

STUDY 12

Christ—New Tabernacle, New Temple

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And the word became flesh and tabernacled (or lived in a tabernacle) in our midst, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the begotten from the father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14, lit. trans.).

INTRODUCTION¹

These words from the prologue of John's Gospel are important for the Christian gospel. Much has been made of those words, 'the word became flesh'. It establishes the humanity of Jesus Christ and thwarts docetism not only in the early centuries of the church but also today. Liberal doctrine tends to make this the basis of salvation. Important though it may be, the incarnation is a point in the whole purpose of God which starts from a beginning and moves towards the fulfilment in the eschaton. The incarnation presupposes the cross and the atonement. The incarnation must not be considered in isolation. This tends towards a philosophical analysis and ultimately an anthropocentric interpretation, 'emptying the cross of its power' (cf. 1 Cor. 1:17).

It is what follows those words, 'the word became flesh', in this verse that is the focus of our attention in this paper. The words 'dwelt among us'—ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν, *eskēnōsen en hēmin*—means literally, 'lived in a tabernacle or tent in our midst'.² It is quite clear that John is linking the incarnation to the tabernacle which symbolises the presence of God in the midst of Israel. This heralds the Immanuel theme and we celebrate this enthusiastically. However, John was not thinking merely of the warm and cosy presence of the word in our midst. He wrote with reference to all that is implied in the elaborate setting up of the tabernacle and later the temple in Israel and the way it reflects the closeness of the relationship between Yahweh and His people. The presence of God in the tabernacle in the midst of Israel is what Israel cherishes as the people of God though, more often than not, Israel went on a wayward path.

¹ I have drawn much of the material in this paper from G. K. Beale's article (see p. 29, fn. 5).

² C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (SPCK, London, 2nd edn, 1978), p. 165, says that ἐν ἡμῖν, *en hēmin*, means in our midst rather than in our human nature.

Christ—New Tabernacle, New Temple

We have already said much regarding the tabernacle (and temple) and its significance in the life and worship of Israel. The sacrifice and the High Priesthood in the temple worship are all part of the way God has decreed for creation to reflect His presence among His people. So when John wrote, ‘the word became flesh and tabernacled in our midst’, he straightaway moves from the incarnation to the whole of the worship that the word brings into the created realm. It is not just a warm cosy presence to soothe the strains and stresses in our world. It is the expression of the worship that the word in the flesh will bring to the Father on behalf of creation. It is the fulfilment of all that the prophets have said following the failure of Adam and Israel in leading the created world in the worship of Yahweh. The fulfilment is the result of the work of God Himself. One such word came from Isaiah:

He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intervene; then his own arm brought him victory, and his righteousness upheld him (Isa. 59:16).

After having moved to link the incarnation with the tabernacle, John inevitably brings in the glory that is so much a part of the tabernacle worship: ‘And the word became flesh and tabernacled (or lived in a tabernacle) in our midst, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the begotten from the father, full of grace and truth’ (John 1:14, lit.). It is no longer the glory of the tabernacle structure, but the glory of the second person of the Triune Godhead, a glory emanating from the Father, full of grace and truth. The glory had once departed from the tabernacle and that glory is now restored in its fullness by the ‘begotten from the father’. Is John here alluding to the fact that He is the tabernacle? Perhaps not yet.

THE LOGIC OF JOHN 1:14

A problem we have in comprehending the person of Christ is the question of faith and history. I do not think we want to go through the much pursued path of the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. We have the gospel accounts of the human Jesus and what He did and taught, His life and death, and His interactions with all strata of the society in His day, and the effect of all that He did on the society and indeed the wider influence in the world. From that we have distilled into our framework of faith and religion without putting it into the larger context of the purpose of God and His presence with His people. We have left out all the difficult bits, including the mysterious bits that do not fit into our framework, and we work happily away with what we can handle. What we have to do in this school is to struggle with Scripture in all its complexity regarding this larger framework of the dwelling and presence of God. It is this dichotomy that presents the difficulty in our comprehension and therefore the challenge in this school. I am not inferring that our comprehension of the human Jesus is faulty and neither is our understanding of His life and work. The challenge to us in this school is to put all that into the framework of God’s presence with His people.

Christ—New Tabernacle, New Temple

The prologue of John's Gospel has to be seen as a bold introduction to all that John intends to write in it. We will try to see what is behind the mind of John. As we all know, he expands what is in the prologue in the rest of the gospel. So having linked the incarnation to the temple and the glory in the prologue (1:14), John later records in addition to Jesus' remark regarding Nathanael, this comment:

And he said to him, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man' (John 1:51).

This is a clear reference to the vision of Jacob's ladder at Bethel (Gen. 28:12) before his encounter with Esau. While there is no mention of the tabernacle here, this allusion to Jacob's vision must certainly include the presence of God in the sanctuary at Bethel:

Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the LORD is in this place; and I did not know it.' ¹⁷ And he was afraid, and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven' (Gen. 28:16–17).

This remark by Jesus may appear unrelated, but Jesus was responding to Nathanael's answer, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' (John 1:49). The response by Jesus in describing Himself instead as the 'Son of man' and as the one upon whom the angels of God ascended and descended must have stated clearly His role as the mediator between God and man. It is Jesus Himself who is now the link between heaven and earth, and not the earthly structure of the temple. In fact it is also quite evident from the Old Testament accounts that the holy presence of God in a place was not an intrinsic property of the place but because God was there. When He was not present, then the place was no longer holy. The account of Moses and the burning bush again makes this clear.

John follows this up in the next chapter with the cleansing of the temple at which Jesus said:

'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' ²⁰ The Jews then said, 'It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?' ²¹ But he spoke of the temple of his body (John 2:19–21).

Here John is making it plain that he identifies the temple with Jesus. John in his prologue has emphasised the mutual indwelling between the Father and the Son, 'the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father' (1:18). C. K. Barrett commented that 'the human body of Jesus was the place where a unique manifestation of God took place and consequently became the only true Temple, the only centre of true worship'.³

Mark amplifies what Jesus said:

We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands' (Mark 14:58).

³ C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John*, p. 201.

Christ—New Tabernacle, New Temple

He is the new temple in His body made without hands. This will be dealt with in the next paper. The spiritual nature of this worship in a temple made without hands is brought out in Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman in John 4:

Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.²³ But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him.²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth' (John 4:21–24).

He is the new temple and the true worship. The question is no longer whether worship is in Samaria or Jerusalem. The question of where we worship cannot be answered with reference to spatial concepts in the created universe. The new temple and the new Jerusalem has superseded all that. The reality of all that God has purposed has now arrived. There is to be a new worship led by the λειτουργός (*leitourgos*) in the true sanctuary (Heb. 8:2), a theme that we will come back to a little later. But before that we need to see the pronouncement by Jesus at the Feast of the Tabernacles:

On the last day of the feast [i.e. feast of the Tabernacles], the great day, Jesus stood up and proclaimed, 'If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink.³⁸ He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, "Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water."³⁹ Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive; for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified (John 7:37–39).

We have already seen from Ezekiel (47:1–6) the imagery of water flowing from the new temple, from the throne of God, in an earlier paper. Jesus identified this 'water' with the Holy Spirit. At the end of John's Gospel, he recorded the breathing of the Holy Spirit into the disciples. This giving of the Spirit brings new life into the new creation:

And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit' (John 20:22).

The allusion is to God breathing life into Adam in the Genesis account: 'then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being' (Gen. 2:7). So, just as the Spirit breathed life into Adam, so the Spirit breathed new life into the generation of the second Adam.

THE TEMPLE IN PAUL'S LETTERS

It is Paul who contrasted between the old and new creation and to this we will now turn briefly as this will be dealt in greater detail later this morning. While we may say that we are the temple of the Holy Spirit and Christ dwells in us, we are only the temple insofar as we are in Christ (the temple) and part of His body (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16). When Jesus was questioned regarding destroying the temple, 'he spoke of the temple of his body' (John 2:21). Barrett's comment on this is relevant here:

Christ—New Tabernacle, New Temple

It cannot therefore be maintained that the body that is raised up is the church, understood in terms of the familiar Pauline image . . . It was his own body, killed on the cross, that Christ raised up, but in doing so he brought the church into being.⁴

In Revelation, John affirmed that the temple is God Himself, ‘and I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb’ (Rev. 21:22). Yet Paul was able to talk about the people of God as the temple:

Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? ¹⁷ If any one destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and that temple you are (1 Cor. 3:16–17).

We are only God’s temple insofar as we are identified with Christ and part of his body. That is the logic of the incarnation. Jesus became man so that humanity may become part of Him. Without that it would be merely a metaphysical body and not a true incorporation. So when Paul says, ‘For we are the temple of the living God’, it is because, ‘I [God] will live in them and move among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people’ (2 Cor. 6:16).

It is the Spirit of God who effects this incorporation into the body of Christ. Paul made this incorporation clear:

You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on your hearts, to be known and read by all men; ³ and you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts (2 Cor. 3:2–3).

So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²² in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit (Eph. 2:19–22).

In writing to the Colossian Christians, Paul affirmed this incorporation into Christ again:

For in him the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily, ¹⁰ and you have come to fulness of life in him, who is the head of all rule and authority (Col. 2:9–10).

Jesus is the temple of God in the primary sense. We are only the temple in a secondary sense because of our incorporation into Jesus. In Him is the fullness of the deity and we have come into fullness in Christ. The temple that Jesus is includes humanity through incorporation and in that sense we are also the temple.

THE HEBRAIC CONTRIBUTION

The writer to the Hebrews puts forth the thesis that the final revelation is to be seen in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. From His pre-existence, to His humanity and finally His exaltation, the writer argues how He has superseded the pattern of the Jewish temple worship. The spiritual worship with the new order of Melchizedek’s priesthood has already been pointed out. The new Great High Priest, without beginning and without

⁴ C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John*, p. 165.

Christ—New Tabernacle, New Temple

ending, is also the sacrificial lamb. Having argued for the new and excellent way, the writer to the Hebrews finally makes his point in chapter 8:

Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven,² a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent which is set up not by man but by the Lord (Heb. 8:1–2).

Hebrews 8:2 may be put this way: *a minister in the most holy place and the true tabernacle which is set up by the Lord and not by man.*⁵ The reference is clearly to the temple worship in the most holy place only entered by the Great High Priest. However, the structural reference is straightaway removed by the addition of the word ‘true’ to describe the tabernacle that is not man-made. The worship is now taken over from the old order by Melchizedek’s new High Priest as He ministers in the new temple which is now His body prepared by the Lord (Heb. 10:5).

And so it can now be seen what the writer to the Hebrews is writing about. Christ is the High Priest. Christ is the temple. He is at once the High Priest and the sacrificial lamb. Christ is the λειτουργός (*leitourgos*), the leader of the worship, as only He can offer that which the Father accepts. He is the minister in the tabernacle not made with hands. He *is* the tabernacle. He is the fulfilment of all that the Father purposes. He is the Alpha and the Omega. He is all in all. He is the one who will sum up (ἀνακεφαλαίω, *anakephalaioō*) all things in the universe.

AND FINALLY

That is why John wrote in Revelation:

And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb (Rev. 21:22).

⁵ τῶν ἁγίων λειτουργός καὶ τῆς σκηνῆς τῆς ἀληθινῆς, ἣν ἔπηξεν ὁ κύριος, οὐκ ἄνθρωπος (Heb. 8:2).