

Day of Atonement

09/12/06

Introduction

Heb 9:6-8 recalls the Day of Atonement, and draws this lesson from its symbolism: “The way into the holiest of all was not yet made manifest.” The history of our race is one of being excluded from the presence of God, and seeking to find our way back.

- Last week we considered the same idea, in the context of being excluded from Eden by the cherubim, and our desire to return to the rest of God.
- Here the same idea is presented under the figure of the tabernacle. One main lesson of the Day of Atonement is the alienation between people and God.

vv. 11-12, in a carefully structured sentence, explain how Christ has overcome this limitation for us. Special emphasis is placed on two elements of his work and how they contrast with the old order: the sanctuary in which he ministers, and the blood that he offers, and we are told that he did this work only once.

In the rest of the chapter, these elements are further developed:

- The blood is the subject of vv. 13-22.
- The sanctuary is the subject of vv. 23-24.
- The uniqueness of his sacrifice is the subject of vv. 25-28, whose discussion carries over into ch. 10.

Today, analyze 9:11-12 and summarize its lessons. The objective is twofold:

1. Technically, walk through the diagramming of a sentence.
2. Spiritually, understand in more detail Christ's work of redemption for us.

We often draw diagrams to look at the structural relations that scripture authors construct among multiple sentences. Diagrams can also help us see important structure within a single sentence.

To diagram the sentence, we can use lots of special lines and symbols, as we did in school, but it's easier and often sufficient to just indent the text, sometimes with a few simple lines, to show what modifies what. In this case the core of the paragraph is the finite verb, “entered in.” (A finite verb is one that can occur in a simple, independent sentence. “Christ entered in” can stand alone “Christ being come” cannot. There are seven modifiers to this sentence.

- Two are very simple: “once” and “into the holy place”.
- Three are longer prepositional phrases, all with “by.” One of these refers to the tabernacle, and two to the blood.
- Two are participles: “being come” and “having obtained.”

Closer examination will suggest that the two simple ones really subsume the others. The prepositional phrases all explain in more detail the nature of “the holy place” and how one enters in, while the participles explain why this only has to happen once.

The text on the right of the handout shows how these themes and key words are amplified in the rest of the chapter.

Core Sentence: “Christ Entered In”

But.--The author is drawing a strong contrast with the priests of the Levitical order in vv. 6-7.

Christ entered in.--The verb is different than that in v. 6, probably following the usage in Exodus. There, the entry of Aaron and his sons into the tabernacle is described using the verb in v. 6 (Exod 28:29,35), while the verb in v.7 is distinctive of Moses' entry into the presence of the Lord (20:21; 24:18; 33:8,9; 34:35; once of the priests, in 29:30). Aaron and his sons were simply carrying out the ritual; Moses was meeting with the Lord face to face. Christ is the new Moses.

once.--The priests entered “once every year,” 9:7. This word is different. It means “once for all,” “never to be repeated.” It will be explained by the participial clauses, and amplified in 25-28 and indeed in ch. 10 (where this distinctive word recurs in v. 10)..

into the holy place.--The holy of holies, discussed further in the prepositional phrases, and amplified in 23-24. This is no earthly sanctuary, but heaven, the very presence of God.

First Basis of “Once (for all”): His Unique Role

Our Lord only had to enter the heavenly sanctuary once. The writer explains this with two participial phrases, one focusing on his unique role, and the other on what he accomplished.

being come.--The word has the sense of arriving at a goal. He didn't just happen to stop by on his way to somewhere else. He arrived purposefully at his destination. He came to do a particular task, and he carried it out.

good things to come.-- the phrase recurs in 10:1. The “things to come” is a common phrase to describe the things that have been promised but have not yet arrived:

- 1 Cor 3:22 and Rom 8:38 use the word to describe the opposite to “things present.” It is the complete range of the yet-unfolded future.
- Heb 11:20 reminds us that “Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come.”
- Paul spoke to Agrippa, in Acts 26:22, of “those [things] which the prophets and Moses did say should come.”
- Heb 6:5 says that believers have “tasted ... the powers of the world to come.”
- In Col 2:16-17, Paul says that the Jewish rituals “are a shadow of things to come; but the body *is* of Christ.”
- Heb 10:1 reminds us that “the law [has] a shadow of good things to come, *and* not the very image of the things.”

Note especially the contrast in Col 2 and Heb 10. The law was a shadow. The undimmed light of heaven (Rev 21:23), shining into the past, cast shadows of the realities of that future world. From the shadows we can only get a vague idea of what the reality is.

Aaron was high priests of the shadows. Thus his offerings have no real effect, and he has to offer them over and over, a point that is amplified in 10:1-4.

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Christ is high priest of the final reality to which all the shadows point. His sacrifice is final, and never needs to be repeated. This is the first reason that Christ entered in “once for all.”

This truth is one of the main points on which the Roman Catholic system founders, with their notion that the mass is a repeated sacrifice of Christ. They dance around the language, insisting that it is a bloodless sacrifice—but it would be much better to confess, with Scripture, that Christ's body was offered “once for all” (10:10). He “died unto sin once for all,” Rom 6:10. He “needeth not daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifice, first for his own sins, and then for the people's: for this he did once (for all), when he offered up himself,” 7:27.

Next, two prepositional phrases amplify the nature of these “good things to come” of which our Lord has arrived as the High Priest.

Discussion of “The Holy Place”

The sanctuary and its accompanying rituals of the “high priest of good things to come” were very different from those of the old covenant. “By” is used in the sense of “by means of.” The tabernacle and the offering are described as his tools, the implements of his sacred trade.

The Tabernacle

On the original day of atonement, the priest needed a holy of holies. The day emphasized the question of separation between man and God, and entry into the presence of God was central to the ceremony. What corresponds to the tabernacle in the work of our great high priest?

The tabernacle.--In Greek, the noun is definite: “the tabernacle,” not just “a tabernacle.” Our writer has already introduced this tabernacle, in 8:2, “the tabernacle which the Lord pitched, and not man.” The parallel with v. 24 shows that the main reference here is to “heaven itself.” It has four distinctive features.

greater.--Moses' tabernacle was about 45 feet long, and 15 feet high and wide. It would fit inside one of most of our houses. The heavenly tabernacle is immense.

and more perfect.--“Perfect” in Hebrews has the sense of completion or fulfillment. The first tabernacle was only an “example and shadow,” 8:5. The heavenly sanctuary is the reality, one of the “good things to come” of which Christ is high priest.

not made with hands.--God emphasized in the OT that no man-made house could contain him:

The heaven *is* my throne, and the earth *is* my footstool: where *is* the house that ye build unto me? and where *is* the place of my rest? (Isa 66:1)

Stephen quoted this verse in arguing to the Sanhedrin that “the most high dwelleth not in temples made with hands,” Acts 7:48.

not of this building.--This generalizes the previous expression. “Building” is the Greek word for “creation.” Not only is it not man-made, but it is not made at all. It is not part of this present created order.

The Blood

The blood was also central to the OT ritual. Here again, our Lord's sacrifice is distinctive.

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goats and calves represent the two main elements of the sacrifice on the day of atonement. The bullock was offered first, v.6, 11, “for himself,” to “make an atonement for himself, and for his house.” Then two goats were brought for the people (v.5), one sent away as the scapegoat, the other offered “for the people” (v. 15).

his own blood.--In contrast to the twofold offering under the old covenant, our Lord brought only one. He had no need to offer for his own sin, as had the priests of old, for though “tempted in all points like as we are, yet” he was “without sin,” 4:15, “holy, harmless, undefiled,” 7:26.

The distinction between the animal sacrifices and our Lord's own blood is amplified in 13-14.

- The animal sacrifices were effective only outwardly. They “sanctify to the purifying of the flesh.”
- His offering is able to “purge your conscience from dead works.”

The writer does *not* say that Christ entered the holy place “with” his blood, but “by” his blood. Whether he took his blood physically into heaven is never explicitly stated in Scripture, and we will not speculate on it. The point that the writer makes here is that it was **by means of** his blood that he was able to enter the sanctuary. Having taken on the burden of our sin, he would be excluded, but the shedding of his blood satisfied God's just judgment against our sin, and enabled him to enter the presence of God.

Second Basis of “Once (for All)”: His Accomplishment

Now we return to the second participial clause. Recall that these are laying down the basis for the claim that he “entered in ... once for all.”

having obtained.--The verb is curious. Literally, it means “to find.”

Why is our Lord said to have “found” redemption, rather than to have achieved it, or wrought it, or something more active? It sounds as though there is some contingency in what he did, as though he was not certain of success when he set out on his work. The most common use of this verb in the LXX is to translate the Hebrew expression, “find favor,” expressing the desire of a subject person toward an authority. One does not demand favor, or curry favor, or manipulate God's favor. One comes in humility before him and hopes to find favor.

This verb emphasizes this aspect of our Lord's redemptive work. We have seen in John 12:27 the horror that he felt as he approached Calvary. He recognized that the justice of God might well require his eternal separation from the Father.

God ordained that the high priest wear bells on the hem of his garment, so that he could be heard as he moved about the sanctuary:

Exodus 28:33-35 ³³ And *beneath* upon the hem of it thou shalt make ... bells of gold between them round about: ³⁵ And it shall be upon Aaron to minister: and his sound shall be heard when he goeth in unto the holy *place* before the LORD, and when he cometh out, that he die not.

Later tradition dictated that he have a rope tied around his ankle when he entered the holy of holies on the day of atonement, so that if God smote him dead and the bells no longer were heard, his body could be pulled out.

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We should not miss this contingent element in our Lord's offering. From the standpoint of the eternal counsels of God, redemption was accomplished before the foundation of the earth. But in our Lord's execution of those counsels, he felt terror and anguish. He shouldered our sin, and bore it with fear before God's tribunal. Heb 5:7 tells us that he "offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared." He went on a quest on our behalf, a quest for eternal redemption, and by God's grace, he found it.

The middle voice here emphasizes his own exertion in this quest. He himself, and no other, sought out and found the redemption that we need.

eternal redemption.--The Jewish high priest risked death each year for the sake of a shadow, and had to return over and over again. But the redemption that Christ has found for us is eternal. Once he has procured it, he never needs to do it again, and so once again we see how that he "entered in once for all."

Notes

There is an ancient and widespread interpretation of "the tabernacle" as referring to the body of Christ, first his own body in which God "tabernacled" among his people, John 1, and then the church, which is declared to be "a dwelling place for God by the Spirit," Eph. 2. This is an intriguing idea, and some objections against it can be answered:

- His body certainly was "of this building," but not in its capacity as a tabernacle—that was done by the work of God.
- How can the church be said to be "in heaven"? Answer: we are seated with Christ in heavenly places, Eph 2.

But one should be cautious.

- Where is the church ever spoken of as a "tabernacle"? A temple, yes, but not a tent.
- Christ did not enter into his body at the time of his sacrifice, but at his incarnation.
- Most commentators appear to have overlooked the systematic parallels between 11-12 and 13-28. The parallel with "the tabernacle" there is explicitly "heaven itself," v. 24.

Now, it certainly would seem that something more than just the presence of God is meant, for this tabernacle is said to be "pitched" by God, 8:2, and it may be that the notion of the church as the dwelling place of God through the spirit has something to do with the imagery here, but the writer does not develop this theme or make it explicit, and we should tread carefully.