

The Temple of God: God's People as His Place

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Dispensationalism teaches that a literal temple must be rebuilt since it plays a significant role in end-time events surrounding Israel. Many dispensationalists contend that the materials for the temple are already prepared and that construction of the temple could commence at any moment. Despite their sincere attempts to take seriously Old Testament prophecies concerning the temple, the Scriptures present a much larger and complete picture of the temple. The Bible presents the temple as a dwelling place for God in which he lives in and among his people. The temple motif is not confined to one picture in Scripture (i.e., a stone structure), but is first revealed in the opening chapters of Genesis and then developed throughout the plotline of Scripture, taking on many dimensions and perspectives until its final presentation in the new heavens and new earth.¹

Genesis and Exodus

The opening chapters of Genesis reveal that the Garden of Eden was a temple sanctuary where Adam met with God. The first indication of the garden being a temple sanctuary is the intimate presence that Adam experienced with God. God met with Adam on a regular basis in the garden and Adam enjoyed unhindered fellowship with God (Gen 3:8). It was broken fellowship with God that was the ultimate curse of Adam, which resulted in hard labor, sickness, strife, and death. This broken fellowship with God becomes the central problem in the biblical storyline. God promises to restore this relationship through his chosen seed (Gen 3:15). Despite broken fellowship with his people God continues to dwell and meet with them through the means of the temple, but this fellowship is hindered in some sense (e.g., veil) because of sin.²

The next event in Genesis where the idea of temple is presented is Jacob's dream at Bethel (Gen 28:10-22). Jacob has a dream of a ladder with angels ascending and descending on it. God re-affirmed his covenant with Jacob and Jacob pledged to give a tenth to the Lord. The event was so momentous that he named the place Bethel, "the house of God." This encounter foreshows God's presence with his people. Jacob's name will be later changed to Israel and God's promise to Israel was to dwell with them just as he came to meet with Jacob (Gen 32:24-32).

The purpose of God delivering the Israelites from the hands of the Egyptians was so they might come out to worship him (Exo 3:10-22). The Israelites constructed the tabernacle according to the pattern God showed Moses (Exo 25:9ff; Num 8:4; cf., Acts 7:44; Heb 8:5). The tabernacle was the central means in which God dwelt with his people (Exo 25:8; 29:45-46; cf.,

¹ To survey in-depth the idea of temple would take much more space than I have allotted for with this essay. The aim of this essay is to write a short and concise introduction on the theme of temple. For an extensive treatment of the temple see G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004); Simon Gathercole and T. Desmond Alexander, eds., *Heaven on Earth: The Temple in Biblical Theology*, (UK: Paternoster, 2004).

² There are other features of the Garden of Eden that indicate it was a temple. For a detailed discussion of the garden as a temple see J. V. Fesko, *Last Things First* (UK: Christian Focus, 2007), 57-73.

Lev 26:12). However, the tabernacle was not an end to itself, but foreshadowed what God intended for all of creation and his people. In other words, the tabernacle was a microcosm of his creation temple in which all created things would enjoy unhindered and intimate fellowship with him (Exo 25:20, 31; 26:7, 33; 28:31; 30:18; 39:32, 43; cf., Gen 1:2, 14, 20, 27; 2:1-3; Psa 104:2).³ The glory of the Lord rested on the tabernacle and God dwelt with his people (Exo 40:34-38). Despite dwelling with his people, the original fellowship Adam had with God was not fully restored. Therefore, the promise of restoration remained. The rest of the Old Testament defines and fills out the idea of tabernacle, which initially finds its fulfillment in the temple constructed by Solomon and then, eventually, it is completed in Christ Jesus.

David and Solomon

After peace and stability had come to the kingdom under David's reign, David sought to build God a permanent dwelling place (2 Sam 7:8-17; cf., 2 Sam 23:1-7). He wanted to build a house for the Lord, but God told David that he will instead build a house (or kingdom) for him. The promise given to David was that his house, his kingdom, and his throne shall endure forever (2 Sam 7:16). God promised four things to David and his descendant. This future king will secure a permanent place for God's people (2 Sam 7:9-11), establish David's kingdom forever (2 Sam 7:12-13), build a house for the Lord's name sake (2 Sam 7:13), and be a son of God in which his lovingkindness will be with him forever (2 Sam 7:15).

The promises given to David seem to have reached their fulfillment in Solomon. Solomon reigned over the known world, brought peace the land, and provided blessings to God's people. Solomon built a great temple for the Lord (1 Kings 6:1-38; cf., 1 Chro 28:3). This temple was grand and beautiful (1 Kings 8:1ff). However, Solomon, like his father, disobeyed the Lord and was not the promised seed to build God's house (1 Kings 11:1-13). Despite the glory of David and Solomon's reigns, they were not able to bring the true restoration and peace with God that the temple pointed to. The kingdom was split after the death of Solomon. The rest of Israel's history prior to exile was filled with disobedience and judgment. None of the kings or their kingdoms were able to bring about the proper restoration between God and his people; thus, the promises given to David, though complete in an immediate sense, remained unfulfilled. The message of the prophets is that God will remain faithful to his promises, but not before terrible judgment. In order to bring about his promises, God will enact a new covenant in the future, unlike the old covenant and he will fulfill his promise of dwelling with his people.

Ezekiel

The children of Israel were facing impending exile. Israel was condemned by God because of her unfaithfulness as a bride (Ezek 16:1ff; 23:1ff). Due to their sin, Ezekiel primarily spoke about the glory of the Lord leaving his people (Ezek 10:4; 10:19; 11:23; cf., 8:1-11:25; cf.,

³ For an excellent discussion of this idea see Meredith Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1999), 35-56; Peter Leithart, *A House for My Name* (Moscow: Canon Press, 2000), 82-87; G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 29-80; and Vern Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses*, (Phillipsburg: P & R, 1991), 9-40.

Psa 137:1ff). Though God would be with them in exile (Ezek 11:16), the principle way in which God's presence was manifested in their life and practice was his presence in the temple. For the temple to be destroyed and Jerusalem sacked meant the glory of the Lord was departing. Just as much as the glory of the Lord leaving the temple is a major theme in Ezekiel, so is the Lord's return (Ezek 11:14-25). Despite going into exile, God was still with his people and promised a day in which he will set his sanctuary in their midst and dwell with them forever (Ezek 37:24-28).

God will rebuild the temple and his glory will return (Ezek 40-48; cf., 28:13; 31:8). In his closing chapters Ezekiel foretold of a time when the temple will be constructed and the glory of the Lord will inhabit all things. The architecture of Ezekiel's temple was staggering. His flamboyant language is symbolism richly rooted in temple categories that the Israelites would have understood. In this new temple God's presence will be with all his people equally and he will protect them from all their enemies (Ezek 43:2-7; 44:4; 48:16, 35). Moreover, this future temple represents life from God. Living water comes from the temple that will give life to all things and it will have trees that will bear fruit and leaves of healing (Ezek 47:1-12).

Haggai and Zechariah

Many people lived long enough to remember the greatness and glory of Solomon's temple and were discouraged with the stature of the post-exilic temple (Ezra 3:12; Hagg 2:3). Haggai and Zechariah were sent to encourage the people.

Haggai spoke of a future temple. All the nations will come and bring their wealth to this future temple (Hagg 2:6-7). God will fill this new temple with glory and its glory will be greater than the former temple (Hagg 2:7-9). Moreover, Zechariah anticipated a time when God will rebuild Jerusalem. This city is so expansive that it cannot be measured because of the amount of people and livestock within it (Zech 2:4). God will protect the city and his glory will dwell in it (Zech 2:5).

For both Haggai and Zechariah the way in which God will return and dwell with his people is by his Spirit. The Spirit of God was already abiding with them (Hagg 2:5) and it was only by God's Spirit that this future temple would be completed (Zech 4:6; 12:10-12). In the future, the city of God will be so pure and his presence so great that all things will be holy unto the Lord, even the cooking pots (Zech 14:20-21). Zechariah spoke of a time when God will gather his people from among the nations and make them holy (Zech 2:6-7; 8:3-16; 10:10). God's people will come to this future city and worship the Lord (Zech 2:11; 6:15; 8:22; 10:10; 14:16). God will appoint his priestly-king to rebuild this future city-temple (Zech 3:8-10; 4:8-14; 6:11-15). This priestly-king, named Branch, will build the temple of God and sit on God's throne and rule.

The Gospels

The New Testament announces that Jesus is the fulfillment of the temple promises found in the Old Testament. Matthew understands Jesus as God incarnate come to be with his people (Matt 1:23; cf., Isa 7:14) and John speaks of Jesus as the glory of God come to tabernacle

with humanity (John 1:14). Moreover, the vision of Jacob is recalled in John 1:50-51, which points to the fact that the “house of God” has come down to be with men (cf., Gen 28:10-22). Jesus is the ladder to heaven and it is only through him that men will have access to God.

The clearest expression of Christ as the fulfillment of the temple is found in John 2:19-22. Here Jesus declares himself the true temple (cf., John 1:11-14; 2:13-25; 4:7-29; Matt 21:42; 26:61; Mark 12:10; 14:58; Luke 20:17; Col 1:19; 2:9; Heb 1:1-3). Jesus, as the true temple, transposed the hope of Israel from gathering around the glory of the Lord at a physical temple, to gathering all people to and around himself as the true temple (Luke 2:32; 49). He is the place in which men will meet with God. From the temple of God (Jesus) will flow streams of living water. From Jesus will come water that will grant everlasting life (John 7:37-39). As Jesus now becomes the center of God’s meeting place with men, God’s presence is no longer found in a temple or on a mountain, but those who will approach God must do so through his chosen temple (Jesus) and must do so in spirit and in truth (Matt 27:51; John 4:23-24).

Acts

Stephen is accused of speaking against the temple and the Law of Moses (Acts 6:9-15).⁴ Stephen will demonstrate that he is not speaking against the temple, but will show both historically and theologically that the temple was never an end in itself, but pointed to something greater. God had a plan from the very beginning when he visited and called Abraham out of his land. God was with Abraham as he led him to a new land (Acts 7:1-16; cf., Gen 12:1ff). Joseph was sold into slavery, but God was with him. God was with his people and preserved and blessed them in a foreign land. God met with Moses in the land of Midian and revealed himself to him (Acts 7:17-36). God was with his people in the wilderness. God dwelt with the people in a tabernacle and went with them into the land and drove out their enemies (Acts 7:44-45; Josh-Judg). David wanted to build a temple for God, but it was Solomon who built a house for the Lord (Acts 7:46-47; 1-2 Sam, 1-2 Kgs). However, the prophets agree that God does not live in temples made by human hands, but heaven is his throne and earth is his footstool, what kind of house will you build for me (Acts 7:49-50; Isa 66:1-2)?

To think that God’s dwelling with his people is confined to a parcel of land or a stone temple runs contrary to both history and prophecy. Throughout the history of Israel God’s presence was always with his people regardless of their geographical location (e.g., Ur, Egypt, Midian) or external circumstances (e.g., paganism, slavery, wilderness). God’s presence is now offered through Jesus Christ by faith. God presence with his people is not just for Jewish people, but for all those who trust in Christ for salvation.

The Epistles

The promise of God’s presence with his people is possible because of the work of Christ and the presence of the Spirit. God is rebuilding the promised temple of the Old

⁴ For the purpose of this essay I will only deal with the temple aspect of Stephen’s sermon. For a discussion of the law in Stephen’s sermon see the following link: <http://theroadtoemmaus.wordpress.com/2007/05/10/the-importance-of-stephens-sermon/>

Testament. However, his rebuilding of this temple is not with brick or mortar, but with his people as living stones. God's people are his temple.

Under the new covenant God not only dwells with his people, but *in* his people (2 Cor 6:16). God walked among his people in the flesh when Jesus was on earth and the reality of Immanuel, "God with us" continues as God walks among his people by his Spirit (cf., Col 1:19; 2:9; cf., Rev 2:1-3:22). In the Old Testament God took up residence only in a singular place called the holy of holies, but in the New Testament each individual person is the temple of God (Rom 8:9; 1 Cor 3:16-17; 6:12-20; 2 Cor 5:2; 6:16; 1 John 3:24; 4:13). God comes to dwell and take up residence in every person, in every temple, in every heart by his Spirit.

The chief cornerstone of this new temple is Christ (Matt 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11; 1 Cor 3:11). Christ is the foundation and builder of this new temple. Christ is the chief cornerstone and individual believers are living stones being built up into the temple of God (Eph 2:11-22; Heb 9:15-28; 1 Pet 2:4-8). Because Christ is the foundation for this temple, it can have no other priest or king (cf., 2 Thess 2:1-12).⁵ Once more God will shake the heavens and the earth and the only thing that will remain is the temple of God; a temple that is being built up to God to offer living and spiritual sacrifices (Hagg 2:6; Rom 12:1-2; Heb 12:26; 13:15-16; cf., Phil 4:18). Because the people of God are his temple, God will never again dwell in a man-made temple.

When Jesus came he showed the glory of God, a glory which was only made manifest in the Old Testament temple. Although Jesus has ascended to the Father, his glory continues to show forth, not in a building, but through the lives of his people. God's presence with his people is a fantastic reality that all those who trust in Christ can enjoy. However, there still remains a promise of face-to-face fellowship with God. Permanent presence with God is the final hope for God's people, which will be experienced in the new heavens and new earth.

Revelation

The final book of the New Testament provides the most potent and complete picture of God's rebuilt temple. The epistles describe God's redeemed covenant community as the temple and John builds on this idea by providing a detailed description of the full number of God's elect and the intimate fellowship they will experience with him in rich symbols that are rooted in Old Testament motifs. With the introduction of the new heavens and the new earth, John's readers are given a vivid and grand picture of what awaits those who persevere and remain pure in Christ.⁶

John is taken up to see the bride of Christ adorned in all her glory. He is carried away in the Spirit to a high mountain to see the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven

⁵ For a discussion why the temple in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 is not a physical rebuilt temple, but the church in which the man of lawlessness will try to usurp Christ's reign see G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission*, (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 269-292 and Kim Riddlebarger, *The Man of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 117-134.

⁶ For a more detailed discussion of John's city-temple and its relationship to past temples (e.g., Ezekiel's temple) see G. K. Beale, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 1039-1121; *The Temple and the Church's Mission*, (Downers Grove: IVP: 2004), 313-334; Dennis Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb* (Phillipsburg: P & R, 2001), 301-324. Also see, Edmund Clowney, "The Final Temple," *WTJ* 35 (1972-73): 156-89 and Robert Gundry, "The New Jerusalem: People as Place, Not Place for People," *NovT* 29 (1987): 254-64.

from God (Rev 21:10; cf., Isa 49:18; 61:10; Eph 5:26-27; Rev 11:2; 21:2, 9). The city is filled with the glory of God and her brilliance is like crystal-clear jasper (Rev 21:11). God's throne is described as crystal and jasper (Rev 4:3-6; cf., Zech 14:20-21). The brilliance of God's people is like him: holy, righteous, and pure (Exo 16:10; 24:16-17; 40:34-35; Isa 6:3; 60:1-2, 19-20; Habb 2:14; Zech 2:5).

The city has twelve gates for the twelve sons of Israel and twelve foundation stones for the twelve apostles (Rev 21:12-14). The people of God are founded upon the twelve sons of Jacob and the twelve apostles (Matt 16:18; 1 Cor 3:11; 12:28; Eph 2:20; 3:5; 4:11; 1 Pet 2:6-8; cf., Matt 19:28; Luke 22:30; James 1:1). The twelve gates and twelve foundation stones are symbolic of all the people of God from both the Old and New Testament (cf., Heb 11:1ff). Moreover, the reference to angels at each gate signifies God's protection of his people (cf., Gen 3:24; Isa 26:1-3).

The measurements of the city represent the people of God (Rev 21:15-18). The city is laid out in a square (Rev 21:16). The square is representative of God's presence in the holy of holies, which was a perfect cube (Exo 26:15-25; 1 Kings 6:20). Thus, God's presence is with his people in an intimate and unique way, which only some experienced under the old covenant. The length, width, and height of the city is 12,000 stadia (Rev 21:16). Multiples or powers of ten represent large amounts in the book of Revelation. Here the 12,000 stadia represent the population of God's redeemed (Rev 21:12-14). The city is full of God's people in length, width, and height. The 12,000 stadia times the 12 edges or lines of the cubed city equals 144,000; a figure that refers to the full number of God's elect (Rev 7:4-9). Moreover, the city walls are 144 cubits thick (Rev 21:17). Just like the dimensions of the city represent the people of God, the 144 cubits echoes back to the 144,000 of God in Revelation 7:4-9.⁷ Thus, not only do the dimensions of the city reflect the people of God, but so do its materials (1 Cor 3:9; Eph 2:20-22; 1 Tim 3:15; 1 Pet 2:4-6).

The materials of the city walls are like the throne of God, signifying once again that this city is God's redeemed people (Rev 4:3-6; cf., Ezek 1:28). The description of the city is of God's elect, perfectly secure and perfectly redeemed, full of his presence. The materials of the city represent the people of God as priests unto him (Rev 21:19-21). The foundation stones of the city were adorned with every kind of precious stone (Rev 21:19-22). The twelve stones mentioned correspond roughly to the twelve stones on the breastplate of the priest (Exo 28:17-20; 39:10-14; cf., 1 Kings 5:17; 7:9-10; 2 Chro 3:6; Ezek 28:12-14). These stones demonstrate the priestly nature of each believer in the new heavens and new earth (Rev 1:6; 20:6; cf., Exo 19:3-6; Isa 61:6; 66:21; 1 Pet 2:9-10). As his precious stones, the people of God reflect God's glory (Rev 21:11; 18, 21). The idea of God's people as precious stones is also substantiated from the Old Testament. In Isaiah 54:11-12 precious stones are mentioned in conjunction with God's salvation of his people. The people of God are adorned with precious stones, signifying God's great love for them. Moreover, the presence of stones points to a restored Eden because precious stones characterized the original Eden (Gen 2:11-12; cf., Ezek 28:12-14).

The bride of Christ is characterized as having pearls as gates and streets of gold clear as transparent glass (Rev 21:21). In the Scriptures, pearls are considered items of great value (Matt 7:6; 13:45-46), so too the people of God are of great value. Streets of gold are also used to

⁷ For an excellent discussion on the 144,000 as the people of God and not national Israel see Christopher Smith, "The Portrayal of the Church as the New Israel in the Names and Order of the Tribes of Revelation 7:5-8," *JSNT* 39 (1990): 111-18.

describe this city as God's people. In the Old Testament the floor of the temple was overlaid with gold (1 Kings 6:20-22, 30; cf., Exo 25:17). Thus, the glory of God overlays all of his people and spreads out over them like pure gold (Rev 7:15; 21:3, 11; cf., Psa 61:4).

With God's people redeemed and serving him as priests, there is no need for a temple (Rev 21:22-27). The Lord God and the Lamb are its temple. God's perfect presence is with his people as their temple (cf., Jer 3:15-18; Hagg 2:6-9). Because the glory of God has come down to men there will be no need of the sun or the moon. The sun and the moon were the splendor of God's creation to rule the day and night (Gen 1:14-18). However, God will now be the splendor of the new heavens and new earth, replacing the sun (Isa 24:23; 60:19-20; Zech 14:6-7). The moon ruled the darkness in the old age, but now the moon is taken away. Darkness in the Scriptures is a metaphor to describe the evil deeds of unbelievers (John 3:19; Eph 5:11; 1 Thess 5:7-8; 1 John 2:9). With the removal of the moon there is a removal of evil. Because there is no darkness and only daytime, the redeemed nations will walk by the light of the Lord and bring their splendor into it (Rev 5:9; 7:9).

In Revelation 22:1 a river flows from the throne of God clear as crystal (Rev 22:1; cf., Gen 2:10-14; Psa 46:4; Isa 44:3; Ezek 36:25-27; 37:9-14; Joel 3:18; Zech 14:8; John 2:19-21; 4:10-14; 7:37-39; Rev 4:6). On either side of the river is the tree of life bearing twelve kinds of fruit every month for the healing of the nations (Rev 22:2). The tree of life was first introduced in the Garden of Eden. The tree of life signified life and presence with God (Gen 2:9; 3:22-24; cf., Rev 2:7; Ezek 47:1-12). Thus, presence with God is restored. The tree of life provides healing for God's people. The healing is symbolized by the twelve kinds of fruit produced every month. God will feed his people with himself, for all of eternity. Month after month God will nourish his people with living water and healing fruit. He will be their comfort and he will satisfy them with his glory and goodness. God's people will not only enjoy him forever, but they will see him face-to-face and have his seal on their foreheads (Matt 5:8; Rev 22:4; cf., Exo 28:36-38; Psa 17:15; 42:2). All of God's people will be "holy unto the Lord" and they will all serve him as priests forever (cf., Zech 14:20-21).

In the Garden of Eden the curse of sin came upon humanity (Gen 3:1-19), but now the curse is removed (Rev 22:3-5). Now that the curse is removed God is going to walk among his people just like he once did with Adam; however, his presence will be much greater than before. God's people will be his place and he will dwell with them forever. Nothing will ever separate God and his people because worthy is the Lamb who was slain and purchased men from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation (Rev 5:9).