

THE WORK OF GOD OR OF HUMAN BEINGS: A NOTE ON JOHN 6:29

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Abstract: *According to John 6:29, faith is “the work of God” (τὸ ἔργον τοῦ θεοῦ). This genitive construction has been interpreted either as the work that God requires or as the work that God does. On the basis of the flow of the argument in John 6, with its focus on God’s gift, this article argues for the latter interpretation, emphasizing that faith is given by God.*

Key Words: *John 6:29; faith; work of God*

Commentators are divided about the interpretation of John 6:28–29: “[t]hen they said to him, ‘What must we do to perform the works of God?’ Jesus answered them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.’” Is the phrase “the work of God” (τὸ ἔργον τοῦ θεοῦ) a subjective genitive, referring to the work that God does?¹ Or is it an objective genitive, referring to the work that God expects of human beings?² On the latter interpretation, Jesus teaches his audience

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¹ So Theodor Zahn, *Das Evangelium des Johannes* (6th ed.; Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 4; Leipzig: Deichert, 1921), 335; Adolf Schlatter, *Der Evangelist Johannes: Wie er spricht, denkt und glaubt* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1930), 171; Rudolf Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes* (KEK; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1964), 164; Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (I–XII): Introduction, Translation and Notes* (AB 29; New York: Doubleday, 1966), 262, 265; Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 207–8; J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 367.

² So Heinr. Aug. W. Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of John*, vol. 1 (trans. William Urwick; Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the NT; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1874), 281; B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John: Introduction and Notes on the Authorized Version* (London: Murray, 1908), 101; J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1929), 1:192; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 319; Barnabas Lindars, *The Gospel of John* (NCB; London: Oliphants, 1972), 255–56; Severino Pancaro, *The Law in the Fourth Gospel: The Torah and the Gospel, Moses and Jesus, Judaism and Christianity According to John* (NovTSup 42; Leiden: Brill, 1975), 392; F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 151; Ernst Haenchen, *John 1* (trans. Robert W. Funk; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1984), 290; Michel Roberge, “La composition de Jean 6, 25b–34,” *LTP* 50 (1994): 174, 180; Ben Witherington, *John’s Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 155; Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (ed. Daniel J. Harrington; SP 4; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 209; Udo Schnelle, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes* (THKNT; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1998), 121; George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (2nd ed.; WBC 36; Dallas: Word, 1999), 91; D. Moody Smith, *John* (ANTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 152; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 1:678; Urban C. von Wahlde, *The Gospel and Letters of John*, vol. 2: *Commentary on the Gospel of John* (ECC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 297; Jean Zumstein, *L’évangile selon Saint Jean (1–12)* (CNT 4a; Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2014), 222. Some commentators emphasize that the work that God requires, faith, is also the work that God does (Edwyn Clement Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel* [2nd ed.; ed. Francis Noel Davey; London: Faber and Faber, 1947], 293; C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel*

that God is only interested in one thing: faith, as opposed to the many works they have in mind. On the former interpretation, the dialogue is an example of Johannine misunderstanding. Whereas Jesus's audience is thinking of the works that God requires of them, Jesus teaches them that what matters is not what they do, but what God does. Their faith in him is a gift from God. The most literal translations preserve the ambiguity with the expression "work of God" (NRSV; cf. ESV; HCSB; NAB; NASB; NIV; NKJV), but many resolve it in favor of an objective genitive: "the work that God requires" (REB; cf. CEB; CEV; GNB; NEB; NET; NJB; NLT).³ In this brief article, I will argue that contextual considerations favor the subjective genitive.

In the Scriptures of Israel and in the literature of Second Temple Judaism, the construction "work of God" or "works of God" is used both with reference to the works that God does and to the works that he requires of human beings.⁴ With regard to John 6:29, the arguments in favor of the latter interpretation have been presented forcefully by Urban C. von Wahlde.⁵ He intends to debunk the interpretation that Jesus's words were meant to correct a legalistic misunderstanding of works. Scholars who have seen Jesus as attacking legalism point to the contrast between the interrogators' use of the plural "works" (ἔργα) and Jesus's use of the

According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text [London: S.P.C.K., 1967], 239; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium*, vol. 2 [HTKNT 4; Freiburg: Herder, 1971], 52; Ludger Schenke, "Die formale und gedankliche Struktur von Joh 6,26–58," *BZ* 24 [1980]: 38; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* [Pillar NT Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991], 285; Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John* [BNTC; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005], 227.

³ The genitive "Gottes Werk" is maintained in most German translations (Elberfelder 1905; Luther 1984; Züricher Bibel; Neue Evangelistische; Einheitsübersetzung). Gute Nachricht has taken the phrase as an objective genitive: "Gott verlangt nur eins von euch." La Bible de Jérusalem, Segond 21, Nouvelle Edition de Genève (1979), and La Bible du Semeur have a genitive construction as well: "Œuvre de Dieu." Bible en français courant (1997) presupposes an objective genitive and renders: "Œuvre que Dieu attend de vous." A genitive is also found in the Spanish Reina-Valera 1995 ("la obra de Dios") and the Italian Nuova Riveduta 2006 ("l'opera de Dio"). More idiomatic translations rephrase based on the interpretation of the expression as an objective genitive (the Spanish Dios Habla Hoy, Nueva Traducción Viviente, La Palabra, Traducción en lenguaje actual, and the Italian La Bibbia della Gioia). The translations of the Swedish (2000) and the Danish (1992) Bible societies retain the genitive construction ("Guds verk"/"Guds gerning"), in contrast to the Norwegian Bible Society (1978 as well as 2011, but not 1930), which interprets the phrase as an objective genitive: "[d]ette er den gjerning Gud vil dere skal gjøre." I have not found a Bible translation that rephrases the expression based on the interpretation that it is a subjective genitive.

⁴ For the former, see Exod 32:16; Jer 51:10 LXX; Pss 63:10 LXX; 65:5 LXX; 77:7 LXX; Tob 12:7, 11, 22; 2 Macc 3:36; CD-A 1:1–2; 1QS 4:4; 1QH^a 13:36. For the latter, see Jer 31:10 LXX; Bar 2:9; 1 Esd 7:15; 4 Ezra 7:24; CD-A 2:14–15; 13:7–8. Some of these instances may be debatable, but for our present purposes it suffices to note that both meanings are in evidence. Roland Bergmeier has shown that the meaning "works required by God" is well attested when the term is used in the plural, and that John also operates with the contrast between the works of God, performed by human beings, and the works of the devil, also performed by human beings (John 8:41–47; see "Glaube als Werk? Die 'Werke Gottes' in Damaskusschrift II, 14–15 und Johannes 6, 28–29," *RevQ* 6 [1967]: 253–60). This background is of limited value for the interpretation of John 6:29, as the question concerns the significance of the change from the plural (ἔργα τοῦ θεοῦ) to the singular (ἔργον τοῦ θεοῦ) in Jesus's reply.

⁵ Urban C. Von Wahlde, "Faith and Works in Jn VI 28–29: Exegesis or Eisegesis?" *NovT* 22 (1980): 307–14.

singular (ἔργον). They also maintain that the plural is meant to be derogatory, as is the use of the verb ἐργάζομαι (“perform”). Von Wahlde shows that these conclusions are unwarranted. The plural form “works” (ἔργα) as well as the verb ἐργάζομαι (“perform”) are widely used with positive connotations, both in Jewish literature and in the Gospel of John. Von Wahlde avers that the tension between legalism and faith is not an issue in the Gospel of John.⁶ He therefore prefers to read the phrase in light of Jesus’s words in John 3:21; 8:39–47; 9:4. These verses describe the deeds of the disciples, not as legalistic works, but as works that are commended.⁷

Von Wahlde has successfully demonstrated that the Johannine Jesus speaks positively of works and that he expects his followers to have works. However, his arguments do not focus on the immediate context of the verse under discussion, John 6:29. It is therefore necessary to take a closer look at the function that Jesus’s words serve in the argument that unfolds in the bread of life discourse.

Jesus’s words, “this is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent” (6:29), are given in answer to a question from the audience: “What must we do to perform the works of God?” (v. 28). This question has followed Jesus’s assertion that he will give (δώσει) “the food that endures for eternal life” (v. 27). As Diana Swancutt has shown, Jesus’s words allude to Isa 55:2–3: “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.”⁸ Jesus thus explains the point of the preceding feeding miracle: he brings the free gift of God (cf. Isa 55:1). This gift is the real provision from God, in contrast to Moses’s provision of manna for the wilderness generation (6:32–33).⁹ Throughout his discourse, Jesus emphasizes the gift-character of his provision.¹⁰ The bread of life pericope is characterized by an unusual frequency of the term δίδωμι. It occurs 11 times, including eight times on Jesus’s lips (vv. 27, 32 [bis], 33, 37, 39, 51, 65). His gift of “the food that endures for eternal life” (v. 27) is nothing other than himself, as he explains: “I am the bread of life” (v. 35; cf. v. 51). “To eat this bread” is therefore a periphrasis for “to believe in him” (vv. 35, 47–51).¹¹ In other words, to believe is to receive the gift that is Jesus himself. Accordingly, Jesus also describes the act of coming to him as a gift from God: “Everything that the Father gives (δίδωσιν) me

⁶ Ibid., 306.

⁷ Ibid., 314–15.

⁸ Diana M. Swancutt, “Hunger Assuaged by the Bread from Heaven: ‘Eating Jesus’ as Isaian Call to Belief: The Confluence of Isaiah 55 and Psalm 78 (77) in John 6.22–71,” in *Early Christian Interpretation of the Scriptures of Israel: Investigations and Proposals* (ed. Craig A. Evans and James A. Sanders; JSNTSup 148; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 219.

⁹ Peder Borgen, *Bread from Heaven: An Exegetical Study of the Concept of Manna in the Gospel of John and the Writings of Philo* (NovTSup 10; Leiden: Brill, 1981), 149.

¹⁰ Similarly, Frederick A. Rusch, “The Signs and the Discourse: The Rich Theology of John 6,” *CurTM* 5 (1978): 388–89.

¹¹ Similarly, Swancutt, “Hunger,” 246; Stephen E. Fowl, “John 6:25–35,” *Int* 61 (2007): 316.

will come to me” (v. 37).¹² “And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me (δ δέδωκεν μοι), but raise it up on the last day” (v. 39; cf. 10:29; 17:2, 6, 7; 18:9). “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted (δεδομένον) by the Father” (6:65).¹³

As is typical of John’s Gospel, Jesus’s words about God’s work in 6:29 are being misunderstood. Thinking that believing in him is a choice they make based on adequate evidence, his audience asks: “What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?” (6:30). The irony is that Jesus has just performed the legitimating sign, but the interrogators remain in disbelief (6:36; cf. 10:25–26; 12:39; 15:24).¹⁴

As in the case of the Pharisees that interrogated the man born blind (9:41), the very fact that they see confirms their culpability. Even though they see the sign, they are unable to interpret the sign appropriately. They have not understood the value of Jesus’s action as sign, as Jesus has already told them: “I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves” (6:26). They have their mind set on the matters of this world, “food that perishes,” not on the spiritual gift that Jesus provides, “the food that endures for eternal life” (6:27).

The narrative reveals people’s inability to accept the gift that is given to them in the ministry of Jesus.¹⁵ Jesus therefore observes: “[n]o one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me” (6:44; cf. 10:26–27). When someone comes to Jesus, which is to say, when someone believes in Jesus, their coming is the work of the Father, who draws them. To receive the gift of Jesus is itself a gift, given by the Father. The point is succinctly stated by Jesus in v. 29: “the work that God does is that you believe in him whom he has sent.”

That faith in Jesus is the work of God is a point John also makes elsewhere. In the prologue, he emphasizes that to believe in his name is to be “born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God” (1:12–13). The use of the concept of new birth strongly emphasizes the need for a divine initiative. Nicodemus observes that no one can “enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born” (3:4). In the conversation with Nicodemus, the concept of faith (3:15–16, 18) is once more used to explain the idea of being born again (3:3, 5, 8).¹⁶

The bread of life discourse emphasizes the same point. Faith in Jesus is a gift that God gives.

¹² Rusch observes: “Here reception of the bread, or Jesus, is a product of the Father’s initiative” (“John 6,” 388).

¹³ A. Vanhoye aptly observes: “c’est le Père qui donne Jésus aux hommes, c’est le Père qui donne les hommes à Jésus” (“Notre foi, œuvre divine, d’après le quatrième évangile,” *NRTb* 36 [1964]: 342).

¹⁴ Fowl, “John 6:25–35,” 315.

¹⁵ Similarly, Vanhoye, “Notre foi,” 341.

¹⁶ Brown observes that vv. 14–15 provide “the actual answer to Nicodemus’ question, ‘How can things like this happen?’” (*John [I–XII]*, 145).