

DIVING HIDING IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

By: Matthew Graham

The topic of divine hiding can be approached from at least two angles. First, it can be discussed in terms of God's deliberate withholding of His presence, revelation, or blessing. In this sense divine hiding is dealing not with the question of God's existence, but with the question of God's presence. The second way in which divine hiding is discussed is when philosophers and laymen ask questions that associate divine hiding with questions of God's existence. In this sense, divine hiding is evaluated in order to determine if a lack of God's presence implies a lack of God's existence.

The Gospel of John does not speak directly to the latter sense of divine hiding, since for John and his audience, the issue of God's existence is not in question. It would certainly be possible to use the book of John to look for answers concerning the hiddenness of God in the latter sense, but this would be a philosophical paper that refers to the book of John. But to use John in this way is to lose the theme of divine hiding that exists in his gospel. It will be the project of this paper to discuss divine hiddenness in the sense of the Father's withholding of Himself from those Jews who did not know Him.

Jesus' Identity Stated Clearly

It seems more than a little odd to speak of the hiddenness of God in any Gospel, let alone the Gospel of John. These are the accounts of 'God in the flesh' revealing eternal truths to mankind. The synoptic gospels show this clearly enough, and John's portrayal exemplifies the revelation of God in Jesus Christ to an even greater degree. From the very opening of John's Gospel, it is clear that his account of Jesus will be that of cosmic figure. There is no question that Jesus is to be understood as a Man who is

“bigger than life.” He is portrayed as an ancient and enigmatic figure who would exegete the Father.

In what way then does John speak to the hiddenness of God? Clearly Jesus did not withhold vital information from His audience concerning His identity. Attempts on our Lord's life were made several times because His hearers *did* understand what He said about Himself. Jesus claimed the following:

1. authority over Simon – 1:42
2. that the temple was His Father's house – 2:16
3. that whoever believed in Him would have eternal life – 3:15
4. that the world would be saved through Him – 3:17
5. that He was the living water – 4:14
6. that He was the Messiah – 4:26
7. that He and His Father were working together – 5:17
8. that He could give life, just as the Father gives life – 5:21
9. that the Scriptures spoke of Him – 5:39
10. that the work of God was to believe in Him – 6:29
11. to be the bread that came down from heaven – 6:35
12. to be able to raise people up at the last day – 6:44
13. to be the only one who has seen the Father – 6:46
14. that streams of living water would flow from those who believe in Him – 7:38
15. to be before Abraham – 8:58

If I were to speak at a local Baptist church and claim to be the “rider of the white horse” spoken of in Revelation chapter 6, it's likely that I would not be asked to speak there again. Or again, if I tried to convince a group of Christians that whoever believed in me would not die but have eternal life, I would expect to get an earful at the very least. These are the kind of claims Jesus made about Himself. The Lord's audience knew that He was making rather peculiar claims about His identity. The reaction of the Jews and the disciples show the varied responses to His claims. In his book “The Theology of the Gospel of John,” D. Moody Smith observes that “Typically, Jesus declares who he is and

debates with opponents his own status and role. That is, he makes straightforward christological assertions and defends them against attack.”¹

Not only does John introduce Christ as the eternal Son, he shows his readers a Jesus who confronts those who disagree with Him. Jesus transcends the confrontation to openly declare His identity and message. He performs a miracle, makes claims about who He is, and bids His listeners to come to Him.² For example, after feeding the five thousand Jesus tells them that the work of God is to believe in Him, and then openly declares to be the true bread that comes down from heaven. Jesus often makes provocative statements to His listeners to elicit a response and then speaks to them of the kind of life He offers them. (Jn 1:47; 3:3; 4:16; 6:5) The purpose of this approach seems to be to get the listeners to radically shift from their self-centered paradigms. He is speaking to people from an eternal perspective. If Jesus openly affirms His authority, purpose, and message, in what way can it be said that He hides Himself?

The Language of Christ

Perhaps Jesus hides Himself in the language that He uses. One cannot read through John’s Gospel without noticing that many of those hearing Jesus gravely misunderstood Him. This misunderstanding on the part of the Lord’s hearers is a common literary theme in this Gospel. It may be the case that John later understood the claims of Christ as an insider, but it is clear that many people did not immediately understand what Jesus was trying to get across to them. (Jn 3:3; 4:13-15; 6:26-27) The woman at the well did not understand Jesus speaking of Himself as the “living water.”

¹ D. Moody Smith, *The Theology of the Gospel of John* (United Kingdom: Cambridge 1995), 110.

Nicodemus, a teacher of Israel, did not understand what it meant to be “born again.” This being the case, wouldn’t it be reasonable to hold that Jesus was being unclear about what He was saying?

Certainly Jesus could have explained in plain language what He meant by His teachings. He could have elaborated on the spiritual references, making His teachings more palatable to His hearers. Jesus explained parables and teachings to His disciples so that they could understand Him more clearly. (Mt 13:36; Jn 16:29) Perhaps if He had done this more often His audience would have heard and understood, and having heard and understood maybe they would have not rejected Him.

This notion however is not a terribly viable one. It may have been the case that Christ’s listeners were puzzled by His opening remarks, but by the end of His discourses they were not arguing about *what* He claimed about Himself, but about whether or not to *believe* Him. For example, the woman at the well may not have understood what Jesus was getting at when He spoke of “living water,” but by the end of the conversation she was encouraging members of her town to come and see if Jesus really was the Messiah. There are many examples in which Jesus gives a discourse, and at the end of the discourse the crowd is divided over Him. (Jn 6:66; 7:40-44; 11:45-46)

Christ’s initial engagement with a person or group of persons is enigmatic for a reason. The use of this approach appears to highlight the lack of understanding and perspective on the part of humans. John uses this sort of encounter to show what happens when mankind encounters God. As D. Moody Smith notes: “The typically Johannine misunderstanding of Jesus is more than a literary or rhetorical technique of the evangelist.

² Though not necessarily in that order.

It manifests in a dramatic way the world's inability to understand Jesus on its own terms."³

In summary, Jesus' declaration about His identity was clear and the language that He used was not misleading. In addition, God's Messenger was faithful to proclaim only those things His Father told Him to proclaim. He did not act on His own accord, but He did only those things that He saw the Father do. His miraculous work was recognized by those who accepted Him and by those who rejected Him.⁴ The Anointed One of Israel openly described Himself as the King of Israel before Pilot.

The miracles of Jesus were done in plain sight. His claims to divinity were obvious, and obviously understood. His message was stated time and time again. Finally, the association with His identity and message was unmistakable. In what way then was God hiding? God was hiding both the glory of the Son and the coming judgment of the Father.

The Judgment of the Father

In Isaiah 6:9-10 it is prophetically uttered that Israel would be judged for its idolatry. In Matthew 13:14 these words find their fulfillment. The Pharisees and teachers of the law seek a sign of Jesus. His response is "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of Jonah." (Mt 12:39) Jesus then goes on to describe the judgment against the generation that rejects Him. The

³ Smith, 113-114.

⁴ This is the case even though they did not believe the message to which those signs pointed.

men of Nineveh and the Queen of the south would rise up in judgment of that generation because they did not recognize or believe the Son of God.

The primary judgment against those who did not know God was that they would not know the Son. God would walk among them, and they would not see or hear it. The Word of God was right there to tell them of the Father, whom they claimed to know, and even though they were face to face with Jesus, they did not recognize Him. God Himself blinded them so that they were unable to see His work of redemption among them. (Jn 9:39)

This judgment, while not elaborated on, seems to be presupposed throughout John's gospel. There were numerous instances in which Jesus performed a miracle and gave a lengthy discourse. Following these events He was received by some and rejected by others. John portrayed a Jesus who was not surprised by the willful non-belief of some. Jesus did not plead with those who didn't believe. Instead He told them plainly that they were not the sons of God, that where He went they could not come, (Jn 8:21) and that they were the sons of the devil. (Jn 8:44) John showed that one was either in the camp of believers or one was not.

This strict bifurcation seems to indicate that John saw the world from a cosmic perspective. Man does not know for sure who will or will not believe; only God does. John speaks of unbelievers not as possible candidates for becoming believers, even though they may have been, but as people who are either born of God or people who willingly reject the goodness and knowledge of God.

It is not only the case that these people simply do not believe. They do not believe because they are not the Lord's sheep. (Jn 10:26) They do not believe because they are not

willing to accept the testimony of Jesus and the Father. (Jn 5:37) There is an architecture behind every scene in this gospel. The rejection of Christ was not an accident. It was not by the will of men that God's plan would be accomplished in the way in which it was accomplished. The entire ministry of Jesus was skillfully planned out and calculated to weed out those that would only follow a political Messiah.

Judgment came on "the Jews" because their hearts were far from God. They worshipped Him in vain. Perhaps Jesus could have set up an earthly kingdom where He was the ultimate benevolent Monarch. Many of the Jews that rejected Jesus probably would have accepted a heroic warrior king. The plan of God, however, was to restore the *heart* of the nation, not the *political situation* of the nation. A change in the political situation of Israel would have been glorious for only a moment if the heart of the nation was not changed. Malachi chapter 3:1-5 tells us about the coming of God's Holy One and what that coming would bring.

"See, I send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty. But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire, or like launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, he will purify the Levites, and refine them as gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years. "So I will come near to you for judgment. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear me," says the LORD Almighty.

The Jews should have realized that when Malachi speaks of God's judgment, that judgment would extend to them because they were adulterers, perjurers, and oppressors. They did not recognize this and were therefore judged. Now the Messenger was on earth and that judgment was at hand. As the Gospel of John says, "The Father loves the Son

and has placed everything in his hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him." (Jn 3:35-36)

John 9:39 says that Jesus came into the world for judgment. However, John 12:47 states that Jesus did not come into the world to judge the world, but to save it. These statements appear to be contradictory on the surface. How could Jesus come into the world for judgment and yet not come to judge? It is clear that John 1:19 through John 12:50 show an ever increasing divide between those who believe and those who don't. Those who do not believe become more and more hardened in their position against Jesus. Those who do believe are either further weeded out, (Jn 8:30-47) or their belief is deepened. (Jn 6:68) Jesus' presence, words and actions are what brought about the judgment of those who reject Him and acceptance of those who believe Him.

God's Hiding

It is clear that life and judgment were brought by the Word, but in what way was God "hiding" Himself from those who heard His Son? One way in which He did this was by defying the expectations of His audience. He knew what His hearers wanted to hear, and rather than simply giving them the answers they wanted to hear He used the speaking time to expound on the eternal truths that they were missing. If His audience was thinking about water, Jesus talked about "living water." If they were thinking about the temple, He told them about the One for whom the temple was built.

There was a sense in which Jesus intentionally *did not* try to reach people "where they were." It's as though He were intentionally trying to throw them off guard in order to find out what kind of response they would have. Christ revealed Himself consistently to those who listened. He did not hold back who He was, but He worded His claims in a

way that would baffle those who did not know God and give life to those who did know God.

Jesus was also hidden because of the large number of Jews who were ignorant of the facts. Jesus' accusers may have been correct about the Messiah coming from Bethlehem (Jn 7:42), but they were incorrect in assuming that Jesus was not born in Bethlehem. They thought that no prophet had ever come from Galilee, (Jn 7:52) but Jonah had come from Gath Hopher. (2 Ki 14:25) Jesus did not correct these people or rebut the claims of His accusers. He let them believe things that were not true. In some cases, He even played into the false notions of His opponents. (Jn 6:52-59)

Jesus also understated Himself by avoiding common messianic titles. He did this in part because of the plethora of ideas associated with those titles. Many of these ideas of the Messiah were mistaken or misleading. Four hundred years without revelation from God gave the people of that time plenty of room for speculation about the Messiah. Jesus did not want to be associated with false Messianic notions. He did, however, cleverly use these notions to hide Himself from the Jews. This can be seen in the instance where Jesus does not correct his opponents about their false claims about Him. (Jn 7:42)

One of the ways Jesus used His opponent's expectations to hide was by the nature of the miracles themselves. It seems very odd that shortly after Jesus fed the five thousand, the people asked for a sign from heaven. (Jn 6:30) Not only did they ask Him for a sign, but they made reference to Moses feeding the children of Israel in the desert. Jesus had just turned five small barley loaves into enough bread to feed over five thousand people! What kind of idiot would not see that as a sign of Christ's identity?

Perhaps these people were not looking for just *any* sign. Even though the miracle of Jesus was extremely similar to that of Moses, they wanted something else. They wanted Moses! Moses led the people out of Egypt. They wanted Jesus to lead them out of the hands of the Romans. It would appear then that the miracles Jesus performed were close enough to the Old Testament miracles to be identified with them, but different enough for people not to get the point of the sign. Oddly enough, miracles themselves were not what these people were looking for.

Jesus points this out to the crowd. “I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill.” (Jn 6:26) Jesus then bids them, “Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.” They wanted Jesus to perform for them. Because of this, Jesus made stronger claims about Himself, stronger requirements on the part of His hearers, and refused to show them another miracle.

Why God Hid

God hid Himself from “the Jews” because they were not born of God. They could not find God’s Anointed One because they could not discern the work of God. They could not discern the work of God because they did not know God. They did not know God because they did the work of their Father the devil. They did the works of their Father the devil because their deeds were evil and they loved the darkness. Because they loved the darkness, they did not believe into the name of the One that could save them from the darkness. And because they did not believe on the One whom God sent, they were not born of God.

