

### C. The Confrontation at the Feast of Tabernacles (7:1-53)

John used his prologue to set the orientation and tone of his account of Jesus the Messiah. And at the heart of that prologue is John's declaration that Jesus "came to His own but His own did not receive Him." The One who is the incarnate Word came to the historical and covenantal recipients of Yahweh's word – a people who'd always vowed their commitment to honoring and obeying that word – only to encounter their disbelief, resistance and ultimate rejection. For all their scholarship and piety, the people of the word failed to discern its message and promise and so could not recognize its living embodiment in Jesus the Nazarene.

Thus Jesus' self-presentation to Israel ("He came to His own") was met with confusion, defiance and even hostile opposition ("His own did not receive Him"). Even the vast multitudes who embraced Him as the Messiah did so almost entirely on the basis of distorted conceptions and expectations. They received Him as the One promised by the Scriptures and thus Yahweh's fulfilled word to Israel, but they misunderstood that word and its promise so that their embrace amounted to refusal; what they embraced was a creation of their own imagination and longing. John documented that dynamic of unbelief with a series of episodes tied to Israel's festal cycle. The present episode is framed by the Feast of Tabernacles and so had Jerusalem as its setting. (This feast, along with Passover and Pentecost, required all Israel to be present in Jerusalem – cf. Exodus 23:14-17; Deuteronomy 16:9-17, 31:10-13).

1. John began his account, not in Jerusalem, but in Galilee just prior to the start of the feast. The text identifies two reasons for this, both of which pertain to John's staging of the episode: The first is Jesus' interaction with His brothers as they prepared to go up to Jerusalem for the feast; the second is John's introductory note that Jesus had been restricting His labors to Galilee because He knew the Jewish authorities – whose seat of power was in Jerusalem in Judea – were seeking to kill Him (7:1; cf. 5:18). The latter is fundamental as it provides the context for the entire episode and all of its particulars.

Again, John's staging of this episode included his account of what was taking place in Jesus' household as His brothers prepared for the upcoming festival in Jerusalem (7:2-9). This account makes a significant contribution, not just to the present context and John's gospel record, but to the New Testament itself in that it provides some of the best insight into how Jesus' family was dealing with His self-presentation as Israel's Messiah. And what John revealed is the discomfort, offense and resentment which existed among Jesus' brothers, sentiments which likely extended to other family members as well. His actions had set them squarely in the spotlight, and, from their vantage point, not for good. Whatever His intent, Jesus had made His family a public spectacle in Israel – an object of curiosity for some, and of mockery, scorn and even hatred for others.

- a. Jesus' fame (and notoriety) came at great expense to His family and John's account drips with the antipathy felt by His brothers. They doubtless expected Jesus to go up to Jerusalem for the Feast of Booths and used that occasion as an opportunity to deride Him. John seems to indicate that they knew the reason Jesus had been avoiding Judea and so also recognized the threat which awaited Him if He attended the feast (cf. vv. 1 and 3). Thus their exhortation (7:3-4) was a taunt:

*If you really are the Messiah, you have no reason to fear the Jews; the Lord will protect you. You need to go up to Jerusalem and testify to yourself while all Israel is gathered there. Indeed, you already have disciples in Judea; aren't they entitled to witness your mighty works and hear your words? How can you expect them to follow you as Messiah if you hide yourself away in Galilee?*

From this vantage point, it's not inconceivable that Jesus' brothers were actually hoping He'd be arrested and silenced. They understandably would have feared the authorities implicating them along with their brother and, believing Him to be a fraud (7:5), were doubtless keen to see His messianic pretensions brought to an end. John's presentation, then, seems to suggest that he wanted his readers to view Jesus' brothers as motivated by the same self-serving concerns and antipathy as Israel's rulers (cf. vv. 1, 5).

Even if somehow it could be argued that they didn't fully grasp the seriousness of the threat and didn't have malicious motives, this would not lend innocence to their words. For Jesus' brothers spoke, not out of ignorance, but unbelief. John's language ("*unwilling to walk in Judea*" followed by the exhortation "*go into Judea*") implies that the brothers were aware of the reason for Jesus' reluctance to go to the feast, but they didn't share His concern any more than they shared His conviction: *He* might believe Himself to be Israel's Messiah, but they didn't and they wanted Him to know that: *You claim to be the Messiah and want people to believe that; well, there couldn't be a more public figure than Messiah. If you're that man, you need to be out in public making yourself known to as many people as possible – indeed, to the Romans as well as your own countrymen. Your unwillingness to present yourself publicly in Judea argues against your claim.*

Some summary observations are in order before moving to Jesus' response:

- Jesus' family would have observed that for several months He'd been limiting His ministry to Galilee and the surrounding areas (cf. Mark 7-9) without entering into Judea. But now, with the Feast of Booths at hand, they must have expected that to change. He'd gone up to Jerusalem for previous feasts (1:13, 5:1); why wasn't He making preparations this time?
- Moreover, they knew Jesus had disciples in Judea (1:23) who hadn't seen Him for a long time. Was this how the Messiah would build a following and rally Israel to himself? Even more, Messiah represented the focal point of political and divine power in Israel; He was the Son of David, anointed by Yahweh to establish His kingdom and rule over Israel from His throne in Jerusalem; what, then, could be more appropriate than that Jesus should focus His energies on Jerusalem and Judea?
- The people of Israel – and so also Jesus' brothers – expected Messiah to be a man of power, much like Yahweh's prophets, who'd authenticate himself by mighty deeds and demonstrations of the Lord's hand.

Jesus' brothers were surely aware of His miraculous signs – perhaps they'd even witnessed some of them; if He was indeed Yahweh's Messiah appointed to rule in Jerusalem, why wasn't He demonstrating His authenticating power to all Israel, including the Jerusalem authorities? Even more, Messiah was going to establish Yahweh's kingdom and rule by vanquishing the subjugating powers and liberating His captive people Israel; shouldn't Jesus, then, be eager to demonstrate His messianic credentials to the Roman power in Judea? In every way, Messiah was to be preeminently a public figure; hence the significance of His brothers' question: "*If you do these things, show yourself to the world.*"

- b. Whatever the brothers' underlying attitude and motivation, Jesus responded to their challenge in straightforward fashion (7:6-9). Several things about His reply are critically important to note:

First, Jesus' reluctance was a matter of *timing* rather than fear (vv. 6, 8). He hadn't been avoiding Judea because He was afraid of being killed; indeed, He understood that He had come into the world to give His life (cf. 6:51, 12:23-27; also Matthew 20:26-28). The issue was that His death needed to come at a certain time and place and in a certain way in order to fulfill the Scriptures and His Father's will. This is evident from John's use of the noun *kairos* which refers to a designated season or appropriate time as opposed to *chronos* which has to do with time in general (clock time). Because of who He is and what He'd come to do, every aspect of Jesus' life was subject to proper timing. But it was not so with His brothers; they had no such appointment or mission and therefore no such constraint of timeliness or propriety: "*the time is always suitable for you.*"

This consideration helps with the apparent problem of Jesus' reversal in going to the feast (cf. vv. 8, 10). (Some manuscripts read *not yet* in verse 8 rather than *not*, but this was likely a change made to resolve the difficulty). Jesus clearly wouldn't deceive His brothers; did He perhaps change His mind? Or was He merely saying that He'd come at a later time? The context is key and it connects Jesus' statement with the fact that His actions and activities were governed by a pre-existing scheme He'd come to fulfill. Like their countrymen, Jesus' brothers couldn't see beyond their own natural speculations and Jesus tacitly rebuked them by responding as He did: He was *Yahweh's* Messiah and so subject to His purpose and design, not human notions and expectations. He would go up to Jerusalem to the feast, but in accordance with His Father's design and not theirs: *I will not go up to this feast as you propose because my time hasn't yet been fulfilled.*

This, in turn, points to John's use of two levels of meaning in his account. (This dynamic is common in the Scriptures.) At one level, Jesus was talking about the feast just as His brothers were, but He was also speaking cryptically of His larger mission as it implicated His presence in Jerusalem. Raymond Brown's comments are helpful here: "*On the purely natural level it appears to the brothers that Jesus does not find this an opportune time to go up to the festival in Jerusalem.*"

*“Jesus’ subsequent behavior in going up to the festival shows us, however, that this was not really what he meant. John has prepared the reader to understand Jesus’ real meaning by the reference to death at the hands of the Jews in vs. 1. When Jesus speaks of his ‘time,’ he is speaking on the level of the divine plan. His ‘time’ is his ‘hour,’ the hour of passion, death, resurrection and ascension to the Father; and this time is not to come at this festival of Tabernacles – it is reserved for a subsequent Passover.”*

This use of two-level meaning highlights the contrast – thematic in John’s gospel – between Jesus’ sense of Himself and His purpose and the natural perspective of those around Him. Whatever His brothers believed about Him and the coming Messiah, their natural minds insured that they were wrong on both counts. They were of the *world* – a world that is cut off from God’s life and cannot discern His mind; a world that, in its alienation, is actually hostile to Him; a world of men whose piety, worship and zeal – even for the true God – amount to *evil works*.

Jesus testified to this truth in the first instance by His mere presence in the world; whatever men’s sense of their relationship with God, their hostility toward Jesus proved their hostility toward the God who sent Him (cf. 5:16-38, 6:41-45, 7:25-29, 8:12-19, 15:23-25, etc.). Jesus knew well the hatred of a world estranged from God – something His brothers couldn’t experience because they were of one mind and orientation with the world (7:7). *For this reason, and in spite of what they may have believed about themselves, they actually stood together with the hostile world in its effective hatred of the living God and the Messiah He sent to it.* Their attitude toward their brother proved their attitude toward Israel’s God.

These observations indicate that John recorded Jesus’ answer in such a way that it would echo his prologue (ref. esp. 1:9-11). So also this answer points forward to what was to come when Jesus accomplished His work: *His accomplishment would bring about deliverance and ingathering; He was going to liberate human beings from the world’s bonds such that they would no longer stand in solidarity with the world, but with Him against the world. The world would regard them the way it regards Him because of their share in His life* (ref. 15:12-16:15, 17:1-19).

- c. After His family departed Jesus also went up to the feast, but not in the public manner proposed by His brothers (7:9-10). He kept His presence hidden, but only for a short while (ref. 7:14ff), which indicates He had a purpose in His secrecy. John gives no explanation, but the context implies timing was once again the issue. Jesus hid His presence until the feast was well underway and John’s record suggests His design was to allow expectancy and controversy to grow ahead of His self-disclosure (7:11-13). The people expected Jesus to be there and His absence spawned discussion and debate among them. But it seems they also knew of the Jews’ intent to execute Him and so didn’t want to connect themselves with Him by speaking openly. Together these dynamics created a palpable tension which captured everyone’s attention and made Jesus the focus of the festal celebration, setting the stage for the moment when He would do the same thing.