



The Epistle to the Hebrews

Hebrews 8:1-9:22: Yom Kippur and a New Covenant

The Work of the Great High Priest: Overview

Having established that Jesus is a high priest of a different “order” from Aaron’s lineage, our homilist next turns to an exposition of the work peculiar to the high priest and shows how Jesus, through his death and exaltation, does something analogous to the high-priestly action on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. The development of the idea takes up a major portion of Hebrews, from 8:1 to 10:18. The structure of the section resembles that of the sermon on Psalm 95 at Hebrews 3:1-4:13. The homilist begins with a preface 8:1-6, summarizing the argument so far and sounding themes that will run through the rest of the exposition. Then he cites (8:7-13) a scriptural text, Jeremiah 31:31-34, that seems unrelated to his theme. His exposition develops in five balanced parts. He first describes the Tabernacle and the Yom Kippur ritual ordained in scripture (9:1-10), then recounts the corresponding action of Christ in heaven (9:11). At the center of the exposition (9:15-22) he ties the death of Christ it to the passage from Jeremiah. He then reflects further on Christ’s “heavenly” action (9:23-28), before decisively turning to earth again (10:1-10). He concludes with a summary (10:11-18) involving the passage from Jeremiah and its central affirmations. Like the similarly structured section on Psalm 95, this whole composition has the flavor of a homily in its own right, reflecting Jewish homiletic conventions.

The Introduction: Hebrews 8:1-6

The opening verse, with its motif of Christ’s session “at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty” recalls Psalm 110, which has appeared at crucial points in Hebrews (1:13; 4:16; 5:6; 7:21). The evocation of the verse recalls the preacher’s fundamental affirmation that Jesus is enthroned in heaven with God. Since Jesus is a “heavenly” high priest, the place where he functions is not the earthly tabernacle, but the tent pitched by God in heaven (v 2). The reference to the “Tabernacle” is deliberate; the homilist consistently talks about not the Temple build by Solomon or the Herodian Temple of Jesus’ time, but the tent that accompanied the Israelites in their years of wandering in the desert. It is not that tent in which Jesus works as high priest, but in its heavenly counterpart. The homilist’s warrant for speaking about the counterpart is Exodus 25:40, where Yahweh refers to the “pattern” of the tabernacle and its furnishings that Moses is shown on Mt. Sinai. What the Biblical author had in mind is not

totally clear. It could have been more of an architectural plan or design than a model or archetype, but our homilist seems to understand it in the latter way. The dichotomy between heaven and earth established by Exodus is framed in terms that evoke the Platonic distinction between the reality of the ideal world of stable forms and shadowy reflection of that reality in the sensible world. This is particularly the case with the description of the earthly tabernacle as “sketch and shadow” (or perhaps better “copy and shadow”) of the heavenly one (v 5). As we shall see, our homilist is hardly committed to a Platonic view of things, but he gestures toward or evokes it here for a purpose. He wants his audience, like those who might be enamored of a Platonic world view, to seek for what is most real and true. Defining where that is to be found will be a critical move.

The concluding sentence of the introductory paragraph (v 6) strikes an unexpected note. Sounding the comparative theme that he had used in the early chapters of Hebrews, the homilist says that Jesus is involved in a “more excellent ministry” (or “worship,” Greek *leitourgia*, the source of our word “liturgy”), to the extent that he is the “mediator of a better covenant.” The theme of “covenant” had been casually introduced in 7:22, where Jesus was called a “guarantor” of a greater covenant. The development of the theme now begins in earnest. The “better promises” on which the covenant is based recalls the theme of divine “rest” from 4:1-11 and anticipates the eschatological hopes that the homilist will highlight later in Hebrews (12:18-29)

The Citation of Jeremiah: Hebrews 8:7-13

The introductory paragraph was built on the antithesis of heavenly and earthly. The citation from Jeremiah, the longest quotation of the Old Testament in the New, introduces another antithesis, “first” and “second” (v 7) or “old” and “new” (v 8, 13). Jeremiah’s prophecy (Jeremiah 31:31-34) foresaw a time when the covenantal relationship between God and Israel would be renewed and the people’s sin that had led to the Babylonian exile would be removed. The means for doing so would be Israel’s heartfelt acceptance of God’s laws. God promised, “I will put my laws in their minds, and write them on their hearts and I will be their God and they shall be my people” (v 10). Other heirs of the heritage of ancient Israel, such as the sectarians who produced many of the Dead Sea Scrolls, read this passage and understood their community to be its fulfillment. Our homilist was not alone in finding it to be a text of hope, but the key issue for him is how that “writing on the heart” would take place.

The passage from Jeremiah also makes a promise, that God would be “merciful toward their iniquities” and would “remember their sins no more.” The covenant involves forgiveness for sin, but what is the relationship between forgiveness and the law on the heart?

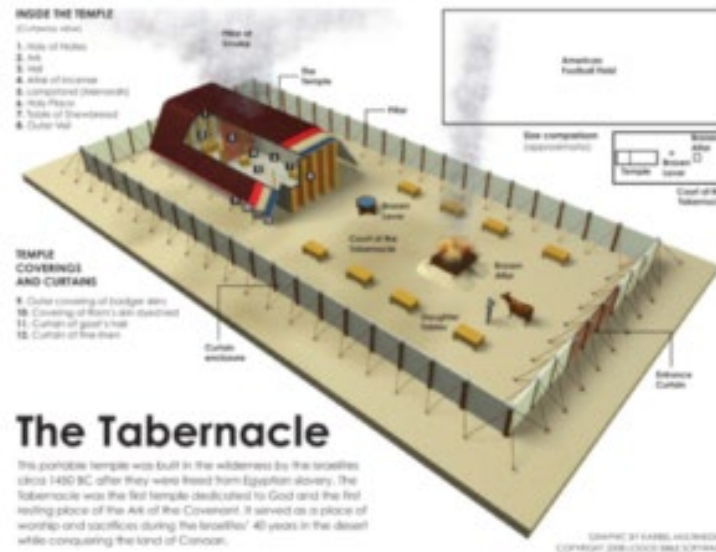
After citing the passage from Jeremiah, the homilist remarks that the designation of a new covenant makes the old obsolete (v 13), which is not exactly what Jeremiah seems to have had in mind. Later the homilist will make some disparaging comments about traditional Jewish observances (13:9), which he definitely does not favor for his audience. The sharp antithesis here anticipates his later critical stance.

The Earthly Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement): Hebrews 9:1-10

The first stage of the exposition of Christ's work as high priest offers a summary of the structure of the Tabernacle (9:1-5) and of the high priest's action on Yom Kippur. The details of the structure and furnishing of the Tabernacle are largely familiar, derived primarily from Exodus 25 and 26, but there are some oddities. The readings of some manuscripts in vv 2 and 3 suggest that the homilist may have reversed the designations of what we know as the Holy, i.e., the outer segment of the Tabernacle, and the Holy of Holies, the inner segment, "behind the second curtain" (v 3). The variant readings may simply be scribal errors, but the homilist may already be hinting that his audience would not find what was most sacred in the usual place. The homilist also seems to place the altar of incense in the inner portion of the Tabernacle (v 4), although it belongs in the outer. Is this a mistake or a deliberate signal? Within the inner portion sits the "Mercy Seat" overshadowed by the Cherubim (v 5). The technical term for "Mercy Seat" (*hilasterion*) had been used by Paul in his reference to the death of Christ (Romans 3:25, translated in the NRSV as "sacrifice of atonement").

The homilist now describes the priestly actions in the Tabernacle (9:6-10), relying primarily on Leviticus 16. Ordinary priests performed their rituals in the Holy place, outside the "second veil." Action within the Holy of Holies was reserved for the High Priest who entered the space once a year, on Yom Kippur, sprinkling the blood of the sacrificial animals on the Mercy Seat, cleansing it of impurity and thus expiating the sin of the people. Our homilist does not worry about how ancient Israelites understood the ritual to work. He interprets the arrangement and action as a pointer, or as he puts it a "symbol" (NRSV) or "parable" (v 9) indicating the future that is now being realized. The arrangement, which keeps ordinary priests from access to the inner portion of the Tabernacle, is a sign of exclusion. The "way into the (inner, true) sanctuary has not yet been disclosed" (v 8). The homilist will later celebrate the opening of a "way" through Christ to what is holy (10:19). The sacrificial actions done daily by the priests and repeated yearly by the High Priest constitute a negative pointer to a different reality. They are weak and ineffective, unable to "perfect the conscience of the worshipper" (v 9). They deal only with realities of the flesh, anticipating a "time ... to set things right" (v 10).

Other interpreters of traditional Biblical rituals during the Second Temple period also found them to be somewhat mysterious and turned to allegory to make sense of them. The Jewish philosopher and Biblical interpreter, Philo, for instance, when treating texts about sacrifice, reads them in terms of mental and moral processes (*On the Sacrifices of Cain and Abel*). Our homilist does not turn to allegory, but finds the traditional rituals and their inadequacies a sign of something to come.



An image of the Desert Tabernacle, courtesy of Wikimedia

The Heavenly Yom Kippur: Hebrews 9:11-14

Contrasting with the old and earthly Yom Kippur is the action of the heavenly High Priest. Like the earthly high priest, he entered into a very holy place, heaven itself. And like the earthly high priest, he brought with him “blood” to effect a cleansing. The image of Jesus entering heaven, or God’s heavenly dwelling, carrying his blood, sounds naively mythical. It is certainly based on early Christian traditions about Jesus’ resurrection and ascension. It is unclear whether the homilist assumes, like Acts, that there were two different events, resurrection and ascension, that happened at different times, or, like the Gospels of Luke and John, Jesus moved directly from tomb to heaven. Our homilist is not interested in chronology but significance, noting that Christ’s action was done “through the eternal Spirit” (v 14). The object of the cleansing is also not a physical or even metaphysical space, but “our conscience” (v 14). Here he hints at his final theological synthesis.

A Covenant Inaugurating Death: Hebrews 9:15-22

The next section hinges on the fact that one word in Greek, *diatheke*, used in the prophecy of Jeremiah, can refer to two kinds of legal documents, a contract or “covenant” between two parties, and a testament or will. Paul exploits this ambiguity in Galatians 3:17-18. Our homilist clearly has a testament in mind (v 16) and interprets the *diatheke* promised by Jeremiah as a situation where a testator, whose “death has occurred” (v 15) and been legally “established” (v 16), has left something behind, in this case a “promised eternal inheritance” (v 15). The homilist wraps together the death of Christ with the covenants of old by recalling first in vv 18-19 the ceremony with which Moses inaugurated the covenant at Sinai (Exodus 24:3-8). That ceremony concluded with Moses sprinkling sacrificial blood on the people, and his words (Exodus 24:8) are quoted in v 20. The homilist also recalls another ceremony in which cleansing

blood was sprinkled (Leviticus 8:15, 19). He concludes by citing a general principle, that just about everything was cleansed with blood according to the Law (v 22), evoking a fundamental principle of the priestly code, Leviticus 17:11, “for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement.” The evocation of that famous verse is a crucial move; the blood that atones stands for life and the life of Jesus has been handed down as an eternal inheritance by the testament that he has left.

It is also interesting that the object of the “sprinkling” in the inauguration of the “old covenant” was not simply the ritual apparatus, but the people themselves (Exodus 24:8). The “blood of the covenant” in effect cleanses as it identifies them as covenant people. The inauguration of the New Covenant works in a similar manner. It identifies a people who “inherit” what the covenant promises: heartfelt obedience to God and forgiveness of sin.

Yale Divinity School, 409 Prospect Street, New Haven, CT 06511

www.yalebiblestudy.org