

Explore the Bible: I Am the Light

January 25, 2023

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for Feb. 5 focuses on John 8:3-18.*

The Feast of Tabernacles is the context for Jesus' second "I Am" statement, found in John 8:12. This seven-day celebration commemorated the 40 years the Israelites spent in the wilderness where God "tabernacled" among his people, an important theme for John's own portrayal of Jesus.

John's readers are reminded of the reference in the Gospel's opening chapter where Jesus is portrayed as the word made flesh who pitched his tabernacle with humanity by making "his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). John also situates the beginning of this new section of the gospel with Jesus "teaching in the temple courts near the place where the offerings were put" (John 8:20).

Jesus as the "Light of the World" (John 8:12)

Jesus states in verse 12: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but have the light of life." The image of light not only beckons John's readers back to John 1, but also to the use of light in relation to the Old Testament and specifically the Feast of Tabernacles.

The context of a celebration remembering God's provision for Israel as they relied on God in the wilderness post-Egypt is fitting setting for Jesus' words. Leaning on the use of light during this seven-day celebration, Jesus' proclamation reveals the significance of the image in three ways: (1) The

light in the wilderness (Exodus 13:21-22, (2) The promised light for the Gentiles (Isaiah 42:6, 49:6), and conclusively then (3) The light of life (Psalm 119:105; John 1:4, 12).

God's provision noted in Exodus did not consist of only instructions for the establishment of the tabernacle and the Law, but also the personal direction given through the "pillar of a cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light" (Exodus 13:21). This light was a gift of personal direction and assurance as the Israelites traveled with God through the wilderness.

The suggestion is outlandish for Pharisee ears on two further fronts: (1) Jesus is the luminary himself, and (2) Jesus is the light of "the world." That Jesus was not simply pointing to the light, but was in fact the source of light stands as utter blasphemy for these Pharisees. On top of this is the note that Jesus is more than "the light of Israel," but rather "of the world," serves as an implied nod to the promised light in writings of Isaiah.

Jesus' statement concerning himself being the source of light concludes with a promise made to all who follow him to have what is needed for lighting their path in life. This no doubt incited the Pharisees as proud keepers of the oral and written Law of Moses.

Jesus and the need for two witnesses (John 8:13-18)

Responding to Jesus' seemingly outlandish claim and promise, the Pharisees retort with their own assertion to the invalidity of Jesus' statement. Their case rests on the issue of insufficient witnesses.

John's readers will remember that the list of witnesses previously provided by Jesus in John 5:33-47 was deemed as insufficient by the religious

leaders. Standing at an impasse, Jesus concedes the point that he is in fact his own witness. This is not a problem for Jesus, because he knows where he comes from and where he is going, something that cannot be claimed by others with such a finite perspective of their own future.

Jesus advances the debate by the need for two witnesses as stated in the Law (Deuteronomy 17:6). For Jesus, he and his Father who sent him satisfy the requirement needed. Important to note is that Jesus uses the Greek expression *ego eimi*, or I AM as read in the Septuagint (Greek reading of the Old Testament), a deliberate reference to the covenant name for God.

Jesus' second reference to "the Father" is met with the Pharisee's chiding question, "where is your father?" (John 8:19). The question is not to be read as a legitimate quandary by this group who have already made up their minds about Jesus. Instead, likely is the intended insult of a man whose earthly father no longer appears in the picture. Either way, Jesus employs the question for his own purposes.

Jesus and the Accusation (John 8:19-20)

The question is met with Jesus' own accusation of the Pharisees. With both himself and his father serving as the two witnesses to his testimony, Jesus suggests the Pharisees know neither of them. His reply is that these men of high repute and diligent studiers of the Law not only do not know the man who stands in front of them, but also do not know God the father.

For Jesus, these men proverbially are standing in the dark, groping around and seeing nothing. Jesus, on the other hand, offers the way forward in the tradition of the pillar of fire by night. For he is in fact the "light of the world." And all one must do is follow him.

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