



Approaching the Real Temple

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1st Kings 8; John 6:56-69

First Century Judaism was very much focused on their temple. They looked back to the Temple built by Solomon as the greatest achievement and testament to Jewish faith in Yahweh, God of Israel. Herod's temple did not display the same grandeur as Solomon's. It was still supposed to be a hallmark and a firm foundation for faith. The temple was supposed to draw all peoples from all over the world to the presence of Yahweh, per Solomon's statements at its dedication. Jesus never seemed to give it nearly so much importance. What is its due place?

From the days of the Exodus through the wilderness wandering to the establishment of monarchy in Israel, the tabernacle was central to witnessing the presence of God. It was supposed to reflect God's dwelling in heaven, as though a reflection of the "true temple" in the heavenly courts. Yahweh's presence was deemed visible in the smoke of the altar and the fires that were never to be extinguished.

These signs were pointers for the presence of God in the midst of the nation. They called on the people to recognize God's presence and their need to honor, revere, and serve Yahweh who was nearby through the temple or tabernacle, accessible there through prayer, incense, sacrifice, and offering. While other nations called on their gods to appear to them in dreams, visions, and signs, Yahweh was deemed to be continually present in the holy of holies, expressed in the cloud of smoke continually filling the air.

Jesus did not especially downplay the temple in his day, but neither did he accord the temple the same importance that others gave it. The message in his words and actions at times may even strike a conflicting note, as on the one hand he drives out merchants from the temple when they interfere with people approaching God. On the other hand, we find him telling his disciples that the stones of the temple will be ripped apart and pointing them to a greater reality than the temple buildings.

Perhaps nowhere is the conflict more dramatic than the passage we read in John 6. We may miss the connection at first glance, however, if we do not take into account what the temple was actually supposed to accomplish. More than anything, it was supposed to mediate God's presence, as though it were a special portal through which Yahweh would make himself known upon the earth. The Torah communicated God's will, but the temple communicated God's presence, the focal point for God's action within Israel and upon the earth.

The temple as home for the Ark of the Covenant not only represented the mercy seat of God sitting in judgment, but also as a conduit for communication with God. If the people prayed while looking toward the temple, God was to hear their prayer, even from afar. It was to be a place where pleas for forgiveness would be heard, mercy enacted, and communication with God would be visible and effective. It was to be a visible reminder of God's blessing, hearing, and care for the nation.

Yahweh living in the clouds above the tabernacle would be as visible and present within the temple, ready and willing to hear and respond to the nation. Because of such access and response, the temple was to call others from far and near to recognize and serve Yahweh, the truly living and active God, present in the midst of Israel. That was all clearly defined and well-established within Judaism.

Then Jesus stepped into the picture to muddle things and upset the apple cart.

He took the focus off the temple and placed it on himself. Is it any wonder people responded to him in anger, frustration, and violence? "My father is the God of Life, and he sent me to grant you the life of the ages if you would but partake of my body and blood."

What?! The Jews understood that they already participated in God's life and action through the temple which housed God's earthly judgment seat. They were joined to God through participation in and

worship within the temple, God's earthly symbol of presence and action. The Ark of the Covenant contained samples of the manna from the wilderness journey, the bread that came from heaven. Now Jesus started saying that he was the bread from heaven! Not only that, he argued that the bread eaten in the wilderness had short-lived effects, while those who partook of his flesh would live in a whole new realm of life!

The crowds went away murmuring. They were confused as confused can be. Some were undoubtedly angry with Jesus for having the audacity to declare himself somehow superior to the temple and the contents in the Ark of the Covenant. He intimated that he would not simply offer them access to God via the sanctuary and Holy of Holies, but would grant them the very life of God as though coursing through their veins.

It was all too much for the crowds. They were too disturbed with Jesus' words that on one hand sounded cannibalistic and on the other hand seemed to downplay the temple and its importance. The popularity he had experienced vanished as he began speaking in these terms.

Turning to the disciples, he asked why they were not abandoning him, as well. "Where else shall we go? Only you have the words of life."

The words of life... They were still confused. They did not understand him much better than the crowds who were reacting so negatively to him. It was not understanding or special knowledge that kept them from abandoning Jesus. It was something else, entirely. It seems to have been a question of confidence, of trust. Peter says they had come to accept the Jesus was the Son of God. If they were to give up on Jesus, where would they go?

It is as if they understood that the truth somehow went beyond the limits of their understanding. Their faith was not a question of having the answers squared away. Their faith was about living in the presence and under the direction of God, even when their understanding and knowledge failed them.

They knew what temple worship was all about. They were very much versed in the traditions about the temple and its importance. They understood, however, that the temple was to point them toward God, not replace God. They understood there was validity in their traditions, but that faith and confidence in God would carry them where their traditions were unable to go.

That is what Jesus offered them. He did not offer a means to find God, or point to God. He offered the unmediated presence of God. The temple pointed to a greater reality than itself. Jesus was that greater reality. If they were to give up on the greater reality, they would effectively be left with nothing.

So it is in our lives. We have the opportunity to confuse what points us to God as being the ultimate reality and missing God in the exchange. We have the opportunity to consider that what we know and depend on are more important than struggling with trusting God when our knowledge and understanding fall short.

Paul puts it a little differently in a different context, but one that applies just as well: "Claiming to be wise, they became fools and substituted the revelation of God for something less."

We worship God in a different setting today. Some of the issues and purposes of these structures are similar to those of the temple for Judaism. Others are not. We don't expect to find God present in clouds of smoke and burning incense. We do not expect God in the trappings of animal sacrifice. Yet if we are not careful, we may find that we allow other trappings of our faith and its practice obscure the very presence and activity of the God we gather here to serve.

God is in the business of offering a new quality of life. If we exchanged God for something of lesser importance, we give up on all that really matters. The Jews protected the centrality of their temple, but missed the presence of God to whom it pointed. Will the story of our lives be any different?

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