THE TEMPLE OF GOD

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The figure of the Temple of God is not only well known; it is an integral part of the history of the People of God. And throughout their history, that which made the temple holy was the presence in it of the Living God.

God instructed His ancient people to "make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst" (Ex. 25:8). In obedience to His directions they built the tabernacle and tent of meeting with God's assurance that, "there I will meet with the people of Israel and it shall be sanctified by my glory; I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar ... and I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God, who brought them forth out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them; I am the Lord their God" (Ex. 29:43-46).

At its dedication "the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud abode upon it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle" (Ex. 40:34, 35). The Shekinah, the visible manifestation of the presence of God in the midst of His people was that which sanctified the tabernacle.

This traveling tent accompanied the twelve tribes throughout their years of wilderness wanderings and was, for several centuries, the central sanctuary of Israel during the interval between Joshua and Solomon.

During the reign of Solomon the first temple was built in Jerusalem. Even from its inception Solomon realized that this would not be the dwelling place of God, but simply the place of meeting.

> The house which I am to build will be great, for our God is greater than all gods. But who is able to build him a house, since heaven, even highest heaven cannot contain him? Who am I to build a house for Him, except as a place to burn incense before him? (II Chr. 2:5, 6).

The same thought was expressed in his prayer at the dedication of the temple.

> But will God dwell indeed with man on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain thee; how much less this house which I have built! Yet have regard to the prayer of thy servant and to his supplication, O Lord my God, hearkening to the cry and to the prayer which thy servant prays before thee; that thy eyes may be open day and night toward this house, the place where

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> thou hast promised to set thy name, that thou mayest hearken to the prayer which thy servant offers toward this place. And hearken thou to the supplications of thy servant and of thy people Israel, when they pray toward this place; yea, hear thou from heaven thy dwelling place; and when thou hearest, forgive. (II Chr. 6:18-21)

It was incomparably grander than the tabernacle, but built to follow the same ground plan (I Ki. 6:1ff). Here was the inner sanctuary; here was the ark (I Ki. 8:1-6). This was the place where God revealed himself to his people. At its dedication the Shekinah again was observed. "And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord" (I Ki. 8:10, 11).

Following its erection and dedication the theology of Judaism began to consider the temple and its city as the dwelling place of God (I Ki. 8:13; Ps. 132:11-14). They believed it would last forever (Ps. 78:69; 93:2ff).

When men began to trust in the temple rather than in the God of the temple, God's prophets were strong in their denunciation,

> Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Amend your ways and your doings, and I will let you dwell in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: "This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord the temple of the Lord." ... Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, "We are delivered!"—only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den or robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, says the Lord.... And now, because you have done all these things, says the Lord, and when I spoke to you persistently you did not listen, and when I called you, you did not answer, therefore I will do to the house which is called by my name and in which you trust, and to the place which I gave to you and to your fathers, as I did to Shiloh. (Jer. 7:3-15).

Yet, in spite of these prophetic words, the people regarded the destruction of the temple by Nebuchadnezzar a catastrophe of the first order. It was not grievous enough to see their city destroyed and their best citizens deported; the destruction of the temple meant, for them, the loss of God's presence (Ezek. 9:3; 10:4, 5; 11:23).

Following the return from Babylonian captivity under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Joshua a new temple was begun, but not completed until the sixth year of the reign of Darius of Persia (Ezra 6:15). Much hope and anticipation had been expressed for it by the Jews during the years of their exile. Many of their prophets had equated the restoration of the temple with the regathering of Israel. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and others had all prophesied an eschatological temple which would not only regather and re-unite the divided nation of Israel but also include the Gentile nations. Yet, when it was completed there was great disappointment expressed by those who remembered the former temple (I Esd. 5:63-65; Josephus: Ant. 11:80, 81). Their demoralization was evident in the blemished and worthless sacrifices they offered (Mal. 1:6-2:9). Its desecration by

Antiochus Epiphanes seems to have confirmed the suspicion that this temple was not fully restored to holiness (I Enoch 89:73; 90:28ff). Certain rabbis even suggested that the divine presence had not returned to the temple (Targ. P. Ta'an 65A).

It was at this time that the doctrine of the heavenly temple began to formulate. During the years of exile when the Jews were without a temple, the prophets had sought to assure them of God's presence (Ps. 139:7-12; Ezek. 11:16). And along with the concept of God's immanence was the concept of his transcendence, an idea hinted in Is. 6:1f; II Chr. 6:18. But now it took concrete form as the intertestamental writers began to postulate a heavenly temple to which the earthly temple corresponded. Both were seen as the dwelling place of God. The fullest description of the heavenly temple is I Enoch (14:16-18, 20; 26; 85-90). Most interpret these passages to teach that the new, heavenly temple will some day descend to earth and replace the old one.

One of the strongest parallels to the doctrine of the heavenly temple is found in Plato's Republic with its concept of *idea.* To him, *idea* constituted reality. It is eternal, intangible, and immutable, present always and everywhere, self-existent and true. *Idea* forms a pattern or model of which all earthly phenomena is a copy. Philo employed the Platonic idealism to explain the origin of the tabernacle. The writer of Hebrews perhaps also employed this same idealism when he described the earthly tabernacle as merely a copy of the heavenly sanctuary (Hebrews 8).

Another tendency which became prominent at this time was the spiritualizing of worship. Without a temple it was impossible to offer sacrifices. Therefore the sacrifice of a contrite soul, of a humble spirit, of an obedient life would be acceptable to God.

This tendency is seen most clearly in the Qumran Community which was founded on the belief that atonement for sins would be achieved through obedience to the law, without any reference whatever to the temple at Jerusalem. They considered themselves to be a "Sanctuary of Men." (4 Q Flor. 1:6f). By adhering to God's will as laid down in the law, the community itself became the temple; their obedience to the law became the sacrifice.

> Atonement will be made for the earth more effectively than by any flesh of burnt-offerings or fat of sacrifices. The "oblation of the lips" will be in all justice like the erstwhile "pleasant savor" on the altar; righteousness and integrity like that free-will offering which God deigns to accept. At that time, the men of the community will constitute a true and distinctive temple—a veritable holy of holies—wherein the priesthood may fitly foregather, and a true and distinctive synagogue made up of laymen who walk in integrity.[1]

Additional references in the Manual of Discipline demonstrate that the members of the Qumran Community considered themselves to be the righteous remnant which God had laid as a foundation, a tested cornerstone in Israel in order to confute the falsehood at Jerusalem

[1]The Manual of Discipline, 9:3-6, Translated by Theodor H. Gaster, *The Dead Sea Scrolls,* (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1956), p. 57.

(5:5-6; 8:4-10). Thus, the idea that a community formed a spiritual temple, which is more fully developed in the New Testament epistles, did exist among Palestinian Jews before New Testament times.

Among such Hellenists as Seneca and Epictetus are to be found suggestions that man is the dwelling or temple of a supernatural being or entity. In spite of their reluctance to suggest that the body is the dwelling place of deity, one can find such statements as: "God is near you, he is with you, he is within you" (Seneca: Ep. 41:1); "God is within you, and your own genius is within" (Epictetus: Disc. 1. 14:13f).

In this same tradition stands Philo who wrote of two temples: the sky, which is the dwelling place of immortal beings; and the mind or soul of man, which is the temple of God (Som. 1:21-34, 215).

To both Philo and the Stoics the spiritual temple was an individualistic concept. They nowhere suggested anything comparable to the Qumran or New Testament conception of the community forming a spiritual temple.

All of the foregoing serves as an introduction to the New Testament statements concerning the Temple of God. John's Gospel presents the incarnation of Christ as the tabernacling *(Skenein)* of God with men (John 1:1, 14). In fact, all of the Old Testament motifs; the regathering and reunion of Israel, the purification of the temple, the inclusion of the Gentiles, the coming of the Messiah, are all present in the Gospels and interpreted in the light of Jesus Christ and His redeeming work.

> Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.... But He spoke of the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken (Jn. 2:19-22).

From the viewpoint of the Gospel of John the death and resurrection of Jesus created the new temple and the new worship. Through His passion would flow salvation to the Gentiles and the life-giving stream for the renewal of the world.

The book of Acts sets forth two diverse viewpoints: the apparent devotion of the early Christians to the temple at Jerusalem (Acts 3:1; 21:26; 22:17), and at the same time, the gathering of the first of the "living stones" both Jew (Acts 2) and Gentile (Acts 10) who were to grow into a "holy temple in the Lord."

It remained for the apostle Paul to bring together all of these strands into one unified statement concerning the people of God. He does so in what could be considered three concentric circles. First: in I Cor. 6:19 God, through His Spirit indwells the personality of the individual believer so that his body becomes the "temple of the Holy Spirit." Second: through the Holy Spirit, God indwells the local assembly of believers who collectively become the "temple of God" (1 Cor. 3:16). Third: the whole church universal, in its widest sense, made up of believing Jews and Gentiles, the whole body of Christ, is a "holy temple in the Lord," in which all individual members are built together to become a "dwelling of God in the Spirit" (Eph. 2:21, 22).

Here for the first time the image of the temple *(naos)* is fused with that of the building *(oikodome)*. Indeed, as F. W. Beare has observed, in this context one discovers

> first a physiological metaphor (body), next a political metaphor, (no longer strangers and sojourners)—neither foreign visitors with no rights in the community, nor aliens enjoying temporary and limited rights as residents—but fellow citizens—no whit inferior in status to the members of the historic community of God's people—not in relationship to the commonwealth of Israel—but as membership in the family of God *(oikeioi)*. The use of *oikeioi* gives rise to the third metaphor—architectural—a holy temple in process of erection, framed for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.[2]

Although an extended exegesis of Eph. 2 is not possible at this point, suffice it to say that Christ is the cornerstone in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord.[3]

The cornerstone also serves to unify the building. Anthanasius, Augustine, and others have suggested that Christ, the cornerstone, joins Jews and Gentiles as the two walls of a building. But this figure breaks down when one remembers that the apostle's whole point in Ephesians 2 is that, in Christ, Jews and Gentiles are not distinguished like two walls of a building, but are co-built *(sunoikodomeisthe)* into one edifice. Probably the author, again drawing upon Isaiah 28:16, was using physiological as well as architectural ideas. The same figure is used in I Pet. 2:4ff of living stones and the Living Stone. Thus the apostle can speak of the building growing from the cornerstone. The same mixing of metaphors occurs in Ephesians 4:15, 16 where the body is joined together and built up from Christ the head. Hence the picture is one of a living structure united because of its organic as well as structural bond to the cornerstone. Not only is one stone united to another, but the whole structure is united with and in the cornerstone. As living stones, Jews and Gentiles are intimately joined together in a common life, the origin and source of which is Christ.

The superstructure is described in two parallel images: it is a holy temple in the Lord *(naos)*; it is a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. Viewed as the building, the church is still incomplete, under construction. Perhaps Paul's statement of Romans 11:25 "until the full number of the Gentiles come in" pertains here. But, viewed as the temple it is an inhabited dwelling. And that which makes it holy is the presence of God.

John Allan suggests that when God brings into being a people for himself, he is said to build (Jer. 31:4; 12:16; Ps. 89:4; 51:18; 102:16; 147:2).[4] That God is engaged in building a new people is the theme of this figure. Here, as in the figure of the body of Christ, the unity of Christ with the believers is set forth. In the figure of the body, Christ is the head which

[2]Francis W. Beare, "The Epistle to the Ephesians," *The Interpreters Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (New York: Abingdon Press, 1955), X, 660.

[3]For a thorough discussion of Christ the Cornerstone see R. J. McKelvey, *The New Temple*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969) pp. 195-204.

[4]John A. Allan, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, (London: SCM Press, 1959), p. 90.

animates and directs the body. In this figure he is the living cornerstone who creates, supports, and upbuilds the temple. And this work of erecting the temple is for the purpose of providing a place for God to dwell in the midst of his people. As the body upbuilds itself in love (Eph. 4:16) so the temple grows into a holy temple in the Lord.

The figure of the temple of God is most prominent in the epistle to the Hebrews with its emphasis upon the priesthood and the sacrifices. And it finds its completion and consummation in Rev. 21 where "the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people and God himself will be with them" (Rev. 21:3). "And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God almighty and the Lamb" (Rev. 21:22).

> As a metaphor of the church, the conception of the temple is perhaps most significant for our understanding of the New Testament doctrine of the church because of its theocentric character. Unlike the images of the body and the bride, which have to do with the church's relation to Christ, the temple image depicts the church's relation to God. The church is the temple of God, or God's Spirit; it is never the temple of Christ.[5]

Thus throughout the history of God's people His temple has played a prominent part. Whether that temple be the wilderness tabernacle, Solomon's magnificent edifice, or the church of the living God, the temple of God has been "the dwelling place of God in history, one point of contact between eternity and time."[6]

[5]McKelvey, *Op. Cit.*, p. 180.

[6]Erich Sauer, *The Triumph of the Crucified,* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Erdmans, 1951). p. 85.