

God Came Down

(The Fourth Gospel)

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Belief and Disbelief

There are many grand and intriguing themes running throughout the Gospel of John; one theme, however, dominates - the theme of belief verses disbelief. In fact, this theme weaves itself throughout the whole composition and gives this Gospel its unity. John's concern is to inform our faith christologically (i.e., to give content to our faith with reference to the identity of Jesus of Nazareth). But all of this is to one end, *viz.*, that we may believe. During Jesus' ministry, many people came to believe in him, while others disbelieved, and some simply did not come to belief. Why some believed while others did not is a critical question in this Gospel, and a question of critical relevance to us today.

John's Gospel develops from one block of material to the next addressing this question. These blocks of material consist of episodes, monologues/dialogues, and editorial comments in which some aspect of Jesus' Messianic identity is revealed, to which a response is made in belief or disbelief, or no belief at all. In **believing** there is a belief affirmation, in **disbelieving** there is a disbelief affirmation; there is a third category in which no belief or disbelief exists. This is often referred to as "**unbelief**" or "**non-belief**;" in that in some situations there is not enough data from which to draw a conclusion, either positively or negatively. The context in which the belief, disbelief, or unbelief occurs must tell the reader which response to the data is present.

The Gospel of John breaks into five sections: **(1)** a prologue (1:1-18), **(2)** the Messiah is here / his public ministry (1:19-12:50), **(3)** the Messiah and his disciples/the farewell discourses to the twelve (13:1-17:26), **(4)** the passion material (18:1-19:42), and **(5)** the resurrection material (20:1-21:25). In the

prologue the theme of belief is introduced (see 1:7, 11-12), then in the first major section of material (the Messiah is here / his public ministry - 1:19-12:50) the theme of belief/disbelief is played upon throughout. This may be seen in the following outline of the material of this section.

I. THE MESSIAH IS HERE / HIS PUBLIC MINISTRY (1:19-12:50)

The Messianic expectation was very high at this time in the history of Israel. In the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah had come. John presents Jesus' Messianic activity in this section of material by locations and in each section of material the theme of belief or disbelief is present as is marked in brackets **[in red and/or bold lettering]** in the following:

The Messianic Expectation (1:19- 2:12)

- (1) John the Baptist and the Pharisees (1:19-28)
- (2) Jesus' Messianic identity revealed to John (1:29-34)
- (3) Andrew and Peter discover the Messiah (1:35-42)
- (4) Philip and Nathaniel discover the Messiah (1:43-51) **[1:50]**
- (5) Jesus changes water into wine, his disciples believe (2:1-12) **[2:11]**

In Jerusalem: First Feast [Passover] (2:13-3:21)

- (1) Jesus cleanses the temple in Jerusalem (2:13-22) **[2:22]**
- (2) Jesus and Nicodemus (2:23-3:21) **[2:23; 3:12, 15, 16, 18]**

Note the theme of belief that dominates this block of material. Jesus' earliest activity in Jerusalem is that of confrontation with the Jewish religious hierarchy. God is not revealed in the temple and its ritual. Judaism had distorted the revelation of God as was manifested in the ancient worship of the tabernacle and temple. They had turned it into a merchandising mart for the profit of Annas, a "godfather figure" who controlled the Jerusalem religious hierarchy. Jesus had come to show us the father. The first thing he did was to remove this disgraceful distortion of God represented by the Jewish priesthood. Two reactions develop from this first cleansing (Jesus cleansed the temple twice): he incurred the wrath of the Jewish religious leaders (and was thereafter in constant conflict with this group), and he aroused a suspicious curiosity on the part of some of the Jewish leadership that he may have truly been sent from God (cf. Nicodemus' visit).

In Judea (3:22-36)

- (1) Exit the Baptist: "He must increase, I must decrease" (3:22-30)
- (2) Commentary by the author (3:31-36) **[3:36]**

Note in John's commentary on the speech of the Baptist how central the theme of belief is to everything he is saying.

In Samaria (4:1-42)

- (1) Setting for the discussion with the woman in Samaria (4:1-6)
 - (2) Discourse on living water (4:7-19)
 - (3) Discourse on worship (4:20-26)
 - (4) The woman tells of her discovery (4:27-30)
 - (5) Jesus' discussion with his disciples (4:31-38)
- (6) Response of the Samaritan village (4:39-42) **[4:39, 41, 42]**

Note here again how dominant the theme of belief is throughout whole block of material. The woman realizes who he is, she runs to the village with her discovery. They come to see for themselves and believe.

In Galilee (4:43-54)

- (1) Reception by the people of Galilee (4:43-45)
- (2) Healing of the nobleman's son (4:46-54) **[4:48, 50, 53]**

Here again belief is the theme of this block of material, and Jesus is the object of that belief.

In Jerusalem: Second Feast [?] (5:1-47)

- (1) Healing at the pool of Bethesda (5:1-9a)
- (2) Following Sabbath controversy (5:9b-18)
- (3) Jesus' Messianic claims (5:19-29) **[5:24]**
- (4) The case substantiating his claims (5:30-47) **[5:38, 44, 46, 47]**

Jerusalem is the scene of antagonism and disbelief. Why does belief seem to result everywhere but in Jerusalem?

In Galilee: Third Feast [Passover] (6:1-71)

- (1) Feeding of the five thousand (6:1-15)
- (2) Jesus walks on the water (6:16-21)
- (3) Setting for the bread of life discourse (6:22-25)
- (4) Discourse on the bread of life (6:26-65) **[6:29, 30, 35, 36, 40, 47, 64]**
- (5) Disbelief and belief (6:66-71) **[6:69]**

This block of material is prefaced with two episodes of Messianic activity on the part of Jesus and the belief of the disciples, then follows an exchange between Jesus and the people wherein they turn from him when he challenges them to believe that he has come from God. The block then concludes with a scene wherein the disciples again affirm their belief.

In Jerusalem: Fourth Feast [Tabernacles] (7:1-10:21)

- (1) Jesus goes up to the feast (7:1-13) **[7:5]**
- (2) Jesus teaches in the temple and is challenged by the Jews (7:14-24)
- (3) Debate among the people concerning the Messiah (7:25-36) **[7:31]**
- (4) Jesus calls upon the people to believe in him (7:37- 44) **[7:38, 39]**
- (5) Reaction of the Jerusalem hierarchy to Jesus (7:45-52) **[7:48]**
- (6) Jesus and the woman caught in the act of adultery (7:53-8:11)
- (7) The Jewish leaders continue to challenge his claims (8:12-20)
- (8) Jesus continues his Messianic claims (8:21-30) **[8:24, 30]**
- (9) Jesus debates with the Jewish scholars (8:31-59) **[8:31, 45, 46]**
- (10) The man born blind and the question of human suffering (9:1-5)
- (11) Jesus heals the man born blind (9:6-12)
- (12) Reaction of the Pharisees to the miracle (9:13-34) **[9:18]**
- (13) Jesus reveals his identity to the one healed (9:35-41) **[9:35, 36, 38]**
- (14) Discourse on the good shepherd (10:1-18)
- (15) Reaction to his speech: belief/disbelief? (10:19-21)

Throughout this block of material one sees the repeated interaction of belief and disbelief. Jesus repeatedly makes claims concerning his identity. Some respond to these claims in belief, others in disbelief. Why there are such different reactions is a question with which John wishes to confront us. When we have answered the question with reference to the original players in this first century drama, then we must answer it for ourselves with reference to ourselves.

In Jerusalem: Fifth Feast [Hanukkah] (10:22-39)

- (1) Are you the Messiah? (10:22-30) **[10:25, 26]**
- (2) Reaction of the Jews to his answer (10:31-39) **[10:37, 38]**

In Judea (10:40-12:8)

- (1) Jesus retires beyond the Jordan (10:40-42) **[10:42]**
- (2) Receives word of Lazarus' death (11:1-16) **[11:15]**
- (3) Jesus' discussion with Martha (11:17-27) **[11:25, 26, 27]**
- (4) Jesus' discussion with Mary (11:28-33)
- (5) Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead (11:34-44) **[11:40, 42]**
- (6) Reaction of the people / the assassination plot (11:45-53) **[11:45, 48]**
- (7) Jesus withdraws into the desert with his disciples (11:54-57)
- (8) Jesus returns to Bethany and is anointed for his death (12:1-8)

Again a belief/disbelief theme runs through this material, building in intensity.

In Jerusalem: Sixth Feast [Passover] (12:9-50)

- (1) Triumphant entry into Jerusalem (12:9-19) **[12:11]**
- (2) Jesus declares that the time of his death is near (12:20-36a) **[12:36]**
- (3) The Jews condemned by disbelief (12:36b-43) **[12:37, 38, 39, 42]**
- (4) Final public discourse: a plea for belief (12:44-50) **[12:44, 46, 47]**

A theme running throughout this whole section of material (The Messiah is here / his public ministry) is "belief vs disbelief." The Greek verb *pisteuo* meaning, "I believe," occurs 98 times in this Gospel, as compared to 58 occurrences in all of Paul's writings, and 52 in Luke and Acts. The theme of "belief/disbelief" is found more in this Gospel than in any other New Testament Gospel or writing. Why this is such a critical theme for this apostle is a question of major importance.

Belief to John is redemptive; but belief in what? Belief in what God has revealed. But what has he revealed? He has revealed himself in his Son. What is to be believed is John' Christology. The christology of John's Gospel is, in essence, God's revelation of himself in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus

is not only a redeemer come from above, he is a revelation come from above, who redeems through his revelation. Those who believe are those who see what is there to be seen, those who are attracted to the light, whose existence has become illuminated by the light, who desire to walk in that light by following Jesus. Those who do not see are blind are in darkness. They misunderstand, they distort, they lie, and consequently, they remain in darkness and even love the darkness.

Not only do they refuse to see the light (God's revelation), they plot to destroy the light so that no one else may see it. This love of darkness has its roots in disbelief. The only hope of redemption is belief in God's revelation, and that revelation is Jesus of Nazareth who is revealed as both the Son of Man and the Son of God. Those who come to faith are those who have grasped the fact that in him God has become one of us in order that he might redeem us.

ASKING THE EXEGETICAL QUESTIONS

The "belief/disbelief" theme is the key that unlocks this inspired document, granting us access into the message of this Gospel and grants this Gospel's message access into us. Our objective as students of Scripture is to "get into the text;" but how does one do that? We become involved in conversation with the text; we must ask it questions (exegetical questions). In each of the block of material in this section called, "The Messiah Is Here/ His Public Ministry (1:19-12:50)," the following questions will open up the text for you.

1. Who are the players and what is the action in this text?
2. What are the implications of Jesus' words or actions in this text? What are the implications of the words or actions of the other players in this text (including the author)?
3. What revelation is present in this text and, especially, what claims are present in this text with reference to the identity of Jesus?
4. What evidence is there to substantiate these claims?
5. Is belief or disbelief present in this text?

6. Who has believed, what have they believed and why?
7. Who has disbelieved, what have they disbelieved and why?
8. Is there a revelation of God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth in this text? If so what is it? How has Jesus shown us the Father?
9. What descriptive designations or Christological titles are present in this text and what is the meaning of the designation or title for the one using it? What does this designation/title tell us about what this person believed about Jesus?)
10. How does this text address me? How does it inform my thinking or what does it say to me? How does it give content to my faith christologically; i.e., how does it add to what I believe about Jesus or how does it enhance my belief in Jesus?

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