
The Sanctuary as a Call to Moral Seriousness

by Jon Dybdahl

Seventh-day Adventists interpret the doctrine of the sanctuary in two main ways. Some say the doctrine is mainly about last day events, or eschatology; others say it is mainly about the assurance of salvation, or soteriology. These interpretations are not mutually exclusive, but they do represent different emphases which alter the function of the doctrine in the light of the church. I propose a third possible emphasis, arguing that, among other things, the doctrine of the sanctuary is an ethical appeal, a call to repentance and moral seriousness. I also claim that the two dominant interpretations are, by themselves, inadequate. After laying out all three interpretations I am going to assess the first two in light of the third.

The first option I shall call the *eschatological* view. This has become the traditional understanding of the sanctuary in Adventism. A good example of it is found in the well-known Adventist book, *Bible Readings for the Home*.¹ This book considers the doctrine in a section entitled, “The Sure Word of Prophecy,” along with other prophecies from the books of Daniel and Revelation. The presentation begins by examining the prophecies of Daniel 8 and 9 showing the dates for the 2,300-day prophecy. The author

elucidates the prophecy of Daniel by going back to Old Testament passages on the sanctuary and ahead to the book of Hebrews. He concludes this section on prophecy with a discussion of judgment and Babylon.

What this means is that here the doctrine of the sanctuary fits into that major category of doctrines called eschatology, or the doctrine of the last things. For many of us raised as Adventists the doctrine basically was the 2,300-day prophecy and its accompanying chart. Everything else simply explained and buttressed the prophecy. On this view the doctrine of the sanctuary functioned as an explanation of the origin of our church and told us we are living in the period after all time prophecies have been fulfilled.

The second option is what I shall call the *soteriological* view. It developed later partly, I suspect, due to an uneasiness with the emphasis of the first view on time and judgment. An early indication of shifting emphasis is the treatment of the doctrine by T. H. Jemison in the Bible doctrines textbook *Christian Beliefs*.² Jemison places the doctrine in the section of his book called “The Ministry of Reconciliation.” This section begins with a chapter on the plan of salvation and moves on to a discussion of the covenants and the earthly and heavenly sanctuaries. Consequently the emphasis shifts. While Jemison discusses Daniel 8, the

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sanctuary is no longer simply another way to understand last day time prophecies, Jemison places the sanctuary primarily within the doctrine of salvation or soteriology. How God saves us, not the 2,300 days, is the emphasis of the sanctuary symbols.

The same emphasis comes out in the material published following the Glacier View meeting in 1980.³ The headline on the cover of *Ministry* magazine, "Christ and His High Priestly Ministry," as well as the name given the now famous consensus document, "Christ in the Heavenly Sanctuary" indicate the direction taken. The main thrust is that the doctrine of the sanctuary concerns the high priestly ministry of Christ who gives the believer assurance before God. The biblical starting place is the book of Hebrews. A section (IV) of the consensus statement does discuss time, but the shift of emphasis away from chronology and Daniel is clear. The sanctuary doctrine functions mainly as a metaphorical affirmation of the believer's assurance of salvation made possible through Christ's high priestly ministry.

I propose a third approach which I call the *ethical* view.⁴ This view interprets the doctrine of the sanctuary as an appeal to God's people to be morally serious in view of the horror of sin and the impending judgment of God upon it. Rather than Daniel or Hebrews, the biblical starting point is the prophets, but it reaches back to even earlier Old Testament voices and forward to the New Testament as well. According to this view the sanctuary fits more directly under the heading of theological ethics than under eschatology or soteriology.

In developing this third view, I will later deal with traditional sanctuary passages in Leviticus 16 and Daniel. However, my exposition begins with other passages, particularly passages in Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Indeed these two writers are essential to understanding this view of the sanctuary. Consider first Jeremiah. In chapter 7:3-15

this prophet gives a powerful sermon at the gate of the temple. He calls for Israel to repent of her sins—her murder, idolatry, and oppression of the poor. If she will not repent, the temple will be destroyed. Mere ritual observance at the temple, says the prophet, does not save; a change of life is necessary. As historical precedent Jeremiah cites the destruction of the Shiloh sanctuary, a tent of meeting presided over by Eli and Samuel and apparently destroyed by the Philistines. The parallel is clear. The sin of an earlier Israel led to the destruction of their sanctuary. Jews of Jeremiah's day are by their sin "defiling" God's house, as verse 30 specifically states, and they, too, face judgment and the loss of their sanctuary/temple.

The second prophet to be considered is Ezekiel. His book makes the theme of temple defilement and judgment even more prominent. An example of this is Ezekiel 5:7-11.⁵ Here Ezekiel makes the clear statement that because of Israel's sinfulness God must execute judgment. In verse 11 Ezekiel says specifically that Israel has defiled the sanctuary and that God's judgment will follow. (As a matter of fact, the temple was desolated by the Babylonians shortly thereafter.) Ezekiel also prophesies a future when a repentant people will return again to their land. In the picture of a restored Israel in Ezekiel chapters 40-48, the prophet, among other things, describes and considers at some length a new sanctuary where God dwells in Israel's midst. A restored and cleansed temple becomes the center of a repentant Israelite remnant restored to her land and her God.

In summary, Ezekiel and Jeremiah use the motif of the sanctuary polluted by Israel's continued sin as a means of appeal for repentance. The mere form of religion is not enough; only if their lives change can Israel avert judgment and God return to his people. The sanctuary doctrine emphasis then is a call to moral reformation in an age of impending doom.

It should also be remembered that these

prophets do not see this cycle as happening only once. Jeremiah, as we have seen, points to Shiloh during the period of the judges as well as to his own late seventh-century world. Interestingly, the gospel writers themselves—see Matthew 21:13, Mark 11:17, and Luke 19:46—do not miss the theme. They all invoke the Jeremiah passage in describing Jesus' cleansing of the temple. Jesus' acted parable is clear—Israel is again deep in sin and polluting the temple. Unless the country changes, serious consequences will follow. All three of these passages are examples of a proclamation of impending judgment and a call to repentance and reformation based on the sanctuary pollution/cleansing motif.

One question remains. How are Jeremiah and Ezekiel related to traditional passages in Leviticus and Daniel? Are the messages of these prophets really connected with the day of atonement motif in Leviticus 16, and Daniel 8 and 9? The answer is yes, as the following evidence suggests.

First, the prophetic passages are related linguistically to Leviticus 16. Both Jeremiah 7 and Ezekiel 5 use the word “defile” to describe what Israel's sins do to the sanctuary. The same Hebrew root word is used in Leviticus 16:16 to describe the uncleanness that necessitates the cleansing of the sanctuary in the day of atonement rites.

Further, the prophetic passages are conceptually and functionally related to the day of atonement. This is especially true for Ezekiel. He repeatedly mentions the pollution of the temple and its subsequent cleansing and restoration. The fact that he conceives of this in terms of the day of atonement would seem to be symbolically indicated by the date on which he receives his vision of a cleansed temple—according to Ezekiel 40:1, the 10th day of the new year. If the new year referred to is the one beginning in the fall, then the day of the vision is none other than Yom Kippur, the day of atonement. On the very day that Leviticus says the

first sanctuary was to be cleansed, Ezekiel saw in vision a cleansed and purified temple.⁶

There is an even broader sense in which the message of these prophets is related to the day of atonement. Remember that Leviticus 16 describes only the ritual connected with the day of atonement. It is much like the description of the marriage rite found in a minister's manual. The description of the rite does not describe entirely the institution solemnized by it. As the marriage rite doesn't tell us what happens if no marriage title occurs or if it is performed incorrectly, so the day of atonement rites of Leviticus 16 do not tell us the consequences of not performing the ceremony or of performing it incorrectly. It is not, however, hard to find implied answers. Consider Leviticus 15:31, just before the description of the day of atonement begins. Unless Israel is kept separate from its uncleanness, the people will die by defiling the tabernacle. I think we can safely connect this with the day of atonement. If the rite is not performed or performed incorrectly, judgment comes.

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Remember here that the day of atonement rites was not simply magical. Forgiveness and cleansing could occur only if there were confession of guilt and change of life.⁷ This is similar to the message of the prophets, who say that the repentance is not evident and, therefore the sanctuary is *not* being cleansed. Unless the sinning stops, God will perform the cleansing himself through judgment, for he cannot abide where sin is not properly cared for. The prophets' message does, therefore, reflect

the day of atonement rites found in Leviticus 16.

We need not belabor the connection between Jeremiah and Ezekiel, on the one hand, and Daniel on the other. Seventh-day Adventist theology has always connected Daniel 8:14 to Leviticus. And we have seen now that Jeremiah and Ezekiel themselves take up the theme in Leviticus. Daniel was a contemporary of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and so it is not surprising that he has a similar concern over the sanctuary.

“The ministry of Christ as High Priest in heaven anticipates its own consummation, its own end. And its end is related to the end, the Eschaton.”

I suggest that we find an emphasis akin to that of Ezekiel and Jeremiah in Ellen White’s presentation of the doctrine of the sanctuary. In *Great Controversy*, Ellen White devotes 23 pages of chapters 23 and 24 entitled “What is the Sanctuary?” and “In the Holy of Holies” to an explanation of the doctrine’s historical role in Adventism: accounting for the non-occurrence in 1844 of the second advent. It should be noted that the sanctuary motif thus functioned at the beginning of Adventism not so much as a motif important in itself, but as something that validated the key doctrinal tenet of the believers—the literal, imminent second coming of Jesus.

Ellen White, however, does not stop here, for in the next six chapters, she develops the ethical and theological implications of the sanctuary. This 77-page section centers around the idea of the law and the Sabbath and is a plea for careful obedience to God’s law rather than easy belief devoid of life-changing commitment. The key to all this is Ellen White’s transition from the sanctuary to the law which comes at the beginning of chapter 25. “When the

temple of God was opened in heaven, the ark of His testament was seen. Within the holy of holies, in the sanctuary in heaven, the divine law is sacredly enshrined . . .”⁸ Building on the theme of the law, Mrs. White attacks easy religion which does not divorce itself from the follies of the world and practices a faith without works. This ethical appeal in light of impending judgment is the same emphasis found in Ezekiel and Jeremiah.

In summary then, I am suggesting that both the Bible and Ellen White use the theme of the defilement/pollution and subsequent cleansing/restoration of the sanctuary as a means of appealing for moral reformation. The theme is the basis for a call in light of impending crisis to forsake evil and live the life of obedience. For Ellen White, the earlier pollutions and cleansings in the time of the prophets and Jesus are precursors of the great final cleansing and restoration at the end of time.

How then does the ethical view assess the other two options in Adventism? Consider first the time prophecy view. I claim that it must take into account a broader range of biblical passages. It must look beyond Daniel and acknowledge that the Bible applies the theme of pollution/cleansing of the sanctuary to many different occasions. It should note, too, that Ellen White spends more time, as do the prophets, spelling out ethical demands based on the sanctuary than she does in expounding the specific historical and chronological details. The sanctuary must somehow be communicated as more than a time chart. In order to be genuinely “traditional,” this view must embrace the emphasis of the Bible and Ellen White.

Of the soteriological view, we may say that the emphasis on Christ as high priest and on the assurance of salvation are indeed commendable. These are vital elements in Christian theology too often neglected by

Adventists. On the other hand, it should be recognized that the priestly-assurance position is basically a theology of Hebrews, and that pollution/cleansing of the sanctuary portrayed in the Old Testament makes a different, equally important point. Just as the time prophecy view reads Hebrews in the light of Daniel, the priestly view tends to read all the Old Testament in the light of Hebrews, or else ignore the Old Testament altogether. It speaks to people who are not assured of their salvation. We must remember, however, that the Old Testament prophets and the early Adventists were speaking to people too assured of their salvation and in need of moral reformation. Although many undoubtedly need the assuring message, it should not be portrayed as the historic Adventist emphasis. In an increasingly secular world, many in the church today may need to hear not only words of comfort and assurance, but also a warning to judgment and a call to obedience and reform.

We may expect a call to reformation that employs the ideas of pollution, judgment and cleansing to be understandable and thus proclaimable in our world. We speak often today of "cleaning up" a long-standing "mess" in some government agency or school administration. We are coming to recognize that we cannot go on dumping

toxic wastes into rivers and streams and fouling our air forever without one day coming to an ecological day of judgment. Even secular writers speak of our past mistakes as accumulating "pollution," leading us to impending nuclear and ecological judgments. Modern men and women recognize the need for cleansing all this "pollution," and many have made this need the basis for a call to changed behavior.

In the Old Testament it is God, of course, who cleanses the sanctuary. Seeing the doctrine of the sanctuary as a call to *us* to engage in acts of cleansing might at first seem odd, but to press this point would be to misunderstand the deeper significance of the whole sanctuary motif. For the cleansing of the sanctuary and the rescue from judgment depend upon the willingness of the people to repent—to cease committing the sins that pollute. It does not stretch the matter overmuch to say that the positive significance of this is that God's people must themselves be cleansing agents in a world polluted by sin. This accords, after all, with the biblical theme of human beings as instruments of salvation for the nation.⁹

A community steeped in the sanctuary doctrine may well consider this ethical motif. Indeed, it may be that the world is ready to listen to the message that continued flagrant.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. My Review and Herald paperback edition lists copyrights in 1914, 1935, 1942, 1949, 1958, and 1963. Page one says "revised" but gives no date for the revision. See page 218ff.

2. T. H. Jemison. *Christian Beliefs* (Mt. View, CA: Pacific Press, 1954), pp. 181–224. See esp. 214ff.

3. *Ministry*, October, 1980. I think the high priestly-assurance view is also the emphasis of Dr. Desmond Ford.

4. My reading of the prophets, in particular Jeremiah and Ezekiel, have influenced me as has Ellen White's *Great Controversy* presentation. My teaching colleague, Glen Greenwalt, has also enhanced my understanding of this issue.

5. See also Ezekiel 7:20–23, 9:3–7, 23:26–39, 24:15–24, 28:18–19, 36:16–18, and 43:6–9.

6. Wm. H. Shea. "The Investigative Judgment of Judah, Ezekiel 1–10," in *The Sanctuary and Atonement* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1981), p. 291.

7. Gerhard Hasel. "Studies in Biblical Atonement II: the Day of Atonement," in *The Sanctuary and Atonement* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1981), p. 120. See also Jacob Milgrom, "The Day of Atonement," in *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1971), p. 1386.

8. Ellen G. White. *Great Controversy* (Mt. View, California Pacific Press, 1951), pp. 433–34.

9. See, e.g., Genesis 12:1–3 and Isaiah 42:1–6. Cf. also the New Testament motif of the church as the body of Christ.