

Society of Biblical Literature, 2005 Annual Meeting, Philadelphia, PA
Hebrews Consultation

The Archaeology of Hebrews' Tabernacle Imagery

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The nature of the heavenly tabernacle in Hebrews has long been a matter of intense debate. Lincoln Hurst has divided the various interpretations into two general camps: 1) those who believe it is a literal tent in heaven of some sort and 2) those who see the heavenly tent as a metaphor for something else.¹ Among those who see it as a literal tent, we can discern two further lines of interpretation. One understands the heavenly tabernacle a) to be some sort of Platonic archetype, while another b) looks to some eschatological sanctuary in Jewish apocalyptic literature as a precedent.²

In distinction from the “literalists,” we also find numerous suggestions among those who take the tabernacle metaphorically, the most prominent of which are cosmological in nature. Thus some understand the tabernacle to be the cosmos itself as a whole, while

¹ *The Epistle to the Hebrews: Its Background of Thought* (SNTSMS 65; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1990), 24.

² Platonic: E.g. F. W. Farrar, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1894), 145; J. Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1924), 106; C. Spicq, “Le philonisme de l’Épître aux Hébreux,” *RB* 56 (1949): 212-42; L. K. K. Dey, *The Intermediary World and Patterns of Perfection in Philo and Hebrews* (SBLDS; Missoula: Scholars, 1975), 174-77; J. W. Thompson, *The Beginnings of Christian Philosophy* (CBQMS 13; Washington D. C.: Catholic Biblical, 1982), 105-7; apocalyptic: E.g. H. Windisch, *Die Hebräerbrief* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1913), 113; Barrett, “Eschatology,” 383-85 (although he saw Platonic language used of the tabernacle as well); O. Michel, *Der Brief an die Hebräer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984), 289; O. Hofius, *Der Vorhang vor dem Thron Gottes: Eine exegetisch-religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zu Hebräer 6,19f und 10,19f* (WUNT 14; Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1972), 49; L. D. Hurst, *Background*.

others see it as the highest heaven beyond the cosmos.³ Finally, we should raise the possibility that we have mixed backgrounds involved in the equation. Most prominent here is the suggestion of George MacRae that the author brings a Platonic view to a rhetorical situation in which the audience is more apocalyptic in orientation.⁴

In the following minutes, we propose to unravel this tangled web. To do so requires a full appreciation of the primarily metaphorical nature of the heavenly tabernacle. We cannot fully resolve the tensions in Hebrews' complex and sometimes conflicting imagery unless we carefully unfold this polyvalent metaphor. *The key is to see the heavenly tabernacle as only one component in a broader metaphor, namely, that of Christ as a heavenly high priest.* Within this broader metaphor, the heavenly tabernacle is not merely the heavenly correspondent of the earthly tabernacle of the old covenant, although this signification certainly holds in one sense. But since the construct of Christ's high priesthood is a larger and more comprehensive metaphor into which the tabernacle metaphor fits, *the most precise referent of the heavenly sanctuary is actually that abstract "sacred space" where Christ's spiritual atonement takes place.* If we were

³ Cosmos: A. Cody, *Heavenly Sanctuary and Liturgy in the Epistle to the Hebrews: The Achievement of Salvation in the Epistle's Perspectives* (St. Meinrad, IN: Grail, 1960), 18; as part of the equation, C. R. Koester, *The Dwelling of God: The Tabernacle in the Old Testament, Intertestamental Jewish Literature, and the New Testament* (CBQMS 22; Washington D. C.: Catholic Biblical Association, 1989), 174-81; Highest Heaven: F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 166. In addition, Hurst mentions less likely metaphorical suggestions like 3) the Eucharistic body of Christ; 4) the glorified body of Christ; 5) the church as the body of Christ ; and 6) an event or set of events .

⁴ "Heavenly Temple and Eschatology in the Letter to the Hebrews," *Semeia* 12 (1978): 179-99. I perceive C. Koester's treatment to lean toward some sort of mixed perspective as well.

to look for a literal correspondent, it would be heaven itself. However, because the heavenly tabernacle is part of a broader metaphor, its precise referent sometimes becomes rather abstract.

The result is a polyvalent piece of rhetoric that resembles a Tel in some ways. On the lower strata of the Tel are the remains of prior Christian traditions on which the author of Hebrews has built. Some of these jut into the structure he has erected on and around them.⁵ But he has built on them new and extended metaphors that sometimes blend and sometimes clash with the other styles of architecture in the final edifice. A full appreciation of the structure requires us to distinguish foundations from framing and décor. The importance of such distinctions holds whether we are approaching the text from a diachronic or synchronic perspective. With these purposes in mind, let the digging commence.

The High Priestly Metaphor of Hebrews

Given that the tabernacle metaphor is in large part defined by the broader high priestly metaphor of Hebrews, a cursory delineation of this broader metaphor seems essential prolegomena to the topic at hand. In regard to Christ's high priesthood, the author of Hebrews openly acknowledges that if Christ were on earth, he would not be a priest (8:4). The author thus implies that Christ's priesthood is a metaphor, the creation of a new signification by the juxtaposition of two unlike things.⁶ According to the "normal"

⁵ The masculine, singular participle the author self-referentially in Heb. 11:32 makes it virtually certain that the author was male.

⁶ P. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, trans. by K. McLaughlin and D. Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984) ix. See also chapter 3 of *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus*

definition of a priest or high priest on earth, Christ would not qualify. He served no sanctuary on earth. No gospel records that he ever even considered himself a priest. He was not from the tribe of Levi (e.g., Heb. 7:14). To call Christ a high priest is thus to use those words in a way other than their ordinary sense. It is to create a new meaning for the phrase “high priest,” by applying the phrase to a context in which it is not normally used.

Perhaps the best perspective from which to delineate Hebrews’ high priestly metaphor is that which begins with the rhetorical purposes for which the author employs it. Hebrews’ hortatory material aims to encourage the confidence of the audience to keep moving forward in faith (e.g., Heb. 3:6, 14; 4:14-16; 10:19, 23; chap. 11) and to dissuade them from “drifting” (2:1) or falling away (e.g., 6:6; 10:39). What is intriguing is that Hebrews repeatedly substantiates these exhortations by way of extensive exposition about the superiority of Christ to the cultus of the “old covenant.”⁷ The best explanation for this phenomenon is that the author considered some Levitical means of atonement as a potential or real detractor from the persistence of the audience in faith. The precise nature of the detraction need not concern us here. What does concern us is that this factor constituted part of the “rhetorical problem” that gave rise to Hebrews, and it led the author to construct the elaborate high priestly metaphor that is perhaps the author’s most important contribution to later Christian theology.

We can identify three basic components to the high priestly metaphor of Hebrews: 1) Christ as a high priest who 2) offers himself as a definitive sacrifice 3) in a heavenly

of Meaning (Fort Worth, TX: Christian University, 1976) 45-70; and chapter 3 of *The Rule of Metaphor* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978 [Fr. 1975]) 65-100.

⁷ For a broad discussion of the interplay of exposition and exhortation in Hebrews, see G. H. Guthrie, *The Structure of Hebrews: A Text-Linguistic Analysis* (SNT 73; Leiden: Brill, 1994).

sanctuary. For the author of Hebrews, these components correspond of course to three key components of the Levitical cultus, namely, 1) Levitical priests who 2) offered sacrifices 3) in an earthly tabernacle. The author draws this metaphorical parallel in order to demonstrate the obsolescence of the Levitical cultus and system, indeed, of the law itself as he refers to it. With regard to the Levitical priesthood, the author notes that “if perfection were possible through the Levitical priesthood ... what need would still exist for a different priest to arise according to the order of Melchizekek” (7:11) and “When the priesthood has been changed, there comes of necessity a change of law as well” (7:12). The author’s contrast of the order of Melchizedek with the order of Levi thus allows him to consider the Levitical priesthood obsolete, along with the law and the covenant of which it was a part (cf. 8:13).

The author makes similar arguments in relation to the sacrifice of Christ in contrast to Levitical sacrifices. While “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (10:4), Christ has “with one offering perfected forever those who are sanctified” (10:14). Now that God has forgiven sins and lawless deeds, “there is no longer an offering for sin” (10:18). Indeed, the imagery of Hebrews 9 amalgamates a number of different sacrifices from the Jewish Scriptures and contrasts them *en masse* to the one sacrifice of Christ, thereby implying that Christ has now rendered all the different kinds of sacrifices found throughout the Pentateuch obsolete. Whether it is the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement (9:7), or the red heifer (9:13) or hyssop ceremonies for cleanness (9:19), or Moses’ inaugural cleansing of the wilderness tabernacle (9:19), Christ’s one sacrifice has not only made any further sacrifice unnecessary; Christ’s sacrifice is the

only one of these sacrifices that actually has worked in cleansing a consciousness of sin (cp., 10:1-3; 9:14).⁸

The Bottom of the Tel: The “Pre-Hebrews” Stratum

With some sense of the author’s overall rhetorical purposes in mind, we now proceed profitably to the “Pre-Hebrews” stratum of the Tel. On this level we find no evidence of a heavenly tabernacle as yet. At least in the New Testament, this notion is the unique provenance of the author of Hebrews. To be sure, we do find Paul speaking of the collective body of Corinthians as the $\nu\alpha\omicron\varsigma\ \theta\epsilon\omicron\upsilon$ (1 Cor. 3:16). And later John will refer to Jesus’ physical body as a temple (John 2:19).⁹ But none of these references bear any substantial resemblance to the heavenly tabernacle in Hebrews.¹⁰ And certainly none of them are good candidates for a source or precedent for Hebrews.

With regard to the notion of Christ as priest, we do find the barest of hints in Romans 8:34 that some prior Christians may have seen Christ as some sort of priestly intercessor

⁸ If Christ’s sacrifice has put an end to the earthly sacrificial system, then it follows that any earthly sanctuary is similarly rendered obsolete. Scholars have long noted and speculated on why Hebrews refers consistently to the tabernacle rather than to the temple. I personally side with those who would say that the Jerusalem temple was already destroyed by the time of Hebrews. Indeed, I wonder if part of the detraction of the Levitical cultus for the audience is in fact related to its absence. While Hebrews 13:9 pushes us to see some actual Levitical detractor in the audience’s environment, we can read most of Hebrews’ rhetoric as a consolation to the audience in the absence of a temple, a reassurance of the positive value of Christ’s death and their lack of need for any other system.

⁹ Cf. John 1:14.

¹⁰ Although we certainly find metaphorical interpretations of the heavenly tabernacle along these kinds of lines in the history of its interpretation.

at God's right hand.¹¹ The context of intercession in this verse pushes us toward seeing Christ's intercession against a legal and probably eschatological context where Christians face potential condemnation or justification by God. While such advocacy on Christ's part need not have priestly overtones, we look only at 1 John 2:2 to recognize how easily the role of παράκλητος could slide into Christ as a ἱλασμός. Yet even if we assume the maximal priestly implications of these sorts of passages, we still do not have the sense of Christ as the one who *offers* the sacrifice nor do we have the image of Christ as *high* priest. The evidence we have in the New Testament for these innovations lies squarely in the hands of the author of Hebrews.

On the other hand, the idea of Christ's *death* as a sacrifice clearly precedes the author of Hebrews and indeed the apostle Paul himself. For example, Romans 3:25 is likely a pre-Pauline or at least extra-Pauline formula that considered Christ's death as an atoning sacrifice of some sort. It is unnecessary to enter into the considerable debates about the precise form of the statement or the precise connotations of ἱλαστήριον in the verse. By nearly all reckonings and interpretations, we have clear indication that early Christians prior to Hebrews understood Christ's death in terms of God offering Jesus as an atoning sacrifice of some sort for sins by means of his blood. While this idea does not play a prominent role in Paul's theology in his letters, it is clearly present and clearly is based on traditions that go beyond him.¹² These observations imply that we are already on metaphorical ground with regard to Christ's death before we even get to Hebrews. A

¹¹ See D. M. Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand: Psalm 110 in Early Christianity* (SBLMS 18; Nashville: Abingdon, 1973).

¹² E.g., Rom. 8:3, sin offering; 1 Cor. 5:7, "passover."

person who had witnessed Jesus' death on a literal level observed the capital punishment on a cross of a Jew deemed a criminal by the Roman authorities. To consider that death a sacrifice offered by God is thus to take the death metaphorically, even if it was a well established *topos* that anyone might readily have understood.

When we get to our text, we find evidence of this pre-Hebrews stratum jutting into the structure of Hebrews' edifice, where it mildly clashes with the style of Hebrews' own building. One of the debates over Hebrews' sacrificial imagery relates to the location where Christ "offered" his sacrifice. On the one hand, Hebrews 9:7 uses the word προσφέρω in relation to the Holy of Holies in the earthly tabernacle. If the author is consistent with his imagery, we would logically expect the offering in the heavenly tabernacle to take place in its Most Holy Place, whatever that might be.¹³ We are thus not surprised to find imagery in Hebrews that would locate Christ's offering in the heavenly tabernacle. 9:24-25 speak of Christ entering into heaven itself to offer his sacrifice in contrast to those earthly high priests who enter into τὰ ἁγία on earth to offer their sacrifices. Heaven seems clearly the location of Christ's offering. This location fits with the claim in 8:4 that Christ was not a high priest on earth, as well as with the precedent of the earthly cultus that the author sets forth in 9:7.

However, the author is not entirely consistent with this location. N. H. Young argued a number of years ago that in fact Hebrews *only* identifies the offering of Christ with the death of Jesus and not with his entrance into the heavenly tabernacle in heaven at all.¹⁴

¹³ W. E. Brooks in fact argues that Christ's offering continues to take place at God's right hand, "The Perpetuity of Christ's Sacrifice in the Epistle to the Hebrews," *JBL* 89 (1970): 205-14.

¹⁴ Young, "The Gospel according to Hebrews 9," *NTS* 27 (1981): 208-209; so also W. Stott, "The Conception of 'Offering' in the Epistle to the Hebrews," *NTS* 9 (1962/63): 62-67.

He surprisingly builds a substantial case for this interpretation. For example, if it were not for the preceding argument in Hebrews 8 and 9, we would no doubt understand Hebrews 10:12 to equate Christ's death with the offering of his sacrifice: "This one sat at the right hand of God after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for all time."¹⁵ Indeed, the author of Hebrews does not use any heavenly tabernacle imagery in the closing argument of 10:1-18. Hebrews 10:10 actually speaks of the "offering of the *body* of Jesus Christ," linking the offering with the earthly and physical body of Jesus, a body Jesus receives after he has entered into the world (10:5).

The question of whether the author of Hebrews saw Christ entering heaven with literal blood is a viable one. On the one hand, 9:12 states that Christ "through his own blood entered εἰς τὰ ἅγια." But the preposition διὰ seems significant—Hebrews does not say that Christ entered *with* his own blood in the sense of accompaniment but *through* his own blood in the sense of instrumentation. Indeed, the phrase immediately preceding this comment takes διὰ instrumentally: "not *through* the blood of goats and calves." Later in 9:25 when the author seems to imply accompaniment, he uses the preposition ἐν: "the high priest enters the Holy of Holies yearly *with* the blood of another." Yet in that passage, the author does not then go on to make the parallel statement that Christ entered into heaven "with" his own blood. Instead, he says that Christ appeared for the nullification of sin διὰ τῆς θυσίας αὐτοῦ.

All in all, the case for the translation "with his own blood," understood in terms of accompaniment, is rather weak. The contrast of Hebrews 9:13-14 underscores this point.

¹⁵ I acknowledge that someone might take the participle in some way other than temporally, but it seems to me that this translation is the most natural syntactical reading of the text.

While the “blood of goats and bulls... sanctifies for the cleansing of the flesh,” “the blood of Christ, who offered himself blameless to God *through eternal spirit*, will cleanse our conscience.” The author seems to word this statement very carefully so that the nature of the offering is spiritual and thus at one remove from Christ’s blood itself. Thus the author consistently shies away from saying that Christ offered blood in the heavenly tabernacle.

Perhaps the clearest instance where the author of Hebrews aligns the offering of Christ’s sacrifice with his death occurs in 9:27-28:

Just as it is appointed for mortals to die once and after this, judgment, so also the Christ, after being offered [προσενεχθείς] for the many to take away [ἀνεγκείν] sins, will be seen a second time without sin for salvation by those who await him.

In the parallelism, human death is parallel to Christ’s offering, just as human judgment is parallel to Christ’s return without sin. Again, if we did not have the preceding argument in Hebrews 8 and 9, we would conclude without question that Hebrews here equates the death of Jesus with his offering to take away sins. We should take the passive προσενεχθείς as a divine passive and thus understand God as the implied one offering Jesus as a sacrifice. The statement is thus highly reminiscent of Romans 3:25 where God offers Christ as an atoning sacrifice for sins.

We thus find ourselves in a situation where the most likely meanings of several verses in Hebrews conflict with each other if taken somewhat literally. Hebrews 9:25 pictures Christ offering his sacrifice in heaven; Hebrews 9:28 pictures Christ being offered on earth at his death. The solution is not to explain away one or the other, as some interpreters have done. The explanation lies in the fact that the author is moving subtly between two slightly different metaphors of offering. The one is the metaphor he inherited from prior Christian tradition, namely, that of Christ’s death on the cross as a

sacrificial offering. We should see this level of metaphor as more fundamental to the author. But on top of that stratum he has also created the image of Christ as a heavenly high priest entering into a heavenly sanctuary, and here he pictures the offering made in heavenly ἄγια. The author's care to avoid associating blood with the heavenly sanctuary underlines this distinction.

Nevertheless, the two images stand in some tension with each other when they are juxtaposed. This tension is our first strong indication that the heavenly tabernacle in Hebrews functions primarily on a metaphorical level. When we take its imagery literally on the subject of Christ's offering, we run into conflicting imagery in the author's argument. In contrast, when we take the imagery metaphorically, the tension is resolved. Our subsequent forays into Hebrews' use of the heavenly tabernacle will only confirm and further substantiate this line of interpretation.

The Foundation Stratum: Heaven Itself as the Tabernacle

The importance of Psalm 110 for the author of Hebrews is self-evident.¹⁶ Given that the first verse of this psalm appears throughout the New Testament in a wide range of contexts, it is clear that this text played a significant role in the life of the early church prior to Hebrews. We can infer its impact wherever we find mention of Christ at God's right hand, one instance of which is the Romans 8:34 passage we have already mentioned. These citations and allusions picture the triumphal seating of Jesus as Lord and Christ at God's right hand (cf. Acts 2:36). Given the cosmology of the ancient world, it is only natural that Christians would also envisage Jesus ascending through the

¹⁶ Hay, *Glory*.

heavens to that right hand. We find such an ascension explicitly in Luke 24:51 and Acts 1:9, and the Gospel of John alludes to it a number of times.¹⁷ But allusions to Christ's ascension per se are relatively sparse in the New Testament as a whole. Hebrews is perhaps the earliest book in the New Testament book to allude to it clearly.

We find a number of instances in Hebrews where the author connects Christ's high priesthood with his passage through the heavens. Hebrews 9:24 is an obvious place to start, since here the author comments that "Christ did not enter into hand-made ἄγια ... but into heaven itself, now to appear before the face of God on our behalf." This verse has long been the favorite of those who see the heavenly tabernacle as heaven itself, a position with which I have great sympathy. But since entrance into a heavenly structure would also require entrance into heaven itself, the statement does not in itself prove definitively that the author thought of heaven itself as the heavenly tabernacle. Nevertheless, the verse does imply that movement through space into heaven was a part of Christ's entrance into the heavenly ἄγια.

The case for this interpretation only mounts as we consider other passages in Hebrews. For example, 4:14 states that the audience has "a great high priest who has passed through the heavens." The two verses that follow then encourage the audience in the light of Christ's priestly function at the "throne of grace," presumably the throne of God.¹⁸ The text thus creates a picture of Christ the high priest passing through the heavens on his way to the throne of grace. Hebrews 7:26 also refers to Christ's high

¹⁷ E.g., John 3:13; 6:62.

¹⁸ This image seems very similar to that we found in Romans 8:34 where Jesus intercedes at God's right hand, only there any priestly role was implicit at best.

priesthood in the same breath as it praises him for “having become higher than the heavens,” presenting us with the same image of Christ passing through the heavens in connection with his role as high priest. Hebrews 8:1-2 then continue the high priestly theme a few verses later with another mention of Christ as a high priest at God’s right hand—a location it then connects with his high priestly ministry in the “true tent.” It is only natural to conclude that the throne of grace next to which Christ sits is *in* the heavenly Holy of Holies, whatever it may be.

Since this imagery is so coherent and consistent, the burden of proof lies squarely on the shoulders of anyone who would deny that Christ’s entrance into the heavenly tabernacle was part of Christ’s ascension from earth to the heavens to the right hand of God, probably understood to be in the highest heaven. Making a distinction between the highest heaven and the created heavens or skies accounts both for Christ being in heaven (9:24) and yet being “higher than the heavens” (7:26). The singular οὐρανός in Hebrews 9:24 in contrast to the plural οὐρανοί in verses like 4:14 and 7:26 may bear out such a distinction. This distinction would then be between created heavens, that will eventually be shaken along with the earth (cf. 12:26), and the heaven where God dwells that is “higher than the [created] heavens” (7:26).¹⁹ The singular of 9:24 would then refer to the unshakeable heaven above the created skies where God dwells and into which Christ entered.

Thus far we have not really eliminated any of the main suggestions for the nature of the heavenly tabernacle, except perhaps a thoroughgoing Platonic one. Entrance into an

¹⁹ The fact that οὐρανός is singular in 12:26 does not negate this suggestion, for the author is citing Haggai 2:6 there.

apocalyptic structure still requires a passage through the heavens to get to it, so the cosmological imagery we have mentioned thus far does not conflict with that interpretation. On the other hand, Lincoln Hurst and Ronald Williamson have raised some significant questions about the viability of a stereotypically Platonic approach.²⁰ For example, while Philo might be able to account for the idea of an archetype being “pitched” (cf. 8:2), Plato could not, for his archetypes were eternal.²¹ On the other hand, even for Philo it is not clear how a person could enter a heavenly archetype or how an event could take place in one.²² We will postpone a fuller exploration of the Platonic approach until our subsequent treatment of Hebrews 8:5. There we will need to be careful to distinguish the “Middle Platonism” current at the time of Hebrews from Plato’s approach over four hundred years previous to it.

To gain further clarity on the nature of the heavenly tent, we must observe carefully the way the author refers to it in 8:1-9:28, particularly the author’s use of the term ἄγια. A significant question in this regard is whether Hebrews pictures an outer room on the heavenly tent. For example, if the author has some literal apocalyptic tent in mind, the more likely the heavenly tent would have chambers to correspond to the earthly tent. But in fact the case against an outer room in the heavenly tent of Hebrews is quite strong. In Hebrews 9, the author strangely speaks of the two chambers in the earthly tabernacle in terms of two *tents* rather than two rooms (e.g., 9:2-3, 6-7). The reason becomes apparent when we get to 9:7-8. The author is interpreting the two “tents” of the earthly tabernacle

²⁰ E.g., *Background*, 29.

²¹ For Philo, the archetypes were created by God (cf. *Opif.*).

²² Hurst, *Background*, 37, addressing the comments of C. K. Barrett in his classic article, “Eschatology in the Epistle to the Hebrews,” 384.

allegorically in terms of the two ages of salvation history.²³ The outer room represents “the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered that are not able to perfect the worshipper in conscience” (9:9). In other words, the outer room represents imperfection and the prevention of access to God: “the way τῶν ἁγίων” is not apparent while the first tent has στάσις” (9:8).²⁴ The author thus gives us significant reason to disassociate the outer room of the earthly sanctuary from the heavenly tabernacle. In the author’s imagery, the outer room stands as an obstacle to divine access. In keeping with his comments elsewhere about direct access to God (e.g., 4:16; 10:19), an outer room for the heavenly tent would stand in conflict with his imagery elsewhere.

A close examination of the author’s train of thought in this passage pushes us more and more to the conclusion that he does not likely envisage an outer room to the heavenly tent. For example, we notice that while 9:2-8 divide the earthly tabernacle into two tents, the two sparse references to a heavenly tent are both singular (e.g., 8:2; 9:11). Secondly, while the author refers to the outer room of the earthly tabernacle as ἄγια in 9:2, his other neuter plural references to τὰ ἄγια seem more likely to refer to the inner sanctum. The phrase, “the way of the Holies,” in 9:8 must refer to the inner room given the author’s Day of Atonement imagery. And despite the immense debate over the meaning of 9:11, almost all agree that the phrase “into the Holies” in 9:12 must refer either

²³ Hurst’s arguments to the contrary seem strained (*Background*, 26-27). The most likely grammatical antecedent of ἥτις is σκηνή and the most likely referent for this word is the first part of the two part earthly tabernacle.

²⁴ There is some debate over what it might mean for the first tent to “have standing,” ranging from those who see an allusion to the destruction of the cosmos to those who argue that it is an idiom about the status of this present age.

literally or metaphorically to the Holy of Holies. Hebrews 9:24 must again refer to the Holy of Holies when it uses the neuter plural Holies again, which is noticeably in parallel to heaven itself. Given such consistent use of the neuter plural ἁγία in these ways, particularly in its articular form, the most likely conclusion is that 8:2 also is thinking of the heavenly Holy of Holies when it says that Christ is a minister τῶν ἁγίων. The full expression here is that Christ is a “minister of the Holies and of the true tent.” While it is possible that we have a mention of a part and then a mention of the whole, the phrase reads very neatly if both are one and the same, the heavenly Holies are in fact the whole of the heavenly tent.

We have thus adduced three significant reasons for thinking that whatever the heavenly tent might be, it does not consist of an outer and inner chamber. These reasons are 1) the fact that the author reflects some antipathy toward the outer room in 9:8 and allegorizes it in terms of imperfection and hindrance to God’s presence, 2) the fact that the author consistently refers to the heavenly tent by the imagery of the inner sanctum of the earthly tabernacle, and 3) the fact that while he refers to the earthly tabernacle as plural tents, he refers to the heavenly tent only twice and both times in the singular. On the whole, we can think of only two passages from which one might argue for an outer part of the heavenly tent. The first is 8:5 where Moses is told to make *everything* according to the type shown him in the mountain. We will treat this verse in the next section. The other passage is 9:11-12, which we will currently discuss.

We have already mentioned briefly the chiasm in Hebrews 9:11-12. These verses are a matter of extensive debate, and the main options are well rehearsed.²⁵ The two key options center on whether the preposition διὰ should be taken locally, “through the greater and more perfect tent,” or instrumentally, “by means of the greater and more perfect tent.” The strongest argument for the local reading relates to the fact that the Day of Atonement is one of the primary images from which the author is working. The Day of Atonement clearly involves movement through the outer part of the tent and into the Holy of Holies. Thus we find some interpreters who take the sequence through the greater and more perfect tent into τὰ ἄγια to be 1) the movement of Christ through the lower heavens into the highest heaven; 2) the movement of Christ through an outer tent of the heavenly tabernacle into the inner sanctum; and 3) a general reference to the heavenly tent as a whole that then turns to the inner sanctum within that tent.

The first of these interpretations falls with the observation that whatever the greater and more perfect tent is, it is not of this creation.²⁶ According to Hebrews 12:25-27, the created heavens are destined to be shaken along with the earth. With this observation, we can eliminate as unlikely conceptions of the heavenly tabernacle that take it as the entire cosmos or that take the lower heavens to be the outer room of the heavenly tent. If the heavenly tent is cosmological, then it is the highest heaven alone rather than the whole universe. The second interpretation is also unlikely, for then the author would refer strictly to the outer room of the heavenly tent as the “greater and more perfect tent,”

²⁵ Hurst does not even try to explain this verse because its most likely reading does not fit into his interpretive framework. He simply states that “the interpretation of this verse is so contentious that it would be hazardous to build *any* theory on it” (*Background*, 27).

²⁶ So rightly H. Attridge, *Hebrews*, 222-23.

which would be a somewhat bizarre comment in the author's argument. The author would not include the inner sanctum in his reference to the greater and more perfect tent. Such a reference seems highly improbable.

The final option, a switch from a reference to the whole tent to a part of the tent, is possible, although it seems a little awkward in sense. It also requires us to see a switch from a local use of διό to two instrumental uses. Such alternation is not impossible. On the other hand, the διό in "through the greater and more perfect tent" does chiastically parallel the instrumental statement "διό his own blood," which might push us to take it instrumentally. But the chiasm as a whole is clearly a little imbalanced—e.g., "not made with hands, not of this creation" does not have the same form as the other lines. And the meaning of the lines is not completely formulated chiastically; there is also some parallel meaning in terms of first half/second half as well. So the call between a local and instrumental interpretation is a close one indeed.

I personally think that a somewhat "modal" sense fits the context best, "by way of the greater and more perfect tent," rather than either the local "through [the first part of] the greater and more perfect tent" or straight instrumental "by means of the greater and more perfect tent." Such a sense fits first with the idea that 9:11 is the second part of a μέν-δέ construction that began at 9:1. On the one hand, the first covenant had a tent of such and such a sort with certain ministrations; on the other hand, Christ did his work by way of the greater and more perfect tent. Secondly, a modal sense to διό here can retain a spatial referent to the tent while also staying closer to the instrumental sense of the other references. It avoids the awkward spatial sense of a purely local reading while also avoiding some wildly metaphorical instrumental sense. The passage thus reads, "But

Christ, when he arrived as a high priest of good things that had come to pass, by way of the greater and more perfect tent—which is not made with hands, that is, not of this creation, and not through the blood of goats and calves—but by way of his own blood, he entered into the Holies once, since he had found an eternal redemption.”

It is thus our contention that the author of Hebrews did not envisage a heavenly tabernacle with an outer room. He did think of the heavenly tent spatially and think of Christ’s movement into it spatially in terms of entering into heaven itself. Indeed, without an outer chamber we have little reason not to identify the highest heaven, heaven itself, with the heavenly tabernacle. While 9:24 would not necessarily require us to identify heaven with the heavenly tent, in the absence of arguments to the contrary, we are free to take it in its most straightforward reading: “For Christ did not enter into hand made Holies, antitypes of the true [Holies], but into the heaven itself, now to appear before the face of God on our behalf.” Of course the identification of the parts of the earthly temple with various parts of the cosmos, including the identification of the inner sanctum with the heavens, is well attested in Philo and Josephus.²⁷ Such an interpretation fits well with those who read Hebrews against a strongly Hellenistic milieu. It does not fit as well with those who read the tabernacle imagery against the heavenly temples of apocalyptic Judaism.

Other Strata: Beyond Heaven Itself

While I think I have made a fair case for heaven itself as the most literal correspondent to the heavenly tabernacle in Hebrews, we cannot yet consider the case to be closed. In

²⁷ E.g., Philo: *Somn.* 1.215; *Spec.* 1.66; *Mos.* 2.88; *QEx.* 2.91; Josephus: *Ant.* 3.123, 180-81.

particular, we find at least three other “pictures” of the heavenly tabernacle that might require us at least to modify our train of thought slightly, perhaps even to scrap our hypothesis. These are 1) 8:5, which is the stronghold of the Platonic interpretation, 2) the picture of the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary in 9:23, and 3) the apparent metaphor of Christ’s flesh as a veil in 10:20.

We start with 8:5. As time is short and I have written on this passage elsewhere, I will make the barest of comments in reference to it.²⁸ First, if the author meant to refer to a Platonic archetype, he has either muddled it or deliberately obscured the connotations. While σκιά is a Platonic term, we find not a single use of ὑπόδειγμα in all extant Greek literature in reference to a Platonic archetype.²⁹ It far more often—including another reference in Hebrews (4:11)—refers to an example. Indeed, Philo himself can use it of the literal precedent of a more important allegorical meaning.³⁰ While we find a few sparse uses of the word as “likeness,” these are rare and even then are not archetypes.³¹ Similarly, while the author could have cited Exodus 25:9 where the verse uses the word παράδειγμα, which was a Platonic technical term, the author for some reasons uses the

²⁸ In “*Philo and the Epistle to the Hebrews: Ronald Williamson’s Study After Thirty Years*,” *SPhA* (14 (2002): 112-35; and *Understanding the Book of Hebrews* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

²⁹ So also Hurst, *Background*, 13.

³⁰ E.g., *Opif.* 157, where Philo speaks of the text of Genesis providing δείγματα τύπων—‘examples of types’, probably a genitive of apposition. Cf. *Her.* 256; *Conf.* 190.

³¹ Attridge suggests a few instances where he thinks it does (*Hebrews* 219), namely, the LXX of Ezek. 42:15 and Aquila’s rendering of Ezek. 8:10 and Dan. 4:17. G. Sterling also argues for this basic sense in *Her.* 256 (‘Ontology versus Eschatology’ 195).

Exodus 25:40 version with the word τύπος. Again, if he wished to make a Platonic sense clear, he has taken a strange route.

Later in 10:1 we note the wording carefully where the author says that the “law *has* a shadow of good things about to come to pass, not the image of those things.” In the typical Platonic scheme, shadow and image are both terms used of copies and generally stand on the same level of likeness. These are all indications that the author is not using these words in the metaphysical sense of Plato or Philo. I have suggested elsewhere that he may be using these terms more in an exegetical sense.³² Regardless, because the law does not “have” the image of the good things to come (10:1), which seems a reference to Christ (9:11), it is not a precise parallel. We mentioned earlier that the author amalgamates all the sacrificial images of the Pentateuch and pits them as a whole against the one sacrifice of Christ. In that sense, they are only a shadowy example of what Christ did—they are not a mirror image of what Christ did. When we then return to 8:5, we do not expect the “type” and the earthly shadows to be precise, mirror images of each other. We might expect the earthly ministrations to have symbolic, even allegorical correspondents, and note again that the author does allegorize the two chambers of the earthly tent. But we are not pressed to see 8:5 as an indication that the earthly tabernacle as we find it in Exodus is some mirror image—Platonic or otherwise—of what exists and takes place in heaven.

Hebrews 9:23 is more revealing. In this verse the author speaks of the need of the heavenly tabernacle to be cleansed with better sacrifices than those used to cleanse the earthly one. The oddity of this comment is well known. Since the heavenly tent is not of

³² Cf. Col. 2:17

this creation (9:11) and is something the Lord pitched rather than mortals (8:2), how is it that it needs cleansed? The observation that the author is thinking in parallel to the inauguration of the earthly sanctuary alleviates some of the tension (9:18-22), but it does not resolve the issue completely.³³ Indeed, this image seems incredibly damning to any literal interpretation of the heavenly tabernacle. If the heavenly tabernacle is some literal, apocalyptic temple, surely the author is at least being metaphorical when he speaks of its cleansing!

This passage more than any other pushes us to see the heavenly tabernacle in Hebrews ultimately as a more metaphorical construct than a literal structure or place. We have argued throughout that the author more often than not does have heaven itself in view when he refers to Christ entering the heavenly tabernacle. But on a more fundamental level, the heavenly tabernacle is not simply the heavenly correspondent of the earthly tent. The heavenly tabernacle is part of a broader metaphor of Christ's high priesthood that is meant to contrast as a whole with the key components of the Levitical cultus. What generates the concept of a heavenly tabernacle in the thought of Hebrews is not some precedent in Platonism, apocalypticism, or Hellenism, although the author may draw some general concepts from one or more of these. But what really drives his use of a heavenly tabernacle concept is the need to have a new covenant space in which Christ can offer his superior sacrifice.

In the overall metaphor of Christ's high priesthood, the heavenly tabernacle represents the space where true atonement takes place in contrast to the superficial cleansings of the earthly tabernacle. From a slightly different metaphorical perspective,

³³ Cf. Hurst, *Background*, 38-40.

Christ's ascension into heaven is understood to be his entrance into such a heavenly Holy of Holies. But these are distinct metaphors built on slightly different precedents, and the author creatively integrates the two. For example, we have mentioned that the author seems careful not to say that Christ took blood into the heavenly tabernacle. But the two metaphors clash significantly when the author speaks of the inaugural cleansing of the heavenly tabernacle. From the perspective of the one metaphor, it makes perfect sense to speak of inaugurating the heavenly tabernacle with better sacrifices than those Moses used. But considered from the perspective of the other metaphor, the idea of heaven itself needing cleansing seems highly problematic if we push the concept very far at all.

Finally, although it is not essential to our argument, we should probably mention the controversial verse at Hebrews 10:20. In the context of this verse, the author encourages the audience to approach (presumably) something like God's throne of grace because they have boldness to enter into the Holy of Holies by means of the blood of Jesus. Then comes the verse in question: this entrance is something "that [Jesus] has inaugurated for us as a new and living way through the veil, that is, his flesh." The most obvious way to take the grammar of this verse equates Christ's flesh with the veil. Not only is *καταπέτασμα* the closest potential antecedent, but *σάρξ* is in the genitive case in agreement with it. While it would be more theologically convenient to see Christ's flesh as the way rather than the veil, *ὁδός* is in the accusative case and thus is not the likely antecedent.

The idea of Christ's flesh as a veil through which brothers may pass into the Holy of Holies is clearly metaphorical. It would be inappropriate either to press the imagery too far or to try to use this particular metaphor as the key to the heavenly tabernacle argument

in the previous chapters. But as William G. Johnsson once hinted, it does show a clear propensity on the part of the author to take the heavenly tent metaphorically.³⁴ It reminds us that the author is swimming around a key concept and that these metaphors are not ends in themselves. The author's ultimate purpose with regard to these images is to bolster the confidence of the audience in the atonement provided by Christ vis-à-vis the Levitical cultic system. The images themselves are somewhat fluid and are ultimately means to an end.

Conclusion

In the preceding pages I have attempted to present the various strata of the Tel in which we find the heavenly tabernacle of Hebrews. We best understand its nature by examining the pre-Hebrews stratum on which it is built. Here we find the idea of Jesus' death on a cross as an atoning sacrifice and hints that some early Christians may have seen Christ playing a priestly role at God's right hand in heaven. In the "earliest" stratum of Hebrews, we find remains of a rhetorical situation in which the author of Hebrews wishes to argue and assure the audience that Christ's death obviates any need on their part to rely on Levitical means of atonement.

On top of this level we find the author building the overall metaphor of Christ's high priesthood. Christ becomes not only the sacrifice, but the priest offering the sacrifice as well. Christ's ascension into heaven metaphorically becomes his entrance into a heavenly tent. When the author is functioning with this latter perspective, the closest

³⁴ "Cultus," 107. The term Johnsson used was a "spiritualizing" intent. I would prefer to say a tendency to take it metaphorically.

literal correspondent to the heavenly tabernacle is the highest heaven where God's throne is. But at the same time, these new significations at times create tensions in imagery and give rise to ambiguity on issues like where exactly the offering was made, on earth at the cross or in heaven. Similarly, when the author contrasts the inauguration of the earthly tent with the heavenly one, he creates the extraneous connotation of heaven needing cleansing, surely unintended on his part.

It is only by careful attention to these layers of metaphor piled on metaphor that we can truly see the complex coherency of the author's imagery in the central chapters of Hebrews. The result is a beautiful architectural design. By identifying these structures as metaphorical, we do not imply that they are somehow less meaningful. Indeed, metaphorical meanings are often far richer than literal ones. However, in the case of Hebrews, many of these metaphors are put to use toward purposes that truly are more pressing for the author. There is a real sense in which he would far prefer the audience rely on Christ's atoning death than invest in his images of a heavenly tabernacle.