



# Richard Davidson



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**Shabbat Shalom:** How would you describe the function of the sanctuary?

**Dr. Richard Davidson:** The Bible implies (and both later Jewish and Christian sources make explicit) that the original sanctuary/temple “from the beginning” was in heaven (Exodus 25:9, 40; Jeremiah 17:12) and that one of its primary functions was as a place of assembly (Isaiah 14:13) where the created heavenly beings came to worship the Creator (Isaiah 6; Revelation 4). The earthly counterparts to this heavenly temple—the first sanctuary in Eden, the wilderness tabernacle, and the First and Second Temples—all had this same basic worship function. After the entrance of sin, the sanctuary/temple took on the additional function of ritually expiating sin so that human beings could continue to enter into the presence of a holy God to worship. Every part of the sanctuary had a part to play in facilitating this worship of the Creator.

**Shabbat Shalom:** In Christian understanding, what is the significance of the sanctuary/temple?

**Davidson:** The basic text in the Bible that speaks to this question is Exodus 25:8, where God told Moses, “And let them make me a sanctuary that I may dwell in their midst.” The sanctuary is God’s dwelling place, His house! The word “temple” in Hebrew comes from a Sumerian word *E.GAL* meaning “great house.” The heavenly temple is His cosmic dwelling, and the earthly sanctuar-



ies/temples were where He made His presence known among His people. The ultimate significance of the sanctuary/temple, then, is that it tangibly reveals God's desire to be near, to dwell among His creatures.

**Shabbat Shalom:** How did the temple/sanctuary affect Christian worship?

**Davidson:** I can speak personally that as a pastor I consciously patterned my weekly worship services after the model of worship set forth in the heavenly sanctuary scene of Isaiah 6. I find this same basic model of sanctuary worship depicted in Revelation 4-5 in the New Testament. I believe the celestial worship in the heavenly sanctuary is the divine pattern after which the earthly sanctuary rituals of the Torah are based, and could well provide a blueprint for all earthly worship, be it Christian or Jewish. Especially significant for real worship is the encounter with the awesome holiness of God in His sanctuary that causes the worshiper to bow humbly before the Creator with a sense of utter unworthiness. Such is the meaning of the Hebrew word for "worship"—to "fall on one's face"; such was the experience of every follower of God who encountered Him directly (in theophany) in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Only such a sense of humility can prepare the way for the cleansing coal from the heavenly altar and for empowerment to obedience to His call.

**Shabbat Shalom:** What does the temple/sanctuary teach us about God?

**Davidson:** The sanctuary/temple teaches us first that God, although infinite, is not timeless (contrary to the claims of Plato and much subsequent philosophical thought). He truly can dwell in a spatiotemporal reality, His house, in heaven and on earth. Recognizing this radical claim of

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Slaughter Area

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Scripture strikes a blow against the dualistic foundation of many Christian philosophical systems. God can truly come and live with His creatures. And, as I've already pointed out, He desires, even longs to be close to us. Thus the sanctuary reveals divine love. At the same time, it also reveals the holiness of God, that He cannot be approached by sinful human beings without a mediator (the priest) and atonement for their sins (via the sacrifice). That God provided a way of atonement shows clearly His grace and mercy. Furthermore, the foundation of sanctuary ethics was *lex talionis*, or the law of just retaliation (e.g., Deuteronomy 19:15-21), making evident the justice of God.

**Shabbat Shalom:** What role did the sanctuary/temple play for early Christians?

**Davidson:** As I understand this period, early Jewish Christians continued to worship at the temple. In those days there was no radical discontinuity between Christians and Jews in their worship. The early Christian house-church worship was largely modeled after the synagogue, which was in turn indebted to the temple for its ritual. For Gentile Christians the sanctuary-related laws applicable to the alien/stranger were still considered mandatory (Leviticus 17-18; Acts 15). At the same time, Christians focused upon the heavenly sanctuary, where the Messianic High Priest was ministering (Hebrews 7-10). But even this was not in discontinuity with the time of the Hebrew Bible, where mediation from the heavenly sanctuary occurred (e.g., Isaiah 6). Radical discontinuity did not come until the fourth century C.E. when institutional Christianity, in the process of assimilating with paganism, by and large rejected the Torah. Such was not the view of the early Christians.



**Shabbat Shalom:** How was the Jewish temple different from the other temples of the same era?

**Davidson:** Outwardly, as archaeologists have verified, the Jewish temple resembled other ancient Near Eastern temples in many respects, both in physical layout and furnishings and in rituals. But I see at least two distinct differences that point up fundamental theological divergences. In the ancient Near Eastern temple floor plans, the presence of benches in the Holy Place in full view of the Holy of Holies seems to indicate that the worshipers were permitted to come into the very presence of the deity. There was apparently no deep sense of the sinfulness of humanity and the utter holiness of the god or goddess which would prevent the worshiper from entering their direct presence. This reflects the nature of the pantheistic religion of Israel's neighbors. By contrast, in the Jewish temple only the High Priest could pass behind the second veil into the Holy of Holies, and that only once a year, with special sacrifices and after the cloud of incense had covered the mercy seat from sight (Leviticus 16). Thus the Jewish temple worship upheld the transcendent holiness of God, the sinfulness of humanity, and the need of a mediator between God and man.

Second, in both pagan sanctuaries and the Jewish temple there was the offering of sacrifices. The record of pagan rituals seems to make clear that the major purpose of those sacrifices was for humans to appease the wrath of the god. In the Jewish temple rituals the divine wrath was also appeased. But, in contrast to the pagan rites, God Himself

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provided the sacrifice to appease His own wrath! Leviticus 17:11 reads: "For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I HAVE GIVEN IT to you

upon the altar to make atonement for your souls." Thus I find that the pagan sanctuary layouts and

rituals distorted crucial aspects of the character of God that affected one's whole concept of worship and salvation. The Jewish sanctuary/temple, as described in the Hebrew Bible, counteracts these distorted perspectives.



Basin

**Shabbat Shalom:** What is the priestly function today without the literal temple being present?

**Davidson:** By means of numerous intertextual links between the narratives describing the Mosaic sanctuary and the Garden of Eden, the Torah makes clear that the Garden of Eden was the first sanctuary on earth. In particular, the Torah uses the same technical terms for the work of Adam and Eve in the Garden as for the ministry of the priests in the sanctuary. After the Fall, again the Torah utilizes the same special technical terminology for God's clothing Adam and Eve as is used elsewhere only in the clothing of the priests in the sanctuary. These echoes clearly indicate that Adam and Eve were the first



Tabernacle Chamber

priests. At the beginning, all of humanity were priests! At Mt. Sinai, God reveals that His original plan was for the whole nation of Israel to be "a kingdom of priests" (Exodus 19:6).

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Christians believe that with the coming of the Messiah God has returned to His original plan of the "priesthood of all believers" (1 Peter 2:5, 9; Revelation 1:6). We also believe that the Messiah who has come



is now ministering in the heavenly sanctuary as High Priest after the order of Melchizedek, in fulfillment of the prediction of Psalm 110 (see Hebrews 7-10).

**Shabbat Shalom:** What is substituted now for the various offerings that were given in the temple?

**Davidson:** Christians believe that the sacrificial system of the Hebrew Bible prefigured the coming of the Messiah, who would die as both Priest and Sacrifice, once for all, in fulfillment of the various sacrifices outlined in the Torah as predicted by the prophets (Psalm 40:6-8; Isaiah 53; Hebrews 10). The New Testament also teaches that believers should offer their bodies as a “living sacrifice” (Romans 12:1) in faith, obedience and praise (Philippians 2:17; 1 Peter 2:5; Hebrews 13:15).

**Shabbat Shalom:** What, if any, is the link between the Messiah to come and the temple/sanctuary?

**Davidson:** I understand that the temple/sanctuary was not only the dwelling place of the Shekinah Glory, but also the embodiment of the divine plan of salvation to be realized with the coming of the Messiah. Hence the whole sanctuary space and ritual as depicted in the Hebrew Bible points toward the Messiah who would “tabernacle among us” (John 1:14). The New Testament is saturated with sanctuary imagery to describe the coming of the Messiah. Tabernacle, priest, sacrifice, altar, laver, bread, Menorah, incense, mercy seat, tables of stone, daily and yearly services—it all is seen to point to the Coming One. Whole books of the New Testament are structured around the sanctuary connected to the Messiah. For example, the Gospel of John describes the Messiah’s ministry in relationship to the Jewish



Bread of Presence Table

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Menorah

festival year. Likewise, the book of Revelation has as its macrostructure seven progressive scenes of the Messiah’s ministry in the sanctuary space and ritual. Without denying the reality of the sanctuary as a place of divine dwelling, the Ultimate

Temple is a person, no, two persons: “the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb [the Messiah]” (Revelation 21:22).

**Shabbat Shalom:** What is one key spiritual lesson you feel is important to learn from the temple/sanctuary?

**Davidson:** The most impressive lesson I have learned from the sanctuary is the amazing persistence and resourcefulness of God’s love, shown in the way He has devised a plan to solve the human sin problem through the sanctuary services, and thus make it possible for Him to dwell with His people and be their God in that same sanctuary.

**Shabbat Shalom:** What were the various areas of the temple/sanctuary? What is the spiritual significance of each of those areas?

**Davidson:** The sanctuary had three main compartments of ascending holiness, from the outer court, to the Holy Place, and then the Holy of Holies. I see these same three ascending spheres of holiness in the original Garden sanctuary in Eden, with the entire newly-created earth constituting the court, the garden itself the Holy Place, and the two trees “in the midst of the Garden” the equivalent of the Holy of Holies, where God met with Adam and Eve. Similarly, at Mt. Sinai, there was the “court” at the foot of the mountain where the people camped, the “Holy Place” where Aaron and his sons and the 70 elders ascended, and the “Holy of Holies” at the top of the mount where God met with Moses. The heavenly sanctuary also appears to have a similar gradation of holiness (see Rev-



elation 4-5; 11:19). After sin, humans were expelled from the Garden sanctuary and (except for priestly mediator/representatives) restricted to the court. In the Mosaic sanctuary and first and second Temples, the court was the place of sacrifice, the Holy Place the sphere of intercession, and the Holy of Holies the location of judgment. The same seems to be true of the heavenly counterpart, with judgment concentrated in the Holy of Holies at the throne of God (Daniel 7). According to the New Testament, the cosmic counterpart of the outer court is this earth (Hebrews 13:10; Revelation 11:2). After the end of sin, redeemed humanity will once more be given access to the inner compartments of the Temple; in fact, their eternal home will be in the New Jerusalem which the book of Revelation equates with the Cosmic Holy of Holies (Revelation 21:1-3, 16).

**Shabbat Shalom:** What do you think of the movement to rebuild and restore the temple?

**Davidson:** With the Christian's shift of focus to the heavenly sanctuary, and the ongoing ministry of the heavenly high priest, the rebuilding and restoration of the earthly temple by human hands ceases to be of pressing significance (except for Christian dispensationalists, for whom the building of the temple is a piece in their eschatological puzzle). I do believe that at the end of the present age God's heavenly temple (the New Jerusalem) will come to this earth and will be the place of worship for His people throughout eternity (Revelation 21:1-4). So the temple on earth will one day be restored, by God Himself!

**Shabbat Shalom:** What is the relevancy of the sanctuary of ancient Israel?

**Davidson:** The Hebrew Bible is saturated with material on the sanctuary. Some 45 chapters of

the Torah and another 45 chapters of the Prophets are given over exclusively to discussing aspects of the sanctuary/temple, not to mention the book of Psalms, which comprised ancient Israel's hymnbook for the sanctuary. The whole life of the ancient Israelite revolved around the sanctuary. To the sanctuary they came every week for the Sabbath, every month for the new-moon festival, and every year for the annual festivals. To the sanctuary they brought their sacrifices, and at the sanctuary they received forgiveness of their sins and instruction in Torah from the priests. The sanctuary was the focal point for worship of YHWH, and the bastion against



Altar of Incense

counterfeit worship at the pagan sanctuaries. The sanctuary was the embodiment of the triple star of human value—beauty, truth, and goodness (see Psalm 27). The sanctuary, both earthly copy and heavenly original to which the earthly pointed, has the same relevancy today as for ancient Israel!

**Shabbat Shalom:** Why is the sanctuary so important in Seventh-day Adventist theology?

**Davidson:** The Seventh-day Adventist Church was born out of a recognition of the relevance of the sanctuary services of the Hebrew Bible. From clues already within the Hebrew Bible, augmented by further elaboration within the New Testament, it became evident to Adventist pioneers that the yearly cycle of festivals, set forth in Leviticus 23, from *Pesach* at "the beginning of months" (Exodus 12:2) to *Sukkot* at the "end of the year" (Exodus 23:16), ritually preenacted the entire scope of salvation history



Ark

from the coming of the Messiah to the end of the world. The prophetic time prophecies of Daniel 7 and 8 were seen by Adventist Bible students to point to the final apocalyptic *Yom Kippur* judgment that was to precede the return of the Messiah. The present time in which we live constitutes the heavenly fulfillment of *Yom Kippur*, and thus



every moment of time is fraught with sanctuary significance. The work of the high priest in the earthly sanctuary every year at *Yom Kippur* (Leviticus 16) foreshadowed the present work of the Messianic High Priest in the heavenly sanctuary, and this is the event predicted not only by Daniel but by John in the New Testament (Revelation 14:6,7). So, not only does the sanctuary have relevance for Seventh-day Adventists because of its portrayal of the first and second advents of the Messiah, in common with the other Christian churches, but also because of its prophetic pinpointing of the current time of heavenly judgment corresponding to *Yom Kippur* of the Hebrew Bible. Adventists await the end of the Cosmic *Yom Kippur* and the commencement of the eschatological *Sukkot* portrayed in Zechariah 14 and Revelation 21-22.

***Shabbat Shalom:*** How would such a Seventh-day Adventist emphasis on the Israelite sanctuary affect the relationship with the Jewish people?

***Davidson:*** I'm convinced that the centrality of the sanctuary and its rituals within both Judaism and Seventh-day Adventism unites us together in a common bond of faith and focus, as does the common belief in the seventh-day Sabbath. Just as has happened with regard to Jewish-Adventist dialogue on the Sabbath, I anticipate that the mutual interest in the Israelite sanctuary could lead to further creative discussion of the profound sanctuary theology in the Hebrew Bible and the practical relevance of this sanctuary theology for our respective faith communities. I can testify that while living in Israel for a total of almost two years during the course of my teaching career, I have had opportunity to savor the Jewish vigor and joy of the three Hebrew pilgrim festivals, and to encounter the Days of Awe centering in *Yom Kippur* as practiced in the Jewish tradition. From these memorable celebrations I have gained a much deeper intellectual and existential

understanding of the sanctuary in general, and in particular I have grasped more fully the experiential essence of *Yom Kippur*. I look forward to many more occasions when Jewish and Seventh-day Adventist faith and practice centered in the sanctuary can enrich each other's perspectives on this crucial theme of the Hebrew Bible.

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***Shabbat Shalom:*** On the other hand, wouldn't this emphasis on the Israelite sanctuary affect the relationship with other Christians who have disconnected from the so called Old Testament?

***Davidson:*** Yes, I believe the united witness of Jews and Seventh-day Adventists to the centrality of the sanctuary in Scripture will have a positive effect on Christians who have largely ignored sanctuary/temple theology due to their disconnection from the Hebrew Bible. It is my hope that such witness, articulated in arenas such as biblical studies, systematic theology, liturgy and the arts, ethics and personal lifestyle, face-to-face encounters, and so on, can capture the attention and imagination of Christianity at large, redirecting their focus to this sublime subject of Scripture. Such redirected focus can then serve as a catalyst for Christians to fully reengage with the truth, beauty, and goodness found in the Hebrew Bible. I'm convinced that the sanctuary theme, if appreciated and emphasized in all its richness by both Jews and Christians, has more potential than any other theme in Scripture, for stimulating Jewish-Christian dialogue and fostering mutual respect and understanding among our respective faith communities. So let's study the sanctuary together!