

God Came Down

(The Fourth Gospel)

Maurice W. Lusk, III

Jesus in Jerusalem, Again (5:1-47)

The Second Feast

This chapter breaks into four major parts: (1) the healing at the pool of Bethesda on the Sabbath (5:1-9a), (2) following Sabbath controversy (5:9b-18), (3) Jesus' Messianic claims (5:19-29), and (4) the case substantiating his claims (5:30-47). In the development of the belief/disbelief theme, this chapter presents us with excellent material for study.

Scene One (5:1-9a) The Healing on the Sabbath

Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for a feast of the Jews. ²Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. ³Here a great number of disabled people used to lie--the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. ⁵One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. ⁶When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, "Do you want to get well?" ⁷"Sir," the invalid replied, "I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me." ⁸Then Jesus said to him, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." ⁹At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.

This miracle occurred at a pool in Jerusalem called Bethesda (Hebrew for, "house of mercy"). The **players** are Jesus and a man who had

been paralyzed for thirty-eight years. The **action** here involves a supernatural phenomenon called “a miracle.” The healing transcended the natural laws of healing in that the man was healed or made well and the healing occurred instantly. People have been healed of paralysis but not instantaneously at the utterance of a word. Here in this scene we see the **theme** of the concern of Jesus for the *anawim*, i.e., the suffering, the oppressed, and the disenfranchised of society. Also present here is the theme of the presence of the supernatural in the action of Jesus of Nazareth.

A Feast of the Jews

The setting of the scene here is that of a Jewish feast. The feast is not named, which has caused much debate concerning the duration of Jesus' ministry. If this is another Passover, then John has jumped almost a year in time, in that 2:13 and 23 refers to Jesus going up to Jerusalem at the time of the Passover, followed by his journey home. It is not likely that this feast the Passover of the following year. It could have been any of the feasts falling between the two Passover reference of 2:13 and 6:4. It could have been *Rosh Hashanah* (October 1st), *Yom Kippur* (October 10), Tabernacles (October 15-21), *Hanukkah* (December), or *Purim* (March of the following year), one month before Passover. The activity and time involved for the events of chapter 4 would not allow the Feast of Pentecost to be the mystery feast, in that it occurred just a month and a half after Passover.

All of these feasts were celebrated in Jerusalem with a large number of pilgrim visitors, and the language used by Jesus here in this text could be easily associated with the themes of a number of these feasts. *Rosh Hashanah* (the New Year), also called the Feast of Trumpets, was celebrated by a blasting of the *shofar* from morning until evening and the public reading of the *Torah*, following the example of Ezra in his return from exile. *Yom Kippur* is not usually called a feast, it is a period of repentance, mourning, and fasting. Tabernacles, or the Feast of Booth, lasted eight days and marked the end of the harvest period. *Hanukkah*, or the Feast of Lights, was the celebration of the deliverance of Israel by the Meccabees in 164 BC, and *Purim* was a celebration of God's deliverance of the Jews, by means of Mordecai and Queen Esther, during their exile in Babylonian (Persia at that time).

Passover, the Feast of Tabernacles, and the Feast of Lights (*Hanukkah*) are specifically mentioned by John. Why he doesn't name this

feast is without a certain answer, but it was very likely a feast of lesser import in his thinking than the three he names. Given the role of the public reading of Moses in emulation of Ezra's reading the *Torah* to the Jews following their return from exile, associated with the Feast of Trumpets (*Rosh Hashanah*), and Jesus' appeal to the Scriptures (5:37-47) as giving witness to his messianic identity, and *Rosh Hashanah* becomes a good candidate. It was a day that marked the beginning of the civil year and was observed on October 1st, which would date it five months following Jesus' return to Galilee.

Scene Two (5:9b-18) The Following Sabbath Controversy

The day on which this took place was a Sabbath,¹⁰ and so the Jews said to the man who had been healed, "It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat."¹¹ But he replied, "The man who made me well said to me, 'Pick up your mat and walk.' "¹² So they asked him, "Who is this fellow who told you to pick it up and walk?"¹³ The man who was healed had no idea who it was, for Jesus had slipped away into the crowd that was there.¹⁴ Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, "See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you."¹⁵ The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.¹⁶ So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jews persecuted him.¹⁷ Jesus said to them, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working."¹⁸ For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.

The scene is the same. The players in this scene are Jesus, the man healed, and the Jews. The action is that of a challenge issued Jesus over this work of healing on the Sabbath. The dialogue has to do with the inquiry of the Jews concerning why the man healed by Jesus was carrying his mat, followed by a response of Jesus to those questioning what he had done. All of this sets the stage for the discourse of 5:19-47, which is Jesus first apologetic presentation of his identity. The most significant themes are the introduction of the Sabbath controversy, the attitude of persecution (*dioko* - to run after, to pursue), with the added motif of assassination, and the Jew's interpretation of what Jesus was claiming about himself.

The Sabbath Day Controversy

The Sabbath day was the seventh day of the week (Saturday), which begins at sunset on Friday evening and ends at sunset on Saturday evening (cf. Exodus 20:8-11). This was the Sabbath in ancient Israel and so in Israel today. The reaction of the Jews to what this man was doing is the point of primary interest here. Their charge is, "It is the Sabbath, it is not lawful for you to carry your mat" (v 10). Upon what biblical teaching is this charge based? They would argue Exod 20:8-11, which reads:

*"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. **On it you shall not do any work**, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.*

The Hebrew word for "work" here is *abad* meaning, "to work, to labor, to till the ground, cultivate, dress the vineyard, etc." What work was forbidden on the Sabbath? It is not as "black and white" as it appears to be. This was a much debated issue among the rabbis. There were ceremonial practices of Leviticus and Numbers that were to be carried out by the priests on the Sabbath. The people heavily attended synagogue services where they engaged in specific "religious activity" (i.e., the reading of Scripture, biblical exposition, singing, prayers, etc.) on each and every Sabbath. So some activity was permitted and some was not.

It is important to see that the Exodus 20:10 command is to, "remember the Sabbath day **to keep it holy**." This command is followed by qualifying directives throughout the remainder of the *Torah* with reference to what constituted "keeping it holy." Obviously, there is a distinction to be made between the "work of man" (i.e., gainful employment) and the "work of God." This is precisely the argument Jesus pursues in another Sabbath controversy (cf. Matt 12:1-8). Jesus did not break the Sabbath; rather, he violated the accepted interpretation of the rabbinic community as to what a violation of the Sabbath was. During this period, called the Second Temple period, the rabbis had developed a list of 39 categories of prohibited activities (cf., *The Mishnah*, "Sabbath"). Jesus was constantly at odds with

the "traditions of the elders;" i.e., the received or traditional interpretations of the Jewish scholastic community.

The biblical tradition itself presents several interpretative questions as to how this commandment was to be observed. In Num 15:32-36 a man was commanded to be stoned to death for breaking the Sabbath. The reason for this action is found in Exod 31:12-14 and Lev 23:28-32. The significance of this story in Num 15, however, was to teach the reader something of what was involved in the man's Sabbath violation. This man was not keeping the day holy; neither was he recognizing God as his Lord and lawgiver. Picking up sticks, in and of itself, was not wrong. A mother could pick up a fallen child on the Sabbath. A herdsman could pull an ox out of a pit on the Sabbath. A shepherd could attend an injured sheep on the Sabbath. The priests could engage in the ritual activity of the Temple and the synagogue leaders could engage in their "sacred labor" on the Sabbath. Circumcision could be performed on a male child if the eighth day following the child's birth fell on the Sabbath. A doctor could heal on the Sabbath if one's life was in question because life was considered sacred, but yet the actions of Jesus were considered an outrage to some of the Jews of Jerusalem.

The assumption underlying all of this erroneous thinking is that God commanded total idleness on the Sabbath day, but he did not. All that was done on the Sabbath day had to be "holy activity" and fall within the latter part of the fourth commandment - "Remember the Sabbath day **to keep it holy.**" The Sabbath was to be kept, not slept through. It was to be a day of ceasing labor, a day of remembering God as the Creator (Exod 20:11) and remembering God as their savior (Deut 5:12-15), and it was a day of celebration, as were all the feast days according to Lev 23, the Sabbath Day being the first of the feast days mentioned in this text. The fact that Jesus worked a miracle on the Sabbath Day and instructed the man healed to take up his mat and walk was in complete keeping with "keeping the Sabbath holy" by reflecting on God as the Creator. The significance of seeing what Jesus had done as an observation of God as Israel's Creator and deliverer was completely lost on those with whom Jesus had to deal. They could not, or would not, see the healing of a crippled man as a work of God.

The Theme of Persecution

In verse 16 we read, "Because of this the Jews persecuted Jesus," and in verse 18 we read, "the Jews were seeking him, to kill him." The

Greek word translated “persecute” is *dioko* meaning, “to run after, to pursue.” This is very literally what was happening here. Having learned that Jesus had healed this man and had told him to take up his mat and walk, they “ran after him.” This is a very graphic word picture of what persecution is all about. Those who engage in persecution of someone aggressively go after or pursue them. They wish to take control of the object of their pursuit. The additional statement of verse 18 is in keeping with the sense of this term. Jesus words had so enraged them that “they were seeking him, to kill,” to translate the text very literally. The justification for their actions was, no doubt, the same as Saul of Tarsus in his “pursuit” of the early Christians. The rationalization here is that, “the soul that sins, it shall die,” in connection with the avenger tradition of the Middle East. It is a violation of the *Torah* to kill someone unless he deserves death. How is such a determination made? It is very difficult for some to make such a determination; for the bigoted mind, however, it is something he “rushes after” (*dioko*).

Many cultures have an “avenger tradition.” This was so in the Middle East in the first century as well as today. This tradition is rooted in the idea of carrying out the principle of an eye for an eye, life for a life (Gen 9:5; Exodus 21:23; Deut 24:16), or to carry out the vengeance of God (Ezek 18:4, 20; Deut 32:43). In Num 35:19, this figure is called “the avenger of blood.” He latter became known in the Middle East as “the assassin,” a term taken from the Arabic word *hash-asashin* which means to partake of hashish, a piece of imagery drawn the ritual of a secrete order of Moslems who would partake of the narcotic in a ceremony in which they vowed to pursue and take the life of someone who was designated worthy of death. The word “assassins” is an appropriate word for these Jews who decided that because Jesus claimed God as his father and because of his disregard for their dogma concerning the Sabbath, he was worthy of death, and then set themselves out to “seek him and kill him.”

Scene Three (5:19-29): Jesus' Messianic Claims (Monologue Scene)

Jesus gave them this answer: "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. ²⁰For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, to your amazement he will show him even greater things than these. ²¹For

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. ²²Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, ²³that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him. ²⁴I 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. ²⁵I 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. ²⁶For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself. ²⁷And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man. ²⁸Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice ²⁹and come out--those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.

This block of material is of critical importance in the development of John's Christology. It takes the form of "an apologetic treatise." Nowhere else in the four Gospels do we find Jesus making such a formal, systematic defense of his messiahship, and the authority of that office. Nor in any other discourse do we see such a marshalling of evidence in proof of his messianic identity. Jesus clearly believed himself to be the Messiah; a careful study of this passage leaves little doubt of this fact.

The player of this monologue scene is Jesus. The setting and action are a continuation of the previous scene. Digging out the themes of Jesus' discourse is where the most valued treasure of this text is to be found. In verse 19, Jesus declared that his will was so at one with the Father's that his will was the Father's will. What Jesus willed to do was what he perceived the Father would do in the same situation. In this, he made their issue with God, not with him (cf. v 17). It is also of interest to note that the word Jesus used for love in verse 20 is not *apape* (good will toward), but *phileo* (an emotionally rooted affection), implying a filial relationship with God.

In verse 21, Jesus makes an even more astonishing claim - that he could raise the dead, as could the Father. This statement would have had special significance to these ancient Jews. In the *Mishnah* it was written that no mortal held power over the rain, the womb, and life consumed in death. Jesus' claim, then, was a claim that he was more than mortal. Just as

astonishing is the claim that the Son should be honored (*timao* - esteemed, revered or venerated) as the Father was honored (verse 23). Then, further, in verse 24, he claims that his words possessed the power of eternal life. To his accusers, it was only God and Moses' words that carried authority. Jesus says "my word," not only equating his word with the words of Moses and the prophets (Hebrew Scripture) but surpassing them. The Hebrew Scriptures could not give eternal life; rather, they could only reveal to them the source life. There is a progression of thought here with reference to the authority of "the voice of the Son of God." His voice is the voice of deity (verse 23), the voice of eternal life (verses 24-25), the voice of divine authority (verse 27), and the voice of resurrection and judgment (verses 28-29).

From verses 19-29 we may conclude the following: (1) He claimed to be so at one with the Father as to have no will separate and apart from the Father. (2) He claimed a special affection (*phileo*) to exist between the Father and himself. (3) He claimed himself to be worthy of the same honor (reverence or esteem) due the Father. (4) He claimed that his voice was the voice of the Son of God, (5) that his voice was the voice of divine authority, and (6) that his voice possessed the power of life - it was the voice of resurrection and judgment.

Scene Four (5:30-47): The Case for His Claims (Monologue Scene)

By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me. ³¹If I testify about myself, my testimony is not valid. ³²There is another who testifies in my favor, and I know that his testimony about me is valid. ³³"You have sent to John and he has testified to the truth. ³⁴Not that I accept human testimony; but I mention it that you may be saved. ³⁵John was a lamp that burned and gave light, and you chose for a time to enjoy his light. ³⁶I have testimony weightier than that of John. For the very work that the Father has given me to finish, and which I am doing, testifies that the Father has sent me. ³⁷And the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me. You have never heard his voice nor seen his form, ³⁸nor does his word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one he sent. ³⁹You diligently search the Scriptures because you think that by them you have eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me,

⁴⁰yet you refuse to come to me to have life. ⁴¹I do not accept praise from men, ⁴²but I know you. I know that you do not have the love of God in your hearts. ⁴³I have come in my Father's name, and you do not accept me; but if someone else comes in his own name, you will accept him. ⁴⁴How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God? ⁴⁵But do not think I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set. ⁴⁶If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. ⁴⁷But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?

In rabbinic tradition the validity of one's claims was determined by the case he or his counsel submitted for his claims (i.e., the evidence, witnesses, or testimony). Jesus made sure his accusers would have a heavy case to consider. His presentation was of a rabbinic sort, such as a Jew would be obliged to receive on legal grounds (as established by *Torah* precedent). Under the law there must be two or three witnesses in order to make a testimony valid, and these must concur (cf., Num 35:29-30; Deut 19:15; see also Matt 18:16 and 2 Cor 13:1). Jesus put himself under the law and gave his accusers an irrefutable case built upon multiple testimonies. He calls upon no less than five witnesses to testify in his behalf: (1) John the Baptist (v 33), (2) his works (v 36), (3) the Father (v 37), (4) the Scriptures (v 39), and (5) the testimony of Moses (the law) in particular (vv 45-47).

The First Witness: John The Baptist (5: 33-35)

John had testified that he was the voice of one crying in the wilderness preparing the way for the coming of the Lord (cf. John 1:19-23; Isaiah 40:3). John had said that he was not the Messiah, but was the one sent to prepare the way for one who was to follow him. That one was Jesus and his accusers knew it. The Isaiah passage said that the herald was to prepare the way of the Lord (in the Hebrew text, *Yahweh*). What does this imply about who Jesus really was?

The Second Witness: His Works (5:36)

From observation of his works, one Jewish scholar (Nicodemus) had come to the conclusion that Jesus must have come from God (John 3:1-2). This was the source of proof Jesus gave the disciples of John in Matt 11:2-

6: "Go tell John what you see me doing and teaching and his discouragement will be lifted." John knew the messianic Scriptures and would be well able to make the connection. (See Isaiah 42:6-7 and 61:1ff.)

The Third Witness: The Father (5:37-38)

The testimony of the Father was given in three forms: (1) by direct testimony, as at Jesus' baptism (Matt 3:13-17), also the transfiguration (Matt 17:1-5); (2) by biblical revelation (the messianic testimony of the OT Scriptures; cf. Luke 24:45f); and (3) by the manifestation of God's presence within the person of Jesus of Nazareth (cf. Matt 1:23 - he was "God with us"). God was present, his very image and glory was reflected in the person before these Jewish leaders, and they refused to see. God had spoken to man by the mouth of Jesus, but they refused to hear. Can you imagine what rage filled those Jews at being told by this Galilean carpenter that they had never seen nor heard God?

The Fourth Witness: the Scriptures (5:39-44)

The words of Jesus here point up the irony of the whole confrontation. The scribes were not a sect of Jews, they were a professional guild of scholars. Since the days of Ezra the scribe, there was a guild of scribes, first known as the *Sopherim*, then later called the *Massorettes*. They had devoted their lives to the copying and preservation of the Hebrew Scriptures. They would make manuscript copies of these writings or scrolls. To copy the Hebrew Scriptures in their entirety would take years. They counted every letter, every word, every line, every *jot* and *tittle*. The ancient scribe Hillel said, "More law, more life . . . He who has gotten himself words of law has gotten himself the life of the world to come." "You search the Scriptures," says Jesus, "because in them you think you have eternal life." That was where they were wrong. It is possible to search these writings and never find eternal life. There is no life in the Scriptures alone, or in and of themselves; but rather, if we will hear their testimony, they will lead us to the one who is life. We find life, not in the Scriptures, but in **him** through **them**.

In these verses Jesus goes at the heart of their real problem (i.e., their love of the glory of men). They did not have the love of God in themselves because they had no room for it. They were too filled with pride and self-esteem, or, as John called it in 1 John 2:16, "vainglory or pride of life"

(empty glory or glory without meaning). Jesus had come in the Father's name and they received him not; however, if he had come in the name of Gamaliel, a doctor of the law (Acts 5:34), or some noted scholar or high ranking personage of the day (Shammai, Hillel, or Johanan Ben Zakkai) they would probably have been more receptive. In verse 44, Jesus becomes as blunt as possible. They loved the praises they received from one another. A question for us is whether things have changed that much today?

The Fifth Witness: Moses (5:45-47)

Here Jesus puts the capstone on his case. They were disciples of Moses. The law of Moses was the final authority. His writings were the supreme writings of all Israel. No one would dare to withstand Moses. If Moses said it, it was so. In the synagogue, when Moses was read, the men would declare "Amen" (Hebrew - so be it). To speak authoritatively was to "sit on Moses' seat" (Matt 23:2). Jesus says here, "Moses accuses you." Accuses you of what? Inconsistency! Jesus was the heart of the Law of Moses and they would not accept Moses here (cf. Deut 18:18ff; Luke 24:25-27, 44-47).

Jesus closes his case and in so doing points up the real reason they rejected it. They are told that all of this is lost on them because of their fourfold sinful condition, which is: (1) their lack of will to see the Messiah God has sent to them; (2) their lack of real love toward God, or desire for his honor; (3) love for the honor of men, rather than the honor of God; and (4) a lack of real faith in the Mosaic writings as well as a lack of understanding of the Scriptures altogether. For those of the modern-day liberal theological community who claim that Jesus nowhere claimed himself to be the Messiah, verse 46 is hard to explain, "For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; **for he wrote of me.**" There it is, he did it! He declared himself, "the Messiah!"

MWLIII