

Sanctuary Symbolism in The Book of Hebrews

by George Masters

Adventism confronts what many claim to be its most serious theological crisis since the so-called “Great Disappointment” of 1844. The history of Christianity reveals that too often these crises of theological reformulation have been plagued with issues which are not central to the task at hand; they are pseudoproblems which arise from semantic confusion, ambiguous definitions, personality clashes or ecclesiastical politics. This paper is intended to highlight such a pseudoproblem which, within the current theological turmoil, could become unnecessarily disruptive.

A passionate debate has developed as to whether the book of Hebrews supports the traditional Adventist understanding that in 1844 Christ moved from the holy to the most holy place in a heavenly sanctuary, or whether Hebrews teaches that the risen Christ entered directly into the second apartment of the heavenly sanctuary at His ascension in A.D. 31. In other words, does

Hebrews support the idea that Jesus entered the heavenly “Holy of Holies” in A.D. 31 or A.D. 1844, and if Hebrews only supports A.D. 31, must Adventists change their traditional teachings about eschatology? Some feel that nothing less than the unique mission of Adventism within the history of salvation is at stake.

To realize that a pseudoproblem has been raised, we first need to understand the purpose of the book of Hebrews. What was the specific problem to which the author addressed his epistle?¹ The evidence would indicate that the book was initially addressed to a group of Jewish Christians who, because of continued persecution, were sufficiently discouraged so as to be contemplating a return to Judaism.² The author of Hebrews approaches this problem of threatened apostasy with his own unique two-pronged attack of appeal and argument.³ It is the latter of these two with which we are interested.

The theological argument of Hebrews has been entitled “a theology of access.” In his attempts to deter these Jewish Christians from returning to their former faith, the author asserts the superiority of Christianity over Judaism by way of an argument drawn from the Old Testament.⁴ He is concerned to

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contrast Judaism and Christianity by showing that the Levitical system of worship with its earthly sanctuary was incapable of providing that necessary access to God, whereas in the high priestly ministry of Christ, man has his sin problem resolved and now enjoys complete and unimpeded access to the very throne of God. It is because of his desire to emphasize the absoluteness of the Christian's access to God that the author concentrates on Christ's activity in "the Holy of Holies" rather than in "the Holy Place."

The only factor which gave the second apartment of the earthly sanctuary its character as "the Holy of Holies" was the manifestation of God's presence, the Shekinah glory, in that place.⁵ It was because God "dwelt" in that particular place, because the absolute holiness of God was manifested there, that the place was called "the Holy of Holies," the throne of God and "the mercy seat" of mankind. It is God's presence which determines its character, and it was this presence which determined the location of "the Holy of Holies" in the earthly sanctuary. If, at the Ascension, Christ went into the very presence of the Father, then it is tantamount to affirming that our Saviour went into the heavenly "Holy of Holies." A careful examination of the book of Hebrews reveals that the author repeatedly emphasizes this fact.

The Levitical priesthood consisted of imperfect mediators providing a very imperfect and "shadowy" access to God. They themselves were sinners in need of forgiveness and purification.⁶ With the exception of one day of the year, their mediatorial work on behalf of the people was performed with a protective veil shielding them from the fiery presence of God, and even on that one day of the year when the high priest was permitted into the very presence of God, he stood but fleetingly, guarded by a cloud of smoke.

In contrast to all this, our author goes to great lengths to stress the superiority of the high priesthood of Christ. At the outset, the superiority of Christ is emphatic. He is a perfect mediator between God and man both by virtue of his divinity and his humanity.⁷ Even his humanity is superior to that of the

Levitical priests because, unlike them, he is sinless and in no need to seek forgiveness of his own sins.⁸ He is the perfect mediator, because in contrast to the earthly priests, he is able to go boldly into the very presence of God, into the very throne room of the universe, the antitypical "Holy of Holies."

The earthly high priest *stood* momentarily in "the Holy of Holies" on the annual Day of Atonement, whereas the heavenly high priest enters and remains, *seated* on the very throne of God.⁹ The earthly high priest offered up the blood of animal sacrifices both for himself and his people year after year, and thereby acknowledged that the earthly Day of Atonement ceremonies and sacrifices were incapable of cleansing from sin.¹⁰ By contrast, our author proclaims that when our sinless high priest, Christ, went into the throne room of the universe and presented the blood of his own sacrifice, that one unique sacrifice adequately "made purification for sins."¹¹ It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the whole thrust of this argument for the superiority of access available to God in Christ the high priest is couched in Day of Atonement imagery and with the intention of visualizing for readers Christ in the heavenly "Holy of Holies."

It is because Christ is in the heavenly "Holy of Holies" that he "sat down at the right hand" of the Father. It is because he is seated upon the throne of God, the "mercy seat" of the universe, that the author affirms that we may "with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy."¹² It is because Jesus is in the very presence of the Father that he is our "hope that enters into the inner shrine behind the curtain."¹³ The imagery of the epistle's argument is undoubtedly drawn from the Day of Atonement ceremony.¹⁴

Furthermore, it is not coincidental that Jesus is consistently referred to as the antitype of the high priest and not merely a priest. This is because the epistle is attempting to underscore the perfect mediatorship of Christ by drawing upon the second apartment ministry on the Day of Atonement and not upon the ceremonies associated with the first apartment of the heavenly sanctuary. Let us be reminded that it was the high priest and

not a common priest who made that timid brief appearance before God on the Day of Atonement, and it is with this imperfect act of mediation that our author wishes to contrast Christ's unbroken appearance face to face before God.

Other passages within the argument of this book draw a contrast between the mediation of the earthly high priest on the Day of Atonement and the exaltation of Christ at his

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Ascension in A.D. 31. A case in point is Hebrews 9:23-28. It explicitly refers to the “yearly” function of the high priest in cleansing the earthly tabernacle. Again, the fact that the Levitical high priests repeated this annual event, generation after generation, only served to add emphasis to the claim that the earthly system could do little but act as a reminder of the sin problem. In comparison, the unique, once-for-all-time sacrifice of Christ has provided the final solution to the problem of sin and the inevitable separation from God which sin had caused.

Drawing again upon the Day of Atonement imagery, Hebrews 10:19-22 continues this theme of perfect access into the heavenly “Holy of Holies” through the blood of Christ's sacrifice. As in Hebrews 6:19-20, that curtain which served to separate man from the immediate presence of God has been finally penetrated by a high priest who can adequately plead our case.

This brings us to a further feature of the author's application of the sanctuary symbolism which has frequently escaped commentators — particularly Adventist commentators. This blind spot is not entirely

surprising, for it is very often of the nature of Bible students to have predetermined the meaning of a passage rather than to allow the passage to reveal itself.

The passage in question is Hebrews 9:1-8. The key to the author's intention is contained in verse 8. Having described the structure of the earthly two-apartment structure and mentioned its “daily” and “yearly” ceremonies, our author then makes an application of these symbols in a manner so different from traditional Adventist expectations that it has often escaped our attention. To make clearer the intention of the author in Hebrews 9:8, the following paraphrase is proposed:

By this two apartment structure, with its daily and yearly rituals, the Holy Spirit was showing that access to *the heavenly sanctuary* (symbolized by the second apartment of the earthly structure with its yearly ritual) was not yet apparent while *the earthly sanctuary* (symbolized by the first apartment with its daily ritual) was still operating.

The author of Hebrews does not visualize two “geographical” locations in heaven which correspond to the two apartments of the earthly structure. To the contrary, the two apartments of this earthly building typify two different sanctuaries and their two different ministries, the one earthly and the other heavenly. The contrast between the daily, repeated ritual of the first apartment and the yearly, once-for-all ritual of the second apartment has provided our author with an ideal vehicle with which to illustrate the contrast between the imperfect access of the Levitical priesthood and the perfect access available through the high priesthood of Christ.¹⁵

This exegesis of Hebrews 9:8 is by no means novel to Adventism. “The sanctuary here described is the heavenly sanctuary of which the inner compartment of the earthly sanctuary is symbolic.”¹⁶ The author of this quotation candidly admits that in this instance, and in other texts in Hebrews, the epistle is concentrating upon Christ's function as mediator in the heavenly “Holy of Holies.”¹⁷ The writer of the quoted article preferred to translate these passages merely as “the sanctuary” and thereby left it to the

commentator to highlight which apartment the author had in mind. Whatever justification there may be in doing this, it surely does little to aid the ordinary reader of the Bible to grasp the thrust of the epistle's argument. As the article implies, the initial recipients of Hebrews would have had no difficulty in understanding that in these passages "the Holy of Holies" was in view. Unfortunately, chronological and cultural gaps, not to mention the peculiar theological impediments found in Adventist circles, present us with exegetical barriers difficult to surmount. We can be thankful that the translators of the New International Version refused to allow themselves to be restricted by principles of translation which conceal the intent of the biblical writer.¹⁸

The parallel columns (see box) are a diagrammatic way of illustrating the application of the two-apartment sanctuary symbolism in the book of Hebrews.

To acknowledge that the author of Hebrews places the exalted Christ within the "Holy of Holies" in A.D. 31 and in some way fulfilling the Day of Atonement ritual is an admission too difficult for many Adventists to make. This is understandable, for such an admission would appear to be a direct contradiction of the traditional Adventist position that Jesus entered the "Holy of Holies" in 1844. Yet, the contradiction is more apparent than real, for the issue is a pseudoproblem.

This pseudoproblem has arisen partly as a result of slavery to a too literal application of biblical symbolism. All religious symbolism is of an experiential character. The sanctuary

symbolism in harmony with other biblical symbols uses language which corresponds more closely to poetry or metaphor than it does to scientific or descriptive prose. The function of the sanctuary symbolism is to focus the concentration of the believer upon God's reconciliation of man to Himself in Christ. Although the general approach to the interpretation of the sanctuary symbols by Adventists has harmonized with the New Testament experiential approach, it has frequently been unequally yoked with a literalistic application which attempts to project into heaven substantial realities corresponding to earthly substances.¹⁹ We are left with a course in "celestial geography" rather than an evocative appeal to man's spiritual sense.

The critical point in the present discussion is whether the sanctuary in heaven has two separate spatial apartments corresponding to the two apartments of the earthly building. (The writer of the book of Hebrews goes beyond ignoring this application; he denies such a possibility. For the author, the two apartments correspond to two different sanctuaries, *not* two separate localities in some heavenly structure.) The key is to understand the significance of the curtain which separated the two apartments of the earthly sanctuary. Too often, the experiential function of the curtain as a symbol is overlooked, while the curtain itself as a material object is projected into heaven. The curtain was not given in order to divide a building into two separate rooms so that in the unraveling of the symbolism we might enjoy a lesson in supernal architecture. The curtain is intended to fulfill a soteriological purpose.

FIRST APARTMENT AND THE DAILY RITUAL

The earthly sanctuary: Type.
Imperfect access.
Repetitive sacrifices.
The Levitical priesthood.
From Moses to the Ascension.

SECOND APARTMENT AND THE YEARLY RITUAL

The heavenly sanctuary: Antitype.
Perfect access.
Unique, once-for-all-time sacrifice.
The Melchizedekian priesthood.
From the Ascension to the Second Advent.

The veil in the earthly sanctuary functioned as a consistent reminder of the problem of sin which had brought about a separation between man and God. The sinfulness of the earthly priests made it necessary for them to be shielded from the divine presence as they performed their typical-shadowy functions. The rending of the veil at the death of Jesus was an indication from God that the separation had been removed.²⁰

When we turn our attention to the antitypical sanctuary in heaven, we should not

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forget that the contrasts are at least as significant as the comparisons. Is it conceivable that our sinless high priest must function with a protective shield between himself and the Father? That which was essential in the earthly sanctuary becomes incongruous in the heavenly.

If we are to admit that a two-apartment building does not exist in heaven and that the author of Hebrews gives the Day of Atonement ritual a fulfillment in A.D. 31, what effect does this have on the traditional Adventist position that Jesus commenced a special ministry corresponding to the Day of Atonement type in 1844? The answer is that this understanding of Hebrews neither affirms nor denies the Adventist eschatological application of the Day of Atonement ritual.

If we remind ourselves that the Adventist interpretation of the daily and yearly rituals of the earthly sanctuary centers upon soteriological functions of Christ, rather than celestial architecture, we will not feel threatened by the loss of two heavenly compartments. Both *phases* of Christ’s high priestly ministry have been performed in the very presence of the antitypical mercy seat, the throne of God. To insist upon two sepa-

rate heavenly locations for these two phases of Christ’s mediatorship is to fail to grasp the significance of the symbolism of the sanctuary in general and the dividing curtain in particular. The issue of the two apartments in heaven is a pseudoproblem.

On the surface, a more serious problem is that of justifying the Adventist application of the Day of Atonement to post-1844 times in the face of the Hebrews assertion that Jesus performed the role of high priest on the Day of Atonement in A.D. 31. Again, this problem is a pseudoproblem which does not necessarily exclude the Adventist position. The fact that Luke-Acts applies Joel 2:28-32 to Pentecost has never caused Adventists to deny that this passage has a second later application.²¹ Likewise, there is no reason why the Day of Atonement *might* not have a double application. An examination of the application by the book of Hebrews indicates that he adopts the Day of Atonement as a vehicle of truth solely because it illustrates his intention of highlighting the unimpeded access to God available to believers in Christ. I cannot believe that either the author of Hebrews or God intended us to imagine that the Day of Atonement typology has been exhausted by this application.

The real problem for Adventism in its vindication of its eschatological positions is not whether Jesus went into the heavenly “Holy of Holies” in A.D. 31, nor whether the author of Hebrews makes a typological application of the Day of Atonement to Christ’s mediatorial work from that time onward. These issues will only become problems if we get caught up in a literalistic, substantial interpretation of biblical symbolism and fail to grasp its experiential dimension.

The urgent task of Adventism is to exert its energies in focusing upon the chinks in its exegetical armor and to discover an adequate biblical rationale for its eschatological positions. This does *not* mean that Adventists are required to find “the investigative judgment” and their other unique teachings explicitly referred to in Scripture in order to justify their positions. The doctrine of the Trinity is acceptable to the whole of or-

thodox Christianity despite the universal recognition that it is only implicit in Scripture. In the same way that the raw material for the development of the Trinitarian doc-

trine was distilled from Holy Writ, so Adventism must concentrate on consolidating its traditional positions from the implications of Scripture.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. New Testament introductions are not unanimous in their answers to this question. These differences are not sufficient to create a variance in interpretation of the Epistle's meaning.

2. Hebrews 2:1-3; 3:12-15; 6:6; 10:23-25, 29; 12:25, indicate the temptation of apostasy. The pressure of persecution is hinted at in Hebrews 10:32-39; 12:3-12; 13:13. All these passages occur in the appeal sections of the epistle. On the other hand, the possibility of a return to Judaism is implied from the substance of the theological argument of the book. (All Scriptural references to R.S.V. unless stated.)

3. McNeile, A. H. *An Introduction to the Study of The New Testament* (2nd edition rev. Williams, C. S. C., Oxford: 1953) pp. 224-229.

4. In contrasting the Old Testament Cultus with Christianity, the word "better" (*κρειττων*) occurs thirteen times: Hebrews 1:4; 6:9; 7:7, 19, 22; 8:6; 9:23; 10:34; 11:16, 35, 40; 12:24. In addition to these explicit statements, the idea of superiority runs like a thread throughout the argument of the epistle. It is because of this one should remember in dealing with the Epistle's symbolism that the contrast between type and anti-type is more significant than comparison.

5. Exodus 25:8; 40:33 ff.

6. Hebrews 5:3; 7:27; 9:7.

7. Hebrews 1:1 ff.

8. Hebrews 4:15; 7:26 f.

9. Hebrews 1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2. This point is emphatic so as to highlight the fact that Christ's appearance into the presence of God was not fleeting as that of the earthly high priest on the Day of Atonement.

10. Hebrews 7:11, 18 f.; 10:1-4.

11. Hebrews 1:3; 7:26 f.; 9:11-14, 26 ff.; 10:1-4, 11 f.

12. Hebrews 4:16.

13. Hebrews 6:19.

14. The constant emphasis upon the believers' "drawing near" to God through their high priest harmonizes well with the other Day of Atonement allusions in the epistle. See Hebrews 4:16; 7:19, 25; 10:1, 22; 11:6.

15. Hebrews 9:25 f.

16. Salom, A. P. "Ta Hagia in the Epistle to the Hebrews" *AUSS*. Vol. V, 1967, No. 1, p. 68.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 66-70.

18. Note the N.I.V. version of Hebrews 9:8, 12, 25; 10:19; 13:11.

19. The application of the table of shewbread to the reality of Christ "the bread of life" and the seven branched candlestick to Christ "the light of the world" or to the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit are two examples of the existential approach to symbolism. We are concerned to grasp their soteriological implications rather than discovering pieces of temple furniture in some heavenly building. And yet, by a curious twist, when we come to the dividing curtain in the earthly sanctuary, we are preoccupied with a substantial application and ignore its soteriological dimension. Rather than seeing that veil as a symbol of the separation created by sin, we project it into heaven as a literal curtain!

20. Matthew 27:50 f.

21. Acts 2:16-21.