

Spirituality and Transforming Worship?

Individual and collective experiences of Jesus' presence (and absence) in John's Gospel¹

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1 Household Imagery in the Fourth Gospel

- In two books, both published by Liturgical Press in Collegeville, Australian scholar Mary L. Coloe develops a fresh perspective on the living spirituality of the Johannine community:
- *God Dwells with Us: Temple Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel* (2001) explores the development of the community's identity awareness through its use of symbolic language—from their roots in Israel's perception of the tabernacle and temple as God's dwelling place (2:16) to its experience of God's dwelling in Jesus as incarnate Word (1:14).
- *Dwelling in the Household of God: Johannine Ecclesiology and Spirituality* (2007) focuses on developments in the community's identity and implied ethos between Jesus' two references to "my Father's house"—in 2:16 as a building (cultic institution) and in 14:2 as a symbol of community, intimacy and mutuality.

2 Sacred Life in God's Household

- John's Prologue announces that ὁ λόγος, the eternal, cosmic Word, the life and light that was with God and that was indeed God (1:1–5), became flesh and dwelled among people (1:14).
- The first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures (Torah) witness to Israel being called to live in a covenant relation with YHWH, to be a holy nation and a blessing to the peoples of the earth. The key motivation for their daily ethos is stated in Lev 19:2, "You shall be holy, for I YHWH your God am holy," with the command to love the neighbour (Lev 19:18b) as culminating point of their holiness code. The usual way in which Israel experienced God's holiness was through God's acts of love, particularly in YHWH's great and merciful act of delivering them from Egyptian bondage. As a symbol of YHWH's presence, they were to build a holy place, a tabernacle (ἡ σκηνή) containing the ark of the covenant (Exod 25:8–16; 26:1–37; 36:8–38).
- The Greek verb ἐσκήνωσεν in Jn 1:14 (σκηνώ = to take up residence) probably alludes to Israel's tabernacle and implies that the visible glory of YHWH's presence that once resided in the tabernacle (and later in the temple) has taken up residence in the person of Jesus, and that this glory can now be "seen" in Jesus (1:14–18).
- According to John's Gospel, Jesus however turns existing (Jewish) notions of holiness, ritual purity and cosmic order upside down. He dramatically cleanses the temple and behaves shamelessly by showing compassion to the ritually impure: a foreign Samaritan woman, a woman caught in adultery, a poor beggar born blind. His holiness paradoxically becomes visible through the glory of his self-giving love.
- Belonging to and remaining in the Holy One sent from God, who embodied God's holiness and love in surprising and shocking ways, who was crucified and resurrected, would form the core of the Johannine community's identity awareness, and the deepest motivation for their ethos of holiness and love.

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3 Mutual ‘indwelling’ as present reality in God’s Household

- The entire narrative of the FG invites worthy discipleship of Jesus and the God whom He represents, encouraging an οἰκία lifestyle (14:2) of belonging, of being loved, and of following—an ethos of remaining with/in Jesus (and the Spirit) as the source of life, love and light (1:39; 6:56; 13:1, 34–35; 14:10, 17, 20; 15:1–11).
- Recurrence of the verb μένω (to remain, stay, abide, live, dwell, reside, wait, continue, endure) is characteristic of the Johannine literature. It is rhetorically significant that it features most prominently in the farewell discourse and final chapters of the Gospel. According to Shelly Rambo (*Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining*. Louisville: WJK, 2010), it lies at the core of Jesus’ teaching to his disciples in Jn 15:1–17. “In the midst of his departing words, Jesus speaks about remaining” (Rambo 2010, 102). Ironically, the mutual indwelling of Jesus and his disciples (15:4) reveals “a new depth of intimacy” that would only be possible through his departure (Coloe 2001, 157).
- For this purpose, John artfully employs temple imagery not only for the person and mission of Jesus, but also for his disciples (cf. 2:19–22; 14:10, 17, 23, 25). Through his farewell discourse, and particularly the promise of the Spirit-Paraclete (14:26; 16:7), Jesus assures them of his continuing presence after his departure while they embody God’s dwelling place on earth.

4 Mimetic Ethos in God’s Household

- Remaining in fellowship with Jesus through the Spirit would necessarily lead to a new ethos—of loving God and one another (13:34; 14:15, 21, 23–24, 28; 15:9–10; cf. 1 Jn 2:3–11; 3:11–24; 4:7, 21). Believing in and loving Jesus, according to John, is a prerequisite for God dwelling/making God’s home with them (14:23; cf. 20:31; 1 Jn 2:5; 3:9; 4:13, 16). Jesus’ preparation of his disciples for his death and subsequent departure (13–17) therefore culminates in his invitation to them to *remain* in him, and in his love (15:4, 9).
- For this community, Jesus physically represented the hospitality of “the Father’s household” (14:2; cf. 13:3–5). His entire ministry is regarded as the embodiment of the love of God for the world—from reinterpreting their traditions and healing the sick, to washing the disciples’ feet and dying on a shameful cross.
- All of this serves as an example (13:15) to his followers as he encourages them to do likewise: “*Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. This mimetic ethos is a distinctive characteristic of the FG as John seems to reconfigure Torah, and particularly Lev 19:18, in significant ways, namely from the radical perspective of Jesus’ example.*”
- How are we supposed to *remain* in (this) Jesus, in his Spirit and in his love—collectively but also individually? And how may our personal commitment and corporate worship engage and enrich each other so as to be truly transformative?

5 Conclusion

- John narrates how Jesus reordered and upset familiar, conventional preconceptions of God and humanity in the first-century imperial setting by practising an ethos of compassion and mercy.
- Jesus prepares his disciples for his “absence” by promising not to leave them orphaned (14:18). Instead, he speaks of “remaining”—of intimate, reciprocal fellowship among them and God’s Spirit—and assures them to be present in new ways. In continuation with YHWH’s covenant with Israel and his own ministry of remaining, Jesus invites them to follow him in *being* a house(hold), a sanctuary where God’s holiness and love would be experienced.
- Today, the narrative of John’s Gospel continues to invite Christian communities to do likewise: to *be* a home for alienated, grieving, despairing, displaced and “homeless” people—a symbol of God’s sacred, life-giving and life-affirming love in the world.