

Part 1: An Overview of the Redemptive-Historical Story of the Old Testament

E. The Continuity of Scripture

14. From Paradise Lost to the Eternal Temple

Another major biblical theme that shows the continuity of the Old and New Testaments is the story of the journey from Paradise Lost to the Eternal Temple. Let's begin by looking at the testimony of one of the leaders of the early Christian church and how he used the Old Testament to highlight the significance of what God had done in Christ.

Stephen was detested by the Jews, who were particularly frustrated by his wisdom in answering their charges. In view of the great threat he represented, they solicited false testimony of blasphemy against him and brought him before the Sanhedrin—the council of 71 men that was both the legislative body and the supreme court of the Jews. Acts 6:13 summarizes the charge they brought against him: *This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place (the temple) and against the law.*

It's interesting that these are the same issues that came up in Jesus' trial. And, as with Jesus, they're what got Stephen killed. That's because, as John Stott has written, "Nothing was more sacred to the Jews, and nothing more precious, than their temple and their law. The temple was the 'holy place', the sanctuary of God's presence, and the law was 'holy scripture', the revelation of God's mind and will. . . . To speak against either was to speak against God or, .. to blaspheme." Stott, Acts, 128

The Sanhedrin was correct that God's temple and law are very important. In fact, they're at the heart of what God has been doing and continues to do in redeeming this fallen creation of his. But the Jewish leaders were wrong, as they had so often been during Jesus' ministry, in their failure to focus on the heavenly realities represented by the temple building and God's law.

God commissioned the building of the precursor to the temple—the tabernacle—shortly after he delivered his people from Egypt and gave them his laws to live by. It was a sign that God was present with his people. And the particular care taken to build, transport, and service it, represented the difficulties inherent in having a holy God live in the midst of an unholy people.

Ever since the Fall into sin, when Adam and Eve made a bid for independence and afterward found themselves out of communion with God and excluded from the Garden, all of humanity had suffered the effects of separation from God. Not complete separation, for God was still present and graciously providing what his world and its inhabitants needed for day-to-day life.

But God was committed to reestablishing the type of relationship that had existed in Paradise. That was difficult because of the holiness of God and the persistent sinfulness of people. But God worked particularly with Abraham to teach him about his holiness and how he could share in that holiness and live the blessed life he had in mind for him.

But God's instruction reached another level after he delivered Abraham's descendants from Egyptian slavery. He brought them to God's holy mountain where he gave them his laws for life. Among these were laws providing for the people to have the holy God live among them without destroying them.

It was common knowledge, after all, that one could not see God and live. God had made special provision for Moses to see his glory without dying, but his provision to be with and yet separate from Israel was the specially designed and constructed tabernacle or tent of meeting,

After the people obeyed all of Yahweh's instructions about the tabernacle and the work was finished, *"then the cloud [the presence of Yahweh] covered the tent of meeting...and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle"* (Ex. 40:34). The people knew that God was in their midst. And he stayed there, with them in all their travels. And nobody said, "What a lot of bother." This was the greatest thing that Israel could imagine, Yahweh living in their midst, protecting them and leading them wherever they would go.

Indeed, this was nothing less than God formally reestablishing his presence on earth. Once again God communed with the people who were the crown of his creation, at least with a representative portion of them. He again lived with people, as he had lived with Adam and Eve in Paradise. It wasn't quite the same; the Garden of Eden had been a perfect place with sinless people. And this place was not perfect. Nor were the people sinless; in fact, a whole generation was disqualified from entering the Promised Land. But God found a way to live with them. And with that, the people were now ready for the journey to the land of Canaan, the new Eden. And as long as God walked with them, and led them on the way to that earthly paradise, they would not lose their way, nor lose their heart.

From the beginning, however, God's presence with Israel was not an unmixed blessing. For example, although Israel often witnessed the benefits of God's presence in their exodus from Egypt, they also suffered the consequences of his presence at times, when he punished them for their disobedience. It was difficult for an unholy people to live with a holy God. And this would be proven over and over throughout Israel's history.

After several centuries, the tent of meeting disappeared, although the ark of the covenant, representing the throne of God, was still housed in temporary quarters in Israel. King David, enjoying a measure of rest from his enemies had it on his heart to build a permanent house for the Lord—a temple. His desire to do this was a demonstration of his commitment to keep God at the center of Israel's life. It was a commendable desire and a good commitment. However, God informed David that, instead, he would build a house for him, i.e. an enduring dynasty. And it would be David's offspring who would build his temple (2 Sam. 7).

That promise of God to David found fulfillment, initially, at least, through David's son Solomon, who built the temple some years later. And after its completion, as we read in I Kings 8:5, the Lord came to dwell in that temple. That didn't mean, any more than it had in Moses' day, that Yahweh's proper home was in any structure fashioned by human hands. But, by showing up at the temple in all his glory, God was reaffirming his intention to dwell with and among his people.

- It was a magnificent temple; Solomon spared no expense in building and furnishing it. But within just a few hundred years, most of its treasures were traded for Israel's protection, or taken as the spoils of war. And shortly after, it was demolished along with Jerusalem.
- An inferior replacement was built by Zerubbabel in the years following Israel's return from exile.
- Then, a couple decades before Jesus' birth, Herod the Great undertook a major renovation and expansion of Zerubbabel's temple. The main part of Herod's temple was completed before his death in 4 BC, but work on it continued until 63 AD, just seven years before its destruction.

- All of these temples were important insofar as they represented the presence of God with his people. However, since God does not live in houses made by men, they were nothing in themselves.

Indeed, what God had in mind was a more glorious house to come, connected with the arrival of one whom the prophet Haggai described to Zerubbabel (2:7) as *the desired of all nations*. The Lord's word through Haggai was this: "The glory of this house will be greater than the glory of the former house... And in this place I will grant peace" (Hag. 2:9).

Zechariah also spoke of a coming temple and its builder in an allusion to God's promise to David that an offspring of his would build a temple for the Lord. That is to say, although Solomon built a temple, God had another of David's descendants and another temple in mind to more completely fulfill his intentions. Zechariah said (6:12-13): *This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Here is the man whose name is the Branch [a reference to Christ], and he will branch out from his place.... It is he who will build the temple of the LORD, and he will be clothed with majesty and will sit and rule on his throne. And he will be a priest on his throne. And there will be harmony between the two (king and priest).*

Zechariah focused more on the builder than the building, and furthermore implied that the temple was always meant to be more than a building. But just what he meant wouldn't be very clear until Jesus made it so by his words and actions. For example, do you remember the story of Jesus' cleansing the temple (John 2:13-22)? He chased the money changers and vendors out of the temple saying, "How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!"

At that time, John writes (v. 17), "His disciples recalled what was written in Ps 69:9 – "Zeal for your house will consume me." The Psalmist had been in deep distress. He was persecuted, alienated, scorned, and falsely accused – sometimes even by his own brothers (v. 8). He remained faithful to God, but no one understood his great zeal for God's house (cf. v.9), his zeal that separated him not only from the enemies of God, but also from those who were supposed to be his friends.

The disciples now saw that Jesus had the same zeal for God's house that the Psalmist had expressed. And later, Stephen would also share that zeal. The disciples, together with Stephen came to see, moreover, that Psalm 69, if not written with Jesus in mind, was at least substantially fulfilled in him. And they came to understand furthermore, that Jesus himself replaced the physical temple as the most intimate point of contact between God and his world. That's why Jesus had told his challengers that if they destroyed this temple (meaning his own body), he would raise it again in three days.

Both Jesus and Stephen were zealous not as much for the temple building itself, as for what it represented – the point of contact between God and his people. What good is the temple if it's only a flea market and not a house of prayer, where unholy people can commune with the holy God? And, as Stephen implies in his history lesson to the Sanhedrin, real blasphemy is thinking that God can be confined to a building. As important as was the temple, it was just a symbol of a connection with God that could become real only through Jesus. In himself, Jesus represents the essence of temple, the presence of God that destroys all self-centered and man-made religion. That's what got Him killed, and also Stephen, who told everyone who would listen what it meant to connect with God, and also that Jesus was the God-approved one, and the only one through whom it could be done.

Now I want to connect these things to another scripture passage: 2 Cor.6:14-18. The context is that Paul is writing to the Corinthian Christians about the impossibility of fellowship and harmony between the temple of God and idols. He begins – *Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols?*

So far, these are points about which no good Jew would have disagreed. But then the apostle goes on to contribute to a further understanding of the meaning of temple in saying, *For we are the temple of the living God.*

This would have astounded Paul's listeners. It might have sounded almost like blasphemy to call the church of Christ the temple of the living God. But Paul, like Stephen before him, had seen that Jesus was the real temple of God to which the structures of Moses' tabernacle and Solomon's temple merely pointed. And if Jesus is the real temple of God, then those who constitute the body of Christ, are also.

In the manner familiar to the Jews of his day, Paul used scripture from the law, the prophets, and the writings to support his statement that "we are the temple of the living God".

- V.16b is from the law (Lev 26:11-12): *As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people."*

Paul says that that this statement still stands, in other words that the full extent of God's promise to dwell with his people had not been realized by Israel until the death and resurrection of Jesus and what happened at the ascension and Pentecost. But now, God is present with you and in you.

- Next Paul quotes from the prophets, specifically from Isa 52:11,12 and Ezek 20:30 (v.17): *"Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you."*

This is Paul's meaning: "Since God is among and in you, you must be separate and distinct from the world." You see, "if the people of God cease to be separate in moral holiness from the rest of mankind [cf. II Cor. 7:1], they cease to be the people of God" (Barrett, 2 Corinthians, 201.)

- Paul concludes with v.18, which is a modification of a selection from the Scripture called 'the writings' (2 Sam 7:14,8): *"I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty."*

The original words were a promise given by God to David that he would always maintain a Father-Son relationship with David's offspring. But the fulfillment of this promise is in Christ and, consequently, in those who, through union with Christ, participate in his Sonship. Of course, that includes believers of both sexes.

Now let me summarize what I've been saying about the Scriptural view of the Temple of God. Because it's an amazing thing, and it gets at the heart of what God is doing on this earth and at the purpose for our lives.

First of all, the temple is a building—that building with the different courts and places for sacrifice, and inside, the Holy of holies, where the ark of the covenant was kept. The temple was at the center of Israel's religious life, the most important structure they ever had. When Israel was taken into captivity it was an awful disruption and tragedy for families and tribes and the entire nation. But the worst thing about it was the destruction of the temple.

But the temple of God was more than a building; it was a city—Jerusalem, the city of God. The building represented the city, and so what the Psalmist, and Jesus after him, actually experienced was a consuming zeal for the *city of God*. Indeed the building itself meant nothing if the city were destroyed.

But the temple of God was even more than a city, for Jerusalem represented God's whole cause. When Jesus wept over Jerusalem, it was not the city that was his main concern, but that God's cause was being undermined because God's own people were not being who he had called them to be. Nor would they even be able to be the people God intended until he himself—Jesus—became the sacrificial mediator who helped people to get right with the holy God. So the essence of what the temple meant was found only in Christ himself, and afterward in the members of his body, God's true people: the Israel of God.

That's why throughout his ministry, including the temple cleansing, Jesus was saying, "Don't get hung up on the symbols of a connection with God, but concentrate on the reality of it.

- The temple is only good if it helps you to connect with the Father;
- Jerusalem is only a Holy City if you remember the connection with the Father that it represents;
- Israel itself is a worthless nation if it does not represent and model the Kingdom of God where there is harmony between God and his creatures.

And, God is doing even more than this too; in his Spirit-filled people he is rebuilding what was destroyed by sin. He wants the whole creation as his temple, just as it was in Paradise. Then there were no special circumstances necessary for Adam and Eve to meet God, and no special place where it had to happen. They could meet God *anywhere* and *everywhere* because it all was good, with no sin to mess it up. That's the end to which God is bringing us—the new Jerusalem in which there is no temple because the temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb (Rev. 21:22).

In the meantime, God calls us to a holy lifestyle that proves our salvation. (1 Cor 6:19) "*Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.*" God wants to build us into a house fit for a king, by the power of the Holy Spirit. That will hurt at times. But it's necessary. God won't live in a house he can't use but if his house suits his purposes he will fill it with His Glory.

And if that happens, people can't help but sit up and take notice. They may not always like what they see, but they will have to notice; they will have to respond. Everybody has to bow; sooner or later everybody has to worship the king. If those around us do not make it sooner, let it not be the fault of God's house.