

THE JEWISH GOSPEL OF JOHN

Discovering Jesus, King of All Israel



Eli Lizorkin-Eyzenberg

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Jewish Studies for Christians

Tel Aviv, Israel

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Eli Lizorkin-Eyzenberg

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TO LISA LODEN MY MENTOR AND FRIEND
May your light never go out.
(Prov. 31:18)

TO MY YOUNGEST DAUGHTER SHELLY
May you know the King of All Israel.
(John 20:31)

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Endorsements

“A genuine apologetic is one that is true to the texts and the history, akin to the speeches of a defense attorney with integrity. Using the best of contemporary scholarship in first-century Judaic history and contributing much of his own, Dr. Eli Lizorkin-Eyzenberg has demonstrated that the Gospel of John is not an anti-Jewish, but a thoroughly Jewish book.”

Daniel Boyarin, Hermann P. and Sophia Taubman Professor of Talmudic Culture
University of California, Berkeley

“Dr. Eli Lizorkin-Eyzenberg has produced an original and thought-provoking work. His book is an interesting effort to view this gospel as reflecting north-Israelite and Samaritan viewpoints. This study brings with it a fresh interpretive air and new light to a challenging field.”

Israel Knohl, Yehezkel Kaufmann Professor of Biblical studies
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

“Dr. Lizorkin-Eyzenberg places the text of John’s Gospel in its authentic context by examining the Dead Sea Scrolls, Philo, rabbinic literature, and suggesting innovative explanations for the nomenclature, ‘the Jews.’ His fresh analysis is sure to stir meaningful debate. His creative approach will make an enduring contribution to the discipline of New Testament studies.”

Brad Young, Professor of Biblical Literature in Judeo-Christian Studies
Oral Roberts University

“The Gospel of John is arguably one of the most powerful and also most problematic texts of the New Testament. The new book by Dr. Eli Lizorkin-Eyzenberg, *The Jewish Gospel of John*, challenges us to rethink our routinely upheld conventions concerning this Gospel’s role in the so-called parting of the ways between Judaism and Christianity.”

Serge Ruzer, Professor of Comparative Religion and Syriac Christianity
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

“This is a refreshing and creative reading of the Gospel of John, focusing on its milieu of composition. Whether or not readers agree with the author on everything, they will undoubtedly be stimulated, even provoked, to think again

about this Gospel and what it means for understanding the Jew Jesus and his message.”

David Neuhaus, S.J., Latin Patriarchal Vicar
Saint James Vicariate for Hebrew Speaking Catholics in Israel

“For some time, research on the Gospels has suffered from stagnation, and there is a feeling that there is not much new that one can say. In light of this, Dr. Eli Lizorkin-Eyzenberg’s new commentary on the Gospel of John, with its original outlook on the identity of the original audience and the issues at stake, is extremely refreshing.”

Ishay Rosen-Zvi, Associate Professor of Talmudic Culture
Tel-Aviv University

“Dr. Lizorkin-Eyzenberg has given us an exciting and challenging opportunity to understand John’s Gospel within its Jewish environment. It is a significant achievement to make accessible, in a popular and readable way, how John sees Jesus, Messiah and King of Israel, within the Judaism(s) of his day. Drawing from a wealth of scholarship, the author has produced an excellent study. The Jewish Gospel of John will give you a greater love for the King of Israel and his people, and will transform your own understanding of the meaning of this wonderful Gospel for today.”

Richard Harvey
The Author of Mapping Messianic Jewish Theology

“In this book Dr. Eli Lizorkin-Eyzenberg presents a new and innovative reading of the Gospel of John, based on the hypothesis that the book is a Jewish/Judean text written to persuade ‘all of Israel’ to join under one Messianic King: Jesus. The careful reader, both academic and lay, who seeks a historical understanding of John’s Gospel without having to sacrifice its contemporary religious importance, will find this book both stimulating and thought-provoking.”

Anders Runesson, Professor of New Testament
University of Oslo

Preface

This book represents my personal journey as a Jew who follows Jesus through one of the most important and beloved accounts of Jesus' life – the Gospel of John. It has been said that some divide the world into men and women, while others into rich and poor, still others into black and white, and so on, but it could also be said, jokingly of course, that the world is really divided into those who love the Gospel of Mark and those who love the Gospel of John.

I have always found the contents of the fourth Gospel in particular, most challenging and most gripping. Having said that, please allow me to confess that this Gospel has literally bothered me for over 20 years until finally I was able to find a way through this challenge. As you know, the word “gospel” means “good news” and I just could not see how this Gospel was anything but bad news for us Jews.

You see, throughout Christian history, the Gospel of John has stood among the most favorite books of the Bible, alongside perhaps only Psalms, Isaiah and the book of Romans. This Gospel has also been a source of much discussion. One of the main reasons for the ongoing discussion is its “anti-Jewish” rhetoric.

It is possible that as you read this book you will find yourself on the side of those who “stand with Israel” and, like the God-fearers of old, you may feel attraction to all things Jewish. The last thing you may be thinking right now is that this beloved Gospel may be read as anti-Jewish. You may even wonder how I could think so. Please, allow me to explain.

In John, as in other parts of the Bible, Jesus has some very hard things to say. The problem here is that the harsh words do not seem to be addressed to a Jewish sub-group, but rather to all “the Jews.” After all, harsh rhetoric is also present in the so-called “most Jewish” of all the four Gospels, the Gospel of Matthew (Matt. 23) and is consistent with the standards of speech of the Israelite prophets. Just begin reading Isaiah or Amos (among many others) and you will easily see my point.

In Matthew, as well as in Mark and Luke, in most cases it can be clearly seen that Jesus argued with Jewish subgroups, such as Scribes and Pharisees, but not with all “the Jews.” It is peculiar that only in the Gospel of John is the un-nuanced “the Jews” (in most English translations) used repeatedly, referring to the opponents of Jesus who were often seeking to kill him. (5:18; 7:1-10; 8:1-22, 8:40; 10:29-33; 11:8; 18:14; 18:28) Probably the best example of this is found in John 8:44. There, John's Jesus said to “the Jews:” “You belong to your father, the devil.” Bearing in mind the biblical language of the concept of “the Children of God” being connected with the people of Israel (Deut. 14:1), is it any wonder that many people,

like myself, are puzzled and bothered by what John's Jesus allegedly said to the Jews?!

As a Jew who follows Jesus, and this may be a predicament unique to people like myself, I simply could not live with my favorite Gospel being an anti-Jewish Christian document. I was acutely and constantly conscious of this problem. I saw this aspect more often than others (Christian non-Jews) would. Call it a psychological problem, if you must. You may ask: "If this was so painful, why did you stay with this Gospel for so many years?" That would be a fair question.



The first part of my answer makes me feel a little bit like Tevye the Milkman from the classic film "Fiddler on the Roof" (if you have not seen it, shame on you, you must! ☺), when he reflected that perhaps those who heard him speak about the importance and variety of Jewish traditions, could ask the question: "Where did these traditions come from?" Tevye imagined a confident answer: "I don't know." So, part of the answer is that something (or someone) continued to draw me to this particular narrative of Jesus' life. Why did I stay with this conflicting narrative of Jesus' life so long without resolution? I don't really know, but as you can imagine I do have a hunch and I have a suspicion that you do too.

There is one other major issue that kept a flicker of hope burning for many years. You see, other than reading the abundance of what seem to be anti-Jewish statements, this Gospel also boasts a large number of pro-Jewish

stories and statements that are in fact not present in the other Gospels. Only in this Gospel are the Jews actually called “his own.” (John 1:11b) Only in this Gospel Jesus meets the Samaritan woman and tells her “Salvation is from the Jews.” (John 4:22) Only in this Gospel Jesus is said to be buried according to the customs of “the Jews” (John 19:40) – this too is a powerful statement of belonging. And as a final example, only in this Gospel is Jesus portrayed as experiencing emotional pain, together with the Jews, when he mourns Lazarus. (Jn. 11:33) Why such stark contrasts?

It is at this point in your reading of this book (which of course is very early, after all you are still in the Preface), that you might be saying, “that psychological problem, you spoke about earlier” may have been deeper than you first imagined. I can almost hear you say: “Are you saying that the Gospel of John is an anti-Jewish and pro-Jewish document all at the same time?!”

Yes! (That is exactly what I am saying).

“But how can it be?” (Should be your response).

Why do you think I wrote the book?!

Come...



Prologue

When I set out to write this book, which I later, after much thought and many other titles, decided to call “The Jewish Gospel of John”, I wanted to answer the question that had disturbed me for years: “How can this Gospel read so pro-Jewish (for example in Jn. 4:22) and anti-Jewish (for example Jn. 8:44) at the same time?” In this very important section of the book, I would like to present for your attention the conclusions I reached. Having read this prior to reading the book itself, you will be able to judge for yourself if my conclusions really do match up with the text of the Gospel of John verse-by-verse.

1) The Gospel of John was initially written for a particular audience consisting of a variety of intra-Israelite groups, one of the main ones being the Samaritan Israelites. To them, unlike for us today, the word *Ἰουδαῖοι* (pronounced *Ioudaioi* and translated as “Jews”) did not mean “the People of Israel,” i.e. “the Jewish people” as we call them today. For these people, the people I propose are one of the main audiences for the Gospel of John, the *Ioudaioi*, meant something different.

One modern example that illustrates this ancient dynamic comes from an Eastern European setting. The Ukrainians often called Russians, with whom they had an uneasy relationship to say the least, “Maskali.”¹ The Ukrainian word “Maskal” comes from the name of the Russian Imperial Capital – Moscow. Those who were either of Russian ethnic descent, or who even as much as acknowledged Moscow’s authority or leading role in the region, could be referred to as “Maskal.” In fact, the Maskal did not have to be from Moscow or be ethnically Russian at all. The individual simply needed to be (or be perceived to be) a supporter of a Moscow-led political agenda. Other peoples outside of the Russian-Ukrainian political conflict, who were familiar with the issues, never used the designation “Maskali” themselves, knowing that it was a Ukrainian term for the Russians and Russia’s affiliates.

Therefore, using a similar analogy, those who acknowledged the Jerusalem-approved authorities in Kfar Nahum (Capernaum) and Cana, which were far from Jerusalem, were also referred to by the principal name for the Jerusalemite formal rulers and leading sect – *the Ioudaioi*. All members of the Jerusalem-led system became *the Ioudaioi* in the Gospel of John. This is very similar to the way “Russians” became “Maskali” to Ukrainians and to others who witnessed their polemic. So when the audience for John’s Gospel heard these anti-*Ioudaioi* statements (like John

¹ At the time of finalizing this book (2015) Russian and Ukrainian political interests have collided to the point of war that took place in Eastern Ukraine.

7:1-2), whom did they think the author/s had in mind? This is the key question.

To Samaritan Israelites, whatever else the *Ioudaioi* may have been, they were certainly Judeans - members of the former Southern Kingdom of Israel who had adopted a wide variety of innovations that were contrary to the Torah as Samaritans understood it. Judging from this Gospel, the original audience understood that, as well as simply being Judeans, the *Ioudaioi* were: i) Judean authorities, and ii) affiliated members of this authority structure living outside of Judea. These affiliates were located both in the territories of the former Northern Kingdom of Israel (Galilee) and in the large Israelite diaspora outside the Land of Israel, both in the Roman Empire and beyond. In this way, the Gospel of John, like the other Gospels, portrayed Jesus' antagonists as representatives of sub-groups within Israel, and not the people of Israel as a whole. In other words *Ioudaioi* ("the Jews" in most translations) in this Gospel are not "the Jewish



People" in the modern sense of the word.

The translation of *Ioudaioi* always and only as "Jews" sends the reader in the opposite direction from what the author intended. While the translation of this word simply as "Judeans," is a more accurate choice than "Jews," it is still not fully adequate - for three reasons that come to mind:

a) The English word *Jews* evokes, in the minds of modern peoples, the idea of Jewish religion (i.e. Jews are people who profess a religion called Judaism) and therefore cannot be used *indiscriminately* to translate the term *Ioudaioi*, since, in the first century, there was no separate category for religion (*Judaism*, when it was used, meant something much more all-

encompassing than what it means to us today). In a sense, it was only when non-Israelite Christ-followers, in an attempt to self-establish and self-define, created the category called *Christianity*, that the category called *Judaism*, as we know it today, was also born. Since then most Christian theologians and most Jewish theologians after them project our modern definition of Judaism back into the New Testament.

b) On the other hand, the English word *Judean* evokes in the minds of modern people, oftentimes, an almost exclusively geographical definition (a *Judean* is the person who lives in Judea or used to live in Judea) and hence cannot be used *indiscriminately* either, since today it does not imply everything it intended to imply in late antiquity.

c) The word *Judean*, without clarification and nuancing, does not account for the complex relationship of the outside-of-Judea affiliates with the Jerusalem authorities either.

Because of the lack of a perfect word to describe what was meant by *Ioudaioi* in the Gospel of John, I suggest that the word is best left untranslated.

2) The Gospel of John was not composed as a pro-Samaritan or a Samaritan document. It was neither authored by Samaritan followers of Jesus nor sought to portray the Samaritans as more faithful to Torah than Judeans. It is a Judean-Israelite document that was originally composed to reach Samaritan and other Israelites with the gospel.



Why do I call this Israelite document *Judean*? Because it is especially in this Gospel that Jesus is shown as belonging to the *Ioudaioi*. As was already mentioned above, Jesus identified on a number of occasions with the *Ioudaioi* (*Judeans/Jews*). In John 1:11b the *Ioudaioi* are “his own.” In John 4:9 Jesus is called *Ioudaios* (*Judean/Jew*). In John 4:22 Jesus and his disciples affirm that salvation is from the *Ioudaioi*; and in John 19:40 Jesus was buried according to the burial customs of the *Ioudaioi*.

On the other hand, if this Gospel is not Samaritan, but Judean in origin (ideologically and not necessarily geographically), what then explains such an acute interest in Samaritan Israelites?

This Gospel was authored by a certain kind of Judean (or more accurately a group of Judeans). He/they expected the coming redemption of

Israel to include the return of the Samaritan Israelites (Jn. 4:35) as well as all the Children of Israel dispersed among foreign lands. (Jn. 10:16; 11:52) The Gospel was probably written in the aftermath of the apostolic mission to the Samaritan lands (Acts 8) and probably provided an alternative to the Gospel of Matthew's anti-Samaritan views. The Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of John display similar tensions to those in the Books of Kings and Chronicles in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. The Books of Kings represent a Judean-centered narrative, telling, in many ways, a story similar to that of the Chronicles. One of the main differences was that the Books of Chronicles, though likely also of Judean authorship, had an "All Israel" perspective at the center. (1 Chron. 9:1; 11:1, 4, 10; 12:38; 13:5, 6, 8; 14:8; 2 Chron. 1:2; 7:6, 8; 9:30; 10:1, 3, 16) They refused to define Israel only as the Southern Israelites, later termed *Judeans*. Similarly, it seems that the Gospel of John (and most probably the Gospel of Luke) was the alternative to the Gospel of Matthew's Judean anti-Samaritan views. (Matt. 10:5) John's Gospel, like the Books of Chronicles, called for all Israel to be united under the leadership of God's anointed king. In John's case, he envisioned Jesus as the King who came to unite representatives/descendants of both Southern and Northern tribes wherever they may be. (John 10:16) Just like the Gospel of Luke, this Gospel declared its firm belief in the coming "Messianic Reunification" that was promised by the prophets of old.

3) The Gospel of John, like the three other Gospels, is technically an anonymous document. Later Christian tradition branded all four Gospels to associate with one of the great figures of the early Jesus movement. What can be said, however, is that the Gospel of John was authored by one for whom the Book of Ezekiel was particularly important. There are an overwhelming number of connections between these two Israelite works. This is, of course, not to say that Ezekiel is the only background for this Gospel; certainly other books, like the Book of Daniel, are also extremely important. The use of Daniel in John's Gospel, however, is almost always connected with the night visions of Daniel (Dan. 7:13-14); while the Book of Ezekiel is alluded to throughout the Gospel by a multiplicity of themes. One of these key themes in Ezekiel, just as I think in John, is the reunification of Southern and Northern Israel under the leadership of God's anointed King. (Ezek. 37:16; John 10:16) Some other compelling examples include: the Good Shepherd of Israel coming in judgment against the evil shepherds who neglect and exploit the sheep under their care (Ezek. 34:1-31; Jn. 10:11); the vision of the Temple bursting open with streams of running water which reach to the Dead Sea and beyond with revitalizing power (Ezek. 47:1-12; Jn. 7:38); and the Son of Man commanding God's Spirit to come and resurrect the people of Israel. (Ezek. 37:9-10; Jn. 16:7)

4) Half of the Gospel (chapters 1-12) seems to cover three years of

Jesus' ministry, judging from the three Passovers, while the second half (chapters 13-21) is concentrated on his Passion alone - roughly one day,



culminating in his death and subsequent resurrection. I conclude, therefore, that the last half of the work is very important to the author's argument, with the chapters 1-12 serving as a disproportionate introduction to the Gospel's crescendo.

In this section, Jesus is on trial before the Judean and the Roman authorities. Yet, from the perspective of its author, the entire Gospel shows that it is the Judean authorities who are on trial. It is Jesus who has come as the covenant prosecutor to press charges against the evil shepherds of Israel. Not the other way around, as it may seem. While Jesus stands before his accusers and before Pilate, it is Jesus who has full power and authority. (Jn. 10:18; 19:11) From the very beginning, Jesus methodically worked his way to his goal, orchestrating and carefully controlling all the events surrounding his life (Jn. 11:6; 11:17; 12:14-15) and his Passion. (Jn. 19:28) The idea of a court motif is everywhere present in John. Throughout the Gospel, we see

many witnesses. Everyone and everything seems to be testifying in favor of Jesus (John 1:7; 4:39; 5:32; 19:35; 21:24); mounting evidence, piece-by-piece, is methodically presented. The inadequacy of the current *Ioudaioi* as leaders of God's people Israel is increasingly emphasized. (Jn. 3:9-10; 6:31-32; 8:21-22) Ultimately, their opposition to God's Anointed One (Jesus) is exemplified by their attempt to preserve Judea's Temple worship and therefore to prosper for themselves, their families and their sects, under the terms dictated by the Roman occupation. (Jn. 11:48) Such aims disqualify them to be the proper leaders of the Children of Israel.

Even though seven miraculous signs (Jn. 2:1-11; 4:46-54; 5:1-18; 6:5-14; 6:16-24; 9:1-7; 11:1-45) together testify to Jesus' power and divine authority, in the end, the ultimate justification of Jesus' person, words and deeds over against the formal rulers of Israel, is set forth – the resurrection of the Son of God as manifested by the empty tomb and three post-resurrection appearances. (Jn. 20-21)

5) John's Gospel has a very interesting use of the word *world* (κόσμος) throughout its narrative and it does not seem to be what we traditionally understand it to mean. The basic working definition of the term, "the world," in this Gospel seems to be *the order that opposes Israel's God*. (Jn. 7:7; 9:39; 12:31; 15:18-19) This opposing order is nevertheless an object of his redemptive love, attention and restoration, (Jn. 1:29; 3:16; 6:33; 14:31; 17:23) because it was once created by God through his everlasting Word. (Jn. 1:1, 10) The primary identity of the *world* in this intra-Israelite Gospel is, not surprisingly – the current *Ioudaioi* and their leadership structure, especially. (Jn. 7:4-7; 8:23; 9:39; 14:17-31; 18:20)

In summary, answering my own original question directly (How can John's Gospel seem pro-Jewish and anti-Jewish at the same time?), I can state the following: This Gospel was written from one of the first century Judean perspectives, where Jesus' identity and mission was intimately tied up with the *Ioudaioi*, as a sub-group within the nation of Israel. This affiliation of Jesus with the *Ioudaioi* was paramount for John's Gospel. Although Jesus is rejected by his own group, it belonged to him (Jn. 1:11; 4:22; 19:40). References like these, among many others, in my mind explain the *pro-Ioudaioi* statements in the Gospel.

At the same time, I propose that this first century Judean perspective included a vision for the restoration of the Northern (Samaritan and Galilean) Israelites, as well as those residing in the Judean and Samaritan diaspora centers outside of the Land. To the author of this Gospel, Jesus was nothing less than the King of Israel in its entirety.

It is especially for those Israelites (whether Samaritan, Galilean, or residing in diaspora) that this Gospel was first written. This, in my mind, accounts for the anti-*Ioudaioi* statements we find in this Israelite Gospel. The anti-*Ioudaioi* statements would not be understood by these late first

century Israelites (or Gentile God-fearers for that matter) as criticizing Israel as a whole. In spite of what Christian and Jewish theologians after them have assumed about John's Gospel, it was not originally meant to be read by everyone. It may even be said that the composition of John's Gospel constituted a significant lack of foresight on behalf of its (human) author. Had the author imagined (and the fact that he also didn't give us insight into the first century Jesus movement) that, just few centuries later, it would be primarily non-Israelites who would read and interpret his magnificent Gospel, being removed culturally and socio-religiously from its original setting, he might have been much more careful with the use of his terminology.

So, how can the Gospel of John seem/be pro-Jewish and anti-Jewish all at the same time? Because: i) It is a Judean Gospel at its core, and ii) It was originally written to Israelites who understood that *Ioudaioi* were but a sub-group within Israel and not "the Jewish People" as a whole.

Although the idea that John's Gospel was at first meant only for Israelites may be threatening to some people, there is absolutely nothing to fear. Most of the books in the Bible had a specific audience, even if most of the time we can only guess who that audience really was. The message of these sacred texts, after being properly understood, can and must legitimately be applied to other contexts as well, and this, my friends, includes everyone who would be willing to hear the message of this Gospel.

Are you ready? If so, let us begin and walk through the Gospel of John, so that we too can believe and in so doing have everlasting life. (Jn. 20:3)



Disclaimer

This section, the disclaimer, is a great section. Here is where the author gets to preempt criticisms of his book (whether fair and not). So this is my attempt to explain a few things that I think are very important for you, my dear reader, to know.

I wrote this book for a particular kind of audience – for serious Christian lay persons and clergy members. While I did expect that scholars would eavesdrop on occasion, I did not think of them as I composed and wrote my thoughts. My main audience, therefore, is not one that is particularly impressed with an overabundance of footnotes and does not consider that the ideas need to be found in other scholarly books and articles as a litmus test of any kind. My main audience tends to appreciate clear, thought-provoking material, reinforced by visual illustrations. This is the reason why you will not find many references to secondary sources (scholarly literature), but instead there are a fair amount of references to original (ancient) sources and an abundance of hand-drawn illustrations by Lyda Estrada, a talented Colombian artist. (For those who are interested, a good list of secondary sources can be found in the further reading section at the end of the book.)

My main audience is not the only reason this book is so light on secondary sources. I intentionally adopted a different approach to the one used by most scholars who write commentaries. I wanted to read John's Gospel in the quietness of my own soul, heart and mind. I purposefully avoided knowing what other people thought about my subject. I wanted to understand it for myself and by myself. Talk to my mother. She will tell you that I was born independent.

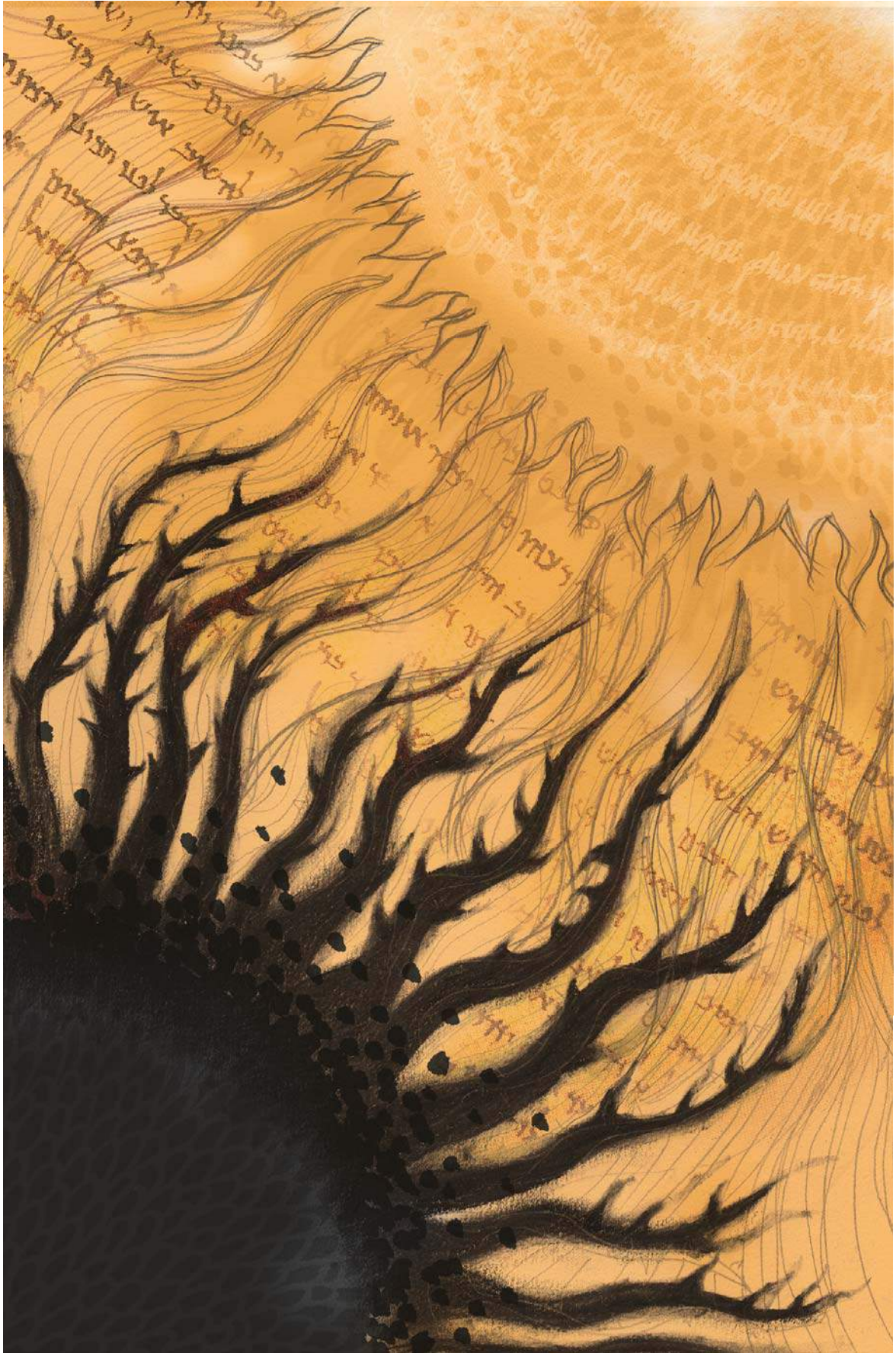
Of course, I had studied other scholars and read extensively for 25 years, so it is inaccurate to say that I was not influenced in this study by others. Of course I was. But at the time of writing the study itself, I purposely stayed away from further reading on the subject. Instead, I relied on the feedback of thousands of my blog readers (Jewish Studies for Christians), where for several years I published the base material found in this book. Many of those interactions were priceless and very helpful to me in writing this book and in correcting numerous factual errors and faults of reasoning.

Another possible perceived weakness of this book may be my almost constant refusal to read the Gospel of John in the light of, and in interaction with, the other Gospels. I wanted to read John for John's sake. I was not interested in discovering one nicely packaged, synchronized and harmonized, Gospel story. Those attempts have already been made many times.

I think it is this approach, during the period of writing this study, of shutting my ears to all other voices, including the voices of great Christian and Jewish scholars and the voices of the other Gospel writers (Luke,

Matthew and Mark), that is to be credited with this book's uniqueness, insight and strength. Whether you will agree with me or not, this is yours to judge. But my conscience is clear. I did what I thought was best.





Chapter 1

Prologue; the Witness of John the Baptizer; the First Disciples

✧ ¹*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* ²*He was in the beginning with God.* ³*All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.*²

For a long time it has been mistakenly thought that the ideas expressed in these three verses of John's prologue are unique to Christianity. It was erroneously believed that this statement constituted nothing less than a ground-breaking departure from Judaism. However, nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, it is not until verse 14 "and the Word became flesh," that an innovative idea, though not contradictory to Judaism, was first introduced. What we read in these first three verses should enable us to clearly understand that the author of this Gospel was a committed Jew, entrenched in the rich concepts of the Judaism of the Second Temple period. His deep Jewish consciousness is evident as he structures his prologue thoroughly within the Israelite interpretive traditions of the time.

First, the author roots his narrative in the foundational verses of the Torah – "In the beginning God..." (Gen. 1:1) and "...God said." Therefore, the notion that the Gospel of John is a Christian document, set in opposition to Judaism, makes no sense in the light of John's own priorities. For John, perhaps even more than for the other Gospel writers, everything begins with the Torah. Secondly, the idea of the Word (Logos/Memra³) of God possessing extraordinary qualities and functions in relationship to God Himself, was not new to Second Temple Judaism. For example, Philo, an Alexandrian Jew who was roughly contemporary with Jesus, but probably never met him, wrote: "...the *most universal of all things is God; and in the second place the Word of God.*" (Allegorical Interpretation, II, 86); "...the *shadow of God is His Word, which He used like an instrument when He was making the world...*" (Allegorical Interpretation, III, 96); "This same *Word is continually a suppliant to the immortal God* on behalf of the mortal race,

² Most quotes are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV) with some minor modifications. The reader is encouraged to compare it with other available faithful versions of the Bible such as NASB among others.

³ Memra is a rough Aramaic equivalent of the word Logos in Greek.

which is exposed to affliction and misery; and is also the ambassador, sent by the Ruler of all, to the subject race... *neither being uncreated as God, nor yet created as you*, but being in the midst between these two extremities..." (Who is the Heir of Divine Things, 205-6)

Philo of Alexandria was not the only Jew in the first century who had a highly developed concept of the Word (Logos) of God. The Jerusalem Targum, in translating and expanding the original Hebrew of Genesis 3:8, states: "...they heard the voice of the Word of the Lord God walking in the garden... and Adam and his wife hid themselves from before the Lord God among the trees of the garden" (Jerusalem Targum). When translating Genesis 19:24, the same translator/interpreter writes: "And the Word (Memra) of the Lord Himself had made to descend upon the people of Sodom and Gomorrah... fire from before the Lord from the heavens."

These examples from Philo of Alexandria and the Jerusalem Targum are only a small portion of the many examples that could be cited.⁴ Therefore, my simple conclusion here is that the concept of the "Word of God" is thoroughly Israelite, no matter in what language it is expressed, and in no way represents an addition or a departure from Israelite thought of the day.

⁴*In him was life, and the life was the light of all people.*
⁵*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

To the author of this Gospel, the Word of God was both distinct from God and yet at the same time was, in some way, God. This Word of God (Logos/Memra) played an exclusive role in the creation of the world, as we read in the verses above. Moreover, the life force that makes any of God's creation breathe, move, and exist was intricately connected with and depended upon that very Word of God. (vs.3) In this section, the author of the Gospel compares this *Logos/Memra/Word* to light shining in the darkness, stating resolutely that the power of darkness was not able to overcome it.

The remainder of this Gospel, including the imagery of light and darkness, was initially, and for many years, attributed by New Testament theologians to Greek Platonic influence on the author who composed it. However, with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1948, and their later availability for scholarship-at-large decades later, a very different picture has finally emerged. The themes of light and darkness, among other similar

⁴ See also Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael at Shirta 4 & Bahodesh 5 (ed. Lauterbach); Mekhilta de Rabbi Simeon b. Yohai, Shirta 4. (p. 81 of the Epstein edition) Cf. also Justin Martyr's discussion of a "second God." (Dialogue 56-60)

themes, abound in the Dead Sea Scrolls collection. (1QS 3.13-4.26)⁵

As an example, we read in a document that was authored by the Qumranites roughly a century before Jesus:

“We shall admit into the Covenant of Grace all those who have freely devoted themselves to the observance of God’s precepts, that they may be joined to the counsel of God and may live perfectly before Him in accordance with all that has been revealed concerning their appointed times, and that they may love all the *sons of light*, each according to his lot in God’s design, and hate all the sons of darkness, each according to his guilt in God’s vengeance.” (1QS 1.7-11)

Scholarly debate about the nature of the community that preserved, and in many cases authored the scrolls, is still far from settled. However, it is certain that the discovery of the Qumran documents places the Gospel of John finally and firmly in the conceptual thought-world of Israel in late antiquity.

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

The ministry of John the Baptist in the Gospel of Mark is set in polemical opposition to the Israelite Qumran community. It is possible that John⁶ was once a part of this community. There are many points of agreement and also sharp disagreements between them. One particular example is that both the Qumran community and John defined their own ministries as “a voice calling in the wilderness, preparing the way of the Lord.” (Is. 40:3) In the Qumran Community Rule we read:

⁵ The language of light and darkness is particularly prominent in the War Scroll. (1QM; 4Q491-496)

⁶ Many of the names, including John, come to the New Testament from our Koine Judeo-Greek manuscripts of the Gospel. Sometimes the texts do actually refer to Greek names such as Timothy (Timotheus, which means honored by God) or Andrei (Andreas, which simply means man or manly). While other names were in fact common Hebrew names, these names were Hellenized and Latinized before appearing in our English Bibles. As an example, Matthew (Ματθαῖος) was Matitياهو, which in Hebrew (מתתיהו) means gift of God) or Bartholomew (Βαρθολομαῖος) that comes from Aramaic (בר-תולמי) and means something like “a son of ploughman.” John (Ἰωάννης) was one of these Hellenized names. His parents called him Yochanan. Yochanan is a combination of two Hebrew words: God and grace. Now imagine hearing the Gospel read for the first time. Someone struggling to read clearly, loudly enough, and with appropriate voice tone gets to the verse that says: “there was a man sent from God, whose name was John.” Now tell me, wouldn’t you hear it differently if you knew that the Hebrew meaning of Yochanan was the “grace of God?”

“... they shall separate from the habitation of ungodly men and shall go into the wilderness to prepare the way of Him; as it is written, Prepare in the wilderness the way of the Lord ... make straight in the desert a path for our God. This is the study of the Torah, which He commanded by the hand of Moses... and as the Prophets have revealed by His Holy Spirit.” (1QS 8:12b-16a; Cf. 1QS 9:19-20)

This means that the Qumran community believed themselves to be the fulfillment of the prophecy found in Isaiah, as did John the Baptist. Following the Septuagint Judeo-Greek translation from Hebrew, Mark writes about John the Baptist, that he was “the voice of one crying in the wilderness...”. (Mk. 1:1-2) In addition to the Isaiah 40 interpretation, there was (among others) another major disagreement. The Qumran Community believed they were the representatives of God’s light, or to use their language – “the Children of the Light.” We read in the War Scroll:

“The first attack of the Sons of Light shall be undertaken against the forces of the Sons of Darkness, the army of Belial... There shall be no survivors of [all the Sons of] Darkness... Then at the time appointed by God, His great excellence shall shine for all the times of eternity for peace and blessing, glory and joy, and long life for all Sons of Light.” (1QM)



John’s Gospel, however, is clear. (Jn. 1:7-8) During the ministry of John the Baptist, he was the only real representative of God’s light. In fact, John

came to testify to the Light of God Himself – Jesus, the Son of God. This concept (the Son of God) was familiar to the Jews who followed the way of Qumran: “He will be called great... Son of God he will be called and Son of the Most High they will call him... His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom... He will judge the Earth in truth and all will make peace.” (4Q246)

¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. ¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

This passage is probably one of the most important passages for discovering the meaning of the Gospel of John. Why is this passage so important? First of all, it is part of the book’s prologue. It is in the prologue where the trajectory for all the material that follows is determined. In other words, the way the interpreter understands the prologue will affect how he reads the rest of what John has to say. Generally speaking, both Christian and most Jewish scholars after them read this passage as if the unit of thought begins at verse 11 and continues until verse 13. (We need to keep in mind that when the Gospel was first authored, there were no breaks between chapters and verses). However, verse 11 continues to develop the idea that begins in verse 10. This is significant because without verse 10, verse 11 can be easily misread. Verse 11 is traditionally interpreted as follows: “He came unto his own (meaning the Jewish people), but his own (meaning the Jewish people) did not accept him.” In this traditional interpretation, verse 12 continues to juxtapose Israel’s national unbelief with the faith of the international body of non-Israelite Christ-followers, creating a false dichotomy. However, there are some issues we must take into account.

First, this verse is grammatically nuanced. Literally the translation of the first “own” in verse 11 from the Greek, should be rendered as: “He came to his own things.” The Greek word is, in fact, neuter plural, and therefore cannot in anyway refer to the Jewish people, or any people for that matter. It most probably refers to “the world” in verse 10 which precedes verse 11 (“... the world was made through him, yet the world did not receive him.”) The second “own” in verse 11 can, in fact, refer to the people. If one is careful to distinguish the genders used by the author, (the first “own” is neuter and the second “own” is masculine), then the traditional interpretation may not be as certain as previously thought.

Secondly, this interpretation is also problematic from a historical



perspective, because later history is read back into previous history. Before I lose you, please, let me explain. You see, whether someone thinks that John was authored early (around 60 C.E.) or fairly late (around 90 C.E.), during the entire first century Jewish Christ-followers were still present in large numbers, together with many non-Jews who had joined the faith.

In the first century, many of the original Israelite leaders of the early Jesus movement, and their disciples, played an active role in the life of the

early Christ-following community. So to say, at any point in the first century, that people belonging to the variety of Israelite movements by and large rejected Jesus, is simply inaccurate. Surely the author of this Gospel would have been aware of this. For these reasons, I conclude that something else must be in view here.

Thirdly, it is possible, even likely, that this is the first in a series of John's claims to the Judean identity of Jesus. Jesus is not being presented in this Gospel as Galilean (Mk. 6:1-4; Lk. 4:23-24; Matt. 13:54-57), but as Judean. (Jn. 4:43-45) So it is possible that the way to understand verse 11b – "his own (people) did not receive him" – could be to see that, in this Gospel, Jesus belongs to the Judeans in a way that is not stated in the other Gospels. If I am correct, then the rejection of Jesus stated above is not rejection by Israel, but rather by a sub-group within Israel.

If the traditional interpretation of John 1:10-13 is indeed the correct interpretation, then the basic assumption about this Gospel is unavoidable – it is in fact an early Christian anti-Jewish document, regardless of its very rich beneficial spiritual message. I am, however, suggesting that there are other ways to read the Gospel of John, as we will see in later sections of this book.

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, (and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father), full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.'"

In verse 14 it is interesting that the word translated as "dwelt among us" could literally be translated "tabernacled" or "pitched a tent among us." While it communicates virtually the same idea as "dwelling together" in most English translations, in greek it does evoke a far greater degree of connection between Jesus and the Tabernacle, and, perhaps, even with the Feast of the Tabernacles (Sukkot); between God's presence in the Tabernacle of old and the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus. As we will see in many places, John's Gospel should be read against the backdrop of the prophecies of Ezekiel, Zechariah and Daniel. Before we move much further, we can already see Jesus' connection to the Ezekielian eschatological Temple (tabernacle/temple), which will be bursting with living water and satisfying the dry ground of the Judean desert and beyond. (Ezek. 47:1-12; Jn. 7:38; Jn. 4:14; Cf. Rev 7:17; 21:6; 22:1; 22:17)

Additionally, in verse 14a, the concept of the sonship of Jesus appears for the first time in this Gospel. It is important to note that in the Hebrew

Bible/Old Testament, kings (especially at the time of their coronation) were granted the title: “the Son of God.” We read in Psalm 2:6-9:

“As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.’ I will tell of the decree. The Lord said to me, ‘You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.’”⁷

The very act of crowning someone king over Israel was a symbolic act of enormous proportion within Israel’s narrative history. It signified receiving the authority of Israel’s God Himself to rule over Israel and to exercise authority over the nations of the world with the power and the confidence that come from being God’s own son. We can see this same logic in Luke 3:38 when Adam is referred to as the son of God. So while there are other aspects of Jesus’ sonship that should be taken into account when constructing one’s theology, we must keep in mind that the most important aspect must remain – royal authority over all things created.

¹⁶ For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.

From the first century, Christian believers continued to debate, mostly with each other, the importance of the Mosaic Law. While both verse 16 and verse 18 have much that is important and certainly worth being discussed at length, we will concentrate on verse 17 – “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” (ESV)

As the Protestant Christian movement emerged, one of the biggest disagreements between those who would one day become Protestants and those who would remain Roman Catholic was the issue of the function of the law in the life of the believer. One of the five most important theological shortcut phrases of the Reformation was: “by faith alone.” This phrase indicated how one was “saved” from God’s eternal judgment. The intention was to highlight “faith alone” as opposed to “faith and good works of the believers” or “Christ and good works of the believers.” This 15th-16th

⁷ Cf. 2 Sam 7:13-14; 4Q174 3:10-13; for other messianic texts at Qumran, see the Messianic florilegia of 4Q175.

century conflict between Protestants and Catholics was later read back into the Pauline writings and projected back into Paul's own words. Today hardly anyone will object to that fact that Paul must be read through first century Israelite interpretive lenses and not through the later lenses of Catholic-Protestant conflict historically unrelated to Paul.

While the juxtaposition of *law* and *the gospel* was present in the Church Fathers, it is not until the time of the Reformation that the juxtaposing of *law* and *grace* became pronounced.⁸ This became a dominant emphasis. The opposite of *grace* became *law*; the opposite of *law* became *grace*. In all reality, the opposite of *law* was never *grace* but *lawlessness*. Just as the opposite of *grace* was never *law* but *disgrace*.

Like Paul, John has also been greatly misunderstood and interpreted anachronistically. In John 1:17, for example, some important English Bible translations (such as KJV and NET Bible) insert the additional word - "but." This word is not present in the original Greek. Moreover, even when the translations do not add the word "but" (see the ESV quoted above) the verse is normally understood as if the "but" is implied. It is almost impossible for us to read this text and not juxtapose *law* and *grace* in our contemporary minds.

In the mind of the author of this Gospel, the Law/Torah was something very good. The reason for this was his Israelite heritage, entrusted to his people Israel by her God and nurtured, treasured and protected for centuries by his people - Israel. If one ignores the negative reading and instead interprets the phrase (vs. 17) positively - "The Law came through Moses; (and) grace and truth comes through Jesus Christ" - then the text will begin to flow organically. In this case, it will be connected with the previous confession by the Gospel's author that *grace* was given in addition to the *grace* already provided. (¹⁶"For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.") Perhaps a translation that can help us get rid of this inbred dichotomy would go like this: "For the Torah was given through Moses *and* grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." The moment we see that Greek *Nomos* (νόμος) does not need to be translated as "law," or could be translated as Law only in the sense of the Torah of Moses, then more interpretive options become available.

¹⁹ *And this is the testimony of John, when the Ioudaioi sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?"* ²⁰ *He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ."* ²¹ *And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?"*

⁸ E.g., Irenaeus, Adv. haer. III.11.8. Cf. the Epistle of Diognetus 11:6 and Theophilus Ad Autolyclus 3.12, there "law" and "gospel" are in harmony.

And he answered, “No.” ²² *So they said to him, “Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?”* ²³ *He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.”* ²⁴ *(Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.)*

Here for the first time we encounter one of the key characteristics of those whom John calls the *Ioudaioi*. Most disputes that Jesus has with his opponents in this Gospel are in some way connected with the concept of authority. Who is in charge? This is the main question asked and answered by the fourth Gospel. We read that the *Ioudaioi* were in a position of authority to send a commission of Levites and priests from Jerusalem to investigate the activity of John the Baptist. (vs. 19) If we skip to verse 24, we see that the commission was sent from a particular *Ioudaioi* authority – the Pharisees. Josephus Flavius, a Jewish historian hired by the Roman Emperor to write historical works about the Jews, wrote about the pact made between Queen Alexandra of Jerusalem and the leaders of the Pharisaic movement (141-67 BCE): “Under Queen Alexandra of Jerusalem the Pharisees became the administrators of all public affairs so as to be empowered to banish and readmit who they pleased, as well as to loose and to bind.” (Josephus, *Jewish Wars* 1:5:2; Cf. “expelled from the synagogue” ἀποσυνάγωγος in John 9:22; 12:42; and 16:2)

It must be kept in mind that Jerusalem had only one spiritual center – the Temple. There was also a large council of sages, the Sanhedrin, which governed the affairs of the Jewish community. The Sanhedrin consisted of the Temple priests and a large number of leading representatives of the Pharisaic movement. (Common people strongly favored Pharisees over Sadducees.) John, still recognizing to some degree the authority of “the ones that sent” the delegation from Jerusalem, provides his reluctant answers. However, we can see (particularly evident in the Greek grammar) that his answers become shorter and shorter as he replies to the commission’s questioning. (Jn. 1:20-21)

²⁵ *They asked him, “Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?”*
²⁶ *John answered them, “I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know,* ²⁷ *even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.”* ²⁸ *These things took place in Bethany across the*

Jordan, where John was baptizing.

In the previous section, we read that the priests and Levites who came from Jerusalem were commissioned by the Pharisaic faction of Jerusalem's ruling elite. They publicly demanded that John provide them with his credentials. In rapid-fire succession, they asked, "Are you Christ? Are you Elijah? Are you the Prophet?"

These rhetorical questions were really a statement from Jerusalem about John's lack of proper credentials. John was not the Messiah. He was not Elijah, who was expected to prepare the way for God's visitation of his people, neither was he the eschatological prophet of Deuteronomy 18:18. To put it simply, it was implicit in the committee's questioning that John had no authority to carry out this mass Israelite water ceremony. In a later Jesus-related event, (Jn. 10:24) the *Ioudaioi* will tell Jesus that if he is the Messiah he needed to tell *them* (emphasis on "them") clearly. He answered that he did not need their Temple approval, since he had the approval of the yet higher power that once indwelt the Temple – the Almighty God of Israel – his own Father. John's response bewildered the priests and Levites. He said, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." (verses 26-27) From this we can deduce the following:

First, John believed that his authority was based on God's approval. No approval from the Judean authorities was therefore required. Later on in the Gospel, the author will present these Jerusalem authorities as the evil Shepherds of Israel prophesied by the prophet Ezekiel. (Ezek. 34:1-16) The author will further show Jesus to be the Good Shepherd of Israel who must govern Israel in their stead. It will be done *consistently*, in juxtaposition with the incompetence of Israel's current rulers. When we come to treating John Chapter 10 (and we have a long way to go), we will consider in detail the role of Jesus as the Good Shepherd of Israel, as opposed to the *leaders of the Ioudaioi (evil shepherds)*.

Second, John launched the charge of "not-knowing," which would become a repetitive theme in the entire Gospel, resulting in a fully developed court case against Israel's formal leadership. This in turn would show Jesus to be the Good Shepherd of Israel.

In verses 26-27 John essentially challenges the delegation by saying something to this effect: "You've come to me because you've been sent from the official shepherds of Israel. Isn't it interesting that *neither* you, nor those who sent you, know about the One who is coming after me? What I'm doing here is something – yes, but it is nothing in comparison to what He is going to do. He is so much greater than I am."

²⁹ *The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”* ³⁰ *This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.’* ³¹ *I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.”*



Jesus is portrayed in the Gospel of John as the Passover Lamb. You may recall in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, (Ex. 12; Num. 9) that in order for the angel of death to *pass over* the homes of believing Israelite families, the families needed to put a special sign on their doorposts – the blood of a lamb. The Gospel of John pictures Jesus as the ultimate Lamb of God, who not only symbolically covered the sins of Israelite households, but took away the sin of the entire world. (vs. 29)

A short side trip into church history will make this more interesting for us. In many predominantly Christian countries, the festival of Easter was called by a different name; It was called the “Christian Passover.” Why? Simply because, in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the judgment of God passed over the sinners’ heads, just as it passed over the heads of the

Israelites in their exodus from ancient Egypt. You see, all early Christians celebrated a festival that later came to be known as *Easter*, however, it had been called *Pascha* (Passover in Syriac/Aramaic) or *Pesach* (Passover in Hebrew). Over time, Christian and Jewish leaders worked hard to create a clear separation between these two believing communities. This process, in spite of popular opinion, took centuries and did not happen conclusively in the early second century as commonly thought (the so-called “parting of the ways”). The question for the emergent non-Israelite Christ-following movement was not whether or not Biblical feasts such as Passover should be observed, but rather how and when most of them should be observed. Some Christians believed that *Pascha* (Christian Passover/Easter) had to be commemorated on the same date as the Jewish Passover (*Quartodeciman* position, meaning “fourteen” from the 14th of Nissan), signifying the atoning death of Jesus; while other Christians believed that *Pascha* should be celebrated on a different day than the Jewish Passover, commemorating Jesus’ resurrection instead. The latter view won and the first view was eventually declared heretical.

As we read in verse 33b, Jesus’ baptism was meant to identify and reveal Christ to the sons and daughters of Israel (“*I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel*”), but this process was only beginning in what we read in the pages of the Gospel. There were those who were yet to come into Israel – both in the North and in the South there would be a witness and a testimony that Jesus was indeed its long awaited Messiah, Savior and King.



³² *And John bore witness: “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. ³³ I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said*

to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' ³⁴ *And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God."*

In verse 32 John evokes a powerful image of a dove landing as a sign. (Cf. Matt. 3:16; Mk. 1:10; Lk. 3:22) It is usual to concentrate on the symbolism of the dove in connection with the Holy Spirit. Without a doubt, such an obvious connection exists, but we will be remiss if we do not also recall one of the greatest stories of the Hebrew Bible – the story of the dove that, after having been released by Noah several times, finally came to rest on dry ground. (Gen. 8) The dove became a symbol of safety, hope, peace and future. At the time of Jesus' baptism, the dove rested once again on the ultimate symbol of safety, hope, peace and future – the King of Israel, Jesus. This is not the only time in this Gospel that something of enormous symbolic significance, like the dove in verse 32, rests on Jesus.

In John 1:51, Jesus said to Nathanael, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." You will remember, of course, that in the dream of Jacob's ladder, the angels were ascending and descending at the site that became known as Bethel, or the House of God. (Gen. 28:10-19) Like a dove descending on Jesus, soon angels would repeat this highly symbolic act.

Bethel, in Samaritan tradition, was their ancient center of worship. In fact, they believed that Mt. Gerizim and Bethel were one and the same place.⁹ The fact that they were concerned for the spiritual future of Israel demonstrates that they were Israelites. Yet they were not Jerusalem-oriented Israelites like Jesus and his followers. Their center of worship was in Samaria on Mt. Gerizim.

The particular interest in topics that appealed, though not exclusively, to Samaritan Israelites, is characteristic of this Gospel. This points to the fact that it was first intended for various intra-Israelite groups, a major part of which were Samaritan Israelites. This would explain why the author uses the Greek word *Ioudaioi* the way he does. To Samaritan Israelites, the Jerusalem-centered authorities and their religious subordinates inside and outside of Judea were simply – *Ioudaioi*.

In verse 32, the technical term "Holy Spirit" is used for the first time in this Gospel. If we survey the wide variety of Israelite literature dating from the Hebrew Bible/s to Rabbinic literature, we will see that the term "Holy Spirit" is very rarely used. The only place where it appears frequently, other than in the New Testament, is in the sectarian writings of Qumran (the Dead Sea Scrolls). It is reasonable to suppose that either this term was coined in

⁹ The Samaritans, who were themselves Israelites, believed that Bethel, and *not* Mt. Zion in Jerusalem, must forever be the spiritual capital of the people of Israel.

Qumran, and later, via the nationwide Essene movement with which Qumran was probably associated, spread to the followers of Jesus, or that both religious movements inherited it from another source unknown to us.

John himself witnessed this descent of the Holy Spirit. (Jn. 1:34) But does this connect with the idea of being chosen by God to be the King of Israel? I believe it does. The dove-resting symbolism is actually important in the context of Jesus' role as Israel's King – its Good Shepherd. A 17th century Christian collection of questions and answers asks the following question: "How does Christ fulfill the office of a king?" A succinct and clear answer is provided for the believer's instruction: "Christ fulfills the office of a king, in subduing us to himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all his and our enemies."¹⁰ This answer is profoundly accurate when it comes to highlighting one of the most important functions of an Israelite king: to conquer and defend in order to provide safety. The dove-related imagery in the Bible symbolizes safety, hope, peace and future, exactly the kind of things that Israel's king was meant to provide for his people. It is in connection with this concept that the Gospel tells us that John the Baptist declared Jesus to be the chosen one of God. (Jn. 1:34)

³⁵ *The next day John was there again with two of his disciples.* ³⁶ *When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!"* ³⁷ *When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus.* ³⁸ *Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, "What do you want?" They said, "Rabbi" (which means "Teacher"), "where are you staying?"* ³⁹ *"Come," he replied, "and you will see." So they went and saw where he was staying, and they spent that day with him. It was about four in the afternoon.* ⁴⁰ *Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus.* ⁴¹ *The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah" (that is, the Christ).* ⁴² *And he brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas" (which, when translated, is Peter).*

In John 1:35-38 we are told that, upon hearing John the Baptist

¹⁰ Westminster Shorter CATECHISM, Q. 26.

proclaiming Jesus to be the Passover Lamb of God, some of John's followers went after Jesus. They followed him to the place where he stayed. One relevant issue for this kind of book is to note that they addressed him as "Rabbi," which John also noted meant "Teacher." (vs. 38)

That Jesus was a Rabbi is nothing new. This fact is known to almost any Christian who has given thought to the Jewishness of Jesus. However, for the purpose of historical accuracy, it is important to note that Jesus was not a Rabbi in our sense of the word. In Judaism of the Second Temple period, the word "Rabbi" did not mean what it means today. It was not then an ordained position within the Jewish community, having a specific role attached to it. It was simply used as a title of respect, along with the acknowledgement that this person had things to teach others (the function of a teacher worthy of people's time).¹¹ But this is only one side of the story. What if the New Testament provides us a better window into the history of Judaism than do other sources? What if Jesus really was a Rabbi in the sense of the word that has a significant level of continuity with its meaning today? After all, in later rabbinic literature we do read of Rabbi Shammai and Rabbi Hillel, who both lived before Jesus.¹² What if later rabbinic texts were right, that there were Rabbis even before Jesus?! If so, the New Testament collection can be considered the earliest collection of ancient literature that testifies to the existence of the office of a Jewish Rabbi; even if we still need to concede that the office of Rabbi was in its infancy.

Another relevant issue that comes up here has to do with translations and explanations. John often provides translations or simple explanations of Hebrew and Aramaic terms or names in Greek. This is normally taken to mean that John had a Gentile audience in view who knew little about Judaism, so the author felt a need to explain all these things from the start. Here are some examples: Sea of Galilee – Sea of Tiberius (6:1; 21:1); Cephas – Peter (1:42); Messiah – Anointed (1:40-41; 4:25); Rabbi – Teacher (1:38); Siloam – Sent (9:7); Rabboni – Teacher (20:16). Strikingly, several times John translates Greek back into Hebrew/Aramaic as well, such as: Skull Hill – Golgotha (19:17), and Stone Pavement – Gabbatha. (19:13)

Let us imagine an unlikely scenario – that the Samaritans were indeed the sole audience for the book of John. Could this back-and-forth translation still fit? I believe the answer is "yes." Just as all Jews/Judeans/*Ioudaioi* did not live in Judea, so all Samaritans did not live in Samaria. The Samaritan Diaspora was widespread already from the Hellenistic times. These expatriate Samaritans, like the Judeans in the diaspora, may not have had a command of Aramaic or Samaritan Hebrew. They may have needed translation and some limited explanations. Samaritans were not an

¹¹ Cf. John 11:28.

¹² Cf. mBer. 8; mPeah. 6; mShev. 4

exception. These expatriates, especially their children and grandchildren, had far less exposure to Samaritan Hebrew than those who remained in their original communities. They may have needed Greek translations for the religious terms used. In fact, just as with any immigrant community, the second and third generations may have had no command of Hebrew or Aramaic at all. The mere existence of the *Samaritikon*, the Greek Translation of the Samaritan version of Torah, (like the *Septuagint* Greek version of Torah) argues for such a possibility. There was a substantial number of Samaritans in the diaspora and, perhaps, even in parts of their thoroughly Hellenized Israelite homeland itself. The above argument about a diasporic Samaritan audience, though attractive, is also unnecessary, because both Samaria and Judah were thoroughly Hellenized. Jews in Jerusalem and Galilee had a good command of Koine Judeo-Greek, but so did the Samaritan Israelites.

⁴³ The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." ⁴⁴ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him of whom Moses in the Torah and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." ⁴⁶ Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see."

In the Gospel of John we read about many witnesses. Everyone is testifying. The literary context seems to have a strong court motif in which witnesses are called to tell their story of interaction with Jesus, to help to make the author's case. As we come to the end of the first chapter, we meet another type of witness – Nathanael. This is a very interesting encounter indeed. Nathanael's first reaction to Philip's claim that he and others found the Messiah, was rather disappointing in verse 46: "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" For centuries this phrase has puzzled interpreters. What was wrong with Nazareth? Nazareth was a small village. In fact, according to archeological evidence, it boasted no more than 200 residents. It was overshadowed by the Roman city, Sepphoris (Tzipori) with a cosmopolitan population, only six kilometers away. The city served as an administrative center for the region of Galilee under Herodian rule. Jesus must have spent time there as a child and youth, accompanying his parents for a wide variety of reasons related to ordinary living. As a carpenter-builder, Jesus most likely worked in Sepphoris during the city's extensive construction projects.

Although this needs to be considered further, it is possible that the fairly small (even by the criteria of the time) Nazareth settlement was known as some kind of Judean affiliate center in Galilee by those who did not embrace the current Jerusalem leaders or Jerusalem at all. Nazareth's Judean ideological affiliation was a clear negative and signified that they were indeed Jerusalem's regional representatives in Galilee. The name of the village probably came from the Isaian Hebrew (Is. 11:1) by "the Branch" (Netzer). According to Luke 4:16-30, the Nazareth settlement radically rejected Jesus although it was his "hometown." This may argue for the view that this village, along with the village of Cana, was one of those places which was considered to be under Jerusalem's religious control and under the influence of the *Ioudaioi*, as we have discussed in previous commentary sections.

Over all, the Gospel of John paints a very clear picture of Jesus' reception in Galilee as opposed to his utter rejection in Judea where, ironically, he belonged more than any other place. Almost every time Jesus was accepted, it happened in Galilee; while his rejections were almost exclusively connected to the land of Judea. The otherwise important Galilean story of Jesus' rejection, found in Luke 4:14-30, is not mentioned in John. It is therefore probable that: "his own received him not" (Jn. 1:11b), should be read in connection with the largely Judean, Jerusalem-centered rejection of Jesus. After all, he was a Jerusalem-centered, Temple-centered Jew who was not accepted by his own; not in Jerusalem and not in the Jerusalem controlled settlements in Galilee. Why John does not include the Bethlehem birth narrative, as Matthew does, is not clear. It is possible the reason it was only implied, but not explicitly mentioned, is that the city of Bethlehem was too strongly connected with the Davidic dynasty – a connection that John consistently avoided because of his outreach to Samaritan Israelites, as per my theory. The Samaritans accepted the leading role of Judah, because their own Torah stated such in Genesis 49:10,¹³ but not the leading role of David's family (2 Sam. 7:8-9)¹⁴ since this text was outside of "the canon" for the Samaritans traditions.

⁴⁷ *Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!"* ⁴⁸ *Nathanael said to him, "How do you know me?"* *Jesus answered him, "Before Philip called you, when you*

¹³ "The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from his descendants, until the coming of the one to whom it belongs, the one whom all nations will honor." (Gen. 49:10)

¹⁴ "Now, therefore, thus you shall say to my servant David, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts, I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel. And I have been with you wherever you went and have cut off all your enemies from before you. And I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth.'" (2 Sam. 7:8-9)

were under the fig tree, I saw you.”⁴⁹ Nathanael answered him, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”⁵⁰ Jesus answered him, “Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these.”⁵¹ And he said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”

When Nathanael followed Phillip’s advice and went to see Jesus, he was welcomed (in verse 47) with the words: “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no guile!” With these words Jesus assured Nathanael that he saw him under the fig tree, doing something that only Nathanael understood. Not knowing exactly what it was that Jesus referred to (vs. 48), it is hard to explain why Nathanael, whose name means “God gave,” responded to Jesus’ words with the declaration: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.” (vs. 49) “Son of God” and “King of Israel” are therefore (in terms of meaning) one and the same concept. Since a simple Hebraic parallelism is used – the second statement reiterates the point of the first.



It is highly significant for the kind of questions we are asking in this book that Jesus referred to Nathanael, not as *Ioudaios* (Jew/Judean) in whom there is no guile, but in a more generic way: “an Israelite (Ἰσραηλῆτης) indeed in whom there is no guile.” (vs. 47) This terminology

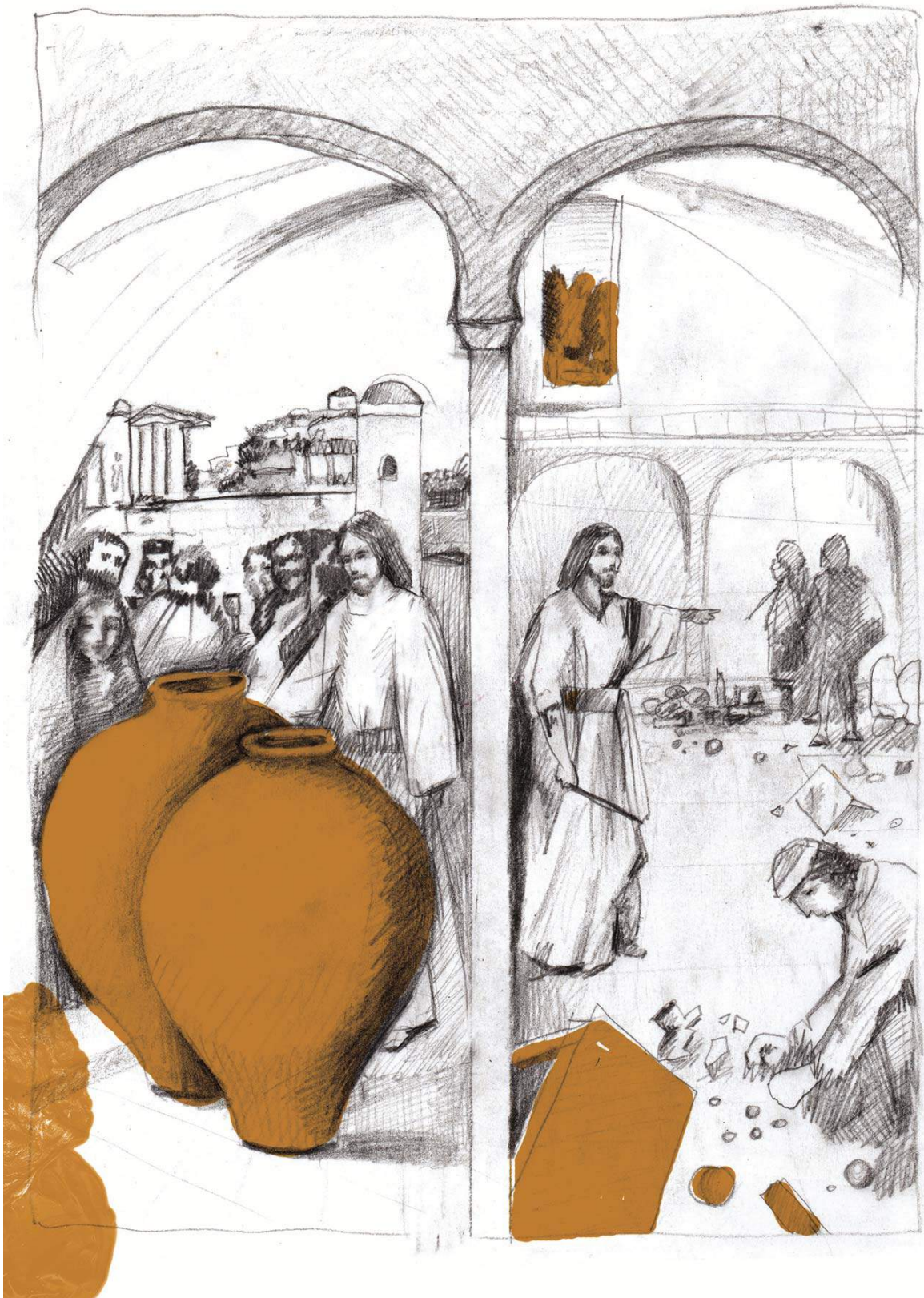
was perfectly fitting for a Samaritan audience as well as for other Israelite movements. (It would probably have been understood by so-called God-fearers as well.) Nathanael's response, therefore, points in the direction of a non-Judean audience. Nathanael referred to Jesus not as the King of the *Ioudaioi* only, but as the King of Israel (vs. 49). The Gospel of John will continue to build the dichotomy between those who follow Jesus and the *Ioudaioi* who did not. Those who did not would be shown over and over again as not possessing necessary insight into the most important matters that pertain to Israel and her God.

In verse 51, Jacob's dream is evoked.¹⁵ According to the biblical story, Jacob most likely dreamed about an ancient ziggurat-like structure that, in the mind of the ancients, *always* had a temple on its summit with *stairs* leading to it. In the dream, Jacob saw angels ascending and descending upon *Bethel* (house of God), where he had fallen asleep. Remember, the Samaritans thought Bethel and Gerizim were one and the same place. (Even today, the Samaritan village of Luza¹⁶ is located essentially next to Mt. Gerizim.) Jesus, in talking to Nathanael, assured him that he had not yet seen what would later be revealed, "...you shall see the heavens opened and the messengers of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." In the Genesis story it was "Samaritan" Bethel that was at the foot of "Jacob's ladder" (Gen. 28); but in John's Gospel, the House of God (Bethel), had become the person of Jesus (vs. 51). The implication of this cannot be overstated. In making reference to Jacob's dream, Jesus indicated to Nathanael that he too would see angels ascending and descending, but not on Bethel, as in the story of Jacob, but upon Jesus himself. This is, of course, stated here in chapter 1 in anticipation of the monumental encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman in chapter 4: "...the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father." (Jn. 4:21) The basic idea is clear: When all is said and done, Jesus, for both Judeans and Samaritans, will be the focal point of the meeting with Israel's God.



¹⁵ Gen 28:10-22; Josephus Ant. 1.19.1-3.

¹⁶ Modern Luza was founded in 1980 due to the tensions caused by the first intifada. Luza's residents are Samaritan transplants from Nablus.



Chapter 2

The Wedding at Cana; The First Passover; The Cleansing of the Temple

✧ ¹On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. ²Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples. ³When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.” ⁴And Jesus said to her, “Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come.” ⁵His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” ⁶Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. ⁷Jesus said to the servants, “Fill the jars with water.” And they filled them up to the brim. ⁸And he said to them, “Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast.” So they took it. ⁹When the master of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom ¹⁰and said to him, “Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now.” ¹¹This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him. ¹²After this he went down to Capernaum, with his mother and his brothers and his disciples, and they stayed there for a few days.

So we are now in the second chapter of John and we are being told about what happened in the village called Cana of Galilee. Jesus and his family were there. (2:1, 12). He also invited his disciples. (2:2) The well-known story of the water that was turned into wine follows this introduction. The wedding occurred on Tuesday or the third day of the Israelite week. The

irony here is the third day of the Israelite week in Torah carried certain importance. After all in Genesis 1:9-13 the phrase “God saw that it was good” is stated twice (vs.10 and vs. 12). In other words the wedding happening on the third day of the week evoked in the ancient Israelite mind the idea of God’s blessing upon the event. But very quickly we saw that the families who organized the marriage feast ran out of wine – one of the symbols of blessing in Israelite culture.

This text is important since it begins a series of seven miracles that Jesus performed. (2:1-11; 4:43-54; 5:1-9; 6:1-5; 6:16-25; 9:1-41; 11:1-44) Every one of the miracles shows how the created order submitted itself to Jesus’ authority. As part of the whole Gospel narrative, these seven miracles testify to Jesus’ authority to *do what he does* and to *say what he says*. As we are considering the way in which the author uses the *Ioudaioi*, there is something else of importance for us as we move through this Gospel. We read in 2:6: “Now there were six stone water pots set there for the purification of the *Ioudaioi*, containing two or three measures each.” It is often argued that the best way to translate the *Ioudaioi* is simply – “Judeans.” It is also often argued, that the *Ioudaioi* were Jerusalemite authorities. Both of these theories fall short in explaining references like these, when the *Ioudaioi* were permanently present outside of Judea. A geographical Judean location was not a necessary condition for people to be classified as *Ioudaioi* and John 2:6 is not the only example of this. Cana was in Galilee, and so were the *Ioudaioi*.

In another instance, opposition from the *Ioudaioi* was seen in Galilee - in Kfar Nahum (Capernaum). In this passage (Jn. 6:24-59), we read that the crowd, together with the assembled leadership of the Kfar Nahum synagogue, asked Jesus to perform miracles as verification of his authority. Jesus characteristically challenged this authority structure, saying that his authority did not reside with the current Jerusalem leadership but with his Father. (Jn. 6:24-59) In this case also, the *Ioudaioi* in Kfar Nahum should be viewed as the adherents or religious affiliates of “the *Ioudaioi* proper,” the Judean-centered ruling elite and the system they administered.

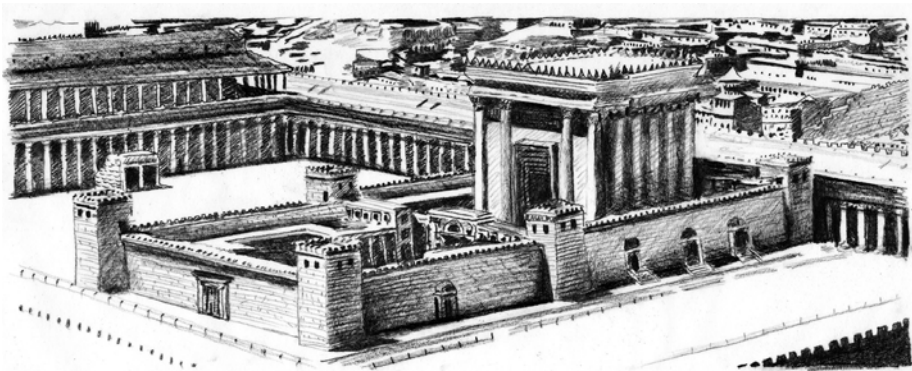
¹³ *The Passover of the Ioudaioi was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.*

On a number of occasions, the Gospel states that Jesus celebrated the feasts of the *Ioudaioi*. (5:1; 6:4; 7:2) Given that the first century non-Jewish converts mostly hailed from the so called “God-fearing” circles that were somehow connected to the Jewish synagogues, almost no one in the original audience of this Gospel needed to be repeatedly told that Passover was a *Jewish* (versus Roman) holiday. Anyone with an interest in Christ-related

claims already knew that Passover had something to do with the people of Israel. After all, the general Jewish presence was numerous and well spread throughout the Empire, consisting of between 6-10% of total population.

The designation “Jewish” Passover, as many Bibles translate it, or more literally “the Passover of the *Ioudaioi*/Jews” (τὸ πάσχα τῶν Ἰουδαίων), is stated each time this feast is mentioned (Jn. 2:13, 6:4; 7:2; 11:51-55¹⁷) but strikingly, the winter Feast of Dedication (Hanukkah) never had the word “Jewish” attached to it. (Jn. 10:22) This was because the Samaritan Israelites did not celebrate this holiday and hence there was no need to specify whose calendar it followed. Keep in mind that the Samaritans rejected the legitimacy of the Jerusalem Temple and would have had no reason to celebrate its cleansing and rededication as the Judean Israelites and their affiliates did. This point argues that Samaritan Israelites were very much at the center of the Gospel of John’s audience, and not simply part of it like everyone else.

Apart from Samaritan and Jewish Passovers, other Passovers were celebrated according to different Israelite calendars.¹⁸ Because of this, it was important to specify which Passover Jesus observed. Jesus was not a Samaritan, nor did he observe the Passover according to the calendar of Qumranites from the Judean desert (Dead Sea Scrolls community). His holiday celebrations, his birth in and his burial according to the customs of the *Ioudaioi* (Jn. 19:40), all harken back to John 1:11b (“his own received him not”), where Jesus’ national, cultural and religious identity as *Ioudaios* (a Jew) was already firmly established.



¹⁴ *In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there.*
¹⁵ *And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the*

¹⁷ Cf. John 19:42

¹⁸ The author of Jubilees is a strong critic of the lunar calendar. (cf. Jub. 6.32-38)

temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ *And he told those who sold the pigeons, “Take these things away; do not make my Father’s house a house of trade.”* ¹⁷ *His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.”*

Here we see Jesus perform the highly symbolic act of Temple cleansing by dispersing those who turned the house of God into a profane, but profitable industry. (2:14-15) It was Jesus’ passion and commitment to *purify* Israel’s religion that moved him to take this action. (verses 16-17) Jesus’ concern here seems to be very different from his motivation as described in the synoptic Gospels (Matt. 21:12-27; Mk. 11:15-33; Lk. 19:45–20:8), which may point to this Gospel’s higher concern for issues of purity. It is striking that the synoptic Gospels use a different quotation from the Old Testament to describe the reason for the cleansing of the Temple. While Mark quotes Jesus as saying “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations?’ But you have made it a robbers’ den.” (Mk. 11:17) John on the other hand, explains Jesus’ action in a very different way. We read in John 2:17: “... Zeal for your house will consume me.”

For Mark and the Synoptic Gospels, the issue seems to be the loss of Israel’s meaningful engagement with Gentiles (Light of the World idea¹⁹). The emphasis on the purity of the Temple, versus the loss of the Light of the Nations outlook in the synoptic accounts, argues that the audience shared these concerns and presumably would have resonated with this message. For John’s Gospel, the issue is the appropriateness and purity of the place used for the worship of Israel’s God. He hereby declares the Temple in Jerusalem unfit for divine worship. The apostate stewards of the Temple were to blame. In this way, just like the Qumranites, Jesus believed that the Temple needed to be cleansed of impurity.

¹⁸ *So the Ioudaioi said to him, “What sign do you show us for doing these things?”* ¹⁹ *Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”* ²⁰ *The Ioudaioi then said, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?”* ²¹ *But he was speaking about the temple of his body.* ²² *When therefore he*

¹⁹ Is. 42:6; 49:6; 51:4; 60:3.

was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken. ²³ *Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing.* ²⁴ *But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people* ²⁵ *and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.*

The authority that Jesus displayed in the prophetic action of cleansing the Temple was once again highlighting the basic question that was implicitly asked – “Who is and who should be in charge of God’s people, Israel?” The Gospel’s answer, predictably, is King Jesus. The text above, verses 23-25, must not be separated from the preceding verses 13-22, which describe the same thing – Jerusalem during the Passover. We must see verse 23 continuing what was begun in Jerusalem some verses earlier. In Greek, “Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all



people,” could and should (because of the overall context) be translated: “Jesus on his part did not believe in them, because he knew them all.” (Jn.

2:24) With this slight translation adjustment, what comes before and what follows in the Gospel account fits much better, especially with the follow-up of verse 25 (“needed no one to bear witness”).

This kind of formula, “show/tell *us*” (¹⁸“What sign do you show us for doing these things?”), will be raised again by the *Ioudaioi* on several occasions. On each occasion, the point was that they were formally in charge of religious life in ancient Israel under Roman occupation. Jesus’ response could not have been more explicit than what he says in 2:19: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” The authorities could not have been more devalued. This was the case whether or not they understood it as they did (2:20), or as they should have (2:21). Without bothering to explain what he really meant, Jesus denied the authority of the *Ioudaioi*.

One of the clearest examples of this “show us/I refuse” dynamic is found in John Chapter 10. The *Ioudaioi* challenged Jesus to submit his candidacy for Messiahship to them – the Jerusalemite leadership. Jesus refused, saying that his Father and his own deeds were enough to prove his authority, thus rejecting their authority:

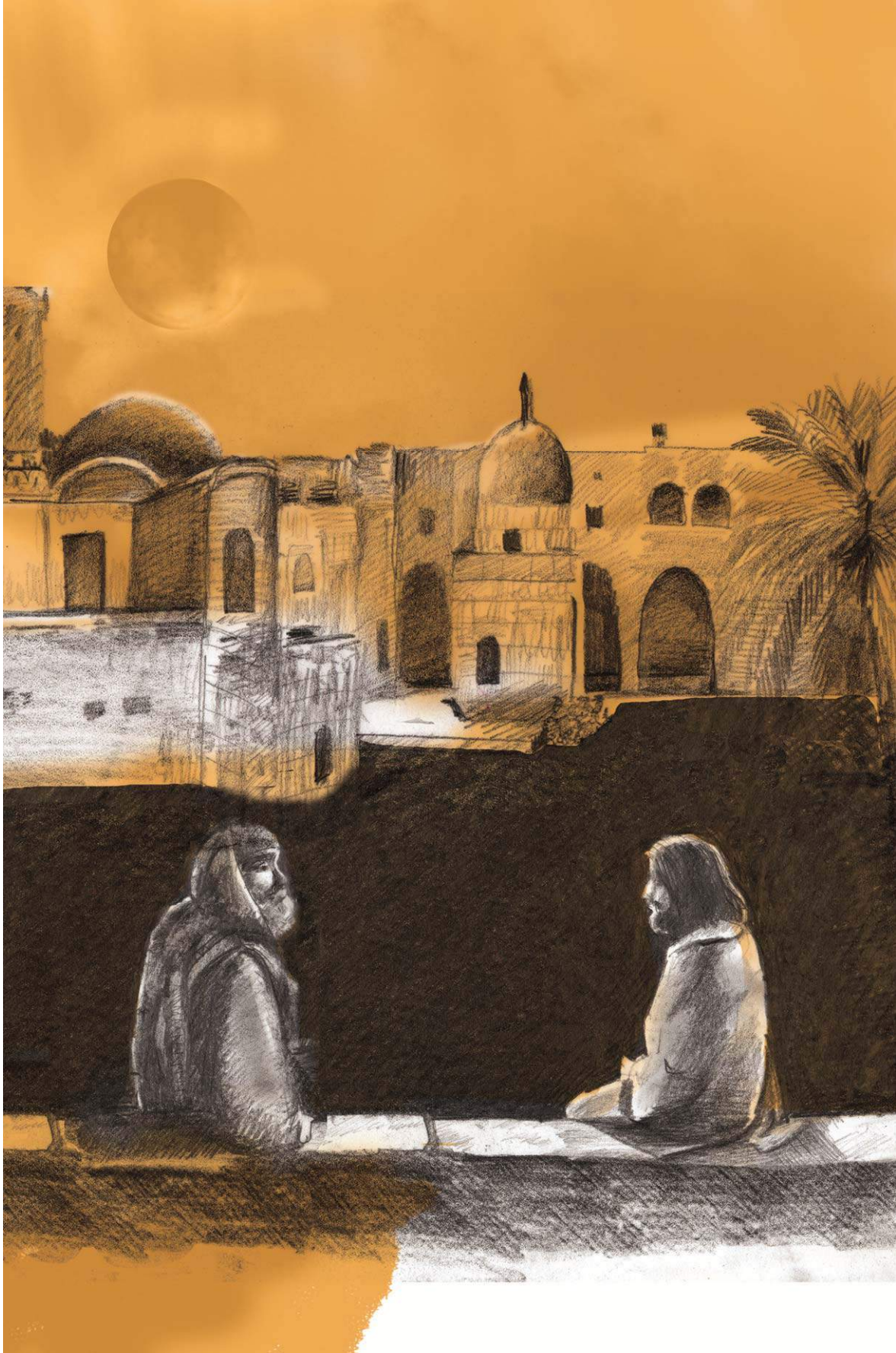
“The *Ioudaioi* gathered around him, saying, ‘How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Anointed One, tell us plainly.’ Jesus answered, ‘I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father’s name speak for me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep.’” (Jn. 10:24-27)

This text is most often read as an instance of Jesus’ general lack of clarity in declaring his Messiahship. However, I think this is unwarranted. The request of the *Ioudaioi* should not be read: “How long will you keep us *in suspense*? If you are the Anointed one, tell us *plainly*,” but rather, “How long will you keep *us* in suspense? If you are the Anointed One, tell *us* plainly.” From the standpoint of the *Ioudaioi*, their authority to validate Jesus’ candidacy for Messiahship was not being honored. Jesus drew large crowds who followed him. The blind saw, the lame walked, lepers were cured, the deaf heard, and the dead came back to life. (Matt. 11:2-5; Is. 29:17-21) Jesus’ identity as Messiah was self-evident, but he had failed to declare himself as such to the Jerusalem authorities. This was the reasoning behind their demand. (How long will you keep *us* in suspense?) Jesus, however, consistently stated that his miracles, and therefore his Father’s witness of his Messiahship, were enough to establish him as God’s Messianic Servant. (Jn. 10:25-42) He refused to acknowledge the Jerusalem rulers’ authority over him and by extension, over the whole of Israel. Jesus was the one to whom Israel’s covenantal God had entrusted such authority and therefore, submitting himself to the illegitimate, or at least lower level authority of the *Ioudaioi*, was out of the question. (Matt. 26:63-64)

We see that the *Ioudaioi* assumed they had the right to approve or

disapprove of Jesus, and were already engaged in the process of judging him. They challenged him at that time, and more explicitly later, to prove who he was. Jesus refused.





Chapter 3

Jesus and Nicodemus; John the Baptist's Testimony

✧ ¹ *Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Ioudaioi.*

Nicodemus is named here as ruler of the *Ioudaioi*. While we cannot know this for sure, it is probable that Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, whose limited authority was sanctioned by the Roman government. It is obvious that Nicodemus had an uneasy connection with the *Ioudaioi*. On the one hand, he was an integral part of it; on the other, he was afraid and pressured by it. As such, he often felt he did not belong. For example, we see that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. In John 7:50-52 we read that when Nicodemus raised doubts about the legitimacy of Jesus' arrest, he was immediately questioned concerning his loyalty: "Nicodemus, who had gone to him before, and who was one of them, said to them, 'Does our Torah judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?' They replied, 'Are you from Galilee too?'"

Nicodemus' final appearance, this time with Joseph of Arimathea, can be found in John 19:38-40:

"After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the *Ioudaioi*, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away his body. Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight. So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the *Ioudaioi*."

The meaning of the name Nicodemus, in Koine Judeo-Greek²⁰, the

²⁰ The entire original text of the document we have come to know as the New Testament was written by Christ-following Jews (in the ancient sense of the word) in a language that can be best described, not simply as Koine (or Common) Greek, but as "Koine Judeo-Greek." First of all what is Koine Greek? Koine Greek (which is different from Classical Greek) was the common multi-regional form of Greek spoken and written during Hellenistic and Roman antiquity. However, I do not think that the kind of Greek we see in the New Testament can be best described ONLY as Koine Greek. There is another component to this Koine Greek and that is its significant Jewish and Hebrew connection. I



language in which this Gospel was written, is “conqueror of the people.” A reader of the Bible in its English translation must reimagine how a Greek speaker would have heard these texts. This “Conqueror of the People” (Nicodemus) was consistently afraid of the *Ioudaioi* – a closed network of people of which he was an honored member as long as he complied with the agenda and abided by the group’s rules.

² This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.”

prefer to call it “Judeo-Greek” (or Judeo Koine Greek). What is Judeo-Greek? Well... Judeo Greek, like the well-known Judeo-German (Yiddish), Judeo-Spanish (Ladino), and the less familiar Judeo-Farsi, Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Italian, and Judean-Georgian languages, is simply a form of Greek used by Jews to communicate. This language retained many words, phrases, grammatical structures, and patterns of thought characteristic of the Hebrew language.

So is Judeo-Greek really Greek? Yes, it is, but it is Greek that inherited the patterns of Semitic thought and expression. In this way, it is different from the types of Greek used by other people groups. So I disagree that the New Testament was first written in Hebrew and then translated into Greek. Instead, I think it was written in Greek by people who thought Jewishly, and what is perhaps more important, multi-lingually. You see... the speakers of a variety of languages manage to also think in a variety of languages. When they do speak, however, they always import into one language something that comes from another. It is never a question of “if,” but only of “how much.”

We must remember that the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek by leading Jewish scholars of the day. Legend has it that the 70 individual Jewish sages made separate translations of the Hebrew Bible and when they were completed, all of it matched perfectly. As I said, “it is a legend.” The number 70 is likely symbolic of the 70 nations of the world in ancient Judaism. This translation was not only meant for Greek-speaking Jews, but also for non-Jews so that they too could have access to the Hebrew Bible. You can imagine how many Hebraic words, phrases, and patterns of thought are present on every page of the Septuagint. So, other than the authors of the New Testament thinking Jewishly and Hebraically, we also have the main source of their Old Testament quotations coming from another Jewish-authored document – the Septuagint. So is it surprising that the New Testament is full of Hebraic forms expressed in Greek?!

As a side note, the use of the Septuagint by New Testament writers is actually a very exciting concept. The Jewish text of the Hebrew Bible used today is the Masoretic Text (MT for short). When the Dead Sea Scrolls were finally examined (a subject covered in my video about Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament), it turned out that there was not one, but three different families of Biblical traditions in the time of Jesus. One of them closely matched the Masoretic text, one closely matched the Septuagint, and one seems to have connections with the Samaritan Torah. Among other things, this of course shows that the Septuagint quoted by the New Testament has great value, since it was based upon a Hebrew text that was at least as old as the original base text of the later Masoretic Text (MT).

Nicodemus addresses Jesus using the respectful term “Rabbi,” (Ραββί), which acknowledges that, despite the acrimony towards him, Jesus was still someone important, even for a powerful member of the Jerusalem ruling elite. The term “we know” most likely refers to a group of leaders inside the Sanhedrin who thought Jesus was indeed a very positive figure. Although there may have been other reasons for doing so, it is likely that the reason Nicodemus came to Jesus at night was to avoid being seen and questioned about him by others within the *Ioudaioi* system.

³ *Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”* ⁴ *Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”*

⁵ *Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”* ⁶ *That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.* ⁷ *Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’* ⁸ *The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”*

Ancient Judaism celebrated several rituals which marked the stages of the Jewish life cycle, beginning with birth and circumcision (Gen 17:10-14; Josephus, Ant. 1.10.5), continuing on to ordination and various levels of Jewish leadership, and culminating in the death of that individual at a ripe age. Nicodemus was in his final stage of such a life cycle (ripe age and high-level Jewish leadership status) when Jesus surprised him with his



statement that “you must be born again.” Later in the story, Jesus respectfully challenges Nicodemus’ affiliation with the *Ioudaioi* by saying: “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?” (Jn. 3:10)

In verse 8 we read that Jesus explained to Nicodemus that God’s Spirit is an unbridled personal cosmic force that submits to the leadership of God alone. This personal cosmic force brings about the new birth that allows someone to be counted among those belonging to the Kingdom of God. Jesus’ rhetorical question to Nicodemus was also a challenge to the authority of the *Ioudaioi* of which Nicodemus, at least for the time being, was still a part. Throughout the Gospel we see that the *Ioudaioi* show themselves to be clueless and insensitive to the things of the Spirit. It is no wonder that Nicodemus, the best and most spiritually aware of them, does not know what the *One sent by God* has in mind.

On one hand, this challenge showed the Jerusalem leaders in a negative light, while at the same time it was meant to provoke an appropriate question in the mind of the Samaritan and other Israelite readers: “What if my sages/leaders are also just as blinded and spiritually incapable as the leadership of Jerusalem?” The story was a Judean self-critique that was meant to provoke Samaritan Israelites, among others, to challenge their own authorities and to seriously consider pledging their allegiance to Jesus. The main challenger to the current Judean and Samaritan leadership structures was talking with Nicodemus at night. His name was Jesus. He was the Son of the Living God.

¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their

works were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. ²¹ But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”

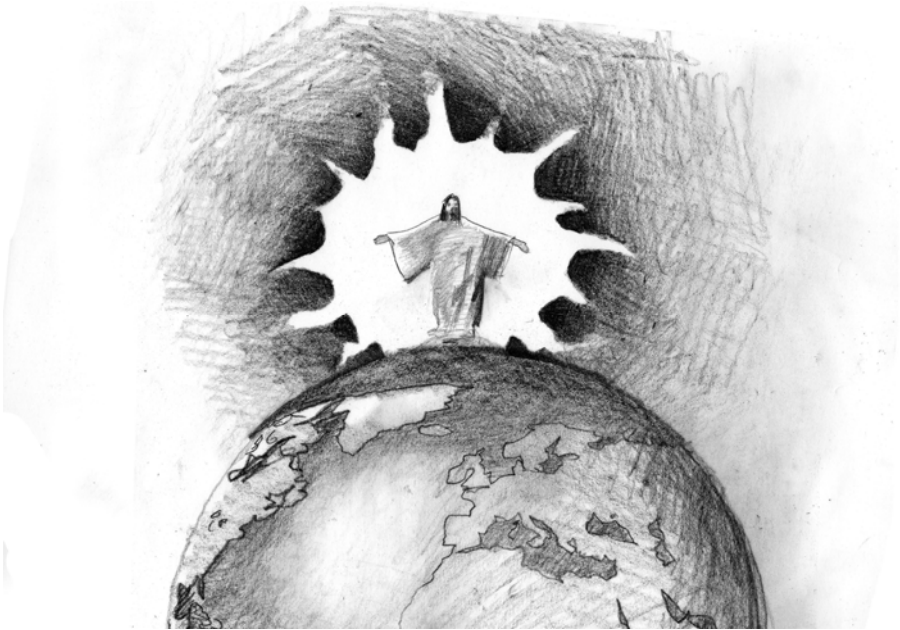


Jesus continued his conversation with Nicodemus around the familiar theme of the Son of Man. This was a well-known concept at the time of Jesus. For example, the Book of Enoch speaks about a divine eschatological figure: the Son of Man. We read:

“And in that place I saw the fountain of righteousness which was inexhaustible: and around it were many fountains of wisdom; and all the thirsty drank of them, and were filled with wisdom, fountains of wisdom... And at that hour that Son of Man was named in the presence of the Lord of Spirits, and his name before the Head of Days. Yea, before the sun and the signs were created, before the stars of the heaven were made, His name was named before the Lord of Spirits. He shall be a staff to the righteous whereon to stay themselves and not fall, and he shall be the light of the Gentiles... All who dwell on earth shall fall down and worship before him, and will praise and bless and celebrate with song the Lord of Spirits. And for this reason hath he been chosen and hidden before Him, before the creation of the world and for evermore.” (1 Enoch 48) “... and from henceforth there shall be nothing corruptible; for that Son of Man has appeared, and has seated himself on the throne of his glory, and all evil shall pass away before his face, and the word of that Son of Man shall go forth and be strong before the Lord of Spirits.” (1 Enoch 69)

This Enochite Jewish tradition is of course working very closely with texts like Daniel 7:13-14:

“I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom that all the peoples, nations and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed.”



It is based on this passage in Daniel that Jesus told Nicodemus no one could go up to heaven if he had not first come down from heaven (3:13). Jesus then predicted that the Son of Man would also be lifted up (3:14) just as the bronze serpent was raised up by Moses (Num. 21) when the Israelites were dying in the desert. Before we continue, let's stop and think about this analogy. We almost automatically connect the pole and the serpent with the wooden cross where Jesus was crucified. We do so mostly because, in many pictorial presentations, Christian artists have painted Moses holding up the cross with the bronze serpent pictured on it. However, does the “lifted up” refer only to Jesus’ crucifixion? We must remember that Jesus said this to Nicodemus before the crucifixion took place, not after.

What is important at this moment is that we also continue to reimagine Jesus talking to Nicodemus in 3:16-21 in the famous “for-God-so-loved-the-

world” text. Why is this important? Because normally, our reading ends with verse 15 and we think of verse 16 as the beginning of a new section with new ideas. I would like to suggest that such a division is arbitrary and problematic. If read separately, these words are no longer the words of Jesus, but rather a theological commentary by the author of the Gospel on the preceding words of Jesus. While possible, nothing in the text necessitates such a conclusion.

The most natural reading of the text is to see it being fully continuous with the previous words of Jesus to Nicodemus. It is Jesus who continues to speak to Nicodemus with the words: “for God so loved the world.” If this is correct, then what Jesus tells Nicodemus does not refer primarily to the future event of Jesus’ crucifixion and death, but to Israel’s God’s appointment of Jesus to rule over Israel.

I fully realize that Jesus’ death on the cross is very important to John and in another sense it would become part of what “God gave,” however, since Jesus’ death has not yet taken place, Nicodemus could not be expected to understand it the way we do. It is much more likely that Nicodemus would have understood “the lifting up” as the ascension of Jesus as the Son of Man according to Daniel’s night visions. This is why this section directly follows the discussion about the Son of Man who comes down in order to go up. (Jn. 3:13 and Dan. 7:13-14) On the other hand, it would be a mistake to think that Jesus was not also preparing Nicodemus for another intermediary “lifting up” - the kind that the enemies of Israel’s God did to Jesus on Calvary’s cross. In the Torah, looking up at the bronze serpent on the pole destroyed the venom of the serpent’s bite and brought life to the people of Israel. Likewise, Jesus’ suffering and death on the cross also speaks of judgment and victory over the “venom of the serpent’s bite.” The ascension is a glorious picture of victory over the enemies of God and his Israel, but one must first look to the Cross where Jesus, the King of All Israel, is first lifted up. When Nicodemus saw the Son of Man crucified/lifted up, he must have recalled Jesus’ words, and yes, also by faith understood that his ascension was soon coming. At the time, Jesus’ statement sounded strange and disconnected. After the crucifixion, one imagines that Nicodemus waited quietly to see the fulfillment of what he believed Jesus had said.

The above discussion brings Psalm 2 to our minds.²¹ There we read:

“Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his Anointed, saying, ‘Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.’ He who sits in the heavens

²¹ Cf. 2 Sam 7:12-14.

laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath and terrify them in his fury, saying, ‘As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.’ I will tell of the decree: The Lord said to me, ‘You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.’ Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.”

In a surprising twist, the unworthy shepherds of Israel, whom Jesus had come to judge, have joined the nations raging against the Covenant Lord of Israel and the God-appointed King. It is they who have raised their voices and fists against the Lord and His Anointed One, Jesus. Yet, the royal decree appointing and installing Jesus as the King over Israel has made things clear: They must honor God’s royal Son or perish in their ways. (Jn. 3:18-21)

²² *After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing. ²³ John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized ²⁴ (for John had not yet been put in prison). ²⁵ Now a discussion arose between some of John’s disciples and a Jew over purification. ²⁶ And they came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness – look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him.” ²⁷ John answered, “A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves bear me witness that I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.’ ²⁹ The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. ³⁰ He must increase, but I must decrease. ³¹ He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who*

comes from heaven is above all. ³² *He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony.* ³³ *Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true.* ³⁴ *For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure.* ³⁵ *The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand.* ³⁶ *Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.”*

John very briefly draws our attention back to John the Baptist. He brings us back, only to move us forward in his narrative presentation of Jesus’ life as he continues to make his case for Jesus’ supremacy. The crucial time has come. The ministry of Jesus is to supersede the well-established, prophetic, anointed ministry of John the Baptist. If we are to see this story in connection with the thesis that the Gospel may have been written with Samaritan Israelites, among other Israelites, in mind, its literary setting will be even more significant than it may seem at first. The Samaritan Israelites were persuaded that they had always followed a more faithful way than had the Judean Israelites.

We are not told the specifics of what the debate was about (vs. 25), but we are told that, following this apparently heated discussion with one Judean (Ἰουδαῖος), the followers of John the Baptist came to question him about the rising popularity of Jesus’ ministry among the people. (Jn. 3:25-26) The Baptist then confirmed to his disciples that Jesus is the one who has supremacy, reminding them that he had previously told them so. (Jn. 3:27-28) John compared himself to the best friend at a bridegroom’s wedding who rejoices with the bridegroom but is not the center of the celebration. John the Baptist’s disciples needed to follow John in allowing Jesus to take the lead. “He,” said John, “must increase, but I must decrease.” (vs. 30) In fact, this statement by John foreshadows Jesus’ statement to the Samaritan woman that will soon follow “... believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.” (Jn. 4:21)

Here, like earlier in the chapter (Jn. 3:16-21), we must remember that John the Baptist is continuing to speak. The Gospel’s author places the words recorded in verses 31-36 in his mouth. John the Baptist makes a statement strikingly similar to Jesus’ statement to Nicodemus. You will recall Jesus’ words to Nicodemus: “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands

condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son." (Jn. 3:16-18) John the Baptist says to his followers: "The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him." (Jn. 3:35-36)

It is essential to note that both John the Baptist and Jesus expected Nicodemus and the Jewish disciples of John the Baptist to understand and relate to the language of the supremacy of the royal Son of God. In other words, for this phrase to be used so openly and freely, it must not, as we are accustomed to think, have been a new or foreign concept to them. After all, the *sonship of God* concept was the very argument that both Jesus and John the Baptist employed to prove their point.

The Samaritan Israelites, among others, needed to accept that Jesus was the chosen King with legitimate authority from above (not from Jerusalem, which they opposed). He was the Son of Israel's God – His royal appointee. (Ps. 2) To listen to Jesus meant to listen to God himself; to disobey Jesus meant to disobey God himself. Jesus was not optional for John's disciples, for Samaritan Israelites, or for anyone else who might stumble over these words in years to come – His capable rule over God's people was an unavoidable necessity and their only real hope for prosperity and peace.





Chapter 4

Jesus and the Samaritan Woman: Rereading a Beloved Story

This chapter, that relates the story of Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well, begins by setting the stage for what will take place later in Samaria, and is rooted in what has already, by this time in the Gospel’s progress, taken place in Judea. Jesus’ rapidly growing popularity resulted in a significant following. Jesus’ disciples performed an ancient Jewish ritual of ceremonial washing with water (known to us today as “baptism”), just as John the Baptist and his disciples did. The ritual represented people’s confession of sin and their recognition of the need for the cleansing power of God’s forgiveness. When it became clear to Jesus that the crowds were growing large, and especially when he heard that this alarmed the Pharisees, he decided it was time to go to Galilee through Samaria. (verses 1-3)

Geography

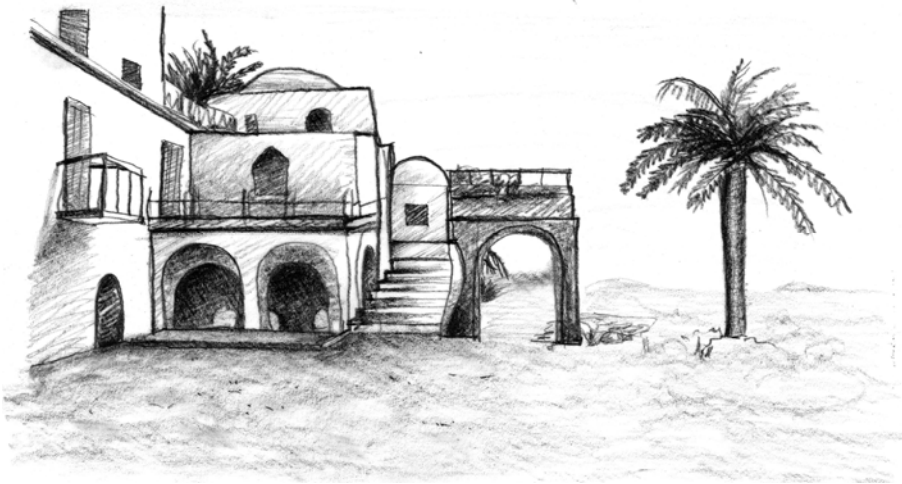
Samaritan lands were sandwiched between Judea and Galilee, though not exclusively. They were situated within the borders of the land allotted to the sons of Joseph, Ephraim and Menashe. (Today most Samaria and large parts of Judea constitute the disputed/occupied territories located in the Palestinian Authority). Given Judeo-Samaritan tensions, which are similar in many ways to today’s Israeli-Palestinian conflict, both groups tried to avoid passing through each other’s territories when traveling. The way around Samaria for Judeans traveling to Galilee took twice as long as the three-day-direct journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, since avoiding Samaria



required crossing the river Jordan twice to follow a path running east of the river. (*Vita* 269) The way through Samaria was more dangerous because Samaritan-Jewish passions often ran high. (*Ant.* 20.118; *War* 2.232) We are

not told the reason Jesus and his disciples needed to go through Samaria. John simply says that Jesus “had to go,”²² implying that, for Jesus, just as it was for all other Jews, this was unusual.

It is of course possible that Jesus needed to reach Galilee relatively quickly. But the text gives us no indication that he had a pending invitation to an event in Galilee for which he was running late. The text only states that he left when he felt an imminent confrontation with the Pharisees over his popularity among Israelites was unavoidable. This was coupled with Jesus’ understanding that the time for such a confrontation had not yet come. In the mind of Jesus, the confrontation with the religious powerbrokers of Judea at this time was premature, and more needed to be done before going to the Cross and drinking the cup of God’s wrath on behalf of his people.



The way Jesus viewed Samaritans and his own ministry among them may surprise us as we continue looking into this story.

Jesus’ journey through hostile and heretical territory has a meaning beyond any surface explanation. In a very real sense, God’s unfathomable plan and mission, from the time His royal Son was eternally conceived in His mind, was to bind all of his beloved creation in redemptive unity. Jesus was sent to make peace between God and man, as well as between man and man. The accomplishment of this grand purpose began with the mission to unify Samaritan Israelites with the Israelites of Judea. Jesus’ movements and activities were all done in accordance with his Father’s will and leading. He only did what he saw the Father do. (Jn. 5:19) This being the case, we

²² The word “it is necessary” (δεῖ) occurs 10x in John (3:7, 14, 30; 4:4, 20, 24; 9:4; 10:16; 12:34; 20:9). Cf. the use of δεῖ in Luke-Acts.

can be certain that Jesus' journey through Samaria at this time was directed by his Father, and so too, was his conversation with the Samaritan woman.

The Samaritans

First, the Samaritan Israelites defined their own existence in exclusively Israelite terms. The Samaritans called themselves – “the sons of Israel” and “the keepers” (shomrim). Jewish sources refer to the Samaritans as “kutim.” The term is most likely related to a location in Iraq from which the non-Israelite exiles were imported into Samaria. (2 Kings 17:24) The name Kutim or Kutites was used in contrast to the term “shomrim” which means the “keepers” – the terms that they reserved for themselves. Jewish Israelite writings emphasized the foreign identity of Samaritan religion and practice in contrast to the true faith of Israel. The Samaritan Israelites believed that such identification denied their historical right of belonging to the people of Israel. The Samaritan Israelites were the faithful remnant of the Northern tribes – the keepers of the ancient faith.

Second, Samaritan Israelites had always opposed the worship of Israel's God in Jerusalem, believing instead that the center of Israel's worship was associated with Mt. Gerizim– the mount of YHWH's covenantal blessing (Deut. 27:12). On the other hand, Jewish/Judean Israelites believed Mt. Zion in Jerusalem was the epicenter of spiritual activity in Israel. One of the reasons for the rejection of the prophetic Jewish writings by the Samaritan Israelites was that the Hebrew prophets supported Jerusalem and the Davidic dynasty.

Third, the Samaritans had a fourfold creed: 1) One God–YHWH, 2) One Prophet–Moses, 3) One Book–Torah, and 4) One Place–Mt. Gerizim. Most Jewish Israelites of Jesus' day agreed with the Samaritan Israelites on two of these points: “one God” and “one Book.” They disagreed on the identity of the place of worship and on other books that should also have been accepted by the people of Israel – the Prophets and the Writings.

Fourth, the Samaritans believed the Judean Israelites had taken the wrong path in their religious practice of the ancient Israelite faith, which they branded as heretical, as the Jews did of the Samaritan's faith expression. The relationship between these two ancient groups can be compared to the sharp disagreements between Shia and Sunni Muslims today. To those outside, both groups are Muslim, but not to the Shia and the Sunni. To them - one is true and the other is false; one is real and the other is an imposter. The Samaritan-Jewish conflict was in this sense very similar. In many ways, this conflict defined the inner-Israelite polemic of the first century.

Fifth, as was mentioned before, the Samaritans are not to be confused with a syncretistic people group that also lived in Samaria (gentile

Samarians), who were most probably the people who approached returnees to Jerusalem to help them build the Jerusalem Temple and were rejected by them. (Ezra 4:1-2) Due to their theology, the Samaritan Israelites, the remnant of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, could not support Temple building in Jerusalem. In 2 Chronicles 30:1-31:6 we are told that not all the people from the northern kingdom of Israel were exiled by the Assyrians. Most of them remained even after the Assyrian conquest of the land in the 8th century BCE, preserving ancient Israelite traditions that would differ from later innovations of the Judean version of Israel's faith.

Sixth, the Samaritan Israelites used what is now called "Samaritan Hebrew" in a script that is the direct descendent of Paleo-Hebrew (ancient Hebrew), while the Jewish Israelites adopted a new form of square, stylized letters that were part of the Aramaic alphabet. Moreover, by the time of Jesus, the Samaritan Israelites were also heavily Hellenized in Samaria proper and in the diaspora. Just as the Jewish Israelites had the Septuagint, the Samaritan Israelites had their own translation of the Torah into Greek, called *Samaritikon*.

And lastly, the Samaritan Israelites believed that their version of the Torah was the original version and the Jewish Torah was the edited version, which had been changed by Babylonian Jews. Conversely, the Judeans charged that the Samaritan Torah represented an edition edited to reflect the views of the Samaritans. As you can see, this was not an easy relationship.

The Encounter

In describing the encounter, John makes several interesting observations that have major implications for our understanding of verses 5-6: "So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour." John mentions the Samaritan town named Sychar. It is not clear if Sychar was a village very near Shechem or if Shechem itself is in view. The text simply calls our attention to a location near the plot of ground Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Whether or not it was same place, it was certainly in the same vicinity, at the foot of Mt. Gerizim. While this is interesting and it shows that John was indeed a local, knowing the detailed geography of the place, it is no less important, and perhaps even more significant, that the Gospel's author calls the reader's attention to the presence of a silent witness to this encounter: the bones of Joseph.²³ This is how the book of Joshua relates that event:

"Now they buried the bones of Joseph, which the sons of Israel brought up from Egypt, at Shechem, in the piece of ground which

²³ Josh. 24:32; Josephus, Ant. 2.8.2.

Jacob had bought from the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem for one hundred pieces of money; and they became the inheritance of Joseph's sons." (Josh. 24:32)

The reason for this reference to Joseph in verse 5 will only become clear when we see that the Samaritan woman suffered in a manner similar to Joseph. If this reading of the story is correct, just as Joseph endured unexplained suffering for the purpose of bringing salvation to Israel; likewise the Samaritan woman endured suffering which led to the salvation of the Samaritan Israelites in that locale. (4:39-41)

"Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour."



It has traditionally been assumed that the Samaritan woman was a woman of ill repute. The reference to the sixth hour (about midday) has been interpreted to mean that she was avoiding the water drawing crowd of other women in the town. The biblical sixth hour²⁴ was supposedly the worst possible time of the day to leave one's dwelling and venture out into the scorching heat. "If anyone were to come to draw water at this hour, we could appropriately conclude that they were trying to avoid people," the argument goes. We are, however, suggesting another possibility.

The popular theory views her as a particularly sinful woman who had fallen into sexual sin and therefore was called to account by Jesus about the multiplicity of husbands in her life. Jesus told her, as the popular theory has it, that He knew that she had five previous husbands and that she was living with her current "boyfriend" outside the bonds of marriage, and therefore she was in no condition to play spiritual games with Him! In this view, the reason she avoided the crowd was precisely because of her reputation for short-lived marital commitments. But there are problems with this theory:

²⁴ Hence the shock of the darkness at the sixth hour when Jesus died. (Matt. 27:45; Mk. 15:33; Lk. 23:44)

First, midday is not the worst time to be out in the sun. If it was 3 pm (ninth hour) the traditional theory would make better sense. Moreover, it is not at all clear that this took place during the summer months, which could make the weather in Samaria altogether irrelevant. Secondly, is it possible that we are making too much of her going to draw water at “an unusual time?” Don’t we all sometimes do regular things during unusual hours and could it be possible that this is such a case? This does not necessarily mean we are hiding something from someone. For example, we read that Rachel came to the well with her sheep probably also at about the same time. (Gen. 29:6-9)

There are also other problems with this reading of the text:

When we try to understand this story with the traditional mindset, we can’t help but wonder how it was possible, in this conservative Samaritan Israelite society, that a woman with such a bad track record of supporting community values could have caused the entire village to drop everything and go with her to see Jesus. (4:30) The standard logic is as follows: She had led such a godless life that when others heard of her excitement and newfound spiritual interest, they responded in awe and went to see Jesus for themselves. This rendering, while possible, seems unlikely to the author of this book, and seems to read much later theological (evangelical) approaches into this ancient story, which had its own historical setting. I am persuaded that reading the story in a new way is more logical and creates less interpretive problems than the commonly held view.

Let us take a closer look at John 4:7-9:

“When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, ‘Will you give me a drink?’ (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, ‘You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?’ (For the Ioudaioi do not associate with Samaritanoi/Samaritans.)”

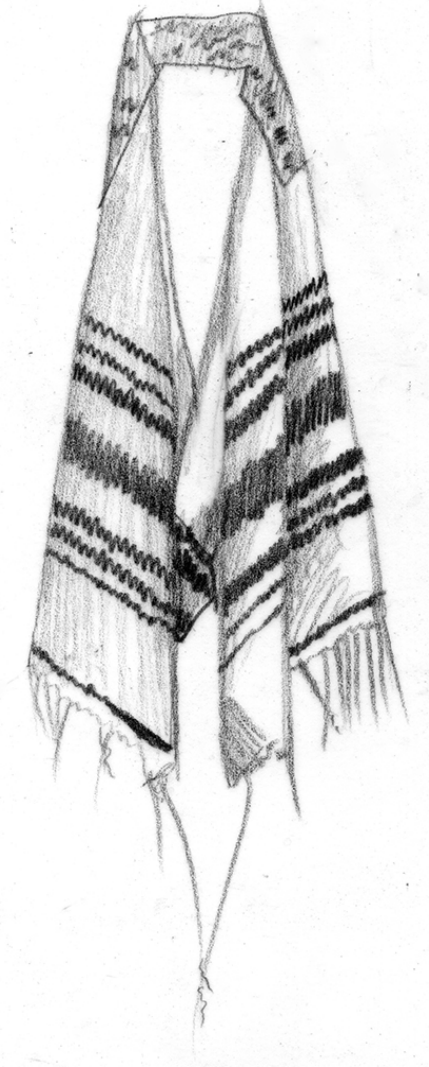
In spite of the fact that, to the modern eye, the differences were insignificant and unimportant, Jesus and the nameless Samaritan woman were from two different and historically adversarial people, each of whom considered the other to have deviated drastically from the ancient faith of Israel. As mentioned above, a modern parallel to the Judeo-Samaritan conflict would be the sharp animosity between Shia and Sunni Muslims. For most of us today Muslims are Muslims, but within Islam this is not an agreed upon proposition. Both parties consider each other as the greatest enemy of true Islam. So, too, for the people in the ancient world. These two warring people groups were Israelites and were both part of the same faith.

However, they were bitter enemies. This was not because they were so different, but precisely because they were very much alike. Both Israelite groups considered the other to be imposters. While we don't have Samaritan sources to tell us their official position, we do know that a later source, the Babylonian Talmud, referring to the views and practices of the distant past, states: "Daughters of the Samaritans are menstruants from the cradle" (bNidd. 31b) and therefore any item that they handled would be unclean to the Judean.²⁵

The Samaritan woman probably recognized that Jesus was Judean by his distinctive Jewish traditional clothing and his accent (It is highly likely that the conversation took place in the tongue familiar to them both.) Jesus would have most certainly worn ritual fringes (tzitzit) in obedience to the Torah/Law of Moses (Num. 15: 38 and Deut. 22:12), but since Samaritan Israelite men observed Torah as well, this would not have been a distinguishing factor (*Samaritan* means the "keepers" of the Law and not the people who lived in Samaria). The difference between these two groups was not whether the Torah of Moses must be obeyed, but *how* it should be obeyed.

Jesus continues:

¹⁰ "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." ¹¹ "Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can



²⁵ The Mishnah also explores the ritual and ethnic identity of Samaritans. (mDem. 3:4; 5:9; 6:1; 7:4; mShev. 8:10; mTer. 3:9; mSheqal. 1:5; mKetub. 3:1)

you get this living water? ¹²Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?’¹³ Jesus answered, ‘Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.’ ¹⁵The woman said to him, ‘Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.’ ¹⁶He told her, ‘Go, call your husband and come back.’ ¹⁷‘I have no husband,’ she replied. Jesus said to her, ‘You are right when you say you have no husband. ¹⁸The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.’ ¹⁹‘Sir,’ the woman said, ‘I can see that you are a prophet. ²⁰Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Ioudaioi claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.’”

This passage has often been interpreted as follows: “Jesus initiates a spiritual conversation. (vs. 10) The woman begins to ridicule Jesus’ statement by pointing out his inability to provide what he seems to offer. (verses 11-12) After a brief confrontation in which Jesus points out the lack of an eternal solution to the woman’s spiritual problem (verses 13-14), the woman continues with a sarcastic attitude. (vs. 15) Finally, Jesus has had enough and he then forcefully exposes the sin in the woman’s life – a pattern of broken family relationships. (verses 16-18) Now, cut to the heart by Jesus’ all-knowing x-ray vision, the woman acknowledges her sin in a moment of truth (vs. 19) by calling Jesus a prophet. But then, as every unbeliever usually does, she tries to avoid the real issues of her sin and her spiritual need by raising doctrinal issues, (vs. 20) in order to avoid dealing with the real issues in her life.” Though this may not be the only way this text is commonly understood, it does follow a generally negative view of the Samaritan woman.

Because this popular interpretation presupposes that the woman was particularly immoral, it sees the entire conversation in light of that negative viewpoint. I would like to recommend a wholly different trajectory for understanding this story. Though it is not an airtight case, this alternative trajectory seems to be a better fit for the rest of the story, and especially for its conclusion. At the very least, it deserves your attention and evaluation.

Rereading the Story

As was previously suggested, it is possible the Samaritan woman was not trying to avoid anyone. But, even if she was, there are explanations for her avoidance other than feeling guilty about her sexual immorality. For example, as you well know, people don't want to see anyone when they are depressed. Depression was present in Jesus' time, just as it is present in people's lives today. Instead of assuming that the Samaritan woman changed husbands like gloves, it is just as reasonable to think of her as a woman who had experienced the deaths of several husbands, or as a woman whose husbands may have been unfaithful to her, or even as a woman whose husbands divorced her for her inability to have children. In ancient Israelite society, women did not initiate divorces. Any one of these suggestions, and others, are possible in this instance.

The book of Tobit (2nd century BCE), for example, speaks about a Jewish woman named Sarah who had seven husbands who, with the help of demonic forces, each died on the day of his wedding. She was scorned by the community, looked upon as cursed and guilty of their deaths. Depressed to the point of suicide, Sarah prayed to God to end her shame, insisting on her purity to the end. (Tobit 3:7-17) People behaved harshly toward Sarah. No doubt the social standing of the Samaritan woman brought her great anguish as well. My own Great Aunt had four husbands and she outlived them all. So I know this happens.

Jesus stated that she lived with a man who was not her husband. Many assume this meant the woman lived with her boyfriend, but that is not stated. Perhaps she needed help and lived with a distant relative, or in some other undesirable arrangement, in order to survive. Jesus was not nailing her to the cross of justice, but instead was letting her know that he knew



everything about the pain she endured. This is certainly more in keeping with the Jesus we know from other instances in his life.

If I am correct in my suggestion that this woman was not a “fallen woman,” then perhaps we can connect her amazingly successful testimony to the village with John’s unexpected, but extremely important, reference to the bones of Joseph. It is worthy of note that for the Samaritan readership of this Gospel, the reference to the place of Joseph’s bones and Jacob’s well would be highly significant. When we understand that the conversation took place next to Joseph’s bones, we are immediately reminded of Joseph’s story and his *mostly* undeserved suffering. As you may remember, only part of Joseph’s suffering was self-inflicted. Yet in the end, when no one saw it coming, the sufferings of Joseph turned into events leading from starvation and death to salvation.

Now let us consider the connection with Joseph in more detail. Shechem was one of the cities of refuge where a man who had killed someone unintentionally was provided a safe haven in Israel. (Josh. 21:20-21)²⁶ As inhabitants of Shechem were living out their lives in the shadow of the Torah’s prescription, they were no doubt keenly aware of the unusual status of grace and God’s protective function that was allotted to their special city. They were to protect people who were unfortunate, whose lives were threatened by avenging family members, but who were not actually guilty of any *intentional* crime deserving the threatened punishment.

Joseph was born into a very special family, where grace and salvation should have been a characteristic description. Jacob, the descendent of Abraham and Isaac, had eleven other sons, whose actions, (apart from Benjamin) instead of helping their father raise Joseph, ranged from outbursts of jealousy to a desire to get rid of their spoiled but “special” brother forever. But there was more. It was in Shechem that Joshua assembled the tribes of Israel, challenging them to abandon their former gods in favor of YHWH and, after making a covenant with them, he buried Joseph’s bones there. We read in Josh. 24:1-32:

“Then Joshua assembled all the tribes of Israel at Shechem. He summoned the elders, leaders, judges and officials of Israel, and they presented themselves before God... But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD. ...On that day Joshua made a covenant for the people, and there at Shechem he drew up for them decrees and laws. And Joshua recorded these things in the

²⁶ Cities of refuge: Num. 35:1-15; Shechem as city of refuge. (Josh. 20; 1 Chr. 6:67)

Book of the Law of God. Then he took a large stone and set it up there under the oak near the holy place of the LORD... Israel served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had experienced everything the LORD had done for Israel. *And Joseph's bones, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem in the tract of land that Jacob bought for a hundred pieces of silver from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem. This became the inheritance of Joseph's descendants.*"

It is interesting that the place for this encounter with the Samaritan woman was chosen by the Lord of providence in such a beautiful way: an



emotionally alienated woman, who felt unsafe, ironically lived in or near a city of refuge and is having a faith-finding, covenant-renewing conversation with God's Royal Son, Jesus, who has come to reunite all Israel with her God. She does so at the very place where the ancient Israelites renewed their covenant in response to God's words, sealing them with two witnesses: 1) the stone (Josh. 24:26-27) - confessing with their mouths their covenant obligations and faith in Israel's God, and 2) the bones of Joseph (Josh. 24:31-32) - whose story guided them in their travels.

In a sense, the Samaritan woman does the same thing as the ancient Israelites - confessing her faith in Jesus as the Christ and covenant Savior of the world, to her fellow villagers, as we read in John 4:29-39:

“Come, see a man who told me everything. Could this be the Christ?” They came out of the town and made their way toward him... Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony...”

The connection between Joseph and the Samaritan woman does not end there. We might recall that Joseph had received a special blessing from his father at the time of Jacob’s death. It was a promise that he would be a fruitful vine climbing over a wall. (Gen. 49:22) Psalm 80:8 speaks of a vine being brought out of Egypt, whose shoots spread throughout the earth, eventually bringing salvation to the world through the *true vine*. In John 15:1 we read that Jesus identified himself as this *true vine*. Like Israel of old, Jesus was also symbolically brought out of Egypt. (Matt. 2:15) In his conversation with the Samaritan woman, Jesus – the promised vine in Jacob’s promise to Joseph – was in effect climbing over the wall of hostility between the Judean and Samaritan Israelites to unite these two parts of His Kingdom through His person, teaching and deeds. In a deeply symbolic fashion, this conversation takes place at the very well that was built by Jacob, to whom the promise was given!

Now that we have reviewed some of the relevant Hebrew Bible/Old Testament symbolism, let us now reread this story through a different lens. It may have gone something like this:

Jesus initiated a conversation with the woman: “Will you give me a drink?” His disciples had gone into town to buy food. The woman felt safe with Jesus because, not only is he not from her village, but he didn’t know about her failed life or even how depressed she may have felt for months. In her view, he was part of a heretical, though related, religious community. Jesus would have had no contact with the Israelite Samaritan leaders of her community.

“If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water,” says Jesus.

It is important that we picture the woman. She was not laughing; she was having an informed, deeply theological and spiritual discussion with Jesus. This was a daring attempt to ascertain truth that was outside her accepted

theological framework and surely would not pass the test of cultural sensibilities of “faithful” Samaritans. She took issue with Jesus, precisely because she took the word of God (Samaritan Torah) seriously:

“‘Sir,’ the woman said, ‘you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?’ Jesus answered: ‘Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.’ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.’”

This theme of water²⁷ will be repeated many times in John’s Gospel, but even at this point, we can see Jesus’ and John’s preoccupation with water as being related to Temple imagery. We will return to this theme in the coming chapters.

After the above interaction, which strikes a familiar chord for the Christian who has experienced the life-giving power of Jesus’ presence and spiritual renewal, Jesus continued the conversation. He let the nameless Samaritan woman know that He understood her troubles much more fully than she thought. He did this by showing her that he was aware of the pain and suffering she had endured during her life.

“He told her, ‘Go, call your husband and come back.’ ‘I have no husband,’ she replied. Jesus said to her, ‘You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.’”

We must try and disconnect from the usual view of this passage and allow for another interpretive possibility. Do you recall the seemingly obscure reference to Joseph’s bones, which was very meaningful to first century Israelites, being buried near this very place where the conversation took place? At the beginning of the story, John wanted us to remember

²⁷ Cf. John 1:26-33; 2:6-9; 3:5, 23; 4:7-28; 4:46; 5:7; 7:38; 13:5; 19:34.

Joseph. He was a man who suffered much in his life;²⁸ but whose suffering was ultimately used for the salvation of Israel and the known world. Under Joseph's leadership, Egypt became the only nation that acted wisely by saving grain during the years of plenty and then being able to feed others during the years of famine. (Gen. 41:49-54) It is highly symbolic that this conversation took place in the presence of a silent witness: the bones of Joseph. God first allowed terrible physical, psychological and social injustice to be done to Joseph; He then used this suffering to greatly bless those who came in contact with him. Instead of reading this story in terms of Jesus nailing the immoral woman to the cross of God's standard of morality, we should read it in terms of God's mercy and compassion for the broken world in general, and for marginalized Israelites (Samaritans) in particular.



According to the popular view, it is at this point, convicted by Jesus' prophetic rebuke, that the woman seeks to change the subject and avoid the personal nature of the

encounter by engaging in unimportant theological controversy. The problem is, although these matters may be unimportant to the modern reader, they were of very real concern to the ancient readers, especially those who lived with the Judean-Samaritan conflict. Therefore, let us consider an alternative interpretation: Having seen Jesus' intimate knowledge of her miserable situation and his compassionate empathy, the woman felt secure enough to also break tradition and climb over the wall of forbidden associations. She makes a statement that invites Jesus' commentary on the subject of the key theological difference between the *Ioudaioi* and the Samaritans.

“‘Sir,’ the woman said, ‘I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Ioudaioi claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.’”

²⁸ It is intriguing to think that, perhaps, there is also some connection to the rape of Dinah and the further violence that followed as a result (Gen.34) since these events too are associated with this location.

The Samaritans were Mt. Gerizim-centered Israelites in their understanding of the Pentateuch (Torah), while the Jews were Mt. Zion-centered²⁹ in their interpretation of essentially the same body of literature, admittedly with occasional variations. This question seems trivial to a modern Christian who usually thinks what is really important is that one can confess: “Jesus is in *my* life as a *personal* Lord and Savior.” But, while the Samaritan woman’s question may not concern us today, it was a major issue in the first century. Indeed this deeply theological and spiritual conversation was a very important intersection on the road of human history, because of the tremendous impact it has had on the entire world, ever since this encounter took place.

With fear and trepidation, the Samaritan woman, putting away her feeling of humiliation and bitterness towards the Judeans/Jews, posed her question in the form of a statement. What she received from Jesus, she definitely did not expect to hear from a Judean:

“Jesus declared, ‘Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Ioudaioi. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.’”

She must have been stunned by his statement. Jesus challenged the main point of the Judean-Samaritan divide – the Mt. Gerizim vs. Mt. Zion controversy – arguing that the time had come for another type of worship altogether. In English we can say “we will worship *on* that mountain,” but when we are talking about the city we say “we will worship *in* that city.” This is also the case in Greek, but in Hebrew, in which no doubt this conversation took place, Jesus would literally have said: “Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither “in” this mountain *nor* “in” Jerusalem. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father “in” spirit and truth. The third “in” therefore suggests that the enigmatic phrase: “to worship God in Spirit and in Truth,” should be understood in the context of three mountains, not two (Mt. Gerizim, Mt. Zion and the Mt. [of] Spirit and Truth.) Jesus is

²⁹ Mt. Zion as epicenter. (Ps. 2:6; 9:11, 14; 14:7; 20:2; 48:2; 48:11-12; 50:2; etc.; 1QM 12:13; 19:5)

saying to the Samaritan woman that she must look up to another mountain. The choice was not between Jerusalem and Shechem (Mt. Zion and Mt. Gerizim). The choice was between Mt. Gerizim and the Mountain [of] Spirit and Truth.

The stunning phraseology that Jesus used in his next statement: “You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the *Ioudaioi*,” (4:22) spells the end of the idea that this Gospel is Samaritan, as some scholars (noting in-depth Samaritan interest) have erroneously concluded. Jesus could not have made this point any clearer. When it came to the Judeo-Samaritan conflict, he was with the Judeans. “We (Judeans) know” and “you Samaritans do not know” what we worship. The most striking statement in the entire Gospel, however, given its overabundance of anti-Judean rhetoric, is – “Salvation is from *Ioudaioi*/Judeans.” What could Jesus possibly mean here? Certainly it cannot be seriously entertained that he was saying that the sub-group that sought his death and, at least in its leadership, decisively rejected him, was going to lead all Israel to salvation. What then did he mean? The preliminary question to ask is whether, upon hearing this statement of Jesus, the Samaritan woman, who we now realize was well versed in Torah and Torah-observance, would hold her peace. What must Jesus appeal to in order for the Samaritan woman to be convinced? The answer is: the shared Torah tradition between Judeans and Samaritans. There is one text in Torah that fits this perfectly.

In Genesis 49:8-10, a passage that is in both the Judean and Samaritan versions of the Torah, we read:

“Judah, your brothers will praise you; your hand will be on the neck of your enemies; your father’s sons will bow down to you. The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be his.”

Domination of enemies and guarantee of security were the essential elements of the ancient concept of salvation. No one at that time had thought of salvation in Western individualistic terms. Judah would lead and rule all others until *someone comes*, whom even the nations will joyfully serve. When Jesus referred to this text, the Samaritan woman silently agreed.

You will recall that Jesus had already stated that the center of earthly worship was to be relocated from physical Jerusalem to the heavenly, spiritual Jerusalem, concentrated in Himself, when he spoke to Nathanael. (1:50-51) He had invoked the great Torah story of Jacob’s dream of the angels of God ascending and descending on the Holy Land of Israel where

he was sleeping. (Gen. 18:12) He said to Nathanael that very soon the angels would be ascending and descending, not on Bethel (in Hebrew – House of God), which Samaritans identified as Mt. Gerizim, but upon the ultimate House of God – Jesus himself. (Jn. 1:14; Jn. 2:21)

The official Samaritan religion, at least as far as we know from much later sources, did not include any prophetic writings, which means the Samaritan woman would have only Torah to rely upon in her definition of a Messiah-like figure. “The woman said, ‘I know that *Messiah* (called Christ) is coming. When he comes, he will explain/teach everything to us.’” We read in Deuteronomy 18:18-19, that is perfectly consistent with what the woman said: “I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call him to account.”

Though a later Samaritan text speaks of a Messiah-like figure (Taheb, *Marqah Memar* 4:7, 12), the Samaritans of Jesus’ time only expected a great teacher-prophet. The “Messiah” as King and Priest was a Jewish Israelite, and not a Samaritan Israelite concept, as far as we know. For that reason, the reply of the Samaritan woman shows this was not an imaginary or symbolic conversation (“he will *explain* everything to us”). In view of this, it seems that now the woman graciously used distinctly Jewish terminology to relate to Jesus – the Jew. Just as Jesus was choosing to climb the wall of taboos, so now was the Samaritan woman.

²⁵*The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”* ²⁶*Then Jesus declared, ‘I who speak to you am he.’*

The story quickly switches to the return of the disciples, their reaction and commentary-like interaction with Jesus. This interchange is sandwiched between the encounters with the Samaritan woman and the men of her village. The disciples were surprised at seeing him conversing with the Samaritan woman, but no one challenged him about the inappropriateness of such an encounter.

²⁷*Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, “What do you want?” or “Why are you talking with her?”* ²⁸*Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people,* ²⁹*“Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?”* ³⁰*They*

came out of the town and made their way toward him.³¹ Meanwhile his disciples urged him, “Rabbi, eat something.”³² But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you know nothing about.”³³ Then his disciples said to each other, “Could someone have brought him food?”³⁴ “My food,” said Jesus, “is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.” (John 4:27-34)

While it is possible that the disciples were surprised that he was alone in conversation with a woman, the general context of the story seems to indicate that their response had more to do with him conversing with a woman who was a Samaritan. It is interesting that none of the disciples could even imagine that Jesus would partake of the food from the nearby Samaritan village (once again due to the issues of variant purity requirements among Samaritans and Judeans). Instead, they wondered if some other disciples had gone to bring him food. (The Gospel does not say that all the disciples went to buy food in the nearby town.) Later on, Jesus would show his disciples that he had no problem with the purity laws the Samaritans followed. Later in the story, we see that he lodged with them for two days. (Jn. 4:40) But before that happened, Jesus had a lot to explain.

Leaving behind her jar, the woman rushed to town to tell her people about Jesus, posing an important question to them: “Could this be the one whom Israel has been awaiting for so long?” Speaking as he did in the context of the encounter, Jesus pointed out to his disciples that what he was doing was purely and simply God’s will. Doing the will of his Father gave him his divine life energy. This divine energy enabled him to continue his work. We continue reading:



³⁵“Do you not say, ‘Four months more and then the harvest?’ I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. ³⁶Even now the reaper draws his wages; even now he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. ³⁷Thus the saying ‘One sows and another reaps’ is true. ³⁸I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labour.”

In these verses, Jesus challenged his disciples to consider the crop that was ready for harvest. It is almost certain that Jesus’ disciples thought the spiritual harvest pertained to the Jerusalem-affiliated Israelites alone. Jesus challenged them to look outside their box, to the neighboring heretical and adversarial community, for the harvest – a harvest field they had not considered until this encounter. The significance of Jesus’ commentary on the encounter was not to highlight the importance of evangelism in general, but rather to bring attention to fields that were previously unseen, or thought of as unsuitable for the harvest.³⁰

He, the King of Israel, will unite the North and the South as part of his restoration program for Israel. We read in Amos 9:11-15:

³⁰ We might recall Jesus’ post-resurrection instructions to the disciples not to leave Jerusalem. He told them “... you shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea *and Samaria*, and even to the remotest part of the earth.” (Acts 1:8) It has been traditionally assumed that Samaria was simply a geographical half-way point between Jewish Judea and the Gentile ends of the earth. As I will argue later, this was certainly not the case. We read that the apostles preached the Gospel in the Samaritan villages, actually implementing Jesus’ directive: “... they started back to Jerusalem, and were preaching the gospel to *many villages of the Samaritans*.” (Acts 8:25) We are told “the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God.” That is to say, in comparison to many others, the Samaritan lands were very receptive to the gospel. (Acts 8:9-14) The Samaritan Israelites, unlike today, constituted a sizable number of people who claimed to have been a remnant of the Northern tribes of Israel. Some recent studies in reputable secular scientific journals on DNA research show that there is a genetic link between modern Samaritans and Israelite priests of old (see article by Oefner, Peter J. and others in the suggested readings list). It is very difficult to speak in precise numbers, but scholars who focus their research on Samaritans suggest that their first century population was roughly equal (or almost equal) to the size of Judean Israelites, both in the Land and in Diaspora. The other Gospels, especially Matthew, were too Judea-centered, and even anti-Samaritan, to be suitable for use among Samaritan Israelites. We read in Matt. 10:5-6: “These twelve Jesus sent out after instructing them: ‘Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’” Matthew’s Jesus couples Gentiles with Samaritans and emphasizes the command (at least at this stage of the ministry) not to go to Samaritan villages. In his great commission (Matt. 28:19-20), Matthew again displays this view by having Jesus command his Jewish Israelite disciples to simply make disciples of all nations, without paying special attention to the Samaritan Israelites.

“In that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old, that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name,’ declares the Lord who does this. ‘Behold, the days are coming,’ declares the lord, ‘when the plowman shall overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes him who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it. I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit. I will plant them on their land, and they shall never again be uprooted out of the land that I have given them,’ says the Lord your God.”



In the book of Acts, we read of a significant move of God’s Spirit among Samaritans and the openness that the Judean Jesus-following communities had for these new-found brothers and sisters in the faith. (Acts 8)

While Jesus was no doubt conversing with his followers about the suitability of teaching the Samaritans God’s ways, he heard voices from the crowd approaching him from a distance. The faithful witness of this Gospel describes it like this:

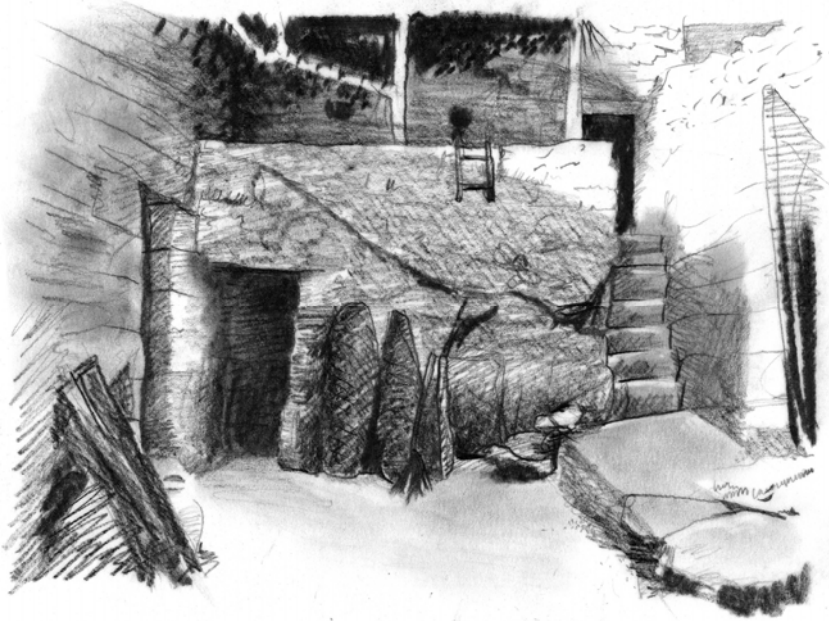
“Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, ‘He told me everything I ever did.’ So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. And because of his words many more became believers. They said to the woman, ‘We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Saviour of the world.’” (verses 39-42)

Interpreting the Bible is a difficult task. We bring our past, our preconceived notions, our already formed theology, our cultural blind spots, our social standing, our gender, our political views, and many other influences to our interpretation of the Bible. In short, all that we are in some way determines how we interpret everything. This does not imply that the meaning of the text is dependent on its reader. The meaning remains constant. But the reading of the text does differ and is dependent on many factors surrounding the interpretive process. In other words, how a reader or listener understands the text can differ greatly from person to person.

One of the biggest handicaps in the enterprise of Bible interpretation has been an inability to recognize and admit that a particular interpretation may have a weak spot. The weak spot is usually determined by personal preferences and heartfelt desires to prove a particular theory, regardless of the cost. I consider that, having an awareness of our own blind spots and being honestly willing to admit problems with our interpretations when they exist, is more important than the intellectual brilliance with which we argue our position.

One opportunity to exercise an honest approach is when commentators recognize that there is something in their interpretation that does not seem to fit with the text and they do not quite know how to explain it. What I feel can be legitimately suggested as a challenge to our reading of the story of the Samaritan woman, are the words the Gospel author places on her lips when she tells her fellow villagers about her encounter with Jesus. She says: "He told me everything *I ever did*." It would have matched the traditional interpretation perfectly, if her words had been: "He told me everything that happened to me" or better yet "was done to me."

I think, once again, we are so preconditioned to think in Christian terms ("we are all fallen people, but especially the Samaritan woman" kind of approach) that we are unable to read this sentence positively. In other words, *everything I ever did*, may be just that - a simple statement that the entire life of the woman was known to Jesus (not necessarily a life of sexual immorality). In other words, this verse should be understood differently - "he knows everything about me." Indeed, she would hardly have gone bragging to the townspeople that "this stranger told me all the sinful acts I have done in my life." When we think of it, that would hardly have sent them running to meet him, but rather sent them running in the other direction! But I realize that getting over preconceived notions and interpretive preconditioning is not easy. It was Krister Stendahl who said "Our vision is often more abstracted by what we think we know than by our lack of knowledge."



⁴³ After two days he departed for Galilee ⁴⁴ for Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honor in his own hometown. ⁴⁵ So when he came to Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him, having seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the feast. For they too had gone to the feast. ⁴⁶ So he came again to Cana in Galilee, where he had made the water wine. And at Capernaum there was an official whose son was ill. ⁴⁷ When this man heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went to him and asked him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death. ⁴⁸ So Jesus said to him, "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe." ⁴⁹ The official said to him, "Sir, come down before my child dies." ⁵⁰ Jesus said to him, "Go; your son will live." The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way. ⁵¹ As he was going down, his servants met him and told him that his son was recovering. ⁵² So he asked them the hour when he began to get better, and they said to him, "Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him." ⁵³ The

father knew that was the hour when Jesus had said to him, “Your son will live.” And he himself believed, and all his household. ⁵⁴ *This was now the second sign that Jesus did when he had come from Judea to Galilee.*

As the reporting of the events connected with Jesus’ stopover in Samaritan Shechem finishes, we come to John 4:43-45. Here we see that Jesus does not return to Judea but continues his journey to Galilee. In addition to the absence of the incident with the Samaritan woman from the Synoptics, there is another significant feature in which the Synoptics and John part company. John states the reason Jesus did not return to Judea, but went on to Galilee, was because “Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honor in his own homeland.” (Literally: “fatherland” in the sense of “motherland” in the English language). (4:44) What is of course striking here is that John names Judea as Jesus’ homeland, his fatherland, and not Galilee as do the Synoptics. (Mt 13:54-57, Mk. 6:1-4, Lk. 4:23-24) It is likely that the Synoptics treat Galilee, the place of Jesus’ upbringing, as his fatherland. For John, however, Jesus is Judean because of his birth in Bethlehem of Judea. To John, Jesus lived in Galilee because of God’s mission and not because of his Galilean identity. To John he was a Judean (but more about this later).

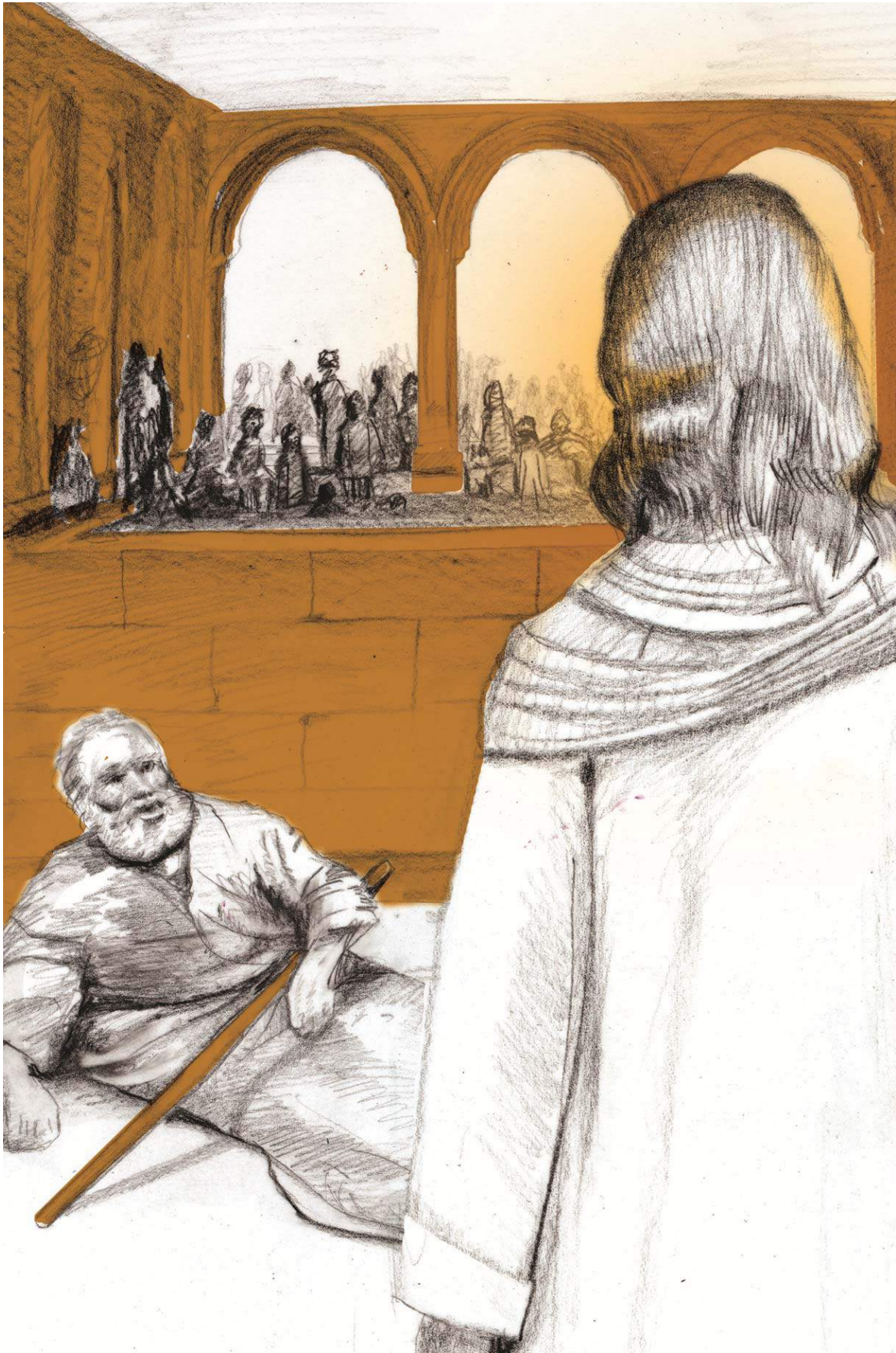
Together with this alternative reading of Jesus’ identity, John paints a picture for his readers of Jesus’ rejection and acceptance, which is also very different from the picture in the Synoptics. Galilee and Samaria were very responsive to Jesus. People there welcomed him with very few exceptions; while everything he did in his homeland of Judea seemed to meet significant opposition.

There is paradox and tension here. In Judea (Jesus’ motherland in John) Jesus faced persecution. He was born there and his Father’s house, the Temple of Israel’s God, was in Jerusalem (not in Galilee and not in Samaria), but it is from there that the real opposition to his ministry came. It is not that unbelief was found only in Judea, after all some Galilean Jewish disciples would leave Jesus after his statements about his body and blood. (Jn. 6:66) But all in all, it cannot be denied that Samaria and Galilee were far more receptive to Jesus than was Judea. I suggest once again, therefore, that we should understand John 1:11 within this context of: “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.”

Jesus departs Samaria and arrives in Cana. Why did Jesus return to Cana? This was the place where his first miracle was performed. (John 2:1-11) It is important, as we read in John 4:47, that his second miracle also takes place here. (vs. 46) Cana was very likely a Judean settlement in Galilee. We remember when Jesus turned water into wine, there were

vessels that were used for ritual purification according to the custom of the *Ioudaioi*. (*John 2:6*) In other words, Jesus went to continue his ministry at “a home, away from home.”





Chapter 5

The Sabbath Healing at the Bethesda Pool; Ensuing Controversy

☆¹ *Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals.* ² *Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Hebrew called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades.* ³ *In these lay a multitude of invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed.*

When it comes to determining the level of the Gospel's historical reliability, the story that will end in the healing of a paralyzed man, is one of the most fascinating textual units in the Gospel of John. Until the recent discovery of the pool with five-roofed colonnades near the Sheep Gate (everyone was looking for a pentagon shaped pool at first), many did not consider the Gospel of John to be historically reliable. It was thought to be either allegorical (truthful only in the sense similar to apocalyptic literature) or simply inaccurate (written by someone who was not from Judea and was wholly unfamiliar with Jerusalem's geography and topography). However, both pools mentioned in the Gospel of John have now been identified – the Pool of Bethesda (John 5:2) and the Pool of Siloam. (John 9:7) The pool mentioned in this chapter turned out to have five colonnades (as described in the Gospel), but it was not structured as a pentagon. There were four colonnades separated in the middle by another one, thus forming the five colonnades, just as the Gospel describes.

It is possible, though unlikely, that the pool of Bethesda was a ceremonial water cleansing facility, a *mikvah*, associated with the Jerusalem Temple. But today's archeological discovery shows, if indeed it was separate at all, it was adjacent to the Jerusalem *Asclepion*. Archeologists date the recently discovered *Asclepion* to several centuries after Jesus, but it is built upon the foundation of an earlier *Asclepion*.

There are many good reasons to believe that this structure was situated within walking distance of the walls of the city of Jerusalem and that it was part of a healing center dedicated to the Greco-Roman god of well-being and health – Asclepius. Devotion to Asclepius was widespread throughout the lands dominated by the Roman Empire. There were more than 400 *Asclepions* (Asclepius-related facilities) throughout empire, functioning as

healing centers and dispensers of the god's grace and mercy towards those in need. The god's mythical daughters, for example, included the goddesses Hygeia and Panacea. We can hear in their Greek names our modern words for "hygiene" and "panacea" – key concepts associated today with medicine and health. Snakes were a key characteristic of Asclepius's cult of health and healing. Even today, one of the key symbols of modern medicine is a pole with a snake around it.

Now stop and think for a moment. If this is correct, it may change our perception of the entire story described here. You see, it is possible that the blind, lame, and paralyzed were not waiting for Israel's God to heal them, but rather for the merciful healing act of Asclepius. Before you begin to think that the above reconstruction is far-fetched, please consider the following:

The second century Christian apologist Justin Martyr mentions a popular obsession with Asclepius among his contemporaries, saying: "When the Devil brings forward Asclepius as the raiser of the dead and healer of all diseases, may I not say that in this matter likewise he has imitated the prophecies about Christ?" (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho, the Jew*, 69) And in a statement attributed to the second century Jewish sage, Rabbi Akiva, we read: "Once Akiva was asked to explain why persons afflicted with disease sometimes returned cured from a pilgrimage to the shrine of an idol, though it was surely powerless." (Babylonian Talmud, *Avodah Zarah* 55a)

The Pool of Bethesda/Asclepion was probably part of the Hellenization of Jerusalem, along with several other important projects such as a Roman theater and a Roman bathhouse. It is probably referring to such Hellenization of Jerusalem that Qumranite devotees, authoring their commentary on the Prophet Nahum, wrote: "Where is the lion's den, the cave of the young lions? (Nah. 2:12b) The interpretation of this concerns Jerusalem, which had become a dwelling for the wicked ones of the Gentiles..." (4QpNah)

In that case, the pool of Bethesda ("house of mercy" in Hebrew) does not have to be a Jewish site at all, but rather a Greek Asclepion-affiliated facility. It is very important to notice that in this particular healing, Jesus does not command the one he healed to wash himself in the pool (of Bethesda), while in the story of the healing of the blind man, he did issue a direct command to go and wash at the pool of Siloam. (Jn. 9:6-7) It therefore appears that, while the pool of Bethesda was a pagan place (an Asclepion), the pool of Siloam was indeed connected with the Jerusalem Temple. Of course, Jerusalem was the center for the *Ioudaioi* in Jesus' days, but it was also the center for Hellenized ideals in Judea and was under strict Roman control.

[... waiting for the moving of the waters; ⁴ for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool and stirred up the water; whoever then first, after the stirring up of the water, stepped in was made well from whatever disease with which he was afflicted.]

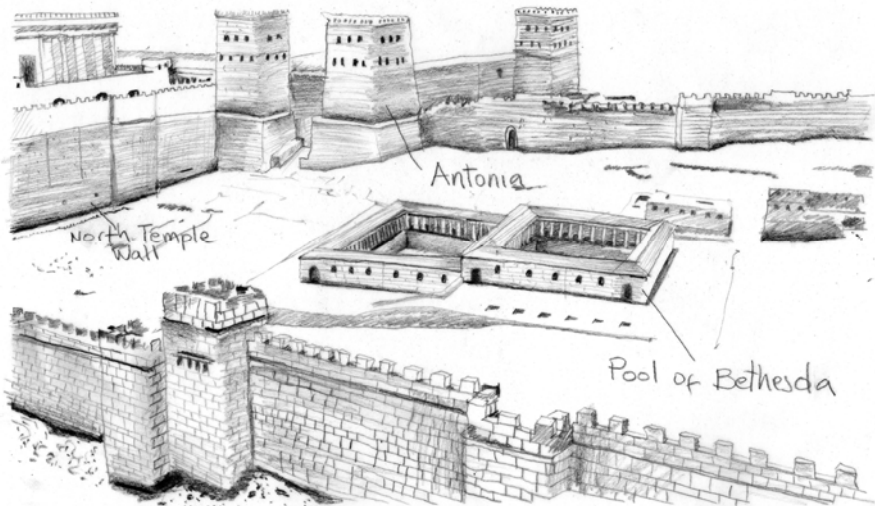


While some modern Bibles still include the above text in brackets (3b-4), it is not contained in the earliest and most reliable manuscripts available to us today and therefore should not be treated as authentic. It seems that the Christian copyist, unfamiliar with cult of Asclepius and the Pool of Bethesda's affiliation with it, added the explanation about the Angel of the Lord stirring up the waters, in an attempt to clarify things for his readers. In reality, he ended up sending all the following generations of readers in the

wrong interpretive direction, missing the whole point of the story.

Contrary to popular opinion, ancient scribes were not always accurate in preserving every jot and tittle of the text they were copying. They did not embellish things, but certainly were not afraid to “clarify issues” when they thought something was missing. Hence, the new character in this story, the angel of Israel’s God, was added by a well-meaning, but misguided copyist. The copyist, unlike the author of John’s Gospel, was not aware of the Greek religious identity of Bethesda. It sounded to him, from the text he had before him and without any evidence of the contemporary culture, like the “house of mercy” of *the* God of Israel. He was simply mistaken.

⁵ One man was there who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. ⁶ When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to be healed?” ⁷ The sick man answered him, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am going another steps down before me.” ⁸ Jesus said to him, “Get up, take up your bed, and walk.” ⁹ And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked.



Two types of people were often seen on the porches of the pool of Bethesda - those who came to try their luck as part of the quest for healing

on the way, as it were, to another promising healing solution; and those who had already given up all hope for any kind of healing. In response to Jesus' question about whether or not he wished to get well, we read an answer that was anything but hopeful. In the words of the sick man: "I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am going, another steps down before me." (vs. 7) The stirring up of the water was likely happening when the priests of the Asclepius cult opened the connecting pipes between the higher and the lower portions of the pool. The water in the upper reservoir would then flow into the lower portion of the pool.

As the Gospel tells us, the "institutionalized" man had been for a long time in the context of a deeply religious, albeit Greek religious, environment. He was a man with a significant personal need and he was without hope. In Greek mythology, Asclepius was known, not only for his healing and life-giving powers, but also for an attitude of benevolence to the people. This made him one of the most popular divinities in the Greco-Roman world. Later in the story, in Israel's Temple, Jesus would meet the man he had healed, and would warn him not to continue his life of sin. This fits well with the idea that the Pool of Bethesda was an Asclepion.

This is a powerful story. Sickness – the symbol of human chaos – was called into order by the power of Jesus' word; in the same way that pre-creation chaos was once called into the order of creation by Israel's Heavenly King. Now, the royal Son of Israel's God (Jesus) came into the pagan abode (*Asclepion*) and healed a Judean man without any magical formulas and spells. Jesus did so simply by *telling* the man to get up and walk. In other words, Jesus healed the man in the same way Israel's God once created the world – simply by the power of His spoken word.

Now that day was the Sabbath. ¹⁰ So the Ioudaioi said to the man who had been healed, "It is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to take up your bed." ¹¹ But he answered them, "The man who healed me, that man said to me, 'Take up your bed, and walk.' " ¹² They asked him, "Who is the man who said to you, 'Take up your bed and walk'?" ¹³ Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had withdrawn, as there was a crowd in the place. ¹⁴ Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, "See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you." ¹⁵ The man went away and told the Ioudaioi that it was Jesus who had healed him.

It was a Sabbath day. We read in verse 10 that once Jesus healed the man, commanding him “to get up, pick up his bed and walk,” the *Ioudaioi* objected to the man carrying his rolled-up mattress because it was the Sabbath day. Referring to Jesus, the man said: “that man who healed me commanded me to do so.” When asked, he could not identify or give a description of Jesus. Everything happened too quickly. He was healed and then Jesus simply disappeared into the crowd. Sometime later, the man encountered Jesus in the Temple complex. Jesus warned him that unless he stopped sinning (in this context, away from idol worship) something worse could happen to him (verses 9-14).

Jesus’ comment about the man’s sin seems uncharacteristic. I therefore conclude that, either the reference was made to something in particular that Jesus knew about in connection with this man’s past, or more probably, that the man, being Jewish, had succumbed to adulterous involvement in Greek religious worship. In other words, Jesus’ rough words to the man had something to do with the place where Jesus found him – the pool of Bethesda – the pool dedicated to the healing power of the Greek god Asclepius. While there may be other reasons, it seems that the man who was healed probably did not like Jesus’ rebuke and went to the *Ioudaioi* to tell them about his healer’s identity. Of course, it’s possible that the man went out because of his sense of naiveté (reporting the great things God has done, as it were), but the natural reading of the story seems to indicate that the healed man reported Jesus to the authorities because of Jesus’ earlier rebuke and warning against future idol worship.

¹⁶ And this was why the Ioudaioi were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. ¹⁷ But Jesus answered them, “My Father is working until now, and I am working.”

The Temple leadership heard of Jesus’ rising popularity. Something happened, however, to incense them. Jesus did the unthinkable. He went to the Greek Temple complex where the god Asclepius was worshiped, or at least honored, by many common people in Judah seeking healing. (In the ancient mind, worshiping and honoring a divinity was not one and the same thing.)

Jesus declared his redeeming/healing Kingship over Israel by physically healing one of the lost sheep of Israel, thus demonstrating full authority over sickness and, like the Israelite prophets of old, putting to shame the false claims of pagan worshipers and those among God’s people who had joined their beliefs in the condoning silence of approval. With this healing, the *Ioudaioi*’s authority, popularity and communal influence were

threatened to the core by this unprecedented challenge issued by Jesus to the temple authorities.

This happens often in life. When a pioneer in any field takes a strong lead over other members, the challenged and threatened establishment attempts to launch an attack against the challenger's character. In this case, they attempted to disown what was most dear to Jesus himself in the context of his life – obedience to the Torah. The Jerusalemite authorities went after him, criticizing him regarding one of the most important things in the life of an everyday Judean – Sabbath observance. The goal was to discredit him by making him someone he was not – a Sabbath-breaker.

But there's more here than first meets the eye. In verse 16 we read: "this was why the *Ioudaioi* were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath." In most interpretations of this story, the emphasis is placed on the Sabbath, so we understand that "this was why the *Ioudaioi* were persecuting Jesus – because he was doing these things *on the Sabbath*." But what if we are simply placing the emphasis on a wrong word? What if the sentence should instead be read: "this was why the *Ioudaioi* were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing *these things* on the Sabbath."

In other words, the issue really was not that Jesus was not a Sabbath-observant Jew. The issue was that Jesus was demonstrating his incredible miracle-working power, which in turn demonstrated his unprecedented connection with the Divine. The influence of the *Ioudaioi* was already jeopardized (due to many other factors unrelated to Jesus) and now it was jeopardized even more. What Jesus did was simply not acceptable.

Jesus had stepped into the abode of the god Asclepius and healed someone who had been sick for many years. In other words, the Jerusalem Temple authorities knew that Jesus could not continue performing such powerful miracles without them (the *Ioudaioi* – Judean authorities) losing their authority over the Jewish communities in Judea and abroad. So they falsely accused him of breaking the laws of the Holy Sabbath – a very serious offense, which would surely disqualify anyone with Messianic claims or hopes. In other words, the Sabbath was not the reason for persecuting Jesus. It was their slanderous excuse. It was his miracles and prophetic words, not only in distant Galilee, but especially the miracle in the nearby Asclepion in Judea. This miracle took place right next to the Jerusalem Temple and this threatened them to the core.

In verse 17, we read that Jesus defended himself with a well-known Jewish traditional concept: "God rested on the Sabbath day after the initial creation described in Genesis, but He has continued to work each Sabbath ever since. He endows children with human souls and brings them into covenant relationship with Himself at the time of their circumcision." Jesus put it this way: "My Father is working until now, and I am working." The

logic was very simple – If children are born on the Sabbath day, then it means that God works to give them life on the Sabbath day. If children are allowed to be circumcised on the Sabbath, then surely God also works, making the covenant with them on the Sabbath.

Therefore, Jesus’ reasoning was already accepted by many *Ioudaioi* as a Jewish Torah-observant opinion and an honorable life-style of a fellow practicing Jew. He was not saying anything new in that regard. Healing on the Sabbath was not something that violated the Torah, contrary to the objections of the *Ioudaioi*.

As we will see shortly, the real problems were connected with Jesus’ other claims. Not only did he claim general Sonship of God, but he claimed to have a particularly close relationship with the Heavenly Father. He was His Son, and therefore equal to God in some very important areas. This claim was rightly perceived by the *Ioudaioi* as threatening their standing in the community, their ability to lead, influence and control. Regrettably, their leadership reached the conclusion that they must do something. Jesus was becoming too dangerous for them. Something needed to be done to discredit him and stop the momentum he was gaining. At the threat of such a grave danger, almost anything seemed justified.

¹⁸ This was why the Ioudaioi were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.

How can this strong negative language toward Jesus be explained? After all, we read that the *Ioudaioi* sought to kill him. It is known that in the vast majority of premeditated murder cases, the actions of the murderer are based on feelings of anger that eventually lead to the murder itself. This is probably why Jesus taught that in some way anger towards a fellow human, is the same as actual murder. (Mt. 5:21-22) When people become angry, and continue to be very angry for a long period of time, they often cannot bear the heavy burden of their anger, but will seek to take some action to satisfy and nullify the anger that causes them so much emotional pain. They must end the pain that their own anger causes them. The stronger the anger, the stronger is the desire to end it. In the absence of a better way, people resort to evil actions such as violence, and even murder.

Incidentally, the word in Greek translated here as “breaking” the Sabbath does not need to be translated this way.³¹ It is equally possible to speak of Jesus “setting the Sabbath free.” It is not that the author of John thought

³¹ Although λύω occurs in 7:23 in a way that would indicate “break” is an acceptable and appropriate translation in this context.

Jesus was breaking the Sabbath. He, in fact, was persuaded that Jesus could not break a command of his own (John holds to high Christology, meaning that Jesus is the incarnation of the LORD God himself). So by definition, Jesus could not be everything John said he was and at the same time be a Sabbath breaker. But, in John's account, it was the *Ioudaioi* who accused him of breaking the Sabbath, because they were seeking to discredit him in the eyes of the people, whose heart-allegiance they did not possess, but whose rebellion they still feared.

Jesus' very presence (His person), as well as his teachings (His words), and his signs (His deeds), were spelling trouble for the Jerusalem Temple elite and others who fed off the same budget and status. Jesus was gaining a more and more popular following. He was performing miracles and giving prophetic speeches almost exclusively outside of Judea, (the headquarters of the *Ioudaioi*). As a matter of principle, he did not respond to their requests to submit to their authority. In this chapter, however, the anger and plans to kill Jesus are only beginning. They reach a crescendo when Jesus crosses the red line of the patience and tolerance of the *Ioudaioi*. Jesus' final threat to the *Ioudaioi* leadership will be his most spectacular miracle: the resurrection of a well-known and respected member of the *Ioudaioi*, a man named Lazarus.

We read in John 11 that Jesus' coming to Bethany (very near Jerusalem) and resurrecting Lazarus, resulted in two significant events. Many members of the *Ioudaioi* placed their faith in Jesus. As a result, an emergency meeting of the top-level leadership was called. In John 11:47-48, we read: "... the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, 'What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.'"

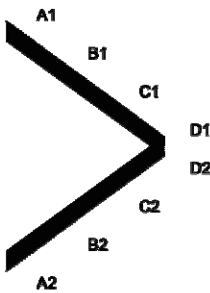
We will look at this story in detail when we get to Chapter 11, but for now, it is clear that the accusations of the *Ioudaioi* in this section did not have to do with Jesus' seemingly "liberal" Sabbath observance, but with his person, words and deeds. It is not that his claims to be the Son of Man/Logos of God, did not have a place in the Judaism of the time, but simply that Jesus was not allowed to take that place. The Jerusalem leaders calculated that if things continued as they were, Jesus, with his prophetic speeches that were validated by his great miracles,³² would surely have put them out of a job.

In the following sections we will see how the roles of Jesus will merge two normally separate concepts: "Son of God" and "Son of Man."

³² Use of the word "miracles" is slightly misrepresentative of John's gospel, which consistently presents Jesus' acts of wonder as "signs" (σημεῖα). This is not the case in the Synoptics, which do speak of Jesus performing "miracles" or "works of power" (δυνάμεις).

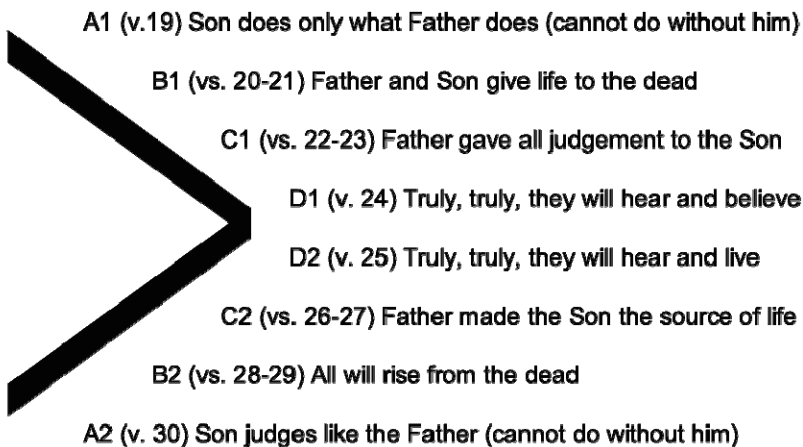
Chiastic Structure

We now come to a very interesting text in John 5:19-30. If you have been reading this book carefully, you may be surprised to find that I've taken such a long text for consideration, instead of dividing it into a number of smaller pieces as I have been doing. The reason is, that in this text we encounter a clear and unquestionable (at least to my mind) example of an ancient form of literary design – a *chiasm*. One of the many functions of chiasm is to help the interpreter clearly see where the literary unit begins and where the unit is brought to a literary conclusion. First, I will show a diagram of chiastic structure, before attempting to explain it. The literary unit, when analyzed, has the following structure:



The sentence, either word-by-word or at the very least, thought-by-thought, is repeated at the beginning and at the end of the literary unit. It is as if the original author moves from A1 to B1, from B1 to C1, from C1 to D1 and then suddenly switches gears and moves backwards according to exactly the same order (D2, C2, B2, A2).

John 5:19-30 is structured as a clear-cut chiasm. Not only are thought-by-thought parallel repetitive structures present, but my positive identification of it as a true chiasm is verified by clearly repetitive word-by-word occurrences as well. Let us take a look:



A1 ¹⁹ Jesus therefore answered and was saying to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, **the Son can do nothing of Himself**, unless it is **something He sees** the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things **the Son also does** in like manner.

B1 ²⁰ “For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing; and **greater works than these** will He show Him, that you may **marvel**.

²¹ “For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so **the Son also gives life** to whom He wishes.

C1 ²² “For not even the **Father** judges anyone, but He **has given all judgment to the Son**, ²³ in order that all may honor the Son, even as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him.

D1 ²⁴ “**Truly, truly**, I say to you, **he who hears** My word, and believes Him who sent Me, **has eternal life**, and does not come into judgment, but has **passed out of death into life**.

D2 ²⁵ “**Truly, truly**, I say to you, an hour is coming and **now is**, when the **dead shall hear** the voice of the Son of God; and **those who hear shall live**.

C2 ²⁶ “For just as the **Father** has life in Himself, even so He gave to **the Son also to have life in Himself**; ²⁷ and He gave Him authority to execute judgment, because He is the Son of Man.

B2 ²⁸ “Do not **marvel** at this; for an hour is coming, in which **all who are in the tombs shall hear His voice**, ²⁹ and shall come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment.

A2 ³⁰ “**I can do nothing on My own initiative. As I hear, I judge**; and My judgment is just, because **I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me**.

At this point, the chiasmic structure of John 5:19-30 is very clear. We will continue this exciting journey and see how this structure should not just make an impression on us, but also help us to understand the original, intended meaning more clearly and accurately.

Because of the chiasmic structure, we can easily see that John 5:19-30 is a clear literary unit. While this unit should still be read in the context of what precedes and what follows, these verses should primarily be read and studied as a *unit*. Another extremely important function of the chiasm is to point the reader/hearer to the key concept within the literary unit. While everything in John 5:19-30 can be said to be important, there is a section that is highlighted as being of greater importance. Which verse or verses are the most important? Simply put, it is the center verse/s - the point at which the forward movement stops and the reverse begins. In this case, D1 and D2 are emphasized as the crucial point of the entire literary unit.

Through his brilliant literary creation, the author of John first states, and then essentially restates in reverse order, the following three ideas:

- 1) Jesus is utterly dependent and reliant on his Father, who causes him to act only in accordance with His will. (A1 and A2)

- 2) The Father and the Son, in equal measure, give life to the dead. Because of the arrival of the Son, the hour of resurrection for the wicked and the righteous draws near. (B1 and B2)
- 3) The Father has fully commissioned the Son to rule/judge in his place. (C1 and C2)

At this point, the author makes us aware of the chiasmic center, thereby, showing the emphasis he meant to give this literary unit. In this text, the emphasis might be summarized as follows: *Eternal life rests on one's response to the words of Jesus, believing that He is the Son of God sent by the Father to bring victory over death and sin.* (D1 and D2). We see this in verses 24-25:

D1²⁴ “**Truly, truly**, I say to you, **he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life**, and does not come into judgment, but **has passed out of death into life**.”

D2²⁵ “**Truly, truly**, I say to you, an hour is coming and **now is**, when the **dead shall hear** the voice of **the Son of God**; and **those who hear shall live**.”

As we look into the Old Testament background of the theological statements clearly presented and highlighted in John 5:19-30, we are of course drawn to several key passages from the prophets. The prophetic words of Daniel in 12:2 and his earlier vision in 7:13-14 are evoked, and play a major role in this text.

Dan. 12:2 “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.”

Dan. 7:13-14 “I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.”

After reading both texts from Daniel, we see: By the time of the writing of Daniel, there was already a clear prophetic hope and expectation concerning resurrection from the dead (A section of this text reminds us of a

depiction of Israel's return from exile, back to the Lord her God and to the Land of Israel promised to her for an everlasting possession. [Ezek. 37:1-14] It is also a powerful image of the massive/collective resurrection of the dead).

Daniel's vision spoke of someone to whom Israel's God (the Ancient of Days) would give his own full, legitimate authority. The figure of the Son of Man, commissioned in Daniel 7:14 to rule the world, is only literally fulfilled at the time of Jesus' ascension. (Lk. 24:50-52)

In John 5:19-30, the texts cited from Daniel are then merged with the idea of the Royal Son of God, from Psalm 2.

Narrator: Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his Anointed, saying,

The Nations: "Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us."

Narrator: He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying,

Heavenly King: "As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill." I will tell of the decree: The Lord said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel."

Narrator: Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

From this we can clearly see that the ideas presented in John 5:19-30 are a composite of collected ideas. Together they find, in this brilliant Johannine chiasm, a new and more systematized emphasis.

³¹ *If I alone bear witness about myself, my testimony is not true.*

As we continue to journey together through this ancient world with Jesus, we will compare and pay special attention to obvious differences between the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John.

When we don't spend most of our time attempting to harmonize the Gospel accounts, surprising insights can emerge. Moreover, it is by highlighting the sometimes sharp differences between the accounts of Jesus' life, that we encounter what otherwise has proven to be an enigmatic enterprise: discovering John's original intention, context, and purpose for composing this Gospel. This time I would like to highlight one very

important difference – the almost complete absence of the courtroom motif in the Synoptic Gospels and its dominance in the Gospel of John. The words, “to witness” or “to testify,” occur throughout John. Everything and everyone seem to be testifying on behalf of Jesus.

In John 5:31, Jesus is reminding his accusers of how the testimony of witnesses was to function according to Mosaic legislation in ancient Israel. Jesus appeals to a Mosaic Law summarized in Deuteronomy:

Deut. 17:6-7 “On the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses the one who is to die shall be put to death; a person shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness.”

Deut. 19:15 “A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established.”

There are other examples in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament that do not carry exclusively negative (prosecuting) connotations when it comes to using the principle of two or more witnesses. In Exodus 32:15, Moses calls the two stones upon which the Ten Commandments were engraved, the “tablets of the Testimony.” In the Temple, above the mercy seat, there were also two supreme witnesses – cherubim who covered the ark of testimony with their wings.

³² There is another who bears witness about me, and I know that the testimony that he bears about me is true. ³³ You sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth. ³⁴ Not that the testimony that I receive is from man, but I say these things so that you may be saved. ³⁵ He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light.

In this passage, Jesus will make a case that he has two witnesses to establish the veracity of his claims regarding his person, and therefore, his deeds and teachings. First is the lesser testimony of John the Baptist. Jesus continues to talk with the *Ioudaioi* recalling, in verse 33, the Jerusalem formal inquiry into the ministry of John the Baptist. There we read, “...the *Ioudaioi* sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ‘Who are you?!’” (Jn. 1:19) We can clearly see that Jesus is not debating with the Jewish people as such, but with the Temple authorities and those who worked for them outside the Temple. We are introduced to the interesting fact that John’s ministry was not rejected from the outset. (vs. 35) In several ways, John looked like many other aspiring Jewish prophets who inspired followings and, in the end, were not themselves important. It is only when

John's activity began to gain momentum that the investigation from Jerusalem was commissioned.

³⁶ But the testimony that I have is greater than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me. ³⁷ And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me. His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen, ³⁸ and you do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe the one whom he has sent.

Secondly, the stronger witness to the person, deeds, and words of Jesus, was the Lord – the Covenant God of Israel Himself. Jesus made a two-fold argument from this point:

Consider the incredible miracle-working power I have. That power is God's seal of approval. God's testimony is that the message that accompanies the manifestations is indeed also true.

While the baptismal event is not recorded in John, it was no doubt already part of the Jesus' tradition. The heavens were opened and God's voice thundered from above, echoing the words of Psalm 2.

We read, related to this theme, a passage in Luke 7:18-22:³³

The disciples of John reported all these things to him. And John, calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" And when the men had come to him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, 'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?'" In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight. And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them."

We read in another related passage, incidentally also in Luke 3:21-22:

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came

³³ Cf. Mark 1:9-11.

from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

³⁹ *You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me,* ⁴⁰ *yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.* ⁴¹ *I do not receive glory from people.* ⁴² *But I know that you do not have the love of God within you.*

It is possible that we have long misinterpreted this verse. You may ask, what is there to misinterpret!? Jesus says he does not seek praise from people, but only from God Himself. It’s pure and simple, and knowing the grammatical nuances of Greek, Aramaic and/or Hebrew languages would not change the message. Well... it’s true that in this case, knowing linguistics would not help, but knowing the background of the New Testament would. During the Second Temple period, in addition to Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes and Samaritans, there were other Israelite groups. Sometime later, some rabbis derogatorily referred to a group that is of particular interest to us here, as the “people of the land.”³⁴ These were Israelites who were the dominant people group in Lower Galilee. They did not engage heavily with the teachings of the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem and, even if they were learned, they were not considered as such by the elitist standards of the *Ioudaioi*.

When we look, especially in John’s Gospel, for the type of person who accepted Jesus’ authority and supported his ministry, we reach an obvious conclusion. Jesus was largely rejected in Judea, but largely accepted in Jewish Galilee. Since Judea was dominated by the *Ioudaioi*, and Jewish Galilee by the Israelite *am ha’aretz* (the people of the land), we conclude that it is entirely possible that Jesus was not referring, in verse 41, to people as a whole, but to the people among whom he was quickly becoming a major celebrity. These people were the Jewish Galilean “people of the land.”

Throughout the Gospel of John, you will recall that the *Ioudaioi* challenged Jesus to submit his ministry to their approval - Jesus consistently refused. In this section (especially in verses 42-47), Jesus leveled a strong critique against the *Ioudaioi*, explaining his reasons for not honoring their authority. They accused him of accepting praise/approval from the people (of the land) instead of from them. Jesus, however, expressed his non-acceptance of their authority in verses 43-47. Let us see what he said:

⁴³ *I have come in my Father’s name, and you do not*

³⁴ *Am ha’aretz* occurs 40 times in the Mishnah, prominently in tractates Demai, Avot, and Toharot.

receive me. If another comes in his own name, you will receive him.

The second part of this verse (*if another comes in his own name, you will receive him*) has been interpreted to be a reference to the coming of Anti-Christ. Even if this is a new thought for you, you can see how this idea might be relevant in this context. However, I do not think it is possible to confidently state what Jesus was referring to here.

There is another possibility that has been largely overlooked. In Jesus' time, the concept of the Wicked Priest was known among Essene-influenced Israelites. Writings regarding the Wicked Priest are well represented in the Qumran Collection. (1QpHab 1:13; 8:8; 9:9; 11:4; 12:2, 8) Presumably the Qumranite Israelite residents, who left Jerusalem in protest and established the headquarters of the Israelite Essene movement in the Judean Desert (a century before Jesus), were persecuted by this Wicked Priest of the Jerusalem Temple. The Wicked Priest may have been a symbolic figure representing all high priestly figures. The Essenes also had a figure they called the Teacher of Righteousness (CD 1:11; 20:32; 1QpHab 1:13; 5:10; 7:4; 8:3; 11:5), who was the oppositional counterpart to the figure of the Wicked Priest.

We read about both of them in the Qumranite Commentary on the Book of Habakkuk (words in italics below are from the prophet Habakkuk, and in regular fonts from the Qumran leaders):

“Because of the blood of men and the violence done to the land, to the city, and all its inhabitants. Interpreted, this concerns the Wicked Priest whom God delivered into the hands of his enemies because of the iniquity committed against the Teacher of Righteousness and the men of his Council, that he might be humbled by means of a destroying scourge, in bitterness of soul, because he had done wickedly to His elect.” (1QpHab 9.8-12)

Among many other references, we cite this passage:

“... the arrogant man seizes wealth without halting. He widens his gullet like Hell and like Death he has never enough. All the nations are gathered to him and all the people are assembled to him. Interpreted, this concerns the Wicked Priest who was called by the name of truth when he first arose. But when he ruled over Israel his heart became proud, and he forsook God and betrayed the precepts for the sake of riches. He robbed and amassed the riches of men of violence who rebelled against God, and he took the wealth of the

peoples, heaping sinful iniquity upon himself ...” (1QpHab 8.4-11)

Theories as to the identity and dating of both of these figures vary greatly. There is certainly no consensus. There is, however, an influential theory that the Wicked Priest is a composite figure who includes a series of various wicked priests whose administration of the Jerusalem Temple covered several centuries.

Though one cannot be certain, I speculate here that it is possible in verse 43b that Jesus referred either to present or past events involving the Wicked Priest/s (Remember Jesus was very familiar with the Essene movement and no doubt was aware of these interpretations). However, I want to underscore, we cannot be sure to what Jesus referred. It could have been something particular, such as the above-mentioned possibility, something hypothetical, or something that was yet in the future - like the Anti-Christ.

⁴⁴ How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?

Jesus’ argument is simple. How can I trust you (the *Ioudaioi*) to make a judgment about me if you yourselves need each other’s approval to remain in power? His point is also simple: there is a conflict of interest. A judge who stood to lose or gain, or was in some way personally connected with a case, would be disqualified because he would not be thought able to judge righteously. Jesus strongly criticized the entire temple establishment, particularly its leadership and its administration. Those leaders were in danger of losing their position and authority. It was logical, therefore, for Jesus to refuse to submit to their judgment.

⁴⁵ Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope. ⁴⁶ For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. ⁴⁷ But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?”

Jesus justified and defended himself, but he was also consistent. He did not come to condemn those whose evil was clearly exposed by the light of his person, words and deeds. He insisted that judgment was not his role. His job was to save and not to condemn. The chief prosecutor of Israel had long since been appointed by the God of Israel himself. His name was Moses.



Chapter 6

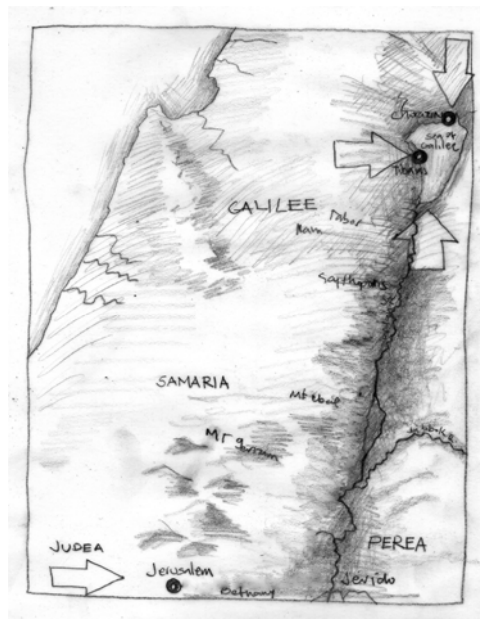
The Second Passover; The 5000 Fed; Walking on Water; Bread of Life

✧ ¹ *After this Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias.*

If we read this Gospel account carefully, we would be somewhat bewildered to discover that a conversation starting in John 5:17 in Jerusalem ends on one of the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

It has long been thought that John was either inaccurate or unconcerned about issues of chronology, geography and details in general; but rather was concerned with the larger theological view of Christ-related events. Since we have already walked together through the first five chapters of this Gospel, we see that this is not the case. John is accurate. He writes, knowing nuanced geography and paying careful attention to details, even if at times he provides a different chronological rendering than that of the Synoptic Gospels.

It is not clear why John tells us nothing about Jesus' travel from Jerusalem to Galilee. A number of suggestions to solve this problem have been raised. However, the suggestions seem to raise more questions. Rather than being a case of neglect, it is possible that this was the author's intention and was part of his careful design, which we saw earlier (Jn. 5:19-30). One possibility is that John intentionally wanted us to know that conversations that began in Jerusalem always spread to other areas. Or, did this have a symbolic meaning? We will



explore this possibility further in the next section and you may be surprised

by what you will see. What is clear, however, is that John expected this to be noticed. We know this because, in the first centuries of the Common Era, the expectation (due to the absence of copy machines and the printing press) was that this Gospel would be read out loud in communal settings. Most probably, the Gospel would have been read in its entirety, or at least in large sections. Whatever the reason for John's omission, the answer is likely to be found in his original design for this Gospel.

² And a large crowd was following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick. ³ Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples. ⁴ Now the Passover, the feast of the Ioudaioi, was at hand.



· MOSES ·

Very soon, in verse 10, we will read that the “large crowd” was a crowd numbering approximately 5,000 men. Taking into consideration that in ancient times only men were counted, the number may have been even higher. Nevertheless, we know that a large crowd of people followed Jesus and witnessed his miracles. At the time, when the village of Nazareth had a population of no more than 200 people, (according to archeological data), one can see that 5000 was indeed a very large number. Therefore, it can be safely stated that Jesus’ following had now transitioned from being local to being regional. Even more of a concern was that Jesus purposely recast himself as the Moses-like figure. In this case, like Moses, he gave his

teachings from a mountain (vs. 3), and provided his followers with food. His teaching was the Torah. Not the new Torah to replace the old, but the new Torah to continue what the Mosaic Torah had already set forth.

⁵ *Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?”* ⁶ *He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do.* ⁷ *Philip answered him, “Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little.”* ⁸ *One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him,* ⁹ *“There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?”* ¹⁰ *Jesus said, “Have the people sit down.”* Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, about five thousand in number. ¹¹ *Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted.* ¹² *And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, “Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost.”* ¹³ *So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten.* ¹⁴ *When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, “This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!”*



John is once again paying attention to details when he states that the place where the people gathered had much grass. He was either highlighting the imagery of the shepherd pastoring his sheep, or simply mentioning this as an otherwise unconnected detail. (This may then point to the fact that the

memories were still fresh and vivid when he wrote the Gospel).

In verse 13 we see that Jesus provided so much food that twelve baskets of bread were left when all the people had finished eating. The number twelve is significant and should not be overlooked or considered coincidental. Given the great importance of the number twelve in Israelite history – twelve tribes of Israel – the number of baskets is, therefore, a significant symbolic number. The meaning of 12, which is considered a perfect number, is that it symbolizes God’s power and authority, as well as serving as a perfect governmental foundation. It indicates that Jesus’ provision is enough, not only for Galilean Israelites, plus those residing in Judea, but also for all Israel – for all twelve tribes. If I am correct that the Gospel of John understands the Samaritan Israelites as one of the major Israelite people groups to which it was addressed, this reference to all the tribes of Israel (twelve baskets) would also be most appropriate.

¹⁵ Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

The mountain was a place away from people. It was a place where one could be alone with God to commune with him in a personal way. All the activity, all the hustle and bustle of the nearby town, was now silenced. The mountains were also often used as hiding places.

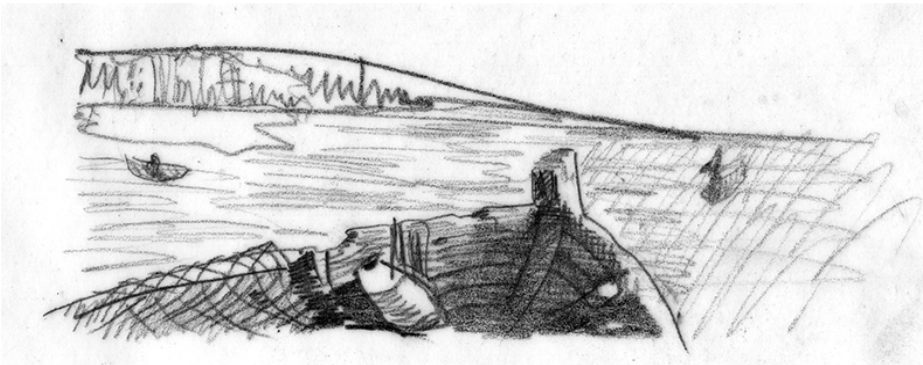
Perhaps, Jesus’ early statement in John 5:41 (*I do not receive glory from people*), addressed in the previous section, is connected with this verse. Not only did Jesus not submit to the power-hungry authority of Jerusalem’s ruling elite, he also did not submit to the blind, often misguided excitement of the people of the land (*am ha’aretz*) who, in opposition to the *Ioudaioi*, wanted to make him King of Israel.

Both the *Ioudaioi* (who were rejecting him), and the Galilean Israelite People of the Land (who were accepting him), failed to see who Jesus really was and what he had come to do. The idea of both Galilean Israelites and Judean Israelites missing the point with Jesus, may have functioned as a literary device when John’s Gospel was first composed. The idea behind the narrative was simple enough: If those who should have known missed the point entirely, was it not also possible that Samaritan Israelite leaders, and ancient Israelites in general, could also miss Jesus’ true purpose? After all in verse 14 the well-fed Galileans say: “This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!” This is very similar to what the Samaritan crowd said to the Samaritan woman after speaking with Jesus – “we know that this man really is the Savior of the world.” (John 4:42) The key thing to see here is that the designation of “prophet who is to come into the world” is strictly

Mosaic. (Deut. 18:18) This fits perfectly with Samaritan expectations of the future redeemer as the prophet-teacher (they only accepted the Torah and did not accept the rest of the writings whereas the Jewish Messianic expectations became far more pronounced).

¹⁶ *When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea,*
¹⁷ *got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum.*

Part of the problem is that we can only know with limited certainty where the miracle of feeding of the 5000 was performed. The most likely location is at a place where Jesus' journey from Jerusalem to the Sea of Galilee would have taken him. He therefore probably performed the miracle of feeding the large crowd not far from the southern shore of the lake. It is not easy to track the movements of Jesus, the disciples, and the crowds in this intense story full of faith, actions, signs, unexplained behavior, and challenging teachings. But if we walk slowly and carefully through the text, we should be able to trace with some clarity almost all the movements described here.



We begin (vs. 16) with the location of where the feeding of the 5000 took place, probably at the southern end of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus hid himself on the mountainside and the disciples boarded a boat for their short journey to the other side of the lake. They landed at Kfar Nahum - literally the village of Nahum (Capernaum). It sounds strange that the disciples left the place without waiting for Jesus, but this is what the text says. It is likely that he gave instructions to his disciples to meet him in Capernaum, his northern headquarters, where Peter's mother-in-law had a house. Jesus' popularity there was huge. We can see that even when he spoke to the worshipers and followers in the town's synagogue about "drinking his blood and eating of his flesh," he did not seem to have been harassed. The story simply ends with the words "Jesus said these things in the synagogue, as he

taught at Capernaum.” (Jn.6:59)

^{17b} It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them.

It is possible that Jesus’ agreement with the disciples was that he would come on a separate boat and would catch up to them mid-way through the lake. We find out from what unfolds that his disciples were in for a very big surprise.

¹⁸ The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing.

Lake *Kinneret* (Sea of Galilee) is situated between the mountains, approximately 200 meters below sea level. Because of this geography, during certain seasons rather violent storms can occur, easily capsizing a small boat. This is still true today. I personally know someone, an experienced fisherman, who once fished there. In spite of his experience, when a storm like the one described in verse 18 occurred, Israeli emergency aid services were called in and the man was airlifted to safety. (Now, he carefully checks the weather before he goes fishing.)

¹⁹ When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were frightened

Just to give you some perspective, today the pear-shaped lake is about 23 kilometers (14 miles) long from north to south, with a maximum width of 13 kilometers (8 miles) in the north, covering 166 square kilometers (64 square miles). The lake is not large but is nevertheless sizeable. We are told that the boat with the disciples had just passed the 3-4-mile mark which is roughly a quarter of the entire distance. It was night and the lights of the coastal cities were still glimmering in the distance. All of the sudden they saw a man walking on the water towards them. Fear was but a natural reaction to this unnatural event.

²⁰ But he said to them, “It is I; do not be afraid.” ²¹ Then they were glad to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going.

Jesus did not make them wait. He responded quickly with comforting assurance. The disciples were astounded and excited to see their leader exercising his lordship over the fiercest force of nature (water), by walking

on it. As we move through the story, we need to keep in mind the big picture of Jesus being painted for us by the evangelist. It is not about the miraculous – rather it is about the lordship of Jesus over everything. One other important point must be made if we are to take the connection between this Gospel and the Torah of Moses seriously, as we should. One of the key stories in the Torah is Noah’s ark. It glides over the waters of judgment, saving people. Jesus does the same. The parallels are obvious (perhaps too obvious) and ironically can be easily missed.



There was no time to think when this was happening and a very curious thing occurred. Although the distance was still sizable, approximately 20 kilometers (or 10 miles) to reach *Kfar Nahum* (Capernaum), the boat immediately and safely touched the stony beach. This may sound like an unconnected-to-anything incident, but we will be at theological fault if we do not recognize that distance and time are also, as is all creation, under the sole lordship of God himself. He alone lives outside of time and outside of distance, and as such, he is eternal and omnipresent. Therefore, this curious occurrence is actually very important because it shows that when the God-Man Jesus (Jn. 1:1, 14) is in the boat with the disciples, the boat is able to disappear from one place on the map and re-appear in another in an instant.³⁵

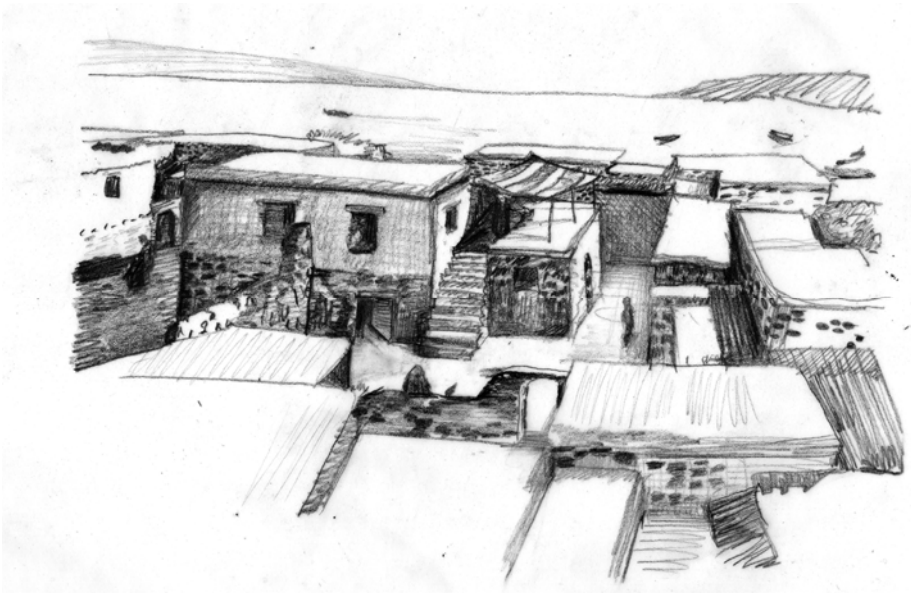
We previously discussed another similar curiosity. Jesus was in Jerusalem in John 5, but as soon as he finishes his talk with the *Ioudaioi* - by the very beginning of Chapter 6 - we find that he was already on one of the shores of the Sea of Galilee, ready to board his boat and cross over. John’s Gospel is full of Jesus’ miraculous activity. The evangelist calls Jesus’ miracles *signs*, reminding the readers and hearers of his Gospel story that these miraculous events (signs) point away from themselves to the reality they signify.

²² *On the next day the crowd that remained on the other side of the sea saw that there had been only one boat there,*

³⁵ Cf. Phillip’s disappearance and physical relocation in Acts 8:26-40.

and that Jesus had not entered the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone.

The crowd wondered what had happened. They must have reasoned, “The disciples could not have left Jesus behind on the shore.” The crowd carefully watched the place where he could have boarded another boat. However, he had mysteriously disappeared after their crowning attempt. Where was he? He was made of flesh and blood; so he had to be somewhere. The crowds reasoned that perhaps he went to Capernaum. How? They did not know.



²³ *Other boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks.*
²⁴ *So when the crowd saw that Jesus was not there, nor his disciples, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum, seeking Jesus.*

It is helpful if we can see the chronology of the story. When the boats from neighboring Tiberias came to the southern point of the sea (the last place Jesus was seen and the same place where Jesus fed the 5000), the crowds thought, “Jesus must have boarded the boat to Tiberias where his disciples must have gone as well.” It was night so the crowds could not see that the disciples did not go northwest toward Tiberias, but northeast toward

Capernaum. Therefore, in verse 24 we read that when the crowds discovered that neither Jesus nor the disciples were in the boats that came from Tiberias, some of them got into boats and sailed to Capernaum from there. They wanted to see Jesus and nothing was going to stop them.

²⁵ When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” ²⁶ Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were satisfied.

Jesus rejects the excitement and zeal of the crowds once again and he lets them know that they are not understanding him. Contrary to how the situation appears, Jesus does not accuse the people of simply having their physical needs met (food), rather than being interested in the spiritual content (salvation). In my opinion, such interpretive dichotomy is simply incorrect. It is definitely foreign to the Israelite theological context in which the Gospel was authored. There is, however, a true dichotomy present. It is not the dichotomy between physical and spiritual, but rather the dichotomy between *signs* (“not because you saw signs”) and *miracles* (“because you ate of the loaves”). Surprisingly, Jesus says that the people were only able to see his miracles, which was not enough. They needed to see the signs. A sign always points away from itself to the thing or person that it signifies - in this case, Jesus.

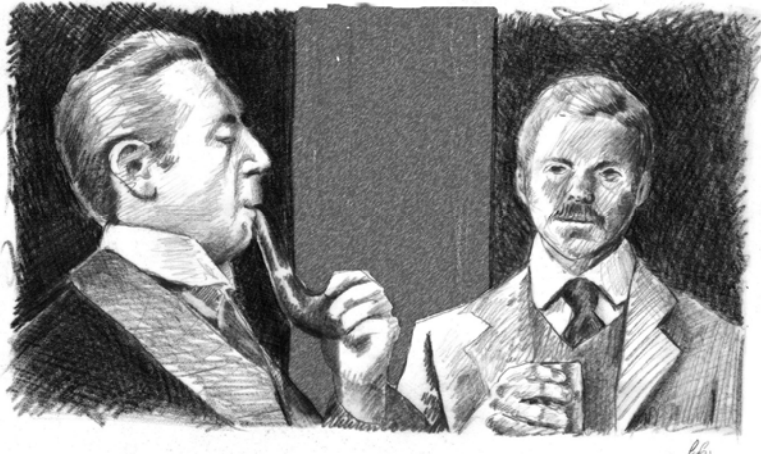
²⁷ Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal.

In ancient times, people were not only paid for their work with coin; they also used the fair-value exchange system. Sometimes workers were paid in goods and at other times they were paid in a combination of goods and money. Jesus is using the familiar to imply something similar to: “Imagine yourself working, but only getting paid with perishable goods. Would your work be worth your while? Would you even be able to save anything, or put something aside?” The answer is implicit in this question - it is a simple “no.” Jesus calls the workers not to settle for less. He wants them to receive fair wages, not something that perishes but something that lasts. In this case - something that lasts forever. It is in this context that rejecting Jesus’ authority can only be compared to “working for the food that perishes,” while believing in him equals working for the kind of wage that endures to

eternal life.

The traditional assessment of this passage is that it is concerned with so-called “Jewish literalism” as well as with “Jewish deficient understanding” - seeking the material/the physical at the expense of the ultimate, spiritual revelation of God. This is an inaccurate assessment made by many Christian theologians regarding Judaism. It is an interpretive error to read this passage in the context of a religious polemic of a “Christian Jesus” and “Jewish Jews.” It should rather be read in the original context of an intra-Israelite polemic.

Perhaps now you can see my point. Our almost automatic interpretation of verses 26-27 is along these lines and shows how conditioned we are by the long history of such interpretation. It seems so obvious that we have a hard time seeing it as simply “imposed later theology” on the ancient original line of thinking. I wish to be clear that the type of interpretation that associates Judaism with the literal/corporal and Christianity with the spiritual/ultimate is not necessarily anti-Semitic in nature. However this does not make it accurate, and therefore it must be rejected by responsible interpreters of the Bible. It is important that we critically question our patterns of thinking and also the thinking of others that have led to our current patterns of thought. Surprising discoveries may emerge when we become conscious of blind spots like this one.



In the new version of the Sherlock Holmes films (the one with Robert Downey), Holmes and John Watson are recast in a very different and one might add, refreshing way. Their friendship is redefined on a more or less equal basis and benefit relationship. However, even in this recast of the original, Holmes gets to share his brilliant thoughts with his faithful companion. In one of the episodes, Holmes critiques Scotland Yard’s approaches to investigation by telling Watson: “Never theorize before you

have data. Invariably, you end up twisting facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts.”

Systematic theology is a human (I mean this in a positive sense) attempt to summarize a variety of scriptural witnesses about a variety of topics discussed in the Bible. Because it is a human attempt, even the best systematizing of the biblical data is still theory. There is, of course, no problem with theories as such. We need theories because theories and systems help us humans make sense of things around us. We need cohesion and wholeness. The question is not *if* we accept a theory/system, but *which* theory/system we accept, and how we can test it to make sure that it is, in fact, accurate.

²⁸ *Then they said to him, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?”* ²⁹ *Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”*

These verses are regularly used, in Protestant circles in particular, to support and illustrate the historical reformation doctrine of “justification by faith alone,” as scriptural. The above-mentioned Westminster Shorter Catechism (a collection of questions and answers that was once used for children’s instruction and is now used for the preparation of ministers), asks and then answers the question about justification in the following way:

Question 33: What is Justification?

Answer: “Justification is an act of God’s free grace in which he pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in his sight for the sake of the righteousness of Christ alone, which is credited to us and received by faith alone.”

Most modern churches in the Protestant tradition would whole-heartedly agree with this statement and subscribe to the core Protestant doctrine of “salvation by faith alone.” I would like to point out, however, that interpreting John 6:28 as scriptural proof of this theological construct (no matter how accurate it may be) is nothing less than reading a later theological system, born from Catholic-Protestant debates of the 16th century, back into a first century Jewish document.

I will use bold italics to show the variety of available textual emphases so that you can see how easily the meaning can change. Pay careful attention, because the nuances here make a major interpretive difference.

A Protestant version:

²⁸ *Then they said to him, “What must we do, to be doing the works of*

God?” - Viewed through the lenses of 16th century Catholic-Protestant debate this means “By what works of ours can we be saved from God’s wrath?”

²⁹ Jesus answered them, “***This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.***” - Once again, viewed through the lens of 16th century Catholic-Protestant debate, this means, “God grants people ability to believe and in this way justifies the believer, by faith alone.”



A likely original version once we take off the interpretive glass of Reformation theology is:

²⁸ Then they said to him, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” Viewed through the lens of the first-century’s Jewish movements, this means, “How can we be faithful to the Covenant God of Israel?”

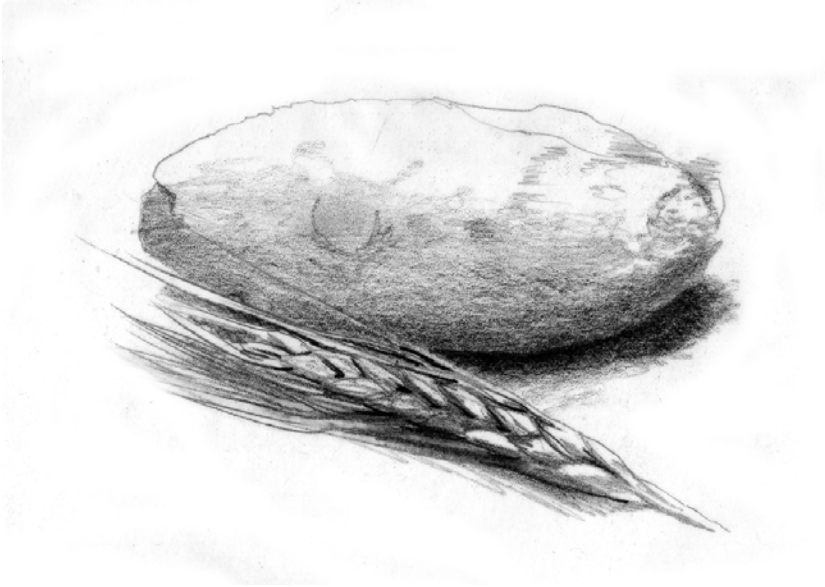
²⁹ Jesus answered them, “***This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.*** Once again, viewed through the lens of the first century’s Jewish religious context, this means “You can be faithful to the Covenant God of Israel only by believing in his authorized representative (Jesus vs. the *Ioudaioi*).

³⁰ So they said to him, “Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform?”

Now the truth emerges. The questions that sounded pious and sincere turn out to be the very same questions with which the *Ioudaioi* in Judea and their Galilean representatives had already challenged Jesus. Notice that,

according to this narrative these are the same people who, a short time before, had seen the sign of the feeding of the 5000 on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

It is not as if Jesus was refusing to substantiate his claims and his teaching ministry by miracles and signs. He showed them to the Galilean Jewish People of the Land, but not to the Jerusalem Temple authorities. The refusal to submit his candidacy for Messiahship to the Jerusalem authorities was at the core of this polemic.



³¹ Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, “He gave them bread from heaven to eat.” ³² Jesus then said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

As had already happened many times, and will continue as we follow the story of Jesus, the Gospel of John will portray many (if not most) representatives of the *Ioudaioi* system as clueless and insensitive to the truth. Jesus will set the record straight.

First, he will argue that the *Ioudaioi* do not understand the basic facts of the Torah they claim as their own. It was not Moses who gave bread to

people, but Moses' God.

Secondly, the manna God gave the ancient Israelites through Moses was but a picture of the true sustenance for the human soul: the incarnate, crucified and finally resurrected Logos of Moses' God. Jesus called the manna simply - the "Bread of God."

As we reread and reconsider John 6:28-31, inasmuch as we are able within the context of intra-Israelite polemic of the first century, we must be disciplined and adjust our theories to fit the facts, not the facts to our theories. If we learn to live with this methodology, our interpretations will be far more accurate.

³⁴ *They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always."*

In response to Jesus' early claims, the Galilean representatives of the *Ioudaioi* who followed Jesus to Capernaum give their response: "Sir, give us this bread always." (Jn. 6:34) This response is reminiscent of the Samaritan woman's earlier response to Jesus' words: "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water." (Jn. 4:15) There are a number of other similarities between the two stories. For now we can say that in this chapter, the Samaritan woman's faith, having only heard Jesus' words, is compared and contrasted with the unbelief of those who actually witnessed Jesus' miracles and failed to see them as signs. Let me demonstrate this exciting insight.

³⁵ *Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst."*

In the book of Deuteronomy, the book from which Jesus most often quoted, we read Moses' reasons for God's provision of manna to the Israelites:

"And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD." (Deut. 8:3)

It is interesting that Jesus speaks of himself being the "bread of life" that satisfies the ultimate hunger and thirst of human existence. He said this in response to representatives of the *Ioudaioi's* demand that he show them a sign. "Moses gave manna," they argued. "What do you give?" Just like Moses before him, Jesus too must prove that he could be trusted. What is

striking, however, is that Jesus says almost exactly the same words he had previously said to the Samaritan woman. Let's review and compare them.

Jesus to the *Ioudaioi*: "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst." (Jn. 6:35)

Jesus to the Samaritan woman: "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." (Jn. 4:13-14)

³⁶ But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe.

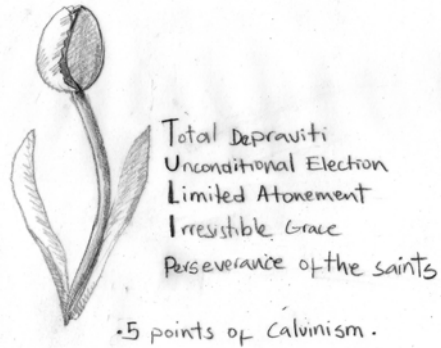
The Samaritans, who did not see a single miracle of Jesus "believed in him because of the woman's testimony..." and "many more believed because of his (Jesus') word." (Jn. 4:39-42) Compare this to John 6:36, where Jesus said to the *Ioudaioi*: "you have seen me and yet do not believe." The *Ioudaioi*, who saw the miracles, were not able to see them as signs, and therefore they did not believe.

Miracles were not enough for the Judean Israelites, yet God's words were enough for the Samaritan Israelites. Perhaps this is the reason that, in another Gospel tradition, Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 8:3, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." (Matt. 4:4) The implication is clear, especially in John - Jesus is God's "Word." True Israelites will live by God's Word, which means they will live by Jesus himself.

³⁷ All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. ³⁸ For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.

As I have mentioned previously, when reading the Bible we can easily read modern theological interpretations into the ancient text, giving it meaning that would have been foreign to the first-century context. John, especially, is often read in this way, particularly against the background of 16th century Catholic-Protestant theological debates that eventually spilled over into inter-Protestant discussion and debate. Please, allow me to explain.

If you have spent time in Christian circles, you have probably encountered the *five points of Calvinism*, which Calvin's disciples systematized from the teachings of this beloved Swiss Reformer who was, in my opinion, a great man of God. If you have done any theological studies, especially within a Protestant context, then you are familiar with the terms: *four-point and five-point Calvinism*. These terms are shortcuts for very complex theological constructs.



One of the key teachings of Reformed Christian theology (a direct heir of the Protestant Reformation) when it comes to salvation, is the doctrine of the “perseverance of the saints.” In other circles it is also, but less accurately, called, “eternal security.”

Basically, the question is: Can a believer in Jesus ever lose his or her personal salvation already gained through belief in Christ? Once a person is “saved” (using an evangelical term), is he saved forever? Or is it possible that he can step into the darkness and never come back? Debates on this question continue to rage until now. However, the reason I am raising this issue is not that I arrogantly think I can settle this age-old debate. I do so rather because verse 39 is a supporting verse for this doctrine. It, along with many other verses from the Gospel of John, is often quoted to substantiate the doctrine of eternal security. In this verse, Jesus states that he will not lose anything that was given to him by his Father to preserve. (vs. 39)

While I do think that personal application may be in order here, I also think reading this passage on a purely personal level is a serious interpretive mistake. If we consider a wider context for the Gospel of John, we notice that this same passage, if read on a national (and not on a personal) level, will affirm a very different message.

The Judean Temple authorities (and their followers) accused Jesus of seeking approval from the Galilean Jewish People of the Land (*Am HaAretz*). Given this background, it is possible that this verse does not refer to a personal experience of the salvific power of God at all, but to Jesus’ royal commitment to the salvation of “all Israel,” which would include other Israelites, such as the Samaritan Israelites. This is not the first time something like this happens in the Bible. For example, the author of the books of Chronicles, in contrast to the author of the books of Kings, essentially retells more or less the same stories, but from a very different

perspective and with a different goal in mind. The Chronicler, for example, makes all his points in the context of unification language: constantly bringing the message that God is concerned with “all Israel,” the entire people of God; while the writer of Kings has a different purpose and therefore a different emphasis. It is, therefore, strikingly Judean-centered.

So imagine the same Jesus who told the Samaritan woman that he was the Messiah expected by all the ancient Israelites, who now says to the representatives of the Jerusalem Temple authorities in Galilee: “I will not lose anything my Father has entrusted to me.” In a sense he is saying, “I

have not come only for Judeans, or only for Samaritans, or only for Essenes or exclusively for any group; I have come as a true King of Israel to reunite and lead ‘all of Israel’ out of exile to the long-awaited redemption.”



⁴⁰ For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”

⁴¹ So the Ioudaioi grumbled about him, because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.”

The words of Jesus in this discourse become increasingly more provocative and intense. This is so, because more and more he is showing those who follow him that he is not just another Messianic candidate whom the Jerusalem authorities could accept or reject (not that it was a practice of any candidate to first check with Jerusalemite authorities). He is Israel’s King, the one anointed by Israel’s God. He is God’s Logos/Memra, who has come from heaven to the people of Israel. He will meet all their needs and unite them in the coming redemption.

Therefore, Jesus here underscores a point that is nothing less than scandalous (unless Jesus really is who he says he is). We read in verse 40: “... everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” Jesus claimed to have the power to give life. In ancient Israelite theology, such a claim was rightfully reserved for Israel’s God alone. (Ps. 30:3; Hos. 6:2; Neh. 9:6)

What is surprising, as we carefully read the text, is not that the *Ioudaioi*

objected to Jesus' words, but *to which words in particular* they objected. Notice that it would have been more logical for them to object to the words: "I will raise him up on the last day." (vs. 40) Instead, we read that they objected to the earlier words of Jesus: "I am the bread that came down from heaven." (verses 35, 38) "Why is this so?" you should be asking. The answer is simply that there is not much difference between the two statements. If one is true, so is the other. Jesus being the *bread of life*, sustaining life by coming from heaven, is the same Jesus who is the *source of life*, giving life to the dead. We will see more on this subject very soon when Jesus speaks the most difficult words the disciples and others would ever hear from his mouth. On hearing them, many would leave him, but those who had ears to hear would stay.

⁴² *They said, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?"* ⁴³ *Jesus answered them, "Do not grumble among yourselves.*

The *Ioudaioi* who followed Jesus to Capernaum were probably from Nazareth, the village where Jesus' family resided after returning from Egypt. They asked how it was possible that Jesus came down from heaven, since they knew his parents. At first, this seems like an honest question with no hidden agenda. However, as we continue to read, we see Jesus, who sees the hearts of men, accuse them of grumbling among themselves. It is important that we note the literary connection with the Israelite grumbling in the desert (Deut. 1:27; Ps. 106:25). The Israelites complained - even when God was providing them with manna from heaven! Earlier in this chapter, the *Ioudaioi* were proudly saying that Moses gave them manna from heaven. Jesus said he was not manna, but *bread* - which was much better - and he also came down from heaven. Now we see them grumbling in the same way as Israel had complained to Moses in the desert.

⁴⁴ *No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.*

In the previous section, I argued that the passage should be read as referring to national salvation and not simply to individual salvific experience. Here I want to mention an important point. Reading it in a national sense does not preclude individual application. The nation of Israel is in fact made up of individual tribes, families, and individuals. Although the story needs to be understood in the national context, it must also include the individual faith of every Israelite. Jesus clearly says that it is not

possible for anyone (particularly for those included in this context) to follow him unless the Father personally draws them. Given the context, these words apply to members of the *Ioudaioi*. This is a truly humbling verse. No person in the world has come to Jesus in true faith by his own volition and power. It is the gracious activity of Israel's God that has worked in the hearts of all people who believe.

⁴⁵ It is written in the Prophets, 'And they will all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me—⁴⁶ not that anyone has seen the Father except he who is from God; he has seen the Father. ⁴⁷ Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸ I am the bread of life.

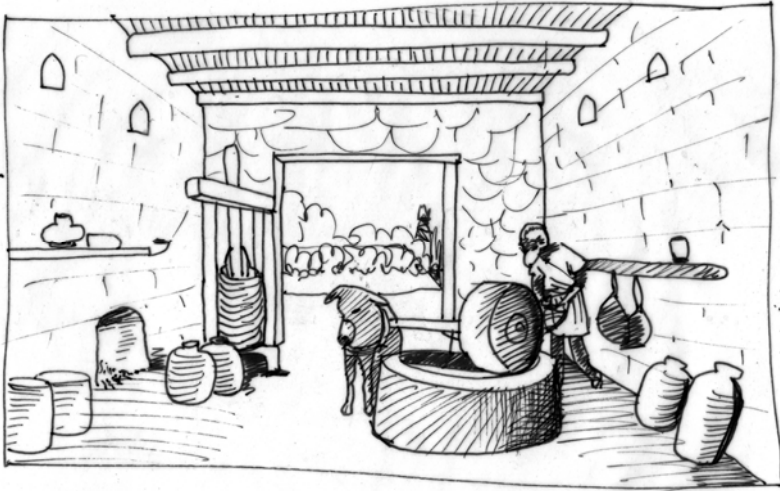
At this point, Jesus makes reference to Jer. 31:31-33:

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

This reference of Jesus to Jeremiah's New Covenant text is an important witness that supports his belief that he had come to restore both houses of Israel (Judah and Israel). The Samaritan Israelites, who lived in Samaria, symbolizing³⁶ the ten Northern tribes of Israel, would certainly be part of this amazing eschatological restoration of Israel. If this is kept in mind as we read the rest of John's Gospel, then the Samaritan themes, especially John 4, become much clearer.

³⁶ The Northern Kingdom of Israel included more than just Samaria. Samaria was a territory of Ephraim and Manasseh only. However, Samaritan Israelites have defined themselves as remnants of the Northern Israel and, therefore, may have symbolized the Northern part of Israel.

⁴⁹ *Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died.* ⁵⁰ *This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.*



Earlier Jesus had made a sharp distinction between the unbelieving *Ioudaioi* and other Israelites. Here he says that the entire generation that came out of Egypt were *their* fathers; the ones who ate manna in the wilderness and did not enter the Land of Promise. In this, he exposes the hypocrisy of his challengers, who dared compare God's gracious provision of the *true bread from heaven*, with Moses' provision of manna in the wilderness. Jesus skillfully and prophetically challenges their unbelief with their own argument. As we look at this, we need to see that Jesus' polemic against the *Ioudaioi* is an inner Israelite, and even inner Judean polemic.

⁵¹ *I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."*

You will recall that Jesus said to the Samaritan woman: "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." (Jn. 4:13-14) Now, he says virtually the same thing to the *Ioudaioi*. This same theme was present in the earlier chapters of John in which the Samaritan

Israelites believed by simply hearing Jesus' words, and the *Ioudaioi* did not believe, in spite of seeing Jesus' miracles. They were just like the generation of unbelieving Israelites in the wilderness.

⁵² *The Ioudaioi then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"* ⁵³ *So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.* ⁵⁴ *Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.* ⁵⁵ *For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.* ⁵⁶ *Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.* ⁵⁷ *As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me.* ⁵⁸ *This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate, and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever."* ⁵⁹ *Jesus said these things in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum.* ⁶⁰ *Many of his disciples, when they heard it, said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?"*

Did Jesus make a rhetorical error by comparing the earthly real union with him (Communion/Eucharist) to eating flesh and drinking blood? If not, our question is, knowing the risk, why did he do this? (Later Christ-followers would be accused of holding meals where human flesh served as food.) Could the answer be obvious? Could it not be that Jesus chose the hardest metaphor possible in order to make sure that only those who perceived its true meaning and were not afraid of being misunderstood would have the privilege of being called his disciples? I think there is some truth to this theory. However, I think that Jesus' main reason for making such a radical pronouncement was simply *because it was true*. Let me state it differently. I think Jesus said this because nothing else could have possibly described that which he was seeking to make clear.³⁷

³⁷ I will argue that Jesus' point here is no different from what those who read the Bible should already be acquainted with: a move from the present to the ultimate. Here one example comes to mind, but there are others. Do you remember the biblical prohibition against swearing, together with the affirmation that Israel must swear only by God himself? We read in Matt. 5:34-35: "I say to you, do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King." But we read in Deut. 10:20: "You shall fear the Lord your God. You shall serve him and hold fast to him, and by his name you shall swear." In Hebrews 6:13 we read: "For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by

Let us ask a different type of question. Did Jesus expect his disciples to understand his “body and blood” speech and accept it? Or was it so culturally and religiously “unacceptable” that only those who could “close their eyes to it” could be expected to remain with him? I am persuaded that



Jesus expected them to understand and fully accept it, and that was not as difficult as we might imagine, because the ancient Jewish Middle Eastern society was a very physical one. The human body was fully associated with the *person* to whom the body belonged. This is clear when you read the Psalms of David.

For example, when the psalmist thought of his own death and burial, he thought of his whole self (not just his body) going down into the grave. In Psalm 30:9 we read: “What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness?” This was said because there was no separation between the body and the soul, as there is in Western societies today. We are very much at home with the body and soul distinction, but this was not the case in biblical times. Moreover, the Hebrew Bible declared that the life of the flesh is in the blood, which is why it strictly forbade Israelites to drink animal blood when they consumed animal flesh as food:

¹⁰ “If any one of the House of Israel or of the strangers who sojourn among them eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood and will cut him off from among his people. ¹¹ For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life. ¹² Therefore I have said to the people of Israel, No person among you shall eat blood, neither shall any stranger who sojourns among you eat blood.” (Lev. 17:10-12)³⁸

Animal blood was symbolically poured on the altar of the Jerusalem

whom to swear, he swore by himself.” There is no apology. The reason Jesus forbids his followers to swear is not because he thinks swearing is unethical in all cases, but because there is no reason to swear about things that first, are not important, and second, call inferior things as witnesses. If one must swear, one must swear by the ultimate – Israel’s God himself.

³⁸ Cf. Acts 15:19-21.

Temple to make atonement for the Israelites. It was meant for God. It was meant to be consumed by Him and by Him alone. This may sound strange to modern ears, but this is exactly how the ancients thought of sacrifice. The ancient Israelites were not exceptional in this understanding of sacrifice. They offered God food for holy consumption.³⁹ Did Israel's God need sacrifices in order to survive? Did he need the flesh and the blood of animals? Of course not! But in the ancient mind, the slaughtered sacrifice was meant to symbolize a fully dedicated life offered to the deity worshipped. No questions asked.

So, what is happening here? I think it is something like this – Jesus says: “Now the tables will be turned. It is God's turn to offer you all that He is. Just as you offer him the sacrifices symbolizing the whole life, so is he offering you Himself in the person of his Son.” Paul also will say something similar: “He who did not spare his own Son but *gave him up for us all*, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Rom. 8:32)

Therefore, when Jesus referred to his body and blood, he meant the bread and wine should become, in the minds and hearts of his followers, fully associated with him in the entire spectrum of his life – his person, his teachings and his works. In other words, Jesus expected to be fully understood and received through active participation by faith. By faith in Him, the believer would partake of salvation, which is found in Jesus alone and is offered freely to all.

So let me summarize. Jesus' statement about his body and blood is true and no other picture could have made it clearer. His flesh and his blood, meaning Jesus Himself – the whole Jesus – is the only thing that can sustain a human being to life everlasting. (Jn. 1:1, 14)

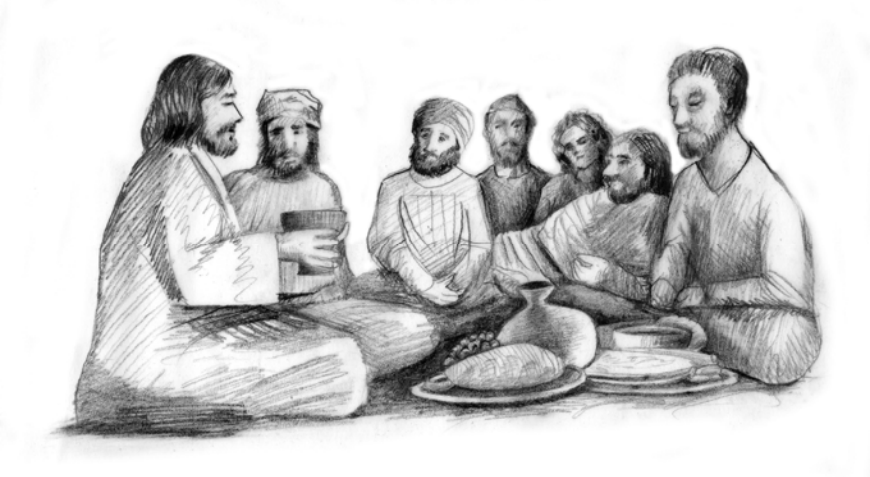
But there is one more intriguing question here. In the context of the Gospel of John (as I have pointed out previously) Jesus is polemicizing with the current rulers of Israel based in Jerusalem. They say: “We are in control. We must approve everything. If Jesus is the Messiah, he must tell *us* (emphasis is mine) clearly.” They are saying: “We are the gate-keepers. We are the way to the Father.” Jesus' view is different. He challenges their authority through his prophetic speeches and signs. Jesus says: “I and the Father are one. I am the way to the Father and I am Bread of Heaven that can sustain Israel to life eternal. I am the way, the truth and the life. If someone eats and drinks me, he will live forever.” The choice is yours!

What then was the hard saying? (Jn. 6:60) Was it that Jesus told the people to eat his flesh and drink his blood? (A difficult concept in general.) Or was the hard saying the implications of what Jesus said about the body and blood? (He was the only real thing that mattered in communing with Israel's God - there was no one else.) I think it was the latter. My view

³⁹ Cf. Lev. 3:11; 21:6; Num. 28:2.

is that the disciples understood him. It was not the Jerusalem Temple, the High Priest and Sanhedrin-led leadership, but Jesus who was the way to the Father. By Him, life is given and is sustained. The disciples were smarter than they seemed. Jesus could not possibly be accepted by those who were already in positions of power and influence. They realized the storm was coming.

⁶¹ But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, “Do you take offense at this? ⁶² Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?”



For his disciples, who understood the implications of Jesus' speech about his body and blood, and realized the difficulty with his extremely problematic claim, he provided an important line of reasoning. In John 6:62 Jesus counters the difficulty with the following rhetorical question: "Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?" His point is simple. "What I say about myself only makes sense if *I am* the Son of Man of Daniel's vision. (Dan 7:13-14) If you believe that vision, then what I am saying should also be believable."

⁶³ It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. ⁶⁴ But there are some of you who do not believe." (For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and

*who it was who would betray him.)*⁶⁵ *And he said, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.”*⁶⁶ *After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.*

Jesus’ teachings are beginning to crystallize and his message is becoming increasingly clear within the context of his prophetic critique of the contemporary Jerusalem Temple leadership, their power structure and its following. It was also becoming abundantly clear that Jesus would not win a Judean popularity contest.

Note that, while Jesus is saying, “no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father,” (Jn. 6:65) the text also states that some will stay with Jesus to the very end. (Jn. 6:66) I think he is clearly saying: *coming to him* and *staying with him* are connected. One cannot truly come and then leave. The opposite is also true. If people were with him and then left, that indicates that they had not truly come to him at all. In other words, they had not yet come to him as the life-giver and life-sustainer; they had not tasted him and had not fed on him.

How can we understand this? How can those who saw God’s goodness and glory turn away from Him? The prophets of the Bible divided the world into three clear categories: 1) those outside of Covenant 2) those inside it and keeping it, and 3) those inside it and not keeping it. Those who remained with Jesus were the very ones whom the prophets called *the faithful remnant of Israel*. However, even those who stayed with Him would soon fail. It was Peter who said, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life...!” (vs. 68) And it is the same Peter who would three times answer the question of his identity as Jesus’ follower with the clear – “I am not.” (Jn. 18:13-27)

What, therefore, would happen on the Cross is this: The faithful remnant of Israel would be reduced to only one person. Jesus would remain faithful to God’s Covenant until the end. He would remain *alone*, becoming a new foundation, under the New Covenant, for the New Jerusalem – the eternal dwelling place of the redeemed. It is upon Him and Him alone that Israel’s God would begin the rebuilding and restoration of his people Israel – drawing them and all the nations of the world to Himself.

⁶⁷ *So Jesus said to the Twelve, “Do you want to go away as well?”*⁶⁸ *Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life,*⁶⁹ *and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.”*⁷⁰ *Jesus answered them, “Did I not choose you, the*

Twelve? And yet one of you is a devil.”⁷¹ He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the Twelve, was going to betray him.



Throughout Christian history, the Jewish people as a whole were often accused by the so-called Christian majority with the charge of deicide (the killing of God). One of the side issues in this type of accusation against Jews is the Christian connection of the Jews with the person of Judas Iscariot. Although Jesus had two disciples named Judas, the fact that the name of the one who betrayed him was connected with Jews and Judaism added oil to the fire of anti-Jewish sentiment. You can probably see why –

Judah/Judas, Judea and Jews are etymologically connected. Even such giants of Christian thought as St. Augustine, understood Judas Iscariot to be the symbol of all Jews. Consequently, John’s Gospel was also reinterpreted as an anti-Jewish document for external non-Israelite consumption, rather than being written for an inner Israelite audience.

Unlike the Gospel of Judas (a later work written in the name of Judas), which portrayed Judas as the truest disciple of Jesus and a hero, I see him in an opposite role. I suggest that *Judah/Judas* was not guilty of the sin he was charged with (betrayal for money), but he was indeed guilty of something far worse. Please allow me to suggest an alternative to the traditional theory.

I think there is a good argument to be made for Judas Iscariot being a former *Sicarii*. This was a movement that was known for using daggers to kill Jews who endorsed Roman occupation, when they were in populated city squares. In other words, it is possible that Judas, in his pre-Jesus days, was a member (as were several other members of Jesus’ intimate circle of disciples at some point⁴⁰) of an ultra-zealot movement that was not unlike

⁴⁰ Simon the Zealot and several others with Zealot-like tendencies.

the modern Al-Qaida and ISIS. The name Iscariot is of unclear origins and may mean several things, including being connected to the *Sicarii*.



When Judas consistently saw Jesus making, what he felt to be, all the wrong steps to bring about a Jewish revolution against the Romans and their Temple puppets, he grew restless. He continued to believe that Jesus was indeed the Messiah who would free Israel from oppression. He had witnessed the majority of his miracles and saw them as signs pointing to him being the long-awaited Messiah, but disagreed with Jesus as to his methods and vision. Judas betrayed Jesus at the time of the Passover celebrations. Make no mistake, Passover was the traditional time for starting Jewish revolts.⁴¹ Everyone, including Judas, knew that. He also began to implement his plan only after he saw Jesus being anointed by Mary. What pushed him over the edge was Jesus' insistence that this story would be told for many ages to come, and to all nations. This hardly fitted the vision that Judas had for Jesus and the Kingdom of Israel. We read in Matthew 26:12-16:

“In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial. Truly, I say to you, wherever this Gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her.” Then one of the twelve, whose name was Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, “What will you give me if I deliver him over to you?” And they paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he sought an opportunity to betray him.

The word “betray” does not indicate the usual charge of “selling” for 30 pieces of silver. The Greek word used simply means, to “hand over.” The risk of being considered the betrayer of Jesus in Galilee was disproportionately high (given Jesus' popularity there), compared to the payment Judas would have received from the Temple in Judea. My point being, that he did not do what he did for money. I believe that what Judas

⁴¹ Cf. Josephus, Ant. 14.2.1-2; 20.5.3.

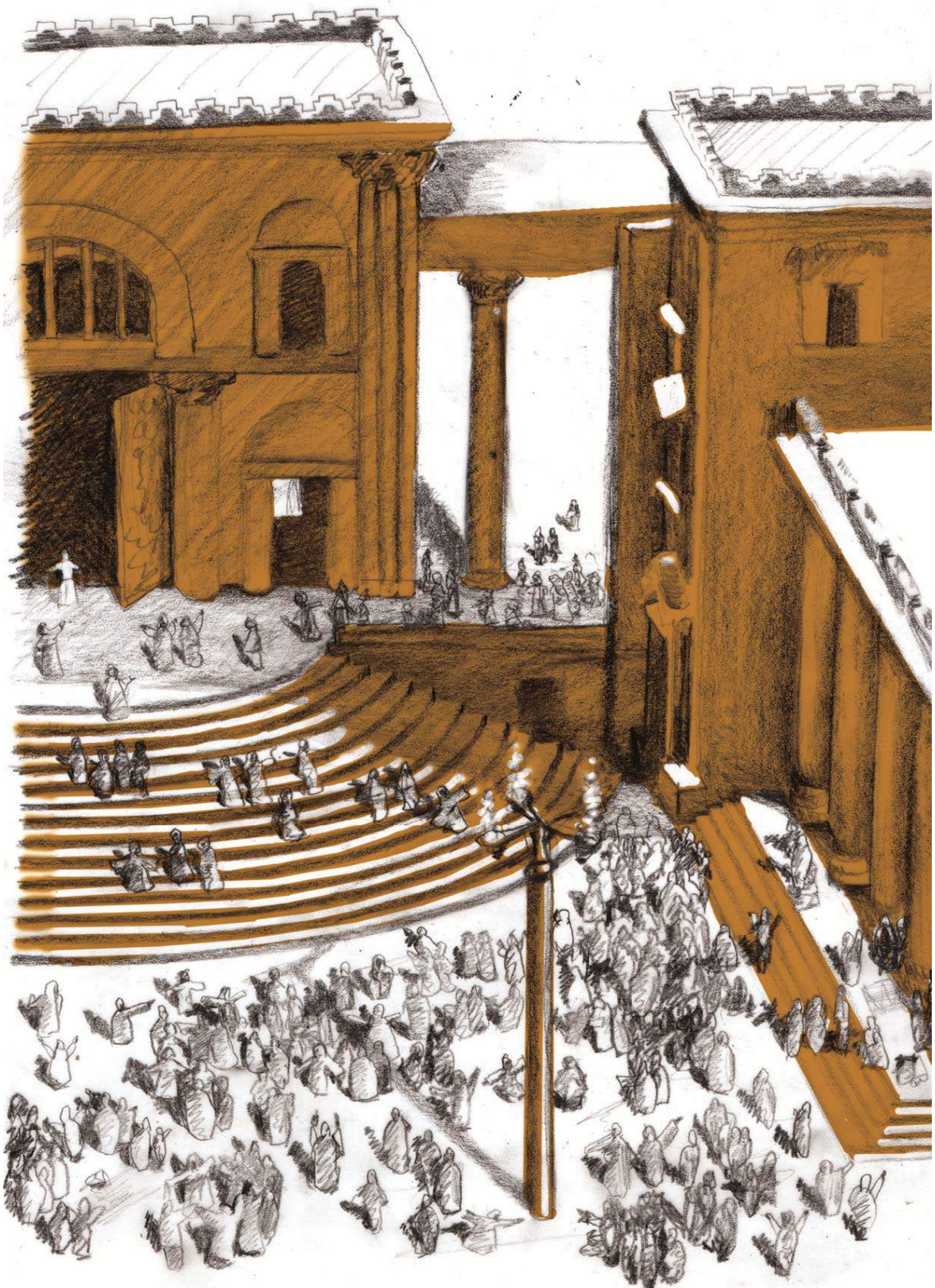
tried to do, being fully convinced of Jesus' divine powers, is this: He thought that, when the arrest was attempted, the long-awaited revolt would finally begin, Jesus would have to show his power, God would finally intervene, and the land of Israel would be liberated. It was a deeply nationalistic desire that drove Judas to his actions.



If I am right in my reconstruction, the sin of Judas was not the betrayal of Jesus to the Temple authorities for mere money, but the much greater sin of seeking to force Jesus to do his will. Judas' plan failed miserably. Jesus did not resist arrest (though his former zealot disciples attempted to do so). Instead, he allowed himself to be crucified. I believe that Judas was overcome with despair when he saw his Messiah King crucified. For him, committing suicide was the only logical response to the events he had set in motion.

When people stand against the will of God, resisting it and trying to force God's hand, they commit the terrible sin of Judas. This is the absolute opposite of how Jesus taught Judas to pray: "*Your will be done... on earth as it is in heaven.*" May none of us become guilty in the same way as Judas – May God's will be done.





Chapter 7

The Feast of Tabernacles; Jesus Teaches in the Temple; Diverse Reactions

✧ ¹ *After this Jesus went about in Galilee. He would not go about in Judea, because the Ioudaioi were seeking to kill him.*

Once Jesus' most dramatic statement about the nature of his person and mission was delivered in Capernaum, he began to spend more time in Galilee. The reason is given in the text - He was avoiding *Ioudaia* (Judea) because the *Ioudaioi* were trying to take his life. This is one of the texts that powerfully connects with the opening statements of the Gospel in John 1:11b (*his own received him not*). The land of Judea, Jesus' natural home, became a place that was hostile, even to the point of death.

² *Now the Ioudaioi' Feast of Booths was at hand.*

The Feast of Tabernacles⁴² (or Booths, also known as *Sukkot*) is essentially a reenactment of the actions of the Israelites who lived in temporary dwellings (tents) for forty years from the point of their exodus from Egypt until their entrance into Canaan. This Feast was meant to remind subsequent generations of God's sustaining and protecting power throughout the difficult and uncertain journey. As with the Passover, so also with the Feast of Tabernacles, the Israelites were instructed to re-enact what happened to their forefathers, so that they and their posterity would remember and identify more fully with their roots.

Once again, as with the Passover of the *Ioudaioi*, here we are told that this Feast of Tabernacles was also the Feast of the *Ioudaioi*. The reason for this statement, and similar statements throughout Gospel of John, was not that the non-Jewish readers needed to know that Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles were Jewish holy days, but rather that there were several different calendars in use at that time. It was important to the author of the Gospel to show which calendar Jesus followed. For John, Jesus was a

⁴² Cf. Lev. 23:42-43; Neh. 8:14-17.

Judean (*Ioudaios*), pure and simple.

³ *So his brothers said to him, “Leave here and go to Judea, that your disciples also may see the works you are doing.* ⁴ *For no one works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world.”*

Jesus’ brothers, who did not yet believe that their oldest sibling was anything special, said to Jesus: “Sukkot of the Judeans is coming. You are one of them! (Note that they referred to the *Ioudaioi* as Jesus’ disciples!). By now his Galilean disciples have already witnessed a number of his miracles, but none were performed in Judea. In effect, they are saying: “You must show your signs not only in Galilee, but also in Judea. If you want to be accepted by your *own*, you must also do your signs in Jerusalem!” Once again John 1:11b (“his own received him not”) is the real conceptual context (*Ioudaioi* as his *own*) of this conversation between Jesus’ brothers and the Lord himself.

⁵ *For not even his brothers believed in him.* ⁶ *Jesus said to them, “My time has not yet come, but your time is always here.*

The phrase “my time has not yet come” was first mentioned at the wedding in Cana (Jn. 2) and will be repeated many times over as the story continues to unfold, until Jesus’ encounter with the outcasts of the Jewish community. I will explain this very important phrase later, but for now, suffice to say, the phrase is mainly used when others call upon Jesus to perform miracles (up to this point by his mother and his disciples).

Sukkot was one of the three feasts during which every Jewish male was obligated to come to Jerusalem for worship. (Ex. 23:14-17; 34:23-24) This would be especially true for those, like Jesus, who lived relatively close to Jerusalem. His brothers were not surprised by Jesus’ decision to skip the trip to Jerusalem this time around. The rumors about his life being endangered were no doubt discussed, not only on the streets, but also in the family circle. Remember, none of his brothers had yet believed. Sometime later, however, one of Jesus’ brothers would become known as Jacob/James the Just (Yakov haTzaddik). In the decades following Jesus’ death and resurrection, James would lead the Jesus movement that was headquartered in Jerusalem and he would be considered by many to be the first rightful patriarch of Jerusalem. (Acts 15:13; James 1:1)

⁷ *The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil.* ⁸ *You go up to the feast. I am not going up to this feast, for my time has not yet fully come.”*

All the evil kings of Israel hated the prophets for not withholding their criticism. One of the reasons King David is portrayed in a positive light is because, when he was confronted about his sin by the prophet Nathan, he responded with repentance and faith. (2 Sam. 12) King David, who was far from perfect, did not seek to kill the prophet of God.

The world to which Jesus belonged (“his own” in John 1:11) has come to hate him. It is important to remember that John repeatedly shows the relationship between Jesus and the *Ioudaioi* as that of one community, one family, and one people group within wider Israel. The *world*, in this context, was not all the people on the planet, nor was it all Israelites, or even all the



Judeans – it was the system of the *Ioudaioi*, to whom Jesus belonged by birth and identity (Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea) that sought to take his life, and thus put an end to his ministry.

⁹ *After saying this, he remained in Galilee.* ¹⁰ *But after his brothers had gone up to the feast, then he also went up, not publicly but in private.*

As soon as his brothers departed for Jerusalem, Jesus also left and traveled to Jerusalem incognito, something his brothers had not expected.

¹¹ *The Ioudaioi were looking for him at the feast, and saying, “Where is he?”* ¹² *And there was much muttering about him among the people. While some said, “He is a good man,” others said, “No, he is leading the people astray.”* ¹³ *Yet for fear of the Ioudaioi no one spoke openly of him.*

The *Ioudaioi* here are clearly portrayed, not simply as Judeans, but as members of the Judean authority. They were looking for Jesus. (vs. 11) Notice how the *Ioudaioi* here have a separate identity from the people who were also clearly Israelite. The phrase, “among the people,” is how the Gospel of John refers to both the people who came to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles, and to the ordinary citizens of Judea. These *people* were engaged in an ongoing, but secret, conversation about Jesus.

What clearly identifies the *Ioudaioi* as the Judean authorities here is that, not only positive, but also negative conversation about Jesus was carried out in secret by the Jewish people present. Jesus was a taboo subject. Everyone knew it, both those who supported him and those who opposed him. The Judean authorities were watching. (vs. 11) The walls had ears!

¹⁴ *About the middle of the feast Jesus went up into the temple and began teaching.* ¹⁵ *The Ioudaioi therefore marveled, saying, “How is it that this man has learning, when he has never studied?”*

The Feast of Tabernacles is a week-long celebration (The Jewish historian Josephus Flavius called this particular feast “a most holy and important feast” in Ant. viii. 4.1) and we are told that Jesus appeared in the Temple and began to speak publicly sometime after the beginning of the Feast. There does not seem to be any particular significance to the fact that Jesus went up to the Temple midweek. He probably simply wanted those who were looking for him to let their guard down, since by then they would have already assumed he feared enough for his life not to come at all.

When he came to the feast, the *Ioudaioi* did not recognize him. This is interesting. Either Jesus’ looks were so “average” that people would not immediately recognize him, or no one who could make an arrest knew him or ever saw him personally. Judas’ kiss served to identify Jesus when the Temple guards came to arrest him. No one actually knew what Jesus looked

like, so Judas' action was necessary. This is the most likely reason that the *Ioudaioi* who heard Jesus speak, wondered: "How is it that this man has learning, when he has never studied?"

¹⁶ So Jesus answered them, "My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me. ¹⁷ If anyone's will is to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority. ¹⁸ The one who speaks on his own authority seeks his own glory; but the one who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and in him there is no falsehood.

Jesus answered the questions the *Ioudaioi* had not voiced, but were probably asking in their hearts – "You are right I did not receive 'approved' schooling, but I have a message to bring you as an authorized representative of Israel's God." In other words, Jesus challenged his hearers to stop thinking of him as a young sage from out of town but rather to begin to think of him as a young prophet from God. After all, a prophet, by definition, does not need to be schooled by men; He has a higher calling, He must be taught by God.

¹⁹ Has not Moses given you the law? Yet none of you keeps the law. Why do you seek to kill me?"

The *Ioudaioi* who were listening to Jesus' speeches and Torah interpretations did not yet make the connection with the now infamous Jesus. Then suddenly Jesus began to make things clear. But one must admit that the author of this Gospel makes a brilliant move here. Remember, he is not talking to Gentiles, nor to the *Ioudaioi*; he has in mind the Samaritan Israelites who have long said that the *Ioudaioi* do not truly keep the Torah of Moses. By offering this critique of Judean misinterpretation of the Torah, he is able, at the same time, to help the Samaritan Israelites be emotionally connected to the drama.

²⁰ The crowd answered, "You have a demon! Who is seeking to kill you?"

The first reaction was shock and disbelief by some of them, who said in a loud voice. "Are you crazy!?" (Literally, in the words of ancient Israelites: "You have a demon!") "No one is after you. Don't be paranoid!" But as

Jesus continued to speak, some of them began to connect the dots. The people in charge indeed were seeking Jesus' arrest and death. So this was not an exaggeration.

²¹ *Jesus answered them, "I did one work, and you all marvel at it.*

It is clear that Jesus was referring to his healing of a Jewish man at the Pool of Bethesda, which had occurred during his previous trip to Jerusalem. Remember, the pool in Hellenized Jerusalem very likely functioned as the healing sanctuary of Asclepius, the Greek god of medicine and health. This healing occurred on the Sabbath and it is likely that Jesus disturbed the public order by walking into a pagan facility and healing someone in the name of Israel's God.

As we read, we must also understand that Jewish authorities worked under the watchful eye of Roman authority. The Roman Empire had its own values. Jewish beliefs were tolerated as long as they did not infringe on the pagan cults, and this was a case of infringement. Jesus, a Jewish religious leader, wielded his authority and power in the Asclepion. Both the Temple authorities and the Romans were very concerned. Therefore, in order to distance themselves from Jesus, the Temple authorities accused him of Sabbath desecration. The *Ioudaioi*'s blind commitment to stop Jesus and strip him of his growing popularity closed their eyes to being able to see the obvious.

²² *...Moses gave you circumcision (not that it is from Moses, but from the fathers), and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath. ²³If on the Sabbath a man receives circumcision, so that the Law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because on the Sabbath I made a man's whole body well? ²⁴Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment."*

It was believed that, through the sign and seal of circumcision, a person is brought into covenant relationship with Israel's God and as a result is made spiritually whole. Notice Jesus agrees with the *Ioudaioi* that, even though it was the Sabbath day, the circumcision ritual still needed to take place because the sign of circumcision takes precedence over ordinary Sabbath regulations. As was customary for Jesus, he didn't argue with the *Ioudaioi* about the legitimacy of the Torah of Moses. After all, the Torah of Moses was Jesus' Torah. He only argued with them about *its interpretation*.

Here he is seen accusing the *Ioudaioi* of the sin of inconsistency. (Jn. 5:22-23)

There was at least one other noteworthy occasion when Jesus accused his opponents of the sin of inconsistency. Qumran Israelites were not allowed to assist their animals in the birthing process on the Sabbath. This was not out of lack of concern for the animal's well-being, but out of concern for working to increase/or preserve one's own wealth on the Sabbath day. One example of what made this Jewish movement different from the far more liberal Pharisaic movement was the following prohibition: "If it falls into a pit or ditch, he shall not raise it on the Sabbath." (Matt. 12:9-13, Lk. 14:5 and Cairo Document XI:11b-14a) Contrary to popular opinion, Jesus' point in arguing with the Pharisees over healing on the Sabbath was not to call them to repentance from legalism and bad hermeneutical methods, but rather to apply their already developed hermeneutical methods *consistently*. In a sense, Jesus is saying: "You, Pharisees – the enemies of Qumranites, can see the acceptability of caring for an animal in trouble on the Sabbath Day, but you refuse me the right to help people who are in trouble on the Sabbath." You are right, but completely inconsistent!⁴³

²⁵ Some of the people of Jerusalem therefore said, "Is not this the man whom they seek to kill? ²⁶ And here he is, speaking openly, and they say nothing to him! Can it be that the authorities really know that this is the Christ?"

Notice how carefully the author of the Gospel distinguishes between the voices of the hearers (the people of Jerusalem) and the authorities (*Ioudaioi*). Suddenly the crowds put the pieces together and realized that this must be Jesus, whom the Temple authorities have determined to arrest. They had heard about his teaching and miracles in Galilee, but not seeking the approval of Jerusalem was nothing less than a challenge to their leadership. There was no place for them and Jesus together. Either they would remain in power, or he would replace them.

²⁷ But we know where this man comes from, and when the Christ appears, no one will know where he comes from."

We read in vs. 27 that it was believed the Messiah would come from unknown origins. However, to the chief priests and the scribes who were summoned by Herod at the coming of the Magi in the Gospel of Matthew,

⁴³ Perhaps this sentiment was behind Jesus' statement about the Pharisees: "So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach." (Matt. 23:3)

the answer seemed clear: all agreed that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, (Matt. 2:4-6) as spoken by the prophet Micah. However, in this passage in John, some members of the crowd (when they thought the authorities had finally recognized that Jesus was the Christ, John 7:26) objected that Jesus' origins were known. Because of this, they thought it was a mistake to recognize him as the Christ. So what was expected of the coming Messiah? Would his origins be known, or not?

You may recall from our previous studies that when Jesus was in Galilee, the *Ioudaioi* said he could not have come down from heaven as he claimed, because they personally knew his parents. (Jn. 6:42) In John 7:27, however, it is likely that the author is referring to something else. Instead of a personal acquaintance with Jesus' parents, the likely issue was that Jesus' ministry was already known to them and had been for some time. He had already been engaged in public ministry for almost three years. There was no suddenness in his Messianic appearance. In John 7, what people were saying was not that they knew Jesus' Galilean parents (that is rather unlikely), but that they had heard about Jesus for so long that he no longer fitted their Messianic candidate checklist.

Much later rabbinic Jewish sources communicate similar sentiments coming from Jewish sages. For example, in the Babylonian Talmud, Rabbi Zera is remembered as having said: "Three come unawares: Messiah, a found article, and a scorpion." (*b. Sanhedrin* 97a) Another example comes from the second-century dialogue between Justin Martyr, a Christian, and



Trypho, a Jew. What is interesting is that Trypho's objections are similar to the above: "But Christ—if he has indeed been born, and exists anywhere - is unknown, and does not even know himself, and has no power until Elijah comes to anoint him and make him manifest to all." (Trypho, Dialogue 8)

Incidentally, it is entirely possible that the conversation between Justin and Trypho never took place and the content of the dialogue was simply reconstructed from New Testament texts alone (a common feature of

polemical religious literature). But it is also possible that this dialogue was put together as a summary of real Jewish-Christian encounters in the second century. If this is so, then it is possible this is an example of a widespread Jewish belief that Christ's coming would be sudden and his origins unknown.

The idea that Christ would be of unknown origins also appears in I Enoch 46:1-3.⁴⁴ This is another witness to the variety of Jewish contemporary opinions about the secret things of the Messiah. There we read:

“There I beheld the Ancient of Days, whose head was like white wool, and with him another, whose countenance resembled that of man. His countenance was full of grace, like *that of* one of the holy angels. Then I inquired of one of the angels, who went with me, and who showed me every secret thing, concerning this Son of man; who he was; whence he was and why he accompanied the Ancient of Days.”

What we can clearly see from these biblical and para-biblical sources is that the Jewish people at the time of Jesus held a variety of views concerning the Messiah; just as modern Christ-followers today differ greatly in their expectations regarding the second coming.

²⁸ *So Jesus proclaimed, as he taught in the temple, “You know me, and you know where I come from. But I have not come of my own accord. He who sent me is true, and him you do not know. ²⁹ I know him, for I come from him, and he sent me.”*

What is even more striking here is, in contrast to the story found in the Gospel of Matthew (regarding Bethlehem), John's Jesus seems to agree with the objection that the Messiah will come from unknown origins. However he explains that, while the people thought they knew him, in reality, they did not. Since Israel's God sent Jesus, there was a lot more to know about him than what the *Ioudaioi* naively claimed.

The question could be asked: “Why would the Gospel, that so forcefully connects Jesus with the *Ioudaioi*, withhold from the readership the obvious connection between Jesus and Judea, seeing that his birthplace was in Bethlehem?” The answer may be complicated, but I will try to explain it.

The Gospel was originally written to reach Samaritan Israelites. Samaritan Israelites accepted the Torah and did not accept other sections of

⁴⁴ Cf. Melchizedek, a type of Christ, who also had “neither father nor mother.” (Heb. 7:1-4)

the *Tanach* that Jewish Israelites accepted (the writings and the prophets). As we remember from the Samaritan woman story, Samaritans had no trouble acknowledging the supremacy of the tribe of Judah. (Jn. 4:22) There, Jesus said to the woman “salvation was from the *Ioudaioi*,” referring to the verse in Torah that speaks of the scepter not departing from Judah. (Gen. 49:10) She made no objection to this. What the Samaritan Israelites objected to, was that the fulfillment of Genesis 49:10 was connected with the Davidic dynasty, because they did not accept the leadership of the Davidic dynasty. This is one of the reasons Jesus told the Samaritan woman, “you worship that which you do not know.” As we have seen already and will see again, this Gospel consistently avoids almost any significant connection between Jesus and King David.

³⁰ *So they were seeking to arrest him, but no one laid a hand on him, because his hour had not yet come*

This phrase, “my time has not come,” was already in use when Jesus said to his mother in John 2:4 “Woman, what does that have to do with us? My hour has not yet come.” Mary, fully aware of Jesus’ divine origins, and probably other things that only a mother would know, sought for Jesus to use his miraculous powers to help the embarrassed couple at the height of their wedding joy. Jesus did help, but said that his “hour has not yet come.” After this incident, Jesus taught the people in the treasury rooms of the Temple and the Temple police did not arrest him. The Temple police had their own reasons as to why they did not arrest Jesus, but the author of the Gospel of John knew the reason he was not yet arrested, tried, and killed was because his time “had not yet come.” (Jn. 7:45-51)

However, when the news about Greek God-fearers seeking to meet Jesus came to him, he responded that “the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” (Jn. 12:20-24) This shows that Jesus was about to be revealed as the King of *all* Israel – to the Judeans, to the rest of humanity, even to those who were attracted to the faith of Israel but were of non-Israelite origin. Shortly before his arrest, Jesus prayed: “... lifting up His eyes to heaven, He said, ‘Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You.’” (Jn. 17:1-2) So it is that here in Chapter 7, when Jesus’ arrest was being sought, that it could not take place for the simple reason that the “the hour had not yet come.” (Jn. 7:30)

³¹ *Yet many of the people believed in him. They said, “When the Christ appears, will he do more signs than this man has done?”*

The story begins with people objecting to rumors that the authorities recognized Jesus as the potential Messiah with “when the Christ appears, no one will know where he comes from,” (Jn. 7:27) but it ends very differently. Many people did believe in Him, posing the opposite rhetorical question: “When the Christ appears, will he do more signs than this man has done?” You can see, just as there were many traditions about the coming Christ’s unknown origins, there were even more traditions that had to do with the coming Christ’s miraculous powers. The Jewish people standing in the crowd were smarter than they seemed, reasoning - “If anyone will ever be the Christ, he wouldn’t be able to do more miracles than this man Jesus!”

³² *The Pharisees heard the crowd muttering these things about him, and the chief priests and Pharisees sent officers to arrest him.*



The author of John makes a very interesting point in this verse. Before the Feast of Tabernacles, people were afraid to talk about Jesus because they were afraid of the *Ioudaioi*. (Jn. 7:13) However, when Jesus began to openly teach in the Temple, the public debate about him could no longer be contained. (Jn. 7:27-31)⁴⁵ The Pharisees, who witnessed this debate in the Temple, sent the

Temple guard to make an arrest. (vs. 32) The Pharisees had the full cooperation of the chief priests. Notice that the “chief priests together with Pharisees” were the very authorities whose powers were enough to dispatch the Temple police to arrest Jesus on criminal charges.

Now let us recall an early reference (Jn. 1:19-24) to an exercise of power against John the Baptist: “And this is the testimony of John, when the *Ioudaioi* sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ‘Who are you?’

⁴⁵ According to the Jewish historian Josephus, who was hired by Rome to write the new history of the Jews, “Alexander (a Judean king taken captive by Pompey in 63 B.C.E during the Roman takeover of Jerusalem) left behind him two sons, Hyrcanus [II] and Aristobulus [II], but committed the kingdom to Alexandra... She permitted the Pharisees to do as they liked and ordered the multitude to be obedient to them. She also restored again those practices which the Pharisees had introduced, according to the traditions of their forefathers, and which her father-in-law, Hyrcanus I, had abolished. So she had the title of sovereign, but the Pharisees had the power.” (Antiquities 13.16.2 408-409)

... Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.” We see something similar at play in both of these events. In both cases, sending the priestly committee and sending the Temple guard, the Pharisees were involved. (Jn. 7:32 and Jn. 1:24) In both cases, however, they were not alone.

³³ *Jesus then said, “I will be with you a little longer, and then I am going to him who sent me. ³⁴ You will seek me and you will not find me. Where I am you cannot come.” ³⁵ The Ioudaioi said to one another, “Where does this man intend to go that we will not find him? Does he intend to go to the Dispersion among the Greeks and teach the Greeks? ³⁶ What does he mean by saying, ‘You will seek me and you will not find me,’ and, ‘Where I am you cannot come?’”*

When the Pharisees and the chief priests dispatched the Temple guard to arrest him, Jesus was addressing a crowd which was in the middle of a public debate concerning him. (Jn. 7:27-31) He told them that his time with them was coming to an end. He would then return to Him who sent him. Notice the power play here. The *Ioudaioi* were exercising their authority to send the Temple police to arrest Jesus, but Jesus was saying that he was sent by someone who was the ultimate authority – Israel’s God Himself. (vs. 33) Moreover, the place to which Jesus was departing was unapproachable and he could not be followed. (vs. 34) The *Ioudaioi* who remained in the crowd (but separate from it) wondered about the words of Jesus, (vs. 35) hypothesizing that Jesus was planning to leave the areas under their control.

It is important to realize when the *Ioudaioi* said they thought Jesus was planning to go to *Hellenisimoi* (verse 35, translated as “Greeks”), it is probable that they did not mean Greek Gentiles, but anyone (including Israelites) who *behaved* like Greeks. In this case, probably the Hellenized Jews. The usual assumption that most Christians make in reading this text is that the *Ioudaioi* thought Jesus was considering going to Gentiles in the lands of the Jewish diaspora. Most importantly, this means that they, the Hellenists (*Hellenisimoi*), were fully outside of the control of the *Ioudaioi*. This realization must have been disconcerting. Examples of such lack of control by the *Ioudaioi* are plentiful.

According to archeological discoveries in Israelite Galilee, there were some older synagogues that were not directionally oriented to Jerusalem and one of them was found in *Kfar Nahum* (Capernaum). An even more interesting case of alternative Israelite worship was found in Elephantine (an island in the Nile River in Southern Egypt), where a mixed Judeo-Samaritan Israelite mercenary military colony was stationed from around

650 BCE. The island boasted its own alternative to the Judean (and in some way also to the Samaritan) Temple.

A very important though not well known, Isaian prophecy, was believed by many to have been fulfilled in Egypt (Is. 19:19-25) at that time. The prophecy of Isaiah reads as follows:

“In that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt... They will even worship with sacrifice and offering, and will make a vow to the Lord and perform it... In that day Israel will be the third *party* with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, ‘Blessed is Egypt My people, and Assyria the work of My hands, and Israel My inheritance.’”

The later Masoretic Text (MT) has one more verse before the prophecy cited above, where it purposely changes the name of the City of Sun (the likely original) to the City of Destruction (a translation that makes no sense at all given the positive context of the prophecy). We read: “In that day there will be five cities in the land of Egypt that speak the language of Canaan (*Land of Israel*) and swear allegiance to the LORD OF HOSTS (*Israel’s God*). One of these will be called the City of Sun,” (changed in the Masoretic version to “Destruction”).

What is striking is that both scrolls of Isaiah found in Qumran (Dead Sea Scrolls) and the texts of Isaiah in the Septuagint (LXX), confirm that in the Hebrew original version, this was the City of the Sun and not the City of Destruction. The reason for this is that both Qumran proto-Masoretic texts and the Septuagint predate the Masoretic texts by many centuries.

According to Josephus, there was at least one additional temple in Egypt. (*Antiq.* Book XIII. ch. 3. sect. 1-3, and *Of the War*, Book VII. ch. 10. sect. 8.)⁴⁶ This temple was built to resemble the one in Jerusalem and was administrated by legitimate priests who actually conducted sacrificial offerings. In other words, this was not a synagogue, but a real temple where sacrificial services regularly took place. It was not located in Jerusalem, which means that Jesus and the Qumranites were not the only people in late antiquity to oppose Jerusalem’s leaders, although for different reasons than those in the Egyptian Island of Elephantine.

³⁷ *On the last day of the feast, the great day*

Sadducees and Pharisees were two Israelite Judean parties that were

⁴⁶ Cf. also Philo’s mention of Alexandrian Jews who eschewed the Jerusalem Temple. (*Migr. Abr.* 89–93)

often at odds with each other. Sadducees were the staunch conservatives who saw Pharisees as dangerous innovators and revisionists, as did many others, including Jesus. (Mk. 7) Sadducees and Pharisees fought over many issues. One of the issues concerned a water ceremony that was held during the Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot). The Sadducees opposed the ceremony because it was not prescribed in the Torah and the Pharisees supported it. We do not know exactly how or where the water pouring ceremonies were conducted, since all of our sources for this information come to us from a later period.

In these later sources, we are told that priests drew water from the Pool of Siloam. With the high priest leading the way, they carried a golden pitcher full of water to the Temple and then processed around the altar. As the priests neared the water gate, the shofar was blown, followed by the singing of psalms of praise and thanksgiving to God for the harvest. As the ceremony developed, the Pharisees insisted that significant emphasis should be placed on the petition for rain. Such symbolism carried the meaning of the festival beyond the traditional emphasis of the desert experience (being protected while living in temporary dwellings - tents). The harvest was symbolized in the citrus fruits that were raised in thanksgiving to God for the recently gathered fruits. (*m. Sukk.* 5:1) The Sadducees, in general, resisted such a changed emphasis on Sukkot as revisionist. The conflict developed further when Alexander Janneus, the Sadducean high priest and king, angered by the Pharisees, poured the water out at his feet rather than making an offering of it, and raised his arm in solemn affirmation of having delivered the petition on behalf of the people.

When Janneus died, his wife, Alexandra Salome, made peace with the Pharisees in exchange for their support for her to remain queen of the land and her son to be made high priest. The Pharisees' triumph in this event meant that, by the time of Jesus, the Pharisaic water-related ceremony was already firmly established.

^{37b} *Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink."*

For six consecutive days, the water procession took place once each morning (if Talmudic sources are to be believed). On the seventh day, it was repeated seven times in order to show the emphasis and concentration on prayer and worship. On the eighth day there was no water ceremony, but a solemn time of reflection and prayer was held.

Jesus could have loudly proclaimed this (vs. 37) on either the seventh or the eighth day of the Feast. Either day could technically be called "the last and greatest day." (7:37) What is most important here, however, is not *when*

Jesus said it, but *what* he said and what he expected the people to understand. Without getting into the Sadducean-Pharisaic debate discussed previously, Jesus declared that all those who are thirsty may come to him and drink! The connection between what had just taken place (an incredibly festive water pouring ceremony) and Jesus' words are obvious, and do not require much explanation. The surrounding context offered a dramatic backdrop for these brief but powerful words.

38 “Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his womb (κοιλίας) will flow rivers of living water.’”

There are times when it is not at all clear what portion of the Old Testament Scriptures is being referred to in the New Testament, and this is the case with this text. Which Old Testament reference does Jesus have in mind here? The choices are plentiful, all having to do with water and salvation-related passages. Before we select the most likely reference(s), we should ask one more question which will provide us with a potential key for solving this riddle: If Jesus is the one of whom the Scripture spoke (“out of his inner being/heart/belly, or literally womb, will flow rivers of living water”), we must look for connections in the context of what had already happened (Chapters 1-6) and also to what is presently occurring. (Ch. 7) Jesus is portrayed as both tabernacle (Jn. 1:14) and temple (Jn. 2:13-25). Of the four canonical Gospels, the Gospel of John is without doubt the most Temple-oriented. This should give us a clue that the likely reference alluded to here may have something to do with the Temple. We should be especially interested in a text that connects the Feast of Tabernacles with the Temple where this discussion was taking place.

Once we consider the Hebrew Bible's water and salvation-related themes explicitly connected with the Temple, one reference in particular becomes a promising interpretive possibility - Ezekiel 47:1-12. The text of Ezekiel describes the future temple out of which flows a river. (Ezek. 47:1) The angelic figure accompanying Ezekiel measured the water, which became increasingly deep. (Ezek. 47:3-5) Then a vision of the blessed future was given. The desert region together with the salty Dead Sea would flourish. Because of this *river of living water*, the deadness of the desert would become a place of life and healing. (Ezek. 47:7-12) The question is, does Ezekiel 47 explicitly connect with John 7:38? I believe it does.

We read in Ezekiel 47:1: “Then he brought me back to the door of the house; and behold, water was flowing from under the threshold of the house toward the east, for the house faced east.” (וַיֵּשְׁבֵנִי, אֶל-פֶּתַח הַבַּיִת, וְהָיָה-מֵיִם יֹצְאִים) (מִתַּחַת מַפְתָּן הַבַּיִת קְדִימָה, כִּי-פָנֵי הַבַּיִת קְדִיִּם) That is to say, it is from within the Temple that this end time river would issue. Jesus said that whoever

believes in him will be joined to him; then together they will be that end time Temple of God from which the river of life and healing will flow, making everything new.

What is even more exciting is that a parallel passage to this Ezekiel text is found in Zechariah 14:14-20. There we read about an eschatological battle, during or after which rivers of living water begin to flow in two directions (west and east) from the Jerusalem Temple. When the battle is finished and Israel's God emerges a clear winner, the defeated and surviving nations (who fought against Jerusalem) will come each year to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles before the face of the Lord (Zech. 14:16) – the very Feast in this chapter in which Jesus is described as participating.



In these two references, you have all the themes which firmly connect the two passages with the events described in John 7:37-38. Incidentally, there is some indication that these texts were actually read aloud as part of the water ceremony. It is possible that following the reading of these very words Jesus got up and proclaimed that it is in Him that the words of the prophets will be fulfilled, evoking imagery of the eschatological Temple providing running/living water to Israel from within his own depths! As with most things Jesus says in the Gospels, and especially in the Gospel of John, these words are earth shattering in their meaning and implication. Jesus is the Temple and from his heart, the water of life will soon begin to flow.

³⁹ Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

This verse then becomes clear. What Jesus said about the *rivers of living water* (according to John's editorial and retrospective comment) had to do with the outpouring of the Spirit during the Festival of Shavuot (Pentecost). According to John, the believers had no knowledge of this because the Pentecost events described in Acts 2 were still in the future.

⁴⁰ On hearing his words, some of the people said, "Surely this man is the Prophet." ⁴¹ Others said, "He is the Messiah." Still others asked, "How can the Messiah come from Galilee? ⁴² Does not Scripture say that the Messiah will come from David's descendants and from Bethlehem, the town where David lived?" ⁴³ Thus the people were divided because of Jesus.

Jesus' challenges to the authorities and his incredible claims were received rather well. Some said that perhaps he was the prophet who was to announce the Messiah; others said that he was indeed the Messiah. There seemed to be a general lack of knowledge about Jesus' origins, because we also see other people saying they rejected Jesus' claims on the grounds that he was not born in Bethlehem of Judea. One of the very interesting observations here is that the author of this Gospel did not feel any need to correct this misconception, although doubtless he, like others, knew that Jesus was in fact born in Bethlehem of Judea. (Matt. 2:1, 5; Lk. 2:4) Perhaps his point was only to show that the public conversation about Jesus had picked up momentum, regardless of how people viewed Jesus' claims.

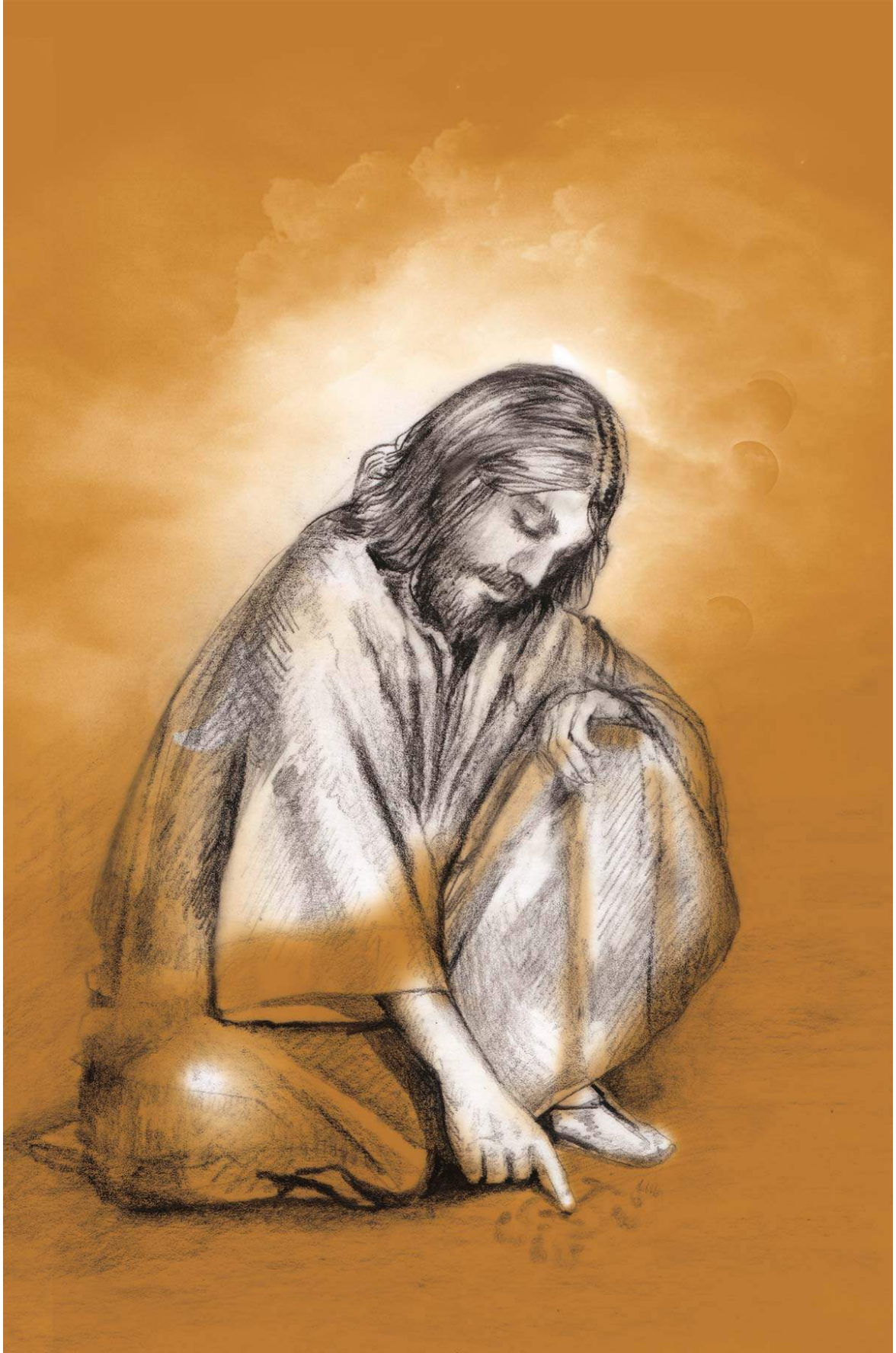
⁴⁴ *Some wanted to seize him, but no one laid a hand on him.* ⁴⁵ *Finally the temple guards went back to the chief priests and the Pharisees, who asked them, “Why didn’t you bring him in?”* ⁴⁶ *“No one ever spoke the way this man does,” the guards replied.* ⁴⁷ *“You mean he has deceived you also?” the Pharisees retorted.*

When the Temple guard, made up of Levitical priests, returned without having arrested Jesus, and admitted that they were impressed with him, they were met with a sharp rebuke by the leading Sadducees and Pharisaic leadership, accompanied by the charge of disloyalty. It was obvious that the formal rulers of Israel were desperately afraid and rapidly losing power over those whose allegiance they owned.

⁴⁸ *“Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed in him?”* ⁴⁹ *No! But this mob that knows nothing of the law—there is a curse on them.”* ⁵⁰ *Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked,* ⁵¹ *“Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he has been doing?”* ⁵² *They replied, “Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee.”*

This de-legitimization of the Temple guard’s inaction was also challenged by the statement (also a mistaken one) that none of the Pharisees who were part of the Sanhedrin accepted Jesus. It is of particular interest to me to see how John treats this misconception. Instead of arguing that, indeed there were pharisaic members of the Sanhedrin (Jn. 3:2) who displayed a profound interest in Jesus and his ministry (“Rabbi, we know that you have come from God!”), John simply showed how those who rejected Jesus dismissed the testimony of those who voiced even tentative support of him.

Nicodemus is a case in point. When he asked for the Sanhedrin’s hearing about Jesus, challenging its prejudgment as unlawful according to the Torah, he was also accused of disloyalty to the system. The message was clear: if anyone, regardless of their position, thought something positive about Jesus, they could not voice it without being attacked. The shameful silence was the price believing *Ioudaioi* had to pay to remain part of the dying system.



Chapter 8

[Adulterous Woman]; “Light of the World”; Truth, Origin and Identity

☆⁵³ *They went each to his own house,¹ but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.² Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them.³ The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst⁴ they said to him, “Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery.⁵ Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?”⁶ This they said to test him that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground.⁷ And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.”⁸ And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground.⁹ But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him.¹⁰ Jesus stood up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”¹¹ She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.”*

In other portions of this book, we considered how the science of textual criticism can help Christian believers to know which texts are authentic and which are not; which belong to the Bible, and which constitute edits done by scribes who handled the transmission of the Holy Writ before the invention of the printing press. Since we don't have a single *original* manuscript or scroll of any of the books of the Bible – multiple versions (most of them with minor differences) of *most* biblical texts do exist – the science of textual analysis seeks to determine which versions of the available textual witnesses are more reliable. There are times when clear answers cannot be given, but sometimes this is just not the case.

In the passage we are considering, as we come upon one of the most

famous and beloved Gospel stories, we are very much in need of textual analysis. So what is the issue? Simply that all the earliest and most reliable manuscripts of the Gospels do not contain this beautiful story that is otherwise so magnificently consistent with the rest of the Gospel of Christ. All modern translations of the Bible, with a disclaimer that this story is not found in early manuscripts, still include it in their printed texts. What is perhaps even more intriguing for our discussion is, to this day this story is often passed on orally more often than many other stories! It is clearly among the people's favorites. This implies that, while the textual criticism scholars have made a strong and even convincing (to my mind) argument that this text was not part of John's original Gospel; the living church of God has generally not accepted the implications of their argument.

Before we continue, let me surprise you, by letting you know that I too, like most modern Christ-followers, think that this is an authentic story. I think it really did take place and therefore must be told and retold in the Gospel proclamation. However, I do agree with most scholars that it does not belong to John's Gospel. It was clearly not part of the original text, composed towards the end of the first century.

First of all, we do know that not everything Jesus taught and did was included in the Gospel. (Jn. 21:25) It is therefore true that Jesus said things that were not written down. Like all books of the Bible, the Gospels are selective in what they present. They only give enough information to make the point the author of a particular Gospel is seeking to make. The Gospels are not like cameras that simply record what happened around Jesus. They are literary works setting forth the arguments of the Gospel writers about Jesus, on the basis of what they and their witnesses remembered had really happened. Therefore, selectivity of presentation was unavoidable.

Secondly, most things Jesus taught and said were not recorded immediately. They were circulated orally as they were passed on from one person to another.⁴⁷ The early Jewish and non-Jewish followers of Christ did not have the New Testament (it was still being written at that time). The Scriptures of the Hebrew Bible were available only to those who were literate and rich enough to acquire them.

There are well known problems in this text that have led people to believe the story itself is not authentic – such as the absence of two or three witnesses, and the second guilty party. It is also argued that the story cannot be authentic because it was illegal under Roman rule for Jews to execute someone. These are just some of the points that are brought up to discredit this story.

I agree that these things are problematic, but they can be explained by pointing out that this event was set up to trap Jesus and therefore can hardly

⁴⁷ Cf. On the oral transmission of the gospel, see 1 Cor. 15:1-3.

be held to the high standards of the judicial requirements of the Torah. To my mind, there is no reason to think this story is fabricated only because it entered the Gospel textual tradition later. It (or a version of it) may have



only been transmitted orally until the issue was raised among the copyists about the need to include it in one of the Gospels. This story is found only in manuscripts dating from the fourth century and later.

Thirdly, textual criticism, like any other scientific enterprise, is a work in progress and certainly can be mistaken. It also has limitations and there can be issues textual scholars did not consider, or about which they were mistaken. For example, we must keep in mind that new discoveries of ancient texts are sometimes made. We certainly cannot be dogmatic about these issues (the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls has convincingly proven this point). Hypothetically, a discovery of an early Gospel manuscript containing this story may yet be ahead of us.

Personally, however, while I think there is some level of historicity in this story, I do not think it was part of the original Gospel of John. I am persuaded that we will never find an early manuscript with this story. Why? To my mind there are at least two other significant reasons.

Ancient scribes rarely cut texts. Normally they increased them in length, clarifying or explaining, and as such expanding the text. One of the insights of textual criticism is in fact called “the priority of the shorter manuscript.” This means that shorter manuscripts are generally considered to be earlier than longer ones.

This story makes use of the pair that is never mentioned together in the

Gospel of John: “Scribes and Pharisees.” (Jn. 11:45-46) This phrase over abounds in the other canonical Gospels, but it is never used in the Gospel of John. On several occasions John features his own pair - “the *Ioudaioi* and Pharisees” - but never “Scribes and Pharisees.” The scribes evidently missed this inconsistency when they inserted it into the narrative of the Gospel of John.

For the sake of the discussion, if we only read through to John 7:52 and jump immediately to John 8:12, we will see that the text reads smoothly. In fact, the story under consideration seems rather awkwardly inserted into the flow of John 7-8. The awkward flow of the text is not a strong enough reason to show that the text was not authentic (there are many awkward flow texts that are in fact authentic), but given the other serious evidence, it adds more weight to the argument.

¹² Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” ¹³ So the Pharisees said to him, “You are bearing witness about yourself; your testimony is not true.” ¹⁴ Jesus answered, “Even if I do bear witness about myself, my testimony is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going. ¹⁵ You judge according to the flesh; I judge no one.

This is not the first time the theme of “light” comes up in this Gospel. In the prologue we read that “In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” (Jn. 1:4-5) We read in Isaiah 60:1-3: “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.”

Jesus applies the high calling of Biblical Israel to be the “light of the world” to himself. He calls himself the Light of the world. (vs. 12) While this may seem familiar to us, it must have sounded very strange to the original hearers. The Pharisees, having disavowed every witness that came to them about Jesus, level the false charge that Jesus had no witnesses. (vs. 13) While there were those in the Sanhedrin who had sympathies for Jesus, most did not. Jesus however, responded that they, as a body, had no authority to judge him because they were not qualified enough to do so. (verses 14-15a) This statement is part of a long list of Jesus’ anti-

establishment statements in this Gospel.

¹⁶ Yet even if I do judge, my judgment is true, for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me.

Jesus' authority comes from his Father. By implication, the *Ioudaioi* (in this case the Pharisees) simply did not possess this authority. They were therefore rendered powerless to judge.

The main Biblical text, in the context of which we must understand Jesus' statements to the *Ioudaioi*, is Daniel 7:9-14. There we read:

"I kept looking until thrones were set up, and the Ancient of Days took *His* seat... and the books were opened... I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven one like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days... to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom... His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed."

Extra-Biblical Jewish traditions also imagined a Son of Man figure who was endowed with authority and judgment. This was also most likely based on the Daniel 7 text. We read in 1 Enoch 69:26-27 that the reaction of the true worshipers of Israel's deity to the revealing of the Son of Man was overwhelming: "...there was great joy amongst them, and they blessed and glorified and extolled because the name of that Son of Man had been revealed unto them. And he sat on the throne of his glory, and the sum of judgment was given unto the Son of Man...".

The passage in Daniel 7 speaks of "thrones (plural) set up," presumably one set up for the Ancient of Days and one for the Son of Man. This idea of another authority/power in heaven (throne implies authority) was also brought up in Rabbinic writings. For example, we read about the angel Metatron's response to Rabbi Ishmael's inquiry about his incomparable greatness:

"Metatron said to Rabbi Ishmael, Out of the love which He had for me, more than for all the residents of the heights, the Holy One, Blessed be He, fashioned for me a majestic robe... He fashioned for me a kingly crown... He set it upon my head, and He called me, 'The lesser YHWH' in the presence of his whole household in the heaven, as it is written, 'My name is in him.'" (3 Enoch 12:1-5)

This idea of co-sitting in heaven in the position of authority (the Son of Man and the Ancient of Days) is a very important idea in the process of development that reached its high point in the New Testament collection.

Eventually, this idea of the two powers in heaven will cause a significant internal friction among rabbinic sages. (b. Haggigah 14b-15a)

¹⁷ *In your Law it is written that the testimony of two people is true.* ¹⁸ *I am the one who bears witness about myself, and the Father who sent me bears witness about me.”*

Jesus will use this argument more than once. The *Ioudaioi* claimed to be experts in Torah knowledge and interpretation. They accused the Christ-following crowds of lack of Torah knowledge. (Jn. 7:49) Jesus told them that since they denied the testimony of witnesses, this disqualified any opinions they might have about him. His own testimony and that of the Father (signs/miracles) were sufficient.

The emphasis on “your Law” (which almost certainly refers to Torah here) seems to be differentiating between the Torah they (*Ioudaioi*) have, with other types of the Torah, most notably the Samaritan Torah. Jesus therefore called them to be faithful to the very Torah they (*Ioudaioi*) claimed to believe and follow.

¹⁹ *They said to him therefore, “Where is your Father?”*

As often happens in court when a witness is presented, the opposite side seeks to discredit the power of the witness by attacking their person. The phrase “where is your Father?” most likely referred to the accusation of the illegitimate birth of Jesus. It is also possible they were simply asking why Joseph (his father) was not appearing with Jesus to give his testimony. While the second scenario is possible, I think the first one is more likely.

Jesus answered, “You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also.” ²⁰ *These words he spoke in the treasury, as he taught in the temple; but no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come.*

The reason John mentions that Jesus said this while he was in the treasury area was to show that Jesus was in close proximity to all the Temple officials and guards. The conversation has moved from Galilee to Judea, from Judea to Jerusalem, from Jerusalem’s streets to the Jerusalem Temple, from the Jerusalem Temple grounds to the symbol of the Temple authority – the treasury unit.

²¹ *So he said to them again, “I am going away, and you*

will seek me, and you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come.” ²² *So the Ioudaioi said, “Will he kill himself, since he says, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come?’”*

We have already heard similar clueless responses to Jesus’ statements. This Gospel continues to portray the Jerusalem Temple authorities as unfit to rule, unaware of the simple things of the Spirit, and in no condition to judge Jesus, the Son of the Living God.

²³ *He said to them, “You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world.*

There is a wonderful play on words here. When we read that Jesus tells his opponents that he is from above and they are from below, there is more here than meets the eye. The Gospel of John, from the beginning, portrays Jesus to be the divine Logos/Memra of God. As such, the pre-incarnate Jesus has always existed with his Father in Heaven. Jesus makes a reference to his divine and heavenly origin, but there is more here. You see, whenever the scripture says that Jesus traveled to Jerusalem it always says that he “went up” to Jerusalem. Getting to Jerusalem was, and still is, a physical ascent to topographically higher ground.⁴⁸

The simplicity that is recovered when we translate the Greek back into the original Hebrew is striking. Jesus arrives from Galilee - the topographically lower country to Judea - he comes to Jerusalem which is the topographically higher place. There he turns things upside down by confronting Israel’s leaders. So if Jesus had this conversation in ancient Hebrew, and there are some very convincing arguments that he did, he probably used simple words like “Lemala” (up) and “Lemata” (down), which literally means “high” and “low.”

“You think you are high up because of your Jerusalem location?” says Jesus. “No, you are actually from down below, because you belong to this world and I belong to the redeemed world to come. That world is from above. You need to get your sacred topography right!”

²⁴ *I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins.”*

Normally this verse is applied to the Jewish people, in particular to those

⁴⁸ References to “going up to Jerusalem” include 2 Sam. 19:34; 1 Kgs. 12:28; 2 Kgs. 18:17; 2 Chr. 2:16; Matt. 20:17-18; Mark 10:32-33; Luke 18:31; John 5:1 among many others.

who were present with Jesus, and by extension and application to mankind. But I think it is clear that a very specific group of people – those who were opposing the royal Son of Israel’s God, yet held on to power in Jerusalem – were in mind when Jesus spoke these words later recounted in John’s Gospel. It is to them and them alone that Jesus originally directed his statement: “unless you believe that I am He you will die in your sins.”

Unless they (the Jerusalem rulers) realized that he was the very Logos/Memra of Israel’s God, they would not stop opposing him. The consequence of their opposition was that they would die in their own sins. Therefore, their acknowledgement of Jesus’ identity as the divine Son of Man was crucial. The leaders in the Jerusalem Temple were the ones representing Israel’s God and claiming spiritual authority, and Jesus was “in their face” so they had no excuse. (James 3:1 tells us that teachers will be judged more strictly than others.) They were exposed as hypocrites and frauds with no “ears to hear and eyes to see.” Therefore they would die in their sins unless, like many members of Ioudaioi, they repented. While I hold that Jesus was God incarnate, I realize there is much complexity to this view and narrative. This statement (Jn. 8:24) was not meant to apply to anyone and everyone. There are many people who trusted Israel’s God through Jesus’ person, work and teachings and yet struggle with exactly how Jesus’ divinity and humanity work together. Therefore, this is not the verse that should be used (as it often is) as a litmus test of whether or not the person is a true believer. In the Gospels, Jesus gives us several litmus tests, and almost none of them have to do with creedal affirmations (though I think they are important), but with the practical living of the follower of Christ. In Matthew 25:31-46 we read:

“...when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne... He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave Me *something* to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me *something* to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.’... The King will answer and say to them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, *even the least of them*, you did it to Me.’”

For the followers of Jesus today, the question is less about how exactly Jesus’ full humanity and full divinity fit together, but more about whether or

not they feed the poor and take care of the oppressed and needy around them. But for the formal shepherds of Israel alone, Jesus says: “unless you believe that I am he, you will die in your sins.”

²⁵ So they said to him, “Who are you?” Jesus said to them, “Just what I have been telling you from the beginning. ²⁶ I have much to say about you and much to judge, but he who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him.” ²⁷ They did not understand that he had been speaking to them about the Father. ²⁸ So Jesus said to them, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me. ²⁹ And he who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him.” ³⁰ As he was saying these things, many believed in him.

An outcome of Jesus’ sharp communication here is testified to in verse 30: “As he was saying these things many placed their faith in Him.” In verse 25 we begin to see that apparently at least some of the Pharisees had begun to inquire more openly about Jesus. “Who are you?” (vs. 25) may have been the very first honest and open question they asked of him. Notice also that the religious rulers are portrayed, not as vicious hateful enemies, but as ignorant sheep who have lost their way. When Jesus speaks to them about the judgment of his Father, they do not understand his reference. (verses 26-27) Even though they did not immediately understand Jesus’ words about his future exaltation; his full son-like submission to the authority of his Father must have produced the greatest miracle of all – faith in the hearts of many of his hearers.

³¹ So Jesus said to the Ioudaioi who had believed him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

We have already clearly made the point that the Ioudaioi are members of a definable group within the people of Israel at the time of Jesus. In this passage, we see Jesus completely understands that not everyone who is part of the Ioudaioi opposes him. The majority may reject him, but there is a faithful remnant that accepts him. Nicodemus and those who agreed with him, who believed that Jesus was a teacher sent to them by God. Therefore, when speaking to the mixed crowd consisting of the Ioudaioi who strongly

opposed him, together with those who believed in him, Jesus directed his challenge to those who were ready to listen: “In order to be my disciples you must hold on to my word, to be free you must know the truth.” (verses 31-32) As we will see shortly, this was nothing less than political language used in the service of significant theological exploration.

³³ *They answered him, “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free’?”*



Once Jesus called the unbelieving members of the *Ioudaioi* in the crowd to obey his words and become free, some *Ioudaioi* answered for their entire group, saying, being offspring of Abraham, they were not bound to anyone. They were most likely referring to their own personal privileged/free status under the Roman occupation.

³⁴ *Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵ The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. ³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*

It is hard to say exactly what Jesus had in mind when he spoke these words. A number of interpretive options are available. To understand the slave/free analogy is vital in this context. To do that, we must take a brief historical detour to understand the practice of slavery in the Roman Empire, whose faithful subjects the *Ioudaioi* really were.

When we think today of slavery, we may think of the race-based slavery of the old American plantations. The slavery that was practiced in the Roman Empire, however, was nothing like this kind of slavery; although it was far from a perfect social platform. Many of the Roman slaves were well-to-do. Slaves had civil rights and they could sue their masters in the court of Roman law and expect a fair hearing. Slaves in the Roman Empire were usually people taken captive in wars. More often than not, they were professionals, doctors, and accountants by profession. Only those who were condemned to slavery as *punishment* experienced brutal conditions. The rest enjoyed a rather comfortable and safe lifestyle.

Slave status was temporary and usually did not last more than 20 years. There was a well-established path to freedom in the Roman world. This important feature came to an almost complete standstill during the period we call *Pax Romana* (1st and 2nd centuries) when, comparatively speaking, few new slaves were generated due to the limited number of military expansion conflicts during this time. In the time of Jesus, it was actually very difficult to receive freedom in the Roman Empire, because freedom from slavery was discouraged by the new unofficial Roman policy.

It is therefore telling that Jesus used the metaphor of obedience to him as being true freedom. Even during the period when freedom for Jews and others in the Roman world was almost impossible to obtain, those who believed and obeyed *Him* (master-slave language) could become truly free. Think about it. It is as if Jesus was saying: “Make me the master of your life. Sell yourself into slavery to me. Then and only then will you be able to gain true freedom.” Why? “Because I am both a slave and a master! I rule everything and yet I obey my Father in everything I do.” So, for the author of the Gospel of John it was clear: either sin would exercise authority over the members of the *Ioudaioi*, or Jesus would. A master-slave relationship with Jesus, paradoxically, brought real freedom – first-class citizenship in the Kingdom of God. Whereas Roman slaves, who with great pains managed to gain their freedom, were only able to pass from being third-class citizens to being second-class citizens of Rome and were still limited in significant ways.

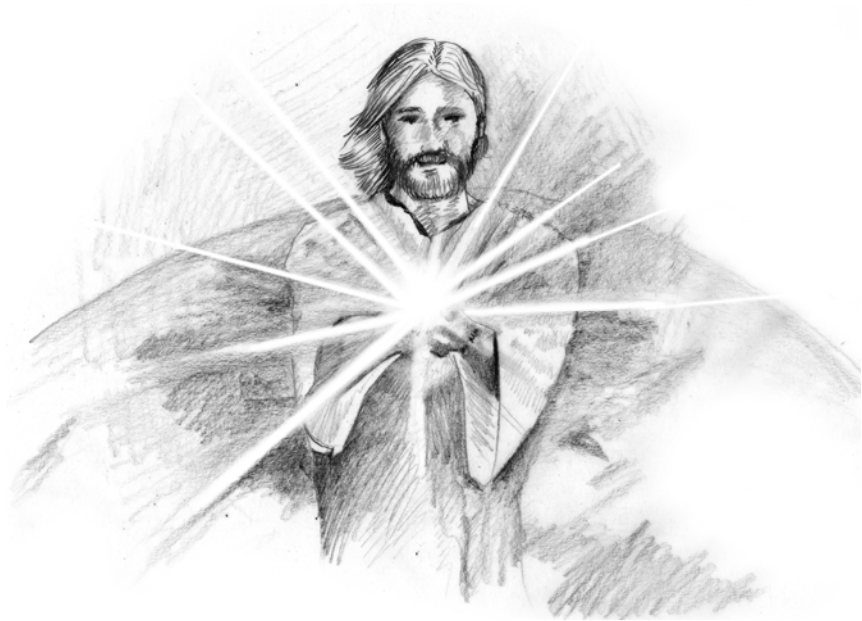
³⁷ I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you.

When the *Ioudaioi* heard Jesus speaking to those who believed in Him about the true status of freedom in the Kingdom of God, they objected that they were not really slaves since they traced their heritage to Abraham. Jesus affirmed the fact that they were indeed the offspring of Abraham, but he argued that the *Ioudaioi* who opposed him were not at all Abraham's spiritual children.

³⁸ *I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father."*

Jesus charges his opponents with obedience to the wrong father, while also saying that he obeys His Father; not theirs. The nature of people is such that they are not able to *not* believe and *not* obey. It is only a question of exactly *who* will earn their full allegiance and obedience. Will it be the right master who can give true freedom? – or will it be someone else?

³⁹ *They answered him, "Abraham is our father." Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, ⁴⁰ but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did."*



It is interesting that, while John sets forth Jesus as the divine Logos/Memra of Israel's God, Jesus addresses himself as "a man" who told them the truth. There is no mistake here. According to John, Jesus is not only the divine logos, he is also fully man. Therefore, without apparent contradiction, John describes the interrelationship between Jesus' full humanity and the divine description of him found throughout this Gospel.

⁴¹ "You are doing the works your father did." They said to him, "We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father—even God." ⁴² Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. ⁴³ Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word."

Once again, the reference is likely referring to stories that had been circulating about Jesus being from an illicit union.⁴⁹ The *Ioudaioi* were making a reference to this, precisely because they simply did not believe the true stories of God's incredible intervention in human history (the virgin birth). This was enough to prove that they only believed the lies of the devil and Jesus' word had no place in their minds and hearts. His prophetic and strong language was more than justified.

⁴⁴ "You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. ⁴⁵ But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me."

For Jesus, the evil shepherds of God's people Israel (we will discuss this connection later) are joined with the devil and are his servants/slaves. They do not love truth because all truth is antithetical to them. When they testify falsely against Jesus, they simply act in accordance with their nature and the lying nature of their father.

⁴⁶ "Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth,

⁴⁹ Cf. the Jesus "son of Panthera" traditions in (much later) rabbinic discourse. (tHullin 2:22; Cohelet Rabbah 1:8(3); yAbodah Zarah 2:2(7); 2:2(12); yShab. 14:4(8); 14:4(13))

why do you not believe me? ⁴⁷ Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.”

Jesus is saying that those who oppose him do not in reality have any excuse. None of them were able to show any wrongdoing on Jesus' part. The simple reason for them not hearing the voice of the Great Shepherd of Israel was because they did not belong to Israel's God, as did other Israelites.

⁴⁸ The Jews answered him, “Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?” ⁴⁹ Jesus answered, “I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me.

The *Ioudaioi* who rejected Jesus continued their argument opposing Jesus' words. This time they accused him of demon-possession and Samaritan theological affiliation. What is interesting here is that Jesus refutes their accusation of demon possession, but says nothing against their accusation of Samaritan heresy. We know that Jesus was not a Samaritan Israelite, nor was he supportive of Samaritan theological positions and yet, this omission is yet another small piece of evidence that, perhaps, the Samaritan Israelite community was the addressee, or at least among the various Israelite addressees for whom this particular Gospel was originally authored.

⁵⁰ Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge. ⁵¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.”

Jesus repeated the very point he had made earlier to those among the *Ioudaioi* who believed in him.

⁵² The Jews said to him, “Now we know that you have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, ‘If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.’ ⁵³ Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?”

As Jesus further clarified his points, his opponents then understood what he was saying. He claimed his words were life-giving and life-preserving,

and in fact they were far more powerful than the words of Abraham and the great prophets of old! That of course was because Jesus was the Logos of Israel's God.

⁵⁴ Jesus answered, "If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, 'He is our God.' ⁵⁵ But you have not known him. I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word. ⁵⁶ Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad."

Jesus made a stunning statement here in response to the challenge given by the *Ioudaioi*. He said that Abraham met him and when he did, he rejoiced. We can already anticipate the reaction of those who opposed him. What Jesus said was absolutely true. In fact, Abraham saw the incarnate Logos of God several times. Take one concrete example.⁵⁰ This event took place immediately prior to Abraham's negotiations with God over the salvation of the city of Sodom because of the righteousness of some of Sodom's residents. You will remember that three visitors came to Abraham. Two were angels and the third was the LORD in human form. (Genesis 18:1-33) The Torah seems to be completely unapologetic about this kind of encounter between God and men when God appears in human form as in Genesis 18 or in Genesis 32 (Jacob wrestling with the messenger of God). Israelite theology did allow for God to appear in visible form. Jesus claiming such, however, challenged the *Ioudaioi*'s position of authority and clearly threatened to remove them from power. This challenge led to a conflict that would eventually result in Jesus' brutal crucifixion by the Roman regime. The issue was not that Jesus could not be Israel's God in human form, but that Israel's God in human appearance could not be Jesus.

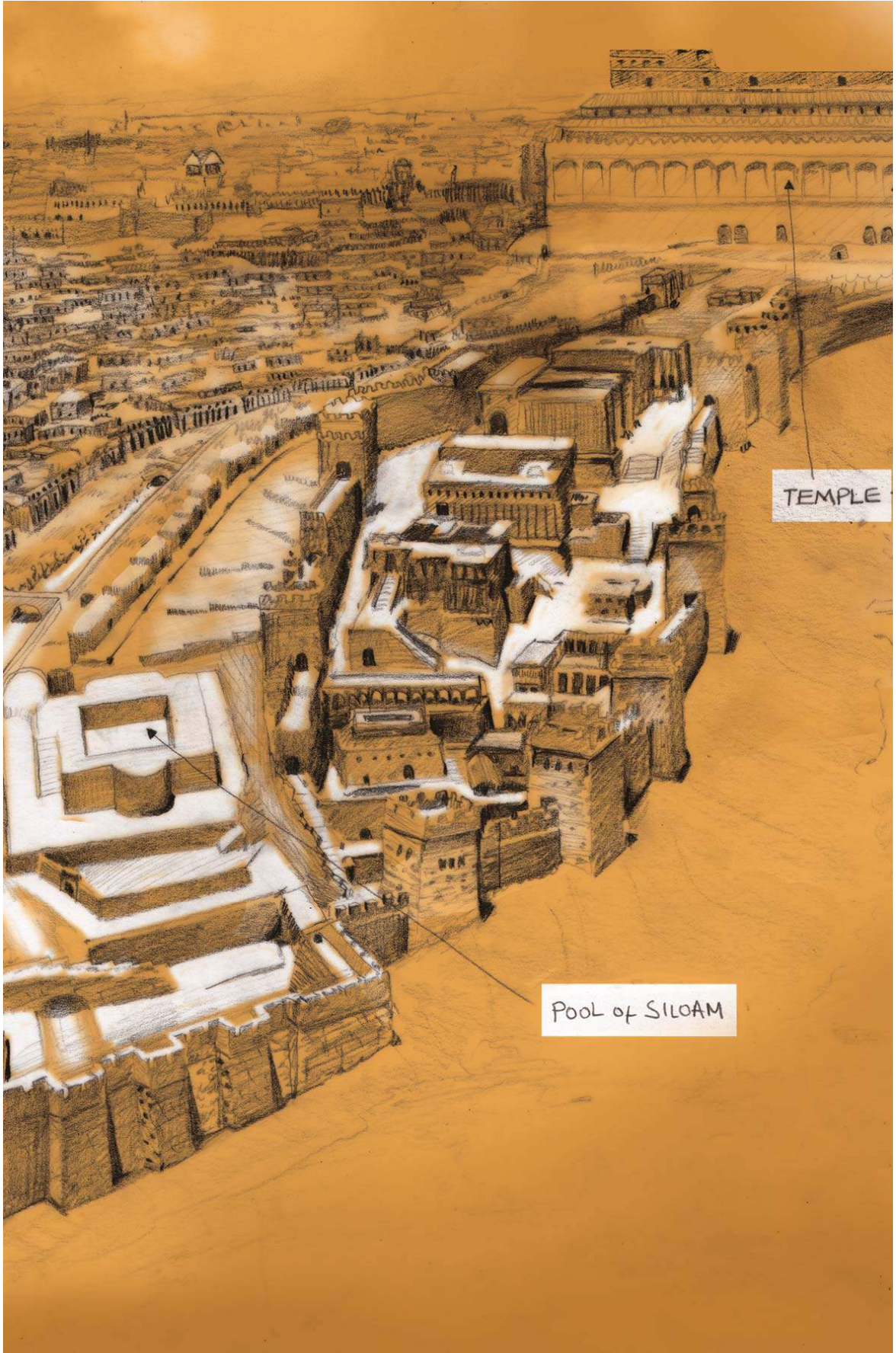
⁵⁷ So the Jews said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" ⁵⁸ Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." ⁵⁹ So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

This was first received with sarcasm "You are not yet fifty years old, and

⁵⁰ This statement (vs. 56) of Jesus may also refer back to the ram caught in the thicket when Abraham was called to sacrifice Isaac. He certainly rejoiced then. Father God quite probably showed Abraham in that moment that his willingness to lay his "only" son on the altar pointed to another day when a far greater Father would willingly give his only son on the "altar of sacrifice."

have you seen Abraham?” But the story rather quickly moved to its conclusion when Jesus stated that before Abraham was born, he already existed. Given the unbelief of the *Ioudaioi*, their reaction to his claim of divinity was to be expected. They prepared to stone Jesus. But the Jerusalemite crowd that surrounded him during this confrontation with the *Ioudaioi* allowed him to hide himself and to escape from the Temple compound unharmed.





TEMPLE

POOL OF SILOAM

Chapter 9

The Sabbath Healing near the Pool of Siloam; Ensuing Controversy

☆ ¹*As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man who had been blind from birth. ²“Rabbi,” his disciples asked him, “why was this man born blind? Was it because of his own sins or his parents’ sins?”*

It was common for disciples of Jewish rabbis to ask their trusted teachers questions that would attempt to make sense of things and reconcile the biblical teachings they knew with the reality they saw around them. The disciples of Jesus were faced with a question that had to do with the nature of human suffering in general, as illustrated by the suffering of the blind man in particular. They gave Jesus two options: was it the blind man himself or was it his parents who were to blame?

³*“It was not because of his sins or his parents’ sins,” Jesus answered. But so the power of God should be seen in him.*

Jesus answered their questions with a simple reply - “neither.” The reason for the man’s blindness was not rooted in sin at all. This would have been the normal explanation. Jesus’ point was that somehow, through the suffering of the blind man, a greater good, in this case, the glory of God, would in the end be manifested. Like the drama in the book of Job, only those who are removed from the events by space and time are able to appreciate what was really going on. In the previous story of the healing of the man who had been a cripple for 38 years, we saw the evil shepherds of Israel being confronted by the Son of Man who steadfastly moves up with his miracles/signs, first from Galilee to Judea’s pagan Asclepion, and now to the facility actually associated with the Jerusalem Temple, performing one of the greatest miracles in the Bible – giving sight to a man who had never seen before (born blind). This kind of healing was absolutely without precedent. (Jn. 9:32)

⁴*“I must quickly carry out the tasks assigned us by the one who sent us. The night is coming, and then no one can work.*

⁵ *But while I am here in the world, I am the light of the world.”*



It seems that the man's blindness from birth symbolized the desperately and deeply flawed condition of hurting sheep – the people of Israel. Therefore, giving light to the eyes of the blind man was a prophetic sign of giving light to all Israel. Both the healing and the ultimately redemptive works of Jesus needed to be carried out quickly to ease the burden of God's people who were suffering oppression from all sides.

The urgency of Jesus' task is set within the immediate context of the ancient world, when work could only be done during the day. Christ, anticipating his agony on the cross, characterizes this as the time of darkness. Mark 15:33 describes this yet future event as follows: "When the sixth hour came, darkness fell over the whole land until the ninth hour." What is interesting here and perhaps counter-intuitive for us, is that it is not the death of Jesus, but only the suffering on the cross, that is described in

terms of night and darkness.

⁶ *Then he spit on the ground, made mud with the saliva, and spread the mud over the blind man's eyes.*

Most people find this verse strange and have trouble connecting the sanitized Western Jesus of our imaginations with what appears to be an act worthy of a Middle Eastern *shaman*. We are simply stunned to hear that Jesus “spit on the ground, made mud with the saliva, and spread the mud over the blind man’s eyes.”

Actually, there should not be anything stunning about this. Prophets were known to not only speak with words, but also through symbolic actions. Ezekiel was especially renowned for this. His prophetic actions include eating a scroll (Ezek. 3:1-3), binding himself with cords (3:25-27), making brick models and enacting siege (Ezek. 4), and shaving his head (Ezek. 5), among others. This is exactly what Jesus is doing here. He is about to heal the man who was born blind and he wanted the people present to connect it with God’s creation of man. God created man from the dust of the ground and the act of healing by Jesus was a redemptive act of restoration – performed by the Logos of God Himself. Jesus’ healing of this blind man is of paramount significance. It is not just a healing; *it is the creation of a new man*.

Everything that Jesus does in John shows him to be God. It displays what, in theological language, we call “high Christology” (which means that it presents Christ as fully divine versus “almost divine” or “somewhat divine”). This is indeed a clear presentation. Jesus drew the parallel between himself and God, not only through the miracle itself, but also through the prophetic-symbolic use of mud/dust of the ground. (Gen. 2:7)

⁷ *He told him, “Go wash yourself in the pool of Siloam.” (Siloam means “sent”) So the man went and washed and came back seeing!*

It is interesting that when Jesus healed the man at the pool of Bethesda he did not tell him to be washed there. This is most likely because the Pool of Bethesda was a pagan facility (Asclepion), while the pool of Siloam was a Jewish facility affiliated with the Jerusalem Temple (the center of worship for the *Ioudaioi*).

⁸ *His neighbors and others who knew him as a blind beggar asked each other, “Isn’t this the man who used to sit*

and beg?” ⁹ *Some said he was, and others said, “No, he just looks like him!” But the beggar kept saying, “Yes, I am the same one!”* ¹⁰ *They asked, “Who healed you? What happened?”* ¹¹ *He told them, “The man they call Jesus made mud and spread it over my eyes and told me, ‘Go to the pool of Siloam and wash yourself.’ So I went and washed, and now I can see!”* ¹² *“Where is he now?” they asked. “I don’t know,” he replied.* ¹³ *Then they took the man who had been blind to the Pharisees,* ¹⁴ *because it was on the Sabbath that Jesus had made the mud and healed him.* ¹⁵ *The Pharisees asked the man all about it. So he told them, “He put the mud over my eyes, and when I washed it away, I could see!”* ¹⁶ *Some of the Pharisees said, “This man Jesus is not from God, for he is working on the Sabbath.” Others said, “But how could an ordinary sinner do such miraculous signs?” So there was a deep division of opinion among them.*

Pharisees were the favorites of urban Jewish dwellers. It is probable that the reason the people went to the Pharisees was that the Pharisaic movement was a grass-roots religious movement and was less connected to the Temple establishment than were the Sadducees. By the time of Jesus, the role of the priests, who were mainly Sadducees, was in many ways taken over by the much more popular and progressive Pharisaic movement.

Jewish people love to disagree with one another, and this time was no exception. Some of the Pharisees thought Jesus’ mud-making activity was Sabbath-breaking; while others (also Pharisees) did not agree, citing this as proof of Jesus’ innocence and of the fact that God had granted him supernatural abilities, therefore approving his ministry.

¹⁷ *Then the Pharisees again questioned the man who had been blind and demanded, “What’s your opinion about this man who healed you?” The man replied, “I think he must be a prophet.”*

Given the fact that not all Pharisees were against Jesus on this matter, we should not assume the investigation into the man’s healing only yielded negative impressions. It is possible that two parties within the Pharisaic camp were debating with each other and, in this case, came to very different views regarding the person of Jesus. Was he a sinner or was he a saint? It

was up to the formerly blind man to report what he thought about the man who had healed him. But it was not so simple. The side that did not approve of Jesus was far more powerful than the group among the Pharisees who loved him. Therefore, the predominant reaction and subsequent questioning of the man who had been blind was overwhelmingly negative. Keep in mind that the Pharisees were part of the *Ioudaioi* (they were a subgroup).

¹⁸ The Ioudaioi still refused to believe the man had been blind and could now see, so they called in his parents.

Those who rejected Jesus and his divine calling had to also reject his miracles, because the argument accepted by all was that Israel's God would not endow someone of whom He did not approve with miracle-working power. The important thing here was not the healing itself; it was not even the fact of opening the eyes of the blind man. The issue was something far more powerful: it was bringing sight to a man who had been blind from birth!



The authorities refused to believe that the man in fact had been blind from birth. They called in witnesses who would validate their growing suspicion that this was either a hoax or a case of partial healing, which was common in the ancient world. No one would know the blind man better than his parents.

¹⁹ *They asked them, “Is this your son? Was he born blind? If so, how can he now see?”* ²⁰ *His parents replied, “We know this is our son and that he was born blind,* ²¹ *but we don’t know how he can see or who healed him. Ask him. He is old enough to speak for himself.”* ²² *His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders, who had announced that anyone saying Jesus was the Messiah would be expelled from the synagogue.* ²³ *That’s why they said, “He is old enough. Ask him.”*

The persecution of the followers of Jesus had already begun. And the primary way they were persecuted was to expel the followers and sympathizers of Jesus from the synagogues.

A word about synagogues of Jesus’ time is probably in order here. In short, synagogues were different from what they are today. A synagogue was something like a mini-Jewish community center; organized, not around what we would call today “religious activity,” such as worship and Torah study (though it included it), but rather around things like travel hospitality, caring for the poor and other activities that supported the community. The institution of the synagogue is actually Greek (*synagogue* is a Greek word that means “a gathering of people together”). When the Gospels speak about synagogues, they always refer to Jewish synagogues, but the idea of a synagogue was a simple gathering of people who assembled together in the Roman Empire.⁵¹ It is important to realize that there were synagogues which were under the religious control of a variety of Jewish religious factions. This is likely to be what was behind Matthew’s usage of “their” (as in Matt.4:23) synagogues (presumably versus “our” synagogues.)

²⁴ *So for the second time they called in the man who had been blind and told him, “God should get the glory for this, because we know this man Jesus is a sinner.”* ²⁵ *“I don’t know whether he is a sinner,” the man replied. “But I know this: I was blind, and now I can see!”* ²⁶ *“But what did he do?” they asked. “How did he heal you?”* ²⁷ *“Look!” the man exclaimed. “I told you once. Didn’t you listen? Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his*

⁵¹ The language of “association” vs. “assembly” may be a little too loose, because of the existence of “associations” of various interest groups in the ancient world. (e.g., Acts 19:24-27) The larger ad hoc gathering of citizens and metalworkers in Ephesus was designated an “ekklesia”. (Acts 19:41) A better gloss of “synagogue” would be “assembly.” (cf. BDAG, συναγωγή 2)

disciples, too?” ²⁸ *Then they cursed him and said, “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses!”* ²⁹ *We know God spoke to Moses, but we don’t even know where this man comes from.”* ³⁰ *“Why, that’s very strange!” the man replied. “He healed my eyes, and yet you don’t know where he comes from?”* ³¹ *We know that God doesn’t listen to sinners, but he is ready to hear those who worship him and do his will.* ³² *Ever since the world began, no one has been able to open the eyes of someone born blind.* ³³ *If this man were not from God, he couldn’t have done it.”* ³⁴ *“You were born a total sinner!” they answered. “Are you trying to teach us?” And they threw him out of the synagogue.*

They came to the healed man, telling him ahead of time what the accepted answer was to be. However, he rejects their answer by saying that he was not a trained theologian and should not be asked about the intricacies of theology and *halachah* (what is lawful and what is not). He only knows that he was blind from birth and now he sees everything perfectly! They continued to question exactly how Jesus healed him. At this point, the man sarcastically asked them if, perchance, they also wanted to become disciples of Jesus, since they were so interested in him. They then pronounced a curse on the man whom God had just blessed with the miracle of sight, insisting that they did not know where Jesus came from and by what authority he did what he did. The healed man’s sarcasm betrayed his new-found confidence. He said to them: “Hm... That’s strange that you don’t know.” Then he used their own argument against them: “We know that God doesn’t listen to sinners, but he is ready to hear those who worship him and do his will. Ever since the world began, no one has been able to open the eyes of someone born blind. If this man were not from God, he couldn’t have done it.” (verses 31-33) They became angry and accused the man of insubordination.

³⁵ *When Jesus heard what had happened, he found the man and asked, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”* ³⁶ *The man answered, “Who is he, sir? I want to believe in him.”* ³⁷ *“You have seen him,” Jesus said, “and he is speaking to you!”* ³⁸ *“Yes, Lord, I believe!” the man said. And he worshiped Jesus.*

We must keep in mind that the blind man did not see Jesus at the time he

was being healed. When the light broke through his blindness, it would have been very exciting but also very confusing. It is doubtful that the man would have even recognized Jesus if he were to see him again. Moreover, he was probably told about Jesus' spitting and mud-making by those who witnessed the miracle, since he would not have seen this for himself.

Jesus asked the healed man if he believed in the Son of Man. Jewish *Son of Man* theology was already very much developed in Judaism in some both canonical (by later standards) texts, such as Daniel 7:14, and non-canonical texts, such as the books of Enoch, as we have seen in prior portions of this book. Given the accusation of the sinfulness of Jesus, it is intriguing that the *Son of Man* in Jewish theological writings was, instead, characterized by utter righteousness. We read in Enoch 71:14-17:

“This is the Son of Man who is born unto righteousness; and righteousness abides over him, and the righteousness of the Head of Days forsakes him not. And he said unto me: ‘He proclaims unto thee peace in the name of the world to come; for from hence has proceeded peace since the creation of the world, and so shall it be unto thee forever and for ever and ever.’”

There were people who accepted this (and similar traditions), and those who did not. Jesus, therefore, asked the man if he believed in that tradition. The man answered in the affirmative. When the man acknowledged that he was ready to accept the Son of Man and to believe in Him, Jesus revealed his identity - that he himself was that Son of Man of Israelite apocalyptic expectation. The man Jesus healed responded by an affirmation of faith and worship before the Logos of God, who had given him light. This harkens back to John 1:9: “The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.” The worship of Jesus by this man was a natural outcome of already formulated Jewish *Logos* and *Son of Man* theology.

³⁹ *Then Jesus told him, “I entered this world to render judgment—to give sight to the blind and to show those who think they see that they are blind.”*

Jesus revealed much more to the healed blind man. He told him the very reason he had come into the world was to judge. This meant that, in some cases he would give sight to the physically blind, and in some cases it would mean showing people that they *were* blind. Taking into consideration the overall thrust of John's Gospel, which is that the Jerusalemite religious leadership are evil shepherds who are disqualified (blind) to lead, too concerned for their own status, and do not care for the good of all the sheep

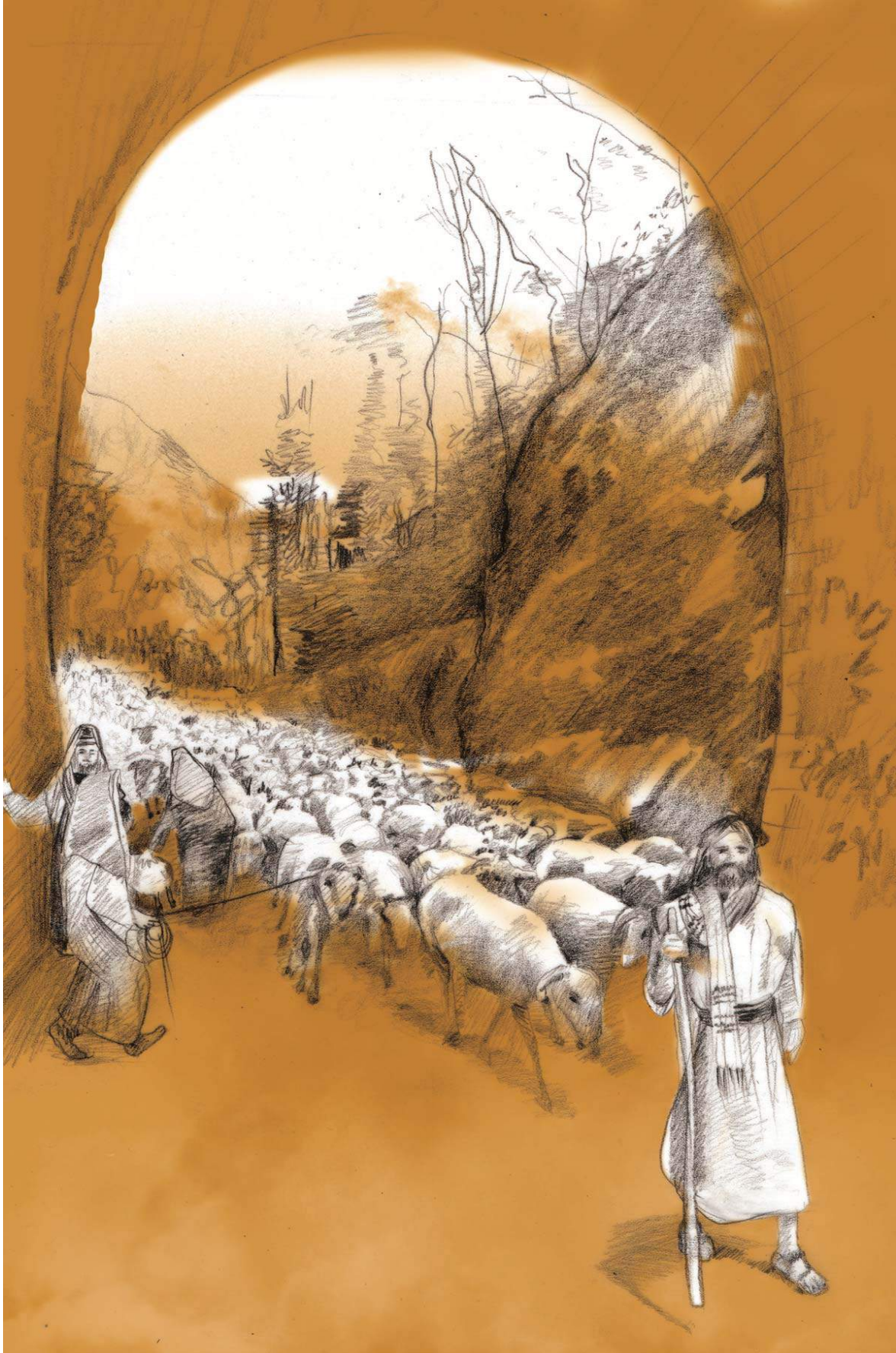
of the house of Israel, these words of Jesus spell out his clear purpose. He will judge the *kosmos* by giving sight to the blind and showing those who think they can see, that they themselves are blind. In our mind, judging someone is a purely negative action, but this is not necessarily so.

Righteous judgment is, in essence, restoring/enforcing the rightful place of all that is good, righteous, and praiseworthy in God's creation. It is affirming, strengthening, and declaring praiseworthy that which is right before God. So here Jesus is saying, not only has he come to perform signs such as giving the man born blind his sight, but he has also come to give light to those who think they see, but truly walk in darkness. We will see this theme developed more and more as this Gospel unfolds.

⁴⁰ *Some Pharisees who were standing nearby heard him and asked, "Are you saying we're blind?"* ⁴¹ *"If you were blind, you wouldn't be guilty," Jesus replied. "But you remain guilty because you claim you can see."*

The confrontation continues. Those Pharisees who overheard this conversation challenged Jesus about his claim that they were blind. To which Jesus responded that it would have been of benefit to them to have been blind, because then they could not be accused of anything. But in their case, they must be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law, because by their own confession, they could see. (See also 8:24) The court motif prevalent throughout the Gospels comes to its sharpest focus in this section.





Chapter 10

The Good Shepherd; Feast of Dedication; Jesus Retreats to Bethany

☆¹ *“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber.² But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep.³ To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.⁵ A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.”⁶ This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.*

In ancient times, like today, all kinds of thievery was practiced. Because the Gospel of John was written when people largely grew their own produce and oftentimes raised their own livestock, this illustration was familiar. It was widely known that if someone wanted to hurt a sheep owner economically, the worst thing that could be done was to let his sheep out under the cover of night, steal them, and disperse them. For their shepherd to gather them into the fold again would be very time consuming. They could of course steal sheep, but it was not possible to steal most of the sheep by persuading them to follow the thief. Thieves could usually steal only what they could carry after killing or binding the sheep. The reason the flock would not follow the thief was simple: They were accustomed to the voice of their own shepherd and would not follow a stranger.

As Jesus continued and intensified his polemic discourses with the *Ioudaioi*, the identity of his person and his mission became abundantly clear. In this very important section, Jesus will recall the image of Israel as God’s sheep, ascribing to the ruling Jerusalemite establishment the role of the evil shepherds of Israel, and casting himself as the Good Shepherd of

Israel, so powerfully described in Ezekiel 34:1-24:⁵²

“The word of the Lord came to me: ‘Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, thus says the Lord God: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! My sheep were scattered; they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them ...I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them.’ For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out... I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy...”

⁷ *So Jesus again said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. ⁸All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.*

It is commonly believed that, in this passage, Jesus is speaking about various people who had claimed to be the Messiah prior to his appearance. It is true that both before and after Jesus there were many who claimed to be the Messiah. (Acts 5:36-37; Josephus Ant. 20.5.1) However, in this context, I think that those who came to the people of Israel before Jesus (given the overall context of John’s Gospel) were the current Jerusalem rulers – the evil shepherds of Israel. They claimed that they alone were the proper entrance to the sheep fold. They were the *door*. If someone was to enter, he must come through them. Jesus says that this is most definitely false. He himself is the *door*, not them; *He* is the *way*. Whoever enters through *him* will find refuge (be saved) and sustenance (true life resources). Only Jesus has the good of his sheep in mind, unlike the evil impostors – the Jerusalemite leadership of the *Ioudaioi*.

¹¹ *I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming*

⁵² God as Shepherd is pictured and referenced in Gen. 48:15; 49:24; Ps. 23:1; 80:1; Ezek. 34:15.

and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³ *He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.* ¹⁴ *I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me,* ¹⁵ *just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.*

Jesus continued his previous conversation with a mixed group of people, often addressing his comments to the *Ioudaioi* who were present, both those who believed and those who did not believe in him. As is obvious from the general context of this discourse, the basic difference between Jesus and those who currently ruled Israel was this: “He owns the sheep and the other shepherds were hired to care for the sheep and therefore do not have the best interest of the sheep in mind.” In other words, they are only shepherds because they draw an income and gain benefits. He is the complete opposite. He who owns everything made himself poor (Jn. 1:11a; Col. 1:15-17) and became a servant for the good of the sheep. He is the Good Shepherd of Ezekiel 34. The God of Israel himself has come to pastor his own sheep.

¹⁶ *And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.*

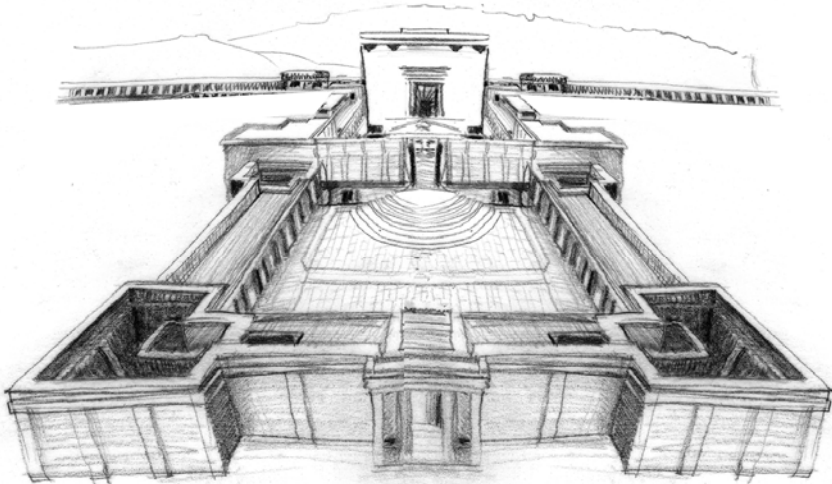
This section of the Gospel of John is one of the most memorable and most often quoted passages in the book. Most Christians are persuaded that the unity of *Jews* and the *nations* is in view in this text. It is traditionally understood that Jesus is speaking to a Jewish crowd when he says: “I have other sheep that are not of this fold” who also need to be reached and brought in under the protective hand of the Good Shepherd. Whilst I think this understanding is wonderful (and is actually true in a sense that other biblical texts teach precisely that), I believe it has nothing to do with the Gospel of John’s context and message.

It is far more likely that something entirely different is in view here. As we have already seen, the author of the Gospel of John has Jesus interacting strongly with the passage in Ezekiel 34 (evil shepherds vs. the Good Shepherd). Ezekiel also describes the incredible regeneration/resurrection of Israel - the vision of the valley of the Dry Bones. It is there that we find the key to Jesus’ words in John 10:16 which we are now considering. In Ezekiel 37:15-24 we read:

“The word of the Lord came to me: ‘Son of man, take a stick and

write on it, 'For Judah, and the people of Israel associated with him'; then take another stick and write on it, 'For Joseph (the stick of Ephraim) and all the house of Israel associated with him.' And join them one to another into one stick that they may become one in your hand... Behold, I am about to take the stick of Joseph (that is in the hand of Ephraim) and the tribes of Israel associated with him. And I will join with it the stick of Judah, and make them one stick, that they may be one in my hand... Behold, I will take the people of Israel from the nations among which they have gone, and will gather them from all around, and bring them to their own land. And I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel. And one king shall be king over them all, and they shall be no longer two nations, and no longer divided into two kingdoms... My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd.'" (Ezek. 27:15-24)

The case is clear - Jesus, in fulfillment of the above text, comes to unite Israel, and this includes all Israel: Samaritan Israelites as the local representatives of the Northern Kingdom, as well as those Israelites currently residing in the dispersion/diaspora. The time had come to place the two sticks of Judah and Israel together, and Jesus would do just that. Before the fulfillment of the reconciling and unifying vision of Israel's God with all humanity, comes a mission of primary importance – the mission of Jesus to reconcile and unify all the house of Israel.



God's reputation and, therefore, his faithfulness to his promises to the people of Israel are at stake. The Gospel of John is a Judean invitation to the rest of Israel to join in following the Messiah Jesus who has come to

shepherd God's sheep.

¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father."

As the time of great confrontation, that will result in the crucifixion of Jesus, draws near it becomes apparent that one of the central themes in John's Gospel is the issue of authority. Who is the true authority? For three entire days, while Jesus was in the tomb, it looked as though he had unwisely overstepped his authority by boldly criticizing the establishment. But the Gospel prepares its hearers: He had the authority to lay his life down and to take it up again. He received this power/authority from his Father (think of the Daniel 7 vision), the author of life.

¹⁹ There was again a division among the Ioudaioi because of these words. ²⁰ Many of them said, "He has a demon, and is insane; why listen to him?" ²¹ Others said, "These are not the words of one who is oppressed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?"

Again, Jesus managed to create a sense of division among the *Ioudaioi*. There were those who accepted him and those who rejected him. The theories about Jesus ranged from *demon possession* to *divine servanthood*. The hearer was more and more pressed to choose for himself what to believe about Jesus.

²² At that time the Feast of Dedication took place at Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³ and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the colonnade of Solomon. ²⁴ So the Ioudaioi gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." ²⁵ Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me, ²⁶ but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep. ²⁷ My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never

perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ *My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.*

It is clear that the feast of Hanukkah is in view here. Hanukkah means "dedication," harkening back to the story of the cleansing of the Temple and its consequent rededication after the Maccabean uprising in 164 BCE. (1 Macc. 4:36-51; 1 Macc. 4:52-59; 2 Macc. 1.9, 18) Hanukkah was also known as the Festival of Lights. In the winter, when the night begins early, the Temple shone with unimaginable brightness and beauty. Herod the Great designed the Temple to elevate his own status by making Jerusalem's Temple the most impressive religious edifice in the Roman Empire.

This text is one of the most often quoted and misinterpreted texts in John's Gospel. Here we see the Jerusalemite authorities approach Jesus and phrase their question directly. The way we have been accustomed to reading and interpreting this encounter is as follows. Pay special attention to the point of emphasis: "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah (Christ), tell us *plainly*." However, I think this reading is incorrect and the emphasis needs to be placed on another part of the sentence. It should rather read: "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah (Christ), tell *us* plainly."

You see there was nothing unclear about Jesus' ministry and teachings as he traveled in Israelite Galilee and Samaria, performing signs and making incredible claims. However, he did not come through the officially approved channels and therefore, the *Ioudaioi* in effect said to him. "Do the right thing. Don't be a loner. Submit your candidacy for Messiahship to us. We are the way. We are the gate. We will decide what to do about it."

As we have seen earlier, Jesus refused to submit to the authority of the *Ioudaioi*. He maintained their authority was inferior to that of His Father. His Father had already approved his mission to Israel and therefore, their approval was wholly unnecessary. The reason they did not believe his words was simply that his voice was foreign to them. He was not their shepherd, they belonged to another.

³⁰ *I and the Father are one.* ³¹ *The Ioudaioi picked up stones again to stone him.* ³² *Jesus answered them, "I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you going to stone me?"* ³³ *The Ioudaioi answered him, "It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God."*

In previous sections of this book, we have seen in various Jewish traditions from the time of Jesus, there was an understanding that God could appear in the form of a man⁵³ and that the *Logos* of God could indeed be manifested. There were many Israelite traditions that expected this kind of manifestation. Some Israelites and some *Ioudaioi* believed in them; others did not. The response of the *Ioudaioi* could have been - either rejection of the concept as a whole or rejection of the person who claims to have fulfilled such expectations. It is therefore logical that if someone thinks Jesus is merely human, his claims of divinity, in this case oneness with his Father, could be considered extreme and dangerous. In that context, they would have been worthy of disciplinary action, even death.

34 Jesus answered them, "Is it not written in your Law, 'I said, you are gods'? 35 If he called them gods to whom the word of God came—and Scripture cannot be broken – 36 do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'? 37 If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; 38 but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father."

Clearly, "your Law" here refers to the Biblical text from Psalm 82:6 ("I said, 'You are gods'") and not to some kind of reference in the oral body of Jewish tradition. First of all, it is clear that "your Law" refers to the "your Torah/Scripture." Literally speaking, the book of Psalms is not a part of the Torah proper (Pentateuch), but in the broader sense it very much is, by its being part of the Scriptures of the *Ioudaioi*.

This text fits perfectly with the Judean-Samaritan conflict as a context for the entire Gospel. When we speak of a body of Scripture, we must realize that, at the very least, there were two different Scripture collections available within the Israelite tradition – the Scriptures of the *Ioudaioi* and the Scriptures of the *Samarittoi* (the Samaritans). So, if the Gospel had Samaritan Israelites in mind, as I think it did, it would make a lot of sense to show the Judean Jesus talking with the *Ioudaioi* and presenting them as unreceptive, even of their own Scriptures.

But how do we understand the term: "You are gods?"⁵⁴ This text has

⁵³ This is an important theme in Justin Martyr's Dialogue with Trypho, chs. 56-60.

⁵⁴ The Hebrew word for "God" and the word translated "gods" in Ps. 82:6 are the same – *elohim* (אֱלֹהִים), which can also refer to someone powerful, like rulers or judges.

been a difficult one to explain. Here is my attempt to bring some clarity to this unfortunate situation:

The reference that Jesus gives refers to Psalm 82. It is important to know the full context of the Psalm. We read:

“God takes His stand in His own congregation;
He judges in the midst of the rulers.
How long will you judge unjustly
And show partiality to the wicked? Selah.
Vindicate the weak and fatherless;
Do justice to the afflicted and destitute.
Rescue the weak and needy;
Deliver them out of the hand of the wicked.
They do not know nor do they understand;
They walk about in darkness;
All the foundations of the earth are shaken.
I said, “You are gods, and all of you are sons of the Most High.
‘Nevertheless you will die like men
And fall like any one of the princes.’
Arise, O God, judge the earth!
For it is you who possesses all the nations.” (NASB)

The context of the entire Gospel, but especially of this chapter, is that Jesus, as the Good Shepherd of Ezekiel 34, has come to judge the false shepherds/evil rulers of Israel, who do not care for Israel, but only for care themselves.

In ancient times, people (including Israelites) did not hold to the system of belief that we call today – *monotheism* (only one God exists). The Israelite worship of YHWH was the worship of Israel’s God as their national patron deity,⁵⁵ who was also far more powerful and glorious than all the gods of other nations. The Israelites did believe these other gods existed, but YHWH was greater than they. In other words, what the ancients meant by god/gods was not the same thing we mean by the word/concept *God* today. For them god/s were powerful rulers, usually, but not always, associated with the heavenly realm.

To understand Jesus’ argument in verses 34-38, we must recall his defense in verse 32: “Jesus answered them, ‘I have shown you many good works from the Father.’” Realizing this, we can now see a clear connection with Psalm 82. Israel’s rulers depicted in this passage were evil. They judged unrighteously in favor of the rich, who bribed them. In spite of their

⁵⁵ This is a prominent theme in Deuteronomy, Cf. Deut. 32:8, where the Most High apportions the nations according to the number of “divine beings” or “gods,” and Deut. 32:43, where the “gods” are invoked to praise the God of Israel.

evil deeds, the psalmist calls these evil rulers “gods.” Jesus, the Good Shepherd, called himself *the Son of God*.

The argument is a typical exercise in Jewish (later to become Rabbinic) logic – from the light to the heavy (*kal vahomer*).⁵⁶ The formula is simple: If “X” is true, then how much more is “Y” also true. In this case, however, it also works in reverse: If the scripture of the *Ioudaioi* (Ps. 82) calls evil rulers gods (X), how much more fitting is it for the *good ruler*, (Jesus) to be called the Son of God (Y)?!

The Jerusalemite evil rulers hid behind their religious power and status. They simply could not judge impartially because they were afraid of losing their positions and therefore they accused Jesus of blasphemy. (v. 36) The verdict was clear: If Jesus was the Son of God, they should stop leading Israel and hand leadership over to him – and *that*, was unthinkable!

³⁹ *Again they sought to arrest him, but he escaped from their hands.* ⁴⁰ *He went away again across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing at first, and there he remained.*

If you have ever been to Israel as a Christian tourist, undoubtedly you would have been taken by the organizers of your tour group to the place in Galilee next to the Lake of *Kinneret* (the Sea of Galilee), that is designated and popularized as the site of the baptism of Jesus by John. This place is certainly *not* the place where Jesus was baptized nor of John’s preaching and ministry. From Jerusalem, it would take approximately 5-6 days to get to Galilee. John the Baptist baptized on the other side of the Jordan River in the place where one of the diaconal centers of the Essene community was located. This was in Bethany, beyond the Jordan. (Jn. 1:28) The real place of John the Baptist’s ministry was located in the territory of the Israelite tribe of Reuben, which today is located in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. It is probably for commercial reasons that the place was identified in Galilee, within the territory of modern Israel. In Matthew 3:1-2, the place of John’s ministry is identified with a wilderness, which further confirms that green Galilee is not the location of John’s baptism. We read: “In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!’”

In verse 41 we are told that “many came to him”. In fact, we are told in Mark 1:5 that “The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.” From this point on, John’s Gospel will show its

⁵⁶ Also seen in John 13:14.

readers that not all the people of Judea were opposed to Jesus, but only its religious leadership.

And they said, “John did no sign, but everything that John said about this man was true.”⁴² And many believed in him there.

So the question must be asked. What is it that John the Baptist said about Jesus? It all started from a commission sent from Jerusalem, questioning John about his spiritual authority. He responded, by quoting the words of the Prophet Isaiah: “I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the LORD’ ... “ I baptize in water, *but* among you stands One whom you do not know. *It is He* who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.” (Jn. 1:23-27) The greatness of Jesus, foretold by John the Baptist, was now recognized by many Judeans who followed him. The leaders of the Judeans were afraid. Jesus came dangerously close to the borders of their personal kingdom. But the greatest challenge Jesus would put forth to them was to still to come.





Chapter 11

The Raising of Lazarus; Final Plot against Jesus; Jesus Retreats to Ephraim

✧¹ *Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.*

The story begins by introducing Lazarus. Lazarus in Hebrew is *Eliezer*, which means *God will help*. He resided in Bethany or *Beit Aniah* in Hebrew, which means something like the *House (or place) of the poor*. There were at least two Bethany's mentioned in the New Testament. Bethany beyond the Jordan, where Jesus and his disciples were stationed at this time; and Bethany near Jerusalem, where Jesus would resurrect his dear friend Lazarus. Both places were special. It is likely that these villages served as Jewish Essene diaconal centers for the nationwide Essene network of diaconal poor-houses.

Essenes were known for their commitment to serve the poor and sick. They established diaconal networks of poorhouses. We read one description of such a network as described by Josephus Flavius (a Jewish Historian writing under Roman patronage):

“The Essenes... are despisers of riches, and so very communal as to earn our admiration. There is no one to be found among them who has more than another; for they have a law that those who come to join them must let whatever they have be common to the whole order, so that among them all there is no appearance of either poverty or excessive wealth. Everyone's possessions are intermingled ... They have no one city, but in every city dwell many of them; and if any of the sect arrive from elsewhere, all is made available to them as if it were their own; and they go to those they have never seen before as if they were long acquaintances. Thus they carry nothing at all with them in their journeys, except weapons for defense against thieves. Accordingly, in every city there is one appointed specifically to take care of strangers and to provide them with garments and other necessities.” (War 2.7.4 §119-127)⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Cf. Josephus Ant. 18.1.5.

It is striking how fitting are the words of Jesus to his disciples when he commissions them to go two by two to preach the good news of the Kingdom: “These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: ‘...You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food.’” (Matt. 10:5-14) In addition, we read in the Book of Acts: “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.” (Acts 2:44-45)

This is not the first time we hear of Jesus freely using the network of Essene travel. As a matter of fact, the best example is found in Luke 22:7-13. This is the passage where Jesus told some of his disciples to go ahead of the other disciples to set up everything for the Passover celebration. The disciples asked: “Where do you want us to prepare it?” Jesus responded: “As you enter the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him to the house that he enters, and say to the owner of the house, ‘The Teacher asks: Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?’ He will show you a large room upstairs, all furnished. Make preparations there.” This particular passage should not be read as a display of Jesus omniscience (knowing everything), but rather of his familiarity with Essene diaconal network for travelers and his ability to use it. Since many Essenes did not marry, the men would do tasks otherwise designated exclusively for women, such as carrying water jars. Therefore, Jesus’ instructions had to do with telling his disciples to look for the Essene poorhouse in the town by looking for a man carrying a jar of water, and then following him.

² It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill.

It is interesting and somewhat surprising that John makes this comment so early because the incident of Mary anointing Jesus is not recorded until the next chapter. (John 12:1-8) This means that either John wrote his Gospel after the other Gospels, expecting people to be familiar with the story, or more likely that the story had already circulated orally and John assumed the hearers were familiar with it.

³ So the sisters sent to him, saying, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” ⁴ But when Jesus heard it he said, “This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.”

This is a striking statement, (vs. 4) because by the time Jesus got the message, Lazarus had already died. Jesus arrived in Bethany near Jerusalem from the Bethany beyond the Jordan some time on the fourth day after Lazarus' passing. (vs. 17) When he got the message he remained where he was for two more days. It takes about a day to get from one place to the other, so this meant while the messenger was on the way to Jesus, Lazarus died. We will soon find out why Jesus stayed where he was for two more days.

Additionally, there are remarkable parallels here between the raising of Lazarus and the healing of the man who was blind from birth. (Ch. 9) In the case of the healing of the blind man, *light* was given; and in the case of Lazarus, *life* was given. Both themes are stated explicitly in the Prologue (Jn. 1:4) that sets the trajectory for the entire Gospel: "In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." Not only that – but the reason for both the death of Lazarus (Jn. 11:4) and the man's blindness was for the glory of God. (Jn. 9:2-3)



⁵ (Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.)

⁶ So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. ⁷ Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again."

When we read verses 5-6, they make little sense. If Jesus loved them, why didn't he come immediately? However, if we read the text carefully,

we will quickly realize that verse 5 is a parenthetical comment inserted between verses 4 and 6. This means that verse 6 (“So when he heard...”) is a continuation of verse 4 (“it is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it”). So that no one would think Jesus did not truly love the family, the parenthetical comment was added: “Now (*you must know*) Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.”

⁸ *The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Ioudaioi were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?”*
⁹ *Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world.* ¹⁰ *But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.”*

If we attempt to understand the *Ioudaioi* in this passage as being the Jewish people, the sentence would sound completely ridiculous. Clearly, the Jerusalemite authorities who were seeking this rabbi’s life are in view here.



¹¹ *After saying these things, he said to them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him.”* ¹² *The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover.”* ¹³ *Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep.* ¹⁴ *Then Jesus told*

them plainly, “Lazarus has died,¹⁵ and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.”¹⁶ So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

Jesus first tells his disciples that Lazarus had fallen into a coma (κεκοίμηται), stating that he would go to release him from it. The disciples, knowing about the dangers Jesus and they themselves would face by being near Jerusalem, objected to going. (vs. 12) Jesus then clarified that he perceived more than what the messenger had delivered in the message from Mary and Martha. He knew that while the messenger was in transit, Lazarus had already died. Thomas’ response confirmed the fear of the disciples – “let us also go, that we may die with him.” (vs. 16)

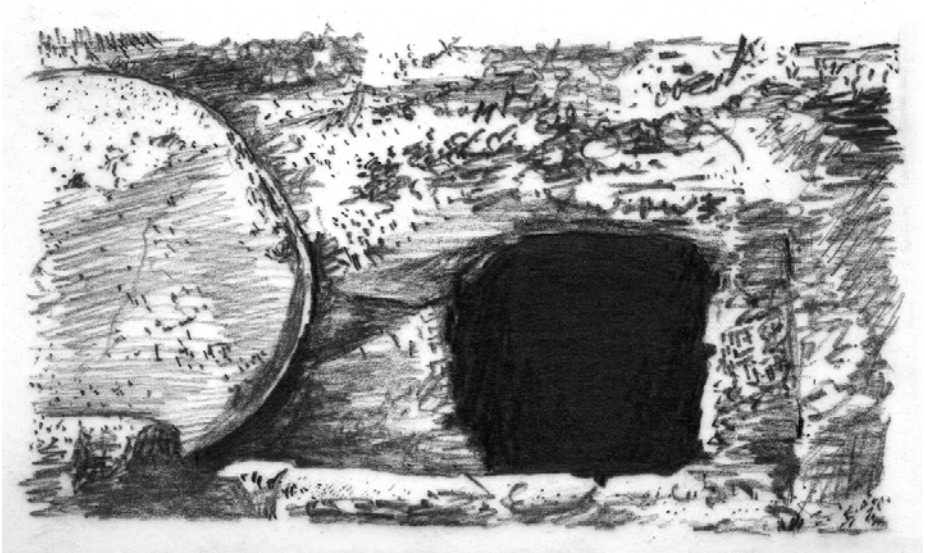
¹⁷ Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days.

There is a tradition in Judaism (that still exists today), that the soul after death does not immediately depart the deceased, but hovers over the body for a period of three days, during which time resurrection is possible. Jesus arrived in Bethany near Jerusalem on the fourth day. This explains why, after hearing the news that Lazarus was very ill, “he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.” (Jn. 11:6) Jesus knew how long it would take to travel to Bethany and he was determined to arrive, not only after Lazarus’ death, but when, according to popular Jewish belief, resurrection was no longer possible – on the fourth day! When Jesus was a child and later as a teenager, he no doubt spent a good amount of time in the city of Tzipori (*Sepphoris*), which was only a brisk 30 minute walk from the small village of Nazareth where he lived. Sepphoris had a Greek theater and Jesus may have spent time watching plays and rehearsals there. The Gospels use theater vocabulary when talking about Jesus exposing the evils of hypocrisy. *Hypocrites* (literally in Greek) are actors on the theatrical stage. But there is one more thing he would have learned from often observing actors on the stage, and this was the art of timing. Theater without timing is not theater. Of course this is not the only place where Jesus may have acquired the art of timing things right, but may very well be that what he learned in Tzipori, he later used in this chapter of his ministry to show God’s glory in the most powerful way possible – resurrecting someone on the day when resurrection was no longer possible.

¹⁸ Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off,¹⁹ and

many of the Ioudaioi had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother.

Lazarus was highly respected by the *Ioudaioi*. Remember that *Ioudaioi* do not equal Pharisees. In fact, after Jesus raised Lazarus, since Pharisees were known for believing in physical resurrection from the dead, some of the *Ioudaioi* would go to the Pharisees (vs.46) to report what had happened. Jesus' closeness with this family, and this family's closeness to the *Ioudaioi* community, supports my suggestion that Jesus' own sub-group of Israel was in fact the *Ioudaioi*. (Jn. 1:11b) Many, hoping to bring much-needed comfort, came to mourn together with Martha and Mary. It is in this story that Jesus makes his final strike against the stronghold of unbelief within the Jerusalem priestly elite. He is about to resurrect a respected member of the Jerusalemite religious society in plain view of members of the *Ioudaioi* system.



²⁰ *So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house.*
²¹ *Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.* ²² *But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you."*

Martha knew by the time Jesus received the message her brother Lazarus

was already dead, and yet since she knew exactly where to send the message, she would have also known how long it would take to get from one Bethany to the other. The math did not work. Jesus was two days late. Perhaps she thought, as the procession towards the place of burial was going on, Jesus would arrive and resurrect her brother. But Jesus did not come. For three more days Martha held out hope that Jesus would come and bring her brother back to life. But still he did not come. He came on the fourth day, and he did this intentionally. Yet Martha's faith was already great. She therefore, in spite of the tradition, said to Jesus that she believed that he was powerful enough to resurrect Lazarus even now. Her faith was mixed with fear and realism. Martha could not have been accused of any wrong doing had she not had faith in Jesus at this point - she would simply have been realistic. But as the story has it, she was not destined for mediocrity.

²³ *Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."*

²⁴ *Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."*

Martha was careful, seeking not to raise her own hopes too high. She probably thought to herself, "Jesus seems to be saying that my brother will be resurrected, but he could be referring to sometime in the distant future. I so hope that I am wrong about this one." She certainly was!

²⁵ *Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life.*

Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live,

²⁶ *and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.*

Do you believe this?" ²⁷ *She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."*

It is as if Jesus had said to Martha: Martha, do not be afraid to trust your own heart and mind. Believe in me! What you, Martha, must understand about me is that *resurrection* is not something I *do* - "*I AM the resurrection and the life.*" Lazarus was among the *Ioudaioi* who believed in me all along, and so are you. "Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." It is important to see that this grand statement Jesus made was fully acceptable to Martha. Her confession of Jesus' identity in the face of personal trial and tragedy is a staggering expression of faith, echoing the words of faith of the Samaritan woman.

A North American Christian musician (he may be the only one), who placed a significant mark on my own development, is Michael Card. One of

his songs (and most of them are really worthwhile!) is called *God's Own Fool*. I think the words should be quoted here because in many ways they sum up the story of this Gospel, its rejection and its reception:

Seems I've imagined Him all of my life
As the wisest of all of mankind
But if God's Holy wisdom is foolish to man
He must have seemed out of His mind
Even His family said He was mad
And the priest said a demon's to blame
But, God in the form of this angry young man
Could not have seemed perfectly sane
We in our foolishness thought we were wise
He played the fool and He opened our eyes
We in our weakness believed we were strong
He became helpless to show we were wrong
So we follow God's own Fool
For only the foolish can tell
Believe the unbelievable, come be a fool as well
So come lose your life for a carpenter's son
For a madman who died for a dream
And You'll have the faith His first followers had
And you'll feel the weight of the beam
So surrender the hunger to say you must know
Find the courage to say I believe
For the power of paradox opens your eyes
And blinds those who say they can see.⁵⁸

²⁸ *When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you."* ²⁹ *And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him.* ³⁰ *Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him.*

For Jesus not to come on time must have been deeply troubling. If one could use a phrase from a famous Christian hymn and turn it into a deeply angry and sarcastic statement, it would be: "What a friend we have in Jesus?!" Where was he? Why was he so late?!

We must not move too quickly here. We need to experience the pain of Lazarus' death and the deep disappointment of Jesus' seeming betrayal

⁵⁸ You can visit Michael Card's website here - www.michaelcard.com.

when Martha whispered in Mary's ear that Jesus had finally arrived. No doubt Mary, who once sat at Jesus' feet when he taught Torah in Bethany, had mixed feelings. She overcame the tension and went out of the village to meet him. It is obvious that he could not enter Bethany because of the *Ioudaioi*. (Verse 30 is another parenthetical comment by which the author is clarifying the meaning of his story as it unfolds.)

³¹ When the Ioudaioi who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there.

What is important here is the author highlights the fact that when Jesus spoke with Mary outside the village, some of the *Ioudaioi* who had come to comfort the family followed her. No doubt, it was women and not men who went out after Mary and followed her to the place where, to their surprise, she was conversing with a man. They did not mean to eavesdrop on this conversation, but they did. They simply thought Mary was overcome with grief and they wanted to make sure she would be alright. Notice here a very important sense of the *Ioudaioi* as those who were able to sympathize and care deeply for the closest friends of Jesus – the family of Lazarus.

³² Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." ³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Ioudaioi who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled.

Here we see Jesus' connection with the *Ioudaioi* as never before in this Gospel (once again a point of connection with John 1:11). Please, allow me to explain: When Jesus saw Mary and members of the *Ioudaioi* grieving passionately over the passing of Lazarus, he was deeply troubled. Notice that it is not simply that when he saw Mary weeping that he was overcome with grief; it was when he also saw the *Ioudaioi* weeping and grieving with her. (vs. 33)

How burials occur within a particular culture tell us much about the people's worldview. In Jewish culture, while the resurrection of the righteous is also affirmed, there is a strong belief that when a righteous man dies, the world suffers loss. The balance of righteousness versus evil tips in the wrong direction. Grief and the sense of loss are very real. There is no

pretense here. Things are bad. Death is bad.

³⁴ *And he said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.”*

A brief excursion into Jewish burial practices of the first century will be helpful here. Most Jews of the first century in the land of Israel buried people twice. When someone died, the body was first wrapped in a cloth and placed in a cave for a prolonged period of time. After the body decayed and only bones remained, they were collected and placed in a special box called an *ossuary*. (If you search online, you can see hundreds of ossuaries from the Israel Museum.) The new ossuary was then placed into a family tomb, together with the ossuaries of other family members.

Jesus, knowing that the first burial had already taken place, asked where they had laid the body. They responded, “Lord, come and see.” (The word *Lord*, used here in Greek, is not a confession of faith that Jesus is the incarnate God, but simply a respectful term of address.) Jesus’ passion and love for the *Ioudaioi* - his own people group, and its particular expression – the family of Lazarus - moved him to overcome his fear and the fear of the disciples who were with him. It was time to enter the place that belonged to the *Ioudaioi* who opposed him.

³⁵ *Jesus wept.* ³⁶ *So the Ioudaioi said, “See how he loved him!”*

No other section of the Scriptures shows Jesus so deeply full of emotion. His full divinity and full humanity meet here in the expression of his grief. He did not just cry. He wept. His reaction (even though he knew he was about to resurrect Lazarus) was fully compatible with the Jewish practice of grieving and wailing. The *Ioudaioi* who witnessed this exchange concluded that Jesus indeed loved the same person they themselves appreciated so much for his service to the community of the poor and the suffering. (Notice again the positive description of the *Ioudaioi* here).

³⁷ *But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?”*

One can see that the crisis of the *Ioudaioi*’s opposition to Jesus was deepening. Now it was not only those from ideologically Jewish Galilee (*Ioudaioi* affiliates) and a few members of the Jerusalem ruling system who began to take interest in Jesus. Many who had come to comfort the family

of Lazarus were moving toward a positive view of Jesus. Their regret was - "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?"

They were not talking about *resurrection*. Their reasoning is therefore very logical. If Jesus could give sight to the man born blind who had never seen light, surely he could have given healing to a man who was sick. One action was much greater than the other.

Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. ³⁹ *Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days."*

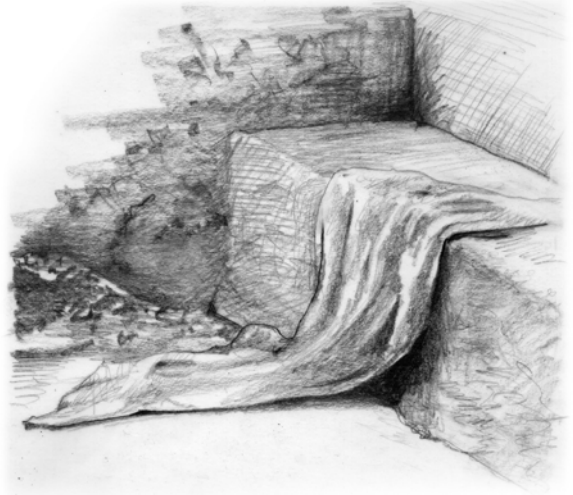
Martha was afraid, if the stone was removed, the smell of a decaying body would be overwhelming. You will recall that the arrival of Jesus was perfectly timed for the resurrection to take place on the fourth day, when it was believed that resurrection was no longer possible. No one was really prepared for what was about to take place.

⁴⁰ *Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?"* ⁴¹ *So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me.* ⁴² *I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me."*

Earlier, Jesus had told Martha that arriving on the fourth day would not limit him. Resurrection was not something he would do with his Father's help. *Resurrection* and *Life* are both the essence of who Jesus is. He is indeed the life-giving *Memra* of Israel's God Himself, and he was determined to show the *Ioudaioi* his Father's glory.

⁴³ *When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out."*

Though most tombs were not very deep, some were and included a tunnel with stairs that went down into a cave where bodies were deposited. So it is possible that we are dealing here with just this kind of tomb. It is not surprising that when the stone that functioned as a door was taken away, Jesus called Lazarus in a very loud voice. Jesus was not a modern television preacher. This was not done to make this event more dramatic and theatrical. It was so that Lazarus, already raised by God, could physically hear the voice of Jesus from afar, in the dark, and enter again into the land of the living. If one thinks further about this, one could ask: “Why could Jesus not go inside the cave and resurrect Lazarus, helping him to get up?” My answer may surprise you, but hang in there. I think it will make some sense in the end. By the way, it may be an alternative reason why Jesus raised his voice (if the tomb in fact had no tunnel to go down).



Jesus was not a *Christian*, but a real, walking and breathing Torah-observant Israelite and a Jew (*Ioudaios*). (Jn. 4:9) This means that the purity requirements of the Torah about not touching the dead were very important to him, even though they sound utterly unimportant to most of us today. There were warnings not to touch a dead body. You might ask, “What warnings?” There are a number of warnings, but this is the key one – “Whoever touches a human corpse will be unclean for seven days.” (Num. 19:11)⁵⁹ The body of Lazarus was almost certainly not the only dead body in the cave going through its first burial. Remember that Bethany was a center for care of sick and poor people. No doubt many of them came there to die. It would have been very easy to touch a corpse in the dark. It may be difficult for us to reimagine Jesus as someone who was thoroughly, and not only peripherally, Jewish. The Torah - all the Torah - was utterly important to him. It is possible that this is why he called in a very loud voice – *Lazarus, come forth!*

⁵⁹ On corpse contamination, see also Lev. 22:4; Num. 5:2; 6:6-11; 9:6-18; Sir. 34:30 as well as the story of the Good Samaritan (where the priest refuses to help the “half dead man”).

⁴⁴ *The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”*

The author of this Gospel was an eyewitness who oftentimes points out small details. He mentions something that no other Gospel does. Lazarus, when he came out of the tomb, was not covered with one piece of cloth but with two. His face had a cloth that was separate from the body shroud. Today, many ancient Jewish tombs have been discovered and this description has been confirmed. Many Jews were indeed buried the way John described with a separate cloth for the face. The author was a local person. He was an eyewitness. He told us what he knew to be true.



⁴⁵ *Therefore many of the Ioudaioi who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. ⁴⁶ But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. ⁴⁷ Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. “What are we accomplishing?” they asked. “Here is this man performing many signs. ⁴⁸ If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation.” ⁴⁹ Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was*

*high priest that year, spoke up, “You know nothing at all!
⁵⁰ You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die
 for the people than that the whole nation perish.”*

The text at hand is very interesting because it shows a distinction existed between Pharisees and the *Ioudaioi*. Some *Ioudaioi* who placed their faith in Jesus went to the Pharisees upon witnessing the resurrection. That made a lot of sense because, among various theological movements among the Judeans (*Ioudaioi*), it was the Pharisees who championed the idea of the resurrection from the dead. Yet most of them, at least at the top level, were not accepting of Jesus’ claims. How can this be? Now that Lazarus is alive again, the *Ioudaioi* who believed had a point to raise.

⁵¹ He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, ⁵² and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. ⁵³ So from that day on they plotted to take his life.

What is intriguing here is that it is the Gospel of John in particular that has the most intense polemic against the priestly leaders at the Jerusalem Temple, yet it is this same Gospel that gives the office of the High Priest in Jerusalem the highest respect. Even the evil shepherd of Israel, when he speaks as a High Priest, is able to bring forth a true prophecy from God.

So that High Priest uttered words that echoed the statement Jesus made in John 10, that he has sheep of another fold that he must bring in. Unlike the traditional interpretation, I think the *sheep of another fold* in the context of John’s Gospel are in fact all Israelite non-Judeans, especially Samaritan Israelites. Here too, I think the High Priest prophetically summarizes the mission of God in Jesus, as described in this Gospel: “(he) would die for the nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one.” The language here parallels Ezekelian prophetic tradition where the God of Israel promises to re-gather Northern Israel and make it one with the Kingdom of Judah under the new leadership of His anointed King. As was quoted previously in Ezekiel 37:15-28, Israel’s God through the symbolic action of the prophet (putting two sticks together and holding them in the prophet’s hand), says:

“I am going to take the stick of Joseph—which is in Ephraim’s hand—and of the Israelite tribes associated with him, and join it to Judah’s stick. I will make them into a single stick of wood, and they

will become one in my hand. Hold before their eyes the sticks you have written on and say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will take the Israelites out of the nations where they have gone. I will gather them from all around and bring them back into their own land. I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel. There will be one king over all of them and they will never again be two nations or be divided into two kingdoms. They will no longer defile themselves with their idols and vile images or with any of their offenses, for I will save them from all their sinful backsliding,’ and I will cleanse them. They will be my people, and I will be their God.”

⁵⁴ Therefore Jesus no longer moved about publicly among the people of Judea. Instead he withdrew to a region near the wilderness, to a village called Ephraim, where he stayed with his disciples.

It is even more interesting that the following verse states that Jesus, realizing the danger to his life and his disciples’ lives by remaining near Jerusalem, relocated them to the village called Ephraim. Ephraim in Ezekiel is one of the symbols of the northern Kingdom that I think is in view when it comes to the restoration of Israel as part of God’s mission in Jesus. Today’s Christian village in the Palestinian West Bank, called in Arabic *Taybeh*, was the very place the Gospel is referring to here. It is situated in the territory of the tribe of Benjamin and was once called Ephraim. What is intriguing is that it is located almost on the border of Samaria and Judea. This is the place where Jesus chose to hide and regroup before his final trial in Jerusalem, which was soon to unfold.

⁵⁵ When it was almost time for the Passover of the Ioudaioi, many went up from the country to Jerusalem for their ceremonial cleansing before the Passover. ⁵⁶ They kept looking for Jesus, and as they stood in the temple courts they asked one another, “What do you think? Isn’t he coming to the festival at all?” ⁵⁷ But the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that anyone who found out where Jesus was should report it so that they might arrest him.

The people who went up to Jerusalem from a variety of Jewish settlements in the region were very interested in Jesus and hoped to meet

him while they were in Jerusalem. Would he now claim his Messianic title? Would he come at all? They did not know the authorities had already decreed that Jesus was to be arrested and killed.





Chapter 12

The Third Passover; The Entry into Jerusalem; The Time Has Come

☆¹ *Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.* ² *So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table.* ³ *Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair.*

Mary, who is routinely confused with the repentant prostitute of Luke 7:36-50, began to do something that was apparently a sign of honor in ancient society, no matter how bizarre it sounds to us today. A Roman pound was equal to slightly more than 320 grams or about 12 ounces. Nard is an oil-producing plant, the rhizomes of which were crushed to produce an extravagant, aromatic oil. The content of the jar was, therefore, very expensive. Mary's symbolic act was thought-provoking to say the least, especially given the fact that Bethany was literally home to many poor and disadvantaged people. They were taken care of by the hard work of villagers and the sacrificial donations of others. As with any organization that did a lot of good, funds were always lacking; but there was something else at play here. In Judaism (and in many other cultures in the ancient world), hair was associated with a woman's glory; her self-worth and self-respect. (1 Cor. 11:15) Not only did Mary pour an extremely expensive ointment on the feet of Jesus, she also used her hair to wipe the oil that did not get absorbed into Jesus' skin. In other words, she placed her self-worth at his feet; she gave him her riches and her glory. It was an act of worshipful devotion.

The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴ *But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said,* ⁵ *“Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?”* ⁶ *He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help*

himself to what was put into it. ⁷ *Jesus said, “Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial.* ⁸ *For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me.”*

This Gospel is an eyewitness account. It is filled with minute details about what happened. For example, the author remembers that, when the anointing took place, because of the extraordinary amount and potency of the oil, the entire house was filled with the aroma of the perfume.

Judas Iscariot was about to hand Jesus over to his enemies. Yet, just as John is careful to distinguish the Passover of the *Ioudaioi* from other cyclical Passovers (like that of the Samaritans for example), John also carefully distinguishes between two people named Judah, who were both part of Jesus’ circle of twelve disciples - one being Judah Iscariot and the other Judah Thaddeus. Judah Iscariot’s questioning of the legitimacy of wasting so much money on this act is understandable. In verse 6 we start to see Judah Iscariot beginning to display the kind of qualities that the Gospel ascribed to the leaders of Israel who were contemporary with Jesus – thievery and self-care.

After the resurrection of Lazarus, it was clear that Jesus had brought a final challenge to the Temple authorities. His arrest and death were now a foregone conclusion and it is in this context that Jesus states when he dies, Mary will be able to use the remainder of this oil for his burial.

Jesus’ answer to Judah (*the poor you always have with you*) makes sense only within the particular context of this story. This is not an excuse for all Christ-followers anywhere to be unconcerned for the poor; but rather it is a place-specific statement. Bethany (the house of the poor) was the place where the poor would always be.

⁹ *When the large crowd of the Ioudaioi learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.* ¹⁰ *So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well,* ¹¹ *because on account of him many of the Ioudaioi were going away and believing in Jesus.*

By now Jesus had succeeded not only in gathering followers from among the Israelite movements of Jewish Galilee, but also from those who were part of the Temple establishment – the *Ioudaioi* themselves. (The *Ioudaioi* in John’s Gospel are a complex group, consisting of the Judean leadership plus all those who acknowledged their religious leadership in

Judea, Galilee and the Diaspora.) The end was indeed near. The establishment was rapidly losing power and they had to do something quickly. Killing both Jesus and Lazarus suddenly became a viable option.

¹² The next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. ¹³ So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!”

When the Jewish crowds heard Jesus was near Jerusalem, they used palm branches to greet him as had been done during the Maccabean liberation. (1 Mac. 13:51) They called out to Jesus: “Hosanna!” In Hebrew “*hosha na*” literally means “Save, please!” Not only were those gathered in Jerusalem calling on Jesus to save them; they were invoking the greatest blessing possible upon him: “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord – even the King of Israel.”

It is very important to note that in this Gospel, Jesus is described as the King of Israel and not as the Son of David as in Matthew and Mark. Remember that Matthew and Mark were not at all concerned to reach Samaritans with the Good News. Therefore, there was no sensitivity to the Samaritan belief that the Messiah would not be a descendent of King David, as the Judeans were persuaded. For example, in Matthew 21:9 we read: “The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David!’ ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!’” In Mark 11:9-10, “Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, ‘Hosanna!’ ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!’ ‘Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!’” The emphasis is clearly on the Davidic descent of Jesus, but here in John 12:13, the accent is being placed on the idea that Jesus is the King of Israel. Another Gospel that can be said to be sensitive to Samaritan Israelites is



Luke. In Luke 19:37-38 we read: “When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen, saying: ‘Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!’” John chooses to state it in the best possible way for Samaritans: “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!” (vs. 13b)

¹⁴ And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written, ¹⁵ “Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt!” ¹⁶ His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him.



The Gospel of John evidences an obvious interest in two particular prophets of the Hebrew Bible: Ezekiel and Zechariah. Ezekiel was referenced to show the connection between Jesus and the Temple, which is one of the main themes, if not *the* main one, in this Gospel. Zechariah also has a strong temple interest in view and this is referred to in this passage from John. Quoting Zechariah 9:9, John shows that Jesus will be welcomed by the Jerusalem crowds. As a city, Jerusalem will submit to him as to the conquering King. It was customary for victors to enter cities that they

conquered on horses, parading their power as the reason for acceptance. When a city welcomed a victor with open arms without an exercise of power, it was expected that the victor would enter on a donkey and not on a horse – and this is just what happened. In the Book of Revelation, the world is being judged and this time Jesus Christ arrives as the conqueror to whom the people did not submit willingly. He, therefore, arrives symbolically on a horse. We read in Revelation 19:11-16:

“I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns [diadems]. He has a name written on him that no one but he himself knows. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. *He will rule them with an iron scepter.* He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: King of Kings and Lord of Lords.”

A much later rabbinic Jewish text records a rabbinic tradition that struggled to reconcile the power and meekness dichotomy of the future visitation of the Lord’s Messiah. We read in the Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 98a:

“...it is written, and behold, one like the son of man came with the clouds of heaven whilst (elsewhere) it is written, (behold, thy king cometh unto thee...) lowly, and riding upon a donkey! If they are meritorious, (he will come) with the clouds of heaven if not, lowly and riding upon an ass.”

Zechariah has another very interesting passage (Zech. 14:1-5) that places the coming of the Lord, together with the Holy Ones, as a symbol of salvation arriving to Jerusalem: “Then the Lord will go out and fight against those nations as when he fights on a day of battle. On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives...” What is intriguing here is that Jesus had obtained the donkey and was about to arrive in Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. This is exactly where Bethany (Beit Aniah) was located. The Mount of Olives was not only the place of Jesus’ triumphant entry; it was also the place of his ascension to one of the two thrones in heaven. (Acts 1:9-12) Moreover, Bethany was the very place of the resurrection of Lazarus and as such it would make perfect sense that Jesus would know where the donkey was (or that it was arranged in advance with Lazarus, Mary and Martha) and

that he would, without any hindrance from its owners, simply ride it from there to Jerusalem.

¹⁷ *The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to bear witness.* ¹⁸ *The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they heard he had done this sign.* ¹⁹ *So the Pharisees said to one another, “You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him.”*

The crowd, consisting of the *Ioudaioi* who had witnessed the resurrection of Lazarus, became a powerful witnessing force for Jesus against others, notably the Pharisaic leadership. The Pharisaic leadership, who had a previous special arrangement with the Roman leadership (Josephus, *Ant.* 13.15.5; 398-404; *War* 1.4.8; 105-106) as far as their influence in the religious affairs of the nation went, now acknowledged that the whole world had begun following Jesus. Their control was almost gone.

²⁰ *Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks (“Ἕλληνές”).* ²¹ *So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”* ²² *Philip went and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.* ²³ *And Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.*

There are two words in the Greek language that could be translated as “a Greek” and are sometimes incorrectly translated simply as “Gentile:”⁶⁰ Ἑλληνιστάς⁶¹ and Ἕλλην.⁶² Both refer to Greek affiliation. John uses the latter word here. The difference between the words is as follows: *Hellenistoi* is used for Greek-behaving people, for example Greek-speaking *Ioudaioi* (Hellenized *Ioudaioi*/Jews); while *Hellenoi* refers to ethnic Greeks, in this case probably the Greek God-fearers we meet in the book of Acts. In recent archeological evidence, a list of God-fearers was found on a stele in the ancient city of Aphrodisias. Upon this monument is a listing of those who gave funding to a local Jewish synagogue. One side of the stele lists over fifty clearly Jewish names, and separately from that, another list of Greco-Roman names is presented, who, like in the book of Acts, are referred to as

⁶⁰ Rom. 1:16 (and also to Gentile in NIV for example).

⁶¹ Hellenistas in singular or Hellenistoi in plural.

⁶² Hellen in singular or Hellenoi in plural.

God-fearers (θεοφοβείς).

However, in John's Gospel, we are faced with an interesting dilemma. John does not seem to use the term "*Ioudaioi*" as others used it. He had his own usage which was particular to his Gospel, given his unique audience and situation. Thinking along the same lines, it is entirely possible that John had his own use of "*Hellenoi*" as well. Whereas others use the term *Hellen* for ethnic Greeks, John may have been using it in a different way. But this, of course, is speculation. The burden of proof is upon those who would like to argue that these were Hellenized Jews and not God-fearing Greeks. We must however allow for both possibilities, with the second one being the most probable.

Whether Hellenized Jews were in view, or Greek God-fearers who were seeking out Jewish religious leaders for a meeting, Jesus' following had reached the farthest corner of the Jewish community/or of its influence. If one looks at the Israelite umbrella of various Jewish movements, things become clearer. The Greeks who came to see Jesus were people on the very margins of the influence of the *Ioudaioi*. Now that Jesus had followers, not only in Judea, Galilee and Samaria, but also in the Greek Diaspora (both among Jews and Greeks), he declared that the time for the Son of Man to be glorified had finally come.



²⁴ Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵ Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I

am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.

This Gospel does not tell us if Jesus actually met with the Greeks. We are left to discover this for ourselves. Instead, the author switches his emphasis to the words of Jesus when he spoke of his coming death and sacrifice. It is likely that Greeks were invited in, and what comes in the following verses may constitute a summary of that conversation. Jesus' point is simple: Unless he dies, his ministry will not bear much fruit. Those who sanctify God's name might also be required to die with him, but his Father would honor them.

²⁷ "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. ²⁸ Father, glorify your name."

The words of Jesus speak deeply of his full humanity. It is not natural for a human being to want to suffer and die, but Jesus, understanding the core of his mission, was willing to accomplish it to the very end.

Then a voice came from heaven: "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." ²⁹ The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." ³⁰ Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not mine."

The connection between God's voice and thunder is important here.⁶³ We read in Exodus 19:16-19:

"On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder."

⁶³ Cf. Mek. de Rabbi Ishmael, Bahodesh 3-4.

The voice of God, in speaking of the glorification of Jesus, is therefore set in the same glorious context of thunder.

³¹ Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out.

As I discussed in a previous section, while it is traditional to assume that the ruler of this world is Satan, the enemy of God's purposes on this earth, it is also possible (though only a possibility) that instead, a particular evil leader of the *Ioudaioi* was in fact in view. (The Qumran community spoke of a wicked priest as a towering evil figure in the Qumranic imagination. While one cannot simply draw quick conclusions, we are justified in entertaining the possibility that such a figure was in view here). It is noteworthy that every known case of persecution against Jesus and the Jerusalem believers in Jesus, especially their leaders, was perpetrated when the reigning high priest was one of those who belonged to the powerful Sadducean family of Annas: Caiaphas, Annas' son-in-law, condemned both Jesus and Stephen; James the Son of Zebedee was executed and Peter was arrested by Agrippa I, while Matthias, son of Annas, was probably a priest; Ananus II put James to death, taking advantage of the death of the Roman Emperor before the appointment of the next one. This was a case of a family vendetta against the followers of Jesus, the man whose movement Caiaphas (as a member of Annas' priestly family) had failed to stop. (We have already talked about how John uses the word *kosmos* [world] and we will come back to it again in future chapters.) It is therefore possible that Jesus was not speaking here about Satan, but about a key evil shepherd of Israel.

³² And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." ³³ He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die.

When Jesus referred to his *lifting up* in a conversation with Nicodemus, the *lifting up* could be understood by Nicodemus exclusively in terms of Jesus' future ascension as per the Daniel 7 vision. Here, however, the idea of ascension, while still very present, is already merged in John's theological reflection with crucifixion and being lifted up on the Roman cross. Jesus said that once this happens, all people whom he had come to unite and save would be drawn to him. If we consider the *lifting up* here and in John 3 (Nicodemus) as a two-stage event (Cross and Heavenly Throne), the statement about drawing people to himself becomes more logical, both theologically and historically. The Cross alone scatters his people; the Cross and the Throne together, gather them to himself.



Chapter 13

The Last Passover Meal; Washing of the Feet, Peter's Denial

✧¹ *Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.*

After the events discussed in the previous chapter, it was clear to Jesus that this would be the last Passover he would spend with his beloved disciples. You may recall that he had come to this decision when the God-fearing Greeks sought him out. Additionally, the content of this chapter comes on the heels of the previous confrontation with the *Ioudaioi* and Jesus' presentation of himself as the Good Shepherd who came to judge the evil shepherds of Israel. This verse begins by stating that, as the Good Shepherd of Israel, Jesus loved his own sheep with the highest commitment and dedication possible. It is difficult to say with precision to whom "his own" refers. These words appeared in John 1:11b ("...*his own* did not receive him"). The most coherent way to understand this would be to think of the disciples of Jesus belonging to the *Ioudaioi* just as Jesus did himself.

² *During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him,* ³ *Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God,* ⁴ *rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist.* ⁵ *Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him.*

It is clear that in one of his last interactions with his disciples, Jesus wanted to personally model something very important for them to understand. The normal way to see this text is as disconnected from the overall context of John's Gospel; as a polemic between Jesus and Jerusalemite leaders. In other words, today's Christians normally see this feet-washing ceremony as only applicable to all Christ-followers in the

world as an example of true humility. However, I suggest that, while this example applies by extension to all Christ-followers, in this present context it meant something else. Please, let me explain:

Jerusalemite leaders were known for not caring for the needs of others. They did not care for the needs of Israel and they fought tooth-and-nail with each other for their own privilege and status. Jerusalemite leadership was not very different from what we know of the modern dynamic of infighting in the corporate world. Everyone was looking out for himself. It was very much an: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” type of approach. Jesus’ washing the feet of his disciples and wiping them with a towel was a way of expressing to them that their leadership over Israel must be very different from that of the current leaders. (We have already seen something like this happen when Mary of Bethany demonstrated such commitment to Jesus by pouring oil on his feet and drying them with her hair.) The number of selected disciples being twelve was not coincidental. Jesus chose twelve disciples because his plan included the full renewal of Israel. The twelve heads of the tribes of



Israel were to be now represented by the twelve Jewish apostles who would lead Israel into a renewed future, defined by redemption. We can see this idea in the description of the New Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation. (Rev. 21:12-14):

“It had a large, high wall with twelve gates. Twelve angels were at the gates, and the names of the twelve tribes of Israel were written on

the gates. There were three gates on the east, three gates on the north, three gates on the south, and three gates on the west. The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the lamb were written on them.”

We read in verse 3, “knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands,” Jesus rose to wash the feet of his disciples. As we noted earlier, this was one of the last and most important leadership training sessions Jesus would have with those who were to become the good shepherds of Israel. They were to rule the new Israel with an attitude of utter self-sacrifice and care.

⁶ *He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, do you wash my feet?”* ⁷ *Jesus answered him, “What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand.”* ⁸ *Peter said to him, “You shall never wash my feet.”* *Jesus answered him, “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.”* ⁹ *Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!”* ¹⁰ *Jesus said to him, “The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you.”* ¹¹ *For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, “Not all of you are clean.”* ¹² *When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, “Do you understand what I have done to you?”* ¹³ *You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am.* ¹⁴ *If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.* ¹⁵ *For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you.* ¹⁶ *Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.*

Peter made his opposition known by simply voicing the bewilderment of the other disciples: how could it be that the greater would serve the lesser? Jesus responded by saying, unless he lets Jesus wash his feet, Peter would not be able to share in the crucial service of the good shepherds. Peter, naturally thinking that Jesus was speaking about ceremonial water cleansing when he said “you are clean,” offered to go through the entire ceremony

(*mikvah*), as no doubt they all did on a more or less regular basis. Jesus specified that the *mikvah* ceremony had already made everyone ceremonially clean. (vs. 10) Although the *mikvah* generated clean status to the Israelite, it must also be matched by being cleansed from within. Jesus made it clear that not all who went through the ceremony before Passover were actually clean within (certainly not Judas Iscariot). In John 15:3, although in a completely different context, we read: “You (speaking to disciples) are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.”

Washing the feet of guests was the task of the youngest family member or a servant. He would wash the dirty feet of newly arrived guests coming into a house from the outside. Although the disciples were Jesus’ servants, here we see Jesus being a servant to them. In verses 14-15 Jesus’ logic once again is a reversed form of later rabbinic *kal v’homer* (from light to heavy), as we discussed in a previous chapter. If someone great does this, then how much more should those who are lesser do the same thing. The conclusion was inescapable. If he did it for them, how much more should they be willing to do the same for others. To be true shepherds of God’s people Israel, they too must be trustworthy, humble, and not self-seeking. Jesus would later challenge Peter from the context of Ezekiel’s prophecy of the evil shepherds of Israel, with the words: “Feed my sheep!” (Ezek. 34)

¹⁷ *If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.*
¹⁸ *I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But the Scripture will be fulfilled, ‘He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.’* ¹⁹ *I am telling you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I am he.*

Although this was not his focus, Jesus predicted future events. Everything was done so that the Apostles would be strengthened in their faith before a time of very difficult service (for most it would end with martyrdom) that lay ahead of them.

On the battle field, ancient soldiers engaged in a symbolic act of domination over the defeated enemy. If the enemy, laying on the ground and heavily wounded, was still alive, they would take their foot and place it on the neck of the defeated enemy as a symbol of their victory. If I am right that Judas did not seek the death of Jesus, but hoped that the attempted arrest would cause Jesus to finally exercise his Messianic powers to start a successful insurrection, then this statement (vs. 18) would fit perfectly. Judas’ sin was not that he “sold” Jesus for 30 silver coins, but that he actually *lifted up his heel over Jesus’ neck*, by trying to force him to do his will.

²⁰ *Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.*”

In this concluding remark, Jesus once again showed the importance of the twelve apostles he was leaving in his place. He gave them all the authority necessary to lead God’s people. Receiving them would mean receiving Jesus (the Son of Man), just as receiving Jesus meant receiving his Father (the Ancient of Days). The twelve had the authority to lead because Jesus himself promised to be with them always. It was the twelve who would lead on behalf of Jesus and because of his special presence with them.

²¹ *After saying these things, Jesus was troubled in his spirit, and testified, “Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.”* ²² *The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke.*

The last person in the minds of the disciples who would be considered for the role of the betrayer of Jesus would have been Judas Iscariot. Remember, while Matthew was best at accounting (he was once a tax-collector), it was Judas Iscariot who was entrusted with the keeping of the group’s treasury. At the time, he had the trust of the disciples and Jesus, but even more importantly, as a man who was highly skilled in defending the treasure bag from the hands of bandits that frequented the roads of the Roman Empire, Judas Iscariot’s candidacy was out of the question.



²³ *One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was reclining at table at Jesus’ side,*

In a world where tables were on the same level as the floor, the disciples partook of their food reclining (almost prostrate) around the area where food was served. One of the disciples was this mysterious person known as the “the beloved disciple.” (Jn. 19:26; 20:2-5; 21:4-7, 20-24) There have been

various theories put forth as to the identity of this disciple and none of them are fully convincing to my mind. We read in John 21:24: “This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true.”

²⁴ so Simon Peter motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. ²⁵ So that disciple, leaning back against Jesus, said to him, “Lord, who is it?” ²⁶ Jesus answered, “It is he to whom I will give this morsel of bread when I have dipped it.” So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. ²⁷ Then after he had taken the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, “What you are going to do, do quickly.” ²⁸ Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. ²⁹ Some thought that, because Judas had the moneybag, Jesus was telling him, “Buy what we need for the feast,” or that he should give something to the poor. ³⁰ So, after receiving the morsel of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.



Notice the level of detail the Gospel gives. It can best be explained by the author (in opposition to Luke’s account) being an eyewitness to the narrated events. He remembers the small details, like the beloved disciple motioning to Jesus to get his attention during a noisy meal, during which the disciples were loudly talking. We can almost feel the tension as Jesus spoke of his imminent betrayal by one of the disciples. The beloved disciple asked him quietly to show him who exactly would betray him. Jesus answered, just as quietly: “I will show you now.” It was customary to take a piece of bread, dip it in something tasty, and give it directly to another person nearby. This was the perfect way to

tell the beloved disciple something in such a way that no one would guess what Jesus was really doing. Jesus showed the beloved disciple what others

would only know later. As Jesus extended his hand to give the piece of bread to Judas Iscariot, he told him out loud that he should hurry up. Jesus had routinely given Judas assignments, so it looked like nothing unusual had taken place.

³¹ When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. ³² If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once. ³³ Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Ioudaioi, so now I also say to you, ‘Where I am going you cannot come.’ ³⁴ A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. ³⁵ By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

It is intriguing that, while we normally ascribe the term *glorification* to Jesus only after his resurrection, Jesus does so in advance of the events. It seems that Jesus viewed betrayal, death, resurrection, and ascension as one package; so much so that at the time when the events that ultimately led to his death and resurrection began, he was already able to say: “Now is the Son of Man glorified.”

One of the foundational stories of the twelve sons of Jacob was the story of Joseph’s near killing and eventually being sold into slavery in Egypt. (Gen. 37) One can hardly speak of anything more unloving than the heads of Israel’s key family attempting to murder their own brother. But it turns out that Jewish tradition ascribes an especially negative role to Judah. Judah was to have been the leader of his brothers. (Gen. 49:10) Therefore, rabbinic sources hold him responsible for the deception, even though it was not Judah himself who brought the coat to Jacob. Even though Judah tried to save Joseph, the rabbinical sources still consider him responsible for it. As the leader of the brothers, Judah should have made a greater effort to carry Joseph home to Jacob on his own shoulders. (Genesis Rabbah 85:4) These sources argue that Judah’s brothers would have listened to Judah and would have returned their young brother home. (Exodus Rabbah 42:2)

It is possible, if not probable, that the above-mentioned rabbinic sources reflect much earlier Jewish interpretive traditions. If so, then the name of the chief betrayer of Christ Jesus (a Joseph-like figure in the Gospels), is most appropriately called by the name of the betrayer of Joseph - the son of Jacob - Judah. If understood in this way, then Judah should not be connected with the Judea/Jews theologically or psychologically, but with

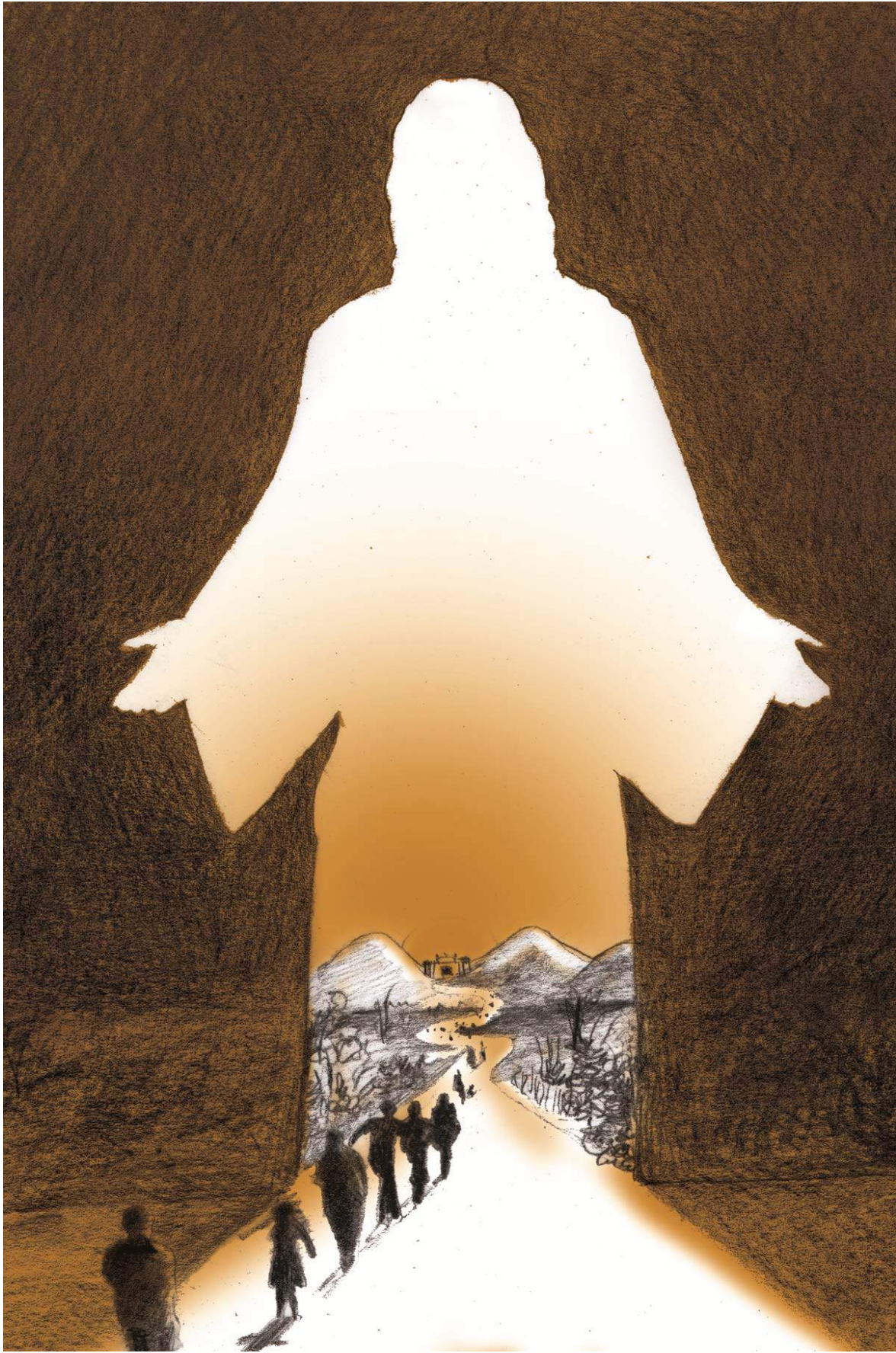
the head of one of the Israelite tribes that otherwise received an honorable status in the Christian Church at large. Therefore, highlighting this dynamic, Jesus commends the twelve to love one another, unlike their forefathers, and in so doing reverse the curse that seems to have been following Judean leadership up to the time of Jesus.

Originally the commandment to “love one another: just as I have loved you,” was spoken particularly to “the twelve.” (v. 34) However, it applies by extension to all Christ-followers everywhere, and at all times.

³⁶ *Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, where are you going?” Jesus answered him, “Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward.”* ³⁷ *Peter said to him, “Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.”* ³⁸ *Jesus answered, “Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times.*

Peter’s commitment would soon be tested. Jesus told Peter that a time would come when Peter would deny him three times. That time was rapidly approaching. One of the reasons Jesus said this was because he already knew Judas Iscariot was on his way to the Temple to betray his location to the authorities for his immediate arrest, illegal trial and ultimate death at the hands of Roman soldiers – and this would be accomplished at the instigation of the Jerusalemite leadership of the *Ioudaioi*.





Chapter 14

The Last Speech of Jesus (Part I)

☆ ¹ “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. ² In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.

Jesus assured his disciples that despite the fact that his death was approaching, they must maintain faith in God and in him. He promised that he was going to prepare a place for them in God’s house, assuring them that God’s house is large enough to include all God’s redeemed children. The question now arises: What is God’s house? The only house of God we are familiar with in the context of the Bible is his Temple, whether in the form of the tabernacle or in its later elaborate structures of stone.⁶⁴ Since we know Jesus went to be with his Father after his death, we must conclude that the heavenly tabernacle is probably in view in this passage.

In the book of Revelation, we read about the final restoration and recreation of the earth – *the new heavens and the new earth*. The heavens will come down to the earth to form one entity. At this point, there will not be a temple in the city of Jerusalem because the entire Earth will become one huge temple. This is how John wrote about it in Revelation 21:22: “And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.”



Returning to Jesus’ words to his disciples, in light of the book of Revelation, we can understand as Jesus told them he must die, he was

⁶⁴ References to tabernacle or temple as God’s house: 1 Chr. 6:48; 9; 22; 2 Chr. 3:3; 4-5; Ezra 1:4; 2:68; 3:8, Ps. 42:4; 52:8; Jud. 9:1; Matt. 12:4, among others.

indicating that this would result in a process of recreation. After his death and resurrection, he would begin to prepare an eternal, joyful, peaceful, and righteous dwelling place for his disciples. Once the earth is created anew, that new creation will become the eternal home for the followers of Jesus.

⁴ *And you know the way to where I am going.* ⁵ *Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"* ⁶ *Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.* ⁷ *If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."* ⁸ *Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us."* ⁹ *Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?* ¹⁰ *Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works.* ¹¹ *Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves.* ¹² *"Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father.* ¹³ *Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.* ¹⁴ *If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.*

Unlike the *Ioudaioi* (Jn. 8:21), Jesus' disciples knew where he was going. (vs. 4) It is likely that Thomas first thought Jesus was referring to a secret hiding place, where he would now withdraw in order to escape his impending arrest (something that was done on a number of occasions⁶⁵). However, Jesus was speaking of something completely different. In verse 6, he declared to Thomas that he was preparing to go to his Father. As the Son of God, however, he did not need to follow a path to get there - He *was the way* to the Father!

It must be understood that these words (*I am the way, the truth and the life*) were not pronounced within the context of Muslim-Christian-Jewish-

⁶⁵ Cf. John 6:15.

Hindu-Buddhist and other types of modern religious polemical settings. Instead, all the main polemical settings of the time/space were intra-Israelite. All of them claimed that their way was the way to God. Judean authorities, since they were playing the central role in opposing Jesus, were naturally the main focus. Jesus declared to Thomas that they were wrong: *He was “the way, the truth and the life.”* If Israelites would believe in Him, they would surely get to the Father who had sent him. To such a degree was this so, that Jesus could say to them: “If you had known me, you would have known my Father also.” The Gospel repeatedly drives the same point home, to see Jesus, is to see God; to accept him, is to accept God; to serve him, is to serve God.

The name of Jesus means much more than we usually ascribe to it. The name, *Jesus (Yeshua means “He saves”)*, is a powerful symbol of the combined essence of all that Israel’s anointed King is; what he says and what he does. To ask something *in the name of Jesus* is to ask because of who he is, of what he says, and of what he does. There is indeed power in his Name, and we must seek no other. However, we must realize that it is not a simple addendum, or a “send” button, to our prayers. In spite of popular belief, we can pray in Jesus’ name without actually ending our prayer with the well-known phrase: “in Jesus’ Name. Amen.” The main thing here is that Jesus becomes the focal point of Israelite worship, the center of Israelite life. It was not Mt. Gerizim (like for Samaritan Israelites) and not Mt. Zion (like for Judean Israelites) which was the center of God’s presence – but Jesus, and him alone.

¹⁵ “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Comforter/Helper, to be with you forever, ¹⁷ even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. ¹⁸ “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. ¹⁹ Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live.

Israel Knohl, a professor at Hebrew University of Jerusalem, in his book *Messiah before Jesus*, proposed an intriguing theory: in the generation before Jesus, there was an Essene Jew in Jerusalem who claimed to be the Messiah. In a hymn he wrote, he described himself as “beloved of the king, a companion of the holy ones,” with a status more exalted than that of the

angels; yet he also presented himself as the “suffering servant” of Isaiah 53, one despised and rejected. Because of his wild claims, he was rejected by other Jews and eventually killed. His followers claimed that he rose after three days and went up to heaven, and that his suffering and death had all been part of God’s plan. Israel Knohl hypothesizes, in the next generation, Jesus inherited this idea of what he called “catastrophic messianism.” Most significantly, Israel Knohl proposes a specific historical identification for this messiah: he was Menahem the Essene, described in a passage in Josephus (*Ant.* 15.372-79) in which Menahem foretells that Herod will become king and thus wins Herod’s favor for the Essenes.

This is indeed a very interesting thesis, among other things, because of the intriguing phraseology used by Jesus to communicate to his apostles that the Holy Spirit (“another Comforter”) will come after his own death and departure to his Father’s house. If the Holy Spirit is the other *Comforter* to come, who was the original one? Knohl proposes that the Greek *paraclete* (comforter) is a translation from the Hebrew *Menahem* which also means “comforter.” If we were to see Jesus movement somehow connected to the Essene communities and at the same time sharply critical of them, then we could see Jesus’ identity as someone who provides real alternative to the Essene Menachem. Jesus will also be executed just like Menachem, but unlike him he will overcome death with life. Jesus is the first real Menachem (comforter); Another one was to follow.

Jesus was not the first one to oppose the evil shepherds of Israel; there were others before him who fought the system of the Ioudaioi. The Essene *Menahem*, did not succeed, the second *Menahem* - Jesus - did. But when he goes to heaven to secure a place for his followers, “another comforter” would be sent to earth to empower and teach God’s people. It just could be the case that Jesus saw himself within the tradition of the Essene Menahem who also opposed the Jerusalemite elite, declared himself divine, and was eventually killed.

I think this an interesting idea, but we are lacking much more evidence to conclude that this theory really works. At the very least we can conclude that both the man on whom Knohl posits his theory of Menahem’s identity, and Jesus Himself, come from the world of Jewish apocalyptic thinking. The time for the end of all things was near. God’s rule was breaking through the darkness of this world. (You can find full information on Knohl’s book in the bibliography and suggested readings section in the end of the book).

²⁰ *In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.* ²¹ *Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest*

myself to him.” ²² *Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, “Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?”* ²³ *Jesus answered him, “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.”* ²⁴ *Whoever does not love me does not keep my words.*

In verses 20-21 Jesus states, when the other Comforter arrives, he would manifest himself to his followers. Judah’s challenge to the apparent lack of logic in Jesus’ statement is understandable. After all, Jesus’ struggle had not been to persuade his disciples, since they were already following him, but to persuade the *Ioudaioi*, who in John 7:4 are referred to as “the world,” and who largely did not follow him. In verses 23-24 Jesus explains, while he views the *Ioudaioi* as “his own” in some very significant ways (1:11; 7:4; 11:33; 13:1; 19:40), ultimately “his own” are not simply the group to which



he belongs (the *Ioudaioi*), but those who belong to his Father (Jesus’ committed followers). These are his followers from all Israel. All those who love the Torah and are truly obedient to it are the ones who belong to Jesus and will be loved and accepted by his Father. No one other than these can claim to love Jesus in any way. They must obey His teachings.

And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father’s who sent me. ²⁵ *“These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you.”* ²⁶ *But the Comforter/Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.* ²⁷ *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.* ²⁸ *You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I will come to you.’ If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I.* ²⁹ *And now I have told you before it takes place, so that when it does take*

place you may believe.

In this section, there are many things that deserve our attention. I would like, however, to concentrate on verse 28b, where we read that Jesus said “my Father is greater than I.” On the one hand this is a proof text that is often used to show that Jesus is not divine – “God is God” - “The Son of God is the Son of God,” say those who claim this, usually by quoting this particular verse: “My Father is greater than I.” On the other hand, there are those (the majority) who believe in the traditional definition of the doctrine of the Trinity: God is One in three (Father, Son and Holy Spirit). In this belief, they affirm fully that Jesus is God. But when it comes to verses like this (vs. 28b), they feel very nervous and quickly become uncomfortable, not knowing how to deal with such a text.

There is one thing we should keep in mind before going on. John’s Gospel is a Gospel with high Christology, meaning that when the enigmatic theological language is deciphered, it shows Jesus to be divine. Not only does it show him as divine somewhere in the middle, or towards the end of the narrative (as do Matthew, Mark and Luke), but the Gospel of John begins from this very idea, and consistently carries it through. So, to say that the author of John’s Gospel does not think Jesus is divine amounts to suddenly declaring oneself to be out of one’s mind! In John’s Gospel, Jesus is God from the beginning to the end.

But is this all, or is it more nuanced? The answer to this question, as you might have already guessed, is *yes*, it *is* more nuanced. Daniel’s night visions are the key to understanding what is going on with John’s high Christology and Jesus’ statement about his subordination to the Father. Daniel saw the Ancient of Days (God the Father) residing on one of the two heavenly thrones. The Son of Man was brought up to him; The Ancient of Days crowned the Son of Man, seating him on the throne located on his right hand as a permanent heavenly priest, (Heb. 10:11-14) and giving him all judgment, rule, dominion, power, glory and worship over all the created order. (Dan. 7:13-14) In John’s Gospel, it is beyond question that Jesus filled the role of the *Son of Man*. He is, on one hand, equal to the *Ancient of Days*, but on the other hand, the Ancient of Days is indeed the Son of Man’s superior. Everything the Son of Man is and has comes from His Father and not from himself.

No matter what we happen to think of the doctrine of the Trinity as it is traditionally explained, we must do it justice. The doctrine of the Trinity is a Christian theological construct created several centuries after the New Testament was authored; nevertheless, its roots go deep into the Holy Scripture. For example, the Westminster Confession of Faith, in its treatment of God and the Holy Trinity states:

“There is but one only, living, and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts... God has all life... He is the alone fountain of all being, of whom, through whom, and to whom are all things; and has most sovereign dominion over them, to do by them, for them, or upon them whatsoever Himself pleases. In the unity of the Godhead there be three Persons of one substance, power, and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The Father is *of none, neither begotten nor proceeding*; the Son is *eternally begotten of the Father*; the Holy Spirit *eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son.*”

This is to say that the standard and traditional way to define Trinity is not to simply say that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are equal. That, by itself is, theologically speaking, an heretical statement, because it affirms one aspect of the Trinity, but denies another. In the proper definition of the Trinity, all three are of the same essence, but they are not the same in functionality. While the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are equal in power and glory; they are not equal in their roles. The Father alone eternally begets the Son, while both are commissioning the Holy Spirit (according to this historical document at least) to carry out his/her work in the world. There is no confusion here. Jesus is God incarnate, but his Father is greater than He.

³⁰ *I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no claim on me,* ³¹ *but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us go from here.*

Jesus had told Judah to go and do what he had planned, knowing that within an hour he would be arrested. The primary person behind his arrest (though no doubt many including Caiaphas were involved) was Annas, the father-in-law of the current high priest. While it is possible that Jesus saw in him the representation of Satan’s power (“the ruler of this world”), it is more likely that, together with other uses of the term “the world” in John, Jesus’ intention was that the ruler of the *Ioudaioi* was on the way to arrest him. Jesus then, in verse 30b, declared his innocence of any charges the “ruler of this world” might press against him. (“He has no claim on me.”)

The *Ioudaioi* in particular, being symbolically representative of the entire *world*, must be persuaded that Jesus loved His Father. Jesus then took steps to show he was resolute in completing his mission. He knew from the beginning that the Cross lay in his path, but he was not going to go to his Cross passively. He was in control. He had said previously “no one takes

my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.” (Jn. 10:18) Because of this, Jesus, in no uncertain terms, told his disciples: “Rise, let us go from here.”





Chapter 15

The Last Speech of Jesus (Part II)

☆¹ *“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. ² Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. ³ Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.*

The next three chapters of the Gospel are mostly composed of the direct words of Jesus to his disciples. The Gospel begins this teaching marathon with Jesus comparing himself to the vine in God’s vineyard, evoking one of the greatest Israelite prophetic symbols. We have already seen that the Gospel of John continuously echoes several prophetic voices of the Hebrew Bible, notably Isaiah, Zechariah and Ezekiel. The book of Isaiah contains significant content regarding the concept of the vineyard. In short, according to this Isaiah reference, Israel is God’s vineyard and its wellbeing depends upon this vineyard bearing fruit. We read in Isaiah 5:1-16:⁶⁶

“Now I will sing for my friend a song about his vineyard. My friend had a vineyard on a hill with very rich soil. He dug and cleared the field of stones and planted the best grapevines there... He hoped good grapes would grow there, but only bad ones grew... Now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard: I will remove the hedge, and it will be burned. I will break down the stone wall, and it will be walked on. I will ruin my field... The vineyard belonging to the Lord Almighty is the nation of Israel; the garden that he loves is the people of Judah. He looked for justice, but there was only killing. He hoped for right living, but there were only cries of pain... The Lord Almighty will receive glory by judging fairly; the holy God will show himself holy by doing what is right.”

A similar idea coupled with judgment can be seen in Ezekiel 15:6-8:

“Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: ‘Like the wood of the vine among the trees of the forest, which I have given to the fire for fuel, so have I given up the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And I will set my face against them. Though they escape from the fire, the fire shall yet consume

⁶⁶ Other Israel-vineyard passages are: Jer. 2:21; 5:10; 6:9; 12:10; Hos. 10:1; Matt 21:33-44.

them, and you will know that I am the LORD, when I set my face against them. And I will make the land desolate, because they have acted faithlessly, declares the Lord God.’”

Jesus taught his disciples to love one another by washing each other’s feet, thus setting the example of service and self-sacrifice for the new leaders of renewed Israel. Between the account of this powerful act and the actual arrest of Jesus, we are privileged to hear Jesus himself speak to his disciples. Up to this point in the Gospel there have been six occasions when Jesus defined himself by using the phrase: “I am” - *I am* the bread of life (John 6:35, 48); *I am* the light of the world (Jn. 8:12, 9:5); *I am* the door (Jn. 10:9); *I am* the good shepherd (Jn. 10:11); *I am* the resurrection and the life (Jn. 11:25); *I am* the way, the truth and the life (Jn. 14:6); and now, in this section that immediately precedes his arrest and violent death, he makes the following claim – *I am the true Vine*. In verse 2, Jesus spoke of the pruning activity of God. Not every branch in the vineyard will remain; only those branches that bear fruit will remain. This is the language of judgment. God is the judge; Jesus is the one (vs. 3) who is able to present those who follow him as acceptable/clean before his Father. The only purification people really need is his word.

⁴ *Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.* ⁵ *I am the vine; you are the branches.*



Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

Jesus calls himself the *true vine* and, as is common in John, he does not directly quote from the Hebrew Scriptures, as do the Synoptics. He usually merely alludes to these powerful Old Testament texts. It is possible (though not at all certain) that John's Jesus not only refers to Isaiah 5, but also to Genesis 49:22, where we read "Joseph is a fruitful vine, even a fruitful vine by a well; whose branches run over the wall." This, and the remainder of the passage, speaks of the mighty blessings placed upon Joseph by his father Jacob.

It is clear Joseph is in many ways a type of Christ. We see this in his departure from his father, his betrayal, his suffering, and his return from the dead (though clearly in Joseph's case, only symbolically). You may recall that Christ and the Samaritan woman conversed in Samaria at the site of the burial of Joseph's bones. Joseph was pictured in Genesis 49:22 as the unstoppable vine that overcomes obstacles and is full of life which is irreversibly blessed by God. Its branches will even climb over a wall. It is possible that John's Jesus is shown here as the ultimate Joseph, who is the *blessed vine*. This is the vine to which all members of Israel, especially its leaders, must be connected so that they may survive, be blessed, and bear fruit. The connection that I brought out previously between Judah betraying his brother Joseph, and Judah betraying Jesus, may provide an intriguing backdrop to this section.

If this is the case, then my hypothesis that John may have been written to particularly reach Samaritan Israelites (though obviously not exclusively) with the Gospel of Christ, is strengthened by this connection to Joseph. You may recall, for the Samaritan Israelites, Joseph was one of the great figures of their history and identity. Therefore this connection would be logical, especially to those Israelites who identified with Joseph far more than did other Israelites at this time (namely the Judeans).

⁹ As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and

abide in his love. ¹¹ *These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.* ¹² *“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.*

If my hypothesis of a connection with Joseph is correct, (incidentally thanks go to my friend and mentor David Loden for pointing this out to me), it is clear that Joseph’s blessing itself originated with God. From there, through Joseph – the *blessed vine* – blessing can flow to all branches of the vine and they will bear much fruit; first because of their connection to the vine, but ultimately because of God’s blessings upon the vine itself (Joseph/Jesus).⁶⁷

In the previous section, we established the fact that, from the standpoint of Jesus, the number twelve for his apostles was not coincidental. He was the Good Shepherd of Israel who established and delegated his authority to the twelve to rule Israel in his place after his absence. They were the new heads of the Israelite tribes and are reminiscent of the twelve patriarchs. Jesus, as he establishes new leadership over Israel, recalls this story of deep family dysfunction, saying that these new heads must behave differently than the original tribal heads. These new leaders must love one another.

¹³ *Greater love has no one than this that someone lay down his life for his friends.* ¹⁴ *You are my friends if you do what I command you.* ¹⁵ *No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.* ¹⁶ *You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.* ¹⁷ *These things I command you, so that you will love one another.*

For several years, the disciples of Rabbi Jesus (as they referred to him) were his servants. This may sound strange to modern ears, but in ancient times, especially in this Jewish setting, if someone was a student of a religious leader, the student was also his servant. The time for Jesus’ departure had come. He began the final preparation of his disciples for the very challenging task of being his representatives during a foundational

⁶⁷ King David was also given the same promise. (Ps. 18:29)

period that would prove to be incredibly unstable. The time had come for them to be included in his council, not only as his disciples/students, but also as his friends. He was approaching his death, and through it would show them that they must follow his example and commit to what one day would become one of the core Jewish values: *Ahavat Yisrael* - Love of (the people of) Israel. The love of one another is first of all contextually described in terms of the love of all Israelites within Israel – something that seemed extremely hard, if not impossible to do, but it had to begin with the new leaders of Israel – the twelve.

¹⁸ “*If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.*” ¹⁹ *If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.* ²⁰ *Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours.*

It is very challenging to understand John’s use of the word translated as “world.” It seems that John uses this word *kosmos* (κόσμος), not as created order (i.e. it is not planet earth including humanity that is in view here); instead, the word *kosmos* here is something adversarial to God’s order (Jn. 7:7; 9:39; 12:31; 15:18-19). One particular defining factor is present in every text where the word *kosmos* is used – it is not an allegiance to a neutral order, but precisely to the order of things/beings that oppose God. It is possible the reason there is interchangeability of meaning between the *world* as *Ioudaioi*, and the *world* as generally oppositional to God, is because the oppositional forces had changed by the time the Gospel was finally written.

Please, let me explain this point. I am proposing that at the time of Jesus, when the events described in the Gospel were taking place, the opposing force was the *Ioudaioi*. When John was writing the Gospel, and certainly his letters, the main opposing force of the Jesus movement was already the Roman Empire.⁶⁸ This opposing order is, nevertheless, an object of his redemptive love, attention and restoration (Jn. 1:29; 3:16; 6:33; 14:31;

⁶⁸ If the same person who wrote the Gospel and the letters, actually wrote the book of Revelation (and I am aware of significant language style differences between them and other issues), the shift of meaning could make perfect sense. The Book of Revelation is a Jewish document that is heavily anti-Roman. The ambiguity of meaning in John and his letters goes further than the *Ioudaioi* and the Roman Empire. It reaches to the general world/order of evil that opposes God anywhere and anytime. So I am suggesting that the shift in John is from the particular to the universal.

17:23), because it was once created by God through his everlasting Word. (Jn. 1:1, 10) The primary identity of the *world* in this intra-Israelite Gospel is not, surprisingly, the *Ioudaioi*. (Jn. 7:4-7; 8:23; 9:39; 14:17-31; 18:20) This particular component certainly calls for further study of John's Gospel and its use of the word *kosmos*.

²¹ *But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me.* ²² *If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have been guilty of sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin.* ²³ *Whoever hates me hates my Father also.* ²⁴ *If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin, but now they have seen and hated both me and my Father.* ²⁵ *But the word that is written in their Law must be fulfilled: 'They hated me without a cause.'*

It is still clear that these particular words of Jesus belong in a particular historical setting. The opposition by the *Ioudaioi* and in particular, by those in leadership, the evil shepherds of Israel, is clearly in view. The summarizing phrase in verse 25: "they hated me without a cause," referring to the persecution and suffering of Jesus, is a direct reference to several of the Psalms of Lament. In Psalm 35:1-8 we read:

"Contend, O LORD, with those who contend with me; fight against those who fight against me! ...Say to my soul, "I am your salvation!" Let them be put to shame and dishonor who seek after my life! ...Let their way be dark and slippery, with the angel of the LORD pursuing them! For without cause they hid their net for me; without cause they dug a pit for my life."

While in Psalm 69:1-4 we read:

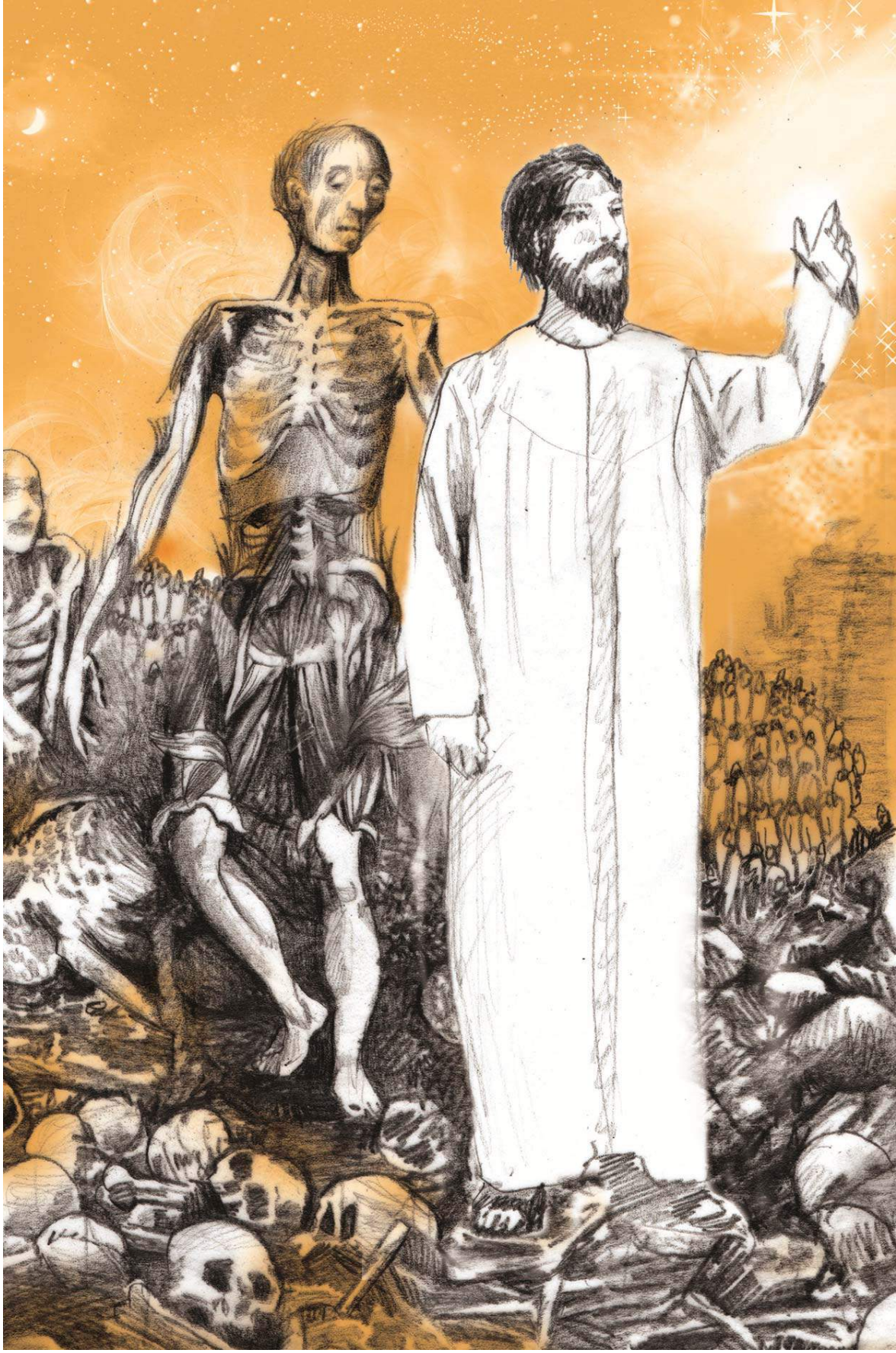
"Save me, O God! For the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me. I am weary with my crying out; my throat is parched. My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God. More in number than the hairs of my head are those who hate me without cause..."

This is the case throughout the Gospel of John. The *Ioudaioi* launched a full attack against Jesus, hating him without a *justified* cause. And this is the

The Jewish Gospel of John

case with the world - it has no justified reason to oppose God, but it hates Him and everyone who belongs to Him.





Chapter 16

The Last Speech of Jesus (Part III)

✠¹ *“I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. ²They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. ³And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me. ⁴But I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told them to you.*

Jesus is preparing his disciples for persecution, disappointment, and extreme hardship. What he said in Chapter 15, and what he will continue to say now, is meant to strengthen the disciples' commitment. This was because they would be banished from the synagogue system of the *Ioudaioi*.

We must understand that the word *synagogue* was not exclusively Jewish. When it was, as is certainly the case in the Gospels, it was not simply a Jewish alternative to the Christian Church as is more or less the case today. Synagogues in ancient times were something like today's Jewish community centers and not like modern synagogues. The main purpose of being a part of the synagogue was not to hold worship services as it is today. The synagogue was part of the community in every way and in all its aspects. Synagogues functioned as lecture halls, hotels, theaters, discussion clubs, as well as places where Torah was read and studied. It is not as if worship was not going on in the synagogue, but that it was not as central to it as was communal mingling.

Basically, Jesus was warning his disciples that they must be prepared to pay any price for following him. Whether it was to be excluded from all the benefits that were controlled by the *Ioudaioi* system community (synagogue) or to be put to death (vs. 2) because of their affiliation with him, the disciples had to be prepared to act decisively and with total commitment.

“I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. ⁵But now I am going to him who

sent me, and none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’
⁶ But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. ⁷ Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Comforter/Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.

Jesus knew the more he spoke of his departure, and the more the situation around him intensified, the sadder his disciples would become. They already understood his arrest and execution were imminent. As was discussed in the previous section, Jesus was referring to the prophecy of Ezekiel (Ezek. 37) that deals with the resurrection of Israel - the valley of dry bones vision. There, the Son of Man (assumed to be Ezekiel) is told to prophesy to the wind/spirit. When he does so, the wind comes and brings about resurrection.

There is no doubt that the *Comforter/Helper* in verse 7 refers to the Spirit in Ezekiel 37. What is interesting is that Jesus said: *I must go, so that the Comforter/Helper can come*. The implication is that this prophecy could only be fulfilled after Jesus had ascended to his heavenly throne and was able to prophesy/speak with the authority of the ultimate Son of Man, directing the Holy Spirit of God to finish the work he had begun.

⁸ And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: ⁹ concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; ¹⁰ concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; ¹¹ concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.

In verses 8-11 John tells us that the Holy Spirit will do three things: He will convict those opposed to Jesus’ order (the *Ioudaioi*): 1) of sin, because they did not accept Jesus by faith; 2) of Jesus’ innocence, because God received Jesus to Himself; and 3) of judgment, because the ruler of the *Ioudaioi* will be deposed from his place of authority and power.

¹² “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³ When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify

me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵ *All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.*

In verses 13-14 we see the Son of Man (in Ezek. 37:1-14, Ezekiel himself) prophesied to God's Holy Wind to resurrect the whole house of Israel. The wind of God will come spiritually and physically to resurrect Israel, but she will do so by the authority of the two powers in heaven – the Father and his royal Son. We read in Ezekiel 37:9-10:

“Then he said to me, ‘Prophesy to the Spirit/breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to her/it: *This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come, Spirit, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.*’ So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.”

This vision of resurrection is intimately connected to the vision of reunification of the South (Judah) and the North (Joseph/Ephraim). This fits perfectly with my thesis that the Gospel of John was written within the context of the Judean-Samaritan conflict, as it focusses on seeking the reunification of Judeans with all other Israelite groups, including Samaritans. Although I have already quoted this text a couple of times, we read in Ezekiel 37:15-22:

“Son of man, take a stick of wood and write on it, ‘Belonging to Judah and the Israelites associated with him.’ Then take another stick of wood, and write on it, ‘belonging to Joseph (that is, to Ephraim) and all the Israelites associated with him.’ Join them together into one stick so that they will become one in your hand... I will make them into a single stick of wood, and they will become one in my hand ...I will take the Israelites out of the nations where they have gone. I will gather them from all around and bring them back into their own land. I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel. There will be one king over all of them and they will never again be two nations or be divided into two kingdoms.”

As you will continue to see, I think many words of Jesus in the Gospel of John must be read against the background of the prophecies of Ezekiel. When we do this, his words begin to make sense, both locally and universally.

¹⁶ *“A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again*

a little while, and you will see me.” ¹⁷ *So some of his disciples said to one another, “What is this that he says to us, ‘A little while, and you will not see me, and again a little while, and you will see me’; and, ‘because I am going to the Father’?”* ¹⁸ *So they were saying, “What does he mean by ‘a little while’? We do not know what he is talking about.”* ¹⁹ *Jesus knew that they wanted to ask him, so he said to them, “Is this what you are asking yourselves, what I meant by saying, ‘A little while and you will not see me, and again a little while and you will see me’?”*

The disciples of Jesus had no way of knowing what was about to happen, and his very confusing words did not help. They did know that Jesus’ life was in danger, but they did not know to what degree this was imminent. They certainly did not know during his private interaction with him, Jesus had told Judah to go ahead with his plan. In other words, they did not know what Jesus knew – that he was about to be arrested, taken away, illegally tried, publically humiliated and killed, and then rise from the dead, only to appear to them again.

²⁰ *Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy.* ²¹ *When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world.* ²² *So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.*

As Jesus continued with the idea of the *world* as those in opposition to God’s power (the *Ioudaioi*’s leadership), he prepares his disciples for the fact that their Passover joy will soon be turned to sadness, before it turns again to joy with his resurrection and ascension. Soon it will be the world’s turn to be joyful, celebrating what they would see as the final defeat of the Jesus movement.

²³ *In that day you will ask nothing of me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you.* ²⁴ *Until now you have asked nothing in my*

*name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.*²⁵ *“I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures of speech but will tell you plainly about the Father.”*²⁶ *In that day you will ask in my name, and I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; ²⁷ for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. ²⁸ I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father.”*

As Jesus transforms his disciples into a company of friends and co-workers in God’s vineyard, Israel, he now tells them that soon they will have a new and wonderful privilege. They will be able to communicate with the Father in the name of Jesus and expect a positive fatherly response directly from Him. The task of Jesus was to pave the way to the Father. He was about to leave the place that opposes God (in this case Judea as *world*) and return to heaven where all obey God. One day, God’s desire will be accomplished on the earth as it is in heaven. But, at least in Hebrew, which most probably was the underlying thought and conceptual language of the Greek Gospels, the Earth (אָרֶץ) refers also to the Land of Israel and not to planet Earth. So it could very well be, that Jesus actually taught his disciples to pray “Your Kingdom come... to Israel (אָרֶץ) as it is in Heaven” and not the generic “on Earth as it is in Heaven.”⁶⁹ The Lord’s Prayer, by extension, naturally does apply to all the earth and all the people of the world, but I sometimes wonder how many things we miss by reading everything in the Gospels through our universal lenses of generalization and premature application.

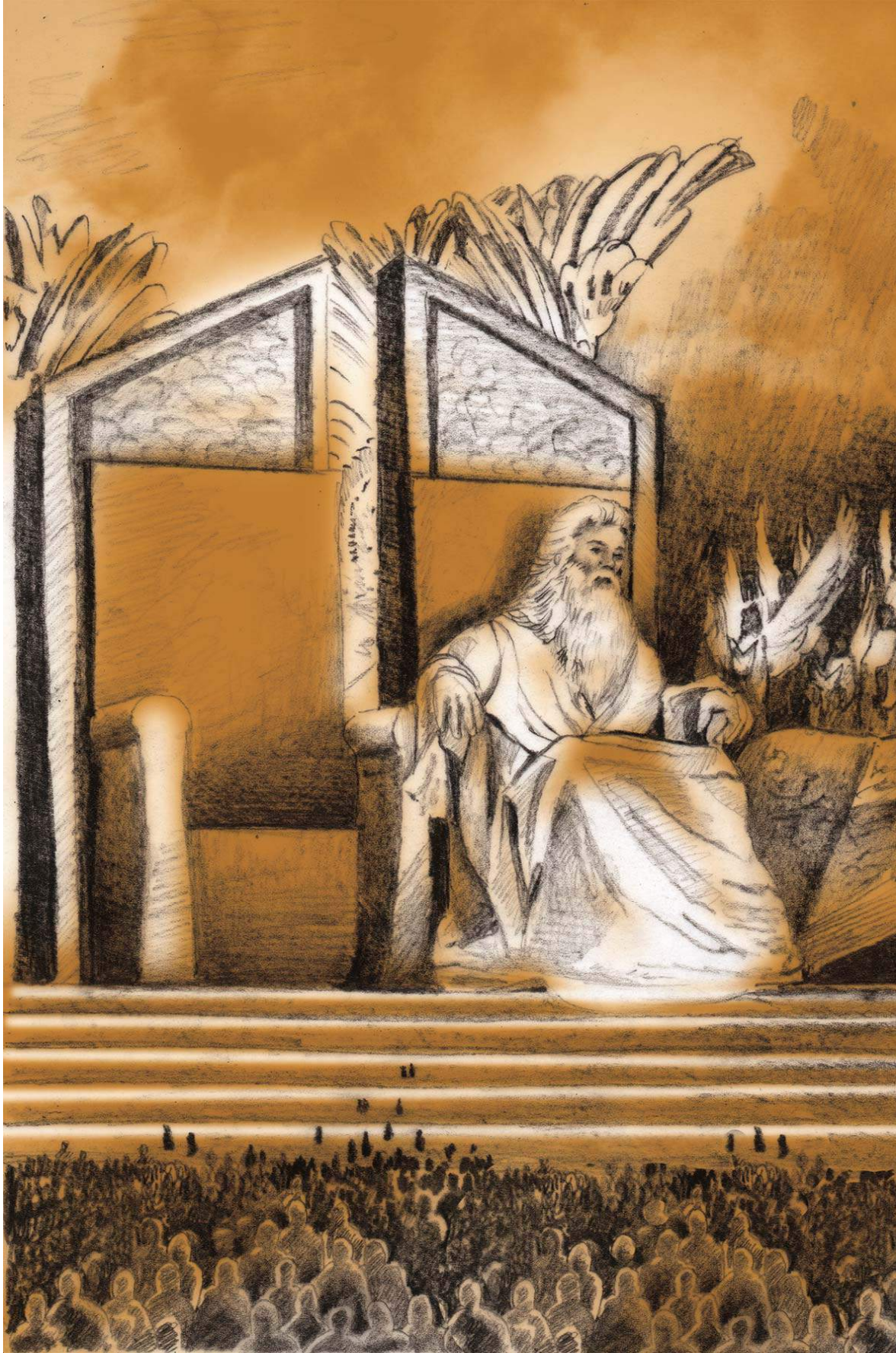
²⁹ *His disciples said, “Ah, now you are speaking plainly and not using figurative speech! ³⁰ Now we know that you know all things and do not need anyone to question you; this is why we believe that you came from God.” ³¹ Jesus answered them, “Do you now believe? ³² Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me. ³³ I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have*

⁶⁹ Cf. Matt. 6:10; Didache 8:2.

tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”

In this passage, Jesus predicts very harsh persecution against his disciples and against those who would follow them. Several times he repeats the idea that he is warning them ahead of time not to be surprised when persecution comes, but to take courage because this was to be expected. In the midst of this tribulation, they could be confident that Jesus had overcome the opposing forces of the time – the Jerusalemite leadership of the *Ioudaioi*. Therefore, by faith, his disciples who are in Him (vine and branches imagery) will know a peace, even in the midst of tribulation. In spite of the extreme challenge ahead, the disciples needed to know that Jesus has in fact overcome the world.





Chapter 17

The Great High Priestly Prayer of Jesus

✧ ¹ *When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, ² since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. ³ And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”*

Jesus clearly stated that all the authority, as described in Daniel 7:13-14, had already been granted to him. What is interesting here is that we normally think of this event as taking place in history only after the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. However, it seems that Jesus viewed it all as one package. This is why he emphatically stated in his prayer that all authority had already been transferred to the Son of Man. Now he is only asking God to glorify the Son, but not to grant him all authority.

⁴ *I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. ⁵ And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.” ⁶ “I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world.” “Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷ Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. ⁸ For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.*

Pre-Christian, Jewish theology of *Logos/Memra* is at work here. Jesus’ pre-existence and eternal-divine nature as the Son of God has come out many times in this Gospel. His own self-awareness of this is clear from the text.

God’s name is a shortcut (using modern language) to everything that

God is, says and does. Jesus stated that he manifested (disclosed) God's Name to all those who followed him. This means at the end of his ministry, Jesus had a deep sense of satisfaction in the work he performed on His Father's behalf. He was content with what he had accomplished. He manifested God's Name to all whom the Father had given him.

⁹ I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. ¹⁰ All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them. ¹¹ And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. ¹² While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me."

In this particular prayer, Jesus states explicitly that he is petitioning his Father only on behalf of his followers. He underscores his intimate relationship with the Father by saying that *all* that are his are also his Father's, and all that are his Father's are also his. (vs. 10) Jesus, in anticipating his departure to the Father, had already stated that he had left the world. This is a typical realized action statement by Jesus. Although he had not yet left this world (this opposing order) in a physical sense; in another sense, he had already left. Jesus' prayer is centered on asking his Father to preserve the work he had done. (vs. 11) But notice something more here: it is not just that Jesus had a mission from the Father to carry out, but there is also a sense of ownership that is clearly present. This is not simply a servant who did his job. This is someone who Himself is now deeply invested in these people. Jesus, therefore, personally asks the Father who commissioned him to do it, to keep them in His Name.



¹² "I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost

except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. ¹³ *But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves.* ¹⁴ *I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.* ¹⁵ *I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.* ¹⁶ *They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.* ¹⁷ *Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.* ¹⁸ *As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.* ¹⁹ *And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.*

Jesus and his disciples' relations to the *Ioudaioi* and others who oppose him are such that they live physically inside of this order that opposes God. This order will one day be redeemed, but that is still in the future. For now, the world opposes God and his Messiah. Jesus' clarification is important. He does not ask the Father to remove them from the world. The order itself is not bad but it must be reformed and redeemed to become the order that embraces and supports the values of the Kingdom of God. It must cease to be the opposing regime that it is now.

To be in the world is dangerous, not only for Jesus but also for anyone who follows him. The ultimate price of martyrdom may have to be paid. Jesus is clear in his prayer: "Father, keep them from the evil one." The evil one here is primarily the ruler of this opposing order, but in another sense, the ultimate evil one is of course the ultimate enemy of God – Satan. Sanctification (making and keeping them holy) is of primary concern to Jesus. It is extremely important to everything he is doing. If his disciples are not sanctified, they will not be able to lead God's people into a new redeemed direction. Jesus' mission must not fail. To ensure this, he asks his Father to see that it is done.

²⁰ *"I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word,* ²¹ *that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.*

These verses are very important for us as we seek to understand the relationship of the world as *Ioudaioi*, to the world as a general order opposing the God of Israel at any time and in any place. As I suggested before, I think that what accounts for the interchangeability of this term is that by the time the Gospel of John was written, the main enemy of the Jesus-followers (the main opposing force) was no longer the *Ioudaioi*, whose authority was brought to ground zero with the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E.; It was now the Roman Empire. The ownership of the world throughout history will change hands many times, the message of the Gospel of John is clear – Jesus wins! He has overcome the world. As long as we are with him and in him, we share in that victory. All those who read and hear this Gospel must make the choice to submit himself/ herself to the loving, but firm rule of the Son of God.



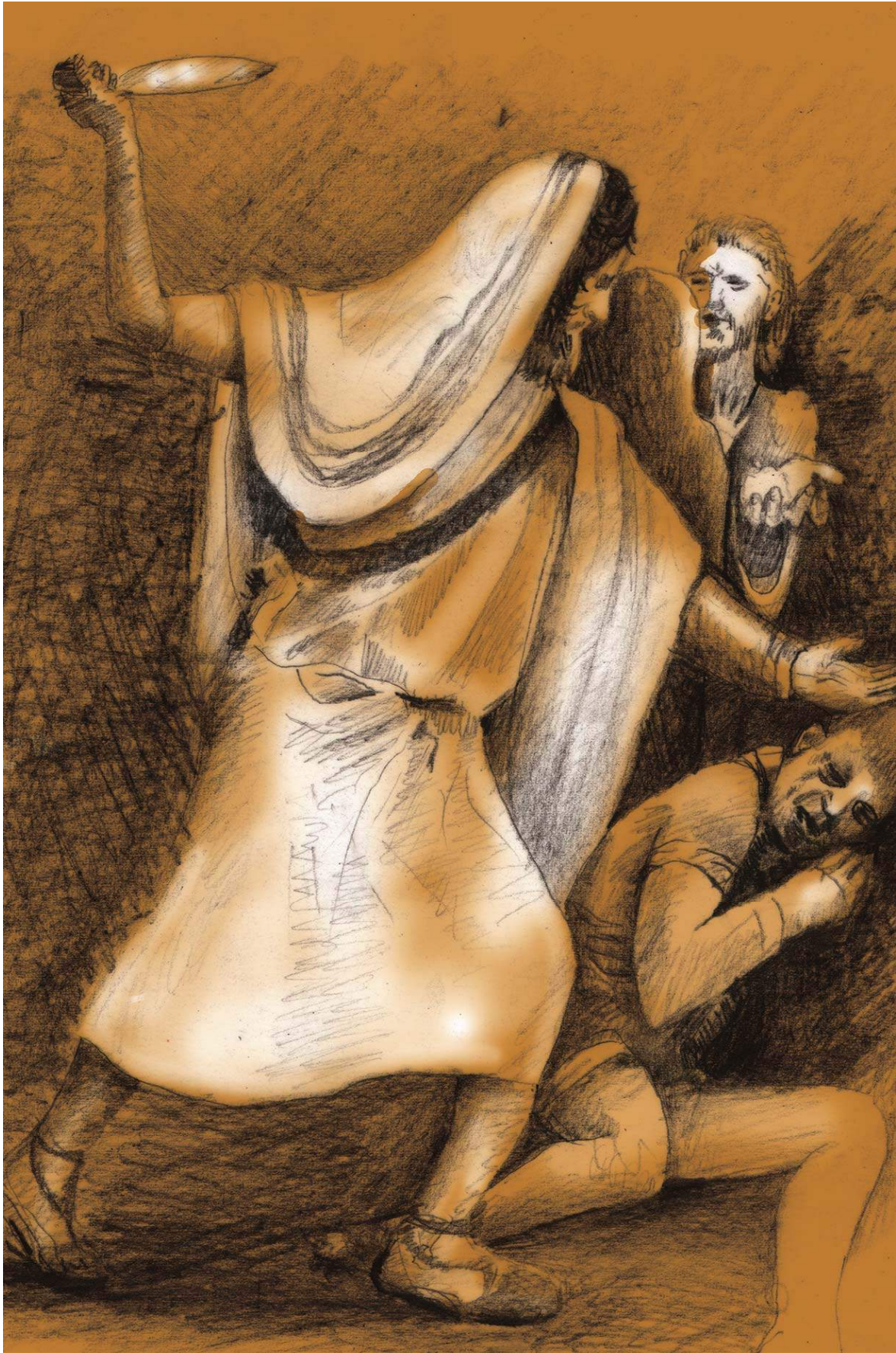
²² *The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one,* ²³ *I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.* ²⁴ *Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given*

me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.” ²⁵ *“O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me.”* ²⁶ *“I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”*

If one follows the logic of the text closely, one cannot help but notice that the *world* is not simply an evil force. Opposing force? Yes. Satanic? No. Why? Because it was very important to Jesus that this *world* would be persuaded that Israel’s God sent Jesus and that this God loves the disciples of Jesus as much as He loves Jesus himself. There are two hurdles here that need to be overcome. The *world* must first see that Jesus is from God, and then understand God’s love for Jesus’ followers is as strong as his love and approval for Jesus himself. If the world fully belongs to Satan, why should God and Jesus even care? “Save the disciples and send the rest to hell!” could have been Jesus’ attitude. But his attitude shows he has a deep love and abiding care for this oppositional order (the world). It was very important to him that this order would stop being oppositional and start being submissive.

Once again, whether the *Ioudaioi* or the Roman Empire was in view, we can see how Jesus’ words can be significant in both historical circumstances. Jesus and His disciples must be justified in the eyes of the world – a strange desire indeed, unless God has truly loved the world, as John had already stated in John 3:16: “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.”





Chapter 18

Arrest; Meeting in Annas' House; Peter's Denial; Jesus' Trial before Pilate

✧ ¹ *When Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the brook Kidron, where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. ² Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, for Jesus often met there with his disciples.*

When speaking these words, Jesus' feet literally stood on the Mount of Olives. The Mount of Olives or Mount Olivet (הַר הַזַּיְתִּים, *Har HaZeitim*) is a mountain ridge, east of and adjacent to, Jerusalem's Old City. It is named for the olive groves that once covered its slopes. The southern part of the Mount was the necropolis of the ancient Judean/Southern kingdom. The Mount of Olives is a two-mile long ridge, or foot hill, with three summits. Just east of the Mount of Olives is the wilderness that leads down to Jericho and the Jordan Valley. David ascended the Mount of Olives when he fled from his son Absalom. (2 Sam. 15:30) When Jesus was in Jerusalem, he often stayed in Bethany, a village on the east side of the Mount of Olives, about a two-mile walk southeast of Jerusalem. The walk from Jerusalem to Bethany took Jesus through Gethsemane.

The Garden of Gethsemane appears to be a place where Jesus and his disciples often regrouped without threat of arrest. It was near the brook of Kidron. The Kidron Valley itself was situated between the Mount of Olives and Jerusalem. In Luke 21:37 we read, "every day he was teaching in the temple, but at night he went out and lodged on the mount called Olivet." While Jesus and his disciples did fear for their lives, the ultimate fear that filled the hearts of the current leadership in Jerusalem was the impact Jesus himself had on the movement he was leading. This Jesus movement included those who followed him with utmost commitment, as well as those who did not, but who found his leadership inspiring. This comes up later when Annas holds a pre-trial against Jesus in his residence. The very first thing he will ask, even before he would ask about Jesus' teaching, would be a question about his disciples. (Jn. 18:19)

³ *So Judas, having procured a band of soldiers and some officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees, went there with lanterns and torches and weapons.*

It is interesting that the Gospel writer places blame on Judas and says that Judas did not simply betray Jesus by telling his enemies where Jesus was located, but he actually led the team that came to arrest Jesus. The word translated as “a band of soldiers” is a bit misleading. The word *σπεῖραν* (*speiran*) is a technical term for a Roman cohort, normally a force of 600 men. The cohort was commanded by a) *χιλίαρχος ciliarco*, see verse 12). It is improbable that an entire cohort was being sent to arrest a single man. It is likely that *σπεῖραν* here refers only to a *maniple*, a force of 200. Even so, we must not picture a few soldiers coming to arrest Jesus. We are talking about a massive operation with the use of both Temple priestly guards and Roman soldiers stationed in Jerusalem in the Antonia Fortress that overlooks both the Temple and the Pool of Bethesda.

The Temple leaders wanted to arrest Jesus and stop his rapidly growing influence. The last time the Temple guards were sent to arrest Jesus, they failed completely. They seemed to be so impressed with his words, just as the Temple police had been, that they too began to doubt the orders from their superiors. This time, extra precautions were taken to prevent another failure, so the leaders requested a Roman cohort to join the Temple guard to reinforce their compliance. Enemies of Jesus were fearful of him and his followers in the context of the approaching Passover. This was the traditional revolutionary time that reminded the Israelites of God’s mighty deliverance from slavery in Egypt.

⁴ *Then Jesus, knowing all that would happen to him, came forward and said to them, “Whom do you seek?”* ⁵ *They answered him, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Jesus said to them, “I am he.” Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them.* ⁶ *When Jesus said to them, “I am he,” they drew back and fell to the ground.*

The arrest and trial of Jesus in the Gospel of John is very different from what is recorded in the synoptic Gospels. Not only does this Gospel not tell us about the trial with Caiaphas (Matt. 26:57-68; Mark 14:53-65), it also portrays Jesus in full control of what is happening. One gets a feeling that Jesus knows it, orchestrates it, and displays his power throughout. Here too his initiative and control are beyond doubt.

The practice of bowing face-down before God is widely attested in the

Bible. (Gen. 17:3; Ex.34:8; Gen. 18:2; Is. 49:23) This idea is seen even more in the prophetic books of Ezekiel (3:23, 9:8, 11:13, 43:3, 44:4) and Daniel. (8:17,18, 10:9,15) Given our earlier observations that the Gospel of John has a special interest in Ezekiel and Daniel, this is at least intriguing. No doubt the people who came to arrest Jesus did not fall down before him in voluntary worship, but his power had swept them off their feet, certainly humbling their pride.

⁷ So he asked them again, “Whom do you seek?” And they said, “Jesus of Nazareth.” ⁸ Jesus answered, “I told you that I am he. So, if you seek me, let these men go.” ⁹ This was to fulfill the word that he had spoken: “Of those whom you gave me I have lost not one.”

In his arrest, Jesus, the Good Shepherd of the sheep, is bargaining for the safety of his sheep. Their well-being is very important to him. Their safety is also very important to him at this time.

¹⁰ Then Simon Peter, having a sword, drew it and struck the high priest’s servant and cut off his right ear (The servant’s name was Malchus). ¹¹ So Jesus said to Peter, “Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?”

While other more symbolic interpretations are of course possible, it is most likely that Peter was going to kill Malchus with his sword, and had been aiming at his head. Why did he cut off his ear instead? Did he simply miss his target? Verse 11 features Jesus’ exchange with Peter after his reaction to the impending arrest of his beloved teacher. The cup of God’s wrath was meant for all those who oppose the rule of Israel’s God, (Jer. 25:15-26) but because Jesus’ attitude towards the world that hates him is one of love and redemption, He will be drinking this cup on their behalf. (vs. 11) He understood that, while he deserved only the cup of salvation (Ps. 116:13), He must instead drink the cup of God’s judgment and wrath on their behalf.

¹² So the band of soldiers and their captain and the officers of the Ioudaioi arrested Jesus and bound him.

The Gospel of John is well-known for giving more details about every

event than do the other Gospels. It is likely that John, by mentioning that Jesus was bound (something the other Gospels do not do), was showing the obvious connection with Abraham's offering of Isaac. (Gen. 22:1-19) Isaac, like Jesus, was willing to accept his own death. Like Jesus, he was bound, and like Jesus he would (figuratively) be raised from the dead. We read in Hebrews 11:19: "Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death."

¹³ *First they led him to Annas, for he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year.* ¹⁴ *It was Caiaphas who had advised the Ioudaioi that it would be expedient that one man should die for the people.*

The Romans only allowed the high priests to serve terms, but many Jews believed that to become a high priest was a life-long position. This may explain why Caiaphas was the formal high priest, but his father-in-law Annas was still wielding an incredible amount of power and influence. So much so that following the arrest of Jesus, he was first brought to Annas. It is interesting that, as in the previous time Jesus had come before him, Caiaphas is not portrayed in a particularly negative light. In fact, his high priestly office was honored in John 11:50. It could be an interesting possibility that the *ruler of the world* in the Gospel of John was none other than Annas – the father-in-law of Caiaphas.

¹⁵ *Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple. Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he entered with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest,* ¹⁶ *but Peter stood outside at the door.*

This, among many other hints in the Gospel of John, may point to the fact that the author of this Gospel was a Levitical priest according to his family lineage. In fact, there are some early traditions that link John, the son of Zebedee, himself one of the strong candidates for the role of the author of this Gospel, with the Levitical priesthood. The early Church historian Eusebius quotes Polycrates of Ephesus (c. 130-196) saying that this was the case with John, the son of Zebedee. (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.31.3)

So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to the servant girl who kept watch at the door, and brought Peter in. ¹⁷ *The servant girl at the door*

said to Peter, "You also are not one of this man's disciples, are you?" He said, "I am not." ¹⁸ Now the servants and officers had made a charcoal fire, because it was cold, and they were standing and warming themselves. Peter also was with them, standing and warming himself. ¹⁹ The high priest then questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching.

Notice the High Priest questioned Jesus about his teachings second and about his disciples/followers first. The real concern was not Jesus and his teaching, but Jesus and his following. It was Annas (vs. 19) who first questioned Jesus and only then sent him to Caiaphas. (vs. 24) Annas officially served as High Priest for ten years (6–15 C.E.), when at the age of 36 he was deposed by the procurator Gratus. Yet, while having been officially removed from office, he remained as one of the nation's most influential political and social individuals, aided greatly by the use of his five sons and his son-in-law as puppet High Priests.

²⁰ Jesus answered him, "I have spoken openly to the world. I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all Ioudaioi come together. I have said nothing in secret. ²¹ Why do you ask me? Ask those who have heard me what I said to them; they know what I said." ²² When he had said these things, one of the officers standing by struck Jesus with his hand, saying, "Is that how you answer the high priest?" ²³ Jesus answered him, "If what I said is wrong, bear witness about the wrong; but if what I said is right, why do you strike me?" ²⁴ Annas then sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

Jesus answered the second question and did not answer the first. His ministry, he argued, was always public and not secret. Annas made the decisions, but it was Caiaphas who had the formal say and the rubber-stamping authority that Rome approved.

²⁵ Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. So they said to him, "You also are not one of his disciples, are you?" He denied it and said, "I am not." ²⁶ One of the servants of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, "Did I not see you in the garden

with him?” ²⁷ *Peter again denied it, and at once a rooster crowed.*

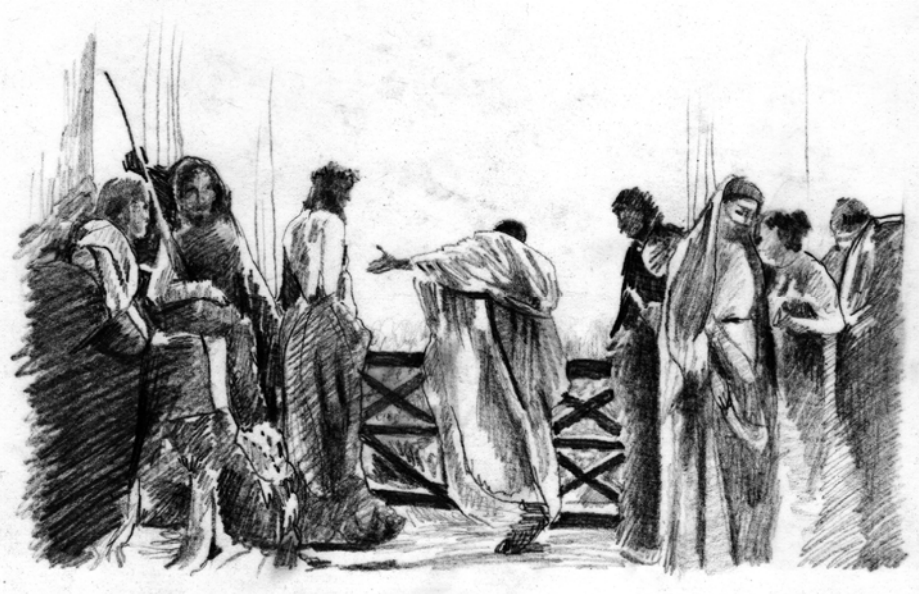


Peter denied Jesus three times. Later Jesus would tell Peter three times: *feed my sheep* (Jn. 21:15-19), invoking once again the Ezekiel theme of evil shepherds versus the Good Shepherd Jesus, and those who will pasture God's flock on his behalf. Malchus' relative, who was also present at the arrest of Jesus and saw what happened to Malchus' ear, remembered Peter.

The leaders of the new Israel, whom Jesus was leaving to further the Kingdom of God on earth after his death, were not perfect. Peter, one of the most faithful disciples of Jesus, managed to denounce Jesus three times during the space of one night. Even so, this imperfect but repentant leadership was much better than the leadership that was then responsible for Judea.

²⁸ *Then they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the governor's headquarters.*

It was likely that Annas and Caiaphas resided in separate wings of the same high priestly complex. For the trial with Pilate, Jesus was brought to the Governor's headquarters (this was likely the Antonia Fortress, north of the Temple area). The regular residence of the Roman Governor was in Caesarea, (Acts 23:35) far from Jerusalem, but during the holidays, the likely time of Jewish insurrection, he was always personally present in Jerusalem, secure in the Antonia Fortress.



It was early morning. They themselves did not enter the governor's headquarters, so that they would not be defiled, but could eat the Passover.²⁹ So Pilate went outside to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?"³⁰ They answered him, "If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you."³¹ Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law." The Ioudaioi said to him, "It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death."³² This was to fulfill the word that Jesus had spoken to show by what kind of death he was going to die.

The priestly group who came to Pilate had limited ability to move in and out of places considered ceremonially impure. (vss. 28-29) This was particularly relevant to them because of their priestly duties and their close proximity to the Temple. Pilate's relationship with the Jewish Jerusalemite leadership was far from easy. In verse 29 we see the type of dynamic present. The Roman Governor had to leave his place and come outside to meet the Jewish leaders. They would not enter. The interaction recorded in the above verses shows how uneasy this relationship was. The Jewish leaders expected Pilate to condemn Jesus to death as an insurrectionist. Legal executions were only allowed to be performed by the Roman

government. While occasional death by stoning could be carried out, it was generally done by mob violence and not sanctioned by a court ruling of the Jews. No doubt Pilate was already aware of the uproar about Jesus in Jerusalem and Judea. He knew why they had brought Jesus to him. He knew what they wanted.

³³ *So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, “Are you the King of the Ioudaioi?”*

In contrast to Luke-Acts (Acts 4:26-28), where Pilate is portrayed as one of those who conspired against Jesus and was guilty of his execution, the Gospel of John places the blame squarely on the Judean Temple leadership. This fact supports the idea that the conflict described in the Gospel of John was instead a battle between the Shepherds of Israel.

³⁴ *Jesus answered, “Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?”* ³⁵ *Pilate answered, “Am I Ioudaios? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?”* ³⁶ *Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Ioudaioi. But my kingdom is not from the world.”* ³⁷ *Then Pilate said to him, “So you are a king?”* *Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.”* ³⁸ *Pilate said to him, “What is truth?”* *After he had said this, he went back outside to the Ioudaioi and told them, “I find no guilt in him.”* ³⁹ *But you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover. So do you want me to release to you the King of the Ioudaioi?”* ⁴⁰ *They cried out again, “Not this man, but Barabbas!”* *Now Barabbas was a robber.*

The conversation with Pilate (whether he was sarcastic or reflective) shows that, once again, John had no interest in his literary composition to portray Pilate as the one who was guilty of what was about to happen. According to John, it was indeed the current Temple-based leadership of Israel, that so hated the Son of Israel’s God that they would stop at nothing,

who were guilty. John, however, will tell us later, that while they would win the battle, they would lose the war. They would succeed in putting Jesus to death, but their victory would be short-lived.





Chapter 19

The Trial Continues; Crucifixion, Death, Burial

☆ ¹ *Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him. ² And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head and arrayed him in a purple robe. ³ They came up to him, saying, “Hail, King of the Ioudaioi!” and struck him with their hands. ⁴ Pilate went out again and said to them, “See, I am bringing him out to you that you may know that I find no guilt in him.”*

The horrible tragedy that the reader/hearer is being prepared to witness is that the Word of God himself was being humiliated by Gentile soldiers because of the actions of the leaders of the *Ioudaioi*. According to John, after ridiculing Jesus, Pilate tried to make the Judean leaders change their minds. Once again he repeated his verdict of *not guilty*. Just a few moments earlier, when Pilate had offered to release one prisoner, they demanded Barabbas. *Barabbas* in Hebrew/Aramaic means *Son of the Father* (likely an insurrectionist). The leaders of the *Ioudaioi* decisively rejected Jesus, who claimed to be the Son of the Heavenly Father, eventually asking for and accepting the release of someone whose name is, ironically, also connected to sonship. Yet Jesus is the King of the *Ioudaioi* in spite of their rejection of him. This is the tension of the entire Gospel.

⁵ *So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, “Behold the man!” ⁶ When the chief priests and the officers saw him, they cried out, “Crucify him, crucify him!” Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no guilt in him.*

Jesus, badly beaten and ridiculed, was brought out with Pilate’s own announcement: “Behold the man!” He wanted to release Jesus, perhaps not out of sympathy for him, but rather out of dislike for the Judean leadership itself. But their hearts were not softened by seeing Jesus’ suffering. They cried out: “Crucify *him*! Crucify *him*! (The emphasis is on *him* as we will see with *Barabbas*.) One thing that may indicate Pilate was not as innocent

as it might seem, was that he dressed Jesus in a purple robe – the color of royalty. It is possible, if not likely, that Pilate was using Jesus to antagonize the *Ioudaioi* even more. Pilate was saying in effect, “You go ahead and do it!” Of course this was not possible, because under the Roman Empire, the *Ioudaioi* did not have the right to administer capital punishment.

⁷ The Ioudaioi answered him, “We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has made himself the Son of God.” ⁸ When Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid.

It was an absolute lie that Jesus deserved execution according to Jewish law. This lie was made even worse by additional manipulation: calling Jesus the Son of God. You may recall that *Son of God* was a Jewish concept. People could agree or disagree that Jesus was the Son of God, but it was not considered blasphemy, and neither was it blasphemy or against the Torah, for Jesus to claim to be the Son of God. However, something else was at play here. In Roman theology, the Caesar himself was the Son of God. In the Roman Empire, everyone knew that you don’t call yourself the Son of God if you want to stay alive. This title was reserved for Caesar, the Emperor of Rome, alone. So of course, when Jerusalemite leaders said to Pilate that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, this made Pilate stop and rethink his initial willingness to release Jesus. What is interesting is in the Gospel of John, Jesus’ claim that he was the Son of God was a marginal one. In John, Jesus is usually claiming to be far more than that. He claims to be God Himself! The leaders clearly used phraseology to evoke in Pilate an emotion that would cause him to see Jesus as someone who opposed Rome, and therefore someone who deserved capital punishment.

⁹ He entered his headquarters again and said to Jesus, “Where are you from?” But Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰ So Pilate said to him, “You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?” ¹¹ Jesus answered him, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin.”

Pilate, realizing that he could indeed be dealing with a powerful Jewish insurrectionist, asked where Jesus was from. It is likely that he wanted to

check if Jesus was from one of the places about which Pilate routinely received reports about insurrectionist activity. Jesus spoke with Pilate as if he were not on trial before him. Boldly holding his own rightful honor, Jesus declared that the man who held all imperial authority in the province of Judea (Pilate) had no authority at all because his authority was granted to him on a temporary basis by others (from above Pilate). He did call Pilate's behavior a sin, but a lesser sin than the sin of the person who delivered him to Pilate (the leaders of *Ioudaioi*). The court motif, so clearly displayed throughout the Gospel, now culminated in the passion narrative and particularly in Jesus' trial. The irony here, reading this Gospel in retrospect, is that Pilate, the guards, the soldiers and certainly the leaders of the *Ioudaioi* were those who were on trial, before history and before God, and not Jesus as it might at first appear. How will God and history judge them? That was the real issue and the point of this powerful Gospel story.

¹² *From then on Pilate sought to release him, but the Ioudaioi cried out, "If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar."* ¹³ *So when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Stone Pavement, and in Hebrew Gabbatha.*

It is only from this point that Pilate sought to release Jesus. This indicates that, contrary to when he first paraded and ridiculed Jesus, his intentions had changed. The *Ioudaioi* continued to play the *Son of God* card (all kings were sons of god/s). They calculated that Pilate would have to agree in the end. He could not have released Jesus and remained faithful to the Roman Imperial Son of God. Gabbatha, was probably *Gab Baitha*, "the ridge of the house," on a part of which the Antonia Fortress was built. This temple-mount was covered with a tessellated pavement. A judgment-seat was placed on the pavement outside the hall of the Praetoria.

¹⁴ *Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover. It was about the sixth hour. He said to the Ioudaioi, "Behold your King!"* ¹⁵ *They cried out, "Away with him, away with him, crucify him!"* Pilate said to them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar." ¹⁶ *So he delivered him over to them to be crucified.*

What is the reference to the sixth hour? What time would it have been in

our time system? A Jewish biblical (and post-biblical) hour was defined as 1/12 of the time between sunset and sunrise. The only scriptural reference to there being 12 hours in a day is found in John 11:9 where Jesus asks a rhetorical question, “Are there not 12 hours in a day?” So, we are probably dealing with a time in the afternoon.

If Pilate had indeed wanted to release Jesus, why would he continue to provoke the angry crowd who was demanding Jesus’ death? He continued to call him *their King*. It was likely that by the time Pilate had made a decision, he had no choice but to put the innocent Jesus to death. However, he wanted the satisfaction of knowing that it was the *Ioudaioi* who forced his hand. (vs. 15-16) Under this incredible pressure, he made a decision to put an innocent man to death. He did this to ensure that his own career would not fall prey to Judean internal affairs. He was a governor who did not care for those he governed, much like the leaders of the *Ioudaioi* who did not care for the sheep of their pasture.

So they took Jesus,¹⁷ and he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called The Place of a Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha.¹⁸ There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them.¹⁹ Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Ioudaioi.”²⁰ Many of the Ioudaioi read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Hebrew/Aramaic, in Latin, and in Greek.²¹ So the chief priests of the Ioudaioi said to Pilate, “Do not write, ‘The King of the Ioudaioi,’ but rather, ‘This man said, I am King of the Ioudaioi.’”²² Pilate answered, “What I have written I have written.”

While Pilate rightfully felt that the Jewish leaders had manipulated his decision to execute Jesus, he thought he should at least have the last say. Pilate understood well that the Temple leaders had falsely used the *Son of God* argument, so he turned their manipulation back on them when he recorded the accusation against Jesus. The text of the inscription about Jesus’ crime was recorded on a sign that was to be nailed above his head. The crime was that Jesus claimed to be the King of the *Ioudaioi*. But that is not all. An intriguing suggestion appears on a painting by Fra Angelico (1434), who, in one of his crucifixion paintings, wrote down his interpretive, but possible version of what was written on the tablet over the

cross. The Hebrew version given by Fra Angelico is quite possible: ישוע הנצרי ומלך היהודים = Jesus the Nazarite and the King of the Jews. Fra Angelico added “and” because grammatically it is possible in Hebrew. If this was Pilate’s version, it would make perfect sense. Why? Let me explain.

John’s Gospel declares Jesus to be Israel’s God incarnate. The leadership of the *Ioudaioi* rejected him and sought his death based on the accusation that his own declaration was that he was the Son of God. Pilate returned the favor to the *Ioudaioi*, who forced him to crucify Jesus, by writing the statement of guilt in such a way that it actually portrayed Jesus as Israel’s God (YHWH). How? The acrostic of the sentence “Jesus of Nazareth AND (“ו”) the King of the Jews” (ישוע הנצרי ומלך היהודים) is - "יהוה" YHWH – the covenant name of Israel’s God. Let’s not get carried away with this idea, since we don’t know how Pilate spelled these two phrases in Hebrew, and it may just be the way Fra Angelico posited. Nevertheless, it is an intriguing thought.



²³ *When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his garments and divided them into four parts, one part for each soldier; also his tunic. But the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom,* ²⁴ *so they said to one another, “Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be.” This was to fulfill the Scripture which says, “They divided my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.” So the soldiers did these things,* ²⁵ *but standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and*

his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶ *When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!"* ²⁷ *Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.*

Jesus' crucifixion was an intensely painful experience, not only for him, but also for his friends and family. During the experience of suffering the pain of being nailed to a Roman cross, Jesus fulfilled one of the greatest commandments in the Torah: the commandment to honor one's parents. He told the beloved disciple to care for his mother. Verse 27 tells us that the disciple took her into his own home, as he would his own mother.

²⁸ *After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), "I thirst."* ²⁹ *A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth.* ³⁰ *When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, "It is finished," and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.*

It was believed that vinegar (a sour wine) could lessen the pain of a crucified criminal. John clarifies, however, that the reason Jesus drank it was not to quench his thirst, but to fulfill what was written in the Scriptures about him. (Ps. 42:2; 63:1) Do you recall that, in the garden during his arrest, Jesus told Peter he must drink of the cup of God's wrath? Now, when he was already crucified and near death, he physically drank the soured wine and breathed his last breath. It is possible that the cup Jesus drank is connected with the Cup of Redemption in the modern Passover Seder of Rabbinic Judaism. This would be so if the four cups (cup of sanctification, cup of deliverance, cup of redemption and cup of restoration) in the Seder actually go back to the time of Jesus. While this is certainly possible, we have no evidence for such an argument. The four cups could have been introduced much later, like other elements of the Passover meal. I, therefore, allow for it as an interpretive possibility, but prefer to think the cup that Jesus was to drink on the Cross was the cup of God's wrath that the Hebrew Bible spoke about in many places such as mentioned above. (Jer. 25:15-26)

³¹ *Since it was the day of Preparation, and so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for*

that Sabbath was a high day), the Ioudaioi asked Pilate that their legs might be broken and that they might be taken away.³² So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with him.³³ But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs.³⁴ But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water.³⁵ He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth—that you also may believe.³⁶ For these things took place that the Scripture might be fulfilled: “Not one of his bones will be broken.”³⁷ And again another Scripture says, “They will look on him whom they have pierced.”



Because this was the day of preparation for the Sabbath and the Passover (Jn. 19:14), the Jewish authorities requested Pilate to order the legs of the three who had been crucified to be broken. This would hasten their deaths, so that the bodies could be removed before the Sabbath. (Deut. 21:22-23) When the soldiers came to do this, it appeared that Jesus was already dead. To be certain of this, a soldier pierced his side with a spear. The scripture quoted in verse 36 comes from Exodus 12:46, speaking of the original Passover lamb and the text in verse 37 is a direct quote from

Zechariah 12:10, where God refers to himself as the one who was pierced.

³⁸ After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Ioudaioi, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away his body.³⁹ Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-

five pounds-in weight. ⁴⁰ So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Ioudaioi. ⁴¹ Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. ⁴² So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there.

In this passage we again meet Nicodemus whom we met earlier in the Gospel account. Even though he was part of the ruling council (ruler of the *Ioudaioi*), he and Joseph of Arimathea came to take the body of Jesus. They wanted to give him a proper Jewish burial. The place of Jesus' burial, according to this account, was dictated by Judean observance and carried out by these two godly members of the *Ioudaioi*. Nothing about Jesus' death was coincidental. Jesus was destined to be buried according to the customs of the *Ioudaioi*. Everything was part of the Godhead's plan to declare full victory over sin and death.





Chapter 20

The Empty Tomb; The Three Resurrection Appearances

☆¹ *Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. ² So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.”*

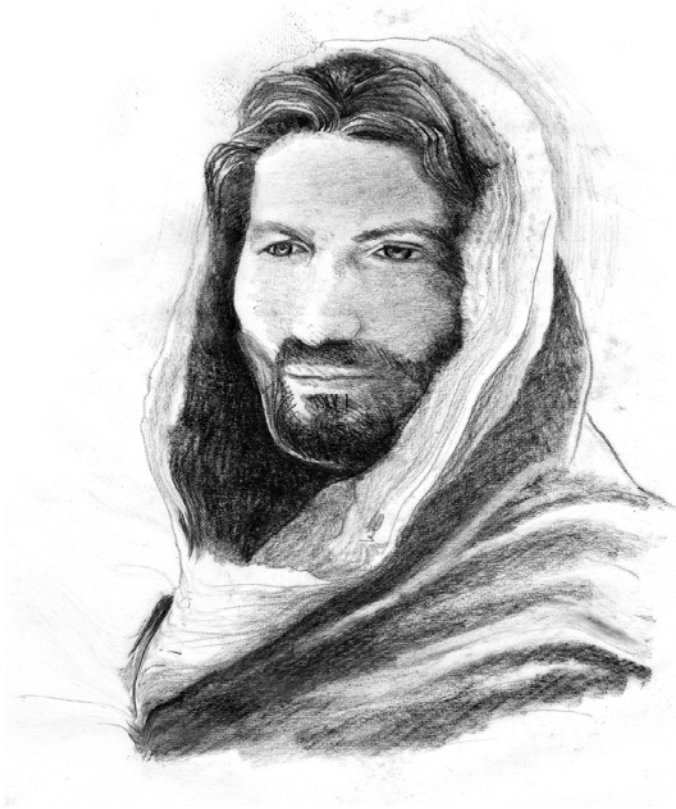
It is striking that very early on Sunday morning Mary Magdalene witnessed the already empty tomb. This leads us to the inescapable conclusion that Jesus rose from the dead some time earlier. It is also notable that, in a time when women were not allowed to testify in a public assembly by law, the Gospel states that the first witness of the resurrection of Jesus was a woman. (The first Samaritan Israelite to testify to Jesus was also a woman). Such a contra-cultural detail testifies to the truthfulness of the account. It would be highly inadvisable of someone merely imagining this story to use a woman witness as a literary device.

³ *So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. ⁴ Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb.*

The *other disciple* is the same as the *beloved disciple*, who is also the author of this Gospel. When he looked in, it was still dark and he could not see clearly, but he did see the grave clothes. It is possible that he was too terrified to actually walk into the tomb. It is equally possible that, being most-probably a priest by lineage,⁷⁰ (perhaps this is how he was known to

⁷⁰ See Johnston, A.E. Was John the Son of Zebedee a Priest? (The Irish Church Quarterly, Vol. 2, No. 8 (Oct., 1909), pp. 292-307) as well as Kinzer, M.S. Temple Christology in the Gospel of John. Available at: <http://jewishstudies.eteacherbiblical.com/wp->

the high priest), John would have been rendered defiled by entering a cave. He ran faster than Peter, but he did not enter the tomb - he stooped to look into it. Peter, however, had no such limitation connected to his lineage. While the author of the Gospel was standing by the entrance, Peter finally arrived and quickly walked into the cave. This was also in line with Peter's far more forceful personality and his denial of Jesus.



He saw the linen cloths lying there,⁷ and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself.

As was pointed out in the story of the raising of Lazarus, the Jewish practice of burying with a separate cloth for the face is attested today

through the archeological excavations done in Israel.⁷¹ The author of the Gospel did not imagine the details, (a separate cloth for the face), he remembered them. Archeological finds confirm his story. Judeans indeed buried their dead the way John described.

⁸ Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹ for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰ Then the disciples went back to their homes.

It was only after Peter told John that Jesus' body was not there, that the tomb was empty, that John entered it. This tomb was now no longer about death, but about life and therefore it could not render John ceremonially unclean.

¹¹ But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. ¹² And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. ¹³ They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."

Mary had no idea what Peter and John had seen. They apparently went by different routes and did not see Mary as they passed. While they ran home, Mary returned to the tomb and was nearby crying, being overcome with grief.

In reading the text (vss. 12-13), one could think that the angelic visitation was not unusual. In fact, Mary continued talking as if two of her neighbors had asked her a question. It could of course be said that she was so overcome with grief that she simply had trouble seeing well, but this is unlikely. It is just as likely that she did not realize these were angels until later, after everyone had a chance to compare their stories. Some have made an intriguing connection between two angels dressed in white and the members of the Essene movement, who called themselves angels and also walked around in white garments. But even though this option is attractive, it is to my mind no more than intriguing.

¹⁴ Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus said

⁷¹ Cf. John 11:44 there Lazarus also has a separate cloth for the face.

to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and said to him in Hebrew/Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher).

Much can be written about this, but suffice it to say, when Jesus called her name, she suddenly realized who it was that was calling her. He called her by name - *Mary*. She greeted him as she always did: *Rabboni*. The speculations of those who say that Mary was Jesus’ wife or lover, could match the first part (vs. 15), but not the second part of the story (vs.16).

¹⁷ Jesus said to her, “Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” ¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”—and that he had said these things to her.

It is not entirely clear what Jesus meant by telling Mary not to touch or cling to him, because he had not yet “ascended to the Father.” We know that just a few days later Thomas was actually invited to touch the wounds of Jesus (20:27), so something must have happened between these two encounters. Why could Mary not touch him, but Thomas could? The reason Jesus gives is he has not yet *ascended to the Father*. This is clearly very relevant because it comes out again in the message Jesus gave Mary to tell his brothers: “*I am ascending to my Father...*” (Notice the present tense is used) We all know that Jesus did ascend to the Father – some 40 days later – but clearly that is not the *ascension* he is referring to here. As I have said before, this Gospel contains high Christology and I believe that is what we are encountering here. As we well know, the death and resurrection of Jesus are the absolute pivotal events in the Jesus story. That is why he came. What we are not privy to here is what needed to happen in the spiritual realm in order for Jesus to appear to his disciples that very evening and breathe on them to receive the Holy Spirit. Was this *ascension* necessary before Jesus could return and impart this precious gift to strengthen them in the days ahead? Were there two ascensions, so to speak? I’ll leave that question with you.

Another interesting thing to note in this paragraph is the very personal,

familial language Jesus is using: “go to my brothers,” “...my Father and your Father,” “my God and your God.” These words must have been tremendously reassuring to his loved ones who had been so recently traumatized by the death of their beloved Rabbi, Master and friend.

¹⁹ On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Ioudaioi, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” ²⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.

It was Sunday evening (beginning of the second day of the Israelite week) and it was dark. The disciples gathered together in a secret place behind locked doors fearing further arrests from the *Ioudaioi*. When all the disciples were gathered, perhaps at a location where there were people whom Mary trusted, Jesus came out and greeted them with the standard *Shalom Aleichem* as he always had done.

Jesus knew that to put the disciples’ fears to rest, the very first thing he needed to do when he saw them was to verify that he was, indeed, raised from the dead. When he did this, everything became clear. It was the crucified and resurrected Jesus who stood before them.

²¹ Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” ²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”

Jesus’ words and actions only make sense if we remember that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, had come to restore, unite, and heal Israel by setting up new leadership to replace the old.

As we discussed earlier, the task was not possible without the power of the Holy Spirit. We know the coming of the Spirit of God would not happen until approximately two months later, during Shavuot/Pentecost. (Acts 2) However, John tells us that, even before that great event, Jesus - at the time of his resurrection - had already breathed his Holy Spirit into his apostles. They were his new creation. Just as God breathed into Adam and Eve the breath of life (Gen. 2:7; Ps. 33:6; Wis. 15:11; 2 Macc. 7:22-23), and just as

Ezekiel prophesied to the *breath* (Spirit) to breathe into the slain army that they might live (Ezekiel 37), Jesus symbolically breathed the life of the Spirit into his apostles. Together with giving them his Holy Spirit, he gave them authority to forgive and to withhold forgiveness. They were his Apostles – His “sent ones.”



²⁴ Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.” ²⁶ Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.”

Thomas (his name in Greek and Aramaic means twin) could not be charged with unbelief. After all, the other apostles had seen exactly what Thomas also wanted to see - the wounds in Jesus’ hands and side. This expectation was a reasonable desire. Jesus came eight days later. The

number eight seems to indicate some kind of connection with *brit milah* (circumcision). If we do not think the eighth day was simply coincidental, then we would be justified in thinking that when Jesus breathed the Spirit into the apostles, this was considered their new birth. Jesus' second visit to the apostles was, therefore, being on the eighth day, comparable to circumcision.

27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." 28 Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" 29 Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Thomas, being presented with undeniable evidence about the resurrection of Jesus, called him *his Lord and his God*. Since Jesus was just that, he did not rebuke Thomas but instead affirmed him.⁷² Jesus extended even greater blessedness to those who would believe without seeing what the apostles had seen. This text too offers a glimpse into the history of the composition of this Gospel that we touched upon when we discussed the use of the word *world*, first as *Ioudaioi* and then interchangeable as referring to any order opposing Israel's God and his King. Verse 29 anticipates post-resurrection faithful followers of Jesus, you and I, who would not have the privilege that the original apostles had.

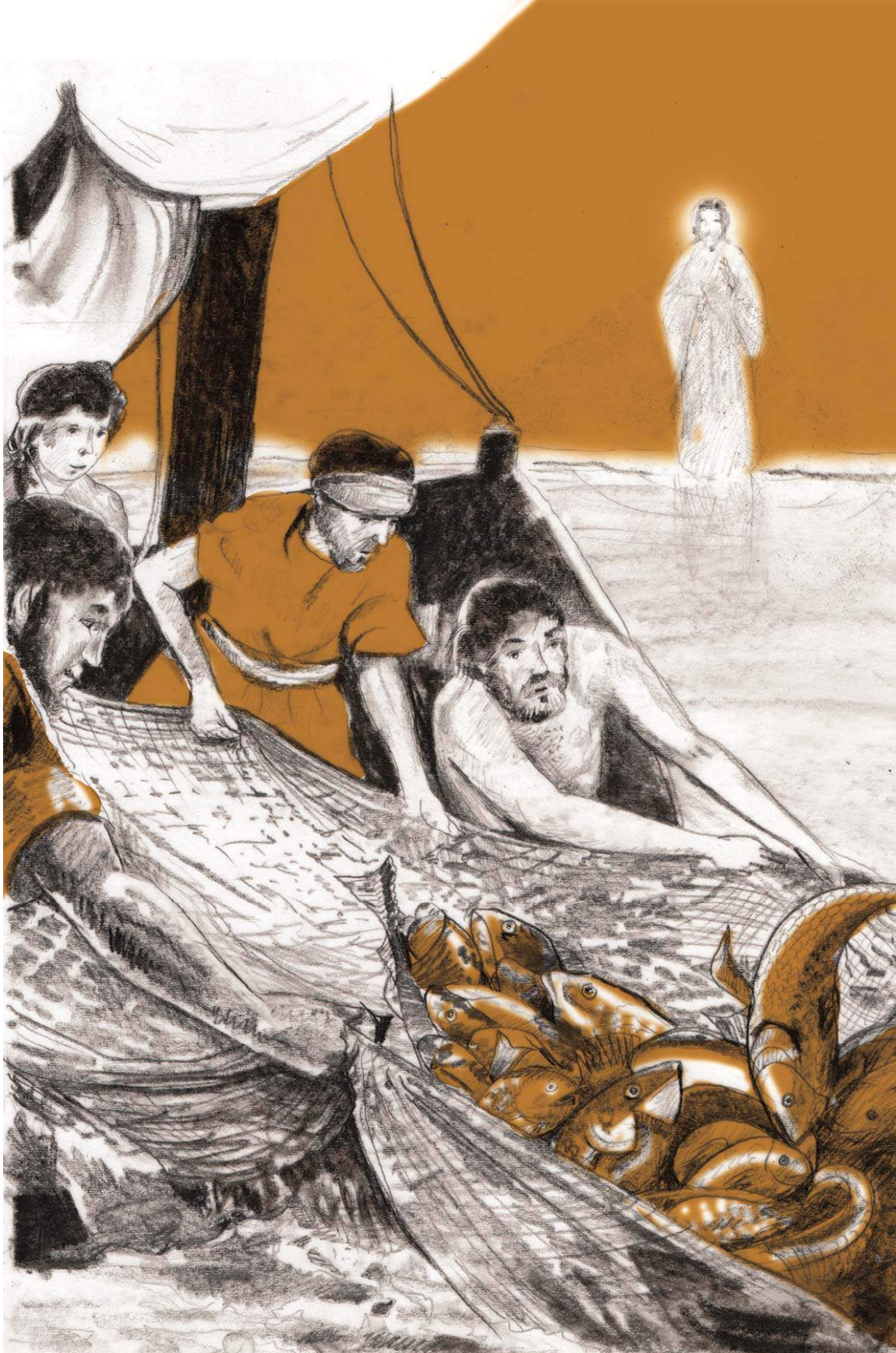
30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; 31 but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Soon the author will bring this incredible Gospel to its rightful conclusion (although as we will see, John's Gospel has several endings). As his narrative begins to slow down, having climaxed with the resurrection and post-resurrection appearances of Christ to his disciples, the author pauses and tells his readers that what he had written was selective, and by no means comprehensive. Jesus performed many more signs than those John

⁷² There are a number of ancient texts in which angels play a prominent role in a vision or narrative and in which they reject a human's misguided behavior of prostration. Cf. Ascen. 7.18-23; 8.1-10, 15; Rev. 19.10; 22.8-9; Tob. 12.16-22; Apoc. Zeph. 6.11-15.

recorded. The ones John chose to tell, however, were the ones he knew were sufficient to convince the readers that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that by trusting him, they would have life.





Chapter 21

Epilogue: Appearance by the Lake; Peter's Love; The Beloved Disciple

✠ ¹After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he revealed himself in this way. ²Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee⁷³, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together. ³Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing.” They said to him, “We will go with you.” They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

One has the sense that the Gospel did already finish in John 20:31. This chapter (21) reads like a *Post Scriptum*, something that was added later or was attached to the original Gospel (a common practice). However, unlike John 7:53-8:11 (the woman caught in adultery) there is no evidence that the Gospel was ever in circulation without chapter 21. We are not told how much time had passed. This is in sharp contrast to the reference to the eighth day in the previous *post-resurrection* appearance. These same disciples were by the Kinneret (Sea of Galilee or Sea of Tiberias) when Jesus again wonderfully surprised them.

Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵Jesus said to them, “Children, do you have any fish?” They answered him, “No.”

It was already becoming light. Jesus, standing on the shore, called out to them and called them children. They may have considered it strange that

⁷³ Bartholomew and Nathanael are recorded in the listings of the twelve apostles, but never together. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, Bartholomew is listed as one of the twelve, but Nathanael is not. Conversely, in John, Nathanael is listed, but Bartholomew is not. From that, many logically assume that Bartholomew and Nathanael were actually the same man who was known by two names, like Simon Peter or Saul Paul.

someone as young as Jesus would refer to them, not as brothers, but as children.

⁶ He said to them, “Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish.

When they reluctantly cast their nets to the other side of the boat, no doubt they wondered why they were listening to what a complete stranger was telling them to do. Taking all your nets and moving them from one side to another was not an easy task and required an effort on the part of these *apostolic* fishermen. When they did, the boat almost capsized because of the amount of fish they caught.

⁷ That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea.

This story is very real, not only because it gives us incredible detail, but also because the details it does give are so true to life. When people are excessively excited about something, they do things that make no sense. Peter, in his excitement, jumped into the water. But, strangely enough, he got dressed first. There are all kinds of possible explanations that can be presented here - from the common practice of the fisherman who did not reach the shore, to Peter thinking that he would again walk on water (*βάλλω* means to throw, to cast, to rush).

⁸ The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off. ⁹ When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread. ¹⁰ Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” ¹¹ So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them.

The most interesting item of discussion is the odd number of fish - 153. The fact that John pays attention to this detail should not surprise us. He often does such things. The fact that John remembered how many fish there were is also not surprising. His memories were still vivid. However, there

may be something more going on here. In one of the sections in this book, we discussed how the Gospel of John is intricately designed, including the idea of a complex literary structure called *chiasm*. It is possible that we have here an early example of what will later become known as *Gematria*. The basic idea of Gematria is to take a word and determine its numerical value, according to, in this case, the Hebraic numerical value system. Once the value of any given word is assessed, it is then matched with another word or phrase with the same numerical value that otherwise seems unconnected.

A prominent New Testament scholar, Richard Bauckham, stated in a summary of his article on this topic:

An important clue indicating the overall unity of the Gospel of John, including Chapter 21, is often overlooked. This is the numerical value of 153 fish caught by the disciples according to 21:11, which represents the mathematical triangle of 17 ($17 \times 3 \times 3 = 153$). The key text for interpreting the passage is Ezekiel 47:10, prophesying streams of living water flowing from the temple in the last days to make the Dead Sea fresh and full of fish. These symbolize numerically the children of God who receive life through believing in the signs given by Jesus, which are enumerated in the Gospel. A complex but consistent numerical pattern or Gematria can be demonstrated to underpin the structure and thematic of the whole Gospel, particularly linking the Prologue with the Epilogue, which is expressed in the number 153.⁷⁴

Had we not seen abundant evidence that the Gospel of John was composed against the backdrop of the book of Ezekiel, we might have been justified in ignoring this suggestion. But since this is not the case, we must at least consider it in future studies by now simply making a reference to it. Among several other interesting possibilities, I find the following one the most intriguing. It fits nearly perfectly with my reading of the Gospel of John in its historic Israelite (North and South reunification) context, especially in light of the emphases the idea of the sonship of God receives in both the Gospel of John and his letters.

The Hebrew phrase “Sons of God,” which would be shared by both Samaritan and Judean Israelites is בני האלהים. If we calculate the numerical value of each letter we would get exactly 153!

Here it is:

⁷⁴ Richard Bauckham, “The 153 Fish and the Unity of the Fourth Gospel,” *Neotestamentica* 36 (2002): 77-88.

ב(2) נ(50) י(10) ה(5) א(1) ל(30) ה(5) י(10) מ(40)=153



A word of caution would be in place here. I think we should be careful in using Gematria in our interpretation. Notice I did not say we should avoid using it, but we should use it sparingly and very carefully, never placing undue emphasis upon it. Even though Gematria comes across as an exact science, the beauty of mathematics is that numbers can indeed be broken up and added up a great number of different ways. As one of my mentors once put it: “When you have a hammer in your hand, everything looks like a nail.”

And although there were so many, the net was not torn.¹² Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Now none of the disciples dared ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord.¹³ Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish.¹⁴ This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

What can be safely assumed here is that Jesus did not look exactly as he had previously. As a matter of fact, this kind of question (Who are you?), may cause us to doubt our assumption that physically, Jesus could be recognized at all. This may explain why Mary thought he was a gardener and why Jesus had to show them the wounds from the nails and the spear. One would think just seeing Jesus alive again would have been sufficient.

The reference to the third post-resurrection appearance (vs. 14) is once again set in the context of a court scene and is presented as the third and last set of evidence that Jesus indeed rose from the dead.

¹⁵ *When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Feed my lambs.”* ¹⁶ *He said to him a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Tend my sheep.”* ¹⁷ *He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” and he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.*



Contrary to popular opinion that two different words for love are used here, it has been conclusively shown that the two words are used interchangeably throughout the New Testament. Jesus' question about "more than these" refers to Peter's early statements about his full loyalty to Jesus in comparison with the zeal of other disciples. After three denials, Jesus receives three affirmations of Peter's love and willingness to be a Good Shepherd. Jesus entrusts Peter with shepherding the flock of Israel; just as he does with the other disciples he leaves behind.

¹⁸ *Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want*

to go.”¹⁹ (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, “Follow me.”

This seems to be a prediction by Jesus of Peter’s death. In 2 Peter 1:12-14, he wrote the following:

“So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body, because I know that I will soon put it aside, as our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. And I will make every effort to see that, after my departure, you will always be able to remember these things.”

Another important and interesting thing here is the progression of Peter’s faith. From the three denials to the three affirmations of faith, and now this discouraging prophecy, after which Jesus says “Follow me.” Perhaps, this is his final test of faith. Will he still agree to follow, knowing, in part, what is ahead for him?

²⁰ Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, the one who also had leaned back against him during the supper and had said, “Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?”²¹ When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, “Lord, what about this man?”²² Jesus said to him, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!”²³ So the saying spread abroad among the brothers that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?”

Apparently, in the aftermath of the writing of the Gospel of John (Ch. 1-20), believers began to elevate the status of the beloved disciple. So, in this epilogue, additional material that had been omitted from the earlier story was included. Peter posed a question to Jesus regarding the “disciple whom Jesus loved.” Jesus then challenged Peter that it was not his business to be concerned about any special relationship that Jesus had with the beloved disciple. Peter needed to simply follow the Lord. The clarification given in verse 23 is clearly in response to a misunderstanding among the first

century followers of Jesus that was probably about the timing of Jesus' return. Jesus did not promise the beloved disciple would see the return of Jesus, instead he virtually told Peter to mind his own business.

²⁴ This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true.

Verse 24 is likely the sealing testimony of the fact discussed above, that someone close to the beloved disciple wrote the last section of the Gospel. This community witness ("we") is both acknowledging the author of the Gospel as an authentic witness, and the truthfulness of the addendum that followed chapters 1-20.

²⁵ Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

This second ending has an intentional similarity to the first ending of the Gospel where the beloved disciple stated:

"Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." (John 20:30-31)



The Call

As you surely understood from reading this book, it is my opinion that the Gospel of John has been misinterpreted for centuries by both Christian and Jewish theologians alike, with painfully tangible consequences. Yet, if the God of all providence is to be believed and trusted, this too, however unfortunate, is somehow meant to be used for the greater good of humanity and to the honor of His Name. But that's just me. It is possible that you may ask: "What painful consequences?! What is so important about this particular Gospel? Does it really matter if it has been misinterpreted in some key points?!"

It is my conviction, that the misreading of the Gospel of John, eventually resulting (obviously with an avalanche of other important factors) in one of the most horrible evils of the 20th century – the European Jewish Holocaust - could have been avoided. I will state it even more bluntly. I am confident that, had the Gospel of John been interpreted in its own original Israelite context, and only then been appropriately applied to non-Israelite *members* of God's household, the intense anti-Judaism present in some Greco-Roman pagan authors would not have had much chance to migrate into the newly organized Christian Church. The early misreading of the fourth Gospel (along with a misreading of Paul) justified the anti-Judaism of many Church Fathers, which later manifested itself in Christian denominations of various kinds throughout the history of the Church.

The Gospel of John has in many ways functioned as one of the defining interpretive lenses (along with Pauline writings) through which mostly Gentile Christ-followers have viewed everything else in the New Testament. But, you may say, the European Jewish Holocaust took place so many years ago. It is now in the past and, while we should not forget what happened to the Jews (along with many others) on Christian soil, we *should* move on and not be fixated on this topic. I tend to agree with you. However, I think the essential problem in Jewish-Christian relations still remains. If not resolved, it may one day, under different circumstances, reappear and cause even more damage than before. This is one of the reasons I believe this book deserves a wide audience who would be challenged to rethink theological interpretations and their powerful implications for history and the life of real people - Jewish or otherwise.

A major reform based on an informed rereading of John's Gospel could, if taken seriously, turn into widespread reform in the Body of Christ; for the ultimate glory of Christ. I fully *realize* this statement is open to a charge of self-aggrandizement (after all who am I to think that this can possibly begin through this very book?!), but I am nevertheless persuaded that the challenge I present in this modest work is of great (disproportionally great)

importance for the Christian Church as it continues, in all of its three major branches (Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant), to rethink what has now, in the post-Jewish holocaust world, been called Christian-Jewish relations.

My argument that the Gospel of John is an intra-Israelite polemical document that deals very little (if at all!), in comparison to the other three Gospels, with the God of Israel's purposes for the nations of the world, does not imply that these nations are not important, any more than the fact that the Torah of Moses was originally addressed to the generations of Israelites leaving Egypt and arriving to the Promised Land implies something similar. I believe that knowing to whom the fourth Gospel was originally addressed will enable modern Christ-followers, Jewish or otherwise, to apply the true message of this Gospel to their respective faith communities faithfully and passionately.

Far from implying that the Gospel of John should not be read by Gentiles since they were not directly addressed by this Gospel in its original composition, I call upon the Christian Church today to rethink this Judean Gospel. I believe great good for modern Jewish, Christian and the communities that are between will inevitably result. This is my fervent hope and to that end I submit this book for your judgment and kind, but careful consideration.



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