

Hebrews 11:8-16; Lev 23:33-36, 39-43

Overview

This year, we studied both trumpets and the day of atonement through the lens of the Book of Hebrews, the NT commentary on the OT ritual law. So it is natural to ask what Hebrews has to say about Booths.

At first glance, it doesn't seem to say anything! The word "booth" does not appear anywhere in the book, nor are there any calendrical clues that would point us to the feast or its symbolism.

But of course, "booth" is an English word. Leviticus speaks of *sukkot*, which are lean-tos or shelters constructed from brush. Jacob constructed one for his cattle in Gen 33:7, and Jonah made one in Jon 4:5 to survey the city of Nineveh. Now, Hebrew *sukkah* doesn't appear in Hebrews either. But the LXX translates it by the word *skhnh*, which does appear.

Skhnh is the most common Greek word for three different Hebrew words. It is the only word used to translate *sukkah*. In addition, it is the most common translation of the words *ohel* "tent" and *mi\$kan* "tabernacle."

Nine of the occurrences of *skhnh* in Hebrews clearly refer to the tabernacle. But the tenth, in 11:9, clearly does *not* refer to the tabernacle, though the AV translates it this way:

By faith [Abraham] sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, **dwelling in tabernacles** with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise:

At first glance, *skhnh* here seems to refer to the tents in which Abraham and his descendants lived, like the tents of the modern Bedouin. The writer of Hebrews would have read frequently in his Greek Bible that Abraham or one of his descendants "pitched his tent" (Hebrew *ohel*) in such and such a place: Gen 12:8; 26:25; 31:25; 33:19; 35:16. But we should look closer.

The OT never says that Abraham **dwelt** in a tent. Only once is anyone said to dwell in an *ohel*: 1 Chr 5:10. The phrase "dwell in booths" does occur in the OT. Notably, it occurs in Lev 23:43 to describe Israel in the wilderness, and in Lev 23:42, Neh 8:14 to describe the feast of tabernacles!

42 Ye shall dwell in booths seven days; all that are Israelites born shall dwell in booths:
43 That your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I *am* the LORD your God.

In using this phrase, the author of Hebrews is alluding to the feast of booths. He can do this because in the Greek Bible, the word for "booth" (as in the feast) is the same as for "tent" (which is what Abraham used). He draws our attention to Abraham's conduct as a model of what the feast signifies, and derives from it a lesson for us.

The Meaning of the Feast from Lev 23:42-43

Moses commands that the people dwell in booths (v. 42). The purpose for this command (v. 43 “that”) is to remind them that their ancestors dwelt in booths when they left Egypt.

Why does Leviticus speak of dwelling in “booths” *sucloth* when in fact Israel encamped in tents *oheloth* (Num 16:26, 27)? During the long encampment at Sinai, they no doubt had time to fabricate tents for themselves. But they were thrust out suddenly from Egypt, without time even to leaven their bread, much less make tents, and the shelters in their first encampment would have been whatever lean-tos they could fabricate from the local vegetation. In fact, Israel's first encampment after leaving Egypt (Exod 12:37) was a place named Succoth, “booths,” and it has been suggested that it took its name from their encampment there.

It was important for Israel, once settled in the land, to remember that they were once pilgrims through the wilderness. From their vantage point of privilege, they were to look back on a time when the land was only a promise, and their survival depended vividly on God's daily provision of manna from heaven and water from the rock, a time when their dwellings were not firm houses and proud cities, but rough huts. The reference to booths rather than tents emphasizes that God wants Israel to remember the beginning of that wandering, “when I brought them out,” the point at which they left the comfort and security Egypt and cast themselves on the Lord.

Exposition of Heb 11:8-16

As shown in the accompanying analytic table, the passage is chiasmic: it begins (8-10) by describing Abraham's hope, around four themes: his Faith, his Forfeit, his Focus, and his Foundation. Then the center (11-12) describes the birth of the descendants who shared this promise with him, and the last part (13-16) extends the same four themes developed about Abraham, to those descendants.

8-10, Abraham's Personal Hope

His Faith

when he was called.--Faith is not our idea. It always starts with God's initiative.

8 By faith Abraham ... obeyed.--Note how boldly the author juxtaposes works and faith. This is a common cooccurrence: “Obedient to the faith,”

- Acts 6:7, a great company of the priests were **obedient to the faith**.
- Rom 1:5, we have received grace and apostleship, for **obedience to the faith** among all nations,
- Rom 16:25, 26 the mystery, which ... is made manifest, and by the scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, made known to all nations for the **obedience of faith**:

“God commandeth all men everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30), and that in responding to the Spirit's call, people are obeying that command. Q: Why, then, aren't they saved by works? A: The point of “not of works” (Eph 2:8-10) is explained further as “not of yourselves,” “lest any man should boast.” Belief *is* a work, but it is the “work of God,” John 6:29.

and he went out, not knowing.--Faith is “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (11:1). Abraham's departure from Ur of the Chaldees was an act of faith because it was based on God's promise alone, without independent verification.

His Forfeit

The obedience of faith lays hold of God's promise of blessing, but it does so at a cost. The Lord's oft-repeated exhortation about the choice between loving and hating one's own life (see sermon on John 12) makes exactly this point. When Abraham chose to obey God and seek God's kingdom, he forfeited his citizenship in the world.

in the land of promise.--In fact, he arrived at the land that God promised him. But he did not live to see the fulfillment of that promise.

9 he sojourned ... as in a strange country.--Even in the land promised to him, he lived as a foreigner. He had to purchase the only portion of the land that he ever owned, Sarah's sepulchre at the cave of Machpelah (Gen 23:16-18). It was to be his in the coming kingdom, but he did not enjoy it during his life. (This example should make us very careful about basing policy decisions concerning the middle east on God's promises to Abraham. If those promises did not justify immediate possession of the land by faithful Abraham, it is questionable to invoke them to justify possession by modern apostate Israel.)

dwelling in tabernacles.--Now comes the phrase from Lev 23:42, 43. Abraham's pilgrim life was of a piece with Israel's wilderness journey. In both cases, they left places of security for the hope of a future blessing. In both cases, they had only temporary shelter, since they were on the move. What mattered was not where they were at the moment, but where they were heading.

His Focus

10 He looked for a city which hath foundations.--Even though Abraham was living in the land of promise, he did not cling to it as his final abode, for he lived as a nomad, not a city dweller. (Contrast his nephew Lot, who wanted to settle down.) Why didn't he settle down? The writer concludes (“for”) that he must have wanted something more than the Canaanite cities around him. Their cities looked solid enough, but they could be leveled by an earthquake, or (like Jericho) by the Lord in response to Joshua's army. He wanted a city with true foundations, as defined in the next clause:

His Foundation

whose builder and maker is God.--Even in the land of promise, he is not satisfied with

anything short of the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of God.

11-12, Abraham's Descendants

Now the writer pauses to emphasize a point introduced in v. 9, that others shared the promise to which Abraham clung.

11 Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed.--The same faith that led him to leave human cities and undertake a pilgrimage to the city of God, also enabled Sarah to conceive his son Isaac, who would join him in this quest.

12 Therefore sprang there ... as the stars of the sky ... and as the sand....--The line did not stop with Isaac. The community of those who joined Abraham on pilgrimage included the innumerable multitude that descended from him. Deut 1:10 shows that Israel achieved this status by the end of the wilderness wanderings, on the eve of their entry into the land; cf. also Neh 9:23. In 2 Sam 17:11, Hushai used “sand by the sea” to describe the Israelite army that he wanted Absalom to gather against David; 1 Kings 4:20, in the time of Solomon, says “Judah and Israel *were* many, as the sand which *is* by the sea in multitude.”

13-16, His Descendants' Hope

These all.--These descendants shared his hope—not just Isaac and Jacob, not just the Exodus generation in the wilderness, but the uncountable multitude, Israel throughout its history.

Their Faith

13 These all died ... not having received the promises.--He is speaking here of the multitude from v.12. All of them died without having received the promise—even Israel living in the land! Like Abraham, they (or at least Israel after the spirit) did not count physical presence in the land as the ultimate fulfillment of God's promise.

having seen them afar off.--Instead, they looked forward to the fulfillment of those promises in the future Kingdom of God.

were persuaded of them, and embraced them.--These phrases correspond to Abraham's actions, “obeyed” and “went out.” Like Abraham, they acted based on the promises, rather than on their physical sight.

Their Forfeit

[these] ... confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.--The subject of the verb continues from the beginning of the verse: “these all,” that is, all of the descendants of Abraham. Abraham originally made this confession to the children of Heth in Gen 23:4, but his descendants echoed it. In Psa 39:12, David cried, “I *am* a stranger with thee, *and* a sojourner, as all my fathers *were*.” See also 1 Chr 29:15, and Lev 25:23.

This is an amazing confession. Even the nation's king does not claim permanent status in the land, but recognizes that it is only a step on the way to the ultimate promise. These instances, from the nation's king, show that the true Israelites looked to a final fulfillment beyond their physical possession of the land.

This confession parallels v. 9. Abraham's confession took the form of “dwelling in tabernacles,” “sojourn[ing]” in the land “as in a strange land,” refusing to adopt a settled life. His descendants lived in houses and fortified cities. Yet, once a year, symbolically they forsook these dwellings. They gathered in Jerusalem, their capital, the very symbol of their nationhood and possession of the land, and there they lived in booths to emphasize that, like Abraham, though they were “in the land of promise,” nevertheless they were “strangers and pilgrims.” Here is the true meaning of the feast of Tabernacles—a recognition of our pilgrim status, reminding ourselves that though we may enjoy God's material blessings now, our real hope lies beyond them.

Their Focus

14 For.--As in v. 10, this verse explains the statement. The explanation is substantially the same in both cases: The confession reveals an underlying focus that goes beyond the land of promise (in which both Abraham and his many descendants lived) and looks to a future fulfillment.

they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country.--Abraham sought a city; his descendants, oriented toward their capital, sought a nation.

15 if they had been mindful ..., they might have had opportunity to have returned.--The author may have in mind the attitude of the people in Num 14:3,4 upon hearing the report of the spies,

3 And wherefore hath the LORD brought us unto this land, to fall by the sword, that our wives and our children should be a prey? were it not better for us to return into Egypt? 4 ... Let us make a captain, and let us return into Egypt.

The flesh is always ready to jettison the path of future promise for present security.

16 But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly.--Paul exhorted the Colossians to “set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth.” The writer to Hebrews is arguing that this attitude is not new with the church age, but was in fact the hope of Abraham and his true descendants even under the old covenant.

Their Foundation

wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God.--Why is he not ashamed when they call him their God? Because they treasure his ultimate promise more than the things of this earth. Conversely, if we cling to present comforts over future blessings, we run the risk of hearing the Lord's awful words, “depart from me, I never knew you” (Matt 7:23).

he hath prepared for them a city.--God's heavenly city is the true fulfillment of the promises to Abraham. In the Sabbath language we considered two weeks ago, “there remaineth therefore a

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Sabbath rest unto the people of God.” Let us labor to enter into that rest; let us be sure that we desire a better country, that is, a heavenly.

Technical Notes

The following spreadsheet shows the translation space for *skhnh*. Totals are overall in the MT and LXX, and include translations of other words not listed and untranslated instances. Thus the row and column totals are not the same, and the grand total is the average of the two.

	ohel “tent”	mi\$kan “Tabernacle”	sukkah “booth”	bayt “house”	Total
skhnh	247	88	27		436
skhnmwa “habitation”	45	17			80
skhnophgia “feast of booths”			5		9
oikos “house”	22			1645	2066
diata “habitation” (Job)	5			2	13
oikia “house”	4			204	268
Total	389	139	31	2052	2741.5

If we normalize each cell by subtracting (row sum * column sum / overall sum) and then dividing the expected value, we get this table:

	ohel “tent”	mi\$kan “Tabernacle”	sukkah “booth”	bayt “house”	Total
skhnh	2.99	2.98	4.48	-1	436
skhnmwa “habitation”	2.96	3.19	-1	-1	80
skhnophgia “feast of booths”			48.13		9
oikos “house”	-0.92			0.06	2066
diata “habitation” (Job)	1.71			-0.79	13
oikia “house”	-0.89			0.02	268
Total	389	139	31	2052	2741.5

Note the high strength of *skhnh* as a translation for *sukkah*.