SHORT STUDY

Jesus’ Supposed Blasphemy
(Mark 14:61b–64)

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Historically, Jesus’ supposed blasphemy before the Sanhedrin consisted in the claim that he would sit at God’s right hand and come with the clouds of heaven, a divine mode of transport. Though replaced with “the Power” in public reporting, “Yahweh” in Jesus’ actual quotation of Ps 110:1 made the supposed blasphemy deserving of death in agreement with m. Sanh. 7:5.

Key Words: blasphemy, tetragrammaton

Darrell L. Bock’s article, “Blasphemy and the Jewish Examination of Jesus” (BBR 17 [2007] 53–114) contains very much of value. I happily agree with his defending the historicity of Mark 14:53–72, especially vv. 61b–64, and would like to strengthen that defense.

Bock notes my view that “Jesus pronounced the divine Name [‘Yahweh’] in violation of m. Sanh. 7:5 when he alluded to Ps 110:1”; that “this citation was suppressed in the public reports of the scene, including Mark’s, so as not to repeat the blasphemy and compound the offense [this suppression in conformity with m. Sanh. 7:5]”; and that “only an utterance repeating the divine Name could count for a charge of capital blasphemy, just as the Mishnah says.”1 This observation does well so far as it goes. Then Bock writes that his own “goal [in Blasphemy and Exaltation in Judaism and the Final Examination of Jesus2] was simply to suggest that a pronouncement of the divine Name alone cannot explain the charge [of capital blasphemy].”3 This statement seems to imply that I think a pronunciation of the divine Name alone could explain the charge of capital blasphemy. Bock writes again, “Gundry . . . raises an objection against the conceptual view;”4

4. Ibid., 74 n. 52.
and ranges my view against his conceptual view, which is that Jesus’ supposed blasphemy consisted primarily in his claiming for himself a seat at God’s right hand so as to share the very authority of God himself and thus “evaporat[e] the distance between himself and God.”

Well before the publication of Bock’s *Blasphemy and Exaltation*, however, I wrote in my Mark commentary (which Bock cites in other respects) that “though capitally punishable blasphemy requires a pronunciation of the tetragrammaton [= the divine Name], such blasphemy consists not merely in pronouncing it, but also in dishonoring it,” and that “we may best think that the high priest and rest of the Sanhedrin judge[d] Jesus to have verbally robbed God of incommensurateness and unity by escalating himself to a superhuman level, by portraying himself as destined to sit at God’s right hand and come with the clouds of heaven.” In much the same language I repeated this opinion in my book (also cited by Bock in other respects) *The Old Is Better: New Testament Essays in Support of Traditional Interpretations*.

So I do not disagree with what Bock has more recently dubbed “the conceptual view.” And because of our agreement on this view, Bock’s argument that my treatment of blasphemy “entirely misses” the point that “the Name could have been pronounced . . . in allusion to Scripture, and as such would not have been seen as a blasphemous offense on its own” becomes irrelevant. I have never claimed that an utterance of the divine Name would have been seen as a blasphemous offense on its own.

Bock and I do disagree, however, on the likelihood of Jesus’ having uttered “Yahweh” in his allusion to Ps 110:1, an allusion in which the divine Name was then replaced with “the Power” in reportage (Mark 14:62). I think the utterance likely because it fits *m. Sanh.* 7:5 so well, right down to the high priest’s tearing his garments at the appropriate moment, and because we have no evidence that when quoting Ps 110:1 in Mark 12:35–37 and parallels, Jesus used a substitute for “Yahweh” (which comes over as κύριος, “Lord,” in the Evangelists’ Greek). Bock thinks it unlikely that Jesus uttered “Yahweh” in his allusion to Ps 110:1 because, in Bock’s view, “the solemnity of the scene” probably led Jesus “to match” the high priest’s substitution of “the Blessed One” for “God” by substituting “the Power” for “Yahweh.” In view of Mark 12:35–37, *m. Sanh.* 7:5, and perhaps in view of Bock’s own characterization of the scene as not a formal trial but

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5. Ibid., 71–85.
9. For details, see my *Old Is Better*, esp. 103–4; idem, *Mark*, 913–20. Since κύριος translates the tetragrammaton, Bock’s statement (“Blasphemy,” 72 n. 45) that “the argument over the term ‘Lord’ works better there [in Mark 12:36], if it was a substitute for the divine Name” makes no sense to me.
10. Ibid., 74, 90, 95–96.
as an informal (and therefore less-than-solemn?) hearing, it seems to me more likely that it was a reporter of Jesus’ statement before the Sanhedrin, not Jesus himself, who matched the high priest’s substitution with another substitution. And this greater likelihood would strengthen the case for historicity by eliminating entirely the objection to historicity that m. Sanh. 7:5 requires utterance of the tetragrammaton for blasphemy to deserve the death penalty, whereas Jesus is not recorded as uttering it. In all likelihood, he did utter it.¹¹