

Wings

*"Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles."
Isaiah 40:31*



January 14, 2018

The Tabernacle in Hebrews

Hebrews was written to first-century Jews, a people whose heritage was rooted in the temple in Jerusalem. But the temple is never mentioned in this book, only the tabernacle. Why?

"Now when these things had been thus prepared, the priests always went into the first part of the tabernacle, performing the services. . . . the Holy Spirit indicating this, that the way into the Holiest of All was not yet made manifest while the first tabernacle was still standing" (Heb. 9:6, 8).

"We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat" (Heb. 13:10).



The epistle to the Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians who were close to giving up their faith and returning to the religion of their forefathers. The author's approach is to contrast various details of Judaism with the corresponding details of the religion of Jesus Christ. Why would they want to abandon a far superior religion for an inferior and imperfect predecessor?

The tabernacle plays a prominent role in this epistle. The author uses the Greek word *skene* (a tent or cloth hut) nine times to refer to the structure where God dwelt among His people. This tabernacle was constructed by the Israelites

on their way from Egypt to their new home in Canaan, based on instructions God gave Moses on Mt. Sinai. It was designed for portability, essential for a people constantly on the move. Even after Israel entered their new home in Canaan, the tabernacle was moved to new locations several times due to political or geographic considerations.

This tabernacle was replaced by Solomon's temple around 950 B.C. This magnificent structure, built with the finest materials available, was everything the tabernacle wasn't: big, beautiful—and permanent. Even after the temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C., the site remained holy to the Jewish people, and replacement temples were erected in 516 B.C. and 20 B.C.

In short, the Jewish people had been serving God in a temple, not a tabernacle, for almost a millenium. The tabernacle was just an historical anachronism to them. Why then would the author deliberately use *the tabernacle* as the symbol of God's dwelling place among His people, and never even mention the temple, with which they were far more familiar?

The answer, I believe, can be seen in the author's purpose. Again and again through this book, he argues for the superiority of the religion of Christ. One of the features of the work of Christ was its permanence: The sacrifice of Christ was the final and complete satisfaction of everything God demanded in payment for our sins. The author's use of the tabernacle was a subtle but unmistakable component of this argument. Just as the tabernacle was a temporary structure awaiting the construction of a permanent replacement, so Judaism was a temporary arrangement awaiting the arrival of God's perfect solution to sin. In Jesus Christ, that replacement has come. To go back to Judaism would be like rejecting the great temple of Solomon in favor of the old tent that was shuffled around in the wilderness.

The lesson for us today? We are pilgrims trekking through our own wilderness, looking forward to "the heavenly Jerusalem" that awaits us (Heb. 12:22). We must persevere, and not turn back to the inferior delights of a world that is soon to pass away.

— David King



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