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Fullfilment and Replacement in the Gospel of John
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Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus reveals that He is fulfilling, supplanting, and replacing the Old Covenant with the New Covenant. This can be seen when Jesus supplants and replaces the Old Covenant institutions, festivals, and law. The replacement motif begins in the Prologue, and continues through the wedding at Cana, and the pericopes that focus on the Festival of the Tabernacles, the Feast of the Dedication, and the Passover. Jesus fulfills what is anticipated in those celebrations and replaces the purification rituals, the Old Covenant law, the temple, and the Passover lamb with Himself. This fulfillment and supplanting theme can also be seen in His expansion of the Chosen People of God to include not just Jews but also Gentiles.

The Wedding at Cana: Replacement of Jewish Rituals

First, Jesus replaced the Jewish purification rituals (John 2:1–11) at the wedding feast at Cana, by turning the water in the purification vessels into wine. Here, the jars “represent [the old] Jewish rituals”, and Jesus’s miracle “signals the beginning of a new order”. By changing the water that was held in the Jewish purification vessels into wine, Jesus showed that He was bringing purification and reconciliation with God to a new higher, deeper level. Here, Jesus is enacting “the replacement of a good thing by a better.” Although water temporarily quenches

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one’s thirst and enables one to carry out life’s necessary functions, wine can facilitate communion and deeper relationships, and is a symbol for joy.\textsuperscript{6} Similarly, the old Jewish purification rites could indeed bring one closer to God, but they pale in comparison to the communion and unity with God and our fellow man that is made possible through the New Covenant, especially through the sacraments of Baptism, Reconciliation, and the Eucharist.

**Wedding at Cana: Replacement of the Old Covenant**

The story of the wedding at Cana also contains echoes of the Old Covenant, and hence alludes to the replacement of the Old Covenant through the establishment of the New Covenant in Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{7} The first of the echoes of the Old Covenant is contained within the first line of the pericope with the statement that the wedding occurred “On the third day” (John 2:1). This suggests a connection to Moses receiving the law at Mount Sinai, where “on the third day” God “came down upon Mount Sinai” and Moses received the Torah (Exod 19–20; Deut 4–5), which was commemorated in the Jewish tradition with the Feast of Pentecost.\textsuperscript{8} Just as God came down to Mount Sinai and revealed to Moses the law, likewise God the Son (Jesus Christ) came down to earth to reveal God to mankind and establish a New Covenant.

In the Old Testament, “the covenant relationship between God and Israel” was likened to a marriage.\textsuperscript{9} In this pericope the Blessed Virgin Mary is unnamed and is instead referred to as

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\textsuperscript{7} Martin & Wright, *The Gospel*, 54–61.

\textsuperscript{8} Martin & Wright, *The Gospel*, 54–55.

\textsuperscript{9} Martin & Wright, *The Gospel*, 56.
“the mother of Jesus”, thus indicating that she is also fulfilling a symbolic role. In the Old Testament, the Chosen People were “often personified . . . as a feminine figure.” At the wedding at Cana the mother of Jesus personifies the “people of God.” At the wedding at Cana, Jesus addresses his mother as “woman”, which “reestablishes the relationship between” Jesus and His mother, indicating that the basis of the relationship is now discipleship. The mother of Jesus responds by telling the servants “do whatever he tells you” (John 2:5), thereby showing her consent and obedience. It is significant that all of this all takes place in the context of a wedding, a wedding at which Jesus Himself is providing the wine. Jesus Christ is the bridegroom, and the Church (represented by His mother) is the bride, replacing the Old Covenant between Israel and God with the New Covenant.

**Jesus as the New Temple**

Next, Jesus shows that He is also fulfilling, supplanting, and replacing the Jewish temple (John 2:13–25). Jesus not only cleanses the temple (e.g., driving out the money-changers), but also stated “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19), meaning the new temple, that is, His Body (John 2:21). The Gospel writer makes it clear that Jesus is replacing the temple with Himself when he follows up with the explanation: “The Jews then said, ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?’ But he spoke of the temple of his body” (John 2:20–21). Under the Old Covenant, the temple was the special

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place of God’s presence on earth, but here it is being made clear that the new, full presence of God on earth is Jesus Christ, fully God and fully man. The disruption and cleansing of the temple signified the transposition of the old sacrificial worship system with the new form of worship in the New Covenant. Previously the temple had been the center of divine worship, but in referring to “his body as the temple, Jesus establishes himself as the center of divine worship.” John returns to this theme in the pericope of the woman at the well, where Jesus tells the woman “believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. . . . But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:21–24). Here, Jesus is announcing the new form of worship in the New Covenant that will replace the temple worship of the Old Covenant.

This replacement of the temple was even alluded to earlier in the Gospel in the prologue in verses 14–18, especially with the statement “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). This statement highlights how God the Son took to himself a human nature (“And the Word became flesh”), and then identifies the incarnate Word as the new temple through the phrase “and dwelt among us” – words that “evoke[] the language used to designate God’s ‘dwelling’ among his people in the Old Testament”, that is, God dwelling in the Tabernacle in

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the wilderness, and then later dwelling in the Temple in Jerusalem.\(^{21}\)

Allusions of Jesus replacing the temple with Himself can also be found in the passages about Jesus at the Feast of the Tabernacles and His hour. At the Feast of the Tabernacles, Jesus proclaimed that He will give the gift of living water (John 7:38), which could evoke His replacement of the temple because it hearkens back to the vision in Ezekiel, “Then he brought me back to the door of the temple; and behold, water was issuing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east” (Ez 47:1).\(^{22}\) After Jesus had been crucified and died on the cross, “one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water” (John 19:34). Just as with Jesus’s proclamation at the Feast of the Tabernacles, water coming out of Jesus’s side also relates back to the vision of the temple in Ezekiel.\(^{23}\) In addition to the passage from Ezekiel, two other Old Testament passages, Zechariah (12:10) and Joel (4:18), also can be read as indicating that “life-giving waters of mercy and regeneration [would flow] from God’s temple on the day of salvation”.\(^{24}\) Jesus Christ fulfills those prophecies, as the new temple from which flows the life-giving Spirit of God, as indicated by the water flowing from His side on the cross.\(^{25}\) In particular, the water flowing from His side directly “alludes to baptism.”\(^{26}\)

**Jesus as the new Bread of Life**

During the multiplication of the loaves and the bread of life discourse (John 6), Jesus is

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fulfilling and supplanting the manna that was given to the Israelites’ ancestors with Himself. The crowd said to Jesus “Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat’ ” (John 6:31). Jesus replied, “it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. . . . I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst.” (John 6:32–35). By signaling that He is the new bread of life that will satisfy their hunger and thirst, Jesus is signaling that He is supplanting the Old Covenant, and more specifically that He is supplanting the law of the Old Covenant. This is because the law of the Old Covenant had been traditionally “likened to food and drink”,27 especially in relation to studying the Torah28 and “tak[ing] it in,” “learn[ing] from it and allow[ing] it to transform one’s life.”29

**Festival of Tabernacles**

Jesus also replaced the Jerusalem Festival of Tabernacles (also known as the Festival of Booths).30 At this festival the Israelites commemorated their ancestors’ time in the desert, celebrated the fall harvest, and prayed for rain.31 The festival featured “ceremonies involving water and light”, which are themes Jesus employs when He shows that He is replacing this joyous autumn festival. The liturgy of this eight-day festival32 included a “daily procession”33 on the first seven days,34 where water from the pool of Siloam was brought to the temple, and then

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27 Martin & Wright, *The Gospel*, 120.
“pour[ed] . . . out as a libation – a sacrificial offering – and a symbolic prayer for rain.”35 Jesus went to the festival (John 7:2–11), and “on the last and greatest day of the feast” (John 7:37), announced that He will give the gift of living water, and that living water is the Holy Spirit:36 “Jesus stood up and proclaimed, ‘If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.’ ’ ”

Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive” (John 7:37–39). By choosing to make this statement at this festival on its greatest day, Jesus is showing that the liturgy of the water at the festival was a foreshadowing and “an anticipation” of His life-giving gift of the Spirit.37

Another aspect of the Festival of Tabernacles were the giant festal torches that were set up in the Temple precinct.38 More specifically, those lampstands were likely “located in the Court of the Women,” where “boxes for financial donations” were also located.39 The lampstands were used to provide light for the nighttime celebrations.40 Shortly after the Festival of Tabernacles (perhaps the next day?), Jesus explained “‘I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.’ . . . These words he spoke in the treasury, as he taught in the temple” (John 8:12–20). Through this statement and His choice to make this statement in the area where the lampstands were located, Jesus is “claiming that he,
and not the festal torch, is the real light of the world.”

For many first century Jews, light symbolized “the wisdom of God” which “was localized in the Law of Moses.” By identifying Himself as the light of the world, Jesus is identifying Himself as the fullness of the Wisdom of God, the new law. The old law pointed towards God, but only in a partial way that foreshadowed the New Covenant. Jesus Christ fully reveals and illuminates the path to God the Father, thus fulfilling and supplanting the Old Covenant (with the Old Covenant being here represented by the Festival of Tabernacles, and in particular the festal torches). Likewise, the Jewish people prayed for physical rain at the Festival of Tabernacles, and Jesus fulfills and replaces the festival through His gift of “living water” (John 7:38) that spiritually satisfies and provides eternal life: “whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14).

Feast of the Dedication

The Feast of the Dedication (also known as Hanukkah) commemorated and “celebrated the dedication of an altar and the reconsecration of the Temple” after the Maccabean revolt successfully ended the suppression of the Jewish religious practices and the desecration of the

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Temple by the Syrian ruler Antiochus IV. During the feast, Jesus stated “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). His audience responded by preparing to stone Him for blasphemy, and Jesus then explained, “do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, ‘You are blaspheming,’ because I said, ‘I am the Son of God’? If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father” (John 10:31–38). Here, Jesus is identifying Himself as divine and equal to God. Furthermore, Jesus is also “replac[ing] the theme of the feast.” The “dedication and consecration” of the Temple is the central theme of the feast, and the Old Testament phrase for the “consecration of the Temple” is here used to refer to Jesus Himself (i.e., “do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, ‘You are blaspheming,’ because I said, ‘I am the Son of God’ ”). It is Jesus whom we should now be celebrating, since Jesus is the new and perfect consecrated temple, divine and equal to God, in whom and through whom we can commune with God.

**Passover**

Jesus also replaces the Passover feast with Himself. Jesus is the new and definitive “Passover lamb of the new exodus.” The identification of Jesus as the new Passover lamb began early in the Gospel with John the Baptist’s announcement” “Behold, the Lamb of God,
who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Later in the Gospel, the sacrifice of Jesus offering Himself for the sins of the world occurs at the same time as the Passover lambs were being sacrificially killed by the Jewish priests in the temple. At “about the sixth hour” on “the day of Preparation of the Passover” (which is the time and day when the temple priests would have began sacrificing the Passover lambs), Pilate brought out a beaten and scourged Jesus to the Jewish crowd (John 19:1–15). The crowd (which included Jewish priests), called out “crucify him!”, and “then [Pilate] handed him over to them to be crucified.” (John 19:6, 15–16).

Also during His hour is mentioned hyssop, which points back to the original Passover. In the Old Testament, at the beginning of the exodus during the original Passover, the Jews were to “take a bunch of hyssop” and use it to brush the blood of the Passover lamb onto “the lintel and the two doorposts” (i.e., their “door frames”) to save their firstborns from death (Ex. 12:22). Hyssop was also used in other Jewish liturgical rites to cleanse “people and their homes”. On the cross, “Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the scripture), ‘I thirst.’ A bowl full of vinegar stood there; so they put a sponge full of the vinegar on hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the vinegar, he said, ‘It is finished’; and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit” (John 19:28–30). Since “hyssop is a small, branchy plant,

60 Martin & Wright, *The Gospel*, 324.
which could not bear the weight of a soaked sponge”,⁶² here John is trying to convey “a spiritual meaning” in referring to the hyssop.⁶³ God’s firstborn, Jesus Christ, is the new Passover lamb who dies in order to save us from sin and death.⁶⁴ The blood of the Passover lamb was placed on the doorframe to save them from the Lord coming into their houses and taking the life of their firstborns; but here God’s firstborn is sacrificed and His blood is shed, and it is through Christ, the ultimate doorframe, that we enter into communion with God and find everlasting life.⁶⁵ Just as the hyssop was dipped into the saving blood of the original Passover lambs and then placed on the doorframe that led to safety (and, in a temporary sense, salvation); at the cross the hyssop was dipped into wine and identified with Christ (through Christ drinking the wine from the sponge on the hyssop), thereby representing the Eucharist (i.e., wine plus Christ), and we enter into safety and salvation through Christ in the Eucharist.⁶⁶ In a sense, the hyssop with the sponge was identifying the Eucharist as the saving blood of the Passover lamb, and marking the entrance to salvation as Jesus Christ.

Jesus is further identified as the new Passover lamb by the fact that His legs were not broken on the cross (because He was already dead).⁶⁷ John notes that “since it was the day of Preparation . . . the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away” (John 19:31). However, “when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs” (John 19:33). John remarks that “these things took place that

⁶² Martin & Wright, The Gospel, 324.
⁶³ Martin & Wright, The Gospel, 324.
the scripture might be fulfilled, ‘Not a bone of him shall be broken’ ” (John 19:36). Here John appears to be referring to the proscription against breaking any of the bones of the Passover lamb (Ex 12:10, 46 and Num 9:12), and thereby identifies Jesus as the new definitive Passover lamb.\(^{68}\)

Jesus also fulfills and replaces the old exodus with the new exodus. In the exodus of the Old Testament, the Israelites were freed from bondage and led away from their Egyptian oppressors and eventually into the Promised Land. Jesus fulfills the Old Testament prophecies of “a new exodus.”\(^{69}\) In the new exodus, Jesus Christ, through His life, death, and resurrection, saves us from the bondage of sin and death\(^{70}\) and leads us into the ‘promised land,’ that is, heaven and full communion with God.\(^{71}\)

**The New Covenant Fulfilling and Supplanting the Old Covenant**

From the very beginning of the Gospel of John (John 1:14–18), Jesus is presented “as the eschatological fulfillment of the Sinai covenant.”\(^{72}\) Not only is Jesus presented as fulfilling the Old Covenant, He is presented as “qualitatively surpassing it.”\(^{73}\) Jesus replaces the Old Covenant with Himself,\(^{74}\) and this can be seen in the replacement of the Jewish purification rituals at the wedding at Cana, the symbolism of the Old Covenant that is found within the pericope on the wedding at Cana, the theme of Jesus replacing the temple that is found throughout the Gospel, and the portrayal of Jesus as the new Bread of Life. In addition, the

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\(^{73}\) Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory*, 50.
replacement of the Old Covenant can be seen in the pericope on the Festival of Tabernacles, where Jesus identified Himself as the source of living water and the light of the world, thereby fulfilling what had been anticipated by the festival. Likewise, in the pericope on the Feast of the Dedication, Jesus replaces the feast because God the Father has consecrated Him, and therefore Jesus is now the new locus of worship. The foregoing shows that the theme of replacement can be found throughout the Gospel of John; however, the replacement motif is perhaps most poignantly depicted in the presentation of Jesus as the new and definitive Passover lamb.

**Good Replaced by Better**

Scholars stress that the Old Covenant was not bad, and in fact it was good; however, Jesus Christ fulfills and supplants it with something demonstrably better and deeper, that is, the New Covenant. Francis Martin and William Wright wrote that “the relationship between the Torah and Jesus is not to be understood as bad followed by good, but as good followed by better.”

“Jesus’ teaching was consistent with the law”, but at the same time we should recognize that the old law “bears witness to him” and that Jesus “displaces the law” with Himself. Jesus did not “reject” the Old Covenant, but rather fulfilled it. Richard Bauckham explained that when Jesus turned the water into wine at the wedding at Cana, the remark by the steward that “you have kept the good wine until now” (John 2:10) meant that the New Covenant was better than the Old Covenant. At the same time, the remark is not meant to be read as “a negative verdict on ‘Judaism’ or the Mosaic dispensation of God’s provision for his people”, but

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rather that the fulfillment of the Old Covenant with the better New Covenant was the fulfillment of the expectations “about the messianic age” that the Jews themselves held, in that “its blessings will surpass all the blessings of Israel’s history.” Martin and Wright even noted that “the water of the Sinai covenant [represented by the water in the Jewish purification jars] is not being thrown out, but it is being transposed into the wine of the Gospel”. In the same vein, the Gospel author did not intend to characterize “the manna in the wilderness” as something that was not genuinely good. Rather, the manna was a genuine gift from God, but “it was incomplete or less than perfect” and moreover it foreshadowed and was fulfilled in Jesus Christ as the Bread of Life.

The Chosen People Today

The supplanting of Israel is seen in the pericope on the vine and the branches (John 15:1–8). Raymond Brown explained that “in the Old Testament, Israel is frequently pictured as God’s choice vine (or vineyard).” Jesus announced, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser” (John 15:1). Here, Jesus is “show[ing] himself as the vine of the New Israel.” Inclusion within the People of God is no longer confined to a specific tribe or nation, as shown by Jesus’s statement to Nicodemus (“unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter

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79 Bauckham, Gospel of Glory, 181.
80 Martin & Wright, The Gospel, 60.
81 Bauckham, Gospel of Glory, 74.
82 Martin & Wright, The Gospel, 122.
83 Bauckham, Gospel of Glory, 74.
84 Brown, Gospel and Epistles, 82.
86 Brown, Gospel and Epistles, 82.
the kingdom of God”; John 3:5). The followers of Christ “become the new Israel.” Perhaps it could be said that the Church has been grafted onto the branch of the Chosen People.

If the Old Covenant has been fulfilled and replaced with New Covenant, and if the New Israel is associated with the Church, this prompts the question: What is the status of the Old Covenant and the Jewish people today? First, it should be recognized that the Jewish people have not been “substituted.” By “substituted” is meant that the Israelites have had been “cut off” from “the promises of God” due to their rejection of Jesus. Martin and Wright pointed out that “God’s covenant with the Jews . . . endures and ‘has never been revoked’ ”, and furthermore the “Jews . . . are part of the people of God, and the Church has a unique spiritual bond with them.” However, Benedict XVI noted that it is more accurate to acknowledge that there are

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89 cf. Paul VI, *Nostra Aetate* [Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions] (Vatican Website. October 28, 1965), §4, accessed May 4, 2019, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html (“The Church . . . draws sustenance from the root of that well-cultivated olive tree onto which have been grafted the wild shoots, the Gentiles” and “the well-cultivated olive tree” could be read as meaning the Chosen People of the Old Testament.).
multiple Old Testament covenants, that the covenants differed in their characteristics,\footnote{Benedict XVI, “Grace and vocation,” 181.} that “covenant’ in the Bible is not singular but occurs in stages”, and Israel did break the covenant.\footnote{Benedict XVI, “Grace and vocation,” 183.} God did elect the Israelites as His Chosen People, but that election is also “codetermined by the whole drama of human error.”\footnote{Benedict XVI, “Grace and vocation,” 182.} Benedict XVI noted that “the love of God cannot simply ignore man’s no”,\footnote{Benedict XVI, “Grace and vocation,” 183.} and Benedict XVI envisioned the supplanting of the Old Covenant(s) with the New Covenant as “the reestablishment of the Sinai covenant in the New Covenant of Jesus’ blood” which “gives the covenant a new and permanently valid form.”\footnote{Benedict XVI, “Grace and vocation,” 184.} 

All of this suggests that we should view the Jewish people today as still remaining the Chosen People, but that the Church has been grafted onto their branch, and it is our connection with the Church that provides life and fruit. Therefore, the Jewish people are still called to believe in and follow Christ. Although the Old Covenant(s) have not been revoked, they are not a source of life, since their primary role was to point toward the true source of life, Jesus Christ who is the New Covenant.
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