

THE TEMPLE IN THE APOCALYPSE

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I. INTRODUCTION

The term ἱερόν (temple complex) occurs frequently in the Gospels and Acts and once in Paul's Epistles (1 Cor 9:13). The word ναός (holy of holies) chiefly appears in John's Apocalypse, a total of sixteen times.¹ What is the meaning of the latter word in the context of Revelation? A preliminary look reveals that the author conveys its meaning as the very presence of God. To illustrate, the expression "temple of God" appears three times (3:12; 11:1, 19), two of which (3:12 and 11:19) are in a celestial setting. Next, the saints in heaven who have come out of the great tribulation have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb and serve God day and night in heaven (7:15). Third, angels are coming forth out of (ἐκ) the temple (14:15, 17; 15:6); and John heard a loud voice coming out of (ἐκ) the temple and from (ἀπό) the throne (16:1, 17). This is the voice of God that proceeds from his very presence and sounds forth, away from the area of his throne. Last, John describes the new Jerusalem as a city without a temple, for the Lord God is its temple (21:22).

In contrast, lexicographers place the term ναός (11:1, 2) in the category of the physical temple in Jerusalem.² Commenting on Rev 11:1, Otto Michel writes, "In this case we are fairly obviously to think in terms of the earthly temple in Jerusalem."³ Similarly Udo Borse calls it a building that is made by hands and can be measured.⁴ How does John use the word ναός in the Apocalypse? In order to answer this question we must look at the individual verses in detail to determine whether this word is used literally or symbolically in Revelation. Of these two options, the second is more likely to be the choice in light of the prevailing symbolism in this book.

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¹ Rev 3:12; 7:15; 11:1, 2, 19 [twice]; 14:15, 17; 15:5, 6, 8 [twice]; 16:1, 17; 21:22 [twice]. The number of instances in the Gospels is as follows: Matthew nine, Mark three, Luke four; Acts has two, 1 Corinthians four, 2 Corinthians two, Ephesians and 2 Thessalonians one each.

² Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (2d rev. and augmented edition by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker from Walter Bauer's 4th ed.; Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979) 533; Joseph Henry Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: American Book Company, 1886) 422.

³ Otto Michel, *TDNT* 4.887.

⁴ Udo Borse, *EDNT* 2.457.

II. SURVEY OF PASSAGES

1. *Rev 3:12*. “He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God.” After the repetitive phrase “he who overcomes” (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22), Jesus promises to make the believer a pillar in the temple of God (3:12). At least two interpretations for the word “pillar” are given. For one, ancient temples had a number of pillars carved in the form of human beings that surrounded these structures. The other explanation is that a pillar in a temple served to honor a distinguished person, much the same as plaques attached to pillars in European cathedrals.⁵ But these illustrations ought not to be taken seriously, because the term “pillar” has a symbolical significance, much the same as James, Peter, and John were regarded as pillars in the church (Gal 2:9; cf. 1 Tim 3:15).

The passage speaks not of pagan temples or the Solomonic temple in Jerusalem (1 Kgs 7:15–21; 2 Chr 3:15–17) but of the new Jerusalem that is coming down out of heaven. This means that the saints are honored within that heavenly temple, which in fact is nothing less than the very presence of God. This rules out, then, any idea of supporting pillars as in ancient temples. In short, the expression “temple” must be interpreted figuratively. God intends to honor his people in his sacred presence.

2. *Rev 7:15*. “Therefore, they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple.” The clause “before the throne of God” implies that the saints have direct access to the one who occupies that throne. Their relation to God is the same as it was in Paradise when God walked and talked with Adam and Eve.

Especially significant is the continuous service God’s people render in his presence. The word “temple” refers not to the structure of a building but rather to the holy of holies, which is the place where God dwells. Some commentators see a conflict in this verse with Rev 21:22 which reads that the new Jerusalem has no temple.⁶ But John explains that “the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple,” which means that because of the pervading presence of God and the Lamb the new Jerusalem is itself a sanctuary. Hence, being in the presence of God before his throne and serving him ceaselessly can be compared to the role of the high priest who entered God’s sacred presence momentarily on the Day of Atonement once a year. The differences, however, are that the saints dwell in God’s presence, not for a few minutes but forever. They do not sprinkle the blood of a bull and a goat to be cleansed from sin, for they are sinless. And no longer do they petition God for remission of sin, for they are cleansed. Thus, they serve him contin-

⁵ Richard H. Wilkinson (“The στῦλος of Revelation 3:12 and Ancient Coronation Rites,” *JBL* 107 [1988] 498–501) calls attention to Solomon’s temple where at a pillar kings were crowned or renewed a covenant (compare 2 Kgs 11:14 and 23:3), but these references have little to do with a pillar in the new Jerusalem.

⁶ R. H. Charles (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John* [Edinburgh: Clark, 1920] 1.215) states, “In the original form of the vision, vii.9–17 . . . the phrase ἐν τῷ ναῷ αὐτοῦ was probably absent.” But there is no manuscript evidence to support this contention.

ually by praising and thanking him (22:3). The saints in heaven know no division of day and night. John remarks, “And there shall be no night there” (22:5).

3. *Rev 11:1, 2*. “And I was given a reed like a rod and was told, ‘Arise and measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there.’” John received a measuring rod and a command to measure the temple of God. We are not told the identity of the one who spoke and gave him the reed, but we assume that an angel as a heavenly messenger supplied it and gave him instruction concerning its use. An OT reference lies behind this text, for the prophets Ezekiel and Zechariah were given a vision by God of the new temple area. A man with a measuring rod that was about 10½ feet (3.2 meters) long surveyed the temple buildings and grounds (Ezekiel 40–43; Zech 2:1). In the NT an angel measures the new Jerusalem (city, gates, and walls) with a rod of gold (Rev 21:15).⁷

John is told to get up and measure three parts: the temple of God, the altar, and the people worshiping there. The purpose of making these measurements is to delimit the area that is holy from that which is profane; and measuring means to protect God’s temple, altar, and people. John’s task is to safeguard that which God has set aside as holy and to shield it from intrusion and desecration. The destroyer cannot enter the place that God has marked off as holy and within whose boundaries his people are secure.

The place where the people are safe is God’s temple, which throughout the Apocalypse means not the temple complex but the holy of holies and the holy place. God opened to full view the inner sanctuary when at Jesus’ death the curtain separating these two places was torn from top to bottom (Matt 27:51). This area is the very presence of God, where he welcomes and dwells with the saints after Jesus offered himself as the perfect sacrifice and removed the sins of his people (Heb 9:12). The temple of God, therefore, is a symbol of the true church that worships the triune God.⁸ In the church God meets his people, accepts their praise and adoration, listens to their petitions and confessions, and acknowledges their expressions of gratitude. As the saints in heaven are always in God’s presence, so the saints on earth have the divine promise: “for where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matt 18:20, AV/KJV).

John presents a picture of the inner sanctuary he must measure. No measurements are listed because the assignment of measuring an area where the saints meet their God proves to be an impossible task. The saints are a

⁷ Kenneth A. Strand (“An Overlooked Old-Testament Background to Revelation 11:1,” *AUSS* 22 [1984] 317–325) argues that the more likely background passage is not Zech 2:1–5 and Ezekiel 40–48 but Leviticus 16. This chapter, however, outlines the Day of Atonement but says nothing about the command “measure the temple.” Also see Frederick D. Mazzaferri, *The Genre of the Book of Revelation from a Source-Critical Perspective* (BZNW 54; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1989) 319–321.

⁸ William Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982 [reprint]) 127; G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John Divine* (London: Black, 1966) 132; R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Revelation* (Columbus: Wartburg, 1943) 326–330.

great multitude that no one can number (7:9). Measuring the temple of God symbolizes the knowledge and care God provides for his people.

What is the significance of the altar? It can be either the altar of sacrifice or the incense altar in front of the curtain. The altar of burnt offerings stood outside the temple building in the outer court. Because John is told not to measure the outer court (v. 2), which was the court of the priests, we interpret the altar to be the one on which incense was offered. This is the altar in the heavenly sanctuary (6:9; 8:3 [twice], 5; 9:13; 14:18; 16:7). By contrast, there are no references to the altar of burnt offerings, for the death of Jesus terminated its usefulness. The incense offered on this altar are the prayers of the saints (8:3, 5). And measuring the altar's dimensions signifies that the saints have access to God and enjoy his protective care.⁹ At the altar they are safe.

The multitude of saints, counted in chap. 7 and measured in chap. 11, are worshiping in Christ's church anywhere and everywhere. Jesus instructed the Samaritan woman at the well of Jacob that the time had come for true worshipers to worship neither on Mount Gerizim nor in Jerusalem, because everyone would worship the Father in spirit and truth (John 4:21–24). Christians worship anywhere; and wherever they are, God shields them from spiritual harm. Although from time to time they endure physical suffering, they will never experience spiritual death. They are safe and secure in the hollow of God's hand. "The 'measuring' of the temple is a variant of the 'sealing' of the Church in 7:1–8."¹⁰ Only God's people are measured or counted, not the profane who are in the outer court outside the church and are doomed.

"But exclude the outer court of the temple and do not measure it because it has been given to the Gentiles, and they will trample the holy city for forty-two months." At first sight, 11:2 appears to be a puzzling passage, for a literal translation reveals an apparent redundancy: "And the court of the temple, the one outside (τὴν ἔξωθεν), cast it outside (ἔξωθεν)." But not really so. God makes a clear division between the saints who worship him in spirit and truth and those people who pay him lip service but whose hearts are far from him (Isa 29:13; Matt 15:8–9). The first group of people worships in holiness and receives his blessing; the second must be cast out because of their hypocrisy. The first group is in the presence of God and is alive, the second is outside of God's sphere and is dead. Here is the contrast between holy and profane that John describes throughout the Apocalypse. The saints are those who have God's seal on their foreheads (9:4); they are measured, that is, protected. The profane are the people who refuse to repent of their evil deeds (9:20–21); they are not to be measured, that is, they are rejected.¹¹ Jesus notes that God's people enter the gates of the holy city (22:14), but outside are those who are unclean (22:15).

⁹ James L. Resseguie, *Revelation Unsealed: A Narrative Critical Approach to John's Apocalypse* (Biblical Interpretation Series 32; Leiden/Boston/Köln: Brill, 1998) 94.

¹⁰ Wilfrid J. Harrington, *Revelation* (Sacra Pagina 16; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1993) 119.

¹¹ Consult A. Feuillet, "Essai d'interprétation du chapitre XI de l'Apocalypse," *NTS* 4 (1957–58) 186–187. Cf. Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) 66.

The temple of Solomon had an inner court for the priests and an outer court (1 Kgs 6:36; 7:12; 2 Chr 4:9; Ezek 10:5; 40:14–47). When Herod the Great built the temple, the outer court was divided into three parts: the court of the women, the court of the Israelites, and that of the priests. Beyond the three-part court was the court of the Gentiles. But in Revelation John speaks symbolically of the outer court of the temple and thus refers to those people who are within the outer perimeter of the church but not part of it (1 John 2:19). These people are part of the world; they have joined arms with the Gentiles bent on destroying the church, if possible. They are those who in John's day were members of Satan's synagogue and were indistinguishable from the Gentiles (2:9; 3:9). All of them are driven by the spirit of the Antichrist and are set on trampling, in other words, desecrating that which is holy.

The last part of this verse raises questions concerning place and time. How do we interpret the sentence, "the Gentiles . . . will trample the holy city for forty-two months"? Is John alluding to the holy city, namely, Jerusalem destroyed by the Gentiles in the second half of the first century? Should the period of forty-two months be taken literally?

First, let us study the expression "holy city" in its Scriptural context. The OT calls Jerusalem the holy city, because it was the place God had chosen to dwell with his people (Psalm 48). The Jews in Jerusalem called themselves "citizens of the holy city" (Isa 48:2) even though they refused to live in truth and righteousness. Daniel spoke prophetically about the holy city (9:24), and Nehemiah noted the restoration of Jerusalem when the Jews resettled in the holy city (11:1, 18). In the NT, however, the appellation occurs at the beginning of Jesus' ministry when the devil tempting him takes him to the holy city (Matt 4:5). When Jesus died on Calvary's cross, some graves were opened and those who were raised appeared in the holy city (Matt 27:53). These references are to the beginning and the end of Jesus' earthly ministry. After that period, the term "holy city" no longer occurs, for God took up residence not in Jerusalem but in the church; and at Pentecost the Holy Spirit filled not the temple or Jerusalem but the apostles and all those who repented and were baptized (Acts 2:1–4, 38–39). This exegesis is confirmed in Revelation where John describes the new Jerusalem as the holy city (21:2, 10; 22:19).¹² He explains that this is "the camp of the saints and the beloved city" (20:9) which Jesus calls "the city of my God" (3:12). The holy city is the spiritual Jerusalem of the saints.

In short, the NT shows that earthly Jerusalem lost its claim to be called holy city when the Holy Spirit changed his dwelling place from Jerusalem to the hearts and bodies of God's people, the saints (1 Cor 6:19). They are persons of every nation, tongue, tribe, and people. Together they are residents of the holy city, the new Jerusalem. The Christian church is symbolically called the holy city, for there God dwells with his covenant people (21:3).

¹² Refer to Hendrik R. van de Kamp, *Israël in Openbaring* (Kampen: Kok, 1990) 174–175; Homer Hailey, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 252; Martin Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1943 [reprint]) 184.

Next, Jesus predicted the destruction of Jerusalem forty years before it happened. He said, "Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled (Luke 21:24; compare Isa 5:5; 63:18; Dan 8:13).¹³ Jesus defines the length of time as "the times of the Gentiles" while John writes "forty-two months." The Apocalypse makes this period equal to 1,260 days or "time, times, and a half time," which is three and a half years (11:3; 12:6, 14). The three and a half years comprise the period of the Maccabean war when the temple was desecrated from June 168 to December 165 BC (compare Dan 7:25; 12:7). Henry Barclay Swete offers the following equation: "the duration of the triumph of the Gentiles = the duration of the prophesying of the Two Witnesses, = the duration of the Woman's sojourn in the wilderness."¹⁴ In short, these periods showing harmony in duration and extent appear to refer to an interval of undetermined length that extends from Jesus' ascension to his return.

Last, some interpreters apply the period of forty-two months to the years immediately preceding the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. But the length of time does not fit the record. The Jewish revolt against Rome began in the late spring of 66 and ended with the destruction of Jerusalem in August–September 70. Also, the trampling of the holy city by the Gentiles began after Jerusalem fell into the hands of the Romans. Placing the forty-two months after September 70 is pointless, for then there is a beginning without an end.

Accordingly, John applies the destruction of the temple not to the earthly Jerusalem, but to the church, which is the image of the new Jerusalem. The Gentiles are not non-Jews but rather non-Christians who trample that which is holy and make it profane. We conclude that in this passage, the word "temple" should not be taken literally but symbolically.

4. *Rev 11:19*. "And the temple of God in heaven was opened and his ark of the covenant appeared in his temple." The twenty-four elders concluded their hymn of praise, and now John responds by describing the temple of God in heaven. This is the holy of holies where God dwells and which is his sacred presence. Since the splitting of the curtain separating the holy of holies from the holy place, the ark of the covenant is open to view. We understand the vision symbolically, for the temple on earth no longer existed at the time John wrote Revelation (7:15; 15:5, 8). The expression "temple" in this book signifies the very presence of God, and John looks at the temple from his earth-to-heaven perspective.

The ark of the covenant in the tabernacle and later in the temple of Solomon was the place where God dwelled. This sacred box symbolized God's presence into which the high priest once a year might enter to atone for his own sins and the sins of the people. On its lid animal blood was sprinkled; and in the ark were the two tablets on which God had written the Decalogue

¹³ Louis A. Vos, *The Synoptic Traditions in the Apocalypse* (Kampen: Kok, 1965) 120–125.

¹⁴ Henry Barclay Swete, *Commentary on Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977 [reprint 1911]) 134.

(1 Kgs 8:9; 2 Chr 5:10; Heb 9:4). This ark now open to all is God's visual demonstration that he keeps covenant with his people. At that place filled with glory, God meets with them and establishes his law among them (Exod 25:22; 29:42–43). And the words of his law that were inscribed on stone tablets in the ark reflect God's sacred presence in the lives of his people. With them he has a covenantal relationship so that the knowledge of God's law fills the earth "as the waters cover the sea" (Isa 11:9; Hab 2:14).

Even though the ark and the tablets of stone were destroyed by the Babylonians when they conquered Jerusalem on the 14th of August 586 BC (2 Kgs 25:9), the practice of observing the law remained intact.¹⁵ The fact that John speaks of a heavenly ark, although symbolically, shows that the relevance of God's moral law endures and is everlasting. There is no place for sin and lawlessness in the presence of the Almighty, for on the one hand his redeemed covenant people are forgiven and on the other the people who deliberately break his law are condemned.

5. *Rev 15:5*. "And after these things I saw, and in heaven the temple of the tent of testimony was opened." The scene is in heaven where John sees the temple that is open and gives him a view of the holy of holies. When Jesus died on Calvary's cross, the curtain separating the holy place from the inner sanctuary was split from top to bottom. God caused the tear to take place when Jesus died on the cross to indicate that Christ's sacrifice had paid for the sins of his people; no substitution of animal blood was needed anymore to sprinkle the ark of the covenant. Hence the inner sanctuary was open to the view of all who entered the temple.

The term "temple" in the phrase "the temple of the tent of testimony" signifies the inner sanctuary of the tabernacle itself. In Moses's writings, the tabernacle and the tent of testimony are one and the same structure (Exod 40:34–35; Acts 7:44). John calls this structure "the tent of testimony" and not "the Tent of Meeting." The expression "testimony" refers to the ark of the covenant that was placed in the holy of holies. The ark contained the two tablets of stone on which the Ten Commandments were inscribed (11:19). In short, this expression alludes to the Ten Commandments which was the basic condition of the covenant God made with his people at Mount Sinai (Exod 25:16; 40:20). These two slabs of stone were called "the two tablets of the Testimony" (Exod 31:18).

The Ten Commandments are a witness to the people's transgressions that would call forth God's judgment and condemnation.¹⁶ Hence from the

¹⁵ According to a tradition recorded in 2 Macc 2:4–8, the prophet Jeremiah took the tent and the ark to Mount Nebo and hid them in a cave which he sealed. They would be revealed by God at the time when he gathers his people and shows his mercy. Even if this tradition circulated among the Jews, John is not thinking of a restoration of temple and ark on earth. His vision of a heavenly ark points to the fulfillment of Christ's redemptive work.

¹⁶ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The Book of the Revelation: A Commentary* (Leicester: InterVarsity and Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 171. S. Greijdanus, *De Openbaring des Heeren aan Johannes*, *Kommentaar op het Nieuwe Testament series* (Amsterdam: Van Bottenburg, 1925) 317.

very presence of God, and from the testimony of these laws divine judgment flows forth. Passing judgment, God executes justice and righteousness on the basis of his law.¹⁷

6. *Rev 16:1, 17*. “And I heard a loud voice from the temple.” In Greek, John stresses the loudness of the voice he heard. He perceived the intensity of the sound coming from the temple (compare Isa 66:6), which in his ears sounded majestically because it was the voice of God himself. In typical Jewish form John avoids using the name of God, so here and in v. 17 he mentions a loud voice coming from the temple and intimates that God speaks. This harmonizes with the last verse in the preceding chapter where he refers to the temple and the glory of God (15:8). The voice came forth from the holy of holies and is none other than the voice of God, who fills the inner sanctuary with his glory and now sends forth his seven angels.

A brief discussion on the translation of 16:17 is in order, “And the seventh angel poured out his bowl on the air. And a loud voice went forth out of the temple, from the throne, saying, ‘It is done.’” First, the Greek literally has “on the air,” while our idiom adopted by many translators is “into the air.” But John looks not from an earthly perspective upward but from a heavenly perspective downward at the angel who is pouring out the bowl. Next, he is precise in the choice of prepositions: the voice comes “out of” (ἐκ) the temple and “from” (ἀπό) the throne. That is, the voice proceeds from the very presence of God and sounds forth away from the area of God’s throne. Third, the translation “it is done” is not derived from the verb “to do” (ποιεῖν) but from the verb “to become” (γίνεσθαι). Therefore, some versions express the concept that the command to pour out the bowls has been fulfilled; they read “it is over” (REB) or “the end has come” (NJB).

7. *Rev 21:22*. “And I did not see a temple in it. For the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.” God and his people dwell together in the new Jerusalem, the city of the Lord God Almighty. If the entire city is the dwelling place of God, then there is no need for a special section reserved for the saints to meet God. The city itself has become the holy of holies.

Jesus predicted that the temple in Jerusalem would disappear (Matt 24:2). And when he died on the cross, the curtain hiding the holy of holies from view was split from top to bottom (Matt 27:51). This was a visible sign that the temple and its services had come to end—realized forty years later in AD 70. Christ Jesus entered heaven in the presence of God, having offered himself once for all to do away with sin; he will appear a second time not to remove sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him (Heb 9:24–28).

¹⁷ Homer Hailey, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 322; Isbon T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John: Studies in Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979 [reprint 1919]) 678.

III. CONCLUSION

The occurrences of *ναός* in their respective settings point to the celestial temple, namely, the very presence of God. Its occurrence in 11:1 ought not to be interpreted literally but rather symbolically.

Nonetheless, for the imagery in this setting John uses the familiar structure of the temple in Jerusalem: the sanctuary, the altar, the worshipers, and the outer court. And the temple destroyed by Roman forces still serves him as a teaching model. Although a literal interpretation of or a historical approach to Revelation may have validity, for an apocalyptic book that is filled with symbolism a figurative explanation is not only sound exegesis, it is even desired.