

Hebrews 9:1-14: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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- [0 : 0 0] Hebrews chapter 9 verses 1 to 14. Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly place of holiness. For a tent was prepared, the first section in which were the lampstand and the table and the bread of the presence.
- It is called the holy place. Behind the second curtain was a second section, called the most holy place, having the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, in which was a golden urn holding the manna and Aaron's staff that budded and the tablets of the covenant.
- Above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail. These preparations having thus been made, the priests go regularly into the first section, performing their ritual duties, but into the second only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people.
- By this, the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened, as long as the first section is still standing, which is symbolic for the present age. According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshipper, but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation.
- But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent, not made with hands, that is, not of this creation, he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves, but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.
- [1 : 3 8] For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God?
- Having already contrasted the old and the new high priesthods, and the covenants corresponding to them, in chapter 9 the author of Hebrews describes the old and the new sanctuaries, and the priestly service corresponding with them.
- He begins by roughly describing the order of the tabernacle, that was constructed according to the plans that were given to Moses on Mount Sinai. Moving from the high place, with the lampstand, the table, and the bread of the presence, he takes us into the most holy place.
- The attentive reader of the Old Testament might scratch his head at some of the details here. The golden altar of incense is not in the most holy place, nor are the manna or Aaron's rod in the Ark of the Covenant.
- In Exodus chapter 16 verse 34, the manna was seemingly placed before the testimony. In Numbers chapter 17 verse 10, Aaron's rod was also placed in the same location.
- [2 : 4 9] In 1 Kings chapter 8 verse 9 we read, There was nothing in the Ark except the two tablets of stone that Moses put there at Horeb, where the Lord made a covenant with the people of Israel, when they came out of the land of Egypt.

We have a number of problems here then, before we move on to consider the meaning of these things. First, how can the author of Hebrews say that the golden altar of incense is inside the most holy place?

Second, how can he say that the manna and Aaron's rod are inside the Ark of the Covenant? Most commentators simply say that the details are inaccurate. However, it is usually the case when reading scripture that seemingly inaccurate or imprecise details are clues to the fact that something more is going on.

To the first question concerning the location of the golden altar of incense, some have suggested that it is to an incense burner, rather than to the golden altar of incense, that Hebrews is referring.

This seems tenuous to me. While it was not unlikely that there was an incense burner in there for the incense brought in, the far more significant piece of furniture was the altar of incense.

[3 : 52] Another intriguing suggestion is that, with texts such as 1 Kings 6, verse 22 in mind, the author of Hebrews is recognising that, although the golden altar of incense is part of the furniture of the holy place, it is especially tied to the Ark of the Covenant, and in some sense belongs to that part of the tabernacle.

It is by means of the altar of incense that one ascends to the most holy place. You might think of it this way. To which room does the ladder belong? The lower room from which it goes up, or the upper room to which it ascends?

Leviticus chapter 16, verses 12 to 13 gives us some sense of this. And he shall take a censer full of coals of fire from the altar before the Lord, and two handfuls of sweet incense beaten small, and he shall bring it inside the veil, and put the incense on the fire before the Lord, that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat that is over the testimony, so that he does not die.

The incense, then, is the means by which one ascends from the lower part, which is the holy place, to the upper part, which is the most holy place. The second question, concerning the location of the manna and the rod, is also challenging.

However, even if there is technically imprecision here, it is instructive. For instance, the golden altar of incense is very clearly connected with the Ark of the Covenant, even though divided from it by the veil.

[5 : 13] It has to be placed before it. The rod and the manna are placed before the testimonies, connecting them with the tablets of the covenant, not merely the ark itself, but its contents.

The relics of the rod and the manna were not present in the Ark, when it was placed in the inner sanctuary in 1 Kings chapter 8. However, the relics of the rod and the manna might also make us think of the furniture of the holy place.

The holy place contains the altar of incense, which connects to the Ark of the Covenant, with the lampstand and the table of showbread. The most holy place contains the Ark of the Testimony, with the rod and the manna.

The rod, with its almond blossoms, connects with the lampstand, with its almond blossoms. The manna, the heavenly bread that God provides in the wilderness, connects with the showbread.

However, after this teasing glimpse into the tabernacle, the author of Hebrews takes us out once more. Having briefly described the tabernacle, he describes the way that the service of the priest related to the sections of it.

[6 : 12] The key term here is first. The priest's service was overwhelmingly in the first section, not in the second. The high priest was the only one who served in the second section, and then only once a year, to take blood on the Day of Atonement.

The limited access to the second section, though only a replica of the heavenly temple, represented the truth of the lack of access enjoyed by the people to God's special presence. The Day of Atonement was a feast with eschatological symbolic import.

It was an anticipation of the great day of the Lord, when there would be a great division, with some being expelled and others granted full access. It symbolised the movement from the present age of the first section, to the age to come of the second section, when the sins of Israel would be dealt with decisively.

The first section of the tabernacle represented the state of the people in the age prior to the work of Christ, a realm of limited access. The Day of Atonement was essential to the functioning of the entire sacrificial system.

It rebooted it every year. Yet its reality was an eschatological one, a reality awaiting the future, where it would be confirmed and enacted. The entire sacrificial system is contingent upon the future time when, with some greater sacrifice, the Lord would open the way for a passage into his very presence.

[7 : 32] This would be achieved, not just in some symbolic building, but in heaven itself. The tabernacle order was characterised by fleshly rituals, which couldn't deal with the root problem of the people's hearts, the problem of the old covenant described in the preceding chapter.

The symbols of offering always anticipated a greater work to come, and their efficacy rested upon this. Christ is the one in whom this movement from the first section, to the second section, from this present age of the flesh, to the age to come, is finally accomplished.

He accomplishes this movement, not in an earthly model of the true temple, but in the heavenly reality itself. He enters by means of his own blood, by means of his own self-sacrifice.

It isn't merely the blood of goats and calves, but the true self-offering that the law and its ceremonies always anticipated and awaited. This redemption is not merely a symbolic entry once a year, anticipating some future reality.

It is a once for all decisive and complete entry into God's presence. The author concludes by contrasting the efficacy of the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer, referring to the rite of Numbers chapter 19, which could cleanse and render people richly holy, with the blood of Christ.

[8 : 48] Christ's blood is not merely related to the symbolic cleansing or sanctification of bodies. Such fleshly cleansing, or sanctification through sacrifice and washing, served as a ritual framework for self-offering to God.

However, Christ performs the perfect self-offering as the mediator of a new covenant. He offers himself up without blemish to God through the eternal spirit, and in the process he deals with the deep down root problem of the covenant, the sinfulness of human hearts, and successfully brings us into God's very presence.

A question to consider. What positive purpose did the tabernacle serve in the author of Hebrews' understanding?