

Temple Imagery in John¹

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The narrative of the Fourth Gospel shows the transference of the meaning of Israel's temple as the dwelling place of God. The temple shifts in meaning from a building to the person of Jesus and then to the community of believers.

When reading a gospel, the first thing to note is its narrative form; this book tells a story with its focus on the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The reader could then mistake this book as simply a narrative about the life, work, and death of this man, but this is where the genre of narrative has to be reassessed. Every gospel, while appearing to be something akin to biography, is in fact a rich theological text, in which the theology is presented in narrative form. In other words, while it may look simply like an historical record of what Jesus of Nazareth said and did, the intention of every gospel is to look beyond the historical—what happened?—to the theological—what did it mean? Each evangelist is taking the tradition he has received with its starting point in historical events and eye witness testimony, and then selecting and shaping his sources to communicate to a new generation of believers what God was doing in and through Jesus of Nazareth. In shaping the gospel for his readers, most likely a particular community, the evangelist will draw upon the community's life experiences, culture, and religious background, in order to make his theology understandable. This is true of all the gospels, and nowhere is this more obvious than in reading the Gospel of John.

The Fourth Gospel is dated towards the end of the first century, some twenty years after the Romans had destroyed Jerusalem and its temple. The gospel presumes its readers are very familiar with the Scriptures of Israel, Jewish religious festivals, and customs and methods of rabbinic argument. These clues in the text lead scholars to identify a Johannine community that is predominantly Jewish, including some disciples of John the Baptist, some Samaritans as well as some Gentiles.² One of the critical issues facing this community at this time, and the wider group of Jesus' believers, is the issue of their religious identity.

¹ This article presents an overview of my study of the temple in John: Mary L. Coloe, *God Dwells with Us: Temple Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 2001), 61–76. For this article, I have selected three major “temple” scenes to show the significance of the image for Jesus and for the community.

² For further information about the gospel's author, location, and community composition, see Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the Gospel of John: Edited, Updated, Introduced and Concluded by Francis J. Moloney* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 2003).

The earliest believers in Jesus came from within Judaism, and the initial proclamation of the gospel was made within Judaism. While the proclamation of Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah received a mixed response (Acts 14:4), initially such a proclamation did not of itself cause a widespread rupture between the Jewish Jesus believers and the wider Jewish community. In the aftermath of the destruction of the temple, this situation gradually changed. With no temple, no sacrifices, and no priesthood, Judaism was faced with redefining its religious identity. The temple was the visible symbol of God's presence. Even if one lived beyond the land of Israel, the temple still functioned as the central place of sacrifice, atonement, and daily purification. With its destruction in the year 70 C.E., a new focus of religious identity was needed, and in the following decades this new focus was identified as the Torah. The transition from temple sacrifice to Torah is illustrated in this later rabbinic tale:

Once, as Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai was coming forth from Jerusalem, Rabbi Joshua followed him and beheld the temple in ruins.

"Woe unto us," Rabbi Joshua cried, "that this, the place where the iniquities of Israel were atoned for, is laid waste!"

"My son," Rabban Yohanan said to him, "be not grieved. We have another atonement as effective as this. And what is it? It is acts of loving kindness, as it is said, For I desire mercy and not sacrifice." (Hos 6:6) (*Avot de Rabbi Natan*, ch. 6)³

The Scriptures of Israel, and with them the figure of Moses, the great lawgiver, revealer, and prophet, became the foundation of post-temple rabbinic Judaism.

At the same time that this process of redefining and refounding Jewish religious identity centered upon Moses and Torah, one group of Jews, given the name Christian, which referred to their belief that the Messiah had come in Jesus (Acts 11:26), were similarly faced with redefining themselves.⁴ Christian teachers, preachers, and evangelists were telling and retelling the Jesus' story and its meaning, proclaiming Jesus, not Moses as *their* revealer and way to God. In this context of two groups with their origins in Judaism, each seeking to understand the action of God in their recent history, and to clarify their religious identity *vis-à-vis* these events, the Gospel of John took its final form. The Jesus story that this gospel narrates necessarily relates to this historical context as the evangelist addresses his real readers and their religious concerns.

A central concern at this time is their relationship with Judaism. How do these Jesus believers now relate to their past heritage and the traditions of Israel? Does faith in Jesus mean abandoning all they once held dear?

³ Quoted in Jacob Neusner, "Judaism in a Time of Crisis: Four Responses to the Destruction of the Second Temple," *Judaism* 21 (1972): 324.

⁴ Two recent studies on this issue relevant to the Fourth Gospel are Raimo Hakola, *Identity Matters: John, the Jews and Jewishness* (NovTSup 18; Leiden: Brill, 2005) and Kåre Fuglseth, *Johannine Sectarianism in Perspective: A Sociological, Historical, and Comparative Analysis of Temple and Social Relationships in the Gospel of John, Philo, and Qumran* (NovTSup 119; Leiden: Brill, 2005).

THE PROLOGUE

The prologue starts to address these questions. “In the beginning. . .” In these, the opening words of Israel’s Scriptures, the story of Jesus is placed in continuity with Israel, even as it presents a new interpretation of those same Scriptures. The prologue, functioning like an overture, then continues to introduce the reader to the plot, major image, and theology of this gospel. The creative and revealing Word of God came to his own and was rejected (1:11). But there were some who did receive him and these, we are told, were given the power to become children of God (1:12). Here, in summary, is the plot that this narrative will unfold.

At v. 14, a central image is introduced. The Word, present with God in eternity, “became flesh and tabernacled (*eskēnōsen*) among us, and we saw his glory (*doxa*)” (1:14). The choice of the terms *skēnē* and *doxa* to describe the incarnation, evokes long traditions of God’s presence in Israel’s midst and the physical symbols for that presence—the ark, the tabernacle, and temple.⁵ But while introducing the Jesus story in continuity with Israel’s great narrative, this gospel reinterprets it. In the historical context of a Jewish and Christian struggle for religious identity, the prologue names two gifts and two revealers: the Law, given through Moses, and a gift named as a “true gift” given through Jesus Christ (1:17). These two gifts and two revealers are set in opposition. “From his fullness we have all received, a gift instead of (*anti*) a gift” (1:16).⁶ The final verse of the prologue reaffirms that there can be only one revealer of God, the one and only Son who rests in the heart of the Father (1:18).

The prologue makes these summarizing statements of plot and theology that the following narrative will develop and explain. In what follows, I will elaborate further on a major image introduced in the prologue and then featured in the narrative—the temple.

ISRAEL’S HOUSE OF GOD

The temple was the great symbol and physical reality that proclaimed to the people of Israel “God dwells in our midst.” The very name for the temple, the “House of God,” speaks of God’s presence, and in the temple cult Israel was assured of God’s blessings (Pss 84; 134:3). When the Solomonic temple was destroyed in 587 B.C.E., the prophets of Israel’s exile kept alive a future hope of restoration when once more God would dwell in the midst of a renewed people (Ezek 37:26–28). This future temple would be a source of fertility and healing for the land (Ezek 47:1–12). A new Israel would then settle in a cleansed and revitalized land with the temple as its center. When the temple was rebuilt by the returning exiles (c. 516 B.C.E.),

⁵ For further discussion of these terms, see Coloe, *God Dwells with Us*, ch. 3.

⁶ Most translations use the Pauline term “grace,” rather than the usual meaning of *charis/charitos*, which is “gift.” Similarly the word *anti* is translated as “upon,” which loses the sense conveyed by the Greek of two contrasting gifts. See the study by Ruth Edwards, “*Charin anti charitos* (John 1:16): Grace and Law in the Johannine Prologue,” *JSNT* 32 (1988): 3–15. In what follows, all Scripture translations are my own.

it failed to usher in the longed for restoration, so Israel's hopes were projected to a future end-time when God would intervene and raise up the eschatological temple in a new and glorified Jerusalem (Zech 12–14).

An aspect of the temple's significance lies in its mythological meaning as the Earth's navel, the very centerpoint of God's life-giving contact with the earth.⁷ The mythic understanding of the temple transcends the history of a particular building in Solomon's Jerusalem. The mythic view perceives the temple in cosmic terms as the link between heaven and earth, as the place in this world that corresponds to the heavenly throne of God and where the life-giving waters of God's throne make first contact with earth.⁸ Within the holy of holies rests the foundation stone, the *'even shtia*, which plugs the great fissure that leads down into the Deep. In rabbinic literature, this foundation stone is linked with the altar Noah erected after the flood (Gen 8:20), the stone on which the ark of the covenant rested in the first temple (1 Kgs 6:19), and even the altar of sacrifice that stood in the priests' court of the temple. The variety of these mythic associations testifies to the sacredness of the temple. As the place of God's numinous dwelling, the temple attracts to it stories and legends of God's presence in Israel's history. The Garden of Eden is thought to be located just beyond its walls, it is the place of Abraham's sacrifice (Gen 22:2; 2 Chr 3:1), the site of Jacob's dream of a ladder linking earth and heaven (Gen 28:10–17). The temple, as a cosmic symbol of God's presence, reaches back in time to the first acts of creation, when God's Spirit hovered over the waters of the Deep (Gen 1:2) and YHWH caused water to rise and form the four rivers bringing life to Eden (Gen 2:6, 10–14). The temple is the earthly "house of God" where all creation can acclaim, "God is here."

THE TEMPLE OF HIS BODY⁹

Jesus' first public action and confrontation with the Jewish leaders occurs in the temple, which Jesus names "my Father's house." While usually called "The Cleansing of the Temple," Jesus' actions could better be described as "The Displacement or Abrogation of the Temple," since Jesus' actions are directed at essential aspects of the temple system—the money-changers and the sacrificial animals.

According to Jewish sources, the money-changers were not a desecration of the temple, and it is possible that pigeons and even the larger animals were also allowed in the outer courts since during festival days there was some relaxation of laws (*m. Hag* 3:6–7). A month before Passover, tables were erected in the outer courts of the temple to collect the half-shekel temple

⁷ See Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 192. For further discussion on the image of the navel, see J. D. Levenson, "The Temple and the World," *JR* 64 (1984): 284.

⁸ A helpful introduction to the myths and symbolism of the Temple is Margaret Barker, *The Gate of Heaven: The History and Symbolism of the Temple in Jerusalem* (London: SPCK, 1991).

⁹ Coloe, *God Dwells with Us*, ch. 4; also Jacob Neusner, "Money-Changers in the Temple: The Mishnah's Explanation," *Judaism* 35 (1989): 287–90, and E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM, 1985).

tax (*m. Šeqal* 1:3), since this was a time when Jews from many lands would come to Jerusalem. This tax paid for the upkeep of the temple and its rituals. Since this tax could not be paid with Roman coins that offended Jewish law with the image of the emperor, the Roman money was exchanged for coins from Tyre that had no “graven image.” Pilgrims, on entering the outer precincts of the temple could change their money, pay their temple-tax, and buy an animal for sacrifice. The trading going on with the money-changers and animal sellers was essential to Israel’s system of worship and not a corruption. Jesus’ words that condemn the temple, concerning his Father’s house being made into a trading house (2:16), are spoken not because such trade in itself was wrong; his words and actions must be seen as a prophetic critique of the entire sacrificial system. The response by “the Jews” indicates that they have understood the meaning of his action, since they do not ask, “Why did you do this?” but they ask instead for a “sign” to legitimate his authority to act and speak as he does (2:18). Behind this request for a legitimating sign lies the figure of Moses, whose authority was demonstrated by “signs and wonders” (Deut 34:11).

Jesus’ actions, as portrayed in John, announce the end of the temple system; this is made explicit in the following discussion with “the Jews.” Jesus declares, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up” (2:19). While the Jews in the narrative misunderstand the reference to the temple, the narrator ensures that readers of the narrative understand that Jesus speaks of himself: “But he spoke of the temple of his body” (2:21). Whatever actions and words occurred in this event historically, the Fourth Evangelist portrays this event in order to bring out its meaning for his community. Jesus is now the dwelling place of God. The glory once visible in Israel’s tabernacle and temple can now be seen in Jesus (2:11). The placement of this scene, at the beginning of Jesus’ public activity rather than at its conclusion as depicted in the Synoptics (Mark 11:15–19 and par.), establishes the image of the temple as a major interpretive clue for understanding this gospel’s portrait of Jesus and his mission.

THE TABERNACLING WORD

The second time Jesus appears in the temple is during the Festival of Tabernacles (7:1–10:21). Two “temples” are dramatically superimposed as Jesus once again enters and remains within the temple. The festival called “Booths” or “Tabernacles” becomes the context for the tabernacling Word (1:14) to reveal himself further in terms of the rituals of this feast, namely, water (7:37) and light (8:12).

Tabernacles had its origins as a harvest festival celebrating the ingathering of the grapes

and olives.¹⁰ During this harvesting time, the labourers would erect temporary shelters in their fields as a second home. In time, this harvest festival became associated with a period in Israel's sacred history when they lived in temporary shelters following their escape from Egypt. The religious festival highlighted the exodus gifts of a pillar of guiding light (Exod 13:21–22) and the provision of water in the wilderness (Exod 17:1–2). In the Festival of Tabernacles, Jesus appropriates these key symbols. He is a source of water for the thirsty (7:37) and light for the world (8:12). It is during this feast that the temple symbolism begins a second transference of meaning from being the temple of his body to being a future temple of believers.

John 7:37 is a notoriously difficult verse to understand because the manuscripts vary in how they punctuate it and so lead to different ways of translating it. There are also divided opinions on whose “heart” (or “belly,” *koilias*) is being referred to, the heart of Jesus, or the heart of the believers. Finally, it is not at all clear to what Scripture he is referring.

On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, “Whoever thirsts, let them come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the scripture said, ‘Out of his (*autou*) heart shall flow rivers of living water.’” Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified. (John 7:37–39)

The passage can mean that Jesus is the single source of water, and that from the heart of Jesus streams of water will flow. It can also mean that Jesus is a source of water now, and that believers who come to him, will be in the future channels of living waters.¹¹ I read the verse in this second way, that while Jesus is present he is the source of living water, but there will be a future time, associated with a future gift of the Spirit (7:39), when believers will be channels of living water.¹²

The Scripture I see that lies behind this image of “streams of living water” is the eschatological temple of Ezek 47. While some scholars suggest other possible passages, there are later rabbinic writings that link the water-libation rituals of Tabernacles with Ezekiel's temple vision (*t.Sukk.* 3:3–18). Behind Ezekiel's image of life-giving waters flowing from the temple lies the Jewish tradition discussed above; according to this mythology the temple lies upon the wellspring of the earth, the center and source of creation.

These ancient traditions underscore the significance of the water libation ceremony that was part of the ritual for Tabernacles.

The waters under the earth were all gathered beneath the temple, they believed, and it was necessary to ensure that sufficient was released to ensure fertility, but not so

¹⁰ A very readable overview of each Jewish Festival and its significance is Gale A. Yee, *Jewish Feasts and the Gospel of John* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1989).

¹¹ This translation is the more traditional approach taken in Patristic writings and has the support of the oldest manuscript tradition P⁶⁶. The use of verbs oriented to the future (“shall flow,” “were to receive”) adds to my conviction that this is a more accurate reading.

¹² For a detailed discussion of this verse see Coloe, *God Dwells with Us*, ch. 6.

much as to overwhelm the world with a flood.¹³

Each morning of the festival a procession of priests filed down to the Pool of Siloam to draw a flagon of water that was carried with great solemnity back to the temple. On reaching the altar, the priest carrying the golden water-flagon circled the altar, then ascended the ramp of the altar to pour the libation into pierced bowls, allowing the libation to flow onto the altar, then down into the deep reservoirs below the temple.

The prominence given to temple and cultic imagery in the Fourth Gospel supports Ezekiel as a likely allusion for the Scripture that Jesus cites. While Jesus is present, he is the temple whose waters can provide life and healing, but the promise is given of a future time, when, through the gift of the Spirit, believers will also be temple-people and sources of living water. During the Festival of Tabernacles, the reference to the believers must be understood as a promise to be fulfilled when Jesus is glorified.

DWELLING IN MY FATHER'S HOUSE

The promise of 7:37–39 is elaborated further in Jesus' farewell meal with his disciples (John 13–17). Jesus is leaving them. The hour has come for his return to the Father. These chapters deal most explicitly with a critical issue for later disciples—how can post-Easter believers continue to experience the presence of God?

At the heart of the final discourse lie two chapters, 14 and 15, which speak of Jesus' ongoing presence with the disciples in terms of mutual indwelling. The theology of mutual indwelling is sustained across both chapters through the word *menō*, translated as “dwell,” “abide,” “remain,” and “live.” Both chapters are introduced with an image—the Father's house (14:2), and the vine and branches (15:1, 5). While the metaphor of the vine and branches is readily understood as a symbol, the metaphorical use of the term “my Father's house” is not so readily perceived. Even when the term is understood in a symbolic sense, it is taken by most commentators to mean the heavenly house of God.¹⁴ However, the terminology “*my Father's house*” was used earlier in the gospel to speak of the Jerusalem temple (2:16), and it is important that this imagery is carried into the reading of John 14. Also, in ch. 2, the temple was re-imagined in terms of Jesus: “He spoke of the temple of his body” (2:21). The temple language and the reinterpetive process found in ch. 2 continue in this chapter.

The reading about “my Father's house” and its “many dwellings” (usually translated “rooms,” “dwelling places,” or “mansions”), is often chosen for Christian funerals, and taken to

¹³ Barker, *The Gate of Heaven*, 18.

¹⁴ The most complete analysis of John 14:2 is James McCaffrey, *The House with Many Rooms: The Temple Theme of John 14:2–3* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1988). He identifies the Father's House with the heavenly temple.

mean Jesus' return to heaven, and his preparation of a heavenly place for his disciples. But such an interpretation offers little consolation to disciples on the eve of Jesus' departure. It is not enough to promise them (and later believers), some future heavenly reunion. A gospel that announced Jesus dwelling among us in the flesh (1:14), needs to offer more than an otherworldly spiritualized presence. So I raise the question, "What and where is 'my Father's house'?"

MY FATHER'S HOUSE¹⁵

In ch. 14, the phrase "in my Father's house" should be interpreted in the light of its earlier usage where "my Father's house" referred to the Jerusalem temple (2:16). Jesus' use of the phrase "my Father's house" to refer to a building is quite strange. In the Hebrew Scriptures, "my father's house" always means the group of people who make up the household, such as the family and servants, or even the future descendants. For example, "So Joseph said to his brothers and to his father's house, "I will go and tell Pharaoh and say to him, My brothers and my father's house have come to me" (Gen 46:31).¹⁶ It is never used in the sense of a building. In speaking of the temple with this phrase, the evangelist began to move away from temple-as-building to something more personal and relational. In ch. 2, the image of temple shifted to a single person, Jesus—"the temple of his body" (2:21).

Chapter 14 develops this personal and relational understanding even further with the shift from the word "house" (*oikos*), the term used in ch. 2, to "household" (*oikiai*, 14:2). In the gospel, the term *oikos* is used only with the sense of a building, namely, the temple building (2:16, 17) and the house at Bethany (11:20). The term *oikiai* is used with a more fluid range of meanings; it can mean a physical building (11:31; 12:3—both references to the house at Bethany), but it can also mean the household (4:53, "the father believed and all his household," and 8:35, "the slave does not continue in the household forever"). Whereas in 2:16, the initial reference was to the *oikos* in the sense of a building, here in ch. 14, through the change of the word to *oikiai* and the OT use of "my father's house" to refer to the household, there is a continuation of the movement begun in 2:21 to understand the phrase "my Father's house" as a quality of personal relationships.

MANY DWELLINGS—*monal pollai*

The shift in the meaning of the phrase "in my Father's household"—from building to personal relationships—requires a similar shift in understanding what the evangelist means by

¹⁵ For a discussion of the use of this term "my Father's house" (14:2), see Coloe, *God Dwells with Us*, ch. 8.

¹⁶ The phrase *bēt 'ab* (father's house) is frequently translated as "family" or "household" in English translations.

“dwellings.” What are these many “dwellings”? Chapters 14 and 15 provide the best interpretive clue to the particular Johannine meaning of this phrase.

Chapters 14 and 15 use derivatives of the word “dwell” (*menō*) and “dwelling” (*monē*) to describe a variety of interpersonal relationships between the Father, Jesus, Paraclete and believers. The relationships are usually described with the translation “abiding” or “dwelling.” These relationships are appropriately introduced by the phrase “many dwellings” (14:2), which subsequent verses explicate as follows:

- the Father who dwells (*menōn*) in Jesus (v. 10)
- the Paraclete who dwells (*menēi*) with believers, and in the future will be in them (v. 17)
- the Father and Jesus who will make their dwelling (*monēn*) with the believer (v. 23)
- Jesus dwells (*menōn*) with the disciples (v. 25)

Many commentators see the metaphor as a reference to God’s heavenly dwelling where the believers will abide at some future time, but the subject of the verb “dwell” throughout ch. 14 is not the believer but God. The action therefore is not the *believers* coming to dwell in God’s heavenly abode, but the *Father*, the *Paraclete*, and *Jesus* coming to dwell with the believers. It is a “descending” movement from the divine realm to the human, not an “ascending” movement from the human to the divine. Given that the emphasis in ch. 14 is on the *divine dwellings* with the believers, it is not surprising that this theology is introduced with an image that draws on Israel’s symbol of the divine Presence in its midst—the temple, Israel’s House of YHWH, renamed as my Father’s house (2:16) and now as my Father’s household (14:2).

From the above analysis, the phrase “in my Father’s house are many dwellings,” is best understood to mean a series of interpersonal relationships made possible because of the indwellings of the Father, Jesus, and the Paraclete with and in the believer. The divine indwellings in the midst of a believing community makes it appropriate to speak of the community as a living temple, where God can now be found. The community is the house (household) of God. David Aune suggests that the term house/household as it is used here and in 8:35 “reflects the self-designation of the Johannine community.”¹⁷

TO PREPARE A PLACE FOR YOU

¹⁷ David E. Aune, *The Cultic Setting of Realized Eschatology in Early Christianity* (NovTSup 28; Leiden: Brill, 1972), 130.

The second part of the metaphor also resonates with allusions to Israel's temple. In the Hebrew text, the terminology of a *prepared place* is used almost exclusively of the ark,¹⁸ and then by extension of the temple. "David . . . prepared a place for the ark of God and pitched a tent for it" (1 Chr 15:1; see also 15:3, 12; 2 Chr 1:4). "And Solomon began to build the house of the LORD in Jerusalem in the mount of Moriah in the place which David had prepared" (2 Chr 3:1).

With the experience of the exile, and the destruction of the temple, hope shifted to a future eschatological temple that would be the "place" for the gathering of the nations (Mic 4:1–2; Isa 2:2–3). From this brief survey, it is possible to see in the phrase "to prepare a place for you" an allusion to Jewish temple traditions, including the later traditions of the temple as the eschatological gathering place that God will prepare for the people.

Taken together, the two key phrases of 14:2—"in my Father's house there are many dwellings," and "I go to prepare a place for you"—show a uniquely Johannine concern with the temple, now reinterpreted in a radically new way as the household of God, where the divine presence dwells within the community of believers. When the disciples fail to understand Jesus' words, his explanation leads into the promise of the Paraclete and an indication that the household of my Father will be prepared through the indwellings of the Father, Jesus, and Paraclete within the believer (14:17, 23, 25). In some way, the action of Jesus' "going" to the Father, is simultaneously the action when he "prepares/builds" the "place" (temple) for the disciples. The Father's house will no longer be a construction of stones, but will be a household of many interpersonal relationships, many dwellings, where the Divine Presence can dwell within believers. In ch. 14, Jesus' words are a promise, looking ahead to the culmination of his "hour" when they will be realized.

The above analysis has sketched major aspects of the temple imagery in the gospel narrative and highlighted its significance for the telling of the traditional story of Jesus' death. I have also described the way in which the gospel redefines temple, firstly in terms of Jesus (2:21), then the believers (in the promises of 7:37 and especially 14:2). I now turn to the Johannine passion account to see how these temple themes and future promises are resolved.

THE ROYAL TEMPLE BUILDER¹⁹

In the Johannine passion, there are two features unique to the Fourth Gospel, namely, the title above Jesus' head (19:19), and the scene with the mother of Jesus and the Beloved

¹⁹ Coloe, *God Dwells with Us*, ch. 9.

¹⁸ The only exception is a reference to the land (Exod 23:20). All other references are to the ark.

Disciple (19:25–30). These features bring the plot announced in the prologue to its conclusion—“He came to his own, but his own did not receive him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God” (1:11–12).

It is Pilate who insists on the title—“Jesus the Nazarene (*ho Nazōraios*), the King of the Jews” (19:19). In fact, two titles are used synonymously, “the Nazarene” and “*the King of the Jews*.” It must also be noted that only the Fourth Gospel calls these words a title (*titlon*). Mark and Luke use “inscription” (*epigraphē*, Mark 15:25; Luke 23:38), while Matthew uses “charge” (*aitia*, Matt 27:37). The Fourth Gospel does not emphasize Jesus’ upbringing or ministry in Nazareth; this is a Synoptic tradition that the evangelist omits. The lack of emphasis accorded to a Nazareth tradition enables the evangelist to use “Nazarene” as a unique and emphatic title for Jesus in his hour (18:5, 7; 19:19). While much has been written on the theme of Kingship, the unique Johannine addition of “the Nazarene” in Pilate’s title has not been given scholarly attention. In what follows, I will argue that this title provides the key for understanding the Johannine interpretation of the cross.

THE NAZARENE

Excavations have shown that the word “Nazareth” has its root meaning in the word “branch” (*netser*) describing the future royal branch from the house of David: “There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch (*netser*) shall grow out of his roots” (Isa 11:1).²⁰ When Jesus is called *the Nazarene*, there is, therefore, the possibility that this means more than the identity of his small village of origin, but that it is a messianic title having its basis in the *netser* from the oracle of Isaiah. This possibility is strengthened by considering evidence from the Qumran writings. The scrolls link the Davidic branch (*netser*) of Isaiah to an equivalent term *samah*, also meaning branch, from the book of Zechariah. In Zechariah, a man named “*the Branch*” is to build the future temple:

Take from them silver and gold, and make a crown, and set it upon the head of Joshua, the son of Jehozadak, the high priest; and say to him, Thus says the LORD of hosts, “Behold, the man whose name is the Branch (*samah*): for he shall grow up in his place, and he shall build the Temple of the LORD. It is he who shall build the Temple of the LORD, and shall bear royal honor, and shall sit and rule upon his throne.”
(Zech 6:11–13)

The community of Qumran looked to a future son of David, and applied to him the term “Branch,” but use the expression *semah*, from Zechariah, rather than *netser* from Isaiah.

²⁰ From the Greek, it was not clear if Nazareth would be spelled in Hebrew with a c (tz) or the simpler z (z). Excavations at Caesarea in 1962 found a clear Hebrew inscription referring to a family from Nazareth using the letter c, thus clarifying that Nazareth is derived from *ncr*. See James Strange, “Nazareth,” *ABD* 4: 1050–51.

YHWH declares to you that he will build you a house. I will raise up your seed after you and establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him and he will be a son to me. This refers to the Branch (*semah*) of David.²¹ (4QFlor col 1, 11; commenting on 2 Sam 7:11. See also 4QpGen col 5, 3–4)

Even more striking is the interpretation of Isa 11:1–5. The quotation follows the Hebrew text and uses *netser* (branch) but in the commentary on this verse, the term *netser* is rendered “the branch of David” using *semah*, from Zech 6:12.²² These texts show that by the time of the Qumran writings, the two terms *semah* and *netser* were synonymous and the man named “Branch” who will build the temple of the Lord, according to Zech 6, has been identified as the messianic shoot of David.²³

The Qumran scrolls indicate that the temple-building role of the Messiah was attested in Second Temple Judaism prior to the Johannine writings, which supports my hypothesis that by the first century C.E., the term “Nazarene” had developed associations with a Davidic messiah who would build the eschatological temple. The use of the word “Nazarene” in the Fourth Gospel adds further support to this hypothesis.

Jesus is identified as *the Nazarene* only in his “hour.” When the soldiers come to Gethsemane they ask for “Jesus the Nazarene” (18:5). For emphasis this is repeated (18:7). Echoing the phrase from Zechariah, Pilate introduces Jesus to the crowd, “Behold the man” (19:5), leaving unspoken “whose name is the Branch.” But these final words are implied in Pilate’s title, the Nazarene (branch) the King of the Jews (19:19). In the Fourth Gospel, the term “Nazarene” is not a name derived from a place, but is a title that leads to Jesus’ arrest and execution. It is the formal charge and final title applied to him in the pre-Easter narrative. Given this particular narrative usage, its historical background in contemporary Jewish literature, as well as the overall emphasis on the temple in the narrative plot, I conclude that the title “Nazarene” above the head of Jesus is a reference to his messianic role as the builder of the eschatological temple. Jesus is condemned and dies as the Nazarene temple-builder. As his body is lifted up on the cross, his prophetic words in ch. 2 are fulfilled. The temple of his body is destroyed, but as “the Nazarene” he is also raising up a new temple.

THE NEW TEMPLE/HOUSEHOLD OF GOD

A second scene unique to this gospel is that of the small group of believers, including the mother of Jesus and the Beloved Disciple, standing at the foot of the cross (19:25–26). The close relationship between Jesus and the Beloved Disciple has already been described with words

²¹ The English text is taken from Florentino Garcia Martinez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated The Qumran Texts in English* (Leiden Brill, 1994), 136

²² 4Q161 (4QpIsa^a line 18)

²³ Donald Juell also argues from Targumic evidence that these two terms were being used to point to the temple-building role of the Messiah. See Donald Juell, *Messiah and Temple* (SBLDS 31, Missoula, Mont Scholars Press, 1977), 189. While dating the Targums is difficult, the evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls confirms that we are dealing with material being used in a Jewish milieu in the first century.

echoing the intimacy of Son and Father (cf. 13:23; 1:18) and suggesting a close familial relationship. In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus' mother is not given a personal name; she is always named in terms of her function and relationship as "the mother of Jesus" (2:1). Although called "mother," her physical maternity has had no role in the narrative so far, because her motherhood is to function in a different symbolic way.

The narrator introduces her as "his mother" (19:25, cf. 2:1). When the narrator changes to give us Jesus' perspective, she is not called "*his* mother" but "*the* mother" (19:26). The use of the definite article gives this title a universal significance. The double use of the term "behold" (*ide*, vv. 26, 27) informs the reader that Jesus' words are a prophetic revelation, while the form of words is very similar to the formula of adoption,²⁴ "Woman behold your son . . . behold your mother" (vv. 26–27). Jesus' proclamation is far more than that of a dying son making provision for the future care of his mother. These two phrases, "behold your son" and "behold your mother," establish a new relationship between the disciple and the mother of Jesus, and in so doing they establish a new relationship between the disciple and Jesus. If the woman always called "the mother of Jesus" is presented also as the mother of the Beloved Disciple, then Jesus' sonship is extended to embrace others; the disciple is adopted as Jesus brother/sister and therefore becomes a child of God (1:12).²⁵ The scene concludes with the disciple taking her "to his own" (*eis ta idia*, 19:27), which forms an *inclusio* with the same expression used of Jesus in the prologue, "he came to his own" (*eis ta idia*, 1:11). The *inclusio* indicates that the action of Jesus coming to his own, is now brought to completion. This scene is the climax of the narrative, bringing the plot announced in the prologue to its conclusion, and the narrator confirms this in v. 28, "After this, Jesus knew that all was now finished." The personalizing of the temple, begun in the transfer of temple imagery to Jesus (2:21), then continued with the promise of the divine indwellings in the community of believers constituting them as "my Father's Household" (14:2), is accomplished. This divine filiation is the ultimate revelation of the "hour" and brings Jesus' mission to its completion.

Those who believe, who receive the incarnate *logos*, are drawn into the intimate relationship between Father and Son as the prologue had promised, "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God" (1:12; cf. 17:24, 26).

After Jesus' word of completion "It is finished" (*tetelestai*), he bows his head and hands down to this mother and son the promised gift of the Spirit (v. 30), constituting them into a new household of God. As the soldiers destroy the "body/temple" of Jesus, the Nazarene temple-builder is in the process of raising up a new temple/Household of God, thus fulfill-

²⁴ See C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John* (London: SPCK, 1978), 552.

²⁵ In the following chapter, this is confirmed when the Father of Jesus is called the Father of the disciples, "Go to my brothers and sisters (*tous adelphous mou*) and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'" (20:17).

ing Jesus' words "destroy this Temple and in three days I will raise it up" (2:19). With skilled artistry, the evangelist structures the crucifixion in two interwoven parallel scenes.

<i>Temple destroying</i>	<i>Temple building</i>
Crucifixion (vv. 16b–18)	Pilate's words, "the Nazarene" (vv. 19–22)
Crucifixion (vv. 23–24)	Jesus' words, "a new temple/household" (vv. 25–30)
Testimony of Death (vv. 31–37)	

CONCLUSION

Household and temple imagery express the richness of the Johannine interpretation of Jesus' life, death, and mission. Jesus is the temple of God's presence (1:14; 2:21). "The Jews," through their priesthood, hand him over to Pilate and so carry out the destruction of the temple that Jesus had prophesied (2:19). In the "hour" of his death, Jesus is manifest as the temple builder, the "Nazarene" (19:19), fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah (Zech 6:11–12). The new "Father's House/ temple" (2:16; 14:2) is born through the creative Spirit released by Jesus' last breath upon the small household of mother and son (19:30). A new house/ household of God (cf. 14:2) comes into being at the foot of the cross when believers are drawn into Jesus' own filial relationship with the Father (19:26, 27). Endowed with the Spirit, the new household of God enables an ongoing presence of God in the world.²⁶

When the temple no longer existed, and Israel's sacrificial cult no longer functioned, the rabbis turned to the law to find in Torah a replacement for all they had lost. Around the same time, the Fourth Evangelist presents Jesus, not Torah, as the new temple. But if that were the only transformation, the Christian community would be as desolate in the departure of Jesus as the community of Israel was in the loss of their temple. The gospel narrative doubly transforms the heritage of Israel, transferring the image of the temple to the Christian community that remains in the world, under the guidance of the Spirit-Paraclete.

²⁶ Those interested in further discussion on the "household" imagery may consult Mary L. Coloe, *Dwelling in the Household of God: Johannine Ecclesiology and Spirituality* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 2007).



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