

The Millennial Temple

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“And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord”
(1 Kings 8:10-11).

This occurred during Solomon’s dedication of the temple that he had just built. The Lord lived with his people Israel on earth in this temple. His presence is indicated by the cloud that filled it. In the same way, a cloud covered the desert tabernacle: “Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting, because of the cloud that abode upon it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle” (Exod. 40:34-35).

Ezekiel prophesied that in the future the glory of the Lord will also fill the messianic temple. “And behold,” he said, “the glory of the God of Israel came from the east ... and the earth shone with his glory ... and I fell upon my face. As the glory of the Lord entered the temple by the gate facing east, the Spirit lifted me up, and brought me into the inner court; and behold the glory of the Lord filled the temple” (Ezek. 43:2, 3-5).

The glory of God rested on Jesus Christ. He is the messianic temple. “Destroy this temple,” he said, “and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19), and the evangelist explains that “he spoke of the temple of his body” (John 2:21). In him we experience the glory of the Lord and are able to walk in his splendor (John 8:12). He is the fulfillment of Solomon’s temple. He is the messianic temple prophesied by Ezekiel. This is why there will be no temple in the new Jerusalem (Rev. 21:22). Jesus Christ dead, risen, and present in the new Jerusalem in his glorified body will be its temple and its light. Therefore there will also be no sun or moon in the new Jerusalem. The glorified Jesus will serve this function too. “And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light shall the nations walk” (Rev. 21:22-24).

This shall be our future; and even now since the death of Jesus Christ, we have no temple for the offering of animal sacrifices. Jesus Christ is our only sacrifice, and therefore we do not need a temple. Instead we have churches where we offer the one and only sacrifice of Christ on the cross, for the eucharistic sacrifice makes us present on Calvary at the very moment of the unique sacrifice of Christ on the cross for our salvation. The offering of the sacrifice of the Mass makes Christ’s one sacrifice on the cross present to us, and makes us present to it as it is being offered on Calvary.

In Christ we experience the glory of God. In him we walk in the light of his resurrection, which illuminates us. He is our messianic temple. His death is the sacrifice that saves us from death and takes from us the pain of sin and guilt. The sacrifices of the

Jews represented ahead of time this one, adequate sacrifice. In Christ we have the reality that their sacrifices symbolized.

But could there not also be more involved in Ezekiel's prophecy about the messianic temple? His description of the temple fits no temple that ever existed, as commentators point out. The minute detail he gives about the size of the windows, doors, etc. serves no symbolic function in itself, but would make perfect sense if Ezekiel, under divine inspiration, were intending to describe an actual temple to be built in the messianic age. In fact, that does seem to be his intention. He is describing a real temple with real animal sacrifices (Ezek. 43:27) that will exist in the last days. I take it therefore as a description of a future messianic temple near the time of the Parousia.

The Apocalypse speaks of a thousand-year reign of Christ on earth (Rev. 20:1-7) between his second coming (Rev. 19:11-16) and the final creation of the new heavens and the new earth (Rev. 21:1) with the descent of the new Jerusalem (Rev. 21:2, 10). This millennium is usually interpreted as co-extensive with the reign of the risen Christ on earth with us now since his death and resurrection (St. Augustine's view) or as his reign in heaven with all the saints who are with him now in glory. It is certainly true that we do reign with Christ now, but it seems likely that St. John intended us to understand that there would be an actual thousand-year kingdom of Christ on earth (Rev. 20:1-7) after his second coming (Rev. 19:11-16) but before the creation of the new heavens and the new earth (Rev. 21:1). Ezekiel's prophecy about a future messianic temple would fit right into this. In addition to being fulfilled in Jesus Christ, Ezekiel seems to point to the actual temple that will exist during Christ's thousand-year kingdom of righteousness on earth following his second coming.

One might argue that this millennial view is impossible because it is not what most Christians believe today. Yet the early Fathers of the Church almost all believed in a literal millennium, as, it seems, did St. John. It was not until the powerful and influential figure of St. Augustine that this literal millennial view was suppressed in favor of St. Augustine's own spiritualized view.

Doctrine, furthermore, takes time to develop. How many centuries did it take to develop our present quite sophisticated understanding of the Trinity? This development took place between the fourth and the seventh centuries. Likewise the doctrine of justification was developed during the Reformation and the disputes of those times. Serious new attention was not turned again to eschatology until about two hundred years ago, and so it is this area of theological understanding that is now being developed.

If therefore we are now to take a more literal view of Revelation 20:1-7 as actually prophesying a thousand-year kingdom of righteousness on earth, can we not then look forward to seeing the Jews in Israel one day rebuilding the final messianic temple on its original site and reinstating animal sacrifices as part of the end-times events? St. Paul prophesied that at the end, after all the Gentiles have come in, all Israel will be saved. "A hardening has come upon part of Israel," he wrote, "until the full number of the Gentiles come in, and so all Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11:26-27).

When this happens, the restored animal sacrifices prophesied for the last days by Daniel (9:27) and Ezekiel (43:27) would look back as memorials to the one and only adequate sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, just as they once looked forward to it and were only effective in that they were done in anticipation of the one sacrifice of Christ. Should this not then be part of our hope for the future, namely a universal kingdom of

righteousness on earth with the risen and glorified Christ reigning visibly and bodily over us from the throne of David in Jerusalem for a thousand years between his second coming (Rev. 19:11-16) and the establishment of the new heavens and the new earth (Rev. 21:1) with the descent of the new Jerusalem (Rev. 21:2, 10), which will then be the eternal state of the saved?

Those who have already died and gone to heaven would, of course, not have to come back again to live as mere mortals in their natural bodies on earth. They would be with Christ in their resurrection bodies, which they received in his coming for his Church (1 Thess. 4:16-17; 1 Cor. 15:51-53). Those who are alive at his coming for the Church and are saved would be given their resurrection bodies at that time (1 Thess. 4:16-17; 1 Cor. 15:51-53) and then be with Christ in heaven. Then when Christ returns at his second coming, they will come with him (Rev. 19:14; 1 Thess. 3:13) and be associated with him in his rule over the millennial earth (1 Cor. 6:2; 2 Tim. 2:12).

St. Paul says that at the end “all Israel will be saved” (Rom. 11:26), apparently by seeing Christ return in glory, for “behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him” (Rev. 1:7). Then, it seems, they will recognize Jesus as their Messiah and acknowledge him with faith, the Messiah whom they had so long awaited and for whom they had been so well prepared by God’s actions and revelations in their history. God, who had done so much for them and who revealed to us through St. Paul that he would never reject his people (Rom. 11:1), “for the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29), has, it seems, planned to bring his covenant and promises to them to fulfillment in this way. Thus will God’s unconditional and everlasting promise to Abraham come to its final fulfillment in the land of Israel and in the city of Jerusalem.

Even though this will only be for a thousand years, it will nonetheless be an everlasting fulfillment, for at the end of a thousand years, the millennial kingdom will merge with the new Jerusalem on the new earth (Rev. 21:1-2, 10), and so their reign in righteousness in Jerusalem in the land of Israel with the glorified Jesus, their Messiah, will continue forever, as God promised to Abraham, saying: “I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. And I will give to you, and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God” (Gen. 17:7-8).

