

The Temple

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April 06, 2024

Since the beginning of time humans have been devoting themselves to higher deities and supernatural powers. Although people have vastly different beliefs on who or what those are, there is a shared principle: the need for a meeting place between the high power and humans. The meeting place often looked different in each culture: a moveable tent like the Israelites, elaborate buildings like the Babylonians, a kitchen table used as an altar like those in the Roman-Greco society, however temples and sanctuaries served as the meeting place with the higher powers across many cultures. Studying the theme of temples through the cultural, geographical, social, and historical world of the New Testament offers a beautiful opportunity to appreciate how the Scriptures reveal a God who is personally present, indwelling, and ruling creation through human beings. For a biblical author such as Paul who grew up saturated in the Old Testament while also living in a Roman-Greco society, calling followers of Jesus, God's new temple was revolutionary (1 Cor. 3:16). This paper will attempt to portray how the biblical authors truly believed that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah completely dismantled the veil that separated humanity from experiencing oneness with the Creator.

Temple: Greco-Roman Culture

The early history of the known world was shaped by the repetitive cycle of the rise and fall of global powers. From the rise of the Assyrian Empire in eight-hundreds BCE to the fall of the Roman Empire in four hundreds AD the social, cultural, economic, and religious landscape experienced much change. One reign in particular remains vital to understanding the context of the New Testament: Alexander the Great and his Hellenistic world. As a pupil under Aristotle, Alexander ensured Greek philosophy, architecture, and religion became normative across his vast empire. Even as the Romans began dominating the globe after taking control of Alexander's

fractured kingdom in 146 BCE, most of the New Testament audience still remained influenced by Hellenistic ideals.¹

The city of Corinth serves as a great example of the religious clash of the Hellenistic period and Roman colonization. A group of scholars noted that “in many ways, Corinth was a thoroughly Roman city like any other colony, and it presented a Roman face to the world, especially in its city center. At the same time, however, it was a city which from its founding was trying to lay claim to a Greek heritage.”² After being sacked by the Roman consul L. Mummius in 146 BCE, the Roman emperor, Julius Caesar, reestablished the colony before in 44 BCE by rebuilding the most important temples and sanctuaries such as Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore, Temple of Aphrodite, Temple of Asklepieion, the cult of Apollo on Temple Hill as well as several smaller temples and shrines that all shared Hellenistic origins. The book of Acts portrays Paul becoming distressed as he journeys through Athens and observes that the city is “full of idols” (Acts 17:16).

In a Roman-Greco society prided in knowledge and philosophical advancement, nothing made a stronger statement of their religious footprint than their architecture.³ As a result, temples constituted the most important expression of religion. Temples represented more than just a building. They would house statues and images of their gods, be a place to perform sacrifices, feasts, and other ritual practices. They served as local banks, city parks, theatres, and dining facilities. Consider the riot of the silversmiths in Ephesus in Acts 19. It was not ideological or theological confrontation, but rather, the temple’s silversmith who opposed Paul over financial

¹ Joel B Green and Lee Martin McDonald, *The World of the New Testament* (Baker Academic, 2013).

² Steven J Friesen, Daniel N Schowalter, and James C Walters, *Corinth in Context : Comparative Studies on Religion and Society* (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2010).

³ Christine Miller, and H.A. Guerber. *The Story of the Greek* (Sarasota, Florida: Nothing New Press, 2009).

losses. In fact, the temple and society were so fully integrated in the Greco-Roman world that it is hard to imagine participating meaningfully in community life without also participating in the religious life of that community.⁴

Temple: Jewish Culture

The theme of temple in a Roman-Greco culture is just one aspect of the New Testament world. Another major facet is the Jewish culture. To the Israelite nation, the temple is central to their identity and relationship with the Creator. The temple theme begins on the first pages of the Hebrew Bible with the bold claim that all creation is God's temple. In Genesis 1:1-23, God orders and gives function to the cosmos with human beings embodying the image of God. Instead of a statue representing the divine image like those seen in pagan temples, humans are depicted as the image of God. Any near ancient eastern society would see Israel's audacious assertion that the Cosmos is God's temple, and his living images reveal the union between heaven and earth. As Old Testament theologian, W.A. Gage, points out "the Hebrew Bible is replete with descriptions of creation as a tabernacle which God has pitched (Ps. 104; Job 9:8; Isa. 40:22), or a house that God has established (with pillars, windows, and doors: Job 26:11; Gen. 7:11; Ps 78:24). Consequently, the temple of Zion, as a sanctuary that God has established, becomes a microcosmic metaphor for creation itself. Tragically, humanity gave up their role as image bearers and tries to create life on their own terms. The rest of the biblical story is about the hope for a new humanity to be reunited with God's realm of life in order to work and rule as God's image in the temple once more.

Through God's loyal love, He made a way to once more dwell among His people, first through a tabernacle and then through a temple. When compared to one another, the literary

⁴ Joel B Green and Lee Martin McDonald.

structure the tabernacle, and the temple both echo the creation story in Genesis One. All these stories share a repetition of seven speeches/acts (Gen. 1-2:3, Ex. 25-31, Ex. 39-40, 1 Kings 6-8), followed by an equivalent culmination of sabbath (Gen. 2:1-3, Ex. 31:12-17, Ex. 40:32-35, 1 Kings 8: 46-53), immediately paralleled by a temptation and fall narrative (Gen. 3, Ex. 32, Lev. 10, 1 Kings 9:1-9 ,11:1-13). Furthermore, the Garden of Eden connect with the three-tiered design pattern of the tabernacle and temple. First, the skies of Genesis One serve as the throne room of God as seen as the Holy of Holies with the ark of the covenant as God's throne. Second, the land with trees, animals, humans in the garden of Eden are depicted as the Holy place where the Menorah (tree), Cherubim (animal), and priest (Adam) are located. Lastly, the seas outside Eden are portrayed by the courtyard and its bronze sea (1 Kings 7:23).⁵ All of these intentional parallels illustrated by the biblical authors are meant to display the incredible reality that God continued to remain faithful to His image bearers by abiding in their midst, despite their adulteress ways.

Unfortunately, Israel and its leaders intensified their ancestors' rebellion and were exiled from their land. God's presence departed and Babylonians destroyed the temple. Despite Israel's disloyalty, the biblical prophets were so convinced of God's covenant faithfulness that they anticipated a day when God would re-establish a new temple and begin to dwell once more with His creation. Zechariah exclaims "Sing for joy and be glad, O daughter of Zion; for behold I am coming, and I will dwell in your midst," declares the Lord..." (Zech. 2:10-13). Ezekiel also envisioned God's sanctuary returning again, saying "Then he brought me back to the door of the house; and behold, water was flowing from under the threshold of the house toward the east, for the house faced east..." (Ez. 47:1-2). After Israel returned from exile, they rebuilt the temple, yet

⁵ Michael Morales, *Cult and Cosmos : Tilting toward a Temple-Centered Theology* (Leuven ; Walpole, Ma: Peeters, 2014).

the presence of God did not return. In such that, The Old Testament concludes and the nation Israel awaits the promise of God's ultimate temple.

Then, nearly two centuries later, Jesus of Nazareth was born. He claimed that through Him, God's presence and rule had returned back to humanity once more. Matthew connects Jesus with the prophesy from Isaiah, calling Him Immanuel, God with us (Matt. 1:23). John's gospel account leaves no room for interpretation of who Jesus is and what He represents. John writes "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:1,14). The word for "dwelling" is tabernacle. Jesus literally has become the reality the temple was supposed to point to all along (Beale). Jesus was so convinced of this truth that He decreed "something greater than the temple is here" referring to Himself and the reunification of humanity and God (Matt. 12:6).

Even though the Jerusalem temple had been rebuilt and was in use, the New Testament authors repeatedly signify Jesus' body as the temple, that is, the real place where Heaven and Earth are united. John records "So the Jews said to him, "What sign do you show us for doing these things?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking about the temple of his body" (John 2:18-21). Because of Jesus, the layers of separation (outer courtyard, inner courtyard, and curtains) are completely done away with, and creation is able to abide in oneness once more with their Creator.⁶

Temple: Acts 2:1-3, and 1 Corinthians 3:16

⁶ J Daniel Hays, *The Temple and the Tabernacle : A Study of God's Dwelling Places from Genesis to Revelation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Bakerbooks, 2016).

After his resurrection, Jesus said that through His Spirit, God's presence would come to dwell in and among His followers so that they could become temples. In Acts 2:1-3 Luke records that "when the day of Pentecost came, [the disciples] were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit". Luke, an Israelite immersed in the Hebrew Scripture, knew the resting of fire was the most common way the Old Testament communicated God's dwelling presence (Gen. 15:17, Ex. 3:2-4, Ex. 13:21, Ex. 19:17-18, Dan. 3:25-26). Story after story, God came down to meet His people through fire.

The most prevalent imagery of God's fiery presence is in terms of the tabernacle and temple. The author of Numbers reminds the reader that God's presence covered the tabernacle in "the appearance of fire" (Num. 9:15-23), and after King Solomon finished building the temple "the Israelites saw the fire come down from heaven and the Glory of the Lord on the Temple" (2 Chron. 7:1-3). It is with temple imagery that Luke reveals the renewed presence of God in and through His people.⁷ This reality was not just to the Jewish nation, but to all humanity.

Luke goes on to record that in Peter's interaction with a roman soldier and his companions, Holy Spirit was poured out onto them, admitting "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right" (Acts 10:34-35). Luke uses the same language to describe Holy Spirit being poured out on the day of Pentecost in Acts Two as he does as Holy Spirit is poured out upon the gentiles in Acts Ten. The literary symmetry of Pentecost to the events at Cornelius' house is meant to illustrate that followers of Jesus from all nations have become a new creation and the

⁷ Gordon D Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* (Baker Books, 2023).

temple of God. To the Jews still awaiting God's return, believing this meant that Jesus was in fact the Messiah, God himself, and transformed all who believe into a new creation (Jer. 31,33; Ez. 1 36, 37). For the gentiles whose community life was intertwined with religious shrines and altars bearing the statues of gods, Luke's words would have meant that a relationship with God was not based on performing appeasing rituals but by being and believing who He created them to be-image bearers themselves.

Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 3:16 the Apostle Paul writes to both Jews and gentiles at the church in Corinth, reminding them that they are the new temple of God because God's Spirit dwells in them (1 Cor. 3:16-17). Not only was Paul describing a God who, through Jesus, re-elevated His people to His image bearers, but he was also declaring they had become the very dwelling place of God. Naturally, both cultures would lack a category for Paul's revolutionary understanding of temple. For the gentiles in the church, Paul's radical words would reshape their shared understanding that humans were more of an annoyance and inconvenience to the gods. Instead, Paul was urging them to experience true intimacy and relationship with the one true God through His indwelling presence. To the Jews, it would have been blasphemy to consider their Holy God personally interacting with sinful humans without a mediator. But thanks be to Jesus who became the Great High Priest and would act as the perfect mediator, allowing believers to interact and experience oneness with God forevermore. Paul reiterates this to the church of Ephesus, declaring that followers of Jesus are no longer strangers and aliens, but are fellow saints in God's household, with Jesus Himself as the cornerstone in whom we all are being laid on top of become His holy Temple, the dwelling of God in the Spirit (Eph. 2:19-22).

In conclusion, Acts 2:1-3 and 1 Corinthians 3:16 offer a profound theological truth: the physical location of the Temple is no longer the dwelling place of God. Instead, Jesus' Spirit

indwelt followers have become His new kingdom temple and are called to take part in bringing God's presence and God's kingdom to earth before an onlooking world. Jesus the Messiah redefined and reimagined the theme of temple in a New Testament world. For Jesus, it did not matter one's culture, history, or experience with previous temples. All that mattered was that He had become the full embodiment of God's presence eternally dwelling with creation. Therefore, believers are called to take, live, and share His story wherever we go- the workplace, school, home with kids, the gas station, the coffee shop, the local park, and the "ends of the earth"- because through faith in Jesus Christ followers have become His dwelling place on earth for all of humanity to see and believe in their loving Creator.

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