

• Review – a letter written to Jewish Christians

• Tempted by hardship to return to Judaism

• An intolerable suggestion

• Jesus is superior in so many ways

• To go back disastrous

• Jesus is the fulfilment of what the Mosaic system foreshadowed

• The writer begins to explain how Jesus fulfils the symbolism of the tabernacle and the Day of Atonement

• We are to continue to exercise our faith and live out a godly Christian life

• What does the tabernacle represent?

• At least three answers

**1. The tabernacle represents the universe**

As we open the pages of the letter to the Hebrews at chapter 9 verse 1, we find the author just about to plunge into a description of the tabernacle. But let us take a look at what it is that brings him to Hebrews 9:1. The writer's great concern is to help these people whom we know as 'the Hebrews'. They were apparently Jewish believers, facing persecution and discouragements of many kinds. Life would be easier for them if they could be simply Jews rather than Christian Jews. They have already suffered a lot, and the suggestion is being put to them (by Satan if by no one else) that if they could only be Jews regarding Jesus as a kind of superior angel working within Judaism, their troubles might be over. But our writer – a friend of Paul but exactly which one we do not know – cannot tolerate the suggestion for a moment. Jesus is vastly superior to any angel<sup>1</sup>. It is dangerous to neglect the salvation that his friends have already experienced<sup>2</sup>. Jesus is a sympathetic Saviour engaged in the work of bringing his weak and fallible brothers and sisters to glory and honour as God's servants<sup>3</sup>. Jesus is infinitely greater than Moses<sup>4</sup>. It is dangerous to fail in following Jesus, just as it was dangerous for the people of Israel when they became rebellious while following Moses. Disaster followed. The Israelites failed to 'enter rest'. There is an equivalent disaster for Christians who fail to hear God's voice<sup>5</sup>.

However, Jesus is the **fulfilment** of what the Mosaic system foreshadowed. Jesus is at work in the heavens as our high priest. We are to come to him to find grace and mercy when we are in need<sup>1</sup>. He fulfilled the Levitical priesthood<sup>2</sup> and if our writer is able to help his friends<sup>3</sup> and if they will be encouraged by God's oath of mercy<sup>4</sup>, he will tell them about the great and unique Melchizedek. For Jesus is more like Melchizedek than he is like the priests in the tribe of Levi<sup>5</sup>. There is a new priesthood, just as there is a new covenant and new promises and a new ministry in a tabernacle far greater than the old tabernacle<sup>6</sup>.

At this point our writer is ready to plunge into his explanation of the way in which Jesus fulfils the symbolism of the tabernacle in general and the Day of Atonement in particular. <sup>1</sup>Now in that first covenant there were regulations for worship and a holy place here on earth. <sup>2</sup>For a tabernacle was prepared... He will go on to say that all of this is fulfilled in Jesus, and it is Jesus' blood (not any animal sacrifice) which has spiritual power<sup>1</sup>. We are to continue to exercise our faith, refuse to become rebellious, follow the faith of the Old Testament saints, and of Jesus himself, refuse to be discouraged by the chastisements of God that we might experience along the way, and live out the Christian life in faith and godliness<sup>2</sup>.

Now in that first covenant... Our writer stresses that it was the 'first' covenant only (and he has already said it is now obsolete). It is 'here on earth' and so was inferior in comparison with what it represented. At this point we might ask: **what does the tabernacle represent?** There are all sorts of theories. Preachers tend to read their favourite doctrines into the tabernacle, and find bits of symbolism which enable them to make points about 'fivefold ministry' or the baptism with the Spirit or body-soul-and-spirit or the doctrine of the trinity – or whatever. But we must ask the question: does the Bible itself give any answers to the question 'What does the tabernacle represent'? The answer is 'Yes – at least three'.

1. **The tabernacle represents the universe.** The high priest's passing through the tabernacle represents Jesus' passing through the heavens to get to the very immediate presence of God. The courtyard – the area outside the tabernacle – represents this world. The tabernacle represents heaven. Going into the tabernacle represents passing from this world into the presence of God. It is not that heaven has sections; the veil was temporary and was due to be taken down. The whole tabernacle represents heaven.

1:1-14

2:1-4

2:5-18

3:1-6

3:7-4:13

4:14-16

5:1-10

5:11-6:12

6:13-20

7:1-28

8:1-13

9:1-10:18

10:19-13:25

## 2. The tabernacle represents the progress between the two covenants

2. **The tabernacle represents the progress between the two covenants.** The first compartment represents the first covenant; the inner compartment represents the new covenant. Hebrews 9:9, as I understand it, says that the first compartment of the tabernacle was 'a symbol for the time then present, during which gifts and sacrifices were offered that could not perfect the conscience of the worshipper'. The first compartment symbolized the time of the Mosaic covenant. The holy of holies speaks of the new covenant and what is available now that Jesus has come. The veil between the two compartments stands for the time when Jesus was here. When Jesus' body was torn on the cross, the veil was torn down and the new epoch of the new covenant arrived. The first compartment represents the first covenant; the inner compartment represents the new covenant. The veil represents the time when Jesus' body was torn and Jesus presented his blood to the Father.

## 3. The tabernacle represents levels of fellowship

3. **The tabernacle represents levels of fellowship.** This follows from the previous two points. If the area outside the tent represents this world, it speaks also of those who have no access to God and no fellowship with him (but the altar and the laver are visible, speaking of atonement and washing). In the first compartment (with its table, the light, the incense) there are symbols of fellowship with God. *There was the first section, in which were the lampstand and the table and the bread of the Presence. It is called the Holy Place.*

• Outside – the world – no fellowship

In the innermost compartment is the greatest fellowship of all. <sup>3</sup>*Behind the second curtain was a second section called the Holy of Holies.* <sup>4</sup>*Belonging to this section was the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold. With<sup>a</sup> this ark was a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron's staff that budded, and the tablets of the covenant.* <sup>5</sup>*Above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat.* These spoke of the presence of God, joining the angels in worship, entering rest, having the law covered so that we may have complete assurance, the blood securing propitiation, the rod speaking of Jesus' priesthood, and the manna speaking of provision.

• First compartment – fellowship with God

• Innermost compartment – greatest fellowship of all – God's presence

Our writer says: *Of these things we cannot now speak in detail.* That means that he could have done if he had wished and if he had had more space in his letter. The tabernacle was built to God's design as 'copy and shadow of heavenly things'<sup>1</sup>. It had spiritual meaning to the Israelites of the time. They had a distant preview of spiritual realities. The law had 'a shadow of the good things to come', which good things actually came with Christ<sup>2</sup>. Christ entered through the veil (not in symbol but in reality) and he is now our mercy seat.

• Under the law a distant preview but now in Christ a reality

### Note

a. The Greek *en* (in? on?) is vaguer than any English preposition. It can be 'in' or 'on' (as when our writer says 'on the mountain' (8:5) or speaks of what is 'not on tablets of stone but on tablets of the human heart'). It could even be translated 'in and on'. The best way to translate it here might be 'with' since the law was within the ark, but the rod and the golden pot were before the ark. Two of the three items mentioned were visible to the high priest; the tablets of the law were not visible since they were within the ark.

□<sup>1</sup> 8:5

□<sup>2</sup> 10:1; 9:11



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**Dr Michael Eaton** is highly respected internationally as a theologian, author, preacher and teacher. He lives in Kenya where he is one of the leaders of the Chrisco Fellowship. His *Preaching Through The Bible (PTTB)* books are highly popular worldwide. Michael Eaton puts the theological and practical meaning of the Bible in a clear and down-to-earth way so that what is written can be easily understood by the reader.



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