

“Divided, Dismissive and Dumfounded”
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Continuing a series on the Gospel of John

John 7:40-52

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Here’s what’s been going on. Jesus has been in Jerusalem’s Temple area: the holiest place in the holiest city of God’s holy People. He has been saying things: *God has sent me. God has taught me. Only I know God. I am going to God.*

How do you react to that?

People have come to the Temple to celebrate and receive blessings from God. Then Jesus tells them: *“Everyone who is thirsty, come to me! Everyone who believes in me, drink!”*

People react. Notice the reactions that different groups have to Jesus.

When some in the crowd heard what Jesus taught, they said, *“This man is truly the prophet.”* Others said, *“He’s the Messiah.”* But others objected, *“The Messiah can’t come from Galilee, can he? Don’t the scripture say that the Messiah comes from David’s family and from Bethlehem, David’s village?”* So there was a division in the crowd over Jesus. Some wanted to arrest him, but no one grabbed him.

The guards returned to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked, *“Why didn’t you bring him?”* The guards answered, *“No one has ever spoken like this one!”* The Pharisees replied, *“Have you too been deceived? Have any of the leaders believed in him? Has any Pharisee? No, only this crowd, which doesn’t know the Law. And they are cursed!”*

Nicodemus, who was one of them and had come to Jesus earlier, said, *“Our Law doesn’t judge someone without first hearing him and learning what he is doing, does it?”* They answered him, *“You are not from Galilee too, are you? Look it up and you will see that the prophet doesn’t come from Galilee.”*

John 7.40-52, Common English Bible (alt)

II

People react to Jesus.

Start with the crowd. These are the *am ha’aretz*, the “people of the land.” These folks get their hands dirty. They struggle to get by. They do not have the time, resources, education nor inclination to stress about things religious. Study God’s Torah? Make the right offerings? Say the right prayers in the right ways at the right times? Keep track of what to do and not do? They have enough to worry about.¹

¹ www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/1356-am-ha-arez

In our terms, think “high school dropout.” Think “dead-end job.” Think “redneck.” Think “baby mama,” different kids with different daddies. Hard-working, but getting nowhere. Hard-partying, because what else is there? (By the way, these are the sort Jesus seems especially comfortable with, and they with him.)

They watch and hear Jesus, and they are astonished. His actions amaze them. His speaking stirs them.

“*He’s the prophet!*” some say. Way back, Moses said God would send another prophet like him. Moses made food come from heaven for ordinary people like them. Starting with next to nothing, didn’t Jesus just feed a crowd of thousands? Moses caused water to rush from a rock to quench thirsty people like them. Hasn’t Jesus just promised living water, refreshment forever?² “*He’s the prophet like Moses!*”

“*Naw!*” others say. “*He’s the Messiah!*” Not a new Moses, Jesus is the new David, God’s promised ruler and champion for God’s People. We need someone to stand up for us. The Romans crush us. Our leaders betray us. Our clergy use us. The Messiah will save us.

“*But what about Bethlehem?*” We know Jesus is from Nazareth, way up north in Galilee. Don’t the Scriptures say the Messiah will come from David’s town, Bethlehem? That’s just down the road, nowhere near Nazareth!³ (You get the irony. We know Jesus was born in Bethlehem, but they don’t. The Gospel-teller just lets the irony sit there. He lets their words unknowingly point to Jesus: he is the Messiah, and Moses’ prophet!)⁴

The crowd splits into arguments.

III

People react to Jesus. The crowd divides. Then there are the cops. That’s sort of what they are. The Roman Empire’s army is around, but the local authorities use their own law enforcement network. Some are investigators and informants. Others are beat-cops and

² F. F. Bruce cites a XX-century rabbi, who said: “As the first redeemer caused manna to descend . . . so will the last redeemer cause manna to descend. As the first redeemer caused the well to gush forth, so will the last redeemer bring up water.” *Ecclesiastes Rabba*, quoted in F. F. Bruce, The Gospel and Epistles of John (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1983), 183.

³ Earlier in chapter 7, some claim that the Messiah will emerge from mysterious origins. There were many competing expectations about the messiah’s identity and arrival. See Raymond E. Brown, The Gospel According to John (I-XI) (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 330.

⁴ The Gospel of John includes no birth narrative, leading some scholars to maintain that the writer knew nothing of Jesus’ origins. With other scholars, I think that the writer did know about the traditions in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, and assumed his readers would know. The objections to Jesus related to his birthplace and (in chapter 8) his parentage become ironic, for the objectors are unwittingly confirming Jesus’ credentials. John does not dwell on this, however; this is the only mention of Davidic origins and Bethlehem in the Gospel. It’s greater concern is Jesus’ divine origins. Frederick Dale Bruner, The Gospel of John, A Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 498f.

the riot squad.⁵ They keep order in the Temple and around it.

They had a warrant to arrest Jesus.⁶ But they come back empty-handed. Which is a head-scratcher. Jesus has no armed force backing him up, no visible protection. Yet something kept them from laying a hand on him. Instead, they come back marvelling about Jesus: “*Has anyone spoken like him before?*” They are astonished and perplexed.

IV

People react to Jesus. The crowd divides. The cops are dumbfounded. This riles their superiors even more.

It’s a strange coalition. We’ve got the chief priests and those around them. They are the aristocrats, from the few families that run things. Called the *Seduqim*, or Sadducees, they run the Temple and make the sacrifices. They run the government, collect taxes, preside over the courts, and try to smooth things over with the Romans (not easy!).⁷ They are all about stability and protecting their privilege. (It reminds me of back when Ontario was called “Upper Canada,” and the “Family Compact” ran everything.)⁸

But we also have the Pharisees. While the Sadducees have the most power, the Pharisees have the most influence among the people. For the most part they are not priests. They are not the elite. Pharisees are committed to faithfulness, living God’s Law in their daily lives. If everyone does that, society will change, and God will bless Israel again. Pharisees are grassroots, often respected. (They remind me of the old Methodist circuit-riding preachers.) However, living faithfully and calling out others when they don’t can make you at least seem legalistic, intolerant and hypocritical. So the crowd switched hot or cold about the Pharisees.⁹

Here’s the thing. Pharisees and Sadducees don’t get along. They compete for power and influence. They feud over matters both theological and political. Yet here they are together. It’s Hilary and Donald sharing a slow dance. It’s Habs fans and Senators fans realizing they agree on something . . . the Leafs!

They are a coalition because they agree about Jesus. They are convinced he is deceiving the crowd . . . which they discount as so ignorant and ungodly. They are shocked that Jesus has made fools of their police force. Even Nicodemus, one of their own, has gone soft on Jesus. (They don’t know that Nicodemus has already been investigating Jesus, and likes what he has been seeing.¹⁰)

⁵ The Greek term used here, *hupéretés*, means servant or attendant. It is someone who acts under orders. <http://biblehub.com/greek/5257.htm>

⁶ John 7:32.

⁷ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sadducees>

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Family_Compact

⁹ Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, Recovering Jesus: The Witness of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007), 90ff.

¹⁰ John 3:1-21.

V

People react to Jesus. The crowd divides. The cops are dumbfounded. The coalition is dismissive. Jesus splits people, and offends people, and leaves people speechless. We react to Jesus.

Don't be surprised. Close to Christmas, we heard about when old Simeon met Mary and Joseph as they brought baby Jesus to the Temple. Simeon said to Mary:

*This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed.*¹¹

Don't be surprised. The Gospel we're working from, the Good News as told by John, starts with a preview. It gives us insider information about whom Jesus is. And it tells us how folks will react.

*He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.*¹²

Don't be surprised. It has happened to me. You? If he has not challenged you, concerned you, confused you, and angered you, then spend more time with Jesus. He will. You need him to.¹³

Don't be surprised.

Wherever Jesus is doing things, some people will be like the crowd: divided about him and his followers. Let's just make sure it is Jesus they are dividing over, and not the un-Jesus-like ways that we his followers can behave.

Wherever Jesus is doing things, some people will be like the Sadducee-Pharisee coalition: dismissing him and his followers as ignorant and ungodly. Let's just make sure we are actually being thoughtful, intelligent, and God-hearted!

Wherever Jesus is doing things, some people will be like the Temple guard: dumbfounded and amazed. Some people will be like Nicodemus the Pharisee: wanting to find out more. Are you ready to welcome them? To listen to their questions? To tell them what you know about Jesus? And to stand with them as, together, we discover more and more about who Jesus is, and what Jesus is about?

And with Jesus, we will be dumbstruck, and awestruck, together. Amen.

¹¹ Luke 2.35-36.

¹² John 1.10-11

¹³ Timothy Keller posted this on his Facebook page: "If your god never disagrees with you, you might just be worshipping an idealized version of yourself." (February 6, 2017)