

God Came Down

(The Fourth Gospel)

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The Passion and Resurrection (18:1-21:25)

As mentioned earlier, this Gospel composition breaks into five sections or blocks of material: (1) the 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 eleven (13:1-17:26), (4) the passion material (18:1-19:24), and (5) the resurrection material (20:1-21:25).

The passion material and the resurrection material may be developed as individual units; this lends itself to a more enhanced study of each theme: (1) the arrest, trial, and death of Jesus, and (2) the resurrection and post-resurrection appearances. On the other hand, both themes may be combined and developed as one theme: the death/resurrection of Jesus, as was done in the apostolic preaching in Acts of Apostles (e.g., Acts 2, 10, 13), and in the writings of Paul (e.g., 1 Cor 15).

The Structure Of The Passion and Resurrection Material

Jesus' Arrest, Trial, and Crucifixion (18:1-19:42)

- (1) Jesus' arrest in the garden (18:1-12)
- (2) The Jewish trial [Peter's denial] (18:13-27)
- (3) The Roman trial (18:28-38a)
- (4) The Jews demand Jesus' death (18:38b-40)

- (5) Jesus is beaten, crowned with thorns, and presented to the Jews (19:1-5)
- (6) The Jews (the hierarchy) again demand his death (19:6-16a)
- (7) Jesus is crucified (19:18b-30)
- (8) He is dead (19:31-37)
- (9) Joseph of Arimathea buries Jesus (19:38-42)

The Theme of Death in the Gospel of John

For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it (John 5:21).

I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life (John 5:24).

I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live (John 5:25).

*This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and **died**, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever,” (John 6:58).*

I tell you the truth, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death (John 8:51).

*At this the Jews exclaimed, “Now we know that you are demon possessed! Abraham **died** and so did the prophets, yet you say that if anyone keeps your word, he will never taste death (John 8:52).*

Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.” 23Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” 24Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” 25Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; 26and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” (John 11:21)

Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead (John 12:1).

Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead (John 12:9).

But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself. He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die (John 12:32-33).

“But we have no right to execute anyone,” the Jews objected. This happened so that the words Jesus had spoken indicating the kind of death he was going to die would be fulfilled [So that all these Scriptures concerning piercing the hands and feet might be fulfilled in the execution of a man], (John 18:32).

First Collection of Appearances (20:1-31)

This collection of resurrection material appears to be the original collection, which ends in 20:30-31. The following material was possibly added by the author at a later date to address a rumor that he would not die before the return of Christ. If this rumor was believed by the believers John had led to Christ, and then John died before Christ’s return, these believers would possibly have lost their faith, believing that the promise of Jesus to return before the death of the beloved disciple had not happen, thus, putting all of the teachings of this Gospel into question.

This would have been a matter of great concern to John given what we know about the Gnostic challenge of John’s apostleship. In 21:22, John presents the statement of Jesus to Peter from which the rumor had developed, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?” In verse 23, John explains the problem that had developed over an incorrect interpretation of this statement and gives his understanding of what he heard Jesus say. His words, “This is the disciple who testifies to these things,” would seem to indicate that John was affirming his recollection of this statement of Jesus. The expression “and who wrote them down” seems to imply that he is affirming that he is the writer of this Gospel.

- (1) The empty tomb (20:1-10)
- (2) Jesus' appearance to Mary Magdalene (20:11-18)
- (3) Jesus' appearance to the ten (20:19-23)
- (4) Jesus' appearance to Thomas (20:24-29)
- (5) The first ending: "These things are written"

Second Collection of Appearances (21:1-25)

The material is, in all probability, an addendum to the first ending of this Gospel. It was probably added to address a circulating tradition that Jesus was to return before John's death. It was necessary to deny this tradition to prevent a large falling away by Christian's who may have lost their faith in the event of John's death.

- (1) A resurrection appearance in Galilee (21:1-14)
- (2) Jesus' conversation with Peter (21:15-19)
- (3) Teaching concerning the death of the beloved disciple (21:20-23)
- (4) Editorial comment: personal authentication of the author (21:24)
- (5) Editorial comment: final comment of the second ending (21:25)

Major Theme of This Block of Material: Death And Resurrection

The major theme of this whole block of material is "death and resurrection." In fact, this theme has surfaced again and again throughout this composition, and here, in these final chapters, reaches a crescendo level of emphasis.

The "death and resurrection" of Christ is not to be understood as two different themes; rather, the "death and resurrection" are to be taken together. The cross cannot be properly interpreted apart from the resurrection, nor can the resurrection be properly interpreted apart from the cross. In fact, in the letters of Paul, as well as other NT writers, the themes of Christ's death, the cross, his blood, and his sacrifice, appear to have become figurative symbols for the event of the "death and resurrection" of Christ and its redemptive effects.

The Crucifix or an Empty Cross?

It has been a major mistake of certain theologies to distinguish between Jesus' death and his resurrection, and to speak of his death as having redemptive powers separate and apart from his resurrection. Christ's death apart from his resurrection has no power to save. This is evident from Paul's statement in 1 Cor 15:17, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins." His death apart from his resurrection has no redemptive significance. It is his death and resurrection that saves us; this is what the NT writers mean when they speak of the cross, the blood of Christ, or the death of Christ as saving us. These expressions are figures of speech called "synecdoche" in which a part stands for the whole (i.e. one aspect of something stands for the whole concept). The cross, the death of Christ, the shedding of his blood, his sacrifice for mankind and all events associated with his passion are all to be understood as having redemptive effects only in-so-far as they are events preceding the resurrection of Jesus, through which the salvation of the human race became a reality.

The point being stressed here may seem labored, but it is a point of major significance to a proper understanding of the death of Christ. To miss this point can lead to an interpretation of Christianity as a religion essentially centered death, as reflected in the most common symbol of the Christian religion, the cross of crucifixion or "the crucifix." This has been the emphasis of most of theologians of the Western Church of Rome down through the centuries and was carried over into Reformation theology by a number of protestant theologians. One can tell how much our culture has been influenced by this emphasis by noting the number of hymns we have in our hymnals centering on the death of Christ as compared to those emphasizing his resurrection. Most of which are hymns written by writers of the Reformed Tradition.

Jesus' Death as a Saving Event

These final chapters of the Gospel of John (18-21) may be viewed as Jesus' return to the Father by means of his death and resurrection. This is the event toward which John has been moving throughout this Gospel. Jesus was to experience human death. He would, as do all men in Adam, exit the stage of human existence through death. But, his death would not be the final chapter of his story. He would, in the most dramatic scene of this

drama, enter onto the stage of human existence again. The power of death would not be able to hold him. The reason, as Paul informs us (Rom 5:12-21), is that the power of death, through which came the curse of death, is sin and Jesus had no sin. Thus, he was not subject to the curse of death. Death had no claim to him. Jesus could and would return to life, and his resurrection to life would not be a return to his old existence “in Adam,” rather, he would be raised into new existence, an existence not subject to the curse of death.

What the Jews and the Gnostics thought was the destruction of Jesus of Nazareth was, in reality, his conquest. It was by means of death that Jesus entered into the final conflict with Satan, within the arena where Satan reigned over death, and there, by the power of his resurrection from death, brought new life into existence, thus eliminating the power intrinsic in death to hold one within its realm. In Jesus of Nazareth, God had entered into human history, and through his experience of human death and resurrection from it, he reversed the curse of death passed upon all men through Adam (Rom 5:12-14, 17-19; 1 Cor 15:20-22, 45ff) for all those who enter into new existence with Christ (Rom 6:1-11; 2 Cor 5:17).

To appreciate the critical significance of John’s interpretation of Jesus death one must remember that John was writing this Gospel in response to a need for an understanding of the death of Christ within a certain community of believers somewhere near the last decade of the first century A.D. The community for whom John wrote this Gospel (called the Johannine community) was being challenged at this very point – the death of their Messiah.

This challenge was coming from two different sources: the Jewish synagogue and the Gnostic heresy. It would appear that the Christians to whom John was writing were in the throws of a major conflict with the Jewish synagogue. At the same time, or perhaps a short time later, they were also thrown into conflict with a group of Gnostics (possibly Jewish as well) who, like the synagogue community, challenged the doctrine of the incarnation of Christ.

Messianic Jews and the Synagogue

After the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 A.D (and this writing was likely composed in the 90's), the synagogue, under the

leadership of Rabbi Johanan Ben Zakkai and Gamaliel II, had become the major religious institution within Judaism. From later Jewish writings we learn that the synagogue was, at this time, expelling any Jew who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah or the Son of God. Those Jews who would not publicly pray for God to curse the followers of Jesus were being declared "anathema" and excommunicated from the Jewish community.

From debates between Jewish and Christian scholars of the second century AD, we know that one of the major issues of controversy between these two groups was the death of Christ. How could these Christians possibly believe in a person who had been put to death for blasphemy? How could this person be a savior or deliverer, if he couldn't even save himself from a Roman execution? This was, apparently, a major issue at the time John wrote this Gospel. Here in these last chapters of this Gospel, John addresses the questions of how one is to make sense of the death of Jesus; John's answer is simply, "his resurrection!"

Conclusion

John portrays Jesus' death as a portal through which he had to pass in his return to the Father. He was not "of this world," and his kingdom was not "of this world" (cf. John 18:36-37). In his resurrection he proclaimed to the world that through belief in God's promises one can conquer Satan, the power of sin, and even human death. He did and so can all those who become one with him in new existence. Believing this can transform us from creatures of dust condemned to death into beings of eternal life. There is power in belief, especially so if that belief centers in the person Jesus of Nazareth and his Christological claims - such claims as are found throughout this Gospel, which is the very reason this Gospel was written (John 20:30-31). The most critical belief of all, for the believers for whom John wrote this Gospel was that Jesus of Nazareth, though put to death by crucifixion, was raised from death through resurrection into eternal life.

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