

## “Most High”

*Psalm 47; John 1:29–34; John 14:6–7 (NRSV)*

**God. Most High. Transcendent . . . and made flesh.**



Imagine that you live in ancient Mesopotamia. You can't sleep and decide to take a long walk. As you leave your village you notice that the night is especially clear. The small lights in the night sky are especially bright and the large light is more vivid than you have ever seen it. You are a bit overwhelmed and begin to think about the gods and the stories of how all this came to be. You wonder to yourself, what are the gods doing right now? You admit you have no idea and you offer a quick prayer that they are ignoring you. As you walk further, your gaze is continually drawn upward – to the shimmering night sky and to the gods living just beyond the lights above.

For, like all ancient people, you believe that the home of the gods and goddesses of your people can be found just beyond the sky above. Their home is way up there, above the hills and mountains, further up than even the mightiest bird can fly. So you build your temples on the highest places and you build artificial mountains, such as pyramids and ziggurats, to get you closer to the gods. And you often refer to the mightiest god of all as God Most High. It only makes sense.

And so it was for the Israelites. YHWH, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, is the Most High, the great king over all the earth, as the psalmist sang. For the Israelites, such language helped them to embrace the transcendence, the otherness, of God. A phrase like “most high” reminded them that God was the authority above all other authorities, with the absolute power and right “to give orders, make decisions, and enforce obedience.”<sup>1</sup> And they, like we, worshipped this God Most High, falling prostrate and acknowledging their own failings. And they, like we, needed help remembering that God is indeed “Most High.” Clinton McCann helps us to reflect on the meaning of the worshipful language of Psalm 47:

It was a persistent temptation for the people of Israel, and it has been and is a persistent temptation for the church to make our God too small. We are quick to recall that God “chose our heritage for us” and loves us (v. 4), but we are quick to forget that God loves the world and that all the world's rulers and people “belong to God” (v. 9). The Christian practice of speaking about Jesus as a personal Savior may be symptomatic of our forgetfulness, for often we seem to mean that we own God rather than that God owns us. To worship the God of Abraham and the God revealed in Jesus Christ is to worship a universal sovereign, and it means claiming every other person in the world as a sister or brother.<sup>2</sup>

### **Advent**

And so we begin the season of Advent, four weeks to prepare ourselves for the coming of the Most High, in the flesh; forsaking transcendent otherness for the shocking immanence<sup>3</sup> of a slimy, squirming newborn from Mary's womb. And it is a man named John who proclaims this God-made-flesh to the world.

It was about 27AD, and John had gone out to the Jordan River, preaching the coming of God's kingdom and urging his fellow Jews to come out to the river to be washed in the river's water, symbolizing their repentance of sin and their cleansing of its stain. Since the time of Joshua, more than a millennium before, the Jordan had been a potent symbol of Israel's freedom and the people's allegiance to the LORD God.

Not surprisingly, John attracted a lot of attention. So much so that the High Priest sent some representatives out to see John. The Baptizer willingly told them that he was neither the Messiah nor Elijah. Rather, he was the one spoken of in the scroll of Isaiah, the one who would prepare the way for the coming of the LORD (see Isaiah 40:1-11). John told his questioners that he was not even worthy to tie the sandals of the one who was

<sup>1</sup> From the Oxford dictionaries

<sup>2</sup> McCann, J. C., Jr. (1994–2004). *The Book of Psalms*. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. 4, pp. 869–870). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

<sup>3</sup> Transcendence speaks to the out-there otherness of God. Immanence speaks to the here-now-with-us presence of God.

coming. The questioners left and the next day, John saw Jesus of Nazareth coming to him. John stopped what he was doing, pointed at Jesus and said for all to hear:

“Behold, the Lamb of God,<sup>4</sup> who takes away the sin<sup>5</sup> of the world.”

How did John know that Jesus, a relative of John’s, was the “Lamb of God”? God had revealed it to him. Apparently, John had baptized Jesus in the Jordan River some time earlier; for John went on to tell the crowd what he saw when he had baptized Jesus. John had seen the Spirit descend on Jesus in the Jordan river and remain on him. Further, God had revealed to John that Jesus was “God’s Chosen One.” John told them that this man, Jesus, was the reason John had called people out to the river.

For Christians, talk of the Most High always come back to Jesus. We make truth claims about a man named Jesus who lived in ancient Palestine and was executed at the order of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. Crucially, we claim that this Jesus was resurrected after his death, thus vindicating all he said and did. Here is one of Jesus’ statements about his relationship, his identity with, the God Most High:

I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him” (John 14:6-7, NRSV).

There you have it. Could Jesus be any clearer? Ask any of Jesus’ fellow Jews on the streets of Jerusalem who the Father is and you’d have gotten a straightforward response: “The Lord God Almighty, of course, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God who revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush and led us out of slavery in Egypt. That’s who the Father is.” And, of course, the next words out of their mouth would be astonishment and shock that any man could claim such a thing – that if you know him you know the Father. Ridiculous! Crazy! Blasphemy!

But earlier, Jesus had asserted, “I am one with the Father” (John 10:30). Now, Jesus has claimed that if you have seen Jesus, you have seen the Father; that Jesus is the way, the truth, the life. N. T. Wright reflects on Jesus’ extraordinary claim:

Within the Western world of the last two centuries or so, this saying of Jesus has become one of the most controversial. ‘I am the way and the truth and the life!’ How dare he, people have asked. How dare John, or the church, or anyone else, put such words into anyone’s mouth? Isn’t this the height of arrogance, to imagine that Jesus or anyone else was the only way? Don’t we now know that this attitude has done untold damage around the world, as Jesus’ followers have insisted that everyone else should give up their own ways of life and follow his instead? I know people, professing Christians, for whom it seems that their central article of faith is their rejection of this idea of Jesus’ uniqueness.

The trouble with this is that it doesn’t work. If you dethrone Jesus, you enthrone something, or someone, else instead. The belief that ‘all religions are really the same’ sounds nice and democratic—though the study of religions quickly shows that it isn’t true. What you are really saying if you claim that they’re all the same is that none of them are more than distant echoes, distorted images, of reality. You’re saying that ‘reality’, God, ‘the divine’, is remote and unknowable, and that neither Jesus nor Buddha nor Moses nor Krishna gives us direct access to it. They all provide a way towards the foothills of the mountain, not the way to the summit.

It isn’t just John’s gospel that you lose if you embrace this idea. The whole New Testament—the whole of early Christianity—insists that the one true and living God, the creator, is the God of Israel; and that the God of Israel has acted decisively, within history, to bring Israel’s story to its proper goal, and through that to address, and rescue, the world. The idea of a vague general truth, to which all ‘religions’ bear some kind of oblique witness, is foreign to Christianity.<sup>6</sup>

And so we prepare ourselves for the coming of the one true and living God, the Most High, the creator of the cosmos . . . in the flesh.

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<sup>4</sup> The phrase, “Lamb of God” is found only twice in the Bible, here and in 1:36. John probably intends it to refer to both the sacrificial lamb of Exodus 12 and the triumphant lamb depicted in Revelation 5

<sup>5</sup> Notice that “sin” here is singular not plural. “Sin” here is not just the individual transgressions nor even their sum, but the beast that imprisons us and holds us in bondage.

<sup>6</sup> Wright, T. (2004). *John for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 11-21* (pp. 59–60). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.