



Grindheim, Sigurd.

God's Equal: What can we Know about Jesus' Self-Understanding in the Synoptic Gospels?

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

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Many New Testament scholars take for granted that John's Gospel presents a "high" Christology while suggesting that the Synoptics never quite reach such heights. Take a representative argument from Bart Ehrman who suggests that Jesus was first declared to be the Son of God at his resurrection, but his exalted status kept getting pushed back as time went on. So in Mark he's declared Son of God at his baptism; in Luke and Matthew at his birth; and in John in eternity past.¹ We see Jesus progress from "a man who was empowered by God to do mighty things"² to the Word of God, who "existed with God in the very beginning, before the creation of the world... before coming into this world as a human being."³ Ehrman says:

This is the view that became the standard Christian doctrine, that Christ was the preexistent Word of God who became flesh. He both was with God in the beginning and was God, and it was through him that the universe was created. But this was not the original view held by the followers of Jesus. The idea that Jesus

¹ Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (and Why We Don't Know About Them)* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 246-49.

² *Jesus, Interrupted*, 247.

³ *Jesus, Interrupted*, 248.

was divine was a later Christian invention, one found, among our Gospels, only in John.⁴

This is a fairly common view of the development of NT Christology among critical scholars. Enter Sigurd Grindheim, who unabashedly goes against the grain in his monograph *God's Equal: What can we Know about Jesus' Self-Understanding in the Synoptic Gospels?*, and turns this argument on its ear. Grindheim seeks to determine what we can know about what Jesus thought about himself from the things that he reportedly said and did. He employs the standard criteria of authenticity (with an emphasis the criteria of multiple attestation and dissimilarity) in examining the sayings of the historical Jesus and key events in his ministry.

Based upon Jesus' brining God's kingly rule to the earth through, e.g., exorcisms (chapter 1); performing miracles according to his own power (chapter 2); possessing authority to forgive sins (chapter 3); standing in judgment over the final destiny of people (chapter 4); speaking with equal or greater authority than the Law (chapter 5); and interacting with his people as God interacted with Israel (chapter 6), Grindheim concludes that Jesus is every bit God's equal. He shores up his argument with reference to Jesus' self-descriptions as e.g., Bridegroom, Mother Hen, King, or Sower (chapter 7) before comparing Jesus' words and actions with the various mediatory figures in Second Temple Judaism (chapter 8). Unsurprisingly, Grindheim finds that no other figure possesses the inherent authority that Jesus does.

Grindheim goes on to examine the Father-Son relationship between God and Jesus (chapter 9); the Son of Man designation (chapter 10); and finally Jesus' charges against the Temple (chapter 11). The results of these chapters are mixed in that Grindheim concludes that there is subordination in the relationship between equals; that Son of Man is probably invested with more meaning than merely "the human one" and refers to Jesus individually rather than to the people of God collectively, but he's inconclusive on the connection to Daniel 7; and whatever Jesus' attitude toward the Temple tells us, whether it be that Jesus was against the temple authorities, the religious practices taking place, or that he merely envisioned the eschatological rebuilding of the temple and sought to enact it, "the temple traditions in the Synoptic Gospels do not provide independent evidence for [his] thesis." (217)

God's Equal is a welcome contribution to the field of NT studies in general and Historical Jesus/Christological studies in particular. Grindheim succeeded in challenging many things that I

⁴ Jesus, Interrupted, 249.

have always taken for granted. For example, in the opening chapter he highlights how Jewish expectation wasn't for a Messianic kingdom, but rather for *God's* kingdom. When Jesus talks about establishing the kingdom of God he presumes the role of God for himself, not of some divine mediator. Likewise, Grindheim persuasively shows in the following chapters that Jewish eschatological hopes were for *God* to heal, deliver, perform miracles, etc., *not the Messiah*. In texts that speak about the forgiveness of sins it is always *God* who forgives sin. At best, an intermediary can pronounce forgiveness, but the agent of forgiveness is always God. Second Temple literature generally depicts God as the *final* eschatological judge and yet this is a role that Jesus claims for himself.

In his examination of intermediaries in Second Temple literature Grindheim shows that the parallels between them and Jesus are trumped by the parallels between God and Jesus. This is an important point that goes largely unmentioned in scholarly publications. In fact, before Grindheim's monograph I have only seen this line of argument substantially developed in Chris Tilling's unpublished doctoral thesis, although Tilling focuses on the Pauline corpus. So Grindheim is to be commended for traveling a fairly uncleared path. His overall thesis is compelling, but that's not to say that it's without shortcomings, some of which I will enumerate below.

Perhaps the most glaring problem with this volume is that Grindheim never explains what he means by "equal." In other words, how does Grindheim understand the equality between God and Jesus to exist? Sure, he shows the bankruptcy of deference to mere agency whenever Jesus speaks or acts as God, but he goes on to describe Jesus' relationship to the Father as "one of submission" (169) and asserts that there is "a clear hierarchy" (184) in the relationship, so is it on ontological grounds that the two are equal? He appeals to the Father-Son relationship so perhaps he understands Jesus' submission as filial and nothing else, whatever that might entail. We're never told, and if left to guess, I think we'd have to assume that Grindheim has ontological equality in mind.

But then what of the submission and hierarchy? How are we to understand that? Grindheim leaves unexamined the various statements in the Synoptics about Jesus coming into the world or having been sent by the Father (e.g., Matt. 10:40; 15:24; Luke 4:18, 43; 9:48; 10:16; Mark 1:38; 9:37; et al.) Simon Gathercole suggests that "when the language of "sending" is used, it is clearly

to focus on the fact that the envoy stands under the authority of God.”⁵ So does Grindheim have submission and hierarchy in terms of authority and power in mind? If so, then doesn't that undercut his main thesis? Again, Grindheim could have been much clearer on this point.

There's also the issue of too easily glossing over certain problematic passages. For example, Matthew 28:18 says, “And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.’” Grindheim doesn't treat this saying in its own right and only mentions it in connection with Matthew 11:27. He says that this “saying of the risen Jesus in Mt. 28.19 [sic] cannot be used as the basis for our understanding of what the historical Jesus said in Mt. 11.27 par.” (181) But why not? Why would we not interpret a less clear statement in light of an explicit one? Or, laying aside our understanding of Matthew 11:27, what do we do with Matthew 28:18? What are we to make of the risen Jesus being given authority if he always possessed it prior to his death and resurrection?

Another area in which Grindheim's language could have been tightened up was in the repeated references to Jesus thinking/claiming he could “take God's place” (1, 3, 53, 122, 123, 131 [2x], 133, 169, 182, 184, 204, 220, 221). One gets the impression that Grindheim is suggesting that Jesus believed himself to have been displacing or replacing God but nothing in the Gospels supports this and by the end of the book we realize that Grindheim doesn't believe this to be the case either. He says, “His implicit claims to authority are so strong that one wonders if he thought he was YHWH, or if he thought he was a second god who had appeared on earth to take YHWH's place. This is evidently not the case, however, as he repeatedly expresses his complete submission to the Father.” (220)

I offer these critical reflections in anticipation of what those less persuaded by Grindheim's overall case might argue, not as one attempting to overthrow his position, with which I find myself in large agreement. I only desire to see as substantive an engagement with these issues as Grindheim shows with his dialogue partners throughout this volume. In general, I'm appreciative for the attempt to fill a lacuna in Christological research; may Grindheim and others continue plumb the depths of the Synoptics in search of a robust Christology.

⁵ Simon Gathercole, *The Preexistent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 179.