

I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD... I AM HE

JOHN 7 & 8



UNDERSTANDING HIS WORD

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF JOHN 7 & 8

The context for chapter seven and eight¹ is that of the Festival of Tabernacles. In this section of the Gospel, John gives an account of Jesus' participation in the Temple worship events. Although reluctant at first, Jesus eventually goes to the Temple to participate in this important worship event. The festival, and all of the liturgy associated with it, functions as the backdrop for Jesus' interaction with the religious leaders. John zooms in on the debates and discussions Jesus is having with his adversaries while maintaining the important landscape of this particular religious festival and the theological themes it affirms.

The Feast of Tabernacles was one of three significant feasts that adult males living proximal to Jerusalem were obliged to attend. The other two feasts (or festivals) were Passover and Pentecost (Feast of the Firstfruits). Tabernacles was celebrated for seven days during September (Lev 23:33-43) and from several ancient accounts, this feast was a favorite of the people. The liturgy for the multiple day services was rich in imagery and the main focal point of the celebration was that the Living God dwells amongst His people. The 100,000+ worshippers who made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem would erect small huts in remembrance of the tents their ancestors used while escaping from Egypt and wandering in the wilderness. Whether rich or poor, all in attendance would sleep in these make-shift tents which made the festival a "level" event.

At the center of this festival is the re-enactment that the Jews used to worship at the one tent (Tabernacle) that contained the Ark of the Covenant. The rich symbolism of the worship services paid homage to the fact that the Living God chose to dwell among His people. Thus, much of the Scripture reading that would accompany the liturgy would recall God's abiding presence with his people. That the great I AM dwelt in the midst of the Israelites was the theological framework underpinning this much beloved festival. The overarching feeling for those in attendance was the sense of God's abiding presence surrounding their tents.

¹ The narrative of the woman caught in adultery (*pericope de adultera*, John 7:53-8:11) is regarded by some biblical scholars as a later insertion. The arguments for this view focus upon the sharp interruption this story causes with the natural flow of events centered on the Feast of Tabernacles (chaps 7 thru 8). In addition, the *pericope de adultera*, is not found in all of the earliest manuscripts of John despite arguments by early leaders, such as Augustine, that it was a genuine story. This narrative is undoubtedly of ancient date (both the western and eastern textual traditions bare witness) and in content it evinces the character of an authentic tradition, not that of a fictitious story.

FESTIVAL OF TABERNACLES LITURGY

During the Festival of Tabernacles, certain passages and narratives from the Hebrew Scriptures were read in remembrance of God's provision for the Israelites. One narrative that was remembered was Moses striking the rock at Horeb in order to produce water for the thirsty Israelites (Exo 17:6). During the worship liturgy of the festival an account of Moses' faithfulness to God's instruction was likely presented as the worshippers remembered God's miracle in the desert. It is important to consider that Jesus, during the remembrance of God's provision of water, declares to the crowd; *"If anyone is thirsty let them come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him"* (John 7:37). The timing of these claims can hardly be a coincidence.

Other narratives that were remembered and celebrated during this festival included the manner in which God provided a pillar of fire at night (and a pillar of smoke during the day) so as to lead his people (Exo 13:21). At one point in the worship this moment would be recounted and the people would celebrate God as guide and light. It is likely that during that moment in the service Jesus proclaims to his listeners that *"I AM the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life"* (John 8:12).

Other passages that would be recited during the seven day festival would bring to bear the uniqueness and sovereignty of God. One passage that would be recited is Deuteronomy 6:4; *"Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one."* This passage could be understood as the fundamental creed of Israel, establishing both the singularity of God (monotheism) and sovereignty of God, that is to say, the Lord has no rivals.

Passages from Psalms, which highlighted the theological focus of the feast were read:

"O House of Israel, trust in the Lord, HE is their help and shield; O House of Aaron trust in the Lord, HE is their help and shield; You who fear him, trust in the Lord, HE is their help and shield" (Psalm 115:9-11).

So also Psalm 50 and 80. Of particular importance was Psalm 46:

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble...There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells...be still, and know that I AM God...I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the Earth."

Important passages from the prophet Isaiah would also be recited and in particular those verses which declared God's unique title. For instance:

Isa 41:4 *"I, the Lord – with the first of them and with the last – I AM HE."*

Isa 43:10 *"You are my witnesses declares the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I AM HE. Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me."*

Isa 46:4 *"Even to your old age and gray hairs I AM HE, I AM HE who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you."*

One final piece of liturgy that was sung by the priests is the song of Moses recorded in Deuteronomy 32. The high point of the song comes in verse 39: *"See now that I, I AM HE; there is no god besides me; it is I who give life and I who take it away."*

In all these passages read or sung, please note the use of the sacred title: **I AM**. Biblical scholars for centuries have contended that these pronouns **I AM**, **I AM HE** are the inclusive summary of God's self revelatory declaration to his people. Harkening back to Yahweh's self

disclosure to Moses: *“God said to Moses, ‘I AM who I AM.’ This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you’”* (Exo 3:14), these ‘divine’ pronouns were understood by the Israelites as being the sacred title of the Lord.

With this backdrop we are now ready to hear Jesus proclaim his identity to the worshippers at the Temple, including the religious authorities.

John 8:12-58

As Jesus was attending the festival, and invariably teaching those who were following him, the religious leaders were keeping a close eye on him. Eventually the religious leaders begin to debate with Jesus about what he was teaching. They did not like what he had to say and they were trying to find ways to ensnare him. In response to their comments Jesus tells them: *“Where I go you cannot come...You are from below, I am from above. You are from this world: I am not of this world...I told you that you would die in your sins; Unless you believe that I AM HE”* (John 8:23-24). The authorities quickly respond to Jesus and ask him, *“Who are you?”* It is conceivable that they ask this question with a sense of heightened tension because Jesus had just uttered the sacred title, **I AM HE**. In the eyes of the religious leaders, it would be intolerable, not to mention blasphemous for Jesus to use such a term of himself.

The exchange continues as Jesus declares: *“when you have lifted up the Son of Man then you will know that I AM HE”* (John 8:28). ‘Son of Man’ is Jesus favorite way of referring to himself and ‘lifted up’ refers to being lifted up on the cross. But what is absolutely shocking about this statement is that Jesus has used the very words by which God himself chooses to be known – the great I AM.

The debate now reaches its highest pitch when Jesus tells the authorities, in no uncertain terms, that they are not following God, but instead they follow the devil. Obviously this does not go over well and when Jesus explains that those who believe in him will not taste death the religious leaders declare that Jesus is insane. ‘Even the great patriarch Abraham died,’ they retort and certainly Jesus cannot be greater than Abraham. In a twisting of words Jesus replies that Abraham has seen the day of Jesus. In his final volley Jesus declares that, *“Before Abraham was, I AM”* (John 8:58). Immediately, the leaders pick up stones to kill Jesus.

Why kill Jesus for speaking an incomplete sentence or for having bad grammar? The reason the religious authorities sought to eliminate Jesus is because he had dared to claim the sacred title of God for himself. Such a move by Jesus is not uncommon. Consider what happens a few months later at the Feast of Dedication (Hanukkah).

²⁴ So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, ‘How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.’ ²⁵ Jesus answered, ‘I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; ²⁶ but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. ²⁷ My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand. ³⁰ The Father and I are one.’ ³¹ The Jews took up stones again to stone him. ³² Jesus replied, ‘I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these are you going to stone me?’ ³³ The Jews answered, ‘It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human being, are making yourself God’ (John 10:24-33).

