

G L O S S A

Heavenly Mansions or Abodes?

John 14:2, “In My Father’s house are many abodes” (mansions—KJV), is regarded by many readers of the Bible as a reference to a large house with subsidiary living quarters. These subsidiary living quarters or mansions are viewed as the eternal dwelling place of believers. Many believe that Christ began to build these mansions after His ascension in order to receive the believers either at His return or when they die. This interpretation, however, is quite problematic. First, it is difficult to argue from the revelation of the Bible that such a view of the Father’s house in heaven is the focus of the Lord’s building work after His ascension and that it will be the eternal dwelling place of the believers. Second, the common understanding of the word *abodes* (μοναί) as *mansions* is difficult to sustain both from the perspective of the etymology of the word and the context of John 14. An alternative interpretation understands the Father’s house as a symbol of the mutual abode of God and man. The Father’s house is typified by the temple and produced as a spiritual reality through the process of Christ’s incarnation, death, resurrection, ascension, and becoming the life-giving Spirit, which opened both the way for the believers to come to the Father and abide in Him and the way for Him to abide in the believers as many abodes. As the church, the Body of Christ, the believers corporately give the Father’s house an increased and enlarged expression on earth. Ultimately, this enlarged expression will consummate in the New Jerusalem which comes down out of heaven from God to rest on the earth as the tabernacle of God with man, the nations on the new earth. This interpretation accords better with the revelation of the Bible, the etymology and use of the words *house* and *abode*, and in the context of John’s writing, and indeed, the entire New Testament.

The Father’s House

The concept of the Father’s house is first introduced in John 2:16. Here the Lord refers to the temple in Jerusalem

as the Father’s house. This concept of the temple on earth being God’s house or dwelling place occurs a number of times in the Old Testament (2 Chron. 29:6; 36:15; Psa. 74:7; 76:2; 132:5, 7; cf. 1 Chron. 17:5; Ezek. 37:26-27). However, in the verses following John 2:16 (especially vv. 19-21), Jesus redefines the notion of the temple by referring to the temple of His body, which would be destroyed on the cross and raised up in resurrection in three days. This body-temple, a different kind of house for the Father, was resurrected, transfigured, and glorified from merely being a physical body-temple to one consisting of spiritual humanity. The Father’s house became a spiritual house (cf. 1 Pet. 2:4-5). He forsook a material temple to dwell within mankind (Acts 7:47-49; Isa. 66:1-2). It is this redefined notion of the Father’s house that Jesus refers to in John 14:2 in which there are many abodes.¹

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Through the resurrection of Christ’s body and His appearing to the believers and indwelling them, the believers became mem-

bers of His mystical Body, the church, and the many abodes in the Father’s house. The inclusion of the believers as many abodes in the Father’s house caused the Father’s house to be enlarged. Therefore, in the Epistles, the notion of the Father’s house is also applied to the church, which the believers are built up into corporately (Eph. 2:19-22; cf. 1 Tim. 3:15; Heb. 3:6). The believers are also considered a temple of God through the indwelling of the Spirit, both individually (1 Cor. 6:19; cf. Rev. 3:12) and corporately as the church, Christ’s mystical Body (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21-22). Much emphasis, especially in the Epistles, is spent on building up the church on earth as the Father’s house and the temple of God. The same Greek root οἰκ- (house) that occurs in John 14:2 also occurs in a number of verbs and nouns related to the church and the indwelling of Christ including, οἰκοδομέω—build (Matt. 16:18; Acts 9:31; cf. 1 Pet. 2:5; Eph. 4:12, 16), ἐποικοδομέω—build upon (1 Cor. 3:10), οἰκοδομή—building (v. 9), οἰκέω—dwell (Rom. 8:9, 11), κατοικέω—make home (Eph. 3:17), κατοικητήριον—dwelling place (2:22),

οἰκεῖλος—members of the household (v. 19), οἰκονομία—economy, plan, household arrangement (3:2, 9; 1 Tim. 1:4), and stewardship (Col. 1:25). It seems inconsistent to emphasize the building of the church as God’s spiritual house on the earth and also have Jesus building a heavenly, physical mansion prepared for the believers when they die.²

Abodes or Mansions?—Etymological Problems

The redefined notion of the Father’s house with the believers as the many abodes mentioned above also accords with the etymology of the Greek word μονή (pl. μοναί—abodes)? in John 14. The word μονή is a noun derived from the verb μένω, “abide, remain, stay” in Greek. Μένω occurs over 100 times in the New Testament and is very common in John’s writings, occurring 64 times, including 10 times in John 14—17 in which the notion of the believers abiding in God and God abiding in the believers is emphasized (15:4-10). Μονή carries notions of both a gerund, “staying, abiding, tarrying,” and a place to stay in, “an abode, a dwelling place.” Μονή occurs only twice in the New Testament, in John 14:2 and 23. Understanding μοναί in verse 2 as mansions or homes that Jesus is preparing for the believers in heaven and to which He will take them at His return does not accord with its use in verse 23 and the meaning of the verb μένω. An alternative understanding of μοναί as stations, night stops, or resting places for travelers on a journey was taken by Origen (and accepted by a few modern commentators), who considered them as stations on the road to God after death (11:6). This interpretation may have been foremost in the mind of Latin translators who rendered μονή *mansio* (a stopping place). The Latin word may have influenced the choice of the English word *mansion*, which was first introduced into English translations by Tyndale and from there came into the King James Version. However, the English word *mansion* never conveyed the sense of a stopping place, but carried the notion of a dwelling place. Later, it picked up its narrower modern sense of a large and stately residence. While the interpretation of a stopping place fits the etymology of μονή better than *mansion*, both interpretations have difficulties, particularly in the context of John 14—17. The best interpretation acknowledges the etymological link between μονή and μένω and treats μοναί in verse 2 as a reference to the believers as the many abodes produced as a result of the Father and the Son coming to make an abode with them in verse 23. This abode issues from the mutual

indwelling of the Father and Son and the believers (in verse 20) which is strengthened by the mutual abiding mentioned in John 15:4ff. As Raymond Brown points out, it is “much more in harmony with Johannine thought to relate *monē* to the cognate verb *menein*, frequently used in John in reference to staying, remaining, or abiding with Jesus and with the Father” (619).³

The Context of John 14

The interpretation of the believers as the many abodes produced by the Lord’s indwelling after His resurrection also accords much better with the context of John 14—17, rather than an eschatological reference to heavenly mansions in which the believers will dwell in some distant future. In His “farewell discourse” the Lord introduces a number of notions in John 14 that are relevant to the proper understanding of the abodes in verse 2. In verse 1 He endeavors to comfort the disciples with the words “do not let your heart be troubled,” and then He intimates the key to experiencing and participating in what follows: “believe into (Gk. εἰς) God, believe also into Me.” Third, He mentions His going (v. 2), and in verse 3 His preparing a place for the disciples, and His coming again. These last three notions puzzled the disciples and indeed have puzzled readers of John ever since, raising the following questions: Where was He going, what was the place He was going to prepare for them, and when was He coming again? In order to gain a better understanding of what these abodes refer to and to answer these questions, we will deal with these notions one by one and show that the abodes are not heavenly mansions but refer to a mutual abode for God and the believers which will finally come to rest on earth.

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From what would the disciples have derived the most comfort in the face of the imminent physical departure of their Lord? A future heavenly dwelling? Or a promise that He would not depart from them but would return in a little while (Gk. μικρόν), initially to be beheld with a resurrected body (14:19; 16:16) and eternally as the Spirit, another Comforter (14:16), His invisible manifestation, indwelling the believers as the many abodes in the Father’s house? The latter proposition seems much more likely to be a source of comfort, and indeed, from the context more fitting. His appearing in resurrection with His glorified body was a promised foretaste to the disciples of the consummation of their own transformation as the many abodes in the ultimate consummation of the Father’s house—the New Jerusalem. The Lord follows

the words “Do not let your heart be troubled” with “believe into God, believe also into Me.” The latter statement points to the disciples’ need to enter into an organic union with God in Christ through believing, as implied by John’s use of the preposition εἰς.⁴ Indeed, it is this union which is the ultimate source of comfort.

According to verses 6, 12, 28, and 16:17 Jesus went to the Father.⁵ He spoke of His secret ascension to the Father in John 20:17. In this ascension He brought His resurrected humanity fully into union with the Father, incorporating deified humanity into the Father’s house. Prior to Christ’s crucifixion the Father was indwelling Christ in His humanity; indeed, they mutually indwelt each other (14:10-11). Thus, He could say to Philip, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (v. 9). He was the temple, the Father’s house, but only as one abode, not many. However, after He passed through death and resurrection and His humanity was deified, transfigured into spiritual humanity, a way was opened to come to the Father (v. 6) so that the believers could be brought into this mutual abode, the Father’s house.

The place the Lord prepared for the disciples was a place in Himself as the Father’s house, which was to be enlarged from one abode to many. This was prepared by His becoming the life-giving Spirit, thus enabling Him to enter into His disciples and them to enter into Him (cf. John 15:4).

This took place when He came again on the evening of the day of His resurrection (John 20:19, 22). This was His coming again in which He came (with the Father—14:23 and as the life-giving Spirit—1 Cor. 15:45) and breathed Himself as another Comforter, the Holy Spirit of reality (John 14:16-17, 26), into His disciples in order to indwell them, thus making them the many abodes in the Father’s house. In this way He also received the believers to Himself. This imparting of the Holy Spirit was the way the Father and Son could make an abode with the believers (v. 23). Thus, the period of time from His departure to the Father until His coming again to be beheld by the disciples was indeed a little while (μικρόν—14:19; 16:16, 18-19). This was a great comfort to the disciples and brought peace to their troubled hearts (14:27; 20:19, 21). For the next forty days He trained His disciples to live in His invisible presence as many abodes of the Father, before He ascended bodily to the Father. Yet, He remained with the disciples in an invisible way, as the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:17; 1 Cor. 15:45) indwelling the believers (Col. 1:27; 2 Cor. 13:5) and making an abode with them.

The abodes in John 14:2 are consummated at the time of His coming again, or *parousia*, when He comes for the consummation of the building of the Father’s house, the builded church, His prepared (builded) wife (Rev. 19:7; 21:2). His coming on the evening of the day of resurrection was the initiation of the process of making the believers the many abodes in the Father’s house which continues throughout the church age as the believers are being built together into a dwelling place of God in spirit (Eph. 2:22). This is a mutual abode—God in Christ as the Spirit dwelling in the believers and the believers dwelling in God (John 15:4). Through the process of mutual abiding, the humanity of the believers is being brought into divinity as they dwell in Him, and divinity is being brought into humanity as He dwells in them. Eventually, the believers become the same as Christ after His resurrection. Ultimately, this mutual abode consummates in the New Jerusalem, which is both a tabernacle (emphasizing God’s dwelling in the believers as His moveable dwelling place among the nations inhabiting the new earth—Rev. 21:3; John 1:14)

and a temple (the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb as the believers’ eternal dwelling—Rev. 21:22).⁶ The New Jerusalem comes down out of heaven from God to be the ultimate consummation of the Father’s house with the many abodes (v. 2; 3:12). Its final destination is not heaven but earth. Thus, the many abodes in John 14:2 are not mansions in heaven but references to the believers in union with God as a mutual abode in the Father’s house, whose final destination is earth not heaven.

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Conclusion

John 14:2 is a crucial verse that develops and even demonstrates our Lord’s desire to refocus the believers from viewing the Father’s house as a material building to viewing it as a spiritual house—the enlargement of His body, which is the church. This transition from a material building to the Lord’s physical body as a temple began in John 2 and continued in John 14:2, which shows how the Father’s house is enlarged through death and resurrection to include the believers as the many abodes in which the Father and Son can abide (v. 23; 15:4). The Father’s house with many abodes is further developed in the Epistles as the church, the Body of Christ with many members, which is built up as the dwelling place of God. Eventually, this building work consummates in the New Jerusalem. It is a shame that John 14:2 has been corrupted to the point that it serves as an oft-repeated assurance that we have a material building waiting for us

after we die, completely negating the thrust and power of the Lord's words in John 14.

by Roger Good

Notes

¹The idea of heavenly dwellings in the light of the great paternal house of God has its roots in Persian or Gnostic thought. Some have proposed that John was influenced by this thought, but it is better to say that it was not John but later interpreters of John who have been influenced by this Persian or Gnostic thought. To apply God's heavenly dwelling place to the Father's house in John 14:2 has many difficulties. Gundry points out difficulties in understanding the Father's house as heaven, understanding "house" (οἰκία) as a reference to the believer's place in the domestic domain of God, as members of God's household or family (70-71). However, at the end of his article he does attempt to merge the two notions of spiritual abodes in the Father's household or family with the usual understanding of John 14:2, a house in heaven (72).

²A number of verses indicate that there is a temple in heaven (Rev. 11:19; 14:17; 15:5), which is also God's dwelling place (1 Kings 8:30, 39, 43, 49; 2 Chron. 6:21, 30, 33, 39; 30:27; Isa. 18:4). Christ is also at the right hand of God in the heavenlies (Eph. 1:20; 1 Pet. 3:22). He entered with His resurrected and glorified body a more perfect tabernacle, not made by hands (Heb. 9:11-12), pitched by the Lord and not by man (8:2), which is heaven itself (9:24). However, this heavenly tabernacle/temple is joined to the earth and, indeed, integrally related to the experience of the believers, who are charged to enter its innermost sanctuary, the Holy of Holies, during their sojourn on earth (10:19). In Revelation 11:1-2 the heavenly temple (Gk. ναός, referring to the inner sanctuary) is to be measured, but not its outer court, which is on earth. This indicates that the heavenly temple is connected to the earth, with part of the heavenly temple being on earth. This connection between heaven and earth is also implied in John 1:51 where Jesus as the Son of Man is presented as the heavenly ladder of Jacob's dream at Bethel (Gen. 28:12), the house of God, linking the earth with the heavens. It is through Christ, the Son of Man, that the believers can enter the Holy of Holies in the heavens while they are living on earth. As note 1 on Hebrews 10:19 states, "The very Christ who is in heaven is now also in our spirit (2 Tim. 4:22). As the heavenly ladder (Gen. 28:12; John 1:51), He joins our spirit to heaven and brings heaven into our spirit" (Recovery Version). Indeed, Hebrews 12:22 indicates that the believers have already come to the heavenly Jerusalem. Eventually, this heavenly tabernacle/temple will come down out of heaven from God to be the eternal mutual

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abode of God and man (Rev. 21:2-3; 3:12), on earth and among men.

³Cf. also Fischer (69-70). Unfortunately this morphological connection between these two words is not captured in most English versions. The verb μένω is translated "abide" (NRSV, NASB, ASV, NKJV, RSV, and Darby), "remain" (NIV), "make home" (Jerusalem Bible), or "dwell" (REB) in John 15:4-7 while μονή is translated "dwelling places" (NRSV, NASB, REB), "mansions" (ASV, NKJV), "rooms" (RSV, NIV, Jerusalem Bible), or "abodes" (Darby) in 14:2, and "home" (NRSV, NKJV, RSV, NIV, Jerusalem Bible), "an abode" (NASB, ASV, Darby), or "dwelling" (REB) in verse 23. Only Darby and REB are consistent in using words of the same root in English to translate μένω and μονή in all places, with NASB and ASV using "abode" for μονή only in verse 23.

⁴For the significance of the preposition εἰς following the verb πιστεύω (believe) indicating a mystical union with Christ, see my article "Prepositions and Our Experience."

⁵Some commentators consider this as Jesus going to the cross (cf. Gundry 72; Ensley 295). While it is the case that He went to the cross and it is through going to the cross that He reached His final destination, the cross was not His final destination, but the Father. This interpretation fits better in the context of John 14.

⁶The notion that God Himself is a dwelling place is also found in the Old Testament (Psa. 90:1; 91:9; Deut. 33:27).

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