



# Unity and Diversity in Torah Practices: A Johannine Vision for Contemporary Christian Communities

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## Abstract

Against the grain of much Johannine scholarship, this article offers a sustained argument *against* the notion that John's Jesus replaces sacred Jewish institutions and practices such as ritual purification, the temple, the Sabbath, and the Jewish festivals. Instead, I argue that John promotes a deeply appreciative and contextually sensitive vision of the Mosaic *torah* in which significant *torah* practices and institutions are retained, whilst also being reinterpreted, diversified, and sometimes relativised. This vision, in turn, has beneficial implications for Jewish-Christian dialogues and can provide wisdom in contemporary debates about the role of Jewish institutions and practices in Christian communities.

## Keywords

Gospel of John; *torah*; ritual purity; temple; Sabbath; Jewish festivals

## Introduction

The assessment of the Jewish law, or *torah*, in John's Gospel is a matter of vigorous debate.<sup>1</sup> Many scholars argue that John promotes a strong *replacement theology* regarding some of the most sacred Jewish practices

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\* This article puts forth a similar argument to the one presented in the third chapter of my hitherto unpublished PhD thesis: Paulus de Jong, 'From Divine Teaching to the Divine Teacher: *Torah* and the Gospel of John' (doctoral dissertation, University of St Andrews, 2022), pp. 61–121.

<sup>1</sup> The article will use the more comprehensive term *torah* ('teaching') rather than the English noun 'law' with its stronger legal connotation. When the qualifier 'Mosaic' is used, this is simply to indicate that, in traditional understanding, the gift of the *torah* is associated with Moses. However, in John, as well as in other ancient Jewish and early Christian literature, the term *torah* (תורה), or its Greek translation *nomos* (νόμος), encompasses much more than the law given to Moses on Mount Sinai or those books of Scripture traditionally attributed to Moses (e.g. John 10:34; 12:34; 15:25; Rom 3:10–19; 1 Cor 14:21; cf. Ps 119).

and institutions. Jesus changes water, meant for ritual purification, into wine (John 2:1–11); Jesus speaks of his own body as the Temple (John 2:21), arguably eliminating the necessity for a human-made divine abode; on the Sabbath, Jesus tells the paralysed man to pick up his mat and walk (John 5:9) in clear violation of scriptural Sabbath law;<sup>2</sup> at the festival of Tabernacles, with its well-known water ritual, Jesus claims to be the source of living water (John 7:37–39), and, at the Passover festival, Jesus is presented as the true Passover Lamb (John 19:36). All these textual data are readily interpreted as corroborating John’s replacement theology. William Loader offers a clear articulation of this view:

Now that the Son has come, the logic of John’s theology demands that the validity of the Law, the scriptures, the institutions and practices of Israel cease. For those for whom they once had authority and significance, the validity of the Law and the scriptures should exist now only as a pointer to Christ.<sup>3</sup>

The foundation for this seemingly programmatic replacement trope is found in John’s prologue: ‘From his fullness we have received “grace *instead* of grace” (χάριν ἀντὶ χάριτος; John 1:16).<sup>4</sup> This verse is often understood as indicating a strong opposition between the Mosaic *torah* and the grace revealed in Christ.<sup>5</sup> On this view, John sees the *torah* as mostly redundant and obsolete. The implications of this outlook would have been clear for John’s earliest audience: followers of Jesus no longer need to observe the Sabbath, engage in ritual purification, worship at the Jerusalem Temple, or keep the Jewish festivals.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Jer 17:22.

<sup>3</sup> William Loader, *Jesus’ Attitude towards the Law: A Study of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 489.

<sup>4</sup> For a strong linguistic case for translating ἀντὶ with ‘instead’, see Ruth B. Edwards, ‘ΧΑΡΙΝ ΑΝΤΙ ΧΑΡΙΤΟΣ (John 1.16), Grace and the Law in the Johannine Prologue’, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 32 (1988), 3–15. For contextual reasons, however, I prefer a different, widely followed, translation of ἀντὶ, namely ‘after’ or ‘followed by’; cf. John F. McHugh, *John 1–4*, International Critical Commentary (London: T&T Clark, 2009), p. 66.

<sup>5</sup> This view goes at least back to Augustine, see *Homilies on the Gospel of John: The Works of Saint Augustine*, trans. by Edmund Hill (New York: New City, 2009), p. 69. This view is also followed by many contemporary Johannine scholars such as John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 80.

<sup>6</sup> For example, Martin Hengel, ‘The Old Testament in the Fourth Gospel’, in *The Gospels and the Scriptures of Israel*, ed. by W. Richard Stegner and Craig A. Evans, *Journal for the Study of the*

There are, however, other ways of assessing the relevant textual data in John's Gospel. Against the grain of much Johannine scholarship, this article will argue for a much more sympathetic view of the *torah* in the fourth gospel. By examining the relevant texts, I will argue that John promotes a deeply appreciative and contextually sensitive vision of the Mosaic *torah* which, as I will draw out towards the end of this article, has beneficial implications for Jewish-Christian dialogues and can provide wisdom in contemporary debates about the role of Jewish institutions and practices in Christian communities.

## The Prologue

Any serious assessment of the *torah* in John's Gospel must be grounded in the gospel's prologue (John 1:1–18). The prologue introduces the reader to the divine Logos, the means of all things created, the source of all things revealed (John 1:1–3). The two images John uses to describe these realities of *creation* and *revelation* are *life* and *light* (John 1:4–5).<sup>7</sup> John is emphatic about the scope of the creative and revelatory work of the Logos: 'All things came into being through it, and apart from it, not one thing came into being that has come into being.'<sup>8</sup> Any assessment of the Mosaic *torah* then, will have to begin with this positive affirmation: the *torah* came into existence through the Logos.<sup>9</sup>

As the prologue continues, the evangelist describes how the divine Logos came to its own, faced rejection and acceptance, and then became flesh, revealing divine glory in human form (John 1:10–14).<sup>10</sup> In

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New Testament: Supplement Series, 104 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), pp. 380–395 (p. 389).

<sup>7</sup> On this understanding of 'life' and 'light' see Karl Barth, *Witness to the Word: A Commentary on John 1*, ed. by Walther Fürst, trans. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), pp. 36–44.

<sup>8</sup> John 1:3; the reason for translating 'it' rather than 'him' is that the human identity of the Logos is not revealed until verse 14. (All translations are my own unless indicated otherwise.)

<sup>9</sup> As Martin Vahrenhorst puts it, 'Der Logos, dessen Name hier genannt wird, ist der Ursprung der Tora. Das wundert nach 1,3 nicht weiter, den schließlich ist ja "alles" durch ihn geworden—also auch die Tora.' Vahrenhorst, 'Johannes und die Tora: Überlegungen zur Bedeutung der Tora im Johannesevangelium', *Kerygma und Dogma*, 54, no. 1 (2014), 14–36 (p. 29).

<sup>10</sup> For a strong example of a revelation-historical reading of the prologue, see Martin Hengel, 'The Prologue of the Gospel of John as the Gateway to Christological Truth', in *The Gospel of*

the final movement of the prologue, John testifies that, from the fullness of this Logos, we have all received χάριτι ἀντὶ χάριτος (John 1:16). Leaving aside the best translation of this phrase for the moment, the next verse specifies that these two occurrences of χάρις respectively refer to the Mosaic *torah* and Jesus the Messiah: ‘Indeed, the *torah* was given through Moses, grace and truth came into being through Jesus the Messiah’ (John 1:17). However one translates the phrase χάριτι ἀντὶ χάριτος, then, it is clear that both expressions of χάρις have a common source: they are both gifts flowing from the fullness of the divine Logos.<sup>11</sup> The divine Logos once gave the *torah* through Moses to the people of Israel. This Logos has now become flesh in Jesus the Messiah. Considering this, one might translate χάριτι ἀντὶ χάριτος simply as ‘one gift after another’, or, with the LEB, ‘grace after grace’.<sup>12</sup>

Another way to see what the evangelist is trying to communicate in this final movement of the prologue is by looking at the passage’s literary allusions to the Jewish Scriptures. Scholars have long noted the reuse of the book of Exodus in John 1:14–18.<sup>13</sup> The Logos ‘pitched his tent’ (ἐσκήνωσεν) among us revealing his divine ‘glory’ (δόξα) which is ‘full of grace and truth’ (πλήρης χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας). The keyword ἐσκήνωσεν, which is cognate to the noun σκηνή (‘tent’), recalls the tent of meeting where YHWH met with Moses (Exod 33:7–11) and the tabernacle where YHWH dwelt among his people (Exod 25:1–8; 40:33–38). The keyword δόξα recalls the glory that filled the tabernacle (Exod 40:34) and the glory revealed by YHWH to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exod 33:18). Finally, the phrase πλήρης χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας is arguably John’s personal rendering of the Hebrew phrase חַמָּוּדוֹת וְרֵוַח (Exod 34:6),<sup>14</sup> which is part of the magnificent self-revelation of YHWH on mount Sinai before he gives the *torah* to Moses. By reusing these specific

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*John and Christian Theology*, ed. by Richard Bauckham and Carl Mosser (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), pp. 265–294.

<sup>11</sup> For this conclusion, see also Jörg Augenstein, ‘Jesus und das Gesetz im Johannesevangelium’, *Kirche und Israel*, 14 (1999), 161–179 (p. 171).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. footnote 4.

<sup>13</sup> For example, M. E. Boismard, *Moïse ou Jésus: Essai sur Christologie Johannique*, *Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium*, 134 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1988), pp. 101–105.

<sup>14</sup> For more detailed case, see Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 2 vols (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 1, pp. 416–419 and McHugh, *John 1–4*, pp. 59–61.

scriptural traditions, then, John connects the dwelling of YHWH among the Israelites with the dwelling of the divine Logos among ‘us’ (John 1:14), and the revelation of YHWH on mount Sinai to Moses with the revelation of the Logos in the flesh. In other words, the same God who revealed himself to Israel now reveals himself through Jesus. However, for John, the connection between YHWH and the Logos not only works forwards but also backwards.<sup>15</sup> *The Logos was always there with God* (John 1:1–2). That is, when Israel’s God chose to dwell among his people, the Logos was there. When God gave the *torah* to Moses on Mount Sinai, the Logos was there. The relation between the Mosaic *torah* and the Logos, then, is not to be defined by opposition but by progression: the divine Logos, who was present on Mount Sinai, indeed, the source of the *torah* (John 1:3, 16), has now become flesh.<sup>16</sup>

By beginning with the prologue, it has been my aim to show that from the outset of the gospel it is problematic to describe the relation between the former and present revelation of the divine Logos as one of ‘replacement’ and to present Jesus as standing in strong opposition to the Mosaic *torah*. Both gifts described in John 1:17 derive from the same source, the Logos, and both gifts are described as gracious (*χάρις*) and thus fundamentally good. This, however, still leaves open the question of how the revelation of the Logos in the flesh affects the practices and institutions revealed in the Mosaic *torah*. It is to this question we now turn.

## Ritual Purification

One of the Jewish practices John’s Gospel records is that of ritual purification (John 2:6; 3:25; 11:55; 13:10; 18:28).<sup>17</sup> Acts of purification

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<sup>15</sup> For this insight, see also Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), pp. 308–311.

<sup>16</sup> Christopher M. Blumhofer, *The Gospel of John and the Future of Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 73.

<sup>17</sup> John typically uses the verb *καθαρίζω* or the noun *καθαρός* in these passages. John 11:55, however, uses the verb *ἀγνίζω*. The difference between *καθαρίζω* and *ἀγνίζω* is subtle. Whereas forms of *καθαρίζω* or *καθαρός* usually focus upon the elimination or ritual impurities, *ἀγνίζω* and related lexemes usually focus upon a positive state of ritual acceptability or dedication to God — which obviously can include the elimination of ritual impurities as well; Louw-Nida Greek Lexicon, s.v. ‘Purify, Cleanse’.

form an integral part of the written *torah*, with the Pentateuch recording many everyday scenarios that require ritual cleansing for both priests, Levites, and laity.<sup>18</sup> In Second Temple Judaism these practices were developed in various ways, and several of these practices are reflected in John's Gospel.<sup>19</sup>

The first such practice is mentioned in the story of Jesus changing water into wine at a wedding feast in Cana (John 2:1–11). The narrator comments, 'Now six stone water jars were set there for the purification of the *Ioudaioi*' (John 2:6).<sup>20</sup> For many scholars, this narrative is programmatic for the allegedly prevalent replacement theme in John.<sup>21</sup> In this reading, the water represents the Jewish law or 'Judaism' and the wine the new revelation through Christ.<sup>22</sup> There are two main reasons for understanding the Cana story in this way. First, there are *six* jars with water meant for purification. Given the highly symbolic use of numbers throughout John's Gospel, many commentators take the number six to represent what Andrew Lincoln calls, 'the imperfection or insufficiency of the old order of Judaism'.<sup>23</sup> Secondly, the idea that Jesus changes water *meant for purification* into the choicest of wine is easily interpreted as an act indicating the abolishment of the requirement for ritual purification.<sup>24</sup>

However, neither of these interpretations necessarily follows from the narrative itself. Even if, at a symbolic level, the narrator wishes to juxtapose God's revelation through the *torah* with the newness of Jesus's revelation, the number six does not amount to a negative judgement on Judaism. It could simply indicate the *progression* from grace

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<sup>18</sup> For example, Lev 12–16.

<sup>19</sup> For a thematic treatment, see Ulrich Busse, 'Reinigung und Heiligung im Johannesevangelium', in *The Scriptures of Israel in Jewish and Christian Tradition: Essays in Honour of Maarten J. J. Menken*, ed. by Bart J. Koet, Steve Moyise, and Joseph Verheyden, Novum Testamentum Supplements, 148 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 141–158.

<sup>20</sup> By using the transliteration *Ioudaioi*, I seek to avoid both the danger of stigmatisation (a potential risk of the translation 'Jews') and de-Judaising the Gospel of John (a potential risk of the translation 'Judeans').

<sup>21</sup> For example, Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, 2 vols, Anchor Bible Commentary Series (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 1, p. 104; Loader, *Law*, p. 453.

<sup>22</sup> See, e.g., Andrew Lincoln, *Gospel According to St John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), p. 129.

<sup>23</sup> Lincoln, *John*, p. 129.

<sup>24</sup> Loader, *Law*, p. 453.

to grace, from anticipation to fullness — with Christ symbolising this fullness of God’s revelation. The same holds true for the sign itself: the provision of wine in these water jars does not necessarily imply the abolishment of the requirement for ritual purification. To the contrary, the narrative itself seems to resist rather than confirm this interpretation. Indeed, one of the key details of the story is that the jars *had to be filled* (John 2:7). That is, they were empty because, presumably, they had been used for ritual purification. In the most literal sense, therefore, Jesus does not *replace* water meant for purification with wine, he uses new water.<sup>25</sup> Rather than a narrative about *replacement* of that which is obsolete, the Cana narrative, then, is better understood as a story about *provision*: Jesus aids the *torah* observant wedding hosts by abundantly providing in that which is lacking, wine.

The second reference to ritual purification (καθαρισμός) is in a dispute between the disciples of John the baptiser and a certain Jew (John 3:25).<sup>26</sup> Although this verse is somewhat enigmatic,<sup>27</sup> the immediate setting makes it clear that this dispute occurs in the context of a discussion on *water baptism* (John 3:22–26). In other words, it appears that the act of water baptism was perceived as a form of *ritual purification*.<sup>28</sup> Far from any notion of replacement, then, the evangelist presents Jesus and John the baptiser as endorsing an act of ritual purification in their respective ministries, although they may have shaped or interpreted this practice in a particular way that could have sparked debate.

That practices of ritual purification were widespread in first-century Judaism is further evidenced by John 11:55 where the narrator comments, ‘Now the Passover of the *Ioudaioi* was near, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify

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<sup>25</sup> Vahrenhorst, ‘Tora’, pp. 16–17.

<sup>26</sup> P<sup>66</sup> and the first hand of Sinaiticus read the plural *Ιουδαίων* which would establish a clearer link with verse 26.

<sup>27</sup> Who the Jew is, what the dispute is about, and how it is resolved all remain unclear. Ernst Haenchen thus rightly labels this verse as ‘an unsolved riddle’. Haenchen, *John 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of John, Chapters 1–6*, Hermeneia Commentary Series (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 210.

<sup>28</sup> Lincoln, *John*, p. 160.



(ἀγνίσωσιν) themselves.<sup>29</sup> No evaluative comment is provided, but the reference to this widespread practice of purification does inform the narrative setting of the story of the foot washing (John 13). In fact, it helps to explain why Jesus implies that Peter and the other disciples had purified themselves through ritual washing, as evidenced in John 13:10. ‘The one who has bathed (λελουμένος) does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean.’<sup>30</sup> Jesus does not condemn this ritual washing but insists that, in addition, his disciples need to receive the purification only he provides: ‘Unless I wash you, you have no share with me’ (John 13:8). Jesus, then, does not abolish the need for ritual washing but introduces an additional ritual practice, the foot washing. Rather than replacement, then, there is evidence of *diversification* of *torah* practices in John.

A final reference to ritual purification is found in John 18:28.<sup>31</sup> Here, the Jewish leaders do not want to enter Pilate’s headquarters, ‘so as to avoid ritual defilement (μαυνθῶσιν) and to be able to eat the Passover’.<sup>32</sup> The irony is obvious in the context of John’s Gospel. The Jewish leaders desire to preserve their state of purity so they can enter the temple and eat from the flesh of the Passover lamb whilst they contribute to the death of Jesus, the true Passover lamb.<sup>33</sup> In all likelihood, the irony of this juxtaposition intends to evoke reflection on behalf of the gospel’s audience. Apparently, as in the case of these Jewish leaders, one can engage in the right practice (i.e. seeking ritual purity) but miss the point (i.e. recognising the true Passover lamb). What is more, one can engage in the *right* ritual practice whilst participating in the *unrightful* act of seeking the death of a *righteous* man. In such a case,

<sup>29</sup> For the difference between καθαρίζω and ἀγνίζω see footnote 16.

<sup>30</sup> The verb λούω typically refers to the washing of the entire body whereas the verb νίπτω usually refers to the washing of only part of the body. See *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (BDAG), s.v. ‘λούω’ and ‘νίπτω’.

<sup>31</sup> I have skipped over John 15:1–2 where the verb καθαίρω, to purify, has been used as a metaphor of the continuing process of purification that is necessary for the branches of the vine. In addition, in John 15:3, the noun καθαρός is used as a metaphor for the cleansing the disciples have received through Jesus’s word. In this passage, however, no ritual practices are in view.

<sup>32</sup> The Greek Pentateuch uses the verb μαινώ repeatedly to denote various forms of defilement that require ritual purification. In the New Testament the verb only occurs here and in Titus 1:14; Heb 12:14; and Jude 7.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. John 6:53 and Exod 12:8 [MT] and John 19:36 in which Jesus is identified as the Passover lamb (cf. Exod 12:46; Ps 34:20).

the prophetic critique of ritual practices without corresponding acts of justice readily comes to mind.<sup>34</sup>

In summary, we have seen that the theme of purification plays a significant role in John's Gospel. The various acts of purification practised by Jesus's contemporaries are never condemned as such. In contrast, Jesus endorses acts of water purification (e.g. baptism) and even introduces a new ritual act to his followers — foot washing. Rather than replacement, then, John fosters a *diversification* of practices of ritual purification. Indeed, to have a share with Jesus, one also needs to be washed by him (John 13:8). At the same time, there is an element of *relativisation* regarding ritual practices: engaging in the right ritual practices without practising justice leaves these practices meaningless. Right practices must go hand-in-hand with right behaviour.

## The Temple

In offering an alternative to the ubiquitous replacement readings of John's Gospel, the biggest challenge is certainly found in John's temple theology. The evangelist presents Jesus as the locus of God's presence and even identifies Jesus's body as a temple (John 2:21). For many scholars this is a clear indication that, according to John, Jesus replaces the Jerusalem temple. A few quotations readily illustrate this point: 'For believers in Jesus, the Jerusalem temple now gives way to the temple constituted by the body of Jesus.'<sup>35</sup> 'Those who recognize Jesus' unique relationship with the Father, recognize in him the true house of God and the Temple has lost its religious significance.'<sup>36</sup> 'Jesus is now the dwelling place of God among his people, and so replaces the Tabernacle and the Temple.'<sup>37</sup> The basic logic underlying these widespread statements can be summarised as follows:

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<sup>34</sup> For example, Isa 58:6–12; Amos 5:21–24.

<sup>35</sup> Hays, *Echoes*, p. 312.

<sup>36</sup> Mary L. Coloe, *God Dwells with Us: Temple Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), p. 74.

<sup>37</sup> John Behr, *John the Theologian & His Paschal Gospel: A Prologue to Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 140.

- John presents Jesus’s body as a temple — the earthly locus of the divine presence.
- Therefore, Jesus now replaces the Jerusalem temple — which used to be the special locus of the divine presence.

The argument begins with a premise from which a conclusion is drawn. However, if we lay out the argument in this way, it becomes clear that there is a hidden premise that often remains unspecified but needs to be articulated for the argument to make sense. This premise can be formulated as follows: *There can only be one special earthly locus of God’s presence.* The reason why this premise is typically not stated, I suspect, is because the very premise is challenged by John’s temple theology.

Before examining this challenge, however, I want to affirm the first premise (John presents Jesus’s body as a temple) by briefly setting out the various ways John’s Gospel presents Jesus as the locus of God’s presence. In John 1:14, the incarnate Logos is presented as revealing God’s glory by dwelling (ἐσκήνωσεν, ‘pitching a tent’) among us, recalling the divine glory which filled the tabernacle (Exod 40:34). In John 1:51, Jesus claims that his disciples will ‘see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man’. This instantly recalls Jacob’s dream at Bethel, the house of God, where he sees angels ascending and descending to heaven on a ladder.<sup>38</sup> Jesus now assumes the role of this ladder as the nexus between heaven and earth.<sup>39</sup> In John 2, Jesus’s body is identified as the temple which will be destroyed and raised after three days (John 2:21). Both in John 4:14 and 7:37–39 Jesus is presented as the source of ‘living water’ which evokes various prophetic images of the ideal or future temple from which streams of ‘living water’ will flow.<sup>40</sup> Finally, Jesus’s crucifixion forms the ironic climax of this temple motif as Jesus’s temple body is crucified and (living) water literally flows from his side.<sup>41</sup> More could be said on each

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<sup>38</sup> Gen 28:10–17.

<sup>39</sup> Richard Bauckham, *The Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2015), pp. 171–180.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary*, New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), pp. 99–101, 175–176.

<sup>41</sup> Behr, *John the Theologian*, p. 190.

of these texts, but it is clear that John consistently portrays Jesus as the incarnate locus of God's presence.

John, however, not only speaks of Jesus as the locus of God's presence but also describes the Spirit in these terms. Jesus will eventually go back to his Father but will give the Spirit to his followers to secure the ongoing presence of God in and among them (John 14:17). John also speaks of this divine indwelling as the Father and Jesus making their *home* within the disciples (John 14:23) — in a sense then, the disciples become houses of the Father (and the Son). Elsewhere John uses the image of 'living water' to indicate the indwelling of the Spirit within Jesus's followers (John 4:14; 7:37–39). This living water will become 'a spring of water welling up to eternal life' (John 4:14). Or as John puts it elsewhere, 'from his belly will flow rivers of living water' (John 7:38).<sup>42</sup> Other texts could be discussed but the point is clear: through the Spirit, God's presence will dwell in Jesus's followers wherever they are. Far from God's presence being confined to one human-made structure or person, there is a clear move towards the *democratisation* of the divine presence in John. Wherever Jesus's followers are, God is present through his Spirit. The hidden premise that there can only be one special earthly locus of God's presence must, therefore, be contested.

Now that we have challenged the hidden premise underlying a fully fledged replacement account of John's temple theology, we are in a good position to consider the significance of the Jerusalem temple in John's Gospel. An important first observation is that Jesus calls the temple 'my Father's house' (John 2:16) and is clearly concerned for its purity. The disciples link Jesus's passion for his Father's house to the words of Psalm 69, 'The zeal for your house will consume me' (John 2:17). It is only when Jesus is questioned about the authority by which he acts that he makes the enigmatic comment about his temple-body which will be destroyed and raised (John 2:19). Within John's narrative world, however, there is no indication that the Son's temple-body somehow *replaces* the Father's house. They simply coexist. In fact, the

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<sup>42</sup> There is a longstanding debate about whether the personal pronoun αὐτοῦ ('his' belly) in verse 38 refers to Jesus or the believers. Both readings are grammatically possible and fit within the wider outlook of John's Gospel. I therefore suspect this ambiguity is intentional and that αὐτοῦ can refer to both Jesus and those who believe in him.

Jerusalem temple continues to play a significant role in John's narrative, forming the location of some of Jesus's most significant teaching discourses. John seems to have no problem with affirming the Jerusalem temple as 'the Father's house' whilst also presenting Jesus's body as a temple.

The only other time the phrase 'the Father's house' occurs is in John 14:2, 'my Father's house has many rooms'. Following the line of typical replacement readings, this text is frequently understood as mysteriously referring to Jesus himself.<sup>43</sup> However, this reading faces some serious problems. To name one, if Jesus is the Father's house, why would Jesus have to go there to prepare rooms (John 14:2)? In my opinion, the much more likely option is that John, in line with many Second Temple Jews, considered the earthly temple to be a representation of the heavenly temple.<sup>44</sup> This heavenly temple, then, is the 'heavenly' house of the Father which has abundant dwelling places for Jesus's followers.<sup>45</sup> This alternative reading of John 14:1–4 removes the need to fit this text within John's alleged replacement theology and retains the common contemporary understanding of the Jerusalem temple as the earthly representation of the heavenly abode of God.

To complete our discussion on the significance of the Jerusalem temple we must face one final text in which the importance of the Jerusalem temple is explicitly discussed.

'Sir', the woman said, 'I can see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.' 'Woman', Jesus replied, 'believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem' [...] 'Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.' (John 4:19–21, 23–24, NIV)

It is important to note to whom Jesus addresses these words: a Samaritan woman and the wider Samaritan community who worshipped

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<sup>43</sup> For example, Coloe, *God Dwells with Us*, p. 163.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. 1 Enoch 39:4 and 4 Ezra 7:101.

<sup>45</sup> Steven M. Bryan, 'The Eschatological Temple in John 14', *Bulletin for Biblical Research*, 15, no. 2 (2005), 187–198.

God on Mount Gerizim rather than on Mount Zion.<sup>46</sup> After acknowledging Jesus as a prophet, the woman shares the dilemma about the appropriate location for worship. Jesus, in response, does not insist on one location over the other but anticipates a time when worship will neither occur on Mount Zion nor on Mount Gerizim — likely referring to the time after the fall of the Jerusalem temple.<sup>47</sup> Jesus furthermore refers to the coming ‘hour’ when true worshippers will worship the Father *in the Spirit and in truth*. In John, this hour is bound up with the mission of Jesus: it refers to his glorification, his return to the Father, and the subsequent gift of the Spirit, who, in turn, will enable true worship.<sup>48</sup> In this passage, then, Jesus offers no criticism of the Jerusalem temple but *relativises* its significance as the one location for true worship. True worship is not bound to a specific location but to the gift of the Spirit.

It is significant that Jesus offers these insights in conversation with a woman and her community for whom an insistence to worship in Jerusalem likely would have formed an obstacle to believing in Jesus. That is, Jesus shows *missional flexibility* in his approach to Jewish *torah* practices. For this non-Jewish audience, he does not impose the requirement to worship at the Jerusalem temple — his Father’s house. Rather than insisting upon this location, he offers the Samaritans a vision of true worship which transcends location. Meanwhile, in the remainder of John’s Gospel, Jesus and his Jewish disciples faithfully continue to worship at the Jerusalem temple.

In summary, rather than interpreting John’s temple motif as a model illustration of John’s replacement theology, our brief discussion offers an alternative way to understand this topic. First, the idea that Jesus simply *replaces* the Jerusalem temple rests on a misunderstanding of the locality of God’s presence. John’s Gospel does not limit God’s presence to one structure or even one person. Rather, God’s presence can both dwell in ‘the Father’s house’, as well as being uniquely exhibited in the incarnate Son, whilst eventually being democratised to all Jesus’s

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<sup>46</sup> ‘You’ in verse 20 is plural, that is, the wider Samaritan community is in view.

<sup>47</sup> Thompson, *John*, p. 104.

<sup>48</sup> John 12:23; 13:1; 17:1.

followers through the Spirit. In other words, to speak of Jesus's temple-body as necessarily replacing the Jerusalem temple as the location where God dwells is simply a non-sequitur.<sup>49</sup> Rather, John *retains* the significance of the Jerusalem temple as 'the Father's house' and the obvious place for Jesus and his Jewish followers to worship, whilst *reconfiguring* the locality of God's presence in terms of Jesus and the Spirit and *relativising* the significance of the proper location of worship for non-Jewish people within the gospel's narrative world.

### The Sabbath

In John, the most explicit debates about Jesus's attitude towards the *torah* revolve around his alleged breaching of the Sabbath (John 5; 7:14–24; 9). To understand these debates from a Johannine perspective, however, we must consider them in the wider context of Jesus's mission in John.

One of Jesus's mission statements occurs shortly before the first Sabbath controversy: 'My food is that I might do the will of the one who sent me and that I might "finish his work" (τελειώσω αὐτοῦ τὸ ἔργον)' (John 4:34). This expression appears with slight variation in John 5:36 and 17:4, 16, culminating in Jesus's final cry 'it is finished' (τετέλεσται; John 19:30). This repeated formula is readily understood as an allusion to the conclusion of the first creation story in Genesis, 'and on the sixth day, God "finished his works" (συνετέλεσεν τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ)' (Gen 2:2). John thus sets Jesus's works in analogy to God's creative works in Genesis. Jesus's mission, in other words, is to bring restoration to God's creation tainted by darkness (cf. John 1:5), thereby finishing the Father's work.<sup>50</sup> This understanding of Jesus's mission forms the appropriate context for the subsequent Sabbath controversies.

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<sup>49</sup> Indeed, this more comprehensive vision of God's presence is widely attested in the Jewish Scriptures. Even the scriptural narration of the dedication of the Jerusalem temple contains the following caveat in Solomon's prayer: 'But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!' (1 Kgs 8:27; cf. Isa 66:1 and Ps 137:9).

<sup>50</sup> Martin Hengel, 'Prologue', pp. 268, 276.

The healing of the paralysed man is the basis for two controversies between Jesus and the *Ioudaioi* (John 5:1–18; 7:14–24). In the initial controversy, there are two reasons why Jesus’s healing work aggravates the *Ioudaioi*: first, he ‘works’ on the Sabbath; second, he commands the healed man to pick up his mat and walk, thereby encouraging him to break the Sabbath command as well.<sup>51</sup> Jesus’s response to the *Ioudaioi* is simple yet profound, ‘my Father is working until now, so I am working’ (John 5:17). Jesus does not deny that he works on the Sabbath but claims that he shares in the divine prerogative to do so.<sup>52</sup> Obviously, this would not have been a very convincing argument for Jesus’s opponents — if it can be considered an argument at all. For the gospel’s audience, however, it does not come as a surprise. Jesus, the divine Son, is sent on a mission to restore a broken creation (John 4:34). He simply follows the Father’s lead in restoring a paralysed man to fullness of life. Of course, one could object, Jesus could have done this on a different day of the week, so why on the Sabbath? John does not provide a specific answer to this question other than that Jesus simply does what he sees the Father doing (John 5:19). A possible answer, however, might be implicit in Jesus’s mission statement: if Jesus is sent to bring healing to a broken creation, thereby finishing the Father’s works, what better day is there to perform his life-giving works than on the Sabbath, the day which marks the perfection of God’s original creation?

The second Sabbath controversy in John still revolves around Jesus’s healing of the paralysed man on the Sabbath. This time Jesus offers a different rationale for his Sabbath ‘work’.<sup>53</sup>

‘Moses has given you circumcision (not that it is from Moses, but from the fathers), and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath. If a man receives circumcision on the Sabbath so that the law of Moses would not be broken, are you angry with me because I made a whole man well on the Sabbath?’ (John 7:22–24, LEB)

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<sup>51</sup> Cf. Exod 25:3; Num 15:32–36; Jer 17:21–22.

<sup>52</sup> Severino Pancaro, *The Law in the Fourth Gospel: The Torah and the Gospel, Moses and Jesus, Judaism and Christianity According to John*, Novum Testamentum Supplements, 42 (Leiden: Brill, 1975), p. 16.

<sup>53</sup> John 7:21 explicitly uses the word ἔργον in reference to the healing of the paralysed man.



At first sight, Jesus appears to make an argument from the lesser to the greater (*qal wahomer*). If even an act that affects only one part of the body (circumcision) overrides the Sabbath law,<sup>54</sup> how much more is it permitted to heal a whole man? As a *qal wahomer* illustration, however, the argument does not work. Circumcision *must* happen on the eighth day, so if that day happens to be a Sabbath it must happen then. But Jesus could have healed the paralysed man on any other day of the week. So why on the Sabbath? If we remember, however, that Jesus is sent by his Father to complete his work and that *he always does the Father's will* (John 4:34), a hidden premise in the argument comes to light:

If a man receives circumcision on the Sabbath, so that the law of Moses would not be broken. Are you angry with me because I made a whole man well on the Sabbath, (so that 'the will of my Father' would not be broken)?

The reason the comparison with circumcision works, then, is because just as circumcision *must* happen on a certain day, so Jesus's work *must* happen on the day his Father chooses.<sup>55</sup> In addition to the argument about Jesus's *divine prerogative* (John 5:17), John 7 offers us an argument of *divine necessity*. Jesus must heal the man on the Sabbath because this is his Father's will.

The third Sabbath controversy originates in a different work of Jesus: the healing of the man born blind (John 9:1–12). This is arguably a *creative* sign as Jesus not simply restores someone's sight but creates the ability to see.<sup>56</sup> Jesus quite literally acts as 'the light of the world' (John 9:5) bringing sight to someone in darkness. In addition to this sign being marked as a 'work of God'<sup>57</sup> — in reference to Jesus's creative mission — Jesus again points to the divine necessity of this work: 'We *must* (δεῖ) work the works of the one who sent me while it is still day' (John 9:4). Notably, however, by speaking in the first-person plural, Jesus also includes the disciples in his mission.<sup>58</sup> Like Jesus, they are called to

<sup>54</sup> Lev 12:3.

<sup>55</sup> For a similar insight, see Augenstein, 'Gesetz', p. 168.

<sup>56</sup> For a more extensive interpretation of the healing of the man born blind as a creative act, see Daniel Frayer-Griggs, 'Spittle, Clay, and Creation in John 9:6 and Some Dead Sea Scrolls', *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 132, no. 3 (2013), 659–670.

<sup>57</sup> John 9:3: 'This happened so that the *works of God* (τὰ ἔργα τοῦ Θεοῦ) might be revealed in him.'

<sup>58</sup> For other instances where the disciples are included in Jesus's work, see John 3:11; 4:2, 38; 6:5; 14:12; 20:21; cf. Thompson, *John*, p. 207.

perform God’s works while it is still day. And since the necessity of this work (healing the man born blind) clearly trumps the command to rest on the Sabbath, the reader may infer that Jesus’s disciples likewise are called to work ‘the works of God’, even on the Sabbath. *From a Johannine perspective, however, this does not constitute a breach of the Sabbath command rather it constitutes obedience to God’s command to perform restorative, life- and light-giving works in accordance with his will, also when this occurs on the Sabbath.* The Father is at work on the Sabbath, so is Jesus, and so should be the disciples.

This adaptation of the Sabbath command is not as shocking as it may appear. In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus could appeal to common exceptions to the Sabbath command: saving a sheep or a child is permitted on the Sabbath (Matt 12:10–12; Luke 14:3–4); it is better to do good than to do evil on the Sabbath (Mark 3:1–16; Luke 6:6–11). From these exceptions it is only a small step to John’s claim that it is good, even necessary, to perform works of God on the Sabbath when one is presented with the opportunity to do so.

So far, we have discovered that Jesus performs life- and light-giving works on the Sabbath. These works bring restoration and renewal to God’s tainted creation. There is, however, one more ‘work’ Jesus needs to complete: dying a life-giving death. We already noted that Jesus’s final cry, ‘it is finished’ (τετέλεσται; John 19:30) echoes the conclusion of the first creation story. This cry, moreover, is followed by John’s enigmatic reference to the ‘great Sabbath’ following Jesus’s death (John 19:31).<sup>59</sup> As Martin Hengel puts it so beautifully, ‘On the cross the creator of the world completes his work of “new creation”.’<sup>60</sup> Jesus’s work, bringing life and light to a broken creation, is now finished. The light has overcome the darkness. A great day of rest has arrived. And this great Sabbath is followed by a new day where, perhaps unsurprisingly, Mary meets Jesus in a garden and mistakes him for ‘the gardener’ (John 20:15).<sup>61</sup> Clearly, John seeks to communicate that Jesus’s resurrection marks the dawn of a new creation — which is inaugurated

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<sup>59</sup> John 19:31: ἦν γὰρ μεγάλη ἡ ἡμέρα ἐκείνου τοῦ σαββάτου, ‘because that Sabbath day was great’.

<sup>60</sup> Hengel, ‘Prologue’, p. 270.

<sup>61</sup> There are many other allusions to Genesis 1–3 in John’s passion narrative. For an excellent overview, see Nicholas J. Schaser, ‘Inverting Eden: The Reversal of Genesis 1–3 in John’s Passion’, *Word & World*, 40 (2020), pp. 263–270.

by Jesus's finished work. And in this new creation, just as Adam once received the breath of life, Jesus now breathes (ἐνεφύσησεν) on his disciples and calls them to continue his life-giving mission (John 20:21–22).<sup>62</sup> Now they must perform the works of God and spread the life and light of God's new creation.

In discussing the Sabbath controversies in John's Gospel, we have placed these disputes in the larger context of Jesus's mission to complete the Father's work and act in obedience to the Father's will (John 4:34). From this perspective, Jesus never breaks the Sabbath but simply obeys his Father's command by performing life- and light-giving works on the Sabbath. This priority to follow the Father's lead over strict Sabbath observance is also extended to Jesus's disciples (John 9:4). Far from a dramatic alteration of the Sabbath command, however, this prioritisation of 'doing the works of God' over 'rest' is not much different from similar forms of prioritisation that Jesus's contemporaries engaged in. The Gospel of John offers no obvious reason, then, for Jewish disciples of Jesus to stop observing the Sabbath as a day of rest (although this rest could be supplemented or 'broken' by engaging in 'works of God'). What is more, the Sabbath would arguably attain an even deeper significance for Johannine believers as this day now can be celebrated in light of the finished work of Jesus and the new creation his work has brought about.

### **Other Potential Indications of Replacement**

Besides the debates regarding ritual purification, temple, and Sabbath, there are yet other motifs in John's Gospel that could easily be interpreted through a replacement lens.

The Jewish festivals play a prominent role in John's Gospel and Jesus's ministry. Jesus attends the Passover (John 2:23), an unnamed Jewish festival (John 5:1), the feast of Tabernacles (John 7:2), the festival

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<sup>62</sup> The Greek verb ἐμφυσάω is a hapax legomenon in the New Testament and rare in the ancient Greek versions of the Jewish Scriptures. It does, however, occur in Greek Gen 2:7 to describe the breath of life God breathed into Adam.

of Dedication (John 10:22), and, again, the Passover festival.<sup>63</sup> Jesus thus observes the festivals together with his disciples. However, on three occasions, John's Gospel refers to these festivals as 'the festival of the *Ioudaioi*' (ἑορτῆ τῶν Ἰουδαίων; John 5:1; 6:4; 7:2). For many scholars this phrase is, yet again, an example of John's replacement theology. Andrew Lincoln comments that it 'is probably not simply a neutral description but reflects the present distancing of the Evangelist and his community from Jewish institutions'.<sup>64</sup> In similar vein, Raymond Brown suggests that this expression 'may indicate a hostility to these feasts which are to be replaced by Jesus'.<sup>65</sup> If one believes that John's Gospel is actively promoting a replacement theology, such comments are understandable as they fit the adopted paradigm, but this is certainly not the only possible interpretation. As Alan Culpepper and Edward Klink have observed, these phrases may simply function as explanatory notes for the implied non-Jewish audiences of the Gospel.<sup>66</sup> They clarify that these are Jewish festivals. Be that as it may, on its own the phrase 'the festival of the *Ioudaioi*' certainly does not indicate either distancing or replacement. Jesus carefully observes the festivals. What is more, the festivals are a significant stage against which Jesus can reveal his identity through his teaching and actions. At the festival of Tabernacles, where, historically, a water and light ceremony at the temple formed a highlight of the celebrations, Jesus reveals himself as the source of living water and the light of the world.<sup>67</sup> At the festival of Dedication, marking the 'sanctification' of the temple after the defilement by Antiochus Epiphanes IV, Jesus reveals himself to be the Father's sanctified agent.<sup>68</sup> At the Passover festival, Jesus acts like a new Moses, performing signs, and, ultimately, gives up his own life and dies as the true Passover Lamb.<sup>69</sup> In other words, each of these festivals fulfils a positive function in facilitating the revelation of Jesus's identity. Nowhere in the gospel is

<sup>63</sup> The Passover is also 'near' when Jesus miraculously provides bread for the hungry crowd (John 6:4). However, Jesus is not in Jerusalem at that time.

<sup>64</sup> Lincoln, *John*, p. 192.

<sup>65</sup> Brown, *John*, 1, p. 114.

<sup>66</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, *The Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), pp. 218–222; Edward W. Klink III, *The Sheep of the Fold: The Audience and Origin of the Gospel of John* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 173–174.

<sup>67</sup> John 7:37–39; 8:12; cf. M. Sukk. 4:9; 5:1–5; T. Sukk. 3:6; 4:1–9.

<sup>68</sup> John 10:36; cf. 1 Macc 4:48; Greek 2 Chron 7:20.

<sup>69</sup> John 19:33–36; cf. Exod 12:10.

there any indication that Jesus's Jewish followers should give up celebrating these festivals. At the same time, however, considering their understanding of Jesus's identity, Jesus's followers would certainly celebrate these festivals in a *reconfigured* way. They would remember Jesus as the one in whom the various elements of their festivals find a new significance.

Another possible indication that the evangelist may be distancing himself and his community from the *torah* is the use of second- and third-person possessive pronouns in combination with the noun νόμος.<sup>70</sup> There are three examples of this in John's Gospel: 'in *your torah* it is written' (John 8:17), 'is it not written in *your torah*?' (John 10:34), 'it was to fulfil the word that is written in *their torah*' (John 15:25). According to William Loader, this distinctive use of possessive pronouns is appropriate 'since it has ceased to be the Law of Jesus and the community, except in its Christological function'.<sup>71</sup> Again, this understanding of these three phrases is conceivable if one takes John's purpose is to promote the replacement of the Jewish law by Jesus. There are, however, good contextual reasons to doubt this interpretation. In John 8:17 and 10:34, we find Jesus arguing with a group of Jewish leaders. Rather than distancing himself from the *torah* he uses evidence from the *torah* to corroborate claims about his identity. The possessive pronoun simply adds rhetorical force to the argument. In John 15:25, Jesus explains that the *Ioudaioi* are fulfilling their very own *torah* by persecuting Jesus. The use of the possessive pronoun simply highlights the irony of this event. Moreover, the use of possessive pronouns to add rhetorical force to one's argument is not unprecedented in the Jewish Scriptures. As Jörg Augenstein has demonstrated, the books of Deuteronomy and Joshua contain ample examples of second- and third-person demonstrative pronouns used for rhetorical purposes rather than creating distance between the speaker and object referred to.<sup>72</sup> Rather than understanding these three examples from John's Gospel as

<sup>70</sup> For this understanding of John 8:17, 10:34, and 15:25 see Hengel, 'The Old Testament', p. 28; Loader, *Law*, p. 489; Pancaro, *The Law*, pp. 520–522.

<sup>71</sup> Loader, *Law*, p. 489.

<sup>72</sup> Jörg Augenstein, 'Miszellen: "Euer Gesetz"—Ein Pronomen und die Johanneische Haltung zum Gesetz', *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche*, 88 (1997), 311–313 (pp. 312–313). E.g., Deut 4:10, 21, 23.

indications of a growing distance between the evangelist and their community and the *torah*, these phrases are best understood as adding rhetorical force to the contextual arguments of Jesus.

A final issue is John's prevalent use of *torah* imagery to describe Jesus. Jesus is presented as the source of life, light, and living water, the truth, and the bread of life. Each of these images is used to describe the *torah* in the Jewish Scriptures, other Second Temple Literature, and later rabbinic sources.<sup>73</sup> For some scholars this is yet more evidence that Jesus replaces the *torah* whereas others conclude that, for John, Jesus is the continuation or embodiment of the *torah*. As Jochen Flebbe puts it in a recent monograph, 'Jesus ist die Tora'.<sup>74</sup> Or as Craig S. Keener claims, 'The Fourth Gospel presents the Logos of its prologue as Torah.'<sup>75</sup> In my opinion, however, both understandings are unhelpful and, ultimately, un-Johannine. For John, the Logos does not replace the *torah* nor is it to be identified with the *torah*. Rather, the Logos (i.e. Jesus) is the *source* of the *torah*. This is the clear implication of my proposed reading of John's prologue. For John, then, the *torah* can be called a light, the source of life, and the truth, *because it derives from Jesus* — not the other way around.

It is easy to see how the three motifs discussed above can be utilised to corroborate a replacement understanding of John's view of the *torah*. However, none of these motifs provides compelling evidence that John wished to present Jesus as replacing the *torah*.

## Summary and Implications

This article has argued that there are no persuasive reasons to suppose that John's Gospel promotes the view that Jesus replaces the institutions and practices of the Mosaic *torah*. There are no indications that, within John's narrative world, Jesus or his followers stopped observing the Sabbath, refrained from temple worship, or stopped performing

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<sup>73</sup> For example, Jochen Flebbe, *Jesus Tora: Christologie und Gesetz im Johannesevangelium vor dem Hintergrund Antik-Jüdischer Torametaphorik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020).

<sup>74</sup> Flebbe, *Jesus Tora*, p. 404. To Flebbe's credit, he does try to avoid replacement language in his wider argument.

<sup>75</sup> Keener, *John*, 1, p. 360.

practices related to ritual purity, neither does the evangelist present Jesus as replacing these practices and institutions or suggest they no longer matter. There is no evidence, furthermore, that the evangelist intentionally distances himself or his community from the *torah*. This article, then, has largely provided arguments for what is not happening, the negative case so to speak, with regards to the *torah* in John's Gospel.<sup>76</sup> Along the way, however, we have seen the signposts of what a more constructive vision of the ethical and ritual practices of a 'Johannine community' might look like.<sup>77</sup>

First among these is the element of *retainment*. John does not envision a community that jettisons its sacred practices and institutions. There is no replacement of ritual washing by baptism, the temple by Jesus, Sabbath by Sunday, or Jewish festivals by a 'Christian' calendar. Rather, each of these practices and institutions are subject to *reinterpretation* now that the Messiah has come: true purity is given through the washing which Jesus offers his followers; true worship is not dependent on location but on the Spirit; God's tainted creation is restored and renewed through the finished work of Jesus; and the festivals find new meaning through the mission of Christ — the bread of life, the source of living water, the light of the world, and the true Lamb of God. In addition to *retainment* and *reinterpretation* John also advocates a degree of *relativisation* about the significance, or appropriate application, of certain Jewish institutions and practices: to worship in Spirit and truth is far more important than the location of worship (John 4:21); to do the works of God is weightier than Sabbath rest (John 9:4); to attain to ritual purity is worth little if, at the same time, one contributes to the death of the Lamb of God (John 18:28). To put this last point differently, in John we find clear evidence that the appropriate observance of the *torah* is dependent on *context*. The Samaritan woman and her community are not summoned to go to Jerusalem to worship and Jesus does not tell the paralysed man, 'You have waited for thirty-eight years, so please wait for one more day because it is the Sabbath today.' For John, observing the *torah* is more than adhering to a set of

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<sup>76</sup> There is also a positive argument to be made about the ethical practices John's Gospel envisions, but this would require a different essay.

<sup>77</sup> By 'Johannine community', I mean the community John's Gospel envisions, or seeks to create, rather than the community or communities from which the gospel emerged.

written or oral teachings, it is being attentive to God's guidance and instructions in specific situations. Finally, there is an element of *diversification* in *torah* practices in John: Jesus introduces the practice of foot washing, encourages fresh ways of Sabbath observance, and opens up new modes of worshipping God.

Taken together, the possible implications of John's vision of the *torah* as set out above are many, but I want to draw out just two. First, a Johannine vision of the *torah* that avoids the language of replacement and emphasises the positive value of the Jewish institutions and practices has serious potential to aid Jewish-Christian dialogue. John, an early and highly influential Christian text, *does not* promote the abolishment of Judaism's sacred practices and institutions nor of the Mosaic *torah* as a whole, despite much evidence to the contrary in the history of its interpretation. Of course, the gospel's central claim about the messiahship of Jesus will remain a watershed issue for Jewish and Christian audiences encountering the text. Still, in an interreligious dialogue, a Christian could affirm the value John's Gospel attributes to Jewish practices and institutions. Moreover, one could explain, that, in this assessment of John's Gospel, Jewish people who acknowledge Jesus as Messiah would not be expected to abandon their traditional Jewish institutions and practices — although they would be subject to reinterpretation in light of the person and work of Jesus.

Second, I have argued that a Johannine vision of the *torah* leaves space for a *diversity* of *torah* practices and encourages *contextual sensitivity*. Currently, both in the country I reside, Scotland, and my home country, the Netherlands, many baptistic churches face renewed internal discussions about the appropriateness of observing certain Jewish practices or institutions such as the Sabbath or Jewish festivals. Rather than providing clear-cut answers, I believe that a Johannine vision of the *torah* as set out in this article can offer wisdom for healthy, contextually sensitive discussions on such issues.