

# God Came Down

(The Fourth Gospel)

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## **The Fourth Gospel and the Synoptics**

The Gospel of John differs from the Synoptic Gospels in emphasis and selection of oral tradition and written materials. John has a similar overall chronology and many of the central elements as found in the other Gospels, yet there are numerous events mentioned in John which are not in the Synoptic Gospels and much of the Synoptic materials missing from John's Gospel. This simply means that John made different choices in the selection of his materials and the emphasis he wished to give his telling of the story of Jesus.

### **Differences and Similarities**

The most distinctive differences concern (1) Jesus' feast visits to Jerusalem, (2) the time of the cleansing of the Temple, (3) the absence of exorcisms, (4) there no parabolic stories, only discourses and monologues, and (5) the time spent in the Galilee is not reflected in John's Gospel and most of John's record of Jesus' teachings is presented in Jerusalem during the five different feasts Jesus attends.

There are a number of similarities: (1) John has seven miracles, (2) the feeding of the 5,000, (3) Jesus' walking on the water, (4) the anointing at Bethany, (5) Jesus' entry into Jerusalem

in the last week, and (5) most of the passion materials are similar; (especially, the chronology; the major difference being the time of the eating of the last meal). The resurrection appearances are different in John but are not in conflict with that of the Synoptic Gospels. John simply records different appearance than those of the Synoptic writers. In fact, some of the appearances of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels differ from one another; they do not, however, contradict or conflict with one another.

### **The Chronology of Jesus' Ministry**

Without the chronology of John we would not be able to approximate the duration of Jesus' ministry. John reports a Passover appearance at 2:13, another feast at 5:1 (not called the Passover), another Passover at 6:4, the Feast of Tabernacles at 7:1, the Feast of Dedication or Hanakkuk in 10:22, and a third Passover at 12:1 (which is the passover of the passion). The first 11 chapters of John cover a period of at least two years where the last ten chapters cover one week. It is obvious that John is more interested in emphasizing something other than a chronological sequence of events.

In contrast to these references in John, the Synoptics offered no clear time markers. In line with the typical practice of ancient biography, in which words and deeds were the foremost feature, the Synoptics gathered material topically and were not concerned to provide a chronology in the same sense as a modern biography, in which every chapter or paragraph stresses that things happened on such and such a date. There are, however, comments in the Synoptic Gospels which would suggest that Jesus' had been in Jerusalem and was, indeed, very familiar with the city. Jesus has acquaintances; even close relationships, with people from the Jerusalem area. There is Mary and Martha, Joseph of Arimathea who was a secret follower of Jesus, the man in Jerusalem who provided a donkey for Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and the man who

provided the upper room for Jesus and his disciples to eat the Passover.

The constant surveillance of Jesus by the Jerusalem hierarchy would indicate a greater familiarity with Jesus than word of mouth reports from Galilee. How Jesus could have been considered a faithful Jew, observant of the Torah and its requirements, a teacher worthy of the title "rabbi," even a prophetic figure and never attend one or more of the pilgrim feasts required of all Jewish males who were considered true to their heritage? To argue that Jesus never went up to Jerusalem because the Synoptic Gospel do not mention such visits is to use the logical fallacy called "the argument from silence" which proves nothing at all except that nothing can be known from silence since it is void of content. Another point of considerable weight is the fact that Jesus' prophetic denouncement of the pollution of the Temple recorded in John 2:12-25 would have provided a great motivation on the part of the Jerusalem hierarchy in their antagonistic pursuit of him throughout his ministry.

### **John's Christology**

Of major concern to John in the selection of his materials is the presentation of the true identity of Jesus as a heavenly visitor from God as contrasted with the people's perception of him as a messianic figure; especially, in the eyes of the leadership of the Jerusalem hierarchy. In fact, John's Gospel is considered as a higher Christology than that of Mark, Matthew, and Luke. The emphasis on the identity of Jesus in Mark is that of the mystery associated with his identity as the Messiah, which Jesus appears to keep the identity concealed from the public. In Matthew Jesus is the fulfillment of the Jewish expectation of the prophet like unto Moses (Deut 18:15-18), the bringer of new revelation from God. Matthew's Gospel contains more public teaching material than any of the other Gospels. Luke's presentation of Jesus is that of the

Messiah, a prophetic figure, and the fulfillment of the messianic expectation of the Hebrew Scriptures, but he is more than the Messiah of Israel, he is the Savior of the world.

John's Gospel appears to have been written to emphasize, not the Messianic identity of Jesus *per se*, but his identity as a visitation of God himself who was here in human existence as one of us, yet he was, in reality, God with us. The Son of Man designation used by Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels appears to be a way of Jesus' speaking of himself as a Son of Adam (a human being) and, in a somewhat esoteric way, to identify himself as the figure in human likeness of the Daniel 7:13-14 prophecy. In John, Jesus' portrayal of himself as the Son of Man is a way of speaking of himself as "one of us" while at the same time he is "God with us." He is God's way of recreating humankind again in his likeness, a theme which is introduced early in John 3:3-21.

In John's development of Jesus' identity to the people, Jesus' makes numerous esoteric claims as to his identity: he is the one of whom Moses and the Scriptures testified (chapter 5), he is the bread of life (chapter 6), the water of life (chapter 7) the one who was before Abraham (chapter 8), the good shepherd (chapter 10), the resurrection and the life (chapter 11), and the one who will be lifted up in order to draw all men to him (chapter 12). Then in chapters 12-17, he reveals himself to the twelve (the eleven less Judas) as the very presence of the Father in their midst, the one who has descended from above, who will ascend again, and who will cause those who believe in him to ascend with him in their deaths.

### **Preaching of the Kingdom**

It has been noted by some scholars that John does not depict the major message of Jesus as portrayed in the Synoptics, *viz.* the proclamation of the coming of the Kingdom of God. Jesus does

discuss the reign or kingdom of God with Nicodemus in John 3:3-5 and he informs Pontus Pilate that his kingdom was not of this world in 18:36; he is not, however, portrayed as moving toward Jerusalem announcing the coming of the kingdom as is depicted in the Synoptic compositions. The majority of the kingdom sayings and announcements of the coming of the kingdom found in the Synoptic Gospels are found in the last months of Jesus' Galilean ministry and then his movement toward Jerusalem for the Passover week. The fact is that this whole block of material is not to be found in John's Gospel.

As has been observed earlier, John does not reproduce the same material found in the other Gospels. The last part of the final year of his ministry goes from the Feast of Hanukkah (December) of John 10:22ff to Jesus visit to Bethany to raise Lazarus (chapter 11:1-44). The next event John records is the assassination plot of the Jewish Sanhedrin against Jesus in John 12:45-53. In verse 54, John states that Jesus no longer moved publicly among the Jews but withdrew to a region net the desert to a village called Ephraim, in Northern Judea, where he stayed with his disciples. In verse 55 John moves to the last journey of Jesus to Jerusalem for the Passover feast. The amount of time between verses 54 and 55 was very likely several months. The travelogue of Luke of chapters 9-19 very likely occurred during this time. Since this period of Jesus' ministry is not recorded by John, the kingdom proclamations of Jesus during this journey are not recorded in John.

### **Length of Jesus' Ministry**

As discussed earlier, in John's Gospel, Jesus moves back and forth between Galilee and Jerusalem. Where the synoptic Gospels only mention one feast of Passover, John makes reference to three Passovers (2:13; 6:4, and the final Passover of 11:55-12:1, 13:1; 18:28, 39; 19:14). John's timeline opens up with Jesus in Galilee (1:43), then mentions the first Passover (2:13, 23) which

takes Jesus to Jerusalem. He then returns to Galilee through Samaria (4:3ff), returns to Jerusalem for another feast (5:1), and return to Galilee in 6:1. Then, four verses later, John has Jesus preaching to a pilgrimage of Jews in route to Jerusalem for the Passover (6:4).

In 7:1, Jesus is back in Galilee, but leaves there for Jerusalem for the feast of Tabernacles (7:2). While in Jerusalem Jesus taught in the Temple courts (8:2), he is confronted with the woman caught in adultery (8:3-11), heals a man born blind (9:1ff), and enters into controversy with the Pharisees of Jerusalem (9:13-34), and leaves the people of Jerusalem debating about his identity (10:19-21).

Then in 10:22, John has Jesus walking in the court of the Temple in December at the time of the feast of Hanukkah. In 10:40, Jesus is found back across the Jordan where John the Baptist had been earlier preaching and baptizing. John then has Jesus located somewhere other than Judea (11:7-8) where he receives a request to come to Bethany near Jerusalem from Mary and Martha, Lazarus' sisters (11:1ff). Jesus comes to Bethany and raises Lazarus from death (11:17-44). Following this event Jesus withdraws from the territory of the Jews (i.e., Judea cf. 11:54), until the time of the next Passover feast of 12:1. Jesus returns to Bethany and is anointed by Mary (12:1-11) and the next day enters Jerusalem (12:12). This chronology may be set out in outline form as follows:

- Galilee (1:43);

### **First Passover (2:13, 23), April of 28 AD**

- In Jerusalem for the Passover Feast (2:13);
- Through Samaria back to Galilee (4:3ff);
  - In Jerusalem for another feast (5:1);

- Returns to Galilee (6:1);

### **Second Passover (6:4), April of 29 AD**

- In Jerusalem for the feast of Tabernacles (7:1-10);
- In Jerusalem for the feast of Hanukkah (10:22)
  - Across the Jordan (10:40);
  - Somewhere outside of Judea (11:7-8);
  - Bethany, near Jerusalem (11:17);
  - Ephraim in Northern Judea (11:54);

### **Third Passover (11:55; 12:1), April of 30 AD**

- Bethany, near Jerusalem (12:1);
  - Jerusalem (12:12).

In the narrative of the gospel the year between the first and second Passover passes in three and a half chapters (2:13-6:4). The year between the second and third Passover passes in six chapters (6:4-11:55). The period of time covered by chapters 12-21 is a little over a week. The traditional view of a three-year ministry for Jesus depends on this chronology of John. This assumes that the feast of 5:1 is another Passover, which is not so identified. Given the events occurring between 5:1 and 6:5, this is unlikely. The time of Jesus ministry, then, allowing for the time prior to 2:13, would be a little more than two years. John is clearly interested in doing something other than writing a historical biography of Jesus of Nazareth. What John writes is the stuff of belief, which is the portal through which one enters into eternity.

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