

Does God Want the Temple Rebuilt?

Is the temple to be rebuilt under the blessing of God for acceptable worship? There are some Bible believing Christians who tell us that it will be rebuilt, and that this will mark a glorious point in the history of the people of God. But will it? What does the Bible say?

Before looking for the answer, we must notice the last phrase of the question, “Under the blessing of God for acceptable worship.” No one can safely predict what a group of people may decide to do in Jerusalem in the coming years. They may build a temple and offer animal sacrifices on its altar, but will this be in fulfillment of God’s revealed will?

The Unity of the Temple and the Tabernacle

The tabernacle pitched in the wilderness was not a clever invention of Moses; it was divinely appointed for the worship of God right down to the smallest detail. God told Moses, “Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you. See that you make them according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.” (Exodus 25:9, 40) Every detail had to be perfect, and so the Holy Spirit imparted spiritual skill to Bezaleel and Aholiab (Exodus 31:1-11).

The worship of the tabernacle centered on the ark of the covenant. The reason for this can be seen in an examination of Exodus 25:22: “There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the Testimony, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites.” Here in the Holy of Holies God came to dwell upon the mercy seat, atop the ark of the covenant; and the two golden cherubim symbolize the heavenly cherubim who ever protect man from presumptuously encountering the Holy.

So it was atop this ark that the blood of the atonement was sprinkled, and this occurred but once a year, for it was only on the day of atonement that anyone could enter this sanctuary within the sanctuary. One can readily see that the tabernacle worship occurred where the ark was and could not occur anywhere else, for the worship centered in the LORD, and he promised to meet Israel upon this ark.

Did the tabernacle worship cease when Solomon built the temple? No, for the worship in the temple is a continuation of the tabernacle worship. As long as God's people lived in tents, he lived in a tent (1 Chronicles 17:5-6), but once God permanently planted his people (1 Chronicles 17:9), he also planted a permanent place for his own worship (1 Chronicles 17:12). All of this worship connected with the temple may be said to be a continuation of the tabernacle worship, except on a grander scale—a scale, it must be noticed, that is by divine warrant alone.

King David gave to his son, Solomon, the plans for the temple, 'The plans of all that the Spirit had put in his mind . . . "All this," David said, "I have in writing from the hand of the LORD upon me, and he gave me understanding in all the details of the plan."' (1 Chronicles 28:11-13, 19)

All of the tabernacle worship is here in the temple—fulfilled, not replaced, in the temple—and what may be said of it, may be said of the temple: Both were patterned after a revealed model, a model shown to Moses, and normative also for David. This model made up the whole contents of each.

Temple Symbolism

Why was the exactness in the temple worship so important to God? The book of Hebrews provides the answer. In Hebrews 8:1-2 Jesus Christ is proclaimed as the great high priest of his people who reigns in heaven. He is called the one "Who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man." The true tabernacle is heavenly, and the one built under Moses is a type of it. Moses' tabernacle is therefore called a "worldly sanctuary" in Hebrews 9:1, and it was "an illustration (Literally: Parable) for the present time . . . applying until the time of the new order." (Hebrews 9:9-10) But of what was it a shadow?

Jesus Christ

The real significance of the tabernacle is Jesus Christ, whose body is the true tabernacle: 'Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." But the temple he had spoken of was his body.' (John 2:19, 21) How can Jesus be said to fulfill the temple worship?

John proclaims Jesus as the Word of God, coequal with the Father, very God of very God (John 1:1-3). This Word, says John, “Became flesh and made his dwelling (Literally: tabernacled) among us” (John 1:14). Truly Jesus is Immanuel, God with us (Matthew 1:23). Now in a fuller way than God tabernacled among his people by means of the tabernacle and the temple, he has come in the flesh and united himself to his people in their conditions.

Jesus is fully God; Jesus is fully human, yet there are not two persons, but the one person, Jesus. So complete is the incarnation, that the unity of God with his people in the tabernacle must fade into insignificance alongside it. This is why the tabernacle worship is called a “copy and shadow of what is in heaven” (Hebrews 8:5). Once Christ the substance came, what place was there for the shadowy worship of the temple? As long as the Jewish temple stood, it testified that the incarnation was still to come.

Nowhere is this brought out more fully than in an examination of the animal sacrifices. As long as the blood of bulls and goats was shed, by divine appointment, God’s people were told that perfect redemption had not yet come (Hebrews 10:1-4). But when Christ, the real sacrifice came, the shadowy sacrifices had to lose their meaning for they testified that full redemption had not yet been made. As long as the animal sacrifices continued, the Holy Spirit signified “That the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still standing. This is an illustration for the present time . . . applying until the time of the new order.” (Hebrews 9:8-10) But when the time of reformation came, Christ “By his own blood . . . entered the Most Holy Place once for all having obtained eternal redemption” (Hebrews 9:12).

A rebuilding of the temple involves reinstating the temple worship, which centers in the animal sacrifices. But these sacrifices deny the completed character of the work of the Lord Jesus on the cross. No one can read the book of Hebrews, especially the passages above, and come to any other conclusion. But the Old Testament did predict the rebuilding of the temple (cf. Ezekiel 40 ff). What can be said about this?

The New Temple

What can be said to this is what the apostles said to this, namely, they interpreted the rebuilding of the temple as the gathering of all nations into the church.

After the Lord died and rose again from the dead, he ascended into heaven, from where he sent the Holy Spirit to indwell his people. The Holy Spirit unites believers to the Lord Jesus Christ in all his offices as prophet, priest and king. In the same way that God dwelt in the tabernacle and the temple, he now indwells the people of God.

The parallels are striking.

Once the tabernacle was consecrated to God, it was filled with the Glorious Presence of the LORD: “Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle” (Exodus 40:34).

When the temple was completed, “Fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple” (2 Chronicles 7:1).

The Lord Jesus as the fulfillment of the temple was baptized with the Holy Spirit (John 1:32).

On the day of Pentecost, “All of them (the church) were filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:4). No longer does God dwell in the physical building of stones; now he dwells in the hearts of his people, the “Living stones that are being built into a spiritual house” (1 Peter 2:5).

This is brought out clearly in several passages. When the gospel was preached, God added people to the Church. Paul saw this as the erecting of the temple: “By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.” (1 Corinthians 3:10-11) That is why Christians are to be holy, because they are God’s holy temple in whom God himself dwells: “Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you?” (1 Corinthians 3:16)

One Temple—One People

In Ephesians 2, Paul tells the Gentile Christians that they are now united to the true nation of Israel through the person and work of Christ (Ephesians 2:12-13, 18-19). There are not two peoples of God, but one, for the purpose of the Lord Jesus Christ was to “Create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace . . . Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household.” (Ephesians 2:15, 19)

The Old Testament temple was characterized by barriers: between God and humankind and between Jew and Gentile, but the Lord Jesus destroyed that temple that he might erect another without these barriers: “For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.” (Ephesians 2:14) “Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place 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)

As there is only one people of God, with identical promises, destiny and salvation, so also the new temple is one building. Jewish and Gentile believers are united to form God’s house. The temple of the New Testament is “Built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.” (Ephesians 2:20-22)

What could be plainer than this? In Christ, the Holy Spirit takes elect Jews and elect Gentiles and builds the true temple of God, the church. If the worldly temple with its barriers between God and people, priest and people, Jew and Gentile, and male and female were to be rebuilt by divine appointment, then the work of the Lord Jesus in uniting us would be declared null and void.

Conclusion

No one can predict what a group of misguided zealots may build in Jerusalem in the future. But no matter what people may call it, it will not

be the temple of God. Every true worshiper worships in the new temple, which the Holy Spirit continues to build—the church. The hope of all humanity—Jewish and Gentile alike—is the Lord Jesus Christ, who has fulfilled the temple worship by his death and resurrection and sending the Spirit.

That is why it is impossible for passages such as the last few chapters of Ezekiel to mean anything else but the building of the temple of the New Covenant, the joining of the living stones into the new house of God. Are the blood sacrifices of bulls and goats offered for sin in Ezekiel 43-46 to be understood in any other way than as a reference to the once for all sacrifice of the Lord Jesus on the cross using the language and imagery of the Old Testament? If so, then Jesus was symbolically an insufficient Savior. But such a thought is utterly contrary to the entire book of Hebrews.

The Lord Jesus' death was all sufficient:

“The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. . . .

“We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.”
(Hebrews 10:1-4, 10-14)