

“So he came and announced-good-news of peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father” (vv. 17–18). The promise of a more intimate “access” to God, through the Messiah and in the Spirit, available to Jews and gentiles together, suggests that the temple balustrade was not the only barrier that had been removed by the Messiah’s *korban*. Ephesians may here hint at what the letter to the Hebrews emphatically asserts—that the way is now open “to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus” (Heb 10:19; see 6:19–20). The proximity to God that was formerly granted only to the high priest, and to him only one day per year, was now the constant privilege of all who are united to the Messiah.

In accord with the temple-ecclesiology of the uncontested Pauline letters, Ephesians presents the *ekklēsia* as a temple in which God resides. In contrast to the earlier letters, however, Ephesians appears to portray this temple as in some respects superior to the Jerusalem temple. While the earlier Pauline writings may only view the *ekklēsia* as an *extension* of the Jerusalem institution, Ephesians evidently considers the body of the Messiah to be the foretaste of its greater eschatological *archetype*. At the same time, there is nothing in Ephesians to suggest that the preliminary manifestation of the perfect *archetype* entails the *nullification* of the institution that served as its imperfect type.¹²⁴ As we will see below in our study of Hebrews, it is possible to hold type and archetype together in eschatological tension.

The Pauline tradition shows no interest in the heavenly, cosmic, or eschatological temples.¹²⁵ When drawing upon the rich symbolic field of realities to which the temple might point, it focuses exclusively on the human temple represented by the community of the Messiah.

In doing so, the temple-ecclesiology of the Pauline writings poses no obstacle to the affirmation of an enduring bond between the resurrected Messiah and the Jewish people, the city of Jerusalem, and the land of Israel.

Hebrews

Scholars of the last century often featured the Letter to the Hebrews as the poster-child for an early “Christianity” that had left Judaism and the Jewish people behind. The following characterization of the text by Bruce Chilton and Jacob Neusner is typical:

The Temple in Jerusalem has in Hebrews been replaced by a conception of the divine throne in heaven and the faithful congregation on earth. . . . The author understands Israel, literally, as a thing of the past, the husk of the first, now antiquated covenant. . . . The true high priest has entered once and for all (9:12) within the innermost recess of sanctity, so that no further sacrificial action is necessary or appropriate.¹²⁶

As is evident, the letter's temple-theology has provided the main rationale for this post-Jewish reading of Hebrews. However, recent studies have challenged this scholarly consensus, and a fresh interpretation of the book has emerged that is powerful and compelling.¹²⁷

Like Paul, the author of Hebrews has tunnel vision when reflecting on the field of realities to which the Jerusalem temple points. Whereas Paul focuses exclusively on the *human* temple, Hebrews concentrates on the *heavenly* temple. Chilton and Neusner are reading Paul into Hebrews when they assert that "The Temple in Jerusalem has in Hebrews been replaced by . . . the faithful congregation on earth." There is no temple-ecclesiology in Hebrews, and the significance of that fact will become clear as we proceed.¹²⁸

In describing the heavenly temple and asserting its superiority over its earthly antitype, Hebrews follows the Jewish exegetical tradition in its reading of Exodus 15:17 and Daniel 2:34–35, 44–45:

But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands [*ou cheiro-poiētou*], that is, not of this creation) he entered once and for all into the Holy Place . . . (Heb 9:11–12a)

For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands [*ou gar eis cheiro-poiēta*], a mere copy [*anti-typa*] of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. (Heb 9:24)

. . . [Christ is] a minister [*leitourgos*] in the sanctuary and the true tent that the Lord, and not any mortal [*anthrōpos*], has set up. (Heb 8:2)

Traditional Jewish readings of Exodus 15:17–18 and Daniel 2:34–35 contrast the humanly fashioned temple ("made with hands") of this age with the divinely constructed eschatological temple. Hebrews instead emphasizes the *heavenly* temple.¹²⁹ In other words, Hebrews appears to posit a strictly vertical spatial duality between the earthly and heavenly temples rather than a horizontal

temporal duality. However, this apparent distinction collapses when the eschatological horizon of the latter book is accounted for, as we will soon see.

This stress on the heavenly temple derives from Christological and soteriological concerns: the author focuses on heaven not as the place of angelic worship but as the site of the priestly office and atoning work of Jesus. In a recent volume, David Moffitt has underlined the importance of these points, and has drawn an inference from them that has escaped past commentators.¹³⁰ First, Moffitt shows how the author of Hebrews carefully distinguishes the Davidic genealogy of Jesus from the Aaronic descent of the Jerusalem priesthood. Two texts are significant in this regard:

¹³ Now the one of whom these things are spoken belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar. ¹⁴ For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests. ¹⁵ It is even more obvious when another priest arises, resembling Melchizedek, ¹⁶ one who has become a priest, not through a legal requirement concerning physical descent, but through the power of an indestructible life. (Heb 7:13–16)

Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. (Heb 8:4)

According to the proper order of worship in the earthly sanctuary in Jerusalem, priests descended from Aaron “offer gifts according to the law.” As one descended from David rather than Aaron, Jesus is not qualified to serve as a priest in *that* venue. His qualification for priestly service derives instead from the “power of indestructible life,” which he now possesses—i.e., from his resurrection and ascension (which God enacted in fulfillment of promises made to David and David’s successors). By virtue of his resurrection power, Jesus enters into the heavenly sanctuary and there exercises his priestly vocation. His priesthood is *heavenly, not earthly*.¹³¹

Second, Moffitt argues convincingly that Hebrews views the sacrifice of Jesus as a heavenly act in which he presents his crucified and now glorified human body before the throne of God.¹³² In other words, Hebrews does not focus on the crucifixion itself as a sacrifice, but on its heavenly aftermath. The heavenly setting of Jesus’ atoning work is evident in numerous verses (1:3; 4:14; 6:19–20;

8:2; 9:11–14; 9:23–24; 10:12), and corresponds to the regimen of the Torah in which the death of the animal constitutes only a preliminary stage in the sacrificial process. According to the Torah, the sacrificial act culminates in the presentation of the blood on the altar and (in some cases) in the holy place. Moreover, a heavenly setting for Jesus' sacrifice is required by the letter's unambiguous assertion that Jesus could not function as an earthly priest. Since Jesus is qualified to serve as priest *only* in the heavenly sanctuary (and not in its earthly antitype), the saving sacrifice which he offers must have its locus in that heavenly setting.

Moffitt infers from these two points a conclusion that challenges past readings of Hebrews:

The author emphasizes Jesus' ascension and heavenly session in part because *he acknowledges the authority of the Law, at least on earth*. Jesus can serve as high priest only if he is in heaven. . . . *The authority of the Law remains valid on earth*, and on earth a lawfully appointed order of priests already exists. Therefore, Jesus, being from the tribe of Judah (7:14), cannot serve in that priesthood.¹³³

Now we see the significant implications of the fact that Hebrews lacks any temple-ecclesiology, or even a trace of temple-Christology: such temple-theologies attend to *earthly* realities signified by the Jerusalem sanctuary or the desert tabernacle. In a literary work that stresses so forcefully the overwhelming superiority of Jesus' priesthood and sacrifice to the institutions of the Torah, which prefigure them, it would be difficult to interpret temple-ecclesiology or temple-Christology as merely *extensions* or *archetypes* of Torah institutions. If Jesus were an earthly priest and his sacrifice were an earthly sacrifice, then the logic of Hebrews would entail the obsolescence, abrogation, and *replacement* of these Torah institutions. But since his priesthood and his sacrifice are both heavenly, they may *coexist*—at least in the interim period between the resurrection of Jesus and his return—with the earthly institutions that prefigure them.

Because Jesus has entered into the heavenly sanctuary with his own body and blood, an atonement has been effected whose transformative power transcends that available through the priestly institutions ordained by the Torah: "For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies

those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!” (Heb 9:13–14). Moreover, his priestly mediation now gives his followers a preliminary access to the heavenly throne of God, to which the holy of holies of the temple corresponds (Heb 6:19–20; 10:19–22). But since Jesus has accomplished this as a resurrected embodied human being, the ultimate goal for his “brothers” (Heb 2:5–18) is not heavenly existence as disembodied spirits but resurrection life in “the coming world” (*tēn oikoumenēn tēn mellousan*; Heb 2:5), the ultimate land of promise (Heb 4:1–11). Thus, the *vertical* spatial duality of Hebrews’ temple-theology unfolds in a way that reveals its underlying *horizontal* temporal duality.

Recognition of the crucial role played by *unrealized* eschatology in Hebrews characterizes the fresh reading of Hebrews offered in recent scholarship. Richard Hays succinctly summarizes this fundamental insight: “Hebrews—despite its conviction that Jesus has in fact completed his atoning work in the heavenly sanctuary—retains a remarkably open-ended eschatology that continues to look to the future for the consummation of salvation.”¹³⁴ The book’s temple-theology does not merely coexist with this “open-ended eschatology,” but is formulated for the purpose of expressing it. This becomes most evident in Hebrews 9:6–10:

⁶ Such preparations having been made, the priests go continually into the first tent to carry out their ritual duties; ⁷ but only the high priest goes into the second, and he but once a year, and not without taking the blood that he offers for himself and for the sins committed unintentionally by the people. ⁸ By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the sanctuary has not yet been disclosed as long as the first tent is still standing. ⁹ This is a symbol of the present time [*hētis parabolē eis ton kairon ton enestēkota*], during which gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, ¹⁰ but deal only with food and drink and various baptisms, regulations for the body imposed until the time comes to set things right [*mechri kairou diorthōseōs epikeimena*].

As Jesper Svartvik has argued, the distinction between the first and second tent symbolizes the distinction between the present world subject to the power of death (Heb 2:14) and the coming world of the resurrection (Heb 7:16).¹³⁵ The

first tent—the world subject to death—is “still standing,” and so “the way into the sanctuary has not yet been [fully] disclosed” (Heb 9:8).

What is so important to the author—and, hence, also to the reader—is that *the outer tent is still standing*. In other words, in the ninth chapter there is a contrast between the present and the future. The author states that he is living in the present time (9:9: *eis ton kairon ton enestēkota*), but that he longs for “the time of a better order” (9:10: *mechri kairou diorthōseōs epikeimena*).¹³⁶

Our “hope” enters even now into the “inner shrine behind the curtain” (Heb 6:19), but hope is not yet full possession (Heb 11:1). The followers of Jesus already partake of an appetizer consisting of the “powers of the age to come” (*dynameis te mellontos aiōnos*; Heb 6:5), but they are not yet able to recline at table and enjoy the full feast.

The eschatological temple-theology of Hebrews also provides the rationale for the book’s interpretation of the “new covenant” of Jeremiah 31. The “first tent” (Heb 9:2) corresponds to the “first covenant” (Heb 9:1), and the “second tent” represents both the “new covenant” and the world to come. This straightforward correlation leads to a surprising conclusion: in the words of Svartvik, “the time of the new covenant *has not been realized*, not yet.”¹³⁷ Svartvik here follows the reading of Hebrews proposed by Peter Tomson:

While the author is clear on the superbness of the worship of the “new” covenant, he speaks of the “old” as something that still continues and that is symbolized in the temple service in the present time. The work of Christ consists, then, not so much in disbanding the worship prescribed by the old covenant, but in fulfilling its true significance while “the first tent still stands.” . . . *The “new covenant,” if we may thus accentuate it, is valid only in heaven, not yet upon earth.* The “good things,” of which Christ is the direct image, are yet to come. In fact, the whole Platonizing allegory remains within the eschatological framework supposed in the original text from Jeremiah . . .¹³⁸

Svartvik reinforces Tomson’s reading by attending to the use of the verb *palaiōō* (“to grow old”) in Hebrews 8:13: “By speaking of a new covenant, he implies that the first one is old [*pe-palaiōken*]. And anything old [*to de palaioumnenon*] and ageing is ready to disappear [*engus a-phanismou*].”¹³⁹ As Svartvik points out, this verb appears only twice in Hebrews. We find it first in

the opening chapter of the book in a citation from Psalm 102:25–26, where it refers to the transitory nature of the present order of the world: “In the beginning, Lord, you founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands; they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out [*palaiōthēsontai*] like clothing . . .” (Heb 1:10–11).¹⁴⁰ Thus, what is “ready to disappear” is not “Judaism” in favor of “Christianity,” but a world subjected to the power of death in favor of a world renewed by the power of indestructible life.

The conviction expressed in Hebrews that the first covenant is growing “old” and is “ready to disappear” cannot be separated from the book’s claim that the risen and ascended priestly-Messiah will soon return and transform the present order of the world:

³⁶ For you need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised. ³⁷ For yet “in a very little while, the one who is coming will come and will not delay; ³⁸ but my righteous one will live by faith. My soul takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back.” ³⁹ But we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so are saved. (Heb 10:36–39)

Like the apostle Paul, the writer of Hebrews possesses a vivid anticipation of the coming reign of the Messiah, and this anticipation shapes the contours of his theology of the temple and the covenant.

The eschatological tension of Hebrews explains the apparent contradiction posed by the author’s writing an urgent letter of instruction and exhortation to those who, as partakers of the “new covenant,” supposedly no longer need such instruction (Jer 31:33–34). The comments of Mark Nanos are apropos:

The author and the addressees know that such a *new* covenant has not in fact been experienced—witnessed by no less than the need to write this letter to ‘teach’ people who are not obeying the covenant as if the ‘teaching’ (= Torah) was now written on their hearts or minds. . . . Those who experience Jer. 31 do not need to have their ‘faculties trained by practice to distinguish good from evil’ (Heb. 5:14). . . . Jer. 31 cannot be accurately used to describe the experience of any community—yet.¹⁴¹

Svartvik draws the same conclusion about the proper understanding of the new covenant of Jeremiah 31, and states his position in a series of rhetorical

questions: “Have all hearts of stone disappeared? Is it true that Christians need not teach each other? Do all Christians know the Lord—from the smallest to the greatest?”¹⁴² For Hebrews, the new covenant is in the process of being realized, just as the first covenant is in the process of growing “old.” But neither process has yet been completed.

As David Moffitt points out, the eschatological tension of Hebrews also reveals the purpose for which the book was written: “Whether or not the audience is presently experiencing persecution, the recognition of this eschatological metanarrative suggests that the question of the community’s falling back into some kind of Judaism they had already left behind is simply not the point at hand. The eschatological time clock is the issue.”¹⁴³ In the face of suffering and unexpected delay, the hearers are in danger of losing their hope in the coming of the Messiah. The author writes to give them courage to persevere.

The two interconnected dualities of Hebrews—one vertical and spatial, the other horizontal and temporal—support the book’s contention that the laws of the Torah for Israel’s sanctuary are prophetic or typological, and thus transitional or temporary. However, until “the one who is coming will come” (Heb 12:37), the order of the earthly sanctuary remains in effect. It is not replaced by a superior earthly reality, that is, the *ekklēsia*. If Hebrews originates in the pre-70 period, this would mean that the author acknowledges the legitimacy of the Jerusalem temple in the period before the Coming One comes. If, on the other hand, Hebrews derives from the period after 70, then the author treats the destruction of the Jerusalem temple as an eschatological sign that the current order of the world will soon pass away. In that case, Hebrews begins to look much like other Jewish texts of the same era, such as L.A.B., 4 Ezra, and 2 Baruch, all of which express hope in the establishment of a new order of worship transcending that experienced by Israel in the past.

These three Jewish texts from the period immediately following the destruction of the Jerusalem temple also raise the possibility that the heavenly temple of Hebrews, “not made with hands,” is envisioned by the author as ultimately *becoming* the eschatological temple.¹⁴⁴ In 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch, in particular, the heavenly temple is inextricably connected to the heavenly city and land, and all three images together comprise Israel’s future hope.¹⁴⁵ The eschatological imagery of Hebrews depicts the world to come as *land* (Heb 3:7–

4:11; 11:14–16) and *city* (Heb 11:10, 16; 12:22; 13:14), but not explicitly as *temple*. However, the eschatological *city* is called Mount Zion (Heb 12:22)—i.e., the Temple Mount—and is associated with angels and heavenly worship (Heb 12:23–24). In context, the immediate contrast is between the eschatological city (i.e., the new covenant) and Mount Sinai (i.e., the first covenant), but readers cannot help seeing the connection between Mount Sinai and the tabernacle first constructed there. In coming to the heavenly Mount Zion, the followers of Jesus also come to the “sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (Heb 12:24), and readers know that this atoning blood is found now in the heavenly sanctuary. In the final analysis, it appears that the two dualities of Hebrews coalesce, and the heavenly temple “not made with hands” becomes the eschatological temple. More precisely, we might say that the heavenly *holy of holies* becomes the eschatological temple/city, for the temporal and ontological duality symbolized by the spatial separation of the holy of holies from the holy place shall itself be abrogated.

I would underline the observation that Hebrews speaks explicitly of an eschatological city and land but not of an eschatological temple. In a sense, there is no temple in the eschatological vision of this book, for the city and the land are themselves equivalent to the heavenly holy of holies. Yet, as Moffitt stresses, that city and that land are “physical” realities, just as the resurrected form of Jesus is truly a “physical” body. Moreover, while the city and the land of the future age are distinguished from the city and land of the present age, the two ontological orders must have some relation to one another—just as the future world as a whole is distinct from the present world and yet related to it.

Hebrews does not delegitimize the traditional Jewish order of worship in the age before the coming of the Coming One, nor does it negate the significance of the city of Jerusalem, the land of Israel, or the Jewish people. The traditional scholarly view that the author viewed Israel as “a thing of the past, the husk of the first, now antiquated covenant” should be discarded.¹⁴⁶

Revelation

Like the book of Hebrews, the Revelation of John focuses attention on the heavenly temple—but, unlike Hebrews, without any polemical intent. Revelation offers no comment on the imperfection of the earthly temple, but instead looks