

THE
TEMPLE
and the
TABERNACLE

A STUDY OF GOD'S DWELLING PLACES
FROM GENESIS TO REVELATION



J. DANIEL HAYS



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To Donna,
the best of Proverbs 31 and the Song of Solomon,
all rolled into one person.

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1

THE TEMPLE AND THE TABERNACLE

AN OVERVIEW

What magnificent buildings!

Mark 13:1

Introduction and Overview

Welcome to the study of the temple and the tabernacle! As we begin our study, it might be appropriate to recall a conversation between Jesus and one of his disciples as they were leaving the temple in Jerusalem. The disciple exclaimed, “Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!” (Mark 13:1).

You can see from the spectacular picture on the cover of this book why he was so impressed. The stones are massive; the buildings are magnificent. Jesus, however, is not nearly as enamored with the wonderful architecture

as the disciple is, and he replies, “Do you see all these great buildings? . . . Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down” (Mark 13:2). Jesus places the impressive temple built by King Herod into its proper historical and theological context.

As we will see in the story throughout the Bible, the temple (and the tabernacle, the mobile temple) draw their significance not from their physical structure but from the fact that God is present in them, relating to his people who come to worship him. Jesus proclaims quite clearly in Mark 13



“Not one stone
here will be left
on another; every
one will be
thrown down.”
(Mark 13:2)

(and elsewhere) that judgment is coming on the temple and on the Jews in Jerusalem who have rejected him as Messiah and King. Don’t miss this important point. In contrast to Jesus, the temple that King Herod built was insignificant. The irony is deep, but tragic. The temple was important only as it held the presence of God.

At the time of Jesus, God had not yet returned to dwell in the temple. That is, there was no “focused” indwelling presence of God in Herod’s Jerusalem temple until Jesus himself walked in the gates! As Immanuel (“God with us”), he was the one who could bring significance to the magnificent temple that Herod had built. But as the story sadly unfolds, we see that the Jewish leaders in the temple reject him and even execute him. Mark begins chapter 13 (in which Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple) with the telling statement, “As Jesus was leaving the temple . . .” Just as God departed from the temple that Solomon built just prior to the conquest and destruction by the Babylonians (Ezek. 8–11), so Jesus walks out of the temple that Herod built and proclaims coming judgment (by the Romans). Thus the magnificent temple of Herod later becomes merely a pile of big stones and not the residence of God and the place of human encounter with God. The presence of God and his encounter with his people are not lost, however, for Jesus tells us, “I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:20).

In this book we will explore the specific biblical texts and the overall biblical story about the temple and the tabernacle—that is, about how God dwells among his people and encounters them in relational presence.



“Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down” (Mark 13:2). The Romans destroy the temple in AD 70, and the rubble from that destruction can be seen today at the bottom of the Temple Mount. Shown in this picture are stone blocks from the upper portions of the walls near the Royal Stoa of the temple courtyard that the Romans pushed over the edge of the wall while destroying the temple.

Basically we will move through the Bible chronologically, examining theologically how God’s presence, power, and holiness engage with people through “temples,” or “temple-like” places. We will try to imagine what the magnificent sanctuaries looked like and how they functioned. But we want to move beyond the “stones” to grasp the eternal theological truths being revealed to us about God through his presence in the temple/tabernacle.

The story begins in the garden of Eden, where God seems to reside, as he is seen walking and relating intimately to Adam and Eve. Disobedience and sin cause them to be driven from the garden and the presence of God (Gen. 1–11). Then later, after the exodus from Egypt, at Mount Sinai God enters into a covenant relationship with the newly formed Israelite nation, declaring in essence a three-part formula for their relationship: “I will be your God; you will be my people; I will dwell in your midst” (Exod.

22:31; 25:8; 29:45–46; Lev. 26:11–12). He is serious about the promise to “dwell in your midst,” and most of the entire second half of the book of Exodus deals with the construction of the tabernacle, the portable temple in which God will reside and “dwell in their midst” as they travel. The ark of the covenant is likewise constructed at this time, according to the tight specifications provided by God. The ark becomes the focal point of the place where the presence of God dwells.

The mobile tabernacle is later replaced by the permanent and opulent temple constructed by Solomon (1 Kings 5–11). The story gets rather complicated at this point, however, for Solomon is a mixed bag of obedience and disobedience, and the narrative in 1 Kings about building the temple has numerous peculiar texts suggesting that something is not quite right. God’s glory does come to take up residence in this temple, but by the end of the Solomon story (1 Kings 11) we see the king leading Israel into the worship of idols, a serious violation of the most basic commandments given to Israel—indeed, the foundational terms by which God would live in their midst and bless them. After Solomon dies, Israel (now split into the two nations of Israel and Judah) continues to defy God and his prophets through idolatry and terrible acts of injustice. Eventually God has had all he can stand, and the sinful idolatry of Jerusalem drives him right out of the temple and the country (Ezek. 8–11). This departure of God is followed by an invasion by the Babylonians, who completely destroy the temple that Solomon built and carry off the inhabitants into exile in Babylon.

Toward the end of the Old Testament, several groups of Jews return to Jerusalem and try to rebuild the temple (Ezra 3–6; Hag. 1–2). This rag-tag group, however, is barely surviving, and they hardly have the resources to build anything nearly as spectacular as Solomon built. Yet it is a start, and they do, after a few halting steps, rebuild a new temple, often referred to today as “the second temple.” In contrast to the inaugurations of the tabernacle and the first temple, there is never any mention in the Bible of God’s “glory” or presence coming to reside in this temple. This is an important observation. Over the next four hundred years, the second temple will be architecturally improved and expanded, especially during the reign of King Herod, but the glorious, indwelling presence of God does not return to this temple until Jesus enters in through the gates.

With the coming of Christ and the advent of the new covenant, the theological realities relating to the temple (sacrifice, experiencing the presence of God) undergo drastic development. Jesus Christ is the ultimate sacrifice, eliminating any need for the sacrifice of animals. Likewise, the Holy Spirit comes to dwell within the people of God, and this becomes the way that God now “dwells in the midst” of his people.

As the biblical story comes to its culminating conclusion in Revelation 21–22, the glorious presence of God in the new Jerusalem preempts any need for a new temple. In the final scene (Rev. 22:1–5), God and his people are once again in the “garden,” where “they will reign for ever and ever” (v. 5).

As we track this story through the Bible, exploring the construction and function of the temple and the tabernacle, along with all of their appurtenances, we will also be discussing the very important theological truths emerging from this story—things like holiness, presence of God, sin, sacrifice, relationship with God, and worship. Hopefully (and prayerfully), by the end of the book your understanding and appreciation of this story will lead you to a deeper appreciation of God’s presence than just “What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!”

Temple Concepts and Terminology

Among Israel’s neighbors in the region surrounding Israel during the Old Testament era, temples were primarily designed to be residences for the gods. Worship (such as sacrifice and other rituals) did take place at the temples—usually outside, in front, and usually only by priests—but the choice of location for the sacrifice was driven by the fact that the god resided inside.²

The English word “temple” (from the Latin *templum*) is typically defined as a building used for the worship of a god. The English word does not usually carry the concept of the structure being the actual residence for the god. The Hebrew and Greek terms, on the other hand, as well as the biblical context, do imply that the structure was viewed as the actual residence of God. It is no surprise that the connotations of the Hebrew and Greek terms for “temple” or “tabernacle” are more in line with the



Remains of an Egyptian temple at Thebes

understanding of the ancient world than the modern one. The English word “temple,” therefore, which often translates various Hebrew and Greek terms, can be a little misleading if we understand it in a modern context (place of worship only) rather than the ancient one (residence of God). There are actually several Hebrew (Old Testament) and Greek (New Testament) words used to refer to the tabernacle and/or the temple, and a review of these words will be a helpful place to start our study.

Old Testament Words for Temple and Tabernacle (Hebrew)

The Hebrew word most commonly used to refer to the tabernacle is *mishkan*, which basically means “dwelling place.” This term doesn’t emphasize the physical structure of the residence as much as it stresses the presence of the occupant. *Mishkan* is most frequently translated in English as “tabernacle.”

Another Hebrew word used in association with the tabernacle is *’ohel*. This is the common Hebrew word for “tent.” In regard to the tabernacle, *’ohel* is sometimes used to refer to the tarp-like canopy that stretched

over the main structure containing the “holy place” and the “most holy place” (Exod. 26:7–14). On rare occasions it is used to refer to the entire tabernacle (Exod. 26:36), or, in a figurative sense, even to the temple (Ps. 27:5–6). The Hebrew word *’ohel* (tent) is also frequently combined with a word that means “meeting place” (*mō’ēd*) to form a phrase that means “tent of meeting” (Exod. 27:21). This phrase occurs 145 times, primarily in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. When the Bible is stressing the tabernacle as the residence of God, the term *mishkan* (“dwelling place”) is preferred, stressing the presence of God. Yet when the Bible describes the activities of the priests in the tabernacle, the phrase “tent of meeting” is preferred, stressing that this is the site where humans encounter God.³

A different nuance is conveyed by the two related Hebrew words *qodesh* and *miqdash*, both of which are used to refer to either the temple or the tabernacle. These two words stress “holiness.” *Qodesh* is the more general term, basically meaning “the holy thing.” It can be used for numerous items such as “holy days,” “holy ground,” or “holy Sabbath.” When used of the temple or the tabernacle, it is typically translated as “sanctuary” (i.e., a holy place). *Miqdash* is more specific and basically means “the holy place.” It is also used of both the temple and the tabernacle and is likewise usually translated as “sanctuary.” Wherever the presence of God resides, the place is “holy.”

One of the most common Hebrew terms for the temple is *bayit* (sometimes it shows up transliterated as *bet* or *beth* as in the town *Bethel*, “house of God”). The basic meaning of this word is simply “house” or “residence.” It occurs 2,034 times in the Old Testament, often with the simple meaning of the structure in which some person lives. When used of the king’s residence (i.e., “the king’s house”), it is often translated as “palace.” When used to refer to God’s residence (e.g., “the house of the LORD”), it is often translated as “temple” (over 400 times in NIV; 63 in ESV). Frequently, however, some English translations (ESV and NASB, for example) will translate *bayit* in a literal fashion as “house,” even when it refers to the temple. Since *bayit* normally connotes the idea of a permanent, immovable structure, it is used frequently of the temple but only rarely of the tabernacle (which was a movable “tentlike” structure).

Table 1. Summary of Old Testament Words for the Temple and the Tabernacle

Hebrew word	Primary referent	English translation (NIV)	Basic emphasis	Representative Scripture passages
<i>Mishkan</i>	Tabernacle	Tabernacle	Dwelling place of God	Exodus 25:9; 40:34
<i>'Ōhel</i>	Tabernacle	Tent	Cloth structure, mobile residence	Exodus 26:36
<i>'Ōhel mō'ēd</i>	Tabernacle	Tent of meeting	Place where humans encounter God	Exodus 29:4, 10
<i>Qodesh, miqdash</i>	Either temple or tabernacle	Sanctuary	Holy place	Exodus 25:8; 35:19
<i>Bayit</i>	Temple	Temple	Structure where God resides	1 Kings 6:1–2
<i>Hekal</i>	Temple	Temple, main hall	Palace, structure where God reigns	Psalms 11:4; Isaiah 6:1
<i>Debir</i>	Temple	Inner sanctuary	The “back room” or “hidden room”	1 Kings 6:5, 16–31

Another Hebrew word often used to refer to the temple is *hekal*. This word is used frequently in the Old Testament to refer to the residence of kings, carrying the nuance of “royal palace.” When used of the temple, it suggests that this is not only the place where God resides as king but also the place from which he rules. *Hekal* is used often in the book of Psalms to refer to the temple, since Psalms is frequently extolling the rule and reign of God (e.g., Pss. 11:4; 18:6; 27:4; 138:2). Yet *hekal* is also sometimes used more specifically to refer to the first interior room of the temple (“the holy place,” before the “holy of holies”). In these passages, English Bibles often translate *hekal* as “main hall” (NIV) or “nave” (ESV, NRSV, NASB) (1 Kings 6:3, 5; 7:21).

Finally, in the account of how Solomon builds the temple, the word *debir* is used several times (1 Kings 6:5, 16–31; 2 Chron. 3:16; 4:20; 5:7, 9). This word basically means “the back part” of something or, in this case, “the back room” or even “the hidden room.” It is used to refer to the most holy place in the sense that the most holy place was behind or in the back of the larger room (the holy place). The NIV translates *debir* as “inner sanctuary.” The term refers to the “inner sanctuary” (i.e., the



Remains of the temple of the goddess Artemis in ancient Jerash (in modern Jordan)

most holy place) although the term itself merely means “the back room.” It does not specifically mean “sanctuary.”

New Testament Words (Greek)

When referring to the temple, the New Testament frequently uses the Greek words *hieron* or *naos*. These were words that were commonly used throughout the Greek-speaking world for pagan temples, and they carried nuances of the residence of the gods and the place where sacrifices and other rituals took place. In the New Testament *hieron* can be used to refer to the entire temple complex, including the courtyards, or just to the central building. *Naos*, on the other hand, normally focuses on the central building. Thus the terms can be somewhat interchangeable.

The word for house (*oikos*) is only used a few times in the New Testament in reference to the temple, usually in quotations of the Old Testament. Jesus, however, does use *oikos* to refer to the temple in John 2:16

(“Stop turning my Father’s house into a market!”). Interestingly, in John 2:13–23 all three of these terms we have discussed are used for the temple: *hieron* (2:14), *oikos* (2:16, 17), and *naos* (2:19, 20).

The Greek word for “holy” (*hagios*) is used a few times in the New Testament to refer to the temple or the tabernacle. The book of Hebrews, in particular, uses this term several times to refer to the “most holy place” in the tabernacle. In other New Testament references to the Old Testament tabernacle, the term *skēnē* is normally used, a word that basically means “tent.”

Table 2. Summary of New Testament Words for the Temple and the Tabernacle

Greek word	Primary referent	English translation (NIV)	Basic emphasis	Representative Scripture passages
<i>Hieron</i>	Temple	Temple, temple courts	Residence of God, place of sacrifice	Matthew 4:5; 26:55
<i>Naos</i>	Temple	Temple	Residence of God, place of sacrifice	Matthew 27:51; Luke 1:21
<i>Oikos</i>	Temple	House	Residence of God	John 2:16; Acts 7:47
<i>Hagios</i>	Temple or tabernacle	Sanctuary	Holy place	Hebrews 9:1, 24
<i>Skēnē</i>	Tabernacle	Tabernacle	Mobile residence of God	Hebrews 9:2, 8

Conclusions regarding the Words for Temple and Tabernacle

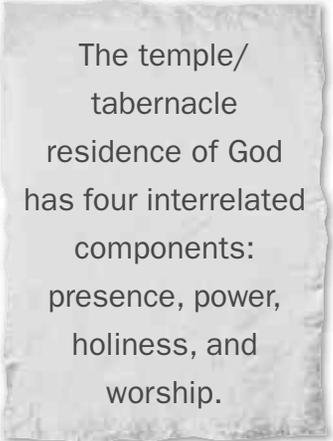
As you see above, quite a few different words are used for the temple and the tabernacle in the Bible. Yet the words reflect a few basic overlapping connotations. Thus in referring to the temple or the tabernacle, the terms (in Greek and especially in Hebrew) connote four interrelated concepts: (1) the temple/tabernacle is the residence of God, stressing his presence; (2) the temple/tabernacle is the place where God reigns and rules as king, stressing his power and his sovereignty; (3) because God dwells there, the temple/tabernacle is holy, stressing God’s holiness; and (4) the temple/tabernacle is a place where people can approach God and worship him. These four interrelated components—presence, power, holiness, worship—are always swirling around in the biblical texts that reveal God as dwelling in the midst of his people, whether in the tabernacle or in the temple, and these four interconnected components serve as the themes that drive the biblical story of the temple/tabernacle.

The Heavenly Temple/Tabernacle

Before we start our study of God's earthly dwelling places (the tabernacle and the temple), we should first note that the Bible frequently refers to God as residing in heaven, often using imagery of a great patriarch stretching out his tent in which to dwell (Ps. 104:2–3; Isa. 40:22; 42:5; 51:13). In addition, the Scriptures often portray God as sitting on his heavenly throne and reigning sovereignly over all creation (Isa. 63:15; 66:1; Pss. 2:4; 14:2; 76:8; 103:19; 123:1). Like a king's palace, the heavenly temple is described as a place both of God's residence and of his reign, a dual concept captured by the Hebrew word *hekal*, which can mean either "royal palace" or "temple." Likewise, the holiness of God is always an ever-present element. Thus Psalm 11:4 proclaims, "The LORD is in his holy [*qodesh*] temple [*hekal*]; the LORD is on his heavenly throne."

Hebrews 8–9 paints a similar picture, alluding to a heavenly sanctuary or tabernacle that is likewise closely associated with the throne of God. Jesus Christ, Hebrews 8–9 declares, has carried out the perfect sacrifice and now sits at the right hand of the throne of God, serving in the perfect heavenly tabernacle (Heb. 8:1–2). The earthly tabernacle (and by inference, the temple as well) is merely a copy (or a shadow) of the heavenly tabernacle (Heb. 8:5; 9:23–24).

Throughout the coming chapters in this book, we will be exploring and comparing the features and significance of the tabernacle that Moses built and of the temples that Solomon and Herod built (as well as the garden of Eden, divinely constructed). But as Hebrews 8–9 points out, these are but shadowy copies of the glorious reality of God's heavenly temple/tabernacle.



The temple/
tabernacle
residence of God
has four interrelated
components:
presence, power,
holiness, and
worship.