

1 Kings 5-7

A Theology of Presence

Not to insult your intelligence, but parental investment is good for children. For some reason we needed studies to prove what we've always known. When a father sips imaginary tea with his daughter, he's doing more than pretending. When a mother watches her son do something dangerous without freaking out, she's doing more than adding gray hair to her head. Presence is essential to well-being.

The same is true for our spiritual lives. No matter how often we try it, a theology of absence never works. This is why the first post-Christian generation has deep issues of anxiety, loneliness, depression, and shame. We have isolated ourselves from our Creator-Redeemer.

The preparation and building of the Jewish temple is the climax of the Old Testament narrative. Ever since the Fall in Genesis 3, the Bible has been anticipating this moment. God was coming down to dwell with his people permanently.

The story begins with the preparation of the Temple (5:1-12) where Solomon signs a trade deal with Hiram, the king of Tyre, who provides the necessary materials. The narrator then focuses on the Temple's design. It was so glorious that the 2nd temple, built by Zerubbabel following the Babylonian captivity, paled in comparison (see Haggai 3:2; see also Psalm 96:6). One unique aspect of the Jewish Temple was its connection to the Garden of Eden. Both were orientated toward the east. The Garden imagery of the Temple was purposeful including the presence of a tree (in the form of a menorah) at its heart. There were also countless flowers and trees carved into the wood and gold throughout. Finally (though countless other parallels could be drawn), cherubim were prominently placed.

What was the significance of the Temple? Behind its construction was a Theology of Presence. The fundamental story of Scripture is how God dwells with his people. Every religion reverses the order of things suggesting worshipers can ascend to the heavens and dwell with God (think of the Tower of Babel). This is done through ritual, journeys, mysticism, or strict rule keeping. Only Christianity has the Holy One descending to dwell with the unholy; the Creator with his creation; the Shepherd with his sheep; God with the godless; the Redeemer with the unredeemed.

The fundamental question of the Bible is, how can a holy and righteous God dwell with an unholy, wicked people? The answer is in both Reconciliation (through atonement) and Purity. After Adam and Eve rebelled against God, he responded through atonement.

The Temple represents the permanent residence of God among his people. It is the culmination of the Abrahamic promise. God described it in Exodus 29:45, “I will dwell among the sons of Israel and will be their God.”

The Temple, like the tabernacle before it, however, was always a temporary solution. Once Babylon destroyed Solomon’s Temple and sent the Jews into captivity, the sense of absence became very real. Through the prophets, God promised he would never leave nor forsake his people. It wasn’t until the birth of Jesus that the theology of presence was given its true climax.

Jesus is the true and better temple. In 20 BC, Herod the Great undertook a massive renovation of Zerubbabel’s Temple which took 46 years to complete (see John 2:20). Herod’s Temple, by all accounts, was marvelous (see Mark 13:1).

Yet, its beauty was a façade. Like the religion of Israel, it looked good on the outside but was corrupt on the inside. Jesus, however, claimed for himself to be the true temple. Following the cleansing of the Temple, Jesus said, “So the Jews said to him, ‘What sign do you show us for doing these things?’”¹⁹ Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ ...²¹ But he was speaking about the temple of his body. ²²When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken” (John 2:18-22).

This follows an astounding statement by John, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). The word for “dwelt” is the Greek word “tabernacle.” Jesus is the true and better temple.

The benefits of Christ as the True and Better Temple are immense. God is not to be found in a temple made of hands, but in a Savior who rescues sinners. We pray directly to God without the aid of priests and rituals. We do not repeatedly offer sacrifices due to our constantly sinning. Rather, we have a true and better Lamb of God who takes away our sins forever.

A three-year-old girl went to her pediatrician with the flu. As the doctor examined her ears, he asked, “Will I find Big Bird in here?” Apprehensively, Katie replied, “No.” Then, before examining her throat, he asked, “will I find the Cookie Monster in here?” Again, “No.” Finally, listening to her heart he asked, “Will I find Barney in here?” With innocent conviction she looked him directly in the eye and said, “No, Jesus is in my heart. Barney is on my underwear!”

Martin Luther said something similar, “Should anyone knock at my heart and say, ‘Who lives here?’ I should reply, ‘Not Martin Luther, but The Lord Jesus Christ.’”