



THE HISTORICAL JESUS XVII:

The Gospel of John: Jesus as the New “I AM”

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN begins with a declaration regarding the self-relational God: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was *with* God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning *with* God” (John 1:1, 2, emphases supplied).

Then the Gospel announces God’s initial creation of the universe: “All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made” (John 1:3, 4).

Next the Gospel employs metaphors from the First Temple to reveal God’s descent from heaven to become truly human: “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt [tabernacled] among us . . . ” (John 1:14). Divinity thus passed through the archetypal Temple veil, which was a pattern of the created order and of humanity itself.¹

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Strangely, the Gospel is wholly silent regarding the early decades following the earthly conception and birth of Jesus. Nothing is revealed of the burdens he bore — his submission to command, to possession, to external powers, and to the fragility of life — except that “the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not” (John 1:10, 11).

Then, in his middle to late 30s (ca. 7 BCE – [30]-33 CE), Jesus left his home in Nazareth and his occupation as a carpenter and journeyed to Bethabara, at the Jordan River, where his cousin, John the Baptist, was ministering (John 1:6-8, 19-28). Here Jesus received the metaphoric and proleptic (anticipatory) death and resurrection of baptism.

Just as in the first Creation “the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:2), so, when Jesus emerged from the baptismal waters, “the

Spirit descend[ed] from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him” (John 1:32). It was in this context that Jesus Christ began his ministry. The Gospel of John next proceeds to address the creative issues that impacted the divine nature, covenantal actions and true humanity of Jesus Christ.

Jesus as the “I AM”

Throughout his ministry Jesus repeatedly declared his divinity to be YHWH — the One-and-Only God. In fact, on about 50 occasions in the Gospel of John, Jesus affirmed his divine name — “I AM” (YHWH) — to his disciples, to his followers, and even to his enemies. For example:

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But I know him: for *I AM* from him, and he hath sent me. —John 7:29, emphasis supplied.

And he said unto them, Ye are from beneath; *I AM* from above: ye are of this world; *I AM* not of this world. —John 8:23, emphases supplied.

Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, *I AM*. —John 8:58, emphasis supplied.

Jesus and the Old Creation

In his covenantal words and actions, Jesus dramatically confronted the old created order. For example:

1. He challenged the religio-political power structures:

And the Jews’ passover was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem, and found in the temple those that sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the changers of money sitting: and when he had made a scourge of small cords, he drove them all out of the temple, and the sheep, and the oxen; and poured out the changers’ money, and overthrew the tables; and said unto them that sold doves, Take these things hence; make not my Father’s house an house of merchandise. And his disciples remembered that it was written, The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up. —John 2:13-17.

2. Through his healing ministry Jesus reversed the natural order of disease and disability. To the infirm man at Bethesda, “Jesus saith . . . , Rise, take up thy bed, and walk. And immediately the man was made whole, and took up his bed, and walked . . . ” (John 5:8, 9).

3. By the raising of Lazarus, Jesus overcame death itself: “. . . [H]e cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth. And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes . . . ” (John 11:43, 44).

Jesus and the New Creation

The Gospel of John explicitly employs Temple metaphors to portray the progressive creation by Jesus of a new, archetypal humanity that not only would dwell on this earth but would enter the eternal life of heaven itself:

1. John the Baptist declared, “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29; cf. v. 36). This was a metaphor for the Temple altar of burnt offering.

2. “. . . John bare record, saying, I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him” (John 1:32). The Spirit symbolized air — the first of the four ancient, primal elements.

3. In speaking to the woman at the well in Samaria, Jesus intimated that he was the water of life: “. . . but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life” (John 4:14). Water was the second primal element, and it was found in the laver outside the Temple entrance.

4. After feeding the 5,000, “Jesus said unto them, *I AM* the bread of life . . .” (John 6:35, emphasis supplied). Bread represented the earth, which was the third primal element, displayed on the table of shewbread in the first apartment of the Temple.

5. After confronting the scribes and Pharisees, who had “brought unto him a woman taken in adultery” (John 8:3), Jesus declared, “*I AM* the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life” (John 8:12, emphasis supplied). Light was the fourth and final primal element, displayed on the menorah in the first apartment of the Temple.

6. When engaging the Pharisees after healing the man born blind, Jesus stated, “*I AM* the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture” (John 10:9, emphasis supplied). The door referred to the entrance into the second apartment — the Most Holy Place — of the Temple. Furthermore, the door referred to the archetypal veil of the Temple, which signified the created order and particularly humanity itself.

7. After the raising of Lazarus from the dead, Jesus spoke to Martha and said, “*I AM* the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live . . .” (John 11:25, emphasis supplied). Here Jesus achieved the Most Holy Place — the eternal life of heaven itself.

Thus, embracing the Temple metaphors, the Gospel of John portrays the life and ministry of Jesus as the progressive creation of a transformed humanity. As Jesus said, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. . . . But he spake of the temple of his body” (John 2:19, 21).

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Hanging on Calvary's cross after his ministry of three years, Jesus cried, "It is finished" (John 19:30). His work was completed. He inaugurally bore the old God, the old covenant of works, and the old created order to the grave. At his resurrection on the third day, Jesus Christ inaugurally brought forth the New Temple — the new God, the new covenant of love, and the new created order — to irrevocable and eternal life.

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At the beginning the Gospel of John declares, ". . . [W]e beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, . . . full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). At the end the Gospel portrays the glory of the Risen Lord, standing on the shore of the sea of Galilee. He had lit a fire, prepared the food, and called to his disciples, "Come and dine" (John 21:12). "Jesus then cometh, and taketh bread, and giveth them, and fish likewise" (John 21:13). Here is the Risen Lord, the God of the universe, waiting on his followers. Here is the New God, the New Covenant, the New Created Order. Here is the ultimate glory, the ultimate power of powerlessness.

. . . [Therefore, h]e saith unto . . . [them], Feed my lambs. . . . Feed my sheep. . . . And when he had spoken this, he saith unto . . . [them], Follow me. —John 21:15-19.

Endnote

1. "Josephus, who was himself a priest (Life 1), says that the tabernacle was a microcosm of the creation, divided into three parts: the outer parts represented the sea and the land but ' . . . the third part thereof . . . , to which the priests were not admitted, is, as it were, a heaven peculiar to God' (Ant. 3.181). *Thus the veil which screened the holy of holies was also the boundary between earth and heaven*" (Margaret Barker, "Beyond the Veil of the Temple: The High Priestly Origin of the Apocalypses," at www.marquette.edu/maqom/veil).