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THE ANALOGY OF FAITH: DOES SCRIPTURE INTERPRET SCRIPTURE?

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There is a principle of biblical interpretation called the *analogy of faith* that is popularly understood to mean “Scripture interprets Scripture,” or “Scripture interprets itself.” This is actually a misunderstanding. Not every Scripture is interpreted by another Scripture. For example, there is no other Scripture that gives us the correct interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15:29 (“Otherwise, what will those do who are baptized for the dead?”¹). In fact, no other Scripture even mentions baptism for the dead. There are, however, other Scriptures regarding salvation and death that *eliminate* some interpretations of this passage. We know, for example, that it cannot mean that vicarious baptism can save the souls of those who are already dead, because this interpretation contradicts the clear statement in Hebrews 9:27 that after death comes judgment.

The analogy of faith is not the principle that Scripture interprets Scripture, but that *all Scripture is in agreement and will not contradict itself*. It assumes the unity and harmony of teaching throughout the Bible. In other words, when multiple passages say something about a topic (either explicitly or implicitly), then what those passages say about that topic will be consistent and will not be contradictory. For example, Psalm 34:15 speaks of God having eyes and ears, whereas John 4:24 says God is spirit. The analogy of faith means that these passages are not contradictory, as they might appear at first glance. We can reconcile them when we recognize that in Psalm 34:15 the author is using a figure of speech and is not asserting that God has literal, physical eyes and ears. He is asserting, rather, that God watches over His people and hears their cries for help; whereas in John 4:24 Jesus is asserting that God is not a physical being, therefore, the physical location of His worshipers is not what is most important to Him. The analogy of faith forces us to dig further to understand how passages that appear to be contradictory should be understood.

This brings us to another aspect of the analogy of faith, that is, that we should interpret unclear passages in light of clear passages, not the other way around. Milton Terry says the expression *analogy of faith* “denotes that general harmony of fundamental doctrine which pervades the entire Scriptures....No single statement or obscure passage of one book can be allowed to set aside a doctrine which is clearly established by many passages. The obscure texts must be interpreted in the light of those which are plain and positive.”² When a particular passage is unclear to us, we can and should go to other passages that address the same topic more clearly in order to help us understand the unclear passage.

The Unclear Passage. Let’s consider Jesus’ statement in John 10:24–36 as example of how this principle works. The Jews had encircled Jesus to confront Him with their demand, “How long will you continue to annoy us? If You Yourself are the Christ, speak to us openly!” (v. 24). Jesus had spoken to them, of course, but they did not believe Him. They were not interested in whether Jesus was really the Christ (Messiah); they just wanted Him to make some statement they could use to accuse Him. When Jesus told them “I and the Father are one” (v. 30), they understood that to be a claim that He is God: “For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy; and because You, being a man, make Yourself out to be God” (v. 33). In what appears to be a defense of His assertion, Jesus said, “Has it not been 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’?” (vv. 34–36).

Many commentators have taken Jesus' statement to be a quote from Psalm 82:6: "I said 'you are gods, And all of you are sons of the Most High.'" Those who deny the deity of Jesus Christ argue that He was *not* claiming to be *God*, that is, divine in nature, but only claiming to be *a god*, a designation that was used of mere humans in Psalm 82. Let's take a look at this psalm and some related passages to see if they shed any light on the meaning of the passage in John.

The Clear Passages. The historical context of Psalm 82 is in dispute, but the meaning seems to be clear. The psalm begins with the declaration that God stands in the midst of "the congregation of God [Heb. *El*]." This is a reference to God's people, Israel. The psalm then says that God judges in the midst of "gods." The Hebrew word here is *Elohim*. This is a reference to the rulers of Israel who were to judge the people. Jesus' statement sounds similar to Psalm 82:6, but if He is referring to this verse, why does He ask, "Has it not been written in your *Law*"? The Psalms are not part of the Old Testament Law.

If you look closely at Psalm 82:6, you will notice that the reference is actually to a statement that God made elsewhere: "I said, 'you are gods [*Elohim*].'" There are two passages in Exodus (which is part of the Law) in which the judges of Israel are referred to as *gods (Elohim)*: "Then his master shall bring him unto the judges [*Elohim*]...and he shall serve him for ever" (Exod. 21:6); "Then the owner of the house shall appear before the judges [*Elohim*], to determine whether he laid his hands on his neighbor's property. For every breach of trust...both parties shall come before the judges [*Elohim*]; he whom the judges [*Elohim*] condemn shall pay double to his neighbor" (Exod. 22:8-9).

The judges of Israel were supposed to be the representatives of God to the people. They were to judge them with righteous judgment (see Deut. 1:16; 16:18). They stood in the place of God to execute His justice; to the people, they were gods. (A similar expression was used with reference to Moses. God told Moses, "See, I make you God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet" [Exod. 7:1]. Since Moses would be God's representative, he would be God to Pharaoh.) There was a problem, however, which the psalmist addresses in Psalm 82. He asks, "How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked?" (v. 2). The judges of Israel were not judging with righteous judgment. They sat in the judgment seat as God's instruments of justice, but they had perverted justice. Their exalted position, however, would not protect them from God's judgment. The psalmist says that even though they were called gods, they would "die like men and fall like one of the princes" (v. 7).

Understanding Jesus' Response. These Old Testament passages give us the background to understand the confrontation between Jesus and the leaders of Israel. In John 7:24, Jesus already had pointed out that they were judging according to appearance rather than righteousness; and in 8:15, He accused them of judging according to the flesh. Then, in chapter 10, when Jesus claimed to be the Son of God and the Pharisees accused Him of blasphemy, Jesus responded by recalling a similar situation where a divine title was ascribed to the judges of Israel.

Jesus said that since the judges of old who only *received* the Word of God were called *gods* because they were the representatives of God, it is proper and right that He who *is* the Word of God should be recognized as the *Son of God* because He is the very presence of God. If it was fitting to call the judges of Israel *gods* because of the work they were appointed by God to do, then it is even more fitting to call Jesus the *Son of God* because of the works that He was set apart and sent by God to do. Jesus took upon Himself the designation *Son of God* because He did the very works of God: "If I am not doing the works of My Father, do not believe Me. But if I am doing them, and you do not believe Me, then believe the works in order that you might know and understand that the Father is in Me and I in the Father" (vv. 37-38). The works of Jesus are key. By them the Pharisees should have recognized Jesus to be the Son of God; instead, they judged Him to be a blasphemer.

These Old Testament passages not only help us to interpret the difficult passage in John 10 correctly, but also to disqualify the interpretation that Jesus was claiming merely to be *a god*, a representative of God, like the judges. They show us that the term *gods (Elohim)*, as applied to the judges, meant that they represented deity, not that they were deity. The Jews understood the title *Son of God*, however, to designate deity (other clear passages about the Son of God also confirm this); to claim this title was to

claim to be God, which is why they accused Jesus of blasphemy. Jesus' response to their accusation was *not* that He was claiming merely to be a representative of God like the judges, which isn't blasphemous, but that His works demonstrated that He really was the *Son of God* or *God*. This explains why the Jews wanted to seize Jesus even after hearing His response; they correctly understood Him, but they still refused to believe that He was the Son of God.

— Thomas A. Howe

NOTES

1. All Bible quotations are the author's translation.
2. Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments*, vol. 2, *Library of Biblical and Theological Literature*, ed. George R. Crooks and John F. Hurst (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1883), 579.