ancient Middle Eastern commerce' ('Christ as Agent', 241).

¹⁸ That the key problem with the objection of 'the Jews' is to be found in the words 'made himself' is suggested by a number of scholars, including Ashton, Barrett, Brown, Meeks, Neyrey and Pryor.

¹⁹ The author wishes to thank J. Truex for fruitful dialogue and helpful insights in discussing many of the points made in this article.