

John 7:40-52

Introduction

Over the last couple of weeks, we've seen Jesus at the Feast of Booths in Jerusalem. The climax of Jesus' teaching at this feast comes in verses 37-38 of chapter seven.

- John 7:37-38 — Now on the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. "He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.'"

Words like this demand a response from all who hear Jesus. No one can truly listen to the things Jesus says, and go away unaffected, unconcerned with coming to any conclusion about who Jesus is. To hear Jesus say the things He says and be "unconcerned" is either not to have truly heard Him or just a cover for the conclusion that He's a liar and a deceiver or else just out of His mind. So in the passage that we come to this morning, John is going to emphasize for us the various reactions and responses of the people to Jesus. We read in verse forty:

I. John 7:40 — Some of the crowd *therefore, when they heard these words*, were saying, "This certainly is the Prophet."

Notice first of all that these are people from "the crowd." They're the "common," "every day," "rank and file" Jewish pilgrims who've travelled from all over the land to be at Jerusalem for this Feast of Booths. But these Jews know their Scriptures. So after hearing Jesus speak they conclude that He must certainly be "*the Prophet*." They're thinking of Moses' words in Deuteronomy eighteen:

- Deuteronomy 18:15-19 — The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen—just as you desired of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, "Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die." And the LORD said to me, "They are right in what they have spoken. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him."

On the one hand, these words seem to mark the formal institution of the prophetic *office* in Israel. They guarantee that when Moses dies, this will not mean the end of God's prophetic word to His people (cf. Deut. 18:9-22). On the other hand, the institution of the prophetic *office* seems to be couched in terms of an ultimate *fulfillment* of that office in one specific prophet "*like Moses*." All of the prophets were "like Moses" in so far as they were *prophets*, but apparently there was to be one particular prophet who would be "like Moses" in a way that no other prophet was. Many years after Moses had died, an inspired editor of Deuteronomy could write these words:

- Deuteronomy 34:10-12 — And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel *like Moses*, whom the LORD knew face to face, none *like him* for all the signs and the wonders that the

LORD sent him to do in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, and for all the mighty power and all the great deeds of terror that Moses did in the sight of all Israel [all in the service of redemption and covenant].

Moses was unique among the prophets. It was in his prophetic role that Moses gave the people the law and was the mediator of the Old Covenant with its temple and priesthood and sacrifices. The prophets that came after Moses called the people to obey this Law and keep this Covenant by faith. None of these prophets ever introduced any new “Law” or any new covenant or any new temple or priesthood. But when Jesus came as the prophet “*like Moses*” (cf. Acts 3:17-24; 7:35-37), this *is* what He did. Jesus came to be the mediator of a covenant, *like Moses was*, but now a new and a better covenant with a corresponding new and better temple and priesthood and sacrifice. He is the prophet “*like Moses*,” and yet exactly what the Scriptures meant by this could never be fully understood until the Prophet Himself had come into the world.

So here the people are in John chapter seven listening to Jesus’ words and concluding that He must certainly be “the Prophet.” And yet something’s still not right. They affirm that Jesus must be “the Prophet” but they seem to be assuming, at the same time, that He must *not* be the Christ (v. 41a; cf. 1:20-21).^{*} They have enough knowledge of the Scriptures to see the ways in which Jesus “fits” the “category” of “the Prophet” and yet that’s exactly their problem. The people had come to see the Scriptures as an independent standard or “category” to which “*the prophet*” would conform rather than seeing “the prophet” as the one who would “fill up” the Scriptures and therefore be the true interpretation and explanation of those Scriptures. Can you see the difference between Jesus “fitting” and “conforming” to a category (even the Scriptural category of “the Prophet”) and Jesus “filling up” that “category” so that He is Himself the true “interpretation” and “explanation” of the Scriptures and of all that they say about who the Prophet will be?

The Jews have enough knowledge of the Scriptures to conclude: “This certainly is the Prophet”; but because of their misguided view of the Scriptures that they know so well, this is a “confession” that’s finally empty and vain. If the Scriptures are read as an independent standard to which the Prophet will conform, then the Scriptures will never be rightly understood and the Prophet, when He comes, will never be truly recognized and believed.

II. John 7:41a — Others were saying, “This is the Christ.”

On the surface, this seems to be an improvement over the first group of people. And yet we still have to ask if the people are “fitting” Jesus into the Scriptural “category” of “the Christ” or if

^{*} By the time of Jesus, the people of Israel had been looking for and awaiting “*the Prophet*” for fourteen hundred years, so in chapter six, when the people saw the sign that Jesus performed in feeding the five thousand, they concluded: “This is truly *the Prophet* who is to come into the world” and they intended to come and take Him by force to make Him *king* (6:14-15). Maybe they didn’t conclude that Jesus was the Messiah (the Christ) because they assumed that if He was the Messiah He would be the one claiming the kingship for Himself. So if He’s not the Christ—they might have reasoned—then He must be “the Prophet” – and a mighty, miracle-working prophet, at that, even **such as Moses was**. In the absence of the Messiah, “the Prophet” would serve wonderfully—for the time being—as Israel’s deliverer and king. Here in John chapter seven, there is no indication that those who are in “the Prophet” camp are thinking of Jesus in royal or kingly terms. Additionally, the people in chapter seven are responding not to a sign Jesus has performed (6:14) but to the words He has spoken (7:40).

they're seeing in Jesus the fulfillment and therefore the final interpretation and explanation of the Scriptures and of all that they said about who the Christ would be. They say that Jesus is the Christ, and yet they seem to be denying at the same time that He is "the Prophet." In other words, these people have concluded that Jesus "fits" better in the category of "the Christ" than He does in the category of "the Prophet." They start with the categories and then seek to understand the fulfillment in the light of those categories rather than starting with the categories and then seeking to fully understand those categories in the light of their fulfillment. If they had taken this second route, then they would have understood in the end—from listening to Jesus—that He was not *either* the Prophet *or* the Christ, but that He was *both* the Prophet *and* the Christ in one glorious Person.

Yes, Jesus is "the Christ," and yet exactly what the Scriptures mean by this can never be fully understood until the Christ Himself has come *into* the world to *finally* illumine and interpret and explain those Scriptures. But this is what the people don't understand. And so we read in the second half of verse forty-one:

III. John 7:41b-42 — Still others were saying, "Surely the Christ is not going to come from Galilee, is He? Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the descendants of David, and from Bethlehem, the village where David was?"

Of course, there *is* a certain irony here that John assumes we'll see right away. Even though Jesus grew up in Galilee and spent the majority of His public ministry in Galilee, He *was* actually born in Bethlehem, the village where David was (Mat. 2:1-11; Lk. 2:1-16; cf. Mic. 5:2), and He *does* actually come from the descendants of David (Mat. 1:1-17; Lk. 3:23-38; cf. Isa. 9:7; 11:1, 10; Jer. 33:15-16; Ezek. 34:23-24; Amos 9:11). So right away, we feel like we've scored a victory, don't we? At the same time, we feel frustrated that there's no mention of anyone setting the record straight. That would have been easy enough to do, wouldn't it? And yet what would it really accomplish? At the most, it would prove to this third group of people that Jesus does *conform to* the Scriptural category of "the Christ," while they remain just as blinded as ever to the reality that the Scriptures themselves must be explained and interpreted and illumined *by* the Christ. They might join the second group but still fail to see that the same Scriptures which say that the Christ would come forth *from Bethlehem* can only be finally fulfilled in one who comes forth *from God* and is going back to God (7:28-29, 33).

We go on, then, to read in verse forty-three:

IV. John 7:43-44 — So a division occurred in the crowd because of Him. Some of them wanted to seize Him, but no one laid hands on Him.

Can you see how pointless this division is? They're all divided over what *category* Jesus *fits* in: "the Prophet," "the Christ," or neither. But the reason they're divided is because they're all united in one fundamental way: They've all failed to understand that it's "*the Prophet*" Himself who will explain and interpret and illumine the Scriptures that speak of Him. They've all failed to understand that it's "*the Christ*" Himself who will explain and interpret and illumine the Scriptures that speak of Him. Their division, then, is the result of their agreement, so that they're

all equally blind. And this blindness that they all have in common is the result of their faulty understanding of and appeal to *the Scriptures* that they think they know so well.

V. John 7:45–46 — The officers then came to the chief priests and Pharisees [the officers who had been sent to arrest Jesus; v. 32], and they said to them, “Why did you not bring Him?” The officers answered, “Never has a man spoken the way this man speaks.”

On the one hand, the officers are suggesting that the hold Jesus has over the crowds has made it impossible for them to find any opportune time for arresting Him. On the other hand, the officers are still compelled to testify on their own behalf that “never has a man spoken the way this man speaks.” What exactly was the “way” in which Jesus spoke? Commentators offer many suggestions that I believe are all very true as far as they go (cf. Ryle), but I think behind all these suggestions is something more fundamental. Even the officers themselves seem unable to put their finger on what exactly it was that set Jesus’ manner of speaking apart from all other men. But in light of all we’ve seen so far this morning, I think we can give a very specific and a very simple answer. Jesus spoke not as a man mechanically “conforming” to a Scriptural category; Jesus spoke as that divine-human person who Himself “fills up” every Scriptural “category” and who Himself finally and definitively explains, and interprets, and illumines the Scriptures so that it’s as if they’re all being revealed afresh for the very first time. Remember what the two disciples on the road to Emmaus said after Jesus “explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures”: “Were not our hearts burning within us...?” (Lk. 24:27, 32; cf. Mat. 7:28-29). It was for this reason—though they couldn’t express themselves in these words—that the officers felt themselves so compelled to acknowledge—even to the chief priests and Pharisees: “Never has a man spoken the way this man speaks.” What to them was a mystery has been made plain to us by grace through faith, so that *we* can now say with full understanding—and yet with no less wonder and awe: “Never has a man spoken the way this man speaks.”

VI. John 7:47–49 — The Pharisees then answered them, “You have not also been led astray, have you? No one of the rulers or Pharisees has believed in Him, has he? But this crowd which does not know the Law is accursed.”

What the Pharisees are saying is that it’s their superior and expert knowledge of the Law—of the Old Testament Scriptures (cf. 15:25)—that guarantees they will never be deceived or led astray by Jesus. But what exactly does the Law say that exposes Jesus as a liar and a fraud? The Pharisees don’t offer any explanation. Not yet. Not so long as they’re speaking to subordinate officers who can be put in their place with insults and abuse. But then we read in verses 50-51:

VII. John 7:50–51 — Nicodemus (he who came to Him before, *being one of them*) said to them, “Our Law does not judge a man unless it first hears from him and knows what he is doing, does it?”

Nicodemus had come to Jesus before and heard Him speak about being “born from above” – “born of water and the Spirit” (3:1-8). Nicodemus had heard Jesus speak of “descending from heaven” and “ascending into heaven” – of being “lifted up” so that the one who believes will in Him have eternal life (3:13-15). Jesus had spoken to Nicodemus as no other man had ever spoken. He had even challenged Nicodemus: “Are you the teacher of Israel and [you] do not

understand these things (3:9-12)?” Jesus wasn’t suggesting that Nicodemus should have had everything figured out ahead of time, but He *was* saying that based on his knowledge of the Scriptures, he should be able to recognize and embrace the *fulfillment* of those Scriptures now that it is being revealed.

Having come to Jesus before and having heard Him speak, Nicodemus knew that Jesus could not be understood by simply measuring Him against their current understanding of Scriptural “categories.” So Nicodemus reminds his colleagues of the very Law that they’ve just appealed to: “Our Law does not judge a man unless it first hears from him and knows what he is doing, does it?” Nicodemus is asking His colleagues to truly *listen* to Jesus. Perhaps in listening to Jesus they will find that Jesus speaks the truth. Perhaps in listening to Jesus, they’ll find that though He doesn’t mechanically “conform” to Scriptural categories, He does speak as one who “fills up” the Scriptures. He does speak as one who finally and definitively **explains** and **interprets** and **illuminates** the very Scriptures they think they know so well.

VIII. John 7:52 — They answered [Nicodemus], “You are not also from Galilee, are you? Search [the Scriptures], and see that out of Galilee a prophet does not arise.”

Can you understand now what’s happening? Can you see the problem? Can you *see* the blindness of the Pharisees?

The Pharisees aren’t saying that no prophet has ever before arisen from out of the geographical region of Galilee. They know that wouldn’t be true. The Prophet Jonah was from Galilee (2 Kings 14:25) and very likely other prophets as well. Not long after the Gospel of John was written a Jewish Rabbi stated: “You have no single tribe in Israel from which a prophet has not come forth” (quoted in Beasley-Murray).

The Pharisees put “out of Galilee” *first* (“*out of Galilee* a prophet does not arise”) to emphasize their scorn and disdain for *such a place* as Galilee. In other words, I think what they’re saying is this: “Search, and see that out of [a place like] Galilee a prophet does not arise.” What was the problem with Galilee? R.T. France says (at the risk of oversimplification):

1. “**Racially** [Galilee]... had... a more mixed population, within which more conservative Jewish areas (like Nazareth and Capernaum) stood in close proximity to largely pagan cities, of which in the first century the new Hellenistic centers of Tiberias and Sepphoris were the chief examples.”
2. “**Geographically** Galilee was separated from Judea by the non-Jewish territory of Samaria, and from Perea in the southeast by the Hellenistic settlements of Decapolis.”
3. “**Culturally** Judeans despised their northern neighbors as country cousins, their lack of Jewish sophistication being compounded by their greater openness to Hellenistic [pagan Greek] influence.”
4. “**Religiously** the Judean opinion was that Galileans were lax in their observance of proper ritual, and the problem was exacerbated by the distance of Galilee from the temple and the theological leadership, which was focused in Jerusalem.”

In the light of these things, we can see how the Pharisees might easily have questioned whether Galilee should even be counted as a part of *true* Israel. And yet the prophets always arose from out of *Israel*, not from centers of pagan Gentile influence – *like Galilee*. Therefore, the Pharisees concluded that it was inconceivable that any prophet—certainly not *the* Prophet or any other eschatological figure—could arise from such a place as Galilee.

Jesus, the Galilean, simply doesn't "conform" to the Pharisees' understanding of Scriptural categories. But what if they had been looking for someone who rather than "conforming" to a Scriptural "category" would interpret and explain and illumine the Scriptures as the one who is Himself their fulfillment? Then they would have come one day to understand these verses from Isaiah in a whole new light – in the light of their *fulfillment*:

- Isaiah 9:1–2 — In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.

Conclusion

Chapter seven is a single unit because it's all centered around Jesus' presence in Jerusalem at the Feast of Booths. But it's telling how John chooses to end this section. He ends it not with Jesus glorious invitation to all those who are thirsty to come to Him and drink and not with the promise that from the innermost being of those who believe in Him there will flow rivers of living water, but rather with this lengthy account of all the various inadequate responses to Jesus. And notice, too, the abruptness with which John ends even this closing section: "Search [the Scriptures], and see that out of Galilee a prophet does not arise."

Why does John end chapter seven like this? Because he would set before us the "permanent hopelessness" (cf. Ridderbos) of reading and studying the Scriptures when those Scriptures are not read and studied in the full light of the one who "fills" them up. Because he would set before us the "permanent hopelessness" of reading and studying the Scriptures apart from the one who Himself interprets and explains and illumines those Scriptures by His own glorious person and saving work.

To the one who reads apart from Christ, the Scriptures will always be either a drudgery and a bore, or an essentially man-centered book, or nothing more than an excuse for religious and intellectual pride. But to us who read them as the writings that are "filled up" by Christ the Scriptures truly are those "*sacred* writings... which are able to make [us] wise for salvation *through faith in Christ Jesus*" (2 Tim. 3:15). To us the Scriptures are "more to be desired than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb" (Ps. 19:10).

Have your eyes been opened to see in all the Scriptures God's glorious revelation of His Son, Jesus Christ, who is our Prophet, our Priest, and our King? Are we "paying careful attention" to the prophetic word "as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in our hearts" (2 Pet. 1:19)?