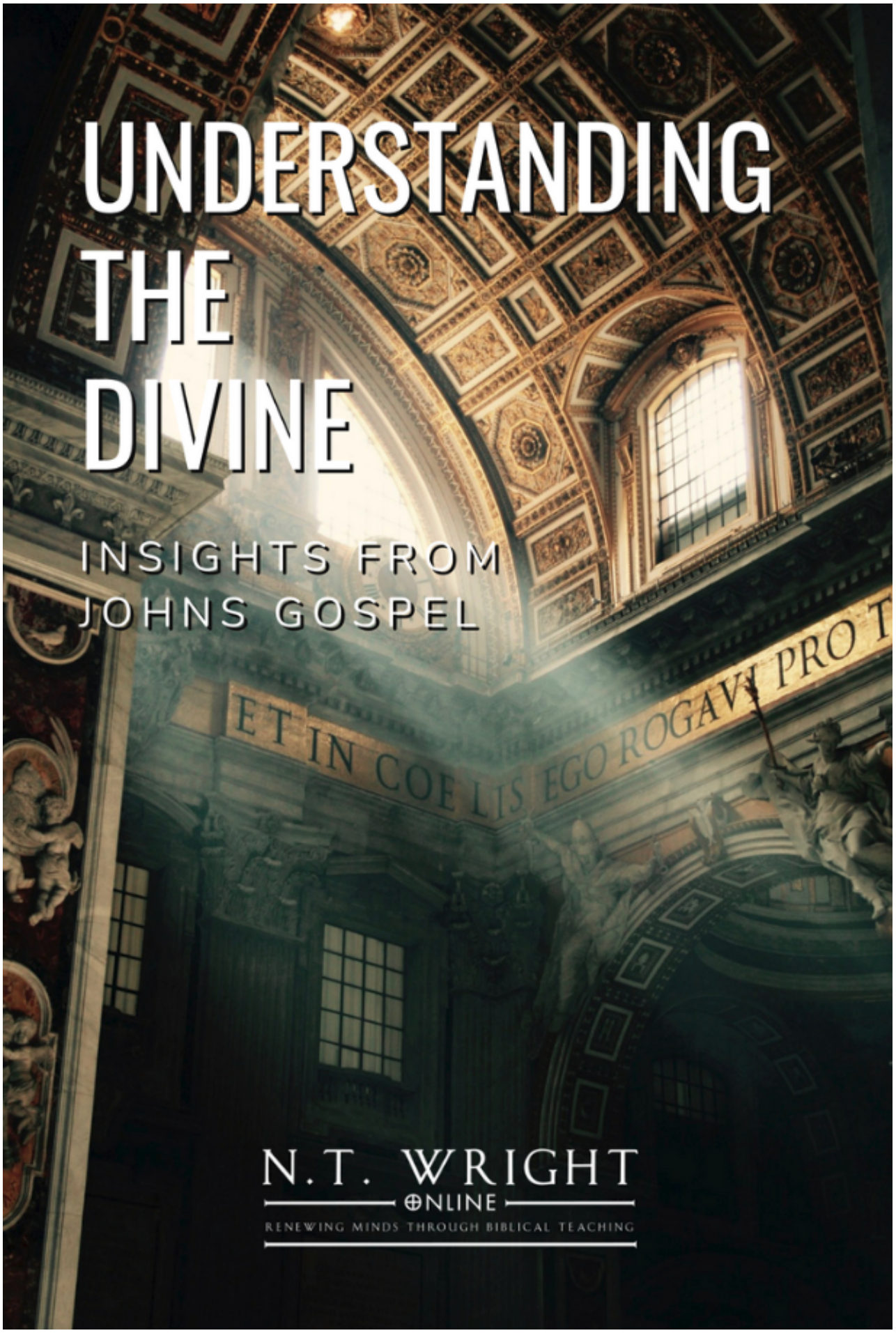
UNDERSTANDING
THE
DIVINE
INSIGHTS FROM
JOHNS GOSPEL
ET IN COE LIS EGO ROGAVI PRO T
N.T. WRIGHT
ONLINE
RENEWING MINDS THROUGH BIBLICAL TEACHING

Understanding the Divine: Insights from John's Gospel

John wants us to know that heaven and earth have met.

This theme of heaven meeting earth grows and swells throughout John, through the reference to Jacob's Ladder at the end of chapter One, into the wedding at Cana in chapter Two (the wedding symbolizing the coming together of heaven and earth), followed at once by the Temple-scene where Jesus is 'speaking of the Temple of his body' and so on.

As with several of John's themes, not least the Word itself, these are stated emphatically at the start in order that the reader may then hold them in mind while, so to speak, watching the action unfold: this, we are to understand, is what is really going on.

When, on Easter morning, Mary sees the two angels in the tomb, they are sitting one at the head and the other at the feet of the slab where Jesus' body had laid—a reflection, as some have pointed out, of the mercy-seat at the heart of the sanctuary. This is where the living God meets with his people.

In particular, all this is what is going on with the revelation of the divine glory: as we shall see, the ancient Jewish hope for the divine glory was for a renewed temple, as in Ezekiel, to which the glorious presence would return at last.

> If Genesis 1 is the great cosmic temple, then humans are the divine image placed within that temple.

The second point, closely allied to the themes of new creation and new temple, is the role of humans in God's image.

The climax of Genesis 1 comes at verses 26–28; if Genesis 1 is the great cosmic temple, then humans are the divine image placed within that temple.

Imagery and Temple Worship

This rules out at a stroke centuries of puzzle as to what aspect of humanity might be supposed to be the divine 'image'. That isn't the point. The picture is vocational (and indeed to see it like that sets in quite a new context all the great questions of sin and salvation, as I have argued elsewhere).

The 'image' in a temple is there for a purpose, indeed for a double purpose, so that the worshipers may bring their worship to the image and thus to the god who is 'imaged', and so that the power and protection and stewardship of the god may flow out through the image to the world around.

This would be true of any pagan shrine and image, and it is what Genesis is saying about the vocation of human beings within the heaven-and-earth temple we call the cosmos. The god is present in and as the 'image'. Psalm 8 picks up this theme and, in later usage, applies it not least to Israel's king, and perhaps also to the high priest.

And when we read John 1 in this light we see that at more or less the same point in the story – at the climax of the narrative – where Genesis has the creation of humans in God's image, John has the Word becoming flesh.

Incarnation: Jesus as the Image of God

And the close thematic parallels to this passage in Colossians 1 and Hebrews 1 ought to leave us in no doubt that John wants us

to make exactly that connection. Jesus is the true human, the ultimate Image-bearer, the one in and as whom the creator is now present in, with and for his creation.

John emphasizes this most strongly when Jesus stands before Pilate on the Friday, the sixth day of the week, and Pilate declares ecce homo, 'behold the man.'

John's narrative is nearly complete at that point, still following through the themes of creation and new creation, Jesus goes to his death with the word *tetelestai*, 'it is finished', echoing Genesis 2:1–2. The six-day work is done, and on the seventh day God rests, this time in the darkness of the tomb, before the new creation which, as John emphasizes, happens 'on the first day of the week'.

But if John is writing a new Genesis then verse 14 is also an indication that he is including a new Exodus at the same time.

This brings me to the another point. One of the themes to emerge from recent work on ancient biblical temple-theology is the reading of Genesis and Exodus as a single narrative arc. From early days, and particularly in the second-temple writings, the wilderness tabernacle and then the Jerusalem temple were seen as small working models of the whole creation.

They were not 'religious' buildings seen as an escape from the rest of the world, signaling access to a remote divine sphere; they were advance signposts, eschatological pointers, indicating (like Noah's ark itself) that, despite the vocational failure of the image-bearers, the waters of chaos would not overcome the world.

The calling of Abraham in Genesis 12, with Abraham seen very much as the new Adam, points ahead to the whole Exodus narrative with its climax in the Tabernacle into which the divine glory comes to dwell.

This it seems is the purpose of Israel, Abraham's family, to be the guardians of the tabernacle, the carriers of the promise that there would be new heavens and new earth. The slavery in Egypt, and then the Exodus, speak volumes about how the people of Israel, themselves part of the Adam-problem, can fulfill this vocation.

The giving of Torah seems in this light to be the preparation for the coming of the Tabernacle and particularly of the divine glory that will dwell in it. All this is vital for John as he unfolds this major theme: that when the Word becomes flesh and 'tabernacles' in our midst, we gazed upon his glory, glory like that of the father's only son, full of grace and truth.

There are multiple echoes here of the Exodus-story in which God reveals to Moses that he is full of *hesed* and *emeth*. Even the Johannine theme of Jesus as the Passover Lamb is, I think, subordinate to this point. In Exodus the new working model of creation has its own divine image within it in the person of the High Priest, Aaron himself.

Jesus goes to his death with the word *tetelestai*, 'it is finished', echoing the day God rest in Genesis 2:1–2. John emphasizes this happens 'on the first day of the week'.

Divinity Returns in the Messiah

In the second temple period, we find the theme which I have come, in recent years, to regard as the major clue to all the early Christian accounts of God's action in Jesus.

Ezekiel tells of the divine glory, riding on the throne-chariot, abandoning the temple to its fate because of the persistent idolatry of people and priests alike. But in the final dream-like sequence of the book the temple is rebuilt, and in chapter 43, the divine glory returns at last.

This is the point, as well, of the whole poem of Isaiah 40–55: The watchmen will see the divine glory returning to Zion, though when they look closely what they will see is the figure of the Servant.

The point is this: In two of the major so-called post-exilic books, Zechariah and Malachi, the Temple has been rebuilt, but the promise of YHWH's glorious return remains unfulfilled.

The prophets insist that the Spirit will return, but that it hasn't happened.

YHWH will indeed return, but that very insistence is powerful evidence that he hasn't done so yet. Of course the people are offering sacrifice and praying in the newly restored temple, because that's how sacred space works, as with the Western Wall in Jerusalem to this day, where devout Jews and even visiting presidents go to pray even though no Jew supposes that Israel's God is really in full and glorious residence on the old Temple Mount.

But when the later rabbis make a list of things that Solomon's temple had which the second temple didn't have, they include the Shekinah, the glorious divine presence. The whole New Testament, Mark as well as John, Luke and Paul alike, insist that this is how we are to see Jesus, as the living embodiment of the returning, living God of Israel.

The Temple has been rebuilt, but the promise of YHWH's glorious return remains unfulfilled.

Understanding the Messiah in Second-Temple Theology

The place to start if we are to understand New Testament Christology, I suggest, is with the second-temple narratives in which Israel's God had made promises about the new temple, which I have said before, is obviously the sign and means of new creation, with the way in which the logic of that temple-discourse works in terms of the simultaneity of the returning divine glory and the appearing of the true divine image.

The coming of God and the appearance of the truly human one seem to be literally made for each other. These are the themes which harmonize in the music which is the food of love. Those whose ears can only hear one note at a time will find it strange to be told that all these notes—temple, image, divine glory, high priest, messiah—can somehow come together.

In John we should not be surprised that, even though this temple-theme has not usually been explored, people have nevertheless seen chapter 17, one of the climactic moments of the whole narrative, as a 'high-priestly' prayer.

And just as other themes are fused together, like the varied rainbow colors brought back into the pure white light from which they came, so Jesus turns out to be both the true temple and the true image within that temple and the high priest and, of course, the victorious Messiah.

Remembering the Romans

'Arms and the man I sing'. That is the classic Roman ideology, the song of a nation whose vocation was war.

Throughout John's gospel, but reaching a peak in chapter 12 and then again in 16 and the dialogue with Pilate in John 18 and 19, John presents Jesus as the one who, like David confronting Goliath, is going out to do battle with 'the ruler of the world'.

Most have taken this as a reference simply to the unseen forces, the dark satanic power that must be dethroned. That is certainly part of it, but I think that John, like other writers of the time, doesn't make so clear a separation between what we call 'spiritual' and what we call 'political' powers.

When Jesus says that 'the ruler of this world is coming,' (14:30) he seems to mean troops, not demons, though it is the satan entering into Judas that will 'accuse' him, that will hand him over (13:2, 27, 18:3).

The theme is stated most clearly in 12:31–32. Some Greeks at the feast have asked to see Jesus, and Jesus appears to regard this as a sign that the last battle is near: if his message is to bear fruit in the wider world, the grain of wheat must fall into the earth and die: the dying fall, perhaps, of the music of love. What is required, for the whole world to be able to receive, and respond in faith to, the news of God's kingdom, is for the dark power that has kept the whole world in captivity to be overthrown.

This is new-Exodus language: Pharaoh must be defeated for the slaves to be freed.

And this will happen through Jesus' death: 'Now comes the judgment of this world! Now this world's ruler is going to be thrown out! And when I've been lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself'.

The Very Heart of the First Christians' Thoughts

As with other preliminary statements, John wants his readers to hold this image of the victorious battle in mind throughout what follows, particularly when Jesus confronts Pilate, arguing about kingdom, truth and power—and then going to his death as Rome does what it does best only to discover that it has been lured into a trap, leading to the moment when God does what God does best, namely creation and new creation.

This is the heart of the New Testament's theology of atonement, the heart of what the early Christians believed about God's action in Jesus. We see it—to look outside John for just a moment—in the fourth chapter of Acts, where the disciples, having been threatened by the authorities, pray a prayer based closely on Psalm 2, celebrating the fact that the nations did their worst and that, when their power was exhausted by their rage against the Messiah, God exalted and enthroned the Messiah and served notice on the powers of the world that their time was up and that they had better come into line.

The heart of the New Testament's theology of atonement, the heart of what the early Christians believed about God's action in Jesus.

War is Overcome

The song of Virgil is overcome by the song of Moses and Miriam, the victory song of the Exodus people—which in Exodus 15 ends, of course, with the establishment of the temple itself.

The dark waters of chaos are overcome with the creation of the heaven-and-earth reality of the original cosmos. The dark waters of the flood are overcome with the Ark, itself symbolizing a new

Jesus as Israel's Messiah wins the victory, the Lion of Judah over the Eagle of Rome, the God-reflecting human against the monsters, the 'son of man' as himself the ladder between earth and heaven.

temple. The overcoming of the Red Sea leads to the construction of the Tabernacle.

In Daniel 7 the monsters come up out of the sea, the same terrifying symbolism that Melville exploited in Moby Dick, and God vindicates the true human, not now an Ishmael but 'one like a son of man,' giving him authority over the monsters and through him establishing his kingdom on earth as in heaven.

John has built all of this and more into his account of God's action in Jesus. Jesus as Israel's Messiah wins the victory, the Lion of Judah over the Eagle of Rome, the God-reflecting human against the monsters, the 'son of man' as himself the ladder between earth and heaven (1:51). His body, the ultimate 'temple', will be destroyed and rebuilt in three days (2:19–22).

Here, too, we are to hold this picture in our minds as we read the story of the crucifixion and resurrection in chapters 19 and 20, so that, for instance, the breathing of Jesus's spirit on the disciples in 20:19–24 is itself an important temple-moment, with the disciples thereby constituted as the new-temple people for the world.

The tabernacle and Solomon's temple were always designed as small working models of the intended new creation. Now, with the preparation of the Farewell Discourses behind them, the disciples are to be the living and active temple in which the Spirit dwells—the new reality corresponding to the promise of Ezekiel 43—with the living water flowing from this temple, as from the Garden of Eden, to refresh and irrigate the whole world.

The Johannine theme of divine victory, like the equivalent moments in Hebrews 2 or Colossians 2, not to mention the Synoptic gospels and Revelation, is bound up with the theme of the temple which is itself a central way, perhaps the central way, in which the early Christians thought and spoke of God's action in Jesus and what it meant.

The Food of Love

There remains one theme, vast and all-embracing. John's music is indeed the food of love, and by *agapē* he means the covenant love of God for his people and, through his people, for the world. 'Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end', *eis telos* (13:1).

This is yet another heading which functions as a lens through which we are to see the events of arrest, trial, crucifixion and resurrection. It looks back to the famous 'God so loved the world' in 3:16 and on to the challenge to Peter: "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" in chapter 21.

Here, as with Paul, I think we often fail to draw out the fact that this is covenantal language, whose natural home is in Exodus and Deuteronomy, in the Psalms and in Isaiah, particularly in the promises of restoration after the exile.

That is, for John, the ultimate meaning of incarnation and cross, the word agapē does not feature in the prologue, just as the word logos is conspicuously absent in the rest of the Gospel.

But the reality is everywhere, with creation itself as the act of overflowing divine love and the covenant with Israel the agonizing subsequent phase of that same love, all held together in the love of Father and Son for one another which is the deepest secret of both the prologue and of the Gospel as a whole.

And this is the final prayer of Jesus as the High Priest at the end of chapter 17: ‘May the love with which you loved me be in them, and I in them’. This is temple language. It is thus the language of creation and new creation, of Jesus as the Image and the disciples, receiving the Spirit, as themselves the new image-bearing new temple, of the new world which will emerge once the final battle with the dark powers has been fought and won.

All these themes converge, with much more for which there has been no time here. We could have told a very similar story from Paul, from the Synoptics, from Hebrews, from First Peter, or from Revelation. Here, I think, we are near the heart of what the first Christians thought and wished to say about God’s action in Jesus.

About the Author

Prof. N.T. (Tom) Wright is Senior Research Fellow at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford University. He is one of the world's leading Bible scholars, with expertise in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity, the New Testament, and Biblical Studies. He is also Emeritus Professor at the University of St. Andrews and the former Bishop of Durham. His has published over 85 books including: *The Case for the Psalms; How God Became King; Simply Jesus; After You Believe; Surprised by Hope; Simply Christian; The New Testament and the People of God; Jesus and the Victory of God; The Resurrection of the Son of God;* and most recently, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*. He is co-founder of N.T. Wright Online which features over 40 online courses.