

## The Temple Motif in Scripture and Its Impact on the Theology of Worship

In our world today, temples come in many shapes and sizes. As English speaking Christians, we usually don't call our places of worship "temples." We simply call them "churches." In fact, many of us would probably feel uncomfortable calling where we worship a "temple."

What do you think of when you hear the term "temple"? The Bible uses the term "temple" in various ways. This paper will explore the temple motif as found in Scripture, tracing its roots from the tabernacle of Moses, through the temples of Solomon, Zerubbabel and Herod in Jerusalem, to the other uses of the term in Scripture. Then we will discuss briefly the impact the temple and its worship have had on our theology and practice of worship today.

### The Terms

Our English word "temple" is derived from the Latin word *templum* which "originally signified an uncovered area marked off by boundaries; especially the place marked off by augurs [priests] to be excepted from all profane uses."<sup>1</sup>

The NIV uses the word "temple" as the translation for a couple of different Hebrew words. The most common Hebrew expression in the Bible for the temple is *בֵּית יְהוָה* (*Bet YHVH*) which literally means "house of Jehovah" or simply *הַבִּתָּה* (*HaBet*) "the house" (1 Kings 6:1). The NIV also translates the word *הַכֹּל* (*Hekal*) as "temple" (Isaiah 6:1). A *Hekal* is literally a "hall."

The temple of the Bible really can be divided into three parts: the *אֹולֶם* (*Olam*), i.e., the front portico or porch; the *Hekal*, which was the hall or building proper; and within the *Hekal*, the *דְּבִיר* (*Debir*), which was the inner sanctuary or shrine, also called the *קְדֻשָּׁה קְדוֹשִׁים* (*Kodesh kodashim*), the "Holy of Holies" or "Most Holy Place."

The inspired writers also used other words in reference to the temple. The word *מִקְדָּשׁ* (*Mikdash*), for example, comes from the Hebrew word "holy" and is translated consistently as "sanctuary"<sup>2</sup> (Exodus 25:8). The word *Mikdash* was used to refer both to the temple in Jerusalem and also the portable temple, the tabernacle, used in the wilderness.

The tabernacle was also called the *אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד* (*Ohel Moed*), literally, "the tent of meeting" (Exodus 27:21). The tabernacle, however, was not primarily a place where God's people met for communal worship, but rather where God met with man.

Tied to that concept is the word which will help us best understand the purpose and worship of the temple in Scripture: *מִשְׁקָן* (*Mishkan*). Consistently translated in the NIV as "tabernacle," *Mishkan* comes from the verb *שָׁקַן* (*Shakan*) meaning "to dwell" (Exodus 25:8,9). The verb *Shakan* is used, especially in the Pentateuch, to describe God's dwelling presence with man (Exodus 24:15; 40:35).

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<sup>1</sup> (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14495a.htm>) For the ancient Romans, a temple didn't need to be a covered building, just a space set apart for sacred use.

<sup>2</sup> I find it ironic that, though we feel uncomfortable calling our places of worship "temples," for some reason we have no problem calling them "sanctuaries."

This dwelling presence of God came to be known in the Talmud and other rabbinic writings as the *שכינה* (*Shekinah*). The tabernacle and the temple were the place where God's Name – where God himself – dwelt among his people.

But isn't God present everywhere? As Paul told the philosophers of Athens, "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hand" (Acts 17:24).

God *is* present everywhere. The temple, however, was a visible representation of God's covenant with Israel that he would dwell with them and be their God and they would be his people (Leviticus 26:11,12; see also Exodus 33:14, where God promised that his "Presence" would go with the Israelites).

**The temple was the visible representation of God's covenant presence with his people.**

In fact, God's *Shekinah*, his dwelling presence, was actually visible to the human eye at different times in both the tabernacle and the temple (Exodus 40:34,35; 1 Kings 8:10,11).<sup>3</sup> We will see the concept of the *Shekinah*, God's dwelling presence, throughout our discussion.

### The Tabernacle

Three months after crossing the Red Sea, the Children of Israel camped at the foot of Mount Sinai. They shook in fear as the *Shekinah* descended upon the mountain in lightning and thunder and smoke.

As the people trembled below, Moses stood on the mountain in God's presence. There God told Moses to collect from the Israelites a large offering of materials. "Then" God told him, "have them make a sanctuary (*Mikdash*) for me, and I will dwell (*Shakan*) among them. Make this tabernacle (*Mishkan*) and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you" (Exodus 25:8,9).

The tabernacle itself was a portable building, a tent made of layers of embroidered linen, protected by layers of goat hair, covered by ram skins dyed red and the hides of sea cows.<sup>4</sup> The tent itself was 45 feet long, 15 feet wide and 15 feet tall.

The *Mishkan* was divided into two rooms by a large blue, purple and scarlet curtain ornamented with cherubim. The first room was larger than the second. It was called simply "the Holy Place." In it were placed three pieces of furniture: a gold lampstand, a gold incense altar and wooden table overlaid in gold on which was placed the bread of the Presence. As one entered the Holy Place, the gold lampstand would stand to your left, the table of the Presence to the right and the incense altar would be directly in front of you (between you and the great curtain). The use of these will be discussed later as we look at the worship of the tabernacle and temple.

On the other side of the curtain was a much smaller room called "the Holy of Holies" or "the Most Holy Place." Only one piece of furniture was placed in it: the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark of the Covenant was a wooden box 3.75 feet by 4.25 feet, overlaid in gold. The Ark had two gold rings on each side through which poles were inserted. The poles were never to be

<sup>3</sup> The *Cavod Adonai* (כבוד יהוה), the "glory of the LORD" is closely related to this concept (cf. Exodus 24:15-17; 40:34,35).

<sup>4</sup> Probably a *dugong*, a mammal closely related to the manatee.

removed. Inside the Ark, Moses placed the stone tablets of the Law, a gold jar of manna and Aaron's staff which had budded (Hebrews 9:4).

On top of the Ark was placed the "atonement cover." On the atonement cover, two golden cherubim were affixed facing each other. The atonement cover, or mercy seat, was where God would meet and speak with Moses (Exodus 25:22). It was his throne, the place of his *Shekinah* (1 Samuel 4:4).

The courtyard of the tabernacle measured 150 feet long by 30 feet wide and was surrounded by a large fence. The tabernacle itself was on the far western side of the courtyard. In front of it was placed a bronze altar, 4.5 feet high and 7.5 feet long and wide. On each corner of the altar horns were affixed.<sup>5</sup> All of the sacrifices commanded on Mount Sinai were performed on this altar. Near the altar was placed a large bronze basin filled with water for the ceremonial washing of the priests. For an artist's rendering and schematic of the tabernacle see Appendix 1.

Moses tells us that when the tabernacle was finished, "the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the Lord (*Cavod Adonai*) filled the tabernacle (*Mishkan*). Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting (*Ohel Moed*) because the cloud had settled upon it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle" (Exodus 40:34,35).

From that time on, "the cloud of the LORD" was over the tabernacle day and night. Moses adds that at night the cloud was filled with fire. This was the pillar of cloud and pillar of fire that led the Israelites throughout the wilderness. This was the *Shekinah*, God's dwelling presence among the Israelites. And it always came to rest on the tabernacle, the *Mishkan*, the visible representation of God's covenant dwelling among his people.

### Solomon's Temple

After the conquest of the Promised Land, the tabernacle came to rest at Shiloh, a town of Ephraim in north central Palestine. There it stayed throughout the time of the Judges. In 1 Samuel 1:9, the tabernacle is referred to as the "LORD's temple" (*Hekal*), implying that the tabernacle by that time was part of a larger, more permanent building structure.

When David established Jerusalem as the capital of his empire, he ordered that the Ark of the Covenant (and presumably the tabernacle) be brought to Jerusalem. But when David settled into his newly built palace, he thought to himself, "Here I am, living in a palace of cedar, while the ark of God remains in a tent" (2 Samuel 7:2).

David wanted to build a more permanent *Mishkan*, a *Bet YHVH*, a "house of the LORD." But God told him, "No." David's son, Solomon, would build God's temple. To his credit, David humbly accepted God's will.

When Solomon assumed the throne of his father, he set out to build a temple for the Lord. The place had already been chosen. After David, in his pride, counted the number of men in his army, God sent a plague on Israel. In order to end the plague, God commanded David to build an altar on the "threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite" (2 Samuel 24:18). That threshing

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<sup>5</sup> On these horns the priests were to smear some of the blood from each sacrifice (cf. Exodus 29:12; Leviticus 4:7,18,25,30). The horns also seem to be a place of refuge for those seeking protection and justice. Adonijah, for example, clung to the horns of the altar after his failed attempt to be king instead of Solomon (1 Kings 1:50). This may be the source of God's name "Horn of salvation" found throughout Scripture (2 Samuel 22:2,3; Luke 1:68,69).

floor was located on Mt. Moriah, where God had commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. It was there on Mt. Moriah that God had provided a ram to be offered as a sacrifice as a substitute for Isaac. On that day, Abraham gave the mountain a new name, יהוה ירעא (YHVH Yireh), “the LORD Will Provide” (Genesis 22:14).

There on Mt. Moriah, at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite, adjacent to his palace, Solomon built the temple. He spared no expense. He imported hundreds of giant cedars from Lebanon. He conscripted tens of thousands of workers. Solomon’s splendid temple was 90 feet long, 30 feet wide and 45 feet tall. The temple was a stone structure, lined on the interior with cedar. No stone was visible on the inside of the temple. The interior walls of the temple were carved with decorative gourds and flowers and overlaid completely in gold.

The Holy of Holies was once again a square room, measuring 30 feet tall, wide and long. In the Holy of Holies, Solomon placed two carved wooden cherubim overlaid in gold. Each cherubim was 15 feet tall and wide. A decorative blue, purple and crimson was once again hung to divide the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place (1 Chronicles 3:14), but it seems that Solomon also placed carved wooden doors made of olive wood between the two rooms (1 Kings 6:31,32).

Two giant pine doors served as the entrance to the temple. The entire temple was adorned with motifs of cherubim, palm trees and open flowers. Two bronze pillars measuring 27 feet tall and 18 feet around were placed set in the front portico or open porch to hold up the roof. The pillars were called *Jakin* (“He establishes”) and *Boaz* (“In him is strength”). The pillars were adorned with motifs of lilies and pomegranates.

Solomon also built an inner courtyard for the priests, where the altar and “brazen sea” (the wash basin) were placed. A large outer courtyard for the people was also constructed.

The ornate brazen sea was decorated with hundreds of gourds and sat upon the backs twelve carved bulls facing outward. The brazen sea measured 7.5 feet tall and 45 feet in diameter and could hold thousands of gallons of water.

Solomon had the Ark of the Covenant once again placed within the Holy of Holies. By this time, the Ark only contained the two stone tablets of the Law (1 Kings 8:9). The Holy Place was furnished in the same way as the tabernacle with the incense altar and the table for the bread of the Presence. But instead of only one lampstand, Solomon made 10 golden lampstands and placed five on each side of the sanctuary.

In all, it took seven years, tens of thousands of workers and what would be today millions of dollars in resources to build Solomon’s Temple. The Temple stood from roughly 960 BC until its destruction by the Babylonians in 586 BC. For an artist’s rendering and schematic of Solomon’s Temple, see Appendix 2.

When the temple was completed, Solomon gathered the people to dedicate it to God. After the Ark was placed by the priests in the Holy of Holies, the *Shekinah* descended visibly on the temple:

When the priests withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of the LORD. And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud for the glory of the LORD filled the temple. Then Solomon said, “The LORD has said that he would dwell (*Shakan*) in a dark cloud; I have indeed built a magnificent temple for you, a place for you to dwell forever. (1 Kings 8:10-13)

Throughout its history, the first temple continually vacillated from periods of misuse and disuse to times of repair and reform. During the reign of Solomon's son, Rehoboam, Shishak king of Egypt attacked Jerusalem and carried off many of the treasures of the temple (2 Chronicles 12:9). It was renovated under King Joash (2 Kings 12). The temple was again looted by the northern King Jehoash (2 Kings 14:14). King Ahaz of Judah (2 Kings 6:8) also plundered the temple to pay of Tiglath-Pileser, king of Assyria. He also built a new altar in the temple courts and changed the worship to conform more to that of the Assyrians. King Hezekiah of Judah once again reformed and restored the temple (2 Kings 19). It was desecrated by his son, Manasseh (2 Kings 21:4-9), only to once again be restored by his son, Josiah (2 Kings 22,23).

Due to Israel's constant rebellion, God sent his prophets, most notably Jeremiah, to warn the people that the city of Jerusalem and the temple would be destroyed. In 598 BC, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon entered Jerusalem and carried off the treasures of the temple (2 Kings 24:13). In 586 BC, he returned, this time to destroy the city Jerusalem and level the temple. The visible representation of God's covenant presence was gone. God's people were carried into exile to the distant land of Babylonia.

### **Ezekiel's Temple**

While God's people sat in exile in Babylonia, God gave the Prophet Ezekiel a vision of another temple (Ezekiel 40-48). This ideal temple and city that God allowed Ezekiel to see and measure in his vision were never built here on earth. A schematic of Ezekiel's temple is found in Appendix 3. Note the massive size of the temple and the temple complex. This is not a literal, physical temple that would be built here on earth.

Though many orthodox Jews believe this is the "third temple" which the Messiah will occupy when he comes, Ezekiel's temple seems to be a symbolic or typical temple. It represents God's covenant relationship with his people through the coming Messiah and the heaven that belongs to them. Again, the *Shekinah*, God's dwelling presence with his people is emphasized. Ezekiel ended his description of the new temple and city by giving Jerusalem a new name: *שְׁמָה יְהוָה* (YHVH Shamah), "The LORD is there" (Ezekiel 48:36).

### **The Second Temple**

With the ascension of Cyrus the Great of Persia in 538 BC, God fulfilled what he had promised through his prophets. The Jewish exiles in Babylon were allowed to return to Jerusalem. Cyrus sent with them the treasures that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple. Upon arriving, the returnees immediately rebuilt the altar and began to rebuild the temple.

Ezra shares with us the bittersweet reaction to the laying of the temple's foundations:

When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments and with trumpets, and the Levites (the sons of Asaph) with cymbals, took their places to praise the LORD, as prescribed by David king of Israel. With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the LORD: "He is good; his love endures forever." And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping. (Ezra 3:10-13)

Due to opposition by the Samaritans and procrastination by the returnees, the temple took 20 years to build and wasn't finished until 516 BC, exactly seventy years after the destruction of the first temple. The second temple is named for Zerubbabel, the Jewish prince whom Cyrus appointed as governor of Judah, and who spearheaded the reconstruction of the temple.

God has not revealed to us many details of Zerubbabel's temple. Due to the reaction of the older exiles who had seen Solomon's temple, we can only assume that it paled in comparison to the glory of the first temple.

It seems by this time that the Ark of the Covenant no longer existed. Theories abound as to the fate of the Ark of the Covenant, but God has not revealed to us what happened. We can assume that it was carried off during one of the many lootings of the temple or at its destruction in 586 BC. The Holy of Holies from this time on would simply be a dark, empty room.

When Zerubbabel's temple was dedicated in 516 BC, the Jewish remnant celebrated with great joy. This time, however, God's visible presence did not descend on the temple.

The worship and sacrifices of the temple resumed, but soon God's people once again fell into spiritual apathy and idolatry.

Following the conquest of Judea by Alexander the Great in 332 BC, the Jewish people came under the rule of the Ptolemaic Kingdom until 200 BC when King Antiochus III of Syria defeated King Ptolemy V Epiphanes of Egypt. At that moment, Judea became a part of the Seleucid Empire of Syria.

Under the Seleucid King Antiochus IV Epiphanes (215-164 BC), the temple was looted, sacrifices were halted and circumcision was forbidden as Antiochus sought to fully Hellenize the Jewish people. A statue of Zeus was placed in the temple and pigs were offered as sacrifices to him.

Such blasphemy was appalling to the faithful Jews living in Judea. Under the leadership of a family of Jewish priests called the Maccabees, the Greeks were driven out of Jerusalem. The temple was purified and rededicated to the service of the Lord. The Jewish festival of Hanukkah celebrates the rededication of the temple.

The Maccabees (also called the Hasmoneans) ruled as kings and high priests of Judea until the year 67 BC, when the Roman general Pompey captured Jerusalem and placed it under Roman rule.

In the year 36 BC, the Romans placed a man named Herod, an Idumean (from Edom), as king (governor) of the Roman province of Judea. Though not considered by many Jews to be Jewish, Herod was a practitioner of the Jewish faith.

Herod's jealous and violent nature is well attested in Scripture. Yet, he has received the moniker "Herod the Great" by historians due to his grand architectural achievements, most notably, the reconstruction of the temple.

In order to gain favor with the Jewish population which considered him a foreigner and to bring fame and glory to his name, Herod set out to build a bigger and better temple. Though it is technically a third temple, it is still considered by most to be a continuation of the second temple. This is in part due to the Jewish belief that the third and most glorious temple won't be built until the coming of the Messiah (cf. Ezekiel's temple above).

Herod's temple is by far the grandest manifestation of the temple in Jerusalem. In order to achieve their approval to his lofty goal, Herod arranged with the Jewish leaders that the temple worship and sacrifices would be carried out uninterrupted during the construction. Begun in 20 BC, the entire project took nearly 50 years to complete. Herod the Great never saw its completion, having died in 4 BC. In fact, the temple probably was not finished until only a few years before its destruction in AD 70.

Though Scripture does not record for us any detailed description of the temple or temple mount, the Jewish historian Josephus as well as the ancient rabbinic writing, the *Mishnah*, paint a detailed portrait of the temple complex.

Herod first began his massive project by expanding the temple mount to an area of 37 acres (roughly the size of 25 football fields). At the time, the temple mount was the largest manmade structure on the planet.

On the south end of the temple mount, where Solomon's palace had once stood, Herod built the Royal Stoa, a giant roofed porch supported by 162 thirty foot tall Roman columns. On the northwest corner of the temple mount towered the Antonia Fortress which housed a Roman garrison tasked with keeping the rebellious and zealous Jewish population in line. It was from this fortress that the detachment of soldiers descended and arrested Paul during the riot recorded in Acts 21.

The temple itself sat just off center of the temple mount, facing east.<sup>6</sup> Though the temple complex took decades to complete, the temple itself was constructed in 18 months. It measured a massive 150 feet high, wide and long.

The temple would be entered by passing through the Royal Stoa where people often gathered and Jesus most likely conducted many of his discourses.

From the Royal Stoa, you would pass down into the large outer Court of the Gentiles. Edersheim tells us:

According to Jewish tradition, it formed a square of 750 feet. Its name is derived from the fact that it was open to all—Jews or Gentiles—provided they observed the prescribed rules of decorum and reverence. In this court tradition places eating and sleeping apartments for the Levites, and a synagogue. But, despite pharisaic punctiliousness, the noise, especially on the eve of the Passover, must have been most disturbing. For there the oxen, sheep, and doves selected as fit for sacrifices were sold as in a market; and here were those tables of the money-changers which the Lord overthrew when He drove from His Father's house them that bought and sold (Matt 21:12; John 2:14). Within a short distance, in the court, a marble screen 4 1/2 feet high, and beautifully ornamented, bore Greek and Latin inscriptions, warning Gentiles not to proceed, on pain of death.<sup>7</sup>

From the Court of the Gentiles, one would walk up to a higher terrace called the Court of the Women. Edersheim tells us, "The Court of the Women obtained its name, not from its appropriation to the exclusive use of women, but because they were not allowed to proceed farther, except for sacrificial purposes."<sup>8</sup> The Court of the Women measured 200 feet squared

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<sup>6</sup> The archaeologist Dr. Leen Ritmeyer has conclusively proven that the temple stood where the Dome of the Rock stands today.

<sup>7</sup> *The Temple: Its Ministries and Services*, p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p. 19.

and was the location of the thirteen trumpet-shaped boxes in which God's people placed their offerings. It was there that Jesus observed the widow who gave all she had.

From the Court of the Women, one passed to the smaller Court of Israel, which led up a few steps to the Court of the Priests. The latter contained the altar which towered 15 feet high and was at least 48 feet wide and long. Between the altar and the Temple proper, slightly to the south was the brazen sea supported by twelve colossal lions.

From there, the priests would walk up twelve stairs to the porch of the temple. Josephus paints an awe-inspiring picture of the temple façade. "To strangers as they approached it, it seemed in the distance like a mountain clad with snow; for any part not covered with gold was of the purest white."<sup>9</sup>

As in the tabernacle, when you entered the Holy Place, to the left you would see a golden lampstand, to the right, the table with the bread of the Presence, and directly in front of you, the altar of incense. Dividing the Holy Place from the dark and empty Holy of Holies, hung an ornate and thick curtain, which was torn in two from top to bottom at the moment our Savior breathed his last. An artist's rendering and schematic of Herod's Temple can be found in Appendix 4.

Just as Jesus prophesied, in the year AD 70, the Roman legions marched into Jerusalem, destroying the city and leveling the temple. Not one stone was left on another (Luke 21:5,6). Today a Muslim mosque called the *Dome of the Rock* sits on the temple mount in the very place the temple once stood. God's people broke their covenant relationship with him. God's *Shekinah* had departed from his obstinate and impenitent people.

### The Worship of the Tabernacle/Temple

What was the worship like in the tabernacle and temple? To understand, we must return to what the temple was in its essence. It was the *Ohel Moed*, the tent of meeting – again, not primarily where God's people met for communal worship, but rather where God met man. The temple was the *Mishkan*, the place of God's *Shekinah*, his dwelling presence. The temple was the visible representation of God's covenant presence with his people. Worship in the temple, therefore, was an encounter with God himself, or better yet, it was a conversation with God.

### God Speaks to His People

The primary activity of the temple was sacrifice. The book of Leviticus is replete with different types of sacrifices. The one overlying theme among the sacrifices is the concept of *substitution*.

Human nature tends to view the sacrifices commanded in the Old Testament as primarily man's service to God. This was the error into which many of God's Old Testament people fell. With their act of sacrifice, they believed they were appeasing or pleasing God. The truth, however, is that the sacrifices were primarily God's service to man. God was speaking to them in the sacrifices.

Payment for sin needed to be made. "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). "Without the shedding of blood, there can be no forgiveness" (Hebrews 9:22). But instead of

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<sup>9</sup> Josephus: *The Jewish War*, p. 360.

demanding their blood, God offered his people a substitute – a lamb, a goat, a calf. That substitute pointed ahead to the vicarious sacrifice that Messiah would offer once and for all on the altar of the cross. Through the sacrifice, the worshiper received the forgiveness Messiah would win for him or her with his vicarious death.

**The sacrifices were primarily God's service to man.**

In fact, before every sacrifice, the person presenting the sacrifice would lay his hands on the animal and confess his sins. In doing so, the guilt of those sins would be transferred to the substitute, just as Jesus took on himself the sins of the world.

The animal would then be killed and drained of its blood. The blood would be sprinkled on the horns of the altar. Then, depending on the type of sacrifice, all or some of the animal would be burnt on the altar – dedicating it to God. The smoke of the offering signified acceptance of the sacrifice on the part of God. It was an “aroma pleasing to God” (Leviticus 1:9).

The sacrifices of the Old Testament, however, were *mediated* sacrifices, i.e., they required a mediator, the priest. The priest was the intercessor between God and man. Again, this pointed the worshiper’s eyes ahead to the Messiah who would be intercessor between God and man, who would reconcile us with God.

Not all of the sacrifices, however, were offered primarily for sins committed. Peace offerings were given out of thanks to God for blessings received and as a celebration of the fellowship the worshiper enjoyed with God. Again, however, that peace and fellowship with God could only be enjoyed through the shedding of blood for sin.

The peace offering was an expression of God’s *Shekinah*, his covenant presence with the worshiper. A part of the offering was burnt on the altar for God. The other part was shared by the worshiper and his family. The peace offering was literally a fellowship meal with God.

Sacrifices were offered day in and day out in the temple. Every morning and every evening dozens, if not hundreds of animals were killed, drained of their blood and burnt on the altar. The sounds of bleating sheep, the sight of blood on and around the altar, the smell of burning flesh would fill the temple courts every day, especially during the high festivals.

Three times a year, every Jew was to journey to the temple for the pilgrim festivals of the Jewish calendar: Passover (Leviticus 23:4-6; Numbers 28:16-25), Pentecost (Leviticus 23:15-22; Numbers 28:26-31) and the Feast of the Tabernacles (Leviticus 23:33-43; Numbers 29:12-40). Passover remembered how God rescued his people from death and slavery with the blood of a lamb; Pentecost thanked God for the gifts of the harvest and the gift of the Law given on Mt. Sinai; and the Feast of Tabernacles remembered God’s providence as his people lived in tents in the wilderness and reminded them to look ahead to their permanent home in heaven.

The other great high festival was *Yom Kippur*, the Great Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16; Numbers 29:7-11). On that day, the high priest would sacrifice a goat and a bull. He would then enter into the Holy of Holies, into God’s presence and sprinkle the blood of a goat and bull on the atonement cover (and later on the rock floor on which the Ark of the Covenant once sat), pointing to how God would atone his people with a vicarious sacrifice.

On that day, the high priest would also lay his hands on the scapegoat, placing on it the sins of the people. The scapegoat would be sent outside of the camp, outside of the city, far away from the people. The scapegoat also pointed ahead to Messiah on whom would be laid

the sins of the world. On the Great Day of Atonement, the sins that separated sinners from their God were removed. The people were literally made “at one” with their God who dwelled among them.

Truly all of the sacrifices turned the people eyes to what God would do for them through the Messiah. They were the visible gospel. In the sacrifices, the people could see, hear, smell and taste how God would win for them forgiveness and peace with him.

### *God's People Speak to Him*

Though the sacrifices were the focus of the worship in the temple, they were not the only aspect of it. God communicated his forgiveness and plan of salvation to his people through the sacrifices and festivals. The people, however, also communicated with God in their prayers, praise and offerings.

Prayer was an integral part of the temple worship. Every morning and evening, as the sacrifices were offered, a priest would enter the Holy Place to burn incense on the altar.<sup>10</sup> At the moment of the incense, the worshipers in the courtyard who had brought their sacrifices, fell down and lifted their hands in silent prayer. The priest in the Holy Place prostrated himself before the altar of incense offering prayers for God's people. The sweet smelling odor of the incense and of the prayers of God's people ascended to God. A solemn silence echoed through the normally noisy inner courts.

Following the burning of the incense, the priest would come out and speak the Aaronic Blessing over the worshipers (Numbers 6:24-26). Following the sacrifices, prayers and blessing, the Levite choirs would lead the worshipers in responsive singing of the Psalms.

At the temple the people brought their monetary gifts of thanks and presented them to God in thirteen trumpet shaped boxes at the Court of the Women. To the temple they brought their thank offerings for blessings received.

The temple was the *Shekinah*, the visible manifestation of God's dwelling among his people. Therefore, the temple worship was truly an encounter with God, a conversation with God. God communicated to the people his forgiveness, his plan of vicarious atonement and his blessing. The people communicated to God their prayer requests, thanks and praise.

The sins that led to God rejecting his people and removing his *Shekinah* from them were in many ways related to their temple worship. Some despised the temple worship completely in order to worship pagan idols. Others polluted their worship of the true God with pagan practices. Spiritual apathy led many to become lazy in their communication with God at the temple. Still others, like the Pharisees, saw the sacrifices and ceremonies as their way to gain God's favor and win heaven. For them, the sacrifices were what they were doing for God instead of what God was doing for them. In the end, they were like Herod's temple: grand and beautiful on the outside, dark and empty in the heart.

**The temple worship was an encounter... a conversation with God himself.**

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<sup>10</sup> The well known story of the angel Gabriel appearing to Zechariah to announce the birth of John the Baptist would have occurred during this time in the Holy Place (Luke 1:5-25).

## **Other Uses of the Temple Motif in Scripture**

Scripture also uses the temple motif symbolically or typically, especially in the New Testament. Jesus, for example, compared his own body to the temple. After clearing the temple courts of the money changers and vendors, the Jews demanded a miraculous sign to prove his authority to do such a thing. Jesus replied, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” The Jews replied, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?” But the temple of which Jesus was speaking was his own body (John 2:18-21). Jesus was the *Shekinah* in flesh and blood, God made man. He was Immanuel, God dwelling among us.

Scripture also refers to our bodies as a temple. The Apostle Paul wrote, “Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit?” (1 Corinthians 6:18,19). Every believer is a temple because God dwells in us through faith.

The most common use of the temple motif throughout Scripture is as a type of heaven. Isaiah’s vision of heaven, for example, was God sitting on his throne in the temple, surrounded by seraphim singing his praises. In fact, a coal was taken from the altar of incense to purify his lips (Isaiah 6). In Psalm 23, David speaks of the banquet of heaven and then declares, “I will dwell in the house of the LORD (*Bet YHVH*) forever” (Psalm 23:6).

The book of Hebrews offers an interesting insight into the temple and its worship. It was written to Jewish Christians who, due to persecution, were rejecting Christ and reverting back to the Old Testament worship. The writer to the Hebrews explains in great detail how Jesus is the fulfillment and purpose of the temple and its worship.

Chapters nine and ten especially speak of the tabernacle and the sacrifices offered there. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that the tabernacle itself was a copy of heaven itself (Hebrews 9:23-25). In heaven we will see “God’s presence” (v. 24). He explains how the sacrifices offered in the temple pointed ahead to Jesus who would offer himself once and for all on the altar of the cross. No more sacrifices need to be made. The curtain has been torn in two. “We have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place [i.e., God’s presence] by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body” (Hebrews 10:19,20).

In the visions of Revelation, John also saw heaven in the form of the temple. “After this I looked and in heaven, the temple, that is, the tabernacle of the Testimony was opened... And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power” (Revelation 15:5,8).

In the end, however, heaven will contain no temple. There will be no need, for we will stand in God’s *Shekinah*, his dwelling presence, basking in the *Cavod Adonai*, his wondrous glory, forever. John tells us:

I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor to it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life. (Revelation 21:22-27).

## **Implications for Our Worship Today**

What implications do the temple and its worship have on our worship today? In its essence, our worship is a continuation of the worship of the Old Testament. The old Latin proverb rings true: *Novum Testamentum in Vetere latet; Vetus in Novo patet.* ("In the Old Testament the New is concealed, and in the New the Old is revealed.")

The temple and its worship typified the coming Messiah and his work, preparing God's people for his coming. Our worship today looks back on the Christ and his work and prepares us for his second coming.

**In the Old Testament the  
New is concealed, and in  
the New the Old is  
revealed.**

Just like the temple worship, our worship is also a conversation with God. Just like the temple, our sanctuaries contain lampstands, wash basins, tables with bread of his Presence and altars from which we too receive the forgiveness won by the sacrifice of a substitutionary Lamb. We too share a fellowship meal with our God. We sing Psalms of praise. We offer him

our prayers and offerings. We leave our worship hearing the same blessing spoken over believers for nearly 3500 years.

There are differences however. Though we have public ministries who preach and preside on our behalf, we need no mediators (1 Timothy 2:5). All believers are priests (1 Peter 2:9). Because of Christ's sacrifice once and for all, no more sacrifice needs to be made (Hebrews 9:28). There is no curtain separating us from God's presence (Hebrews 10:19,20). Having been justified by grace, we have direct access to God (Romans 5:1,2). We enjoy the 20/20 vision of hindsight, while the worshipers of the Old Testament saw only blurry shadows of what was to come.

The warnings of Israel's past should also serve as a wake-up call for us. We too are tempted to despise the worship of our God to follow our modern idols of money, sex and our comfortable pillows on Sunday morning. Spiritual apathy haunts us and our churches still today. Even more dangerously, the Pharisee in each of us wants to think that he is somehow earning God's favor and love by carrying out our acts of worship. May God help us to fight against such temptations so that through his Word and Sacraments we may enjoy the blessings of his *Shekinah* here on earth and the perfect vision of his glory in heaven.

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