

God Came Down

(The Fourth Gospel)

Maurice W. Lusk, III

In Jerusalem: the Fifth Feast (10:22-39)

Feast of Hanukkah

Here a major shift of setting occurs. Jesus is again in Jerusalem, but this is two months later (December) and a new feast, Hanukkah, the Feast of Dedication. The players are Jesus and a group of Jews who insist that he tell them if he is the long awaited Messiah. The setting is the Temple, in the Colonnades of Salomon. The action is that of a confrontation between Jesus and a group of Jews who demand an affirmation from Jesus that he is the Messiah. The dialogue consists of their question and Jesus' answer, followed by their reaction to his answer and Jesus response. The themes are, again, belief vs disbelief, Jesus messianic claims, his miracles, another reference to the sheep that know his voice, the theme of eternal life, his claim of unity with the Father, the violence of his opponents, their accusation of blasphemy against Jesus, and Jesus escape from them when they tried to stone him.

Jesus and the Jewish Feasts

This is the fifth time Jesus has appeared at a Jewish feast, and in each instance John makes a significant point of it. In his first feast appearance (Passover), he cleanses the temple in Jerusalem (2:13ff). In his second feast episode (this feast not identified), he appears again in Jerusalem and heals a man who is paralyzed (5:1). Then in Galilee the Passover is mentioned again (6:4), at which time he fed 5,000 people, which is followed by the bread of heaven discourse. The fourth feast appearance is the Feast of Tabernacles (7:2), which is followed by another appearance at Jerusalem at the Feast of Hanukkah (10:22).

The Passover (observed in April) held more meaning for Jews than any other feast. The original meaning of the Passover was that it symbolized God's deliverance of his people from their bondage. It had also come to symbolize for the Jews God's continuing deliverance of his people by the sending of a savior or agent of salvation, as he did with Moses. When Jesus entered the temple and cleansed it, this was a clear indication that God's representative (a savior or deliverer) had arrived (as with Moses). In John 5 and 6, Jesus spoke of himself in terms of bread. In the time of Jesus, the Passover celebration (called Passover week) had been combined with the feast of unleavened bread, which was eaten while recalling God's deliverance of his people at the exodus.

During **the Feast of Tabernacles** (observed in October), the Jews recalled the wanderings of their fathers, and God's presence with them in the form of light/glory (*Mishnah*, tractate *Shekinah*), and his provision of them in the miraculous giving of water. In John 7-10, Jesus identifies himself with both the light and water symbolism of the celebration. Here in the Feast of Dedication/Hanukkah, Jesus drew upon the meaning of the feast to interpret himself to the people. This feast celebrated the dedication of the altar of sacrifice to God, Jesus was the one whom God had dedicated and sent into the world, who would sacrifice himself in order to deliver the whole of humankind from sin (10:36).

The Feast of Hanukkah

The Feast of Hanukkah (observed in December), was not a Biblical feast. It was a feast commemorating the deliverance of God's people by the Maccabees from the Syrian oppression in the year 165 BC. The Jerusalem Temple and the altar of sacrifice had been defiled by the Greeks and Syrians. After the victory by Judas Maccabeus, the temple and its altar were rededicated to God (1 Macc 4:53-56; 2 Macc 10:5; Josephus, Wars, XII.vii.7). From that time this rededication was celebrated annually as the Feast of Dedication (or, in Hebrew, *Hanukkah* - 1 Macc 4:59).

The feast was celebrated in the winter, beginning on the 25th day of *Chislev* (December), and lasted eight days. The lighting of oil lamps is associated with the celebration, one lamp each day until the eight lights of the *menorah* (eight-branched lampstand) are lit. The feast is also called the Feast of Lights. In the Babylonian Talmud there is found a legend about a very

small quantity of temple oil that burned miraculously for eight days (cf. 2 Maccabees 10). How far this legend dates back is hard to say, but it gives sanction to the Jew's belief that God gave this day Biblical status equal to those feasts of the Biblical tradition. In the days of the second Temple, this feast was celebrated with the celebrants dwelling in tents during the day (to symbolize their father's living in the mountains during the Syrian occupation), Scripture reading in the synagogues and temple from texts concerning dedication or consecration, and at night the dedication rituals centered in the lighting of lights in the temple, and the telling and retelling of the traditions of God's deliverance of his people by special saviors, here the Maccabees (cf. "Hanukkah" in *The Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion*, 172; and "Dedication, Feast of," in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 1:812-13.)

Scene One (10:22-30): The Jews Demand That Jesus Tell Them if He Is the Messiah

Then came the Feast of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter,²³ and Jesus was in the temple area walking in Solomon's Colonnade.²⁴ The Jews gathered around him, saying, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ tell us plainly."²⁵ Jesus answered, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me,²⁶ but you do not believe because you are not my sheep.²⁷ My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand.³⁰ I and the Father are one."

The original question was whether Jesus had actually claimed to be "the Messiah" (10: 24-29), the issue then became whether he claimed to be God (verses 30-39). The antagonists here are "the Jews" (verse 24). When Jesus appeared before the Sanhedrin Council, he was asked the same question, "If you are the Christ, tell us" (Luke 22:66-67). Jesus' answer there was, "Soon you will see the Son of Man at the right hand of the power of God" (22:69), a clear allusion to the Daniel 7 imagery of the human figure who appeared before God and was given dominion over the earth. They then asked him if he was the Son of God (22:70), to which he replied, "*ego eimi*" ("I am"). From this comment they concluded that he had blasphemed, as was the case with the crowd here in Solomon's colonnades (John 10:22-39).

It is interesting, as well as revealing, to note that in both instances when Jesus was asked if he was the Messiah, his answer resulted in the conclusion that he was God or “he Son of God.” Here we are given a significant insight as to the interpretation Jesus placed on the term "Messiah." Traditionally, the Messiah was believed to be an agent of God, a messenger sent from God, a savior come from God. This agent was believed by most of Judaism to be a political deliverer (i.e., a king like David, who would be “the son of David,” cf., 2 Sam 5-7).

To others the Messiah was to be a prophet of God (Deut 18:18), who would bring new revelation and direction from God concerning the future of Israel. To some, however, (especially those associated with the writings of Enoch), the Messiah would be an otherworldly being, who would come bring God's deliverance from the very presence of God. This was clearly the Messianic interpretation Jesus accepted, but there is more. Jesus was not only a heavenly being sent from the presence of God, he was God himself, which is precisely what he claimed in verse 30, "I and the Father are one." These Jews saw this claim as what it was - a claim of deity. He was not an archangelic being, or a spiritual being of some sort, he was the very incarnation of the Father, the very presence of God, who had experienced sonship – a begetting and birth into human existence, a concept hardly capable of human comprehension.

The Father/Son relationship in John is revealing: The Son (who is also called the Word of God) is God (1:1). He was made flesh and dwelt (tabernacle) among mankind, and was full of the glory of God (1:14). No man had ever see God, but the only begotten Son/God (textual question here as to which reading is correct), who comes from the bosom (heart) of the Father, he has revealed him (1:18). The Father loves (*agape*) the Son (3:35). The Son does the will of the Father (4:34; 5:30; 6:38). The Son does what the Father does (5:19). He raises the dead, as does the Father (5:21). The Son speaks as the Father has taught him to speak (8:28). The Father has sent the Son and is continually with him (8:29). The Son has come forth out of the Father (1:8 and 8:42). The Son has experiential knowledge (*ginosko* rather than *oida*) of the Father (8:55; 10:15). The Son has the power to lay down his own life and take it up again as the Father has the power of life and death (10:18); here in this text, he claims that he and the Father are one (10:30); and later he will reveal to his disciples that to have seen him is to have seen the Father (14:9). What we are seeing here is almost too full of wonder, if it truly dawns on us what we are seeing!

Scene Two (10:31-39): Reaction of the Jews to His Answer

Again the Jews picked up stones to stone him,³² but Jesus said to them, "I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?"³³ "We are not stoning you for any of these," replied the Jews, "but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God."³⁴ Jesus answered them, "Is it not written in your Law, 'I have said you are gods' [Psalms 82:6]?³⁵ If he called them 'gods,' to whom the word of God came--and the Scripture cannot be broken--³⁶ what about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world? Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, 'I am God's Son'?³⁷ Do not believe me unless I do what my Father does.³⁸ But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father."³⁹ Again they tried to kill him, but he escaped their grasp.

The Jews did not miss what Jesus was saying. "We are stoning you for blasphemy," they say, "because you, being a man, make yourself God" (verse 33). He was not, however, a man who made himself God, he was God who made himself a man.

Jesus' answer is of a rabbinic nature; which they would have to appreciate. He simply involves them in an inconsistency. There are OT passages that call people by the Hebrew term for God who speak for or act in behalf of God (cf. Psalms 82:6; Exodus 21:6; 22:9; Deut 19:17). Jesus' point with them is how, given their traditional understanding of such texts as these, they can stone him for speaking as these passages are speaking.

The key statement here is found in verse 36, where Jesus draws upon the terminology of the Feast of Hanukkah, and identifies himself as that which is truly consecrated (by God himself) and sent into the world as the final sacrifice to destroy the enslaving power of sin. The altar that this Feast of Hanukkah centered around would no longer receive sin offerings - God would soon do away with all of that. In Jesus' final words, he further enraged his antagonists. "The Father is in me, and I am in the Father," (verse 38). Within him, truly, was the indwelling of deity, but they would not believe such a thing could happen or that it had happened. Again, we are confronted with John's theme of belief vs disbelief. Why is belief in something so wonderful so hard

for some people?

MWLIII