

God Came Down

(The Fourth Gospel)

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Jesus in Jerusalem, Again (7:1-10:21)

The Third Feast

Throughout this block of material (7:1-10:21), one sees the ongoing contrast between belief and disbelief. Jesus repeatedly makes claims concerning his identity. Some respond to these claims in belief, others in disbelief. Believing in Jesus means believing that he is who he claims himself to be; his identity is what is at issue. Why such different reactions is a question John wishes to keep before us. When we have answered this question with reference to the original players in this first century drama, then we must answer it for ourselves with reference to the players of the drama of which we are a part.

The Feast of Tabernacles

All of the material in chapters 7:1-10:21 is set within the context of the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, most probably in the year 29 AD, six months following the events recorded in chapter 6 (the 2nd Passover). It would be helpful to our interpretive efforts to have a good sense of what usually happened in Jerusalem during the celebration of this feast.

The feast of Tabernacles (also called "Feast of Booths") was primarily the feast of the foreign pilgrims of the Jewish Diaspora; i.e., the dispersed Jews of the ten lost tribes of Israel, the Hellenistic Jews of the Mediterranean world. This feast was in the cool of early autumn, when all harvest operations were over. Tabernacles occurred during the Jewish month of *Tishri* (late September and early October). The streets of

Jerusalem were usually filled with strangers from afar, as well as the countrymen of the regions of Palestine (Judea, Perea, Galilee, etc.). Jews from all parts of the Mediterranean world came to Jerusalem to gather under the shadow of the glorious sanctuary of marble and cedar wood, to be near the *shekinah* (the light burning in the Holy of Holies), which represented to all Jews the manifest presence of *Yahweh*, the Holy One of Israel, who dwelt in the midst of Israel.

The Feast of Tabernacles consisted of much symbolism. It was a commemoration of the forty-year journey of Israel's forefathers in the wilderness. Tents were made of tree limbs and branches, in which the people dwelt during six of the eight days of the feast. On the first day, preparation was made for the next seven days and the seven-day celebration was announced on the evening of the first day by the blasting of trumpets. The second day was heralded at daybreak by the blasting of two silver trumpets. A priest, accompanied by a jubilant procession, descended from the Temple with a golden pitcher and proceeded down to the pool of Siloam. There he filled the pitcher with water and ascended again to the Temple on Mt. Moriah. As he passed through each court of the Temple (the courts of the Gentiles, women, Israel, and priests), there was a blast of three trumpets. He was joined at the court of the priest by his fellow-priests and preceded to the brazen altar where the water was poured out at the base of the altar. This ritual symbolized the abundance of water they now enjoyed in the promised land (cf. Isaiah 12:1-6); while, at the same time, calling to memory the promise of God to pour out his Spirit on his people again, at a time when the prophetic spirit would be awakened in Israel (Isaiah 12:1-6; Joel 2:12-32).

Sacrifices were offered throughout the day in the Temple, and the people assembled in the synagogues for prayer and the reading of those Scriptures associated with this feast (e.g., Exodus 23:14ff; 34:22ff; Lev 23:33ff; Isaiah 12; etc.). Much activity, such as lecturing, discussion, and debate, went on within the courts or colonnades of the Temple, and in the synagogues, during the day; such was typical of any Jewish feast. At night the people assembled in large masses in the court of the women. Four huge golden lampstands (which burned oil) were placed in the center of the court. The whole court was illuminated by these lampstands, which were lighted by torchbearers who danced before the people. Such activities as these were carried on for seven days.

Then, on the evening of the eighth day, the tents were disassembled, the drawing of water ceased, the lighting of the lamps discontinued, and the people waited the eighth day, which they kept as a Sabbath (Lev 23:33-36). The eighth day of the feast began at sunset and the night was conspicuous with the silence and darkness. It is, in all probability, during the day activity in the Temple courts (the lectures and discussions among the colonnades) that Jesus' teaching and his encounters with the Jews occurred (cf. 7:14, 28; 8:2, 59).

Scene One (7:1-13): Jesus Goes Up to the Feast

After this, Jesus went around in Galilee, purposely staying away from Judea because the Jews there were waiting to take his life.² But when the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles was near,³ Jesus' brothers said to him, "You ought to leave here and go to Judea, so that your disciples may see the miracles you do."⁴ No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret. Since you are doing these things, show yourself to the world."⁵ For even his own brothers did not believe in him.⁶ Therefore Jesus told them, "The right time for me has not yet come; for you any time is right."⁷ The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify that what it does is evil.⁸ You go to the Feast. I am not yet going up to this Feast, because for me the right time has not yet come."⁹ Having said this, he stayed in Galilee.¹⁰ However, after his brothers had left for the Feast, he went also, not publicly, but in secret.¹¹ Now at the Feast the Jews were watching for him and asking, "Where is that man?"¹² Among the crowds there was widespread whispering about him. Some said, "He is a good man."¹³ Others replied, "No, he deceives the people." But no one would say anything publicly about him for fear of the Jews.

The players here are Jesus, the Jews, Jesus' brothers, and the crowds of Jerusalem. The scene is Jerusalem at the time of the Feast of Tabernacles in October of 29 AD, six months before his death. The action is that of Jesus' brothers trying to persuade him to go up to Jerusalem and announce himself a prophet of God. The dialogue is that of a conversation between Jesus and his brothers, and the questions of the people in Jerusalem concerning the whereabouts of Jesus. The themes are many, but the essential theme running through this scene concerns the identity of Jesus. It would appear that members of his own family (his brothers) were not

convinced that he was who he claimed himself to be. The meaning of the Feast of Tabernacles and its symbolism has thematic significance. His going to the feast in secret, the search for him at the feast, and the various comments about him are used here to develop the theme of who he was believed to be by the people hearing and seeing him and his deeds of wonder.

As concerns the setting of this scene, John jumps ahead several months in placing Jesus in Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles. After the events in Capernaum (6:59), which occurred sometime in April, at the time of the Passover (cf. 6:4), John moves ahead six months to early October and the Feast of Tabernacles (7:2). The tension between Jesus and the Jerusalem hierarchy ("the Jews") was building. This tension is clearly brought out in this chapter. In v 1, we see Jesus avoiding Judea. Why? In 7: 7, Jesus speaks of the hatred some held for him. Who is it that hates him, and why do they hate him? In 7:13, we see the people of Judea afraid to talk openly about Jesus. Why were they so afraid? In 7:19, Jesus accuses the Jews of seeking to kill him. In 7:23, Jesus addresses the issue between the Jews and himself. In 7:25-26, it appears to be common knowledge that the Jewish hierarchy had determined to kill Jesus. In 7:30, the Jews were looking for a way of taking Jesus into custody, but were not able. In 7:32, as a result of the crowd's reaction to Jesus, the Jews tried again to take him into custody. In 7:44, another attempt was made to arrest him, but failed. In 7:45-52, we are given an enlightening depiction of the behind the scenes activity of the religious leaders of Jerusalem and their conspiracy to murder this man Jesus. In all of this we must ask, why so much disbelief and so much hatred of this man Jesus of Nazareth?

***Scene Two (7:14-24): Jesus Teaches in the Temple
and Is Challenged by the Jews***

Not until halfway through the Feast did Jesus go up to the temple courts and begin to teach. ¹⁵The Jews were amazed and asked, "How did this man get such learning without having studied?" ¹⁶Jesus answered, "My teaching is not my own. It comes from him who sent me. ¹⁷If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own. ¹⁸He who speaks on his own does so to gain honor for himself, but he who works for the honor of the one who sent him is a man of truth; there is nothing false about him. ¹⁹Has not Moses given you

the law? Yet not one of you keeps the law. Why are you trying to kill me?" ²⁰*"You are demon-possessed," the crowd answered. "Who is trying to kill you?"* ²¹*Jesus said to them, "I did one miracle, and you are all astonished.* ²²*Yet, because Moses gave you circumcision (though actually it did not come from Moses, but from the patriarchs), you circumcise a child on the Sabbath.* ²³*Now if a child can be circumcised on the Sabbath so that the law of Moses may not be broken, why are you angry with me for healing the whole man on the Sabbath?* ²⁴*Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment."*

The players on stage here are Jesus and the Jews. The stage setting is that of the Temple in Jerusalem where Jesus appears to be teaching in the colonnades of one of the courts, likely that of the Gentiles (where proselytes and curious Gentiles called "godfearers," were allowed), or the court of Israel where only Jewish males were allowed. The action is the aftermath of a teaching session of Jesus, in that the discussion (dialogue) develops around the question of Jesus extraordinary knowledge of Scripture, especially his ability to read Hebrew. The themes have to do with the Jews' curiosity concerning Jesus' great learning, his claims that his learning came to him from God, and his rebuke of these Jewish scholars for their inconsistency of priding themselves on their knowledge of the law while their concern for people was non-existent.

Jesus must have gone up into one of the Temple colonnades where people would have been gathered; perhaps, waiting for one of the Jewish teachers to begin a lecture. There he sat down, as was the Eastern custom for a teacher, and began to teach. What he taught is not specifically known, but it must have concerned some exegetical point from the Hebrew Scriptures. This follows from their remark in 7:15, "How is it that this man has learning, when he has never studied?" The Greek text here says, literally, "How is this man knowing letters (*grammata*), having never learned (*manthano*)." The word *grammata* means, "letters or writing characters, or a written document." The word *manthano* means, "to learn, or be a student." One must realize that the average person in first century Palestine did not read or write. This was especially the case with reference to the Hebrew Scriptures. Most people in Palestine were bi-lingual to some extent, speaking Aramaic and some Greek. During the seventy years of Babylonian captivity, Aramaic had replaced the Hebrew language as the common language of the people. Aramaic is a mixture of Chaldee (the

language of Babylon) and Hebrew; in fact, it sounds like a dialect of Hebrew and is written with Hebrew characters. Hebrew had to be translated for the people in the synagogue services. Jesus' vast knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures seems to indicate a reading ability in Hebrew.

More may be at issue here, however, than the Jews surprise at Jesus' knowledge of Hebrew. He appears to be in possession of exegetical skills and methods of argumentation as would be common to one trained in one of the rabbinic schools, a fact that is evidenced repeatedly throughout the Gospels. Perhaps, here is the point of the comment of those listening to the teachings of Jesus. Their surprise was that he was so knowledgeable of the Scriptures and so skilled in his ability to argue his point, even though he had never been a student of the rabbinic schools. He was not a seminary rabbi; he was a carpenter, yet he surpassed the professional scholars in his knowledge of Scripture and teaching skills.

In 7:16-18, Jesus leaves no doubt as to the origin of his teaching. He may have learned to read the Hebrew Scriptures in the Synagogue *yeshivah* of Nazareth, but his insights into their meaning was clearly enhanced by the Spirit of God (cf. John 3:31-34). In 7:19-24, he moved to the heart of the issue - their teaching was not from God and was not consistent with the teaching that had been given from God. He was exposing them to themselves and to the people in their ignorance and their hypocrisy.

Scene Three (7:25-36): Debate among the People Concerning the Messiah

At that point some of the people of Jerusalem began to ask, "Isn't this the man they are trying to kill? ²⁶Here he is, speaking publicly, and they are not saying a word to him. Have the authorities really concluded that he is the Christ? ²⁷But we know where this man is from; when the Christ comes, no one will know where he is from." ²⁸Then Jesus, still teaching in the temple courts, cried out, "Yes, you know me, and you know where I am from. I am not here on my own, but he who sent me is true. You do not know him, ²⁹but I know him because I am from him and he sent me." ³⁰At this they tried to seize him, but no one laid a hand on him, because his time had not yet come. ³¹Still, many in the crowd put their faith in him. They said, "When the Christ comes, will he do more miraculous signs than this man?" ³²The Pharisees heard the crowd whispering such things

about him. Then the chief priests and the Pharisees sent temple guards to arrest him. ³³Jesus said, "I am with you for only a short time, and then I go to the one who sent me. ³⁴You will look for me, but you will not find me; and where I am, you cannot come." ³⁵The Jews said to one another, "Where does this man intend to go that we cannot find him? Will he go where our people live scattered among the Greeks, and teach the Greeks? ³⁶What did he mean when he said, 'You will look for me, but you will not find me,' and 'Where I am, you cannot come'?"

The players continue to be Jesus, the Jews in attendance at the feast, and the Jerusalem Jews who constituted the hierarchy of Orthodox Judaism in Jerusalem. The setting appears to be the same, somewhere within one of the courts of the Temple. The action is that of the ongoing debate concerning Jesus' identity and the knowledge of the people that the Jewish leadership were trying to have Jesus killed, the Jewish leadership sending the Temple guard to arrest him, and Jesus response to the people concerning where he had come from. The dialogue and themes consists of questions from the people concerning the Jewish leaders opposition to Jesus, a discussion among the people concerning the identity of the Messiah, questions concerning his ability to work miracles, and Jesus' esoteric comments concerning his identity as one who was among them but not of them.

Upon hearing Jesus' teaching and the accusations he made against the Jewish leaders, the crowd seemed to be astonished at what he is doing. Does he not know that these people will kill him for what is doing? The word on the street was that the Jerusalem hierarchy had already made such a decision. Eventually the question is raised as to whether this man may possibly be the Messiah. Here Jesus "cries out" his claim to have come from God (7:28-29). Worthy of note is the two different reactions of the people of 7:30-31?

In 7:32, we see more of the "behind the scenes" activity of the Sanhedrin council, who frequently met in sessions in their stone hall of meeting within the immediate precincts of the Temple. They were, no doubt, watching, with jealous eyes and malignant hearts, every move of this man Jesus of Nazareth. It was only a matter of time; then at the right time, they would destroy him.

***Scene Four (7:37-44): Jesus Calls upon the People
to Believe in Him***

On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. ³⁸Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him [Isaiah 44:3; 55:1]." ³⁹By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified. ⁴⁰On hearing his words, some of the people said, "Surely this man is the Prophet." ⁴¹Others said, "He is the Christ." ⁴²Still others asked, "How can the Christ come from Galilee? Does not the Scripture say that the Christ will come from David's family and from Bethlehem, the town where David lived?" ⁴³Thus the people were divided because of Jesus. ⁴⁴Some wanted to seize him, but no one laid a hand on him.

The players of this scene are Jesus, those of the people who were convinced that he was the prophet of Deut 18, or the Messiah, and others who, because he was called "Jesus of Nazareth," were convinced that he could not be the Messiah, and those of the hierarchy who wanted to seize him but were afraid of the crowds. The setting is the last day of the feast, the location is somewhere in Jerusalem, the action is that of Jesus crying out to the people, the people's response, and the attempt of some to seize him. The dialogue consists of Jesus' invitation to the people to come to him, the comments of the people concerning belief in him, and the comments of those who did not believe in him. The themes concern Jesus' offer of living water to the people, the response of belief and disbelief, and the shadowy presence of those who sought the opportunity to remove him.

The last day of the Feast of Tabernacles was called a "holy convocation," and was kept as a Sabbath day (cf. Lev 23:33-36). It was observed as a memorial of the entrance of their forefathers into Canaan, and was, therefore, called, "the great day of the feast," (7:37). The water ritual, observed each day for seven days, is significant to what Jesus does here. Water was precious to the people of this part of the world; it was a source of life. During the water ritual, the people would chant, "With joy shall you draw water out of the wells of salvation," (Isaiah 12:3).

That Jesus "stood" and cried out is significant. The position

assumed by the teacher in this culture was that of sitting, the teacher always sat. But here Jesus "stood" and "cried out", which means that was taking the position of a herald with a great declaration or proclamation. His words would have had special significance in view of the water ritual observed as a part of the feast (cf., 7:37-39). Jesus' comments here are similar to those he makes to the Samaritan woman in John 4:7-15.

John's comment that the Spirit was not yet given is curious. There are a number of personalities who acted by the power of the Holy Spirit prior to Pentecost of Acts 2. The early chapters of Luke clearly evidence this, and Jesus disciples were capable of doing wonders prior to the outpouring of the Spirit in Acts 2. What is under consideration here in John 7:39 is the pouring forth of the Spirit "in baptismal measure" (i.e., a great pouring forth), in fulfillment of the promise of Joel 2:28-29. As mentioned earlier, the pouring forth of the water by the priest was to offer thanksgiving for the water and to call to memory the promise of God to pour fourth his Spirit upon all flesh as prophesied in Joel 2:12-32.

In reaction to Jesus' words, a debate erupts. The people became divided over the identity of this, "Jesus of Nazareth." Was he the prophet, the Christ, or a deceiver? Someone raised the question of Jesus conformity to the messianic prophecy of Micah 5:2. It is a curiosity that they were willing to acknowledge this prophetic truth the Scriptures, but not the very personification of truth standing before them.

Scene Five (7:45-52): Reaction of the Jerusalem Leaders to the Excitement Created by Jesus

Finally the temple guards went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, "Why didn't you bring him in?"⁴⁶"Never a man spoke as this man does," the guards declared.⁷"You mean he has deceived you also?" the Pharisees retorted.⁴⁸"Has any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed in him?"⁴⁹No! But this mob that knows nothing of the law--there is a curse on them."⁵⁰Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked,⁵¹"Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?"⁵²They replied, "Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee."

In this scene the players are the temple guards, the chief priests, the Pharisees, and Nicodemus, the member of the Sanhedrin who had come to Jesus by night (John 3). The setting is most likely some meeting room somewhere in the Temple, the action is that of the report of the guards to the Jewish leaders, Nicodemus' intervention on the part of Jesus, and the response of the other members of the council. The dialogue consists of the comments of the temple guards, and a debate between members of the council concerning the identity of Jesus, with the arguments of this debate serving as themes.

Here we have the remarkable words of these temple officers (7:46), the reaction of the Pharisees (7:47-49), the reaction of the rulers [the Sanhedrin] (7:48), and the reaction of the people (7:49). Then, there is the reaction of Nicodemus (7:50-51). Nicodemus comments to his fellow Jews that they were in violation of the very law (*Torah*) they were claiming to defend (cf., Exodus 23:1-3; Deut 1:16-18). Their response to Nicodemus' charge is called, in formal debate, "*reductio ad homo*" (i.e., reduce the argument to the man). Their "argument" is no argument at all; rather, it is simply a way of evading the issue, and is recognized as a fallacious or unacceptable argument in formal debate. The only semblance of an argument here is, "Search and you will see that no prophet is to rise from Galilee." As a matter of fact, however, the prophets Jonah, Nahum, possibly Elijah, Elisha, and Amos were all from what was then called Galilee, and the prophets were all "anointed ones" (1 Kings 19:16); so much for the scholarship of the Jerusalem hierarchy.

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