

The Sanctuary, the Gospel, and the Law

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Although not always kept in perspective, the issue around which the Bible has been written is law—law breaking, law keeping, and the result of each. The tragic, drawn-out drama of sin began with law breaking. “Sin is the transgression of the law” (1 John 3:4) encapsulates the definition of sin no matter how one may express it if that expression is compatible with Scripture.

The whole plan of redemption, the great sacrifice of Jesus, the wonders of grace, revolve around God’s desire to rescue humanity from the predicament resulting from law-breaking. This theme, the heart of the gospel, is reflected in the sanctuary service which God gave to ancient Israel as a learning tool to help them, and us, understand the working of the plan of salvation. And the sanctuary model revealed to Moses, following which the tabernacle was made, was patterned after the heavenly (Heb 8:1–5) not merely in its physical aspects, but in the deep significance of the ceremonies to be followed (Heb 9:1, 23–26; 10:1–4).

An analysis of the sanctuary service reveals that the law, by which we here mean the Ten Commandments, is implicit in each phase. All other Biblical laws, statutes, ordinances are, in some way, designed to illuminate and support the Decalogue. As Patrick Fairbairn observes, “The Levitical code [with] . . . its divers washings and ever-recurring atonements by blood bespoke existing impurities, which [impurities] were such because they were at variance with the law of righteousness imposed in the Decalogue.”¹

The record of these things is not to be regarded as about historical curiosities or dead issues, for “whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction” (Rom 15:4 RSV).

Before we go through the sanctuary to demonstrate our thesis, we have three vital observations to make: First, *The symbols and rituals of the sanctu-*

¹ Patrick Fairbairn, *The Revelation of Law in Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), 139.

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ary contribute to or move toward the ark of the covenant, or testament, in the Most Holy Place. The ark is the ultimate goal, **the place of resolution**, of the whole service, as our diagram illustrates (see fig. 1, 106).

Our second observation is: *The ark, the repository of the law, the Ten Commandments, toward which the entire ritual moves, is the heart of the whole sanctuary.*

Our third observation is the most important: *While every aspect of the sanctuary service has to do with the law—and therefore judgment, for law and judgment cannot be separated—its involvement is from the redemptive viewpoint.* It has to do with Christ's forgiveness, cleansing, justification, and sanctification—the gospel. It must be recognized, of course, that judgment is evaluating on the basis of law and includes condemnation for those who fail to avail themselves of the redemptive measures offered (Heb 2:3).

We propose to look at the rituals and symbols of the sanctuary from three perspectives: The ritual itself, its fulfillment (in the gospel), and the significance of the ritual or symbol to the law of God.

Propitiation

The Ritual. Logically, we begin our analysis of the temple ritual and its significance with a sinner who, because he has in some manner transgressed the law, brings his sin offering to the sanctuary (Lev 4, 5) to find escape from condemnation. Near the entrance to the sanctuary complex is the altar of burnt offerings (Heb, literally, "place of sacrifice"), which symbolizes all sin sacrifices. Near this altar the sinner places his hand on the animal's head, thus ritually transferring his sin to the animal. He then slays the victim.

If the offerer is a priest, the blood is caught in a basin and sprinkled before the veil separating the Holy and the Most Holy Places (Lev 4:1-4). In this way sin is ritually transferred to the sanctuary, and thus the sinner is forgiven. If he is a layperson or a ruler, the officiating priest is required to eat some of the flesh (Lev 6:26). By this ritual he assumes the confessed sin, which is ultimately eradicated on the Day of Atonement.

The Gospel. While propitiation is often, and rightly, associated with the ark in the Most Holy Place (the cover of the ark is sometimes called the place of propitiation), the *Sacrifice* which made propitiation possible took place at the cross (1 Pet 2:24; Rom 3:25), which was typified by the altar of sacrifice. At the cross ritual was replaced by reality, type by antitype. They were a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ (see Col 2:17). On the cross the true Sacrifice, the Lamb of God (John 3:16), became the propitiation for our sins (1 John 2:2).

With the slaying of the sacrifice at the ancient tabernacle the active role of the sinner ended. The rest was carried out by the priest, for the offerer had no access to the tabernacle and no further part in its service. His faith had to be in

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the ministration of the priest to bring his sacrifice to fruition. Likewise, our faith must be in the ministration of Christ.

The Law. The penalty for breaking the law deposited in the ark is death (Rom 6:23). “The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law” (1 Cor 15:56). But while the law demanding death for sin was *within* the ark, *above* that law was the mercy seat, or place where the merits of the sacrifice were eventually applied. Propitiation, the provision of the gospel, meets the requirements of the law; Christ died because of the transgressed law. So the ark was the complement of the altar of sacrifice.

Purification

The Ritual. Before the priest could enter the holy place, he was required to purify himself by washing his hands and feet with water from the laver located between the altar of sacrifice and the tabernacle (Exod 30:17-31).

Often the Bible does not explain its types. Their significance is to be understood by reference to ways in which they are applied or alluded to in other contexts.

The Gospel. The washing at the laver, and all other washings required by the ceremonial law, were types, teaching us the necessity of heart purification. Paul writes of spiritual washing in Titus 3:5,6—“the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit,” which comes “through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Whereas in the Mosaic system only the priest could participate in this rite, now the priesthood is extended to all believers (1 Pet 2:5, 9). All who repent may, by faith, be cleansed (1 John 1:9). Of course the ancient worshiper’s faith, going beyond the mere ritual, made available for him what is available for us.

With this washing we are finished with the ceremonies of the courtyard where sin and uncleanness is dealt with. Now the penitent has been forgiven and washed. Now he may have a different attitude than he had upon entering the courtyard. Then he came with guilt, feeling condemned. Now he may enter even the sanctuary joyfully, boldly, because he is forgiven, cleansed (Heb 4:16).

The Law. The law demands purity of heart to stand in the holy place (Ps 24: 3, 4). It requires purification, but it cannot purify. In the Mosaic ceremonies the purity was largely cultic, and was satisfied by external, cultic, cleansing. But the Decalogue requires a spiritual cleansing, a purity of *heart* (Ps 53: 6; 24: 4; Matt 5:8; 1 Tim 1:5). If we come to Christ in sincerity, “if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse (purify) us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9), and to give us His Spirit for obedience (Rom 8:1-4). We are then pure in the sight of the law.

Illumination

The Symbol. As in other cases, Scripture makes no direct spiritual application of the seven-branched lampstand set in the first apartment or Holy Place and kept burning twenty-four hours a day. It has been suggested that it was for

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utilitarian purposes only. But every other item had a clearly symbolic meaning, so we may accept that it did also.

The Gospel. An obvious lesson may be drawn from the fact that a lampstand is intended to give light. In Scripture light is, among other things, symbolic of God's truth: "Oh send out your light and your truth! Let them lead me; let them bring me to . . . your tabernacle" (Ps 43:3), and His Word is a light (Ps 119:105). A spiritual application would be that God's Spirit continually illuminates His people. In Zechariah an angel explains that the seven lamps represent "the eyes of the Lord which scan to and fro throughout the whole earth" (Zech 4:10).

The Law. Because God's law is an expression of His character, it is moral and spiritual light. "For the commandment is a lamp, and the law is light" (Prov 6:23; cf. Ps 19:8). Paul, enlightened by the law, understood what sin is (Rom 7:7). "In thy light [law] shall we see light" (Ps 36:9).

Sustentation

The Symbol. Shewbread, the Bread of the Presence, which was constantly to be in the Holy Place (Lev 24: 5-8), was a reminder of the Israelites' constant dependence on God for sustenance, temporal and spiritual. It was broken and eaten by the representatives of the people, the priests (Lev 24:9).

The Gospel. *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* observes, "It is but a short step from the table of the Lord in the sanctuary to the table of the Lord in the NT. The priests partook of the bread representative of Him who came down from heaven; we eat of the bread Christ says is His body (1 Cor.11:24)" (1:808).

The Law. The law does not only make claims upon us, it does not only require heart cleanliness and provide illumination. It also nourishes. In this sense the Psalmist wrote that the godly man meditates on the law day and night (Ps 1:2). He is spiritually fed by it. And Jeremiah wrote, "Your words were found, and I ate them, and your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart" (Jer 15:16).

Intercession

The Symbol. The function of the altar of incense (Exod 30:1-10) was primarily intercessory. On it a special "perpetual incense," directed toward the mercy seat in the most holy place, was to be burned before the Lord (v. 8). Although it was situated in the Holy Place, in front of the veil (Ex.30:6), it is intimately associated with the ark in several places in Scripture. In 1 Kings we learn that it "belonged to the inner sanctuary" (1 Kgs 6:22 NIV). And in 1 Kings 9:25 we are told it was "before the Lord." Doubtless for these reasons, it is in Hebrews related to the Most Holy Place (Heb 9:3,4). These facts, and the further fact that it was pronounced "most holy" (Exod 30:10), suggests that, next to

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the ark of the covenant, it was the most important piece of furniture in the sanctuary.

In Rev.8:3 we have incense given to an officiating angel to be added to the prayer of the saints. The incense was added to the prayers, apparently to make them acceptable, but did not symbolize the prayers themselves. The only thing that can make us, or anything we bring to God, acceptable is the merits of Christ. Thus there would seem to be little else the incense could represent.

This altar was the nearest a priest could approach to God, represented by the ark of the covenant, except for the high priest once yearly, on the day of atonement.

The Gospel. The psalmist associates prayer and worship with the incense. "Let my prayer be set before you as incense, the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice" (Ps 141:2). As noted, Revelation 8:3, 4 also associates incense with prayer, so we may conclude that prayer and worship were acceptable because of the incense.

Again, the psalmist's associating incense with sacrifice reminds us that only the incense recipe given by God Himself was acceptable (Exod 30:9). We have remarked on the probability that the incense represents Christ's merits. Thus, man's prayers, and his obedience, can be made perfect only by the incense of Christ's merits.

The Law. "One who turns away from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be an abomination" (Prov 28:9). To seek to approach God insincerely, heedless of His will expressed in His law, is to offer strange fire, as the sons of Aaron offered strange fire (Lev 10:1). The relationship of prayer with the burning of incense is seen from Revelation 8:4: "The smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, ascended before God from the angel's hand" (Rev. 8:4). But one's prayers are acceptable to God only as he is in accord with God's law.

Investigation

We can merely remind ourselves that this subject brings us to the Jewish Day of Atonement, for it was on that day, symbolic of the great antitypical Day of Atonement, that the matter of sin (thus involving the law) was dealt with (See Lev 16; Heb 9,10).

The Symbol. Solitary in the Most Holy Place, the most sacred room of the sanctuary, was the most sacred piece of furniture, the ark of the testimony, or law (Exod 25: 22, 23), constructed especially to contain the law (Deut 10:1-5). From the Israelite viewpoint the ark was the very presence and glory of Jehovah (the Shekinah atop the ark. See Exod 40:34-38; 2 Sam 6:2), and the ground of His rulership (the tables of the law within the ark. Exod 25:10-22).

The Law. Every ritual, every item of furniture connected with the Mosaic sanctuary is symbolic, including the ark. (The office of the high priest was also symbolic, but space prevents this being included directly in this article.) Not so with the tables that are in the ark. While there may be some uncertainty about

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the significance of some of the rituals and furniture, this is not so with these tables. On them, inscribed with the very finger of God (Exod 31:18), was the law of God expressing His will—literal, succinct, clear, unambiguous, unmistakable, and eternal (Ps 111:7, 8; Luke 16:17). God would not entrust the recording of His Ten Words to the hand of man, even to Moses. There must be no room for questioning. And by judgment based on that law the eternal destiny of all mankind is decided (Jas 1: 11, 12; Rom 14:10).

At this stage our focus is exclusively on the law as the basis of investigation or judgment. As God is impartial (Deut 10:27; 2 Chr 19:7), He applies His law with impartiality. For the moment justice has its day until we come to the determinative final transaction at the mercy seat.

We earlier observed that the law demands purity, but cannot purify. We may further add, the law demands obedience, but cannot make one obedient. The failure is not in the law but in sinful man. Sin has confronted man with a terrible conundrum. He must keep the law impeccably to be saved, but on his own he cannot do so. The law is “holy, just, and good” (Rom. 7: 12) but the rigor of that law is expressed by both Paul and James. “All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the book of the Law’ (Gal 2:10 NIV). James asserts, “Whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, is guilty of all” (2:10). In other words, it is as if one writing a comprehensive test covering a lifetime gets less than one hundred percent, and consequently has failed the test. He has lost salvation.

So it is at this point that the sinner’s relation with Christ becomes compelling. Have the demands of death for sin (Rom 6:23), and the demands of the law for perfection been met for him and in him?

Exoneration

The Ritual. For the Israelite of old, exoneration, the confirmation of his forgiveness of sin and blame, came on the Day of Atonement. It was on that day that the benefits of the rituals that had, as it were, flowed all year to the Ark on a stream reddened by the blood of sacrifice, came to ultimate realization and resolution.

The Gospel. And so on that stream, originating in the blood of the Sacrifice, and merged with the water of cleansing, the spiritual light and sustenance and intercession, we come to the ark of the covenant in the Most Holy Place with its changeless, eternal law and, above it, the mercy seat. The approach to the Most Holy Place is possible only as we are conducted by Christ, our High Priest, our Sacrifice and Surety (Heb 10:19; Rom 8:1,34; John 3:18). Thus, as William Temple has put it, the mercy seat is “the meeting place of God’s holy love and man’s sin.”

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The Law. “The only way out of the world of law is by death,” wrote H.E. Guillebaud “*in which all obligations to it are discharged.*”² We ourselves should die that death, the death whose hold upon us would be eternal. There would be no release forever. But the law has been fulfilled by Christ, who has made His perfect obedience available for all who receive Him as Sacrifice, Substitute, and Lord. So, for the one who has found forgiveness, cleansing and regeneration through the blood of the Sacrifice, on this great antitypical Day of Atonement the record of the sins that would condemn is forever expunged, his forgiveness has been ratified, he is seen by God as though he had never sinned. So the great problem of sin has been resolved. “Righteousness and peace have kissed each other” (Ps 85:10), the Son has made us free so we are free indeed (John 8:36).

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² H. E. Guillebaud, *Why the Cross?* (London: InterVarsity Fellowship, 1961), 194. Italics in original.