Temple and Community: Foundation for Johannine Spirituality

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Mystics of the Book
Themes, Topics, and Typologies
Edited and with an Introduction by
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Temple and Community: Foundations for Johannine Spirituality

Lawrence E. Frizzell

I. Review of Scholarship

The spiritual riches of the Johannine tradition (the Fourth Gospel and three epistles) have been recognized as a treasure by Christian theologians and spiritual writers since the early centuries. But may we speak of mystical doctrine in John? A discussion of definitions must precede any effort to answer this question.

The term “mystical” may be described as “involving or having the nature of an individual’s direct subjective communion with God or ultimate reality”. Mysticism, then, is “the belief that direct knowledge of God, spiritual truth or ultimate reality can be attained through subjective experience”.

Some scholars object to the term “Johannine mysticism” because they stress that the definition implies direct apprehension of God by the human mind. “St. John is strongly anti-mystical . . . He is emphatic that no man hath beheld God at any time (1:18); that saying repudiates that essentially mystical experience . . .”

However, if one allows an experience of God mediated through the Word made flesh (Jn. 1:14) to be considered mystical, then the Fourth Gospel may be considered as the most complete interpretation and record of the early Church’s experience whereby it felt itself to be in Christ, and through Christ, in God. The relation of the Father with the Son, understood as a mystical relation, becomes the key to illuminate the Christian life.

In the early decades of this century many critical scholars considered John to be the Gospel most influenced by Hellenism. In his influential study of Paul’s mysticism, Albert Schweitzer situates the Fourth Gospel in the second century; along with Justin Martyr, John continued the work of Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, introducing into the Hellenistic mysticism of communion with Christ the theory of Jesus Christ bearer of the Logos.
The discovery of the Qumran scrolls in 1947 and subsequent years has shown that elements in John that seemed “Hellenistic” were already part of the Jewish traditions in the Holy Land of the late Second Temple period.⁷ Although few scholars would follow J. A. T. Robinson, who considers John to be the earliest Gospel, its traditions do fit into the world of Judaism before 70, when the Temple was destroyed.⁸

“John is certainly different from the mystical religions which flourished in the environment of the Gospel”. With these words, the English scholar C. K. Barrett completes his contrast between contemporary general conceptions about mysticism and the message of the Fourth Gospel. According to Rudolf Otto the term “mystical” tends to stress non-rational or supra-rational elements in religion; Barrett states: “John, on the contrary, showed a marked concern for the intellectual content of the Christian faith.”⁹

A fine essay by James McPolin, S. J. entitled “Johannine Mysticism” looks carefully at the theme of communion with God as an essential constitutive principle of the Christian life.¹⁰ He presents many of the texts and themes of the Fourth Gospel that will be treated in this study as well. However, McPolin does not investigate the background of the evangelist’s teaching, so our approaches are complementary.

In a recent work on phenomenological and theological reflections concerning mysticism, the authors entitle the section on the biblical heritage “Experience of God”.¹¹ The chapter on John notes that there is no emphasis on extraordinary spiritual phenomena (such as the charisma described in Paul’s letters). Rather, John offers a profound account of the Christian experience, focused on Christ and radiating from him. Communion with the Father of Jesus is not described in terms of asceticism or contemplation, but by the commandments to believe in God and to practice love. There is no elitist attitude that salvation is for a small group of initiates. Faith is required because no one can see God directly in this life. This faith is grounded on apostolic witness, for which the Gospel comes to the community, and is manifested through fraternal love. The mediation of the apostolic tradition and the community of believers is essential. Communion with God the Father through Jesus is a reality for each person, but is not individualistic; it takes place within a community in imitation of the Trinitarian mystery (Jn. 17:20-24), an introduction into the circle of knowledge and love that constitutes the very life of the three divine persons in the one God.¹²

Not all scholars nuance the tension regarding individual and community as carefully as McPolin and Maggioni. In a recent study we read: “‘Eternal life’ allows John to make more personal and
individualistic the corporate concept of ‘Kingdom of God’... Life is a 'mystical' or perhaps 'spiritual' conception, a description of internal experience or of the ultimate destiny of one's soul”. The thesis of my essay is rather that the Johannine corpus, rooted deeply in the biblical heritage and the Jewish tradition, indeed stresses the personal and interior dimensions of the Christian experience; however this fact should not be interpreted as promoting individualistic piety or theology to the detriment of the group. The community setting is essential, as one would expect in a work emerging from the biblical worldview.

The major purpose of the evangelist in composing his work is indicated in the first ending to the Gospel. "These (signs) are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (20:31). As with all New Testament texts, this Gospel was composed to be proclaimed aloud, so the verb forms are often in the second person plural. Of course, the text lends itself marvelously to personal meditation and provides foundations for a theology of Christian spirituality. The tendency has been to focus on passages that resonate well for a given group and historical period. This approach should be tested against the way in which these texts are integrated into the entire Gospel and its use of the biblical heritage.

II. Covenant in Jewish Tradition

As Maggioni has indicated, communion with God is described by John within the framework of the commandments to believe in God and to practice love. As stated, his point should be applied to the entire corpus of the Jewish Scriptures; to be specifically Johannine he should have added that belief comes through Jesus and love is to be practiced in imitation of him. For our purpose it is necessary first to review the biblical tradition.

How can faith and love be presented as commandments? Does not the gift of self in freedom better connote the mystery of love?

In its division of the Decalogue, the Jewish tradition limits the first commandment to the statement of Exodus 20:2. "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage". Thus a statement of faith is seen to be the basis for the response required in the subsequent commandments. If those belonging to the people believe, their faith should prove itself in acts of faithfulness.

Because the Decalogue and other commandments of God’s Torah (instruction) were to guide Israel’s life as a political community in the
land promised to them, the emphasis in many laws is on the social order. However, the last commandment of the Decalogue points to the necessary of inner self-discipline. The prohibition of covetousness demanded at least that a person not express desires, and probably advocated the need for inner self-control. During the Exile (after the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E.) the people were under Babylonian civil and criminal law, so the prophets and other teachers stressed the personal and interior dimensions of God’s Torah. It remained valid for the people at a level deeper than the social order alone.

The Decalogue and all other commandments are given within the context of the initial gift of the Covenant. “If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:5-6). The call of Abram and Sarai (Gen. 12:1-3) and the revelation of the divine Name to Moses (Ex. 3:13-15) are clearly events wherein God took the initiative. One may recognize that faith as a divine gift is implicit in such experiences; the human response involves an act of acceptance which then requires a continuing activity of faithful obedience in acts of love. The synthesis of faith-and-love in the thought of Paul and John in the Christian Scriptures stands within the ancient biblical message and its interpretation in Jewish circles in the Second Temple period.

The Sinai covenant is presented by the biblical writers as a reciprocal relationship, with responsibilities on both sides. God called the people of Israel his first-born son (Ex. 4:22) to show the intimacy of love which they are privileged to share. He promised protection and guidance on condition that the people submit to the divine will by keeping the commandments. Even after they worshipped the golden calf (Ex. 32:1-6) and Moses executed judgment on the guilty (32:25-29), commandments were bestowed again (34:1-4). In this context the meaning of the divine Name was revealed to Moses more fully than in the burning bush (Ex. 3:1-15), in which God’s Name is revealed as “I am who am”. The Lord passed before Moses and proclaimed: ‘The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty . . . . “ (34:6-7). The rabbis counted thirteen attributes of God in this passage and probably John’s statement “God is love” (1 Jn. 4:8, 16) summarizes the meaning of the divine Name as revealed to Moses. If so, the theological insight of John derives from the covenant experience of Moses and Israel.
In the priestly tradition the reciprocal nature of the covenant is expressed in the statement “I will be your God and you shall be my people” ( Lev. 26:12, see Ex. 6:7). The same formula is part of Jeremiah’s promise of a new covenant to those who survived the destruction of Jerusalem (Jer. 31:31-34, see Ez. 36:22-30). Later, Zechariah proclaimed God’s message in similar terms. “Thus says the Lord of hosts: ‘Behold, I will save my people from the east country and from the west country, and I will bring them to dwell in the midst of Jerusalem, and they shall be my people and I will be their God, in faithfulness and righteousness” (Zech. 8:7-8, 2:11; 8:20-23 for extension of this reality to the nations).

The renewal of God’s covenant with the survivors of Judah, Benjamin and Levi took place in the context of Haggai’s and Zechariah’s mission that resulted in the rebuilding of the Temple. Although by 100 B.C.E. some groups rejected the priestly leadership of the Hasmoneans (and the Sadducees at the time of Jesus), it is an invalid generalization to state that the cult was moribund in Second Temple times, as one scholar does.20

The centers of focus for the spiritual life of most Jews during those centuries were the Torah (and the other parts of the Scriptures) and the Temple, the place where God revealed himself to his people and where sacrificial worship was offered. The three great pilgrimage feasts (Deut. 16:1-17) were the context for large multitudes to seek communion with God; the experience was personal but shared within the community.21 Many drew strength from the rhythms of worship that consecrated each day and week to God, with the sabbath in home and synagogue constituting a profound experience of peace with God and neighbor.22 The psalter provided inspiration for each generation, as it continues to do so for both Jews and Christians today.

As devout lay people who were educated in understanding the Scriptures, the Pharisees maintained that the entire community of Israel was “a kingdom of priests, a holy nation” (Ex. 19:6). They extended and adapted the ideals of priestly holiness in the context of a life in Temple service to their synagogues and homes. Meals were framed by prayer and became an opportunity for family and friends to sense God’s presence in their midst.

Male Jews used tefillin (phylacteries) and fringes as daily reminders “to remember all the commandments of the Lord, to do them . . . .” (Numbers 15:39-40). The tefillin and the mezuzah on the doorpost contained texts of Torah that stressed total commitment to the service of God (Deut. 6:4-9, etc.). As in practices of any religion, there may have been a tendency for some people to fall into routine but many in each generation must have profited by the numerous occasions in
which God’s covenant and teachings were presented. Prayers preserved in the deuterocanonical books, the pseudepigrapha and the Qumran Scrolls give eloquent testimony to the vitality of Jewish spirituality during these centuries.23

Offering a blessing to God at the occasion of numerous events in daily life is a practice rooted in the ancient traditions of Israel. Certainly by the early rabbinic period this was a means of reminding the person of God’s presence in every facet of daily life. It became customary as well to recite a blessing before performing any of the 248 positive commandments. This conscious effort to make ordinary, familiar things and occurrences the occasion for experiencing God has been called “normal mysticism”.24 It may be difficult to show how widespread this practice was before the destruction of the Second Temple. However, there are many texts from Qumran (which are dated to this period) that show a profound spirituality that might be designated “mystical”.

We may conclude that the Jews who were attracted to the teaching of Jesus, of the apostles and others in the first decades of Christianity need not have been deprived spiritually. Rather, many of them would have had a personal experience in prayer and liturgy that provided an excellent foundation for appreciating the Christian message. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the variety of their responses to Jesus and Christianity.

III. Aspects of the Biblical Heritage in John

The Christian experience of the divine mystery in human life, as described by John, is mediated by the person and work of Jesus, and his work, consummated in his “hour”. This “hour” is the series of events from the Last Supper, passion and death to the resurrection and sending of the Holy Spirit, considered in their profound unity. A Greek verb rendered “to be lifted up” was used to show that the humiliation of crucifixion is but the negative prelude to the positive exaltation that allows Jesus to release the Spirit upon the world (see 7:39). “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness (Num. 21:9), so must the Son of man be lifted up so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (3:14, see 8:28; 12:31-33). Thus faith, as a divinely-given insight and a human response, is associated intimately with eternal life. John states: “This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (17:3). The Hebrews experienced God’s presence and work in their midst within the covenant framework and especially in the Temple. Because John presents Jesus within the matrix of the Judaism of his
day, it is important to discuss his references to these realities of Jewish life.

a. The Temple
The prologue (Jn. 1:1-18) moves from a reflection on the creation hymn of Genesis (1:1-2:4) to the Word’s presence as light and life among the chosen people (1:9-13). “The Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us, full of grace and truth; we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father” (1:14). In these statements the poet draws heavily on themes from the book of Exodus. He explains the Incarnation of the Word by referring to the tent of meeting constructed in the wilderness to house the ark of the covenant. The phrase “grace and truth (fidelity)”, which may constitute a hendiadys “faithful loving-kindness”, is associated with the covenant and the divine attributes revealed to Moses (Ex. 34:6-7). The title “glory” designates the impressive, illuminating presence of God in the tent of meeting (see Ex. 40:34-40). Thus, John harks back to the Sinai experience of Israel in order to describe the impact of Jesus upon “those who believe in his name” (1:12).

The intimacy of the Word with God (1:1-2) is now understood as a father-son relationship. Taking flesh (human nature), this unique Son has made the Father known in a new way (1:18). A solemn statement develops this theme for the community of those following Jesus. “Amen, amen, I say to you (plural), you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man” (1:51). This text alludes to Jacob’s dream (Gen. 28:12), after which the patriarch recognizes a particular place to be “the house of God (Beth-El), the gate of heaven” (28:17). John teaches that the new place for the ministry of angels is the Son of man, whose task is twofold: to make the Father known and to offer life to all, after making reconciliation through the forgiveness of sin (1:29). “When I am lifted up, I will draw all human beings to myself” (12:32).

The Fourth Gospel frequently uses the Temple as the frame of reference for understanding the mission of Jesus. As “Lamb of God”, he is the victim to be offered (1:29); Jesus declares that his body is the Temple (naos, sanctuary) that he himself will raise up (2:19-22). As good shepherd, Jesus exercises a priestly function on behalf of his flock. “I lay down my life that I may take it up again . . . .“ (10:17-18). On the feast of Hanukkah, commemorating the rededication of the Temple and consecration of a new altar in 164 B.C.E. (1 Maccabees 4:41-51, see Jn. 10:22), Jesus states that the Father consecrated him and sent him into the world (10:36, see 17:19). The sabbath and several great feasts celebrated in the Temple become the
occasion for John to present facets of Jesus’ mission. John situates the
death of Jesus at the time the lambs were offered in the daily sacrifice
for the forgiveness of sin. The paschal lambs were sacrificed at this
time in preparation for the Passover meal. Like them (Ex. 12:46) not
one of his bones would be broken (Jn. 19:36). To understand what
John wishes to teach about Jesus, his signs and teachings as well as his
“hour”, one must know the practices associated with Temple worship,
wherein the majority of Jews of the day found intimacy with God.26

As this outline shows, the Temple is the scene for several sections
of the Fourth Gospel, and allusions are made to its practices
elsewhere. In contrast, the term “covenant” is never used by John
and only in recent years have scholars noticed the importance of this
theme for Johannine theology.

b. The Covenant
In an important study on the mystery of divine Love, André Feuillet
investigates the doctrine of covenant in the Jewish Scriptures; he
remarks that, as lived by prophets and psalmists, it implies mutual
possession and joy full of love that makes one think of the “most
authentic Christian mysticism”. This experience of the covenant
unites harmoniously the desire to possess God and to enjoy his pres-
ence and the desire to serve God by working for the realization of the
divine plan of salvation.27 Because we have access to these ancient
times only through prophets, psalmists and sages, it should be noted
that many must have followed their lead, striving consistently for this
deep communion with God as they grappled with the ambiguities and
temptations of their age. Unlike the tendency of some to escape from
“the world” by seeking an other-worldly salvation in the divine, the
teachers of Israel tried to unite contemplation and action. The call of
Moses and the other prophets to experience intimacy with God is
always completed by a mission to revive fidelity to the covenant and
its commandments among their contemporaries.

Feuillet notes that, in biblical times, relations between God and
people are first communitarian, whereas the Johannine writings are
above all personal. Then he balances this observation by comment-
ing that, among these Jews, piety evolved toward “personalism”—and
John’s personalism does not lose sight of the Church.28 One
presumes that the last clause is intended as an understatement! By
posing two sources for John, Rudolf Bultmann and his disciples have
tried to show that the ecclesial and sacramental themes that pervade
the Fourth Gospel derive from a later stage of the Gospel’s redaction.
However, when one moves away from a search for Hellenistic,
Gnostic and Mandaean parallels (the background of John according
to Bultmann) to a setting for John within the matrix of Palestinian Judaism, it becomes inconceivable to pit the individual against the community. Jews knew that the community provided the authenticating context for interpreting the Scriptures and living the divine mandate to “be holy as I, the Lord your God, am holy” (Lev. 19:2). There were great differences among those aspiring to leadership during the century before the Romans destroyed the Temple; some groups indeed called for a re-commitment to their model of living the covenant (e.g. the Qumran community) but no one is recorded as advocating a hermetic existence. John knew that “salvation is from the Jews” (4:22); from these roots he challenged his listeners (readers) to be born from above (3:3-8) so that they would belong to the family that will “worship the Father in spirit and truth” (4:23). This phrase “spirit and truth” is a hendiadys which points to the Spirit of truth, “the Paraclete whom the Father will send in my name, who will teach you (plural) all things . . . “ (14:25-26), see 16:15). John certainly stresses that each person is called to experience the mystery of divine love in a profound, interior way. He also teaches that this Trinitarian indwelling must lead to a life of obedience to the new commandment, which is social. The challenge “Love one another” in imitation of Jesus’ love and self-giving is followed by another statement. “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (13:34-35; see 15:12). In the “high priestly prayer” of Jesus at the Last Supper the Christian community is called to live in imitation of the unity that is God. Jesus gives the reason for this life of harmony: “so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (17:21).

Feuillet offers a very important insight when he posits that the reciprocal formula of the covenant is the background for the Johannine clauses of mutual exchange between God and the faithful. As we noted, “I will be your God and you shall be my people” is found in the promises of Jeremiah (31:31-34) and Ezekiel (36:22-30), upon which the Qumran and New Testament theology of a new covenant draws. During the Exile, when the Torah was not the basis for the public life of Jews to the extent it had been in the First Temple period, the prophets emphasized its value for developing sensitivity of conscience. Each person was responsible for his or her own lot, based on obedience to the commandments or rejection of their demands (see Ez. 18:1-32). Thus the Torah became the basis for growing maturity of the community and its members in God’s service. A new experience of the spiritual order was described as “putting my Torah within them” (Jer. 31:33) or as a new heart and a new spirit (Ez. 36:26).
Very appropriately, John’s first use of the reciprocal formula occurs in the discourse of Jesus on “the bread of life”. This takes place at Passover time (6:4) when Jesus’ sign of multiplying loaves and fishes evokes memories of the divine gift of manna. This discourse moves from a call for faith that brings intimacy with Jesus (6:35-50) to hints about a meal wherein the sacrificial self-giving of Jesus will be experienced (6:51-58). At that time the disciples and other listeners were ignorant of the way this would be accomplished. The words are shocking: “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him” (6:56). The only other passage where precisely this reciprocal formula occurs is in the context of the allegory of the vine and the branches (probably evoked by the “blessing for the fruit of the vine” in the Jewish meal). “Remain in me and I in you. As a branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it remains in the vine, neither can you, unless you remain in me...” (15:4-10).  

The Greek word “and” in John 15:4 should be understood as making a comparison: “Remain in me as I in you”. The priority of Jesus’ presence in the disciples is thus emphasized; he makes their presence in him possible. As in the Jewish Scriptures, the Gospel postulates that a moral response must flow from this covenant bond.  

The fruit of good works will redound to the Father’s glory (15:8). The Father’s love is the pattern for Jesus’ love of his disciples and their response must be modelled on the obedient love of Jesus. “If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and remain in his love” (15:10). The parallel between Jesus’ intimacy with the Father and the call for the Christian community to initiate this dynamic life of love within the mystery of divine unity is possible because “they are in us” (17:21). Jesus explained to Jude: “If someone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home in him” (14:23).  

Because of the similar vocabulary, McCaffrey links John 14:2-3 and 23; this verse, “in my Father’s house are many rooms... I go to prepare a place for you” (14:2), is a promise of the disciples’ unity with Jesus in the Father. “The activity of Jesus in Jn. 14:2-3 is directed solely to the disciples as a group, or to the community which they represent... In Jn. 14:23, however, Jesus will come with the Father to make his dwelling (monē) in every believer. As believers have dwelling-places (monai) with the Father in union with Jesus in Jn. 14:2-3, so Jesus and the Father have an abiding-place (monē) in every believer in Jn. 14:23. The plural form monai of Jn 14:2-3 emphasizes the individuality of the places which all believers have with Jesus in the Father. Inversely, the singular of Jn. 14:23 emphasizes the
dwellings-place of the Father with Jesus in each disciple individually. In Jn. 14:2-3 the Father becomes the spiritual area where the whole community of believers dwells individually in union with Jesus; in Jn. 14:23 each individual believer becomes the spiritual area where the Father dwells in union with Jesus.”

Because the immediate context (14:18-20 and 25-26) has the second person plural, it is presumed that McCaffrey uses the term “individual” without a nuance of separateness from the community. The response to the mystery of divine love must indeed be personal and focused on the Father giving his only Son (3:16), yet this life with God is experienced in communion with others, now as well as in the fullness of eternal life. John uses this term “eternal life” to describe both the indwelling of God in the faithful (14:23) and for its eschatological fulfillment precisely because the psalmists and prophets had grasped that the deepest meaning of “life” is communion with the living God. Perhaps the Hebrews remained vague about the human situation after physical death because their neighbors had contaminated their natural human hope with idolatrous practices. However, from the second century B.C.E. the predecessors of the Pharisees and Essenes (with whom the Qumran Scrolls are associated by most scholars) proclaimed resurrection of the body and/or immortality.

c. The Commandments

In a careful examination of the Johannine teaching concerning Torah (the Greek translation nomos means “Law”), Severino Pancaro shows that “keep my word (words)” in John 14:23 relates directly to faith, whereas “keep my commandments” refers to love and its obligations. “When Jesus asks his disciples to keep his word, he is asking them not to abandon the ‘truth’ they have accepted, but to cling to it and allow it to permeate and transform their lives; when he asks them to keep his entolai (commandments), he is referring to his entolē of brotherly love and asks them to allow the love he has made possible to radiate in all their actions . . . . Faith and love cannot be separated.”

As divine gift and human response, faith is the foundation for Trinitarian indwelling in the community of Jesus’ followers.

The Jewish understanding of morality is based on imitation of God, expressed as a commandment (Lev. 19:2) and presented in narrative as the ideal (Ex. 34:6-7). Because the God of Israel is known only after the revelation associated with the covenant, the divine mystery must be approached in the Torah and other parts of the Bible. The commandments in the Torah of Moses provide the practical norms whereby people structure their lives and teach their children. Thus people know where to go in serving God (halakhah). The other part of
God’s instruction is the record of divine dealings with the patriarchs and matriarchs and subsequent generations of Israelites. This narration (haggadah) presents insights that assist listeners to imitate God’s righteousness and love.

The New Testament writers follow this pattern of offering practical principles for responding to the challenges of life and, by focusing on the person, deeds and teachings of Jesus, they present the ideal for imitating God. Thus, the Fourth Gospel shows how Jesus fulfills the Father’s commandment (10:18; 12:49-50; 14:30-31; 15:10) and then, in the Last Supper discourses, he challenges his disciples (13:34-35; 14:15, 21; 15:10, 12, 14, 17).

The universality of divine love is shown in the declaration that “God sent his Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him” (3:17). This deliverance from evil is a gift that must be accepted freely; the response of faith brings each person into the light, “that it may be seen clearly that his deeds have been done in God” (3:21). Born from above of water and the Spirit (3:5), each believer requires spiritual nourishment through the living bread (6:48-50), shared in the sacrificial banquet of the new covenant. The sacrificial self-giving of Jesus brings the community to understand the meaning of his statement “the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh” (6:51). Although a new commandment might be given without allusion to covenant, this would seem unlikely for those steeped in the Jewish way of life. The servant’s task of washing a guest’s feet before a meal was performed by Jesus (13:1-20) and the meal was underway when Jesus proclaimed: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, so you should love one another” (13:34).36 The many acts whereby Jesus served others must be consummated on the cross before the gift of the Spirit can come upon the community of Jesus’ followers (see 7:37-39). Then they will be enabled to imitate the pattern of the Master’s love in their lives.37 The death of Jesus manifests the extent of the Father’s love for the world (3:16) and the total response made by Jesus to the divine will (4:34; 6:38, etc.) for love of humanity (12:32-33). The narration of Jesus’ ministry and passion provides insights for the community of believers concerning the manner in which mutual love must be practiced. The reciprocation of loving service with the covenant community should have a unique quality, complementing the outgoing love demanded by the Torah (Lev. 19:18) and the early Christian tradition of Jesus’ teaching concerning enemies. John’s silence concerning love of enemies could not be attributed to ignorance (see Ex. 23:4-5) and one may presume that his community knew at least
some aspects of Jesus's teaching on this topic. It was impossible to record everything that Jesus did or taught (21:25). The exhausting demands of the Gospel as Christians face the world at large cannot be faced alone; each person should be assured of the replenishment of spiritual energies from within the community of faith, first through the sacraments and prayer and secondly through experiencing and sharing love that strives to imitate Christ's self-giving. Although the ideal of mutual love should be part of married and family life for all peoples, its consistent achievement requires the presence and gifts of the Holy Spirit. The Christian tradition sees Jesus' gift of the Spirit to be fulfillment of Ezekiel's oracle: "I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances" (Ez. 36:26-27, see Jn. 14:25-26; 16:12-15; Romans 8:2). Strength to keep the commandments comes from the Spirit.38

d. The New Covenant
Both Jeremiah (31:34) and Ezekiel (36:25) proclaim that God's new bestowal of life will be accompanied by the forgiveness of sin. To be capable of responding to the Torah and its commandments from interior, personal conviction the burden of the believer's previous sins must be removed. John teaches that this is accomplished by Jesus (1:29) and is experienced through the ministry of those imbued with the Holy Spirit (20:22-23)39 The tremendous responsibility of those called to continue Christ's ministry of forgiveness is clear from the authority he bestowed on them. "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (20:23). The community ministers to its members at times when reconciliation is needed.

Jeremiah's promise of the new covenant, with the Torah written upon the hearts of the people, emphasizes the direct manner in which God's word will be communicated to each person. "No longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each one his brother, saying: 'know the Lord'. For they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord" (31:34). According to the Hebrew tradition this knowledge is a personal experience of intimacy with God, so profound that the marriage relationship is its best analogue in the human order.

This may be one of the texts to which reference is made in John's Gospel: "It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall be taught by God'" (Jn. 6:45). The Johannine allegory of the good shepherd, which draws heavily upon motifs in Jeremiah and Ezekiel, explains that the shepherd know the voice of their shepherd, who calls each by name (10:3), and they follow him in trust. "The good shepherd lays
down his life for the sheep” (10:11). After the second declaration “I am the good shepherd,” Jesus introduced the reciprocal nature of the bond with his followers. “I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father” (10:14-15). The personal intimacy of this relationship is indicated in the post-resurrection scene when Mary Magdalene recognized Jesus only after he called her by name (20:16). The covenant and the knowledge of the Lord that it offers is understood to be patterned after the very manner in which the Father and Son know each other. Thus does the Son reveal the Father (1:18), enabling those who believe in his name to become children of God (1:12); they have eternal life, which is the gift of lasting communion with God. Just as the Son, dwelling in the bosom of the Father, reveals him, so too does the typical Christian manifest Christ to the world. Perhaps this is one of the reasons for the anonymity of the Beloved Disciple. He exemplifies the person whose union with the Master in the meal is the basis for communicating the divine message of forgiveness and reciprocal love (see 13:23).

Long after the tribes of the Northern Kingdom had been deported and lost, Jeremiah expressed the hope that the new covenant would be with the house of Israel and the house of Judah (31:31). Other prophets explicitly taught that foreigners would be integrated into God’s people (e.g. Isaiah 56:3-7; Zechariah 2:15; 8:22-23; 14:16-21). Like the Qumran community, the disciples of Jesus recognized that the twelve tribes were represented symbolically by their leaders (see Matthew 19:28; Luke 22:29-30). Although this symbolism is clear in the Johannine Apocalypse (7:1-10; 21:10-14), the Fourth Gospel does not seem to play with it. However, both the ingathering of God’s people and the inclusion of Samaritans and Gentiles in the new covenant can be traced from the prologue (1:1-18) to the commission of Peter to nurture sheep and lambs in Christ’s name (21:15-17). Fields are ripe for the harvest (4:35-37), sheep beyond the fold must hear the Good Shepherd’s voice (10:16) and the dispersed children of God will be gathered into one (11:51-52). This is clearly another aspect of the Johannine teaching of unity, important because it shows the outgoing nature of Christian spiritual and moral life. Whereas others might seek profound communion with God to be different from the common lot of humanity, John presents Jesus as one who reveals God’s gifts to all. The vocation of Abraham and the prophetic vision for the future might be interpreted differently by others but John’s insistence on the witness of a believing community has a special value. Oral presentation of a believer’s faith must be accompanied by a life of mutual love within the context of a shared experi-
ence. “By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples” (15:8). Thus is enthusiasm to preach about the ideal balanced by an insistence that discipleship is a life-long process and the new commandment an ongoing challenge.

Conclusion

John’s message about union with God, prayer and their implications for the Christian life contain riches that require further exploration. Two important points can be made from this study: 1.) The same spiritual blessings are open to all, mediated through the paschal mystery of Jesus. 2.) They are explained in terms of typically Jewish institutions and symbols. Whether or not we apply the term “mystical” to the Christian experience described by John, we maintain that he offers a profound and comprehensive teaching, one capable of offsetting elitist tendencies that may plague various other systems of spirituality. While John has a universality that touches a common chord with Buddhist and other ways of pursuing perfection, the roots of his message are in the biblical heritage. This strongly suggests that John can be appreciated most fully when seen in the light of this background. Moreover, a deep sense of continuity can be noted as one investigates the Jewish use of the ancient biblical traditions and then moves to the spiritual message of the Fourth Gospel.
Notes


11 Ermanno Ancilli and Maurizio Paparozzi (ed.), *La Mistica: Fenomenologia e riflessione teologica* (Rome: Citta Nuova Editrice, 1984), two volumes.


15. The relation between faith and love as commandments is clear in the great prayer of Jews taken from Deuteronomy 6:4-5. “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” The call to exclusive faith in the God of Israel is followed by a comprehensive commitment to his service. See Kurt Hruby “The proclamation of the unity of God as actualization of the Kingdom”, *Standing Before God* (ed. A. Finkel and L. Frizzell. New York: Ktav, 1981) p. 183-193.

16. See my article “Law at the service of humankind”, *SIDIC* (Rome) 19 (n. 3 - 1986) p. 4-7.


18. Originally this would be understood, not as stressing a metaphysical reality, but as an assurance of God’s presence with his people. See Pamela Vermees, “Buber’s understanding of the divine Name related to Bible, Targum and Midrash”, *Journal of Jewish Studies* 24 (1973) p. 147-166.


28 Ibid. p. 100.


30 See Malatesta, op. cit. for a complete study of the biblical theme of “interiority”.

31 Besides Feuillet and Malatesta’s works, the theme “to remain” is studied by David Mealand, “The language of mystical union in the Johannine Writings”, Downside Review 95 (1977) p. 19-34. He cites Lev. 26:12 as background for John’s reciprocal phrase but does not note that it is a covenant formula.

32 This paragraph draws on Feuillet, op. cit. p. 101.


34 McCaffrey, op. cit. p. 165.


39 On this theme, see Martin Hasitschka, Befreiung Von Stünde nach dem Johannesevangelium: eine bibeltheologische Untersuchung. (Innsbruck: Tyrolia Verlag, 1989).