

The Blood of Jesus and His Heavenly Priesthood in Hebrews

Part III: The Meaning of "The True Tent" and "The Greater and More Perfect Tent"

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THE TENT AS THE INCARNATE BODY OF CHRIST

A number of commentators have interpreted these two expressions as signifying the body or humanity of Christ. Owen, for example, expounds "the true tent" of Hebrews 8:2 as meaning "the human nature of the Lord Christ himself,"¹ explaining that "he is the only way and means of our approach unto God in holy worship, as the tabernacle was of old,"² that "the human nature of Christ is the only true tabernacle wherein God would dwell personally and substantially,"³ and that "we are to look for the gracious presence of God in Christ only."⁴ Bengel is among those who are of a similar mind. The rather long and involved sentence which comprises Hebrews 9:11-12 may be paraphrased as follows:

After coming (to earth) as high priest of the good things fulfilled by his coming, Christ achieved our eternal redemption and then entered once and for all into the sanctuary, through the greater and more perfect tent not made with hands, that is not of this creation, and (he did so) not through the blood of goats and bullocks but through his own blood.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the third in a series of articles entitled "The Blood of Jesus and His Heavenly Priesthood in the Epistle to the Hebrews," which were the W. H. Griffith Thomas Memorial Lectures given by Dr. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes at Dallas Theological Seminary on November 14-17, 1972.

¹ John Owen, *An Exposition to the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia, 1869), VI, 18.

² *Ibid.*, VI, 19.

³ *Ibid.*, VI, 21.

⁴ *Ibid.*, VI, 23.

Chrysostom and some later patristic authors, including Theodoret, Primasius, and Ecumenius, understood this "greater and more perfect tent" to denote the body which the Son assumed in the incarnation, and this understanding has had distinguished advocates ever since.

The justification for this interpretation is sought in the symbolical usage of the term "tent" (σκηνή) elsewhere in the New Testament. Christ Himself spoke of His body as "this temple" (ναός) which He would raise up in three days (John 2:19-22; cf. Mark 14:58; 15:29) — the allusion being primarily to His resurrection from the dead, but also, more cryptically, to the impending cessation of the temple worship which was historically the successor of the tent worship in the wilderness and functionally synonymous with it. John describes the incarnation of the Word as the "pitching of his tent" (ἐσκήνωσεν) in our midst (John 1:14). Paul calls our present mortal body "our earthly tent dwelling" (ἡ ἐπίγειος ἡμῶν οἰκία τοῦ σκηνώματος) and also quite simply "the tent" (τὸ σκηνός) (2 Cor. 5:1, 4). Peter uses the same metaphor when he refers to his approaching death as "the laying aside of his tent" (ἡ ἀπόθεσις τοῦ σκηνώματος μου) (2 Peter 1:13, 14). And, in a manner reminiscent of John 2:19 ff., Paul writes of the body of the Christian as the temple or sanctuary of the Holy Spirit (ναός) (1 Cor. 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16).

On the basis of this symbolism, then, "the true tent" of Hebrews 8:2 and "the greater and more perfect tent" of Hebrews 9:11 are interpreted as a manner of speaking of the human body by means of which Christ accomplished our eternal redemption, for it was this body that enabled Him to function as our high priest and in particular to offer Himself in our place on the cross. This "tent" can be described as "true" or "greater and more perfect" in comparison with the tabernacle of old because of the eternal perfection of the atonement which has been procured through its instrumentality. But the fuller definition of Hebrews 9:11, namely, that it is "not made with hands, that is, not of this creation," raises some problems. For while the qualification "not made with hands" suggests a contrast with the former tent which, though erected in accordance with the divine pattern, was a human construction from earthly materials, the explanation of this phrase as meaning "not of this creation" would appear to call in question the genuineness of that humanity supposedly designated as "the greater and more perfect tent," and therefore to render doubtful the reality of the Son's identification of Himself with mankind.

Theophylact, indeed, in the eleventh century, states that this text was adduced by heretics as proof that Christ's body was of a docetic or ethereal character.⁵ Heretical conclusions of this kind were customarily countered, however, by the explanation that the miracle of the virgin birth afforded adequate justification for defining Christ's humanity as being "not of this creation." It is the explanation given, for example, by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century; and Cornelius a Lapide, in the seventeenth century, gives a good summary of this type of exegesis (without himself approving it):

This is the greater tabernacle because in it God the Word is and dwells and all the fulness of the Holy Spirit; it is more perfect because it achieves greater things than did the old Mosaic tabernacle and sanctifies and saves those who enter into it. This tabernacle is not made with hands, nor of this creation, because the flesh of Christ was not conceived by the work of man but by virtue of the Holy Spirit.⁶

Turning to the Protestant commentators, Owen does not specifically mention the virgin birth, but his explanation of "not of this creation" is to the same effect: "Although the substance of his human nature was of the same kind with ours," he writes, "yet the production of it in the world was such an act of divine power as excels all other divine operations whatever. . . . in its constitution and production it was an effect of the divine power above the whole order of this creation."⁷ Calvin expounds the phrase more vaguely. While admitting that the body of Christ "was certainly created of the seed of Abraham and subject to sufferings and death," he maintains that at this point the author "is not concerned here with the material body or its quality but with the spiritual power which comes to us from it."⁸ His exegesis of the "tent" concept in terms of Christ's body is, however, very plainly stated, as follows:

The word sanctuary is properly and fittingly applied to the body of Christ because it is the temple in which the whole majesty of God dwelt. He is said to have made through His body a way to ascend into heaven because He consecrated Himself to God in that

⁵ Theophylact *Expositio in Epistolam ad Hebraeos* ix. 11.

⁶ Cornelius 'a Lapide, *Commentarii in Scripturam Sacram* (Lyons and Paris, 1864), IX, 949.

⁷ Owen, VI, 271.

⁸ John Calvin, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of St. Peter*, trans. by William B. Johnston. Calvin Commentaries, ed. by David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids, 1963), XII, 120.

body: in it He was sanctified to be true righteousness and in it He prepared Himself to make His sacrifice.... He has entered heaven through His own body because He now sits on the right hand of the Father. He intercedes for us in heaven because He has put on our flesh and consecrated it as a temple to God the Father and has sanctified Himself in it to make atonement for our sins and gain for us eternal righteousness.⁹

Owen seems to be no less confident that this is the correct interpretation, as the following excerpts show:

This tabernacle, whereby he came a high priest, was his own human nature. . . . Herein dwelt "the fulness of the Godhead bodily," Col. ii.9,—that is, substantially; represented by all the pledges of God's presence in the tabernacle of old. This was that tabernacle wherein the Son of God administered his sacerdotal office in this world, and wherein he continueth yet so to do in his intercession. . . . The human nature of Christ, wherein he discharged the duties of his sacerdotal office in making atonement for sin, is the greatest, the most perfect and excellent ordinance of God; far excelling those that were most excellent under the old testament.¹⁰

There is, undoubtedly, much that is attractive in this line of interpretation. But, well suited though it may be to teaching which is found elsewhere in the New Testament, there are reasons for regarding it as exegetically inappropriate within the present context of the Epistle to the Hebrews. For one thing, in the passages cited in support of this interpretation the association between the tent, or the temple, and the body is clearly indicated; but there is no such indication in our epistle. For another, when Christ speaks of raising in three days a temple not made with hands ("he spoke of the temple of his body," as the evangelist explains in John 2:21), it is clear that He intended the glorified body with which He rose from the dead (John 2:22); and likewise when Paul teaches that, even though his present earthly tent dwelling should be dismantled in death, the Christian has "a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens," he too is referring to that ultimate transformation in which the believer is invested with a glorified body similar to that of the risen Jesus. Guided by this understanding, exegetical consistency would surely demand that "the true tent" and "the greater and more perfect tent" should be explained as referring (if indeed this is what our author means) not to the body assumed by Christ at Bethlehem but rather to the glorious body of

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Owen, VI, 266, 267.

His resurrection — not, of course, that there are two bodies, but two different states of the same body: the one humble, the other exalted; the one earth-bound, the other transcendental (as Paul teaches in 1 Cor. 15:42 ff.).

THE TENT AS THE CHURCH

Another interpretation, which starts virtually from the same premise but follows a somewhat different course, is that which makes use of the Pauline identification of the church as the body of Christ (Eph. 1:22 f.). Cornelius a Lapide, indeed, takes our author to be speaking of the church quite simply, without any allusion to the concept of the body of Christ. Thus he writes on Hebrews 9:11:

I conclude that this tabernacle is the Church of Christ gathered here on earth, pilgrim and militant, which Christ himself founded, of which he said in ch. 8:2 that it is a tabernacle set up by the Lord and not by man; for this is identical with the description here, "a tabernacle not made with hands, not of this creation," in other words, not the product of human skill and fashioning, as was the first tabernacle fashioned by Bezaleel. For the tabernacle fittingly represents the Church ... in which Christ in dying on the cross offered himself to the Father, as a victim for the sins of men; and just as the high priest used to go from and through the holy place into the holy of holies, so Christ (and we with Christ) passed from his Church militant here on earth to the Church heavenly and triumphant.¹¹

The step of linking the concepts of "body" and "church" is deliberately taken by, Westcott, whose search for "some spiritual antitype to the local sanctuary"¹² is controlled by the prerequisites which demand that it must both "represent the Presence of God" and also "offer a way of approach to God"¹³ — requirements which he believes are met in the redeemed and perfected humanity which is the community of the church. He states:

Through this glorified Church answering to the complete humanity which Christ assumed, God is made known, and in and through this each believer comes nigh to God. In this Body, as a spiritual Temple, Christ ministers. As members of this Body believers severally enjoy the Divine Presence. . . . It enables us to connect redeemed humanity with the glorified human Nature of the Lord, and to consider how it is that humanity, the summing-up of Creation, may become in Him the highest manifestation of God to finite

¹¹ Cornelius a Lapide, IX, 949.

¹² Brook Foss Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (London, 1889), p. 259.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

being, and in its fulness that through which each part is brought near to God.¹⁴

But this interpretation, too, has its problems. It is reached by using one metaphor (the tent for the body) as the basis for another metaphor (the body for the church), with the consequence that the exegesis has a distinctly mystical quality. It reflects, moreover, a characteristic tendency of Westcott's thought in accordance with which Christ is regarded, evolutionistically, as *Consummator Mundi*, the one in whom the whole unfolding process achieves its culmination—hardly the perspective of the writer of Hebrews! And in any case it is difficult to see what sense there could be in saying, as according to Westcott's understanding we must suppose the author of our epistle to be saying, that "through the greater and more perfect tent," that is His body understood as signifying the church, Christ entered once for all into the sanctuary; for, however rightly Christ may be said to work or minister through the church, there is no way in which one can speak of His having entered into the heavenly sanctuary through the church; the church is not the means of his entry into the heavenly sanctuary, but, to the contrary, He is the means of the church's entry, and it is precisely on the ground that we have a great High Priest in the sanctuary above that those who constitute the church are invited confidently to draw near to the throne of grace through the new and living way which He has opened for us (4:14-16; 10:19-22).

The comparable opinion that the sanctuary into which Christ enters is the souls or hearts of God's people is open to criticism of the same order. This explanation is found as early as the fourth century in Ambrose (in his comments on 8:2) and in Gregory of Nazianzus (*Ad Julianum*, alluding to 8:2). In our own day it has received the approval of F. F. Bruce, who writes as follows (on 9:11):

What then is the nature of the spiritual temple in which God dwells? When Stephen maintained that "the Most High dwelleth not in houses made with hands," he confirmed his statement by quoting Isa. 66:1 f. But in that same prophetic context God declares that in preference to any material temple He chooses "him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and that trembleth at my word." And this means that He prefers to make His dwelling with people of that character, as is shown by the similar words of Isa. 57:15: "For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit." Our author stands right in this

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 260.

prophetic tradition when he affirms that the people of God are the house of God: "whose house are we, if we hold fast our boldness and the glorying of our hope" (3:6).¹⁵

This, however, unexceptionable though it may otherwise be theologically, is still a questionable exegesis of the passage in question. The affirmation of Hebrews 3:6 is not the same as the affirmation of Hebrews 9:11; and, though the people of God are described as a "house" (or "household"), they are not anywhere called a "tent." "The thought of our author must be distinguished here from that of the Fourth Evangelist and from that of Paul," writes Montefiore (on 8:5). "For Paul the congregation of Christians formed the Temple of God (1 Cor. iii.16; 2 Cor. vi.16; Eph. ii.21). According to the Fourth Evangelist, Jesus when he prophesied that in three days he would raise up the temple, was speaking 'of the temple of his body' (John ii.21). But for our author, heaven is to be identified with the heavenly sanctuary, and Jesus entered it at his ascension."¹⁶

As a matter of curiosity, it may be mentioned that the sixteenth century Roman Catholic scholar Catharinus attempted to explain "the greater and more perfect tent" as a reference to the Virgin Mary, through whom Christ appeared as our high priest in this world. If this raises even more acutely the question of the understanding of the definition "not of this creation," no doubt the Roman Catholic apologist would propose that the answer is to be found in the dogmas of the immaculate conception and the assumption into heaven of the Virgin Mary — but this in turn would raise other and more serious questions.

THE TENT AS A HEAVENLY TABERNACLE

Another view, which maintains a close analogy between what is said here about Christ and the action of the high priest in the wilderness tabernacle, supposes that as the high priest of old passed through the holy place into the holy of holies so our High Priest is envisaged as passing "through the greater and more perfect tent" (corresponding to the holy place) before "he entered once for all into the sanctuary" (corresponding to the holy of holies). On this interpretation, Christ at His ascension passed through the outer chamber of the heavens, that is, beyond this earth where the altar of the cross was situated, and entered into the inner chamber of

¹⁵ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, 1964), pp. 199-200.

¹⁶ Hugh Montefiore, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (London, 1964), p. 137.

God's own presence. Thus over a century ago John Brown expounded Hebrews 9:11 as follows:

Our Lord offered His sacrifice on the earth, as the Jewish high priests did without the tabernacle; and having offered His sacrifice on the earth, He passed through the visible heavens, as they passed through the outer tabernacle, into the heaven of heavens, of which the most holy place was an emblem. He entered into the holy place [by which the writer evidently means the holy of holies] through the visible heavens, which are represented in the Old Testament Scriptures as the tabernacle of Jehovah His outer court, throughout which are scattered displays of grandeur and beauty worthy of the antechamber of the great King, the Lord of hosts, a tabernacle certainly greater, more magnificent, more perfect, more highly finished, than the Mosaic tabernacle, with all its curious embroidery and costly ornaments, — a tabernacle formed immediately by the hand of God, who "in the beginning stretched out the heavens as a curtain."¹⁷

Among our contemporaries both Hering and Spicq propound a similar interpretation. According to the former: "The tabernacle is presented here as the way, the sanctuary as the destination. . . . He passes through the holy place, identified as heaven, in order to enter into the holy of holies."¹⁸ And according to the latter: "Jesus, after his resurrection and by means of his ascension, passed through the heavens to arrive at the presence of God."¹⁹ Spicq refers to Hebrews 4:14, "we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens," and to Hebrews 7:26, where it is asserted that he is "exalted above the heavens" (cf. Eph. 4:10). Another advocate of this interpretation is Helmut Koester, who offers the following explanation of the expression "the sanctuary and the true tent" (8:2):

This is not a hendiadys, but expresses that Christ's office includes both the service in the sanctuary of heaven itself (τὰ ἅγια) and the entering by passing through the heavenly regions (ἡ σκηνη) the ascension! It also becomes clear here that the author of Hebrews is more interested in the opening of the way into the heavenly sanctuary than in the performance of a service within the sanctuary of heaven."²⁰

The judgment of the last sentence is surprising; leaving that aside, however, it is true that the term *ox vrj* is used in our epistle of the holy place through which the levitical high priest passed to enter

¹⁷ John Brown, *An Exposition of the Epistle of the Apostle Paul to the Hebrews*, ed. by David Smith (New York, 1862), I, 394-95.

¹⁸ Jean Hering, *L'epître aux Hebreux* (Neuchatel and Paris, 1954), p. 84.

¹⁹ C. Spicq, *L'epître aux Hebreux* (3rd ed.; Paris, 1952-53), II, 256.

²⁰ Helmut Koester, " 'Outside the Camp': Hebrews 13:9-14," *Harvard Theological Review*, LV (October, 1962), 309-10.

the holy of holies (ἡ πρώτη σκηνή), 9:2,6,8, and perhaps 21), yet it is also used of the holy of holies (9:3) and of the tabernacle *in toto* (8:5; 13:10). The description of ἡ σκηνή in 8:2 as ἀληθινή, "the true tent," well defines the sanctuary of which Christ is now the minister, but is scarcely appropriate as a description of the heavenly regions through which the ascending Lord passed. Besides, if the latter interpretation were correct, one would have expected the way to be mentioned before the destination. And, further, that a hendiadys is indeed intended by "the sanctuary and the true tent" is confirmed by the singular number of the pronoun ἦν in the relative clause which follows—ἦν ἔπηξεν ὁ κύριος: our author could hardly have meant that the Lord set up only a heavenly holy place, especially as the focus of his attention is on the high priestly entry of Jesus into the heavenly holy of holies. In fact, throughout these chapters our author's perspective does not include the concept of a holy place above, as distinct from the holy of holies, precisely because, now that the curtain between the two has been abolished and the way opened up by him for all into the heavenly holy of holies which is the sanctuary of God's presence, the distinction no longer exists.

The ineptitude of this interpretation appears, too, from the fact that the qualification of Hebrews 9:11, "not made with hands, that is, not of this creation," applies just as little to the visible heavens as it does to our earth, since both belong equally to "this creation" and both are praised throughout Scripture as the works of the divine Creator (Gen. 1:1; Ps. 19:1, etc.). This consideration alone is enough to disqualify the distinction made by those who propose this type of interpretation. The analogy between the old and the new must not be pressed too far, for there is a radical change in the situation as the result of the sacrifice which the incarnate Son offered on the cross. The rending of His flesh at Calvary was accompanied by the rending of the curtain which separated the holy place from the holy of holies (Heb. 10:20; Mt. 27:51). This symbolized, as we have already observed and as Hebrew 9:8 plainly indicates, the abolition of the outer chamber and the removal of the barrier which hitherto had excluded the people from entry into the chamber of God's presence. Now the way is clear for all God's people, who together in Christ constitute a holy priesthood (1. Pet. 2:5), to approach with boldness the throne of divine grace. This is the new and living way of which our author speaks in Hebrews 10:19 f.

CONCLUSION

It is our understanding, then, that the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews means here not two things but one; that is to say, that the sanctuary into which Christ has entered is the same as that tent which is described as "true" and "greater and more perfect." The correctness of this judgment is confirmed by the assertion of Hebrews 9:24 that "Christ has entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf," in which we find the sanctuary into which Christ has entered defined by precisely the same terms that are used to define the *tent* in Hebrews 8:2 and Hebrews 9:11, namely, *true* and *not made with hands*. This linguistic correspondence shows in a striking manner that the "sanctuary" and the "tent" are one and the same thing. In Hebrews 8:2 our author declares that Christ our High Priest is now "in heaven," where He ministers "in the sanctuary which is the true tent," and in Hebrews 9:11-12 that He entered into the heavenly holy of holies through His entry into "the greater and more perfect tent." If there is a suggestion of a distinction in the latter passage, it is no more than this, that, in conformity with the imagery of the wilderness tabernacle, Christ is envisaged as entering the true tent (of heaven) which contains the true sanctuary (of God's presence). But as the curtain which divided the tent into two chambers has now been abolished, it is easy to see how in the true order of things tent and sanctuary can be treated as synonymous terms.

The contrasts and correspondences to which we have drawn attention may be presented schematically as follows:

<p>The Mosaic tabernacle "on earth" (8:4 f.) "an earthly sanctuary" (9:1) "set up by man" (8:2) "made with hands" "of this creation" (9:11) "a sanctuary made with hands" (9:24) "a copy and shadow" (8:5) "a copy" (9:24)</p>	<p>The heavenly reality "in heaven" (8:1) "set up by the Lord" (8:2) "not made with hands" "that is, not of this creation" (9:11) "not a sanctuary made with hands" (9:24) "the true tent" (8:2) "the true sanctuary" (9:24) "the greater and more perfect tent" (9:11) "heaven itself" (9:24)</p>
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