

God Came Down

(The Fourth Gospel)

Maurice W. Lusk, III

Jesus in Jerusalem (2:13-3:21)

The First Feast: Passover

This text consists of two episodes or scenes: (1) the cleansing of the temple (2:13-22), and (2) Jesus' discussion with Nicodemus (2:23-3:21). In both, Jesus is dealing with the Jewish hierarchy, and the belief/disbelief theme is present in both instances.

Scene One (2:13-22): Jesus Cleanses the Temple in Jerusalem

When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴In the temple courts he found men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. ¹⁵So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!" ¹⁷His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me." (Psalm 69:9) ¹⁸Then the Jews demanded of him, "What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" ¹⁹Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." ²⁰The Jews replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" ²¹But the temple he had spoken of was his body. ²²After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.

Who are the players and what is the action in this text? Jesus (v 13),

those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money changers (v 14), the disciples (v 17), and the Jews (vv 18, 20). The action of this text is that of confrontation or conflict.

***What Is Significant About the Setting of Jesus'
Words or Actions in This Text?***

This event occurred in *the Jerusalem Temple* in the year **28 AD**. According to 2:13 and 23, this was the time of the Passover; in fact, it is the first Passover mentioned by John. Of major significance here is Jesus' words of verse 16, "You shall not make my Father's house **a house of merchandise**." The Greek word here is *emporion* (a merchandising mart). This enterprise in the temple was commonly called, "Annas' Bazaar". Historians tell us that Annas was the most powerful figure of the temple hierarchy. He had earlier been the High Priest and had been deposed by the Romans in 15 AD. He had, however, maintained control of the Jewish power structure associated with the Temple. Among those who followed Annas were his son Eleazar, his son-in-law Caiaphas, his sons Jonathan and Matthias, and his grandson Annas II, up until 62 AD.

Annas was, in essence, a "godfather" figure who controlled the Jerusalem priesthood. Jesus had set himself against the most formidable figure of the Jewish hierarchy in his action of cleansing the temple. His justification is that those entrusted with the Temple had turned it into a marketplace. Reading through the whole of the Old Testament, one cannot find any authorization for the presence of this kind of activity within the Temple courts. But this should not surprise us since it is a fact that none of the High Priests from the time of the Maccabees were of the line of Aaron. Worthy of discussion here is the courage it would have taken for Jesus, at the very outset of his ministry, to take on "the powers that be" within first century Judaism. Why would he have done such a thing? What were his motives? He wasn't successful in stopping the activity; at the end of his ministry he had to do it again (Mark 11:15-19). As a result of this activity on the part of Jesus, the "Jews of Jerusalem " followed him throughout his ministry antagonizing him and attempting to turn the people against him. It is curious to note that "unbelief" always seems to lead to antagonistic, aggressive or violent behavior, were "belief" leads to just the opposite.

***What Themes Are Present in This Text and What Do They Tell Us
with Reference to the Identity of Jesus?***

What do we make of Jesus' expression "*my Father's house*"? What does this expression tell us about why he felt he had the right or authority to take on the Jerusalem Temple priesthood? What was the meaning of the statement of Jesus concerning the destruction of his body as "*a temple (naos) of God?*" The Greek word used by Jesus (*naos*) means "sanctuary," the small structure within the Temple containing the holy place and holy of holies. The Greek word for the temple proper is *hieron*. What Jesus has said is, "Destroy this sanctuary (the dwelling place of God) and in three days I will raise it up." Jesus is saying that God is not to be seen in such religious perversion as was produced by the religious establishment of the Jewish hierarchy of Jerusalem. Where God could be found was standing right in front of them and they didn't have a clue.

How Does This Text Address Me?

Several areas of discussion present themselves here. The discussion of the "belief/disbelief" theme as applied to the Jewish hierarchy should lead to some insightful discussion. Why were they so full of disbelief?

***Scene Two (2:23-3:21): Jesus and Nicodemus –
Discourse on the New Birth***

*Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name.¹
²⁴But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men.
²⁵He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man. ¹Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. ²He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." ³In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. " ⁴"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" ⁵Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the spirit. ⁶Flesh gives birth to flesh,*

but the spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' ⁸The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the spirit." ⁹"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. ¹⁰"You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? ¹¹I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. ¹²I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? ¹³No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven--the Son of Man. ¹⁴Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. ¹⁹This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. ²¹But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."

Verses 23-25 of chapter 2 functions as a summary of the Temple cleansing text and a transition into the 3:1-21 text. Of special significance is the statement that **"many believed in his name"** (v 23).

Who Are the Players of This Scene?

Jesus and ***Nicodemus***, a Pharisee and Ruler of the Jews, a member of the Sanhedrin, (7:45-52) and Rabbi (teacher of Israel, 3:10).

Nicodemus represents a member of the Jewish hierarchy who is not characterized as full of disbelief. He has become convinced that Jesus is a teacher come from God and that God is with him. Why has this Jewish ruler of Jerusalem come to such a different conclusion than his colleagues? Jesus' accepts Nicodemus' words; he is "a teacher come from God" (v 2).

He immediately looked into Nicodemus' soul (see 2:25) and addresses his need; he was in need of spiritual renewal. "Except one be *born anew* he cannot see the reign of God" (v 3). The Jewish hierarchy believed that God's name dwelt and reigned within the Temple of Jerusalem. Jesus knew that Nicodemus had never seen God's reign if all he had seen was the religious perversion of the Temple cultus.

***What Are the Major Themes of This Scene and
How Are They to Be Understood?***

The most immediate theme is found in the expression, "*born anew*." "Except one be *born of water and spirit*," instructs Jesus, "he cannot enter into *the reign of God*" (v 5). Nicodemus tries to interpret Jesus' words as a reference to physical birth, which would be typical of Jewish thinking. Their birth was everything to them, they thanked God daily that they were born Jews. Jesus informed this Jew that his flesh meant nothing; he must experience *spiritual renewal*, a transformation of the inner man. How could Nicodemus have understood Jesus' words of verses 3 and 5? Jesus was speaking to him of a renewal that was in some way related to both water and spirit (the word "Spirit" in the Greek text is not capitalized).

The most natural understanding of what Jesus is talking about is a renewal of the spirit of man that takes place somehow in water. The baptism of John the Baptist (Mark 1:4-5; John 1:26, 31, 33) was, in essence, a call for a spiritual renewal that occurred by means of water purification. Water baptism was the most common means of purification in first century Judaism. This practice was very common among the Jews (pilgrims and locals) in Jerusalem during the celebration of feast days. They would not enter into the part of the Temple where the cultus was being observed without first immersing themselves in water. This was also a practice of the Dead Sea Sect at Qumran, which is located about 10 miles from where John was baptizing. Jesus and his disciples also taught and practiced baptism in water (John 3:22-23), and in the early church, spiritual renewal or new birth was precisely what was taught as occurring in baptism (Rom 6:1-14; for spiritual renewal see: 2 Cor 5:17; Eph 4:22-24; Col 3:9-10).

According to John 2:25, *Jesus knew what is within man*. In vv 3-14, he is seen as a "*teacher come from God*" (v 2) who is *a revealer of "heavenly things"* (v 12). What does this tell us about his identity? Scholars are divided over the question of who is speaking in vv 16-21. Is

Jesus continuing to reveal to Nicodemus “heavenly things,” or is this to be understood as a comment or confessional statement of the author? Whether from Jesus or John, this passage speaks to the theme of *belief vs disbelief* and the results of each for every player of this drama and the human drama of the whole of mankind.

This text provides us with glimpses of the Father. Here God is seen as *one who sends us teachers* (v 2), and *reveals to us heavenly things* (v 12). He is not seen in such practices as the Temple cultus, but *is found in those who experience spiritual renewal* (vv 3-5). He is not a God who considers man's fleshly worth (born a Jew), but is concerned with man's spiritual existence (v 6). *God's love for the world* (humankind) is so great that *he came into the world* by means of an incarnation and sacrificed himself to reclaim his creation (vv 16-18). God has given man *light or illumination* to bring him out of the darkness of enslavement to the Satanic power of sin. But *he will not save man against his will*; man must come to the light of his own will. If he loves the darkness, God will leave him to his own choices, no matter how great his love for him (vv 19-21).

The Christological titles in this text. A number of descriptive titles for Jesus are found in this text: *Rabbi* (v 2), *teacher come from God* (v 2), *the one who has descended from heaven*, *the son of man* (v 13), *the son of man who is to be lifted up* (v 14), *the one who through faith gives eternal life* (v 15), *the only begotten Son* (v 16, 18), *the Son sent into the world by God* (v 17), and *the light that has come into the world* (v 19).

The theme of belief/disbelief. This text addresses us in a number of ways, but most especially in the issue of “belief/disbelief.” In these two texts we see one group of people encounter Jesus who react in disbelief and outrage. In the second text, a member of the Jewish hierarchy responds to Jesus in a completely different way. Why?

The most important question we can ask here concerns how this text informs my faith? What content does it give to my faith. We probably have more difficulty here than anywhere, because we rarely examined our faith for content. This may be one of our greatest areas of need, and a question that should give rise to good class discussion.

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