

The Work of Incarnation – Jesus as Light and Life

I. Introduction

1. The promise of the messianic kingdom was the promise of the recovery of sacred space: *Yahweh's return to redeem and regather exiled Israel and again dwell in their midst as their covenant Lord and Father with the covenanted son of David ruling on His behalf.*
2. Abraham's descendents had waited for more than five centuries for Yahweh to arise and accomplish this work, and now He had done so in Jesus of Nazareth, but in a most unexpected way: *All of Yahweh's promises of return, redemption, renewal, ingathering and kingdom had converged on Him, with incarnation being the very essence of their fulfillment and the basis for their full fruition.*
3. The incarnation is closely associated with the *sanctuary* theme, but the gospel writers also describe and interpret it in terms of other images and themes, including *light and life.*

II. The Work of Incarnation

A. Jesus as the True Light

1. This theme is central in John's gospel in particular, and comes to the forefront at the outset in his prologue (1:1-18). From that introduction, John referred to it repeatedly throughout his account. * 3:1-21, 5:33-36, 8:12, 9:1-5 with 9:35-41, 11:1-10, 12:20-46
2. Considered as a whole, John's use of light imagery provides important insight into the incarnation and its role in God's designs.
 - a. First, light is a metaphor for God Himself, *but particularly as He exists in relation to His creation* (cf. Ps. 4:6, 104:2). John stated that God *is* light, but as a way of expressing His absolute integrity and truthfulness. He is truly and fully who He presents Himself to be, so that there is no darkness – no obscurity, deception or falseness – in Him (1 John 1:5).
 - b. Light illumines and discloses, and so the God who is light discloses Himself to His creation – and most especially to His human image-children – in complete accord with who He is. This is the sense in which God's words and actions are synonymous with His person; to discern God's words and acts is to discern Him in truth. *In terms of the imagery of light, God's words and deeds give light to men as conveying to them the God who is light.* * cf. Psalm 18:28, 36:7-9, 43:3-4, 89:14-15; Isaiah 51:1-5; Micah 7:7-9
 - c. This truth underlies John's understanding of incarnation. If God's word (expressed truth) is synonymous with who He is, then the "word become flesh" is God's absolute self-disclosure; *incarnation is the full and final articulation of the living God and the truth as it is in Him.* Thus John declared that Jesus is the *true light* that has come into the world.
 - d. And as the incarnate logos, Jesus is God's *fully enacted word*. He is God's disclosed truth acted out in time and space such that it assumed actual, realized existence (ref. John 14:6, 18:37). And crucially, this enacted word is enacted *human* word, both in its substance and its object. Jesus is God's word manifest in human existence, but as "spoken" to human beings for their sake, and so ultimately for the sake of the whole creation.

“In Christ, what God communicates to man is not something, but his very self. This is distinct from all other acts of God. This is God’s unique act, his reality-in-the-act, and apart from this act there is no God at all. In the act of creation, God does not communicate himself, but creates a reality wholly distinct from himself, but here in Jesus Christ, God acts in such a way that he is himself in his act, and what he acts he is, and what he is he acts... Jesus Christ as act of God in humanity is identical with God’s own person. Christ Jesus is identical in his human existence and life with the self-giving of God to and for men and women, and so in Jesus it is with the operation of God himself for our salvation that we have to do. Thus we must think of the person of Christ and the work of Christ as completely one, so that he is in himself what he reveals of the Father, and he is in himself what he does all through his life and on the cross in reconciliation. It is only because Jesus is that in himself, and lives it out in himself, that he reveals the Father and reconciles the world.” (Torrance, Incarnation)

3. But as stressed previously, incarnation specifically involves the God of Israel taking up Israel’s existence in Himself in order that Israel should become Israel in truth (cf. Isa. 40:1-11 with Luke 3). And Yahweh’s goal in reconstituting Israel in Himself was that Israel should fulfill its servant vocation on behalf of mankind with a view to the creation’s renewal.
 - a. The God who is light embodied Israel as true son, disciple, servant and witness that Israel should become the *light of the nations* and so fulfill their election as Abraham’s offspring. * ref. Isa. 42:1-6, 49:1-6, 51:1-6, 59:1-60:3; cf. also Luke 2:25-32; John 8:12
 - b. Israel’s restoration would see them become Yahweh’s light into the world, but as He had Himself first returned to Zion to shine upon her and deliver her from the darkness of alienation and exile. Isaiah spoke in this way, but so did others among Israel’s prophets. * ref. Isa. 9:1-7, 58:8-11; Micah 7:7-9; Zech. 14:1-10; cf. Luke 1:76-79; Matt. 4:12-17
4. All of these considerations highlight the fundamental *relational* dynamic in the Scripture’s use of light imagery. Light dispels darkness and illumines, but for the sake of intimacy.
 - a. The introduction of light was the beginning of God’s creative process. The Genesis account introduces the Spirit as “brooding” over the deep in the context of the dark and empty chaos of the newly established earth. Thus light was the first point of remedying the earth’s primeval state (disordered and empty), and the Creator-Spirit accomplished this work, not as a distant and detached power, but as *intimately present* in the world.
 - b. Light comes to the forefront again in the Egyptian redemption and exodus episode. Yahweh’s light embraced Israel while He plagued the rest of the land of Egypt with paralyzing darkness (Exod. 10:21-23). And when He had crushed Egypt and its gods, Yahweh led His covenant children toward His sanctuary land with the light of His presence in a pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night (Exod. 13:17-22).
 - c. And having directed Israel to build Him a sanctuary, Yahweh took up His place in their midst in the form of His *shekinah* – His radiant glory-presence – in the Holy of Holies. And on the other side of the curtain, the perpetual light of the *lampstand* testified of the endless day – the complete absence of darkness – that defines the realm of Yahweh’s habitation. * ref. Exod. 25:31-37, 27:20-21, 40:33-38; cf. also Rev. 21:22-27
 - d. Eventually, Israel’s infidelity led Yahweh to depart from His sanctuary and then destroy every facet of the Israelite kingdom, including His own dwelling place (Ezek. 10-11).

The Jews later rebuilt the Jerusalem temple, but without the Lord's return; *the next five centuries would find Israel dwelling in the darkness of exile and subjugation and waiting for Yahweh's light to again dawn upon them.* * Hag. 2:1-9; Mal. 3:1-4; cf. also Zech. 4

- e. The Lord had promised that this day would come, but it came in a way that Israel could never have imagined. Yahweh returned to Zion by *incarnation*, so that the light of His presence was in a human being. In John's words, this was God's true light in the world that illumines all people, so that everyone who beholds this light and embraces it becomes himself a "son of light." * John 1:4-13, 3:14-21, 8:12, 11:5-10, 12:23-36
- f. Jesus was God's light in the world, which itself spoke to His identity as embodying Israel and fulfilling their calling to be the light of the nations. He was Israel unto Israel, and thus the focus of Jesus' exhortations: *returning to Yahweh in reconciliation and renewal involved becoming Israel in truth by following Him.* * ref. the Sermon on the Mount

B. Jesus as the True Life

1. Jesus and the New Testament writers closely associated Him with the themes of light and life, and these two themes are themselves closely related. Both were introduced in the creation event, with light being the first and foundational manifestation of God's work of ordering and filling. Light, in turn, enabled the introduction of life. The Genesis account indicates this relation, and the earth's living systems explicitly demonstrate it.
2. That same relationship between light and life is present in the rest of the preparatory salvation history. In particular, light is associated with God's presence and provision, while darkness – the absence of light – is a symbol for death, desolation and chaos as they reflect God's relational distance, whether in judgment or actual withdrawal.
3. Darkness, desolation and death emblemized Israel's alienation and exile, so that God's promise of deliverance and reconciliation was the promise of light and life returning to His people. * cf. Isa. 8:16-9:3, 42:1-16, 43:1-21, 49:1-10, 59:1-60:3; Ezek. 37; Dan. 12:1-3
4. The gospels take up this theme as they announce Yahweh's return and restorative work in His messianic son. But, whereas Israel tended to view this renewed life in terms of *national* renewal, God's intent was *human* renewal at the essential level: When He brought life out of death to Israel, it would see His people become true image-children. The Messiah would deliver them from desolation and death, not by liberating them from Gentile powers, but from the enslaving and destroying power of sin. This redemption would transcend earthly circumstances, so much so that it would not address or alter them. Israel's Messiah had come to defeat the dark, enslaving powers that empowered Rome and all human enmity, and He would do so by letting them do their worst; *through death, He would become the Lord of life.*
5. The life that Jesus came to bring, then, is life as it inheres in God Himself – the life that He intended for His image-children by taking them up in His own life through the enlivening power of His Spirit. *Thus the Spirit who ordered and filled the earth with light and life did so with a view to His ultimate creative work, namely bringing forth God's new creation that has its substance and fullness in the glorified Image-Son – the Man of the Spirit* (cf. Isa. 11:1-11, 42:1-7, 61:1-11; 2 Cor. 3:1-18, 4:6) *in whom is the light of life* (John 1:4, 8:12), *even as He is the manifest fullness of the God who Himself is light and life.* * cf. Ezek. 36:16-29, 37:1-14; Joel 2:21-32; Micah 4:1-7 with John 1:4, 4:1-14, 5:1-40, 6:22-63, 11:1-27, 12:20-25, 14:6