

REFLECTIONS OF THE TABERNACLE IN THE NEW COVENANT:

TPOLOGY IN THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

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REFLECTIONS OF THE TABERNACLE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

INTRODUCTION

When words arise in modern society, such as “sacrifice,” “temple,” and “altar,” the images they call to mind are not exactly biblical. Instead, programmed by more than 50 years of cinematography, the average American probably imagines scenes that include such things as shaman headdresses, volcanoes, and sacrificial human victims. Hollywood has continually portrayed sacrificial religious systems as some sort of measure to appease the fickle pleasures of an often unjustifiably angry deity.

This is not, however, the temple or tabernacle system of the Old Testament. Although there are certain similarities to this cultural iconography such as the ritualistic methodology, the similitude is tenuous. The “victim” of the old covenant, is not human but animal. The reason for the sacrifice is not to satisfy some bloodthirsty god, but to pay the penalty for man’s disobedience. The object of that payment is not a god who desires bloodshed, but the righteousness of God who cannot allow sin to go unpunished. Further, these sacrifices were not even true payment; they were only a “shadow” of the true sacrifice that was to come; namely, Jesus Christ.

This introduces an important topic, one that the book of Hebrews most directly and persuasively addresses. The author of Hebrews presents an argument for the superiority of the New Covenant versus the Old. Central to this argument, is the typology presented in relation to the Jewish tabernacle; figures which point to Christ. This student explores the more prominent of

these, expounding their significance for New Testament truth, and detailing the superiority of Christ, over and against the “shadows” of the Old Testament.

BACKGROUND

Before any discussion of the tabernacle symbolism found in Hebrews can begin, it is important to paint a background picture of the things that the author describes. This is because, as mentioned in the introduction, the Old Testament world of religion was one very different from that of modern religious expression. As the Reverend David Keddie expresses so eloquently, two thousand years of separation from Temple worship has

made us forget that the faith of Israel, the faith into which Jesus was born, was rooted in animal sacrifice, and that people expressed and articulated their relationship to God, both individually and collectively, through sacrifice- blood offerings, whole burnt offerings, cereal offerings and guilt-offerings. Sacrifice was essential to all Israelite religion and its practice, and at the centre was of course the Temple...¹

The centrality of the sacrificial system cannot be overstated. This was the 1st century Jew’s way of life. It was as ingrained in his existence, as cars, computers, and televisions in the life of modern man. It was where he found his identity; the prominent feature around which the entirety of his life revolved. Most importantly, the temple/tabernacle and its sacrificial system, was the primary way in which he expressed his faith.

It is this last point that is so important for understanding the message of the epistle to the Hebrews, and the symbols it uses. The pictures painted in Hebrews, using the imagery of the tabernacle, spoke to these people in a way that is difficult for current readers to emulate. Each aspect of the tabernacle, the sacrifice (done upon the brazen altar), the veil, the Ark of the Covenant, and so on, connoted specific meaning to the Hebrew that the author uses to describe

¹David A. Keddie "Hebrews 9:11-14." *Expository Times* 118, no. 1 (October 1, 2006): 28-29. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 20, 2010), 28.

the work and ministry of Christ. The author did not invent this meaning, though, but rather it was inherent in the thing itself.

Indeed, God specifically designed the tabernacle in such a way that it pointed to heavenly truth.² He was painstakingly exact in describing to Moses how to build this structure of worship, saying, “Exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle, and of all its furniture, so you shall make it...”³ The reason for this, it seems, is that these things would serve as a “shadow” of heavenly things.⁴

To look at things a different way, it was through the acknowledgment of the “shadow” of the tabernacle, that faithful pre-Christ Jews would participate in the sacrifice of Messiah. These Jews did not know the name of Messiah. They could not envision the exact circumstances of His coming (beyond the prophetic witness). What they did have, however, was the tabernacle, that foreshadowed the work that He would do. The effectiveness, then, of the temple and its sacrifices, were not in themselves effective against the pollution of sin, but “depended upon Christ whose sacrifice they anticipated.”⁵ In this way, the faithful Jew’s Old Covenant faith, worked (in the end) a New Covenant salvation.

For these reasons, namely, the exactness of the tabernacles construction and the foreshadowing of Christ in the elements of the tabernacle, it behooves the modern reader of Hebrews to examine each carefully. Each of these reveals something about the ministry of

²George W. MacRae. "Heavenly temple and eschatology in the letter to the Hebrews." *Semeia* no. 12 (January 1, 1978): 179-199. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost* (accessed April 20, 2010), 182.

³Exodus 25:9, ESV. The degree of precision demanded by God is interesting. Even the measurements given are exact.

⁴Hebrews 8:5, 10:1.

⁵Robert B. Hughes and Carl J. Laney. *Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary*. (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), S. 670

Christ, and the reality of His present kingdom. In the following section, the writer will examine four of these: the sacrifice, the Veil, the Most Holy Place, and the High Priest.

THE SACRIFICE

A central theme in the epistle to the Hebrews, and its discussion of the tabernacle, is the issue of sacrifice. There is little question that the author of Hebrews wishes to convey to his readers, not only that the Old Covenant sacrifices were always to be a “shadow” or to point to Christ’s sacrifice, but he also wishes to highlight the superiority of the latter. He does this by contrasting the efficacy of the old covenant sacrifices, against the new covenant sacrifice.

Efficacy of the Old

The primary problem with the sacrifices of the earthly tabernacle, according to the author of Hebrews, is that they are not effective. “For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins,” he says.⁶ The Greek word translated “not possible” or “impossible” in most English Bibles, *adunatov*, bespeaks a state of helplessness or powerlessness.⁷ It is something rendered impossible due to a weakness, rather than a logical impossibility.

What is this weakness? Certainly one of the reasons the author cites for the inadequacy of these sacrifices, is their repeating nature. If these sacrifices were effective, he states, “Would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed would no longer have any consciousness of sins?”⁸ To state this sentiment another way, if the sacrifices cleansed the sinner, why offer them again? A person, who has broken a bone, receives a cast. After the bone is set, they remove the cast, and throw it away; it has served its purpose.

⁶ Hebrews 10:4, MKJV.

⁷ James Strong. *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance*. (E-sword electronic ed., 2001), G102.

⁸ Hebrews 10:2. Also, compare to 10:1, 10:11, as well.

Likewise, if your car malfunctions, and you have it repaired, you do not have to have the same repairs done the next day. These things have a “once for all” aspect to them that is inherent in the fact that they are effective in fixing the problem which they are addressing. In the same way, the old covenant sacrifices show that they are not effective, since they do not actually repair the problem.

This brings out another failing in the Old covenant sacrificial system, its inability to deal with the sinner’s guilty conscience. Guthrie states that

The laws sacrificial system, rather than delivering worshippers from their guilt, actually has the effect of reminding them of their sinfulness and, thus, their constant separation from God... [The old covenant sacrifices] remained a separator, a perennial, detrimental force disallowing a permanently right relationship between God and His people.⁹

Guilt is not conducive to a healthy relationship, the author is saying, and so these shadows, pointing to Christ, but unable in themselves to deal with sin, are actually a hindrance to growing closer with God. The very thing that is meant (according to the devout Jew) to bridge the gap between righteous God and sinful man, becomes yet one more barrier between them.

The sacrifices of the tabernacle, while serving their purpose of pointing to Christ, were clearly inadequate. As a mere image of the work of Christ to come, they were without any merit in themselves. The author goes on to show that in these same areas where the law has failed, Christ, reality rather than shadow, has not.

Efficacy of the New

In stark contrast to the inefficiency of the old covenant, stands the all sufficiency of the new covenant sacrifice. In every area that the old way failed, the new shows itself to be effective.

⁹George Guthrie. *Hebrews: The NIV Application Commentary*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 327, words in [brackets] added.

Where the sacrifices of the old covenant tabernacle could not take away sin, Christ's death on the cross is the ultimate answer for it.

Demonstrating this fact is the singularity of Christ's sacrifice. Whereas the temple sacrifices were continually necessary, year after year, Christ's sacrifice is a "single offering" that is "for all time."¹⁰ F.F. Bruce acknowledges that

After hundreds of years, those [old covenant] sacrifices were no nearer the attainment of their aim than they had been at the beginning... [However] The sacrifice of Christ has purified his people from the moral defilement of sin, and assured them of permanent maintenance in a right relation with God.¹¹

Therefore, Christ's work was superior, in that it accomplished its purpose in a single act.

More than just this, the final offering is effective in mitigating the problem of guilt, in a way that the previous offerings could not. The believer's heart, through the efforts of Christ, has been "sprinkled clean from an evil conscience."¹² No longer must believers anguish over their constant failings, but instead the uniqueness of Christ's sacrifice is a constant reminder that they are completely clean. N.T. Wright sums it up best, saying that

The writer intends that his readers should find this enormously comforting. What Jesus has done, in dying as a sacrifice for us, to procure the complete forgiveness of sins spoken of in Jeremiah, and to establish God's new covenant with us, is complete. It does not need adding to, let alone repeating. To suggest either of these would be to suggest that there was something incomplete, something left undone that Jesus did not quite manage to do the first time around. When as Christians we look for assurance that we have truly been forgiven, we do not look-or should not look-at anything we do, at anything the church does, at anything that Christian ministries, clergy, priest, or whoever do. We look back to the event outside of Jerusalem on that dark Friday afternoon, and thank God for what was accomplished fully and finally on our behalf.¹³

¹⁰ Hebrews 10:14.

¹¹ Bruce, F.F. "The Epistle to the Hebrews." *New International Commentary on the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 246-247. Words in [brackets] added.

¹² Hebrews 10:22.

¹³ Tom Wright. *Hebrews for Everyone*, 2nd ed. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2004, 112.

THE VEIL

Within the walls of the outer courts, past the brazen altar, the place of sacrifice, and in the innermost section of the tabernacle, hung a curtain that separated the holy place, from the “most holy place.” This inner sanctuary, within an inner sanctuary, was the location of the Ark of the Covenant; where the localized presence of God dwelled among the people of Israel. In the Levitical system instituted by God, the purpose of the veil was one of division, separating sinful man from the presence of God’s holiness.

Hebrews refers to this “inner curtain” several times.¹⁴ In 6:19, it is the partition in front of the heavenly Holy of Holies. Hebrews 9:3:4 takes a historical look at the earthly tabernacle, describing the contents that it protected. In Hebrews 10:20, the writer compares the curtain to the literal flesh of Christ. What he seems to be portraying, is that just as the as the High Priest in the old covenant had to pass through the literal curtain to come into the presence of God, so too must all who desire communion with God, “pass through” the flesh of Jesus. To state this in another way, those who wish to enjoy reconciliation with God, must join themselves to Christ’s sacrificial death, through faith.¹⁵

Even more important than the veil is the Holy of Holies that it protects. This special place, representing the presence of God, draws much attention from the writer of Hebrews. In the next section, the student will examine its significance in relation to the new covenant.

¹⁴ Hebrews 6:19, 9:3, and 10:20. Some scholars disagree on whether two of these verses are actually referring to the curtain that separates the holy of holies from the holy place. However, Daniel M. Gurtner argues persuasively (*Novum testamentum* 47, no. 4: 344-353) from evidence in the LXX that the Greek word *καταπέτασμα*, when used without qualification, always refers to this specific curtain.

¹⁵ F.F. Bruce engages in an interesting discussion, comparing the rending of the temple veil, in Mark 15:38, Matt 27:51, and Luke 23:45, to the “unveiling” of God through the work of Christ (251).

THE MOST HOLY PLACE

To the Jewish mind, the Most Holy Place, or “Holy of Holies” was the place that God was. Only the High Priest (and him only once a year) could enter this inner sanctum. That anyone might “have confidence” to enter into such a place would be virtually unthinkable.¹⁶ Yet this is exactly what the author of Hebrews says. That through the once for all sacrifice of Christ, believers can actually enter into the presence of God.

In Chapter 9, the writer describes the earthly version of the Most Holy Place. This forbidden area of the tabernacle, contained the most precious artifacts of the Old Testament. It was within this room that legendary items such as the staff of Aaron, tablets of the covenant that God gave to Moses, and the urn of manna was located.¹⁷

The most revered object found within this room, though, was the Ark of the Covenant. Covered all in gold, with the wings of the cherubim rising from each side, and the “mercy seat” lying in between them, it was here where the High priest on the Day of Atonement, would sprinkle the blood of the sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. It was here that the localized presence of God dwelled among the people of Israel.

Because of this, the “mercy seat” was the typological seat of God’s heavenly throne. When the Hebrew man spoke of “God’s throne” on earth, it was to this space between the cherubim to which he referred. The author of the epistle to the Hebrews, picking up this imagery, alludes to this mercy seat when he speaks of the “throne of grace” in Hebrews 4:16. Bruce, pointing to this parallel between earthly and heavenly throne, states

¹⁶ Hebrews 10:19.

¹⁷ When comparing Hebrews 9:3-5 to other accounts such as 1Kings 8:9, there appears to be some discrepancy as to the legitimacy of the author’s statement, regarding the location of these items. Albert Barnes, among others, asserts that there is “no improbability whatsoever” that these items were indeed inside the Ark.

It was at the earthly mercy seat that the work of atonement was completed in token on the Day of Atonement and the grace of God extended to His people; the presence of the Christians' high priest on the heavenly throne of grace bespeaks a work of atonement completed not in token, but in fact, and the constant availability of divine aid in all their need.¹⁸

This, of course, is probably the most profound picture of earthly and heavenly tabernacle, of Old Testament imagery pointing to New Testament reality. The ultimate expression of Christ's rule is in the sacrifice that he has made, the atonement he has purchased, and His present intervention on behalf of his saints. This also brings up the final aspect of typology for the purposes of this discussion, the high priest.

THE HIGH PRIEST

The high priest was the official go-between of the tabernacle. He was the only one permitted to go into the presence of God. He alone could sprinkle the blood on the mercy seat, to atone for the sins of the people. He was the figurative mediator between holy God and sinful man.

For this reason, it is highly significant that the author of the epistle refers to Jesus Christ as the high priest. To say that Christ is the high priest is to make him the way by which the believer has access to God. Through the atonement of His blood that he has offered as high priest, he has both expiated (cleansed) and propitiated (averted God's wrath) the believer's sins.¹⁹ Christ intervenes on behalf of His followers, and it is by him that saints may access God.

¹⁸ Bruce, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 116-117.

¹⁹ Craig R. Koester *Hebrews. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. (Anchor Bible 36 New York—London: Doubleday, 2001), 241.

The high priesthood of Christ is more than this, though. It is not as if Christ is just one more in a long line of priests. The priesthood of Christ, representing the new covenant, is distinctly different from the high priesthood of the old. The old, the “shadow,” was inferior to the new. The author of Hebrews notes several ways that this is true.

The first way that Christ’s priesthood was superior to that of the earthly tabernacle, deals with the issue of permanence. In the Old Testament, the priests were of the line of Levi. They would serve for a time, but ultimately they would grow old and die. They were mortal. Hence, there were likely hundreds of these priests during the period of the Levitical priesthood.²⁰ This was not the case with the high priesthood of Christ. When Christ was exalted, He instituted a new High Priesthood, one that was “after the order of Melchizedek.”²¹ This new priesthood, superior to the old, was much like the sacrifice of Christ; once for all. The priestly line stopped for all time, with Christ, whose priesthood is forever.

Not only is the high priesthood of Christ superior to the old way in its permanence, though, it is also superior in terms of its perfection. Hebrews 7:27 states that the high priest not only had to make daily sacrifices for the people, he also had to sacrifice on behalf of himself, for he was also a sinner. Jesus, by contrast, was “holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens” (ESV). He therefore had no need to offer sacrifices for himself.

Finally, Jesus is a superior high priest, because God himself appointed Him to His position with an oath. This was in stark contrast to the Levitical priests, who gained their position

²⁰ Guthrie, *Hebrews: The NIV Application Commentary*, 267.

²¹ Koester *Hebrews. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 359. According to Koester, the change of the priesthood found in Hebrews 7:17, was in contradiction to Jewish tradition that saw the Levitical priesthood as a permanent institution.

by virtue of genealogical descent. The writer of Hebrews, drawing on Psalm 110:4, states that God Himself swore Christ into the priesthood.²²

It is clear then, that while God did indeed institute the high priesthood of the Old Testament; this was yet one more way in which the tabernacle foreshadowed the future ministry of Christ. An inferior, temporary system, that became obsolete when Christ “sat down” at the right hand of the Father.²³

CONCLUSION

While the shadows contain an element of truth in them, there is little doubt that the new covenant is superior to the old. Examining the typology and imagery of the Tabernacle, reveals that it was not an end in itself, but was an arrow pointing to the work and ministry of Christ. The Tabernacle, and later the Temple, had little purpose other than this.

This is not to say that the system was useless, nor even to say that it had flaws, in the sense of being imperfect for its purpose. Neither of these points is true. The Tabernacle served exactly the purpose that God had intended. God *meant* it to be temporary from the very beginning. The robes, altars, priests, and sacrifices, were signposts pointing the way to spiritual truth. The truth that they revealed, to those who died before seeing the first coming of Christ, was of utmost importance for it was in these “shadows” that these faithful men and women, by faith, found salvation in the Messiah to come.

²² Guthrie, *Hebrews: The NIV Application Commentary*, 267.

²³ Hebrews 10:12.

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