

Sanctuary Language in Hebrews



Sabbath Afternoon

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Hebrews 9.

MEMORY TEXT: “But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building” (Hebrews 9:11).

KEY THOUGHT: Hebrews is full of sanctuary language that helps us understand what the Lord is doing for us in heaven now.

IN DECEMBER 1989, *Moody Monthly* reported: “Two Talmudic schools near the Western (Wailing) Wall are teaching students details of temple service. Other scholars are researching genealogies to identify members of the priestly line. Plans call for an organizing convention of priestly descendants next year. One group of Jewish activists, the Temple Mount Faithful, dedicated a three-ton ‘cornerstone’ two kilometers from the temple site. Police prevented them from staging the ceremony in the Western Wall Plaza.”—Page 74. Long after its destruction, there is still interest in the sanctuary. This week we’ll take a deeper look “within the veil”; that is, the veil of the sanctuary in heaven.

THE WEEK AT A GLANCE: In Hebrews, what role does the earthly sanctuary and ministry play? What can they teach us about what happens in the heavenly sanctuary? What’s the purpose of Christ’s ministry there?

*Please study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 9.

THE SANCTUARY ON EARTH (Hebrews 9).

The book of Hebrews is clear: Jesus is our High Priest in heaven. This concept of priesthood, of course, wasn’t something that Paul’s readers were unfamiliar with. Paul constructs his reasoning around the Old Testament sanctuary and the priesthood that officiated in this sanctuary. Apart from that background, much of what he says about Christ and His ministry in heaven doesn’t make sense.

Read Hebrews 9:1-3. What is the author talking about? Why does he bring this topic into the discussion of Christ’s high-priestly ministry? See also Exodus 25:8. Read Hebrews 9:4, 5. What else was Paul talking about? Now read verses 6, 7. What is the author describing here?

Paul gives a quick review of the ancient Hebrew sanctuary service, describing both apartments, as well as the daily and yearly rituals that took place in them. Then, in verses 8-14, he talks about Christ’s entry into the heavenly sanctuary and His high-priestly ministry there.

Though Paul’s point is the superiority of what Christ is doing in heaven as opposed to what happened on earth (see Heb. 9:11), it is clear that the ministry in the sanctuary below (the earthly) is linked with the ministry in the sanctuary above (the heavenly). That’s why Paul talks about them together. The understanding of what happened on earth helps us understand what’s happening in heaven.

Hebrews uses two words for the sanctuary, *hagion/hagia* and *skene*. The first word is originally an adjective and means “holy.” In Hebrews it is used as a noun and is translated “sanctuary,” “Holy Place,” and “Most Holy Place,” depending on the context. The second word is “tent” or “tabernacle” and reminds us of the Old Testament tabernacle in the wilderness.

How well do you understand the earthly-sanctuary service? Though we don’t need to know all the details, considering that the book of Hebrews places such an emphasis on it, is it not worthy of study? Read the sections in Exodus and Leviticus that detail the building, the structure, and the services performed there, remembering that this whole system symbolized Christ’s death and heavenly ministry in our behalf.

THE SANCTUARY IN HEAVEN.

“Now of the things which we have spoken this is the sum: We have such an high priest, who is set on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens; a minister of the sanctuary, and of the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, and not man” (Heb. 8:1, 2).

The apostle, as well as his audience, must have been well-versed in the Old Testament and its ritual services. The sanctuary that he refers to is the original earthly sanctuary as introduced by God and built under the supervision of Moses (Exodus 25–31 and 35–40), as opposed to the later temple erected by Solomon, which was more elaborate than the wilderness model and contained more items of the same kind, such as ten golden lamp stands and ten tables as opposed to one each in the wilderness tabernacle. (See 2 Chronicles 3–7.)

Besides the elements we studied yesterday, what other aspects of the earthly-sanctuary service are depicted in Hebrews 9?

Heb. 9:9 _____

Heb. 9:10 _____

Heb. 9:21 _____

Besides pointing to all the basic furnishings of the sanctuary, it also talks about some of the rituals that were performed there, including various sacrifices and offerings. Though he doesn’t go into detail about the contents of the heavenly sanctuary, one point does seem clear: The author is convinced that a real sanctuary exists in heaven, in which Jesus is ministering in our behalf.

Read Hebrews 8:1, 2. What does the author say that indicates the reality of the heavenly sanctuary?

Paul’s discussion about the earthly sanctuary and its “gifts and sacrifices” (Heb. 9:9) and “meat and drinks, and diverse washings” (vs. 10) was never an end in itself but always a prelude to a discussion about the heavenly. That’s the whole point of Hebrews: to show the readers that there’s something even better than the earthly system that God Himself ordained, and that’s the heavenly sanctuary, where Jesus ministers as High Priest.

SACRIFICES.

Though Hebrews is clear about the reality of Jesus as our High Priest in the heavenly sanctuary, the topic isn’t limited to just that. He talks also about sacrifices. And no wonder. If sacrifice was central to the earthly system, how much more so to the heavenly?

Which animals are mentioned in Hebrews that were used as sacrifices? Heb. 9:12, 13, 19; 10:4.

Which types of sacrifices do they point to? Lev. 1:5; 4:3; 16:3; Num. 7:17.

Four different kinds of animals are enumerated in the four verses of Hebrews. With the exception of the heifer, they come in pairs: “goats and calves” and “goats and bulls.” Goats are found most often. Interestingly enough, the lamb, which is so prominent in Revelation (see also John 1:29, 36; 1 Pet. 1:19), is not found in Hebrews.

The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, mentions goats in Numbers 7:17 in the context of “peace offerings.” A synonym for the word *bull* used by Hebrews is found in Leviticus 1:6 as a “burnt offering” and in Leviticus 4:3 as a “sin offering.” The heifer, mentioned in Hebrews 9:13, occurs in Numbers 19, in connection with the peace offering. There the ashes of the red heifer are used for purification. Bulls and goats were also used on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16).

Thus, the different animals used as sacrifices remind us of the basic types of Old Testament sacrifices, including (but certainly not limited to) the Day of Atonement.

Yet, all these animal sacrifices were only preliminary, unsatisfactory, unable to save from sin (Heb. 10:4). The shedding of blood was, nevertheless, important, because it pointed to Jesus, who alone brings about forgiveness and reconciliation.

Rivers of animal blood were spilled over the centuries in the Old Testament—sacrificial system. However gruesome, it was to teach an object lesson about the cost of sin. And yet, those were only animals, which, in the end, could never bring salvation. In contrast, what does the death of Christ, the only means of solving the sin problem, tell us about the true cost of sin?

THE SANCTUARY SERVICE (Heb. 8:1-3; 9:5-7).

In the above texts, notice those involved in the sanctuary service. The apostle mentions cherubim, priests, high priests, the minister in the sanctuary, and the mediator. The titles “priest” and “high priest” refer to descendants of Aaron, as well as to Jesus, who is the ultimate Priest and High Priest and whose ministry alone can solve the sin problem. This, again, leads to a key theme of Hebrews: the superiority of Christ and His ministry over all that came before.

The word *minister* (*leitourgos*) is used for the angels in Hebrews 1:7 and for Jesus, the Minister in the heavenly sanctuary. Jesus’ ministry (*leitourgia*; Heb. 8:6) is the real “liturgy.” *Mediator* is found three times in Hebrews (8:6; 9:15; 12:24) and is applied to Jesus only.

The cherubim mentioned in Hebrews 9:5 are the two golden figures placed on the mercy seat in the earthly sanctuary. What do they symbolize? See also Ezek. 1:5-14, 22-26; 10:1, 4, 18-22; Rev. 4:6-8.

Cherubim are not just mythological figures but real beings (Gen. 3:24) living in the presence of God. They form the entourage of the majesty of the universe in His sanctuary.

“There can be no doubt that the Biblical cherubim designate a class of angels. Nowhere are they represented as objects of worship, and therefore cannot have been divine beings.”—*SDA Bible Dictionary* (revised edition), pp. 189, 190.

Hebrews is strongly opposed to angel worship (see Heb. 1:5-14). This may be a reason for not mentioning the heavenly counterpart of the cherubim in the Most Holy Place of the earthly sanctuary.

There’s no question, though, that angelic beings are mentioned in the context of the sanctuary. What exactly they do, we don’t know. However, when we understand the role of the sanctuary service and what God is accomplishing there, then perhaps we can better understand the function of angels, which comes from a word that also means “messenger.” Perhaps, because they are so closely involved, they themselves can witness the work of Christ in the sanctuary, which is a work He does in behalf of saving humanity, a work that has implications for the entire universe.

Think of the heavenly sanctuary and Christ’s work there for us, all in the context of the great controversy, in which great issues regarding the character of God are at stake before all creation. In this context, what role can you see for the angels in the heavenly sanctuary?

THE PROBLEM AND ITS SOLUTION.

Read these verses from Hebrews. All have a similar theme. What is it? Heb. 1:3; 2:17; 8:12; 9:26; 9:28; 10:12; 10:17; 13:11, 12.

The fall of Adam and Eve changed the relationship of humans to God. And though it dramatically altered life on earth, bringing disease, death, and suffering, the real tragedy of sin exists in the rupture between heaven and earth, in the chasm between the creature and Creator. All that sin causes us to do to ourselves and to each other is because of what sin has done to us and to our relationship with God. Sin ruptured that relationship, caused an estrangement, and created a division between the Creator and the created so that the created became separated from the only Source of his or her existence, life, and purpose. This separation comes with consequences more dire than if the umbilical cord were severed in the womb, because what the created lost because of sin wasn’t just physical, but spiritual, even eternal.

First and foremost, then, it was to heal this infinite and eternal rift that Jesus Christ came, died, and now ministers in heaven in our behalf.

And this is what Hebrews is about: God healing the rift between heaven and earth. It’s an overview of the whole plan of salvation, beginning with Christ’s death on the cross (symbolized by the sacrifice) and continuing with Christ’s work in the heavenly sanctuary.

Indeed, in Scripture the emphasis is not so much on this problem but on the solution: forgiveness of sin, liberation from sin, and the power to overcome sin. A key theme in Hebrews is purification. God wants not only to forgive us but to purify us, cleanse us, and make us holy. All this is now possible but only because of the superior sacrifice of Jesus, His superior blood, and His superior ministry in our behalf.

What we have in Hebrews, then, is God showing us what the problem is and how He is solving it. Read again the texts for today. Though all talk about sin, they talk about the remedy too. Focus on what those texts say Jesus has done for us in regard to the question of sin. Write a paragraph expressing the wonderful hope found in them for us, focusing particularly on the results of what Christ has done.

FURTHER STUDY:

Christ was the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. To many it has been a mystery why so many sacrificial offerings were required in the old dispensation, why so many bleeding victims were led to the altar. But the great truth that was to be kept before men, and imprinted upon mind and heart, was this, ‘Without shedding of blood is no remission.’ In every bleeding sacrifice was typified ‘the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.’ Christ Himself was the originator of the Jewish system of worship, in which, by types and symbols, were shadowed forth spiritual and heavenly things. Many forgot the true significance of these offerings; and the great truth that through Christ alone there is forgiveness of sin, was lost to them. The multiplying of sacrificial offerings, the blood of bulls and goats, could not take away sin (*Signs of the Times*, Jan. 2, 1893).”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, pp. 932, 933.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Revelation 7:15 and 16:17 are quite clear: The throne of God is in the heavenly temple. In Hebrews, the throne is found four times (1:8; 4:16; 8:1; 12:2). When we read the context of Hebrews 4:16 and Hebrews 8:2, we get the same impression: The throne is found in the sanctuary. This is supported by Old Testament evidence such as Psalm 11:4 and Isaiah 6:1, which state, “I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple.” The sanctuary is the center of God’s government. Salvation, assistance, and judgment proceed from God’s dwelling place, His palace, which is the sanctuary. In fact, the Old Testament term for temple (*hkl*) is also translated “palace.” In what ways is this idea, that of the sanctuary being where God’s throne resides, important to our understanding of Christ’s ministry in heaven?
2. From what you’ve studied so far, if someone were to ask you, Why is Christ’s ministry in heaven important? what would you respond?

SUMMARY: Hebrews is very rich when it comes to words related to the sanctuary. Indeed, the sanctuary concept forms the foundation for understanding the entire book. And what this concept teaches us is that God wants to be close to us and dwell among us. Through Jesus we now have access to the Majesty of heaven and can rejoice in the assurance of salvation.



A Song for Jesus

Charlotte Ishkanian

Nearly all her life Alla dreamed of becoming a professional musician. She sang for weddings and other special occasions and put on concerts to benefit orphanages.

When Alla was 17, her fiancé died. Heartbroken, she grieved for months. Alla refused to sing anymore. “How can I?” she said. “My heart has been torn from me.” Friends convinced her to study music at a well-known school of art and culture. Although her heart was not in it, she took the entrance exam and passed with top grades. Her high scores convinced her that God wanted her to be a musician.

At the music school, Alla met an Adventist girl. Soon the two were studying the Bible together. Alla began to attend church with her friend and met many special friends in the church. But one day she realized that her life was being pulled two ways. One part of her had a promising career in secular music and dance; the other part wanted to praise God. But before she could choose which path to follow, a philharmonic group asked her to join their organization as a singer.

Maybe I could sing professionally and still honor God, she rationalized. She joined the philharmonic group. For eight months Alla sang with the philharmonic. During this time she did not attend the Adventist church. Then one Sabbath she returned to church and told her friends that she wanted to follow God, even if it meant economic suicide. She preferred to lose her income and her scholarship than to lose God. She felt that God would not leave her penniless.

Her boss convinced her to stay on with the group. He offered her a promotion and promised to let her have Sabbaths off. She agreed to try again, but after two months she realized that it would not work.

She explained to her colleagues why she was leaving. They predicted her economic disaster, but within three weeks she had another job with Sabbaths off.

Then a friend urged Alla to consider studying at Zaosky Theological Seminary, an Adventist school. She was not sure she was worthy, but she asked God to lead. She was accepted into the school, where she is studying English and theology and wants to serve God any way He sees fit.



Alla Simonchuk (left). Charlotte Ishkanian is editor of *Mission*.

Produced by the Office of Mission
Sabbath School-Personal Ministries department of the General Conference
Email: gomission@gc.adventist.org

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