

The Progression of the Temple in Biblical Theology: A Prophetic and Historical Synthesis

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Abstract

This paper synthesizes the biblical theology of the temple through a straightforward, progressive reading of Scripture. It traces the journey from the historical First and Second Temples, through the prophesied Tribulation and Millennial Temples, to the ultimate realization of the temple in the person of Jesus Christ and His Church. By harmonizing unfulfilled covenants regarding national Israel with the New Testament revelation of the Church age, this synthesis demonstrates how God's dwelling place transitions from physical structures to the incarnate Christ, culminating in the eternal, unmediated presence of God.

1. The Historical Baseline: The First and Second Temples

A progressive biblical theology of the temple rests on the premise that Scripture should be interpreted in its plain, ordinary sense unless the text dictates otherwise. The historical baseline for the temple concept is established in the First Temple (Solomon's) and the Second Temple (Zerubbabel's, later expanded by Herod). These were literal, physical edifices in Jerusalem where the presence of God—the Shekinah glory—dwelt among national Israel.

The theological function of these structures was established during Solomon's dedication of the First Temple in 2 Chronicles 6 (and 1 Kings 8). This foundational prayer introduced

a profound “Dwelling Paradox.” Looking at the magnificent structure, Solomon asked, “But will God really dwell on earth with humans? The heavens, even the highest heavens, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!” (2 Chron. 6:18). Solomon recognized that a physical building was insufficient to contain the infinite God, anticipating a future, more perfect dwelling.

Furthermore, Solomon’s prayer anchored the temple directly to the unconditional Davidic Covenant (2 Chron. 6:4-17) while simultaneously establishing the conditions for the temple’s future destruction. Solomon warned that if national rebellion occurred, Israel would face exile (2 Chron. 6:36-39). True to this prophetic warning, God’s glory departed from the First Temple prior to its destruction by Babylon in 586 B.C.¹ The Second Temple, while serving as the center of Jewish worship until 70 A.D., lacked the Ark of the Covenant, and the visible glory of God did not return until Jesus Christ entered its courts.

2. The Tribulation Temple: A Return in Unbelief

Because the first two temples were literal, unfulfilled prophecies concerning future temples utilizing the same geographic and architectural language point to physical structures. The Third Temple, often called the Tribulation Temple, will be built by national Israel in a state of spiritual unbelief prior to or during the seventieth week of Daniel.²

Scripture outlines the necessity of this functioning sanctuary: the coming ruler (Antichrist) will establish a covenant with Israel but desecrate the temple at the mid-point of the Tribulation, ceasing the reinstated sacrificial system.³ Jesus Christ explicitly referenced this future event as the “abomination of desolation” standing in the “holy place.”⁴ Furthermore, the Apostle Paul notes that the “man of lawlessness” will seat himself in the “temple of God,”⁵ an event that requires a literal, rebuilt structure in Jerusalem.

3. The Millennial Temple and the Earthly Kingdom

Following the return of Christ and the establishment of the Millennial Kingdom—the literal, earthly manifestation of the Davidic Kingdom—a fourth temple will be constructed. Ezekiel 40–48 provides exhaustive architectural blueprints for a massive complex that has never existed historically.

This Millennial Temple serves as the ultimate fulfillment of two vital elements of Solomon’s dedication prayer. First, Zechariah prophesies that the Messiah Himself, the “Branch,” will build this temple and rule as a Priest-King, perfectly securing the Davidic Covenant.⁶ Second, Solomon prayed that foreigners would one day come to the temple “so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name” (2 Chron. 6:32-33). In the Millennium, this becomes a global reality, as all nations will literally stream to Jerusalem to worship the King.⁷

A primary theological tension regarding this era is the reinstatement of animal sacrifices in Ezekiel’s vision, given the finality of Christ’s atonement in Hebrews 10.⁸ This tension is resolved by distinguishing eternal salvation from temporal, theocratic administration. The sacrifices are understood either as retrospective memorials (analogous to the Lord’s Supper) or, more consistently within the text, as ceremonial purification.⁹ Because the literal glory of God will dwell on earth among mortals possessing a sin nature, these sacrifices cleanse the physical sanctuary—not the human soul—ensuring the purity of the theocratic space.

4. The Ultimate Temple: Jesus Christ and the Church

While God pursues His physical covenants with Israel, the New Testament reveals that Jesus Christ is the ultimate realization of the temple concept. In John 2:19-21, Jesus identifies His own resurrected body as the true temple. He is the ultimate answer to Solomon’s “Dwelling Paradox”—in Christ, God truly and physically dwells on earth with humans (Colossians

2:9).

During the current Church age, the physical temple is absent, and God's presence is mediated through the Holy Spirit dwelling within believers. Corporately, the Church is built upon the cornerstone of Christ into a "holy temple in the Lord."¹⁰ Individually, every believer's body is sanctified as a "temple of the Holy Spirit."¹¹ Believers thus serve as a living extension of Christ's true temple on earth, carrying the presence of God to the nations while awaiting the fulfillment of the physical Kingdom.

Conclusion

The progression of the temples reveals a unified divine plan. The physical structures of the past establish the pattern for God's earthly dwelling, while simultaneously pointing out their own limitations. The true temple, Jesus Christ, perfectly secures eternal redemption, answers the paradox of God's presence, and extends His Spirit through the Church. Yet, God's covenants with Israel demand a future physical fulfillment in the Tribulation and Millennial Temples. Ultimately, these threads converge in the eternal state, where no physical temple is needed, for "the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple."¹²

Notes

¹Ezekiel 10:18-19.

²John F. Walvoord, *The Prophecy Knowledge Handbook* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1990), 254-255.

³Daniel 9:27.

⁴Matthew 24:15.

⁵2 Thessalonians 2:4.

⁶Zechariah 6:12-13.

⁷Zechariah 14:16; Isaiah 2:2-3.

⁸Hebrews 10:11-14.

⁹John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 928.

¹⁰Ephesians 2:19-22.

¹¹1 Corinthians 6:19-20.

¹²Revelation 21:22.