

Seeing Jesus in John's Gospel

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Tabernacle

Scripture

John 1:1–18 The opening passage of John’s Gospel introduces Jesus and sets the stage for the stories that follow. In verse 14, John uses the metaphor of Jesus as tabernacle to communicate the incarnation of God’s Word in the person of Jesus. The notion of God’s presence “tabernacling” in human flesh is an undercurrent found in other parts of the Gospel.

Prayer

Gracious and everlasting God, you pitched your tent among the Israelites in the wilderness, leading them in the way of life. So also you sent your Word to dwell among us, full of grace and truth. We give you thanks, O God. You have provided for our needs and given us more than we could ever deserve. We thank you. We see your glory in Jesus Christ, whose gifts of grace heal us and restore us to life. May Jesus Christ be real to us today and always. Therefore we praise you, blessed and holy trinity, one God forever and ever. Amen.

Introduction

In verse 1, John introduced the Word of God. Though modern Christians will automatically identify the Word with Jesus, it can be instructive to read John 1:1–3a and to imagine we do not know that John will connect the Word with Jesus. Pausing for a moment in this way can give content to the metaphor of Jesus as the Word. Instead of assuming that Jesus defines what it means to be God’s Word, we remember that ancient Christians, seeking to give voice to their experience of Christ, drew on existing concepts to describe whom they understood Christ to be.

God’s Word is a creative force. John begins with the same words that begin the book of Genesis, “In the beginning . . .” The reader is transported to that time before human existence, when God spoke, and the world came into being (see Genesis 1). Other Old Testament writers also spoke of creation with reference to God’s word: “By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all their host by the

breath of the LORD's mouth" (Psalm 33:6). John uses similar imagery to focus the reader's attention on the creative power of divine speech.

In the first century, God's Word also served an important theological purpose. Many philosophers, pagan and Jewish, were concerned to describe God's interaction with the world in a way that preserved God's holiness. God is invisible, inaccessible to mere mortals. God's "word" (Greek, *logos*) was the principle of reason through which the ineffable God communicated with creation. Jews also understood this *logos* to be the word of Scripture. The abstract concept of the communicating *logos* was embodied in the law, words given by God to guide humans in their pursuit of holiness.

John 1:14 is the climax of John's prologue. It is not until verse 14 that John explicitly associates the Word with Jesus: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory." This creative power of God, this means through which finite, mortal creatures can perceive the will of the eternal God, takes up residence as a human person, Jesus. With these words the good news of John's Gospel begins: the saving presence of God inhabits the world.

The Dwelling Place of God

The dense, beautifully crafted first eighteen verses of John say much about John's theological claims. One claim that usually gets little attention: John's identification of Jesus with the tabernacle. John's first readers were Jews, who knew the traditions of Israel and came to believe in Jesus as Messiah. For them, the language of verse 14 would have called to mind God's dwelling place during the wilderness period, the tabernacle. The Greek word for tabernacle is *skēnē*. John uses the related Greek verb, *skēnoō*, "live," to describe the residence of the Word in the flesh.

In the Old Testament, the tabernacle is depicted as God's dwelling place among the Israelites during their years in the wilderness. God's instructions to Moses for the building of the tabernacle occupy large portions of the book of Exodus. The tabernacle, or tent of meeting (Hebrew, *mishkān*; Greek *skēnē*), moved from place to place with Israel throughout the wilderness period (Exodus 40:36–38). It was a place where people went seeking a revelation from God (33:7), though only Moses is said to have spoken directly to God there (vv. 8–9). The tabernacle was a place of assembly, sacrifice, and consecration of leaders (see, for example, Leviticus 8; Numbers 11:16–17; 16:18).

After Israel began to inhabit the Promised Land, the tabernacle was first set up at Shiloh (Joshua 18:1) and sacrifices were offered there. The tabernacle later came to be associated with the temple after it was built (1 Chronicles 6:31–32). Though the tabernacle was probably destroyed along with Solomon’s temple in 587 B.C. (Psalm 74:7), the rebuilt temple was identified as God’s dwelling place.

The tabernacle (and later the temple) was the place where God’s “glory” appeared: “Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle” (Exodus 40:34). In the Old Testament the “glory of God” indicates the visible manifestation of God’s presence. Humans could not look upon God directly, but could perceive God’s glory. Though the ability to enter into God’s presence is specifically associated with Moses (34:29–35), at times God’s glory appears to all Israel at the tent of meeting (Numbers 14:10b; 16:19, 42). The perception of God’s glory is sometimes associated with God’s acts. For example, Moses and Aaron tell the Israelites regarding the gift of manna, “In the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD” (Exodus 16:7). Thus, God’s glory manifested itself in a number of ways. But the “dwelling place” of God’s glory was the tabernacle.

John’s tabernacle metaphor may seem muted for modern readers. By combining the concepts of the “dwelling” of God with the vision of God’s glory, John sends a cue that early readers of the Gospel would easily understand. John identifies Jesus as the tabernacle. As God dwelt among the Israelites in the wilderness, so also God’s Word dwells in human flesh in the person of Jesus.

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The Dwelling Place of God’s Glory

As the dwelling place of God’s Word, Jesus makes visible the glory of God. Just as God was not directly visible to Moses (Exodus 33:17–23), John also affirms that humans can perceive God’s glory only indirectly, through the place where God dwells: “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known” (John 1:18). Jesus is a visible manifestation of the presence of God.

Though the word *tabernacle* and the verb form *skēnoō* do not appear again in the Gospel, John has set the stage to read the rest of

the Gospel through this lens. Throughout the Gospel, the reader will discover that Jesus' signs reveal his glory (2:11; 11:40). God's glory is especially manifest in Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension (17:5; cf. 7:39; 12:23; 17:1). John's introduction gives the reader a way to understand these claims. God's glory is visible in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus because he is the dwelling place of God.

In John 1 we see the creativity of early Christians seeking to express a new religious experience centered on the person of Jesus. John draws on older ideas that were available in his culture. Jews already conceived of God's Word as being embodied in the law. They also knew stories of God's glory residing in a tent. John brings these ideas together in a creative way to express his understanding of Jesus. The result is something altogether new, a way of giving voice to the meaning and identity of Jesus. John combines these metaphors, Word and tabernacle, to express the complex idea of the incarnation. God's presence still resides in a tent, only this time it is a tent of human flesh. This is the place where God's glory becomes visible.

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John points out numerous instances in which God's glory became visible in the life of Jesus. Yet the perception of God's glory is not limited to those humans who encountered the historical Jesus. In John 1:14 the narrator includes the voice of the believing community testifying to their perception of God's glory: "We have seen his glory." As the dwelling place of God's Word, Jesus continues to manifest God's glory to those who believe.

The continued presence of God was especially important in the period in which John's Gospel was written, for the Jewish people had recently experienced the devastating loss of the temple in Jerusalem. (The temple was destroyed in A.D. 70, and John's Gospel was likely composed between A.D. 75 and 85.) The destruction of this temple raised questions for Jews about the dwelling place of God.

God Continues to Dwell in Jesus

In later chapters, John refers to the destruction of the temple. Because he has already identified Jesus as the tabernacle, John can use these passages to reassure readers that God's presence has not disappeared, but continues to dwell among them in Jesus. The first

of these occurs around the cleansing of the temple. John situates this act at the beginning of Jesus' ministry (John 2:13–22). It is his first public event.

The cleansing of the temple should be understood as a parallel to the sign-acts of Old Testament prophets like Jeremiah (e.g., Jeremiah 13; 27:1–7). Jeremiah not only spoke God's word to the people, but also performed symbolic acts that presaged the judgment of Judah. Jesus' act is to drive the merchants and money changers out of the temple. Like Jeremiah, Jesus symbolically enacts the overthrow of the temple.

In response, the Jews ask Jesus for a sign to justify his ability to take such a bold, symbolic action. Jesus replies, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). At the time, neither the Jews nor the disciples understood this cryptic saying. The narrator intervenes: "He was speaking of the temple of his body" (2:21). The sign that justifies Jesus' purging of the temple is his later resurrection.

For the first Christian readers of the Gospel, any reference to the destruction of the temple would also bring to mind its actual destruction by the Roman army. From this perspective, Jesus' act of cleansing is a destructive act that prophesies the overthrow of the temple. At the same time, his words also promise restoration. Though the temple is destroyed, John claims that God's presence is still available to those who perceive God's glory in Jesus. Thus, Jesus' words in 2:19 make sense at the narrative level as a response to the request for a sign, and they have additional significance for the Gospel's reader, who knows the later historical events.

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Jesus does not denigrate the temple in this passage. Christian interpreters have often cast the cleansing of the temple as a harsh critique of its rituals, symbolizing Jesus' rejection of Judaism as a whole. Yet within the logic of John's metaphors, it makes more sense to read this passage as an affirmation of the temple and its importance. The temple is the earthly dwelling place of God. After its destruction, Christians identified Jesus as God's dwelling. The metaphor communicates the theological claim that all the good things associated with the temple are now available to those who

believe in Jesus. Behind this assertion is the understanding that the temple has abiding value.

John explicitly frames the cleansing of the temple as an act of protection or concern for God's house: "His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me' " (John 2:17; cf. Psalm 69:9). Clearly, Jesus' action communicates pending judgment of current temple practices. Yet the affirmation that Jesus exhibits zeal for God's house is important to John's message. Jesus does not replace the temple in a way that denies its importance. Instead, John gives the reader who grieves the loss of the temple a means of locating God's glory. The dwelling place of God has not been lost but can be found in the person of Jesus.

Spiritual Practice

Try to imagine why the temple was so important to John and to Israel. Many psalms communicate something of the Hebrews' experience of the power and presence of God in the temple. Read one of the following psalms each day of the coming week. Notice what the psalmist claims about the temple and its importance. Choose from Psalms 5, 11, 24, 27, 48, 61, 63, and 138.

Questions for Reflection

From John's perspective, God's dwelling in Jesus' flesh does not end at Jesus' death. Writing from a later period, the narrator affirms, "We have seen his glory" (John 1:14). John claims that Jesus continues to manifest God's presence. Where is God's presence in Jesus visible today?

As the tabernacle, Jesus is the place where God's Word dwells. God's Word is a creative force and a way God communicates with humankind. Think about the places you identified God's presence in the first question. How do you see God's Word as active in these situations?

In Jesus' lifetime, God's glory is seen in Jesus' acts of healing and provision. Thinking again about your answers to the first question, how do the places you identified manifest God's glory in similar ways?