

Mieczysław Mikołajczak

A Synthesis of Temple Theology in Hebrews

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Ks. Mieczysław Mikołajczak

A SYNTHESIS OF TEMPLE THEOLOGY IN HEBREWS

1. Introduction

A theological analysis of the Epistle to the Hebrews, allows us discuss *temple theology* presented in this epistle, which is closely connected to Jesus Christ. In Hebrews, the temple serves as a background against which the perfect and imperfect matters are presented. The author expounds temple theology in order to compare and contrast the Old Covenant against the New.

2. The main idea of the Epistle to the Hebrews

In presenting the theology of the temple first I would like to point out the main idea of the epistle according to which “*the high priest Jesus having made the new covenant in his blood is now leading God’s new people to God*”¹. The structure of the epistle and the emphasis on temple theology are a result of the cultic theme of the Old Testament². Temple theology is not presented and addressed to the gentiles but to the second generation of Christians³. In Hebrews

¹ H.H. Langkammer, *Wprowadzenie do ksiąg Nowego Testamentu*, Wrocław 1982, p. 147; idem, *Teologia Nowego Testamentu (zarys)*, Wrocław 1991, p. 59.

² Cf. idem, *Wprowadzenie do ksiąg Nowego Testamentu*, p. 148.

³ Cf. ibid., p. 148: “*Their faith has already weakened (Hbr 10,25); some have even lost it (Hbr 6,4-6); they have already experienced persecution (Hbr 10,32f); and they were facing new sufferings (Hbr 12,14f); besides a false cult of the angels crept into their beliefs (Hbr 1,5f)*”.

the Old Testament temple theme is utilised to “*prefigure the new covenant made by Christ*”⁴.

3. Temple theology against the background of Hebrews

Temple theology in Hebrews is intricately intertwined with three major parts of the epistle⁵ which consist of “*theological and parenthetical layers mutually interweaving and conditioning each other*”⁶.

This division confirms the need to comprehend the theology of the temple in Hebrews as inseparably connected to Jesus Christ⁷.

Just as in the Old Testament the Jerusalem temple was a place of God’s abiding presence amongst his people and a place of worship and adoration for the chosen nation, in the New Testament the Word of God was “*personified in the Son*”⁸ whose coming signified a transition from the Old Testament temple institution to the New Testament God’s people, replaced by Jesus, and the mission of his Church leading mankind to salvation.

In Hebrews Jesus’ superiority over the temple institution is realised through his “*humbling that leads to exultation*”⁹. Jesus replaces the temple, takes its place and gives his life for us as our brother. The replacement of the temple and the worship of Jahwe practised in the Old Testament period are confirmed by the presentation of Jesus Christ in the New Testament – in the New Covenant, through “*gesta et verba*” od Jesus and above all in his redemption of man who can achieve his salvation only in Jesus – the high priest.

⁴ Ibid., p. 148.

⁵ Idem, *Teologia Nowego Testamentu (zarys)*, p. 59; Idem, *Wprowadzenie do ksiąg Nowego Testamentu*, p. 148:

- The word of God’s promise fulfilled in the Son higher than the angels (Hbr 1,1-4,13);
- Jesus the high priest as the maker of the new covenant (Hbr 4,14-10,31);
- Jesus as an unfailing leader leading the new God’s people in their pilgrimage among the hardships and persecutions to the heavenly temple (Hbr 10,32-13,25).

⁶ Ibid., p. 148.

⁷ I presented the same idea in my research of Luke-Acts where we talked about temple theology only in connection with Jesus Christ.

⁸ Ibid., p. 149.

⁹ Ibid., p. 149; it is supposedly a new interpretation of the traditional confession of a Christian community which was weak in faith and was looking for the tangible effects of the rule of „Christ as the exalted Lord” who was much higher than the temple.

Hebrews presents Jesus as the one replacing the Old Testament temple and also as the High Priest who effectively mediates with God on our behalf. He is the High Priest of the New Covenant¹⁰.

Even in Hbr 1,1-3 (*theological introduction*) one can see the worth of this transition from the temple to Jesus because it is shown:

- that Jesus is the everlasting Son of God;
- that he took part in the process of creation;
- that he died to cleanse all people from their sins;
- that he was exalted¹¹.

I believe that the inspired texts of the Old Testament utilised by the author serve well to show the prominence of Jesus over the temple by presenting that he is of a much higher rank than the angels (Hbr 1,4-13). Because of what he did, Jesus has become a much more perfect and unsurpassable institution than the Old Testament temple which nevertheless has been an important phase in the history of the encounters between the chosen nation and their God Jahwe. But this era has come to an end and a new era has begun – an era of salvation. Thus those who chose to move from the Old Testament temple to the temple personified by Jesus should have hope in him (Hbr 2,5-3,6).

Furthermore, the aforementioned Christology of the priesthood of Jesus (Hbr 7-10) is a noticeable motif of temple theology in Hebrews¹². Hbr 7-10 points to the depths of temple theology expressed in the need of:

- abolishing the sacrificial system of the Old Covenant (Hbr 10,1-18). The Law of Moses is merely an imperfect type of the perfect New Law of the Gospel (Hbr 10,1). All means of our sanctification though constantly renewed draw their effectiveness only from the sacrifice of the cross of Christ (Hbr 10,14);
- being faithful to this new revelation (Hbr 10,19-39). The death of Christ – the High Priest – tore the veil not only of the Jerusalem temple (Mt 27,51; Mk 15,38; Lk 23,45) but also of the heavenly temple giving us access to God (Hbr 10,19f). There is no longer a need for a “propitiatory sacrifice” in the Old Testament sense;

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 149.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 149; cf. A. Paciorek, *List do Hebrajczyków. Tłumaczenie, wstęp i komentarz*, Lublin 1998, p. 13 discussing the structure of Hbr.

¹² H.H. Langkammer, *Teologia Nowego Testamentu (zarys)*, p. 60; idem, *Wprowadzenie do ksiąg Nowego Testamentu*, p. 149: „It is also a theological answer for the difficulties the fellowship is going through”.

- examples of heroic faith (Hbr 11). All things which are seen were not made of visible things (Hbr 11,3). Examples from the lives of the patriarchs show that they only “*looked from afar*” at the messianic promises which were to be fulfilled in later generations (Hbr 11,13). And when they were fulfilled there was a change from the temple worship to a worship that focuses on Jesus - the Messiah. There is a new Israel (Ex 19,6) - people of God born of Jesus the Messiah (Hbr 11,26). The Messiah is someone higher than the temple. It is not in the temple nor from the temple that salvation is ultimately realised because the followers of God Jahwe did not achieve salvation immediately after death. But they are still waiting for Christ to descend down to the abyss (1 P 3,19). The Christians are in a better position now because they have this possibility to become saved, i. e. to achieve entrance to the heavenly homeland (Hbr 10,19) after having lived the life worthy of the disciple of Christ;
- faith and faithfulness to Christ the High Priest who is the model of perseverance (Hbr 12,1-17) „*who suffered and was tempted (...) who through a perfect propitiatory sacrifice redeemed the community (Hbr 10,11-18) and sanctified it*”¹³.

The depth of temple theology in Hebrews is expressed in the uniqueness and superiority as well as the effectiveness of the High Priest of the New Covenant. Sacrifices presented by priests of the Old Testament and their ministry in the temple – the earthly and passing temple – came to an end. “*Christ, the high priest after the order of Melchisedec (Hbr 5,4-10), surpassing Abraham and Levy having laid the perfect sacrifice through his own blood once for all entered the temple of God (Hbr 9,11-14)*”¹⁴.

4. Conclusion

Summarising temple theology in Hebrews I would also like to mention the third part of the epistle where the inspired author introduces parenthetical conclusions. The era of the Old Testament religious institution – the temple – came to an end. Jesus Christ the High Priest replaced the temple. He gathered the New Testament God’s people around himself and leads them to salvation. That is why the lives of Christians, members of this Fellowship, of the new nation who are still “*on the difficult road to the ever-*

¹³ Ibid., p. 150; Idem, *Teologia Nowego Testamentu (zarys)*, p. 60.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 60.

lasting homeland should be characterised by the imitation of Christ and perseverance of faith as well as sufferings and persecutions, based on the steadfast hope that Jesus Christ is their sure leader in the pilgrimage ^{”15}. Jesus Christ is someone higher than the temple – he replaces it in his person – in the person of the Son of God, the Messiah¹⁶.

STRESZCZENIE

Synteza teologii świątyni w „*Liście do Hebrajczyków*”

Analiza teologiczna „*Listu do Hebrajczyków*”, pozwala mówić o zawartej w nim teologii świątyni. Autor w przedstawionym artykule ukazuje, że jest ona ściśle zвязana z Osobą Jezusa Chrystusa. Opracowanie ukazuje, że świątynia służy, jako tło kontrastowe do uwypuklenia tego co było niedoskonale i tego co następuje po niej jako doskonałe. Synteza teologii świątyni została ukazana, poprzez kontrastowe zestawienie relacji Hbr na ten temat – do Starego i Nowego Przymierza.

Autor opracowania prezentuje uzyskane wnioski parenetyczne. Skończył się czas instytucji religijnej Starego Testamentu - świątyni. Jej miejsce zajął Jezus Chrystus Arcykapłan Nowego Przymierza, który skupia wokół siebie Lud Boży Nowego Testamentu, który prowadzi ludzkość do zbawienia. Stąd też, życie chrześcijan, członków tej Wspólnoty, tego Nowego Ludu na trudnej drodze do wiecznej ojczyzny powinno cechować naśladowanie Chrystusa oraz wytrwałość w wierze, w cierpieniach i prześladowaniach, oparte na niezłomnej nadziei, że w tej pielgrzymce niezawodnym wodzem jest Chrystus. Jezus jest kimś więcej niż świątynią, bowiem wypełnia i następuje jej czas i istnienie w swojej osobie. w Osobie Bożego Syna.

¹⁵ Idem, *Wprowadzenie do ksiąg Nowego Testamentu*, p. 150; Idem, *Teologia Nowego Testamentu (zarys)*, p. 60.

¹⁶ Cf. T. Hanelt, *Pismo Święte – historią zbawienia*, Gniezno 1997, p. 118-128.