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Inhabiting Eternity: Finding the Tabernacle and Temple in Isaiah 57:15

Jacob Rennaker

THE language that people use conveys a myriad of meaning. In examining the language an author uses, for example, one can attempt to discover his or her understanding of a subject. This holds true for the author of the book of Isaiah. Isaiah 57:15 contains a curious phrase that is used nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible. Here, God is referred to as One who “inhabits eternity.”¹ These words imply a certain understanding of deity. Traditionally, this verse has been interpreted as a metaphor regarding God’s kingship and His transcendence (see below). In a careful examination of the phraseology and context of the verse, however, Isaiah’s description is reflective of symbols in which ancient Israel found superlative meaning: the tabernacle and temple of God.

The entire verse says:

For thus says the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite.

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1. All translations are from the NRSV unless otherwise indicated.

The phrase under consideration in Hebrew is שֶׁכַּן עַד. The first word, שֶׁכַּן means to reside or inhabit.² This verb is in the active participle form, which in the NRSV is translated “inhabits.” The second word, עַד, can mean either “perpetual continuation; enduring future,”³ or “time without end.”⁴ In both the NRSV and the KJV, the word in this verse was translated as “eternity.” Interestingly, in the entire Old Testament the word “eternity” appears twice in the NRSV, and only once in the KJV.⁵ The uniqueness of this combination of words allows for many different translations and interpretations.

Kingship

Interpreting this verse in light of a kingship context provides valuable insights. Some read the phrase רַם וְנִשָּׂא שֶׁכַּן עַד instead as “in the height as Holy One I sit enthroned,”⁶ or “who sits enthroned forever.”⁷ This particular verse has also been viewed as depicting some sort of royal audience chamber.⁸ One scholar believes that “this reference to [His] eternal rule derives apparently from the Jerusalem tradition of God’s kingship,”⁹ which is reflected elsewhere in the Old Testament. This imagery can be seen in another chapter of the book of Isaiah: “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a

2. Willem A. VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 111.

3. G. Brottetweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Hein-Josef Fabry, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 456.

4. Brottetweck, et. al., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 10, 460.

5. Merrill C. Tenney, *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975), 381.

6. See George A. Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 5 (New York: Abingdon Press, 1956), 671–72.

7. H.C. Leupold, *Exposition of Isaiah*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1971), 279.

8. Joseph Blenkinsopp, “Isaiah 56–66,” *Anchor Bible*, vol. 19 (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 295.

9. Brottetweck et al., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 10, 460.

throne, high and lofty. . . . Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory . . . my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts” (Isa 6:1, 3, 5). This “kingship” of God can be seen as “a royal metaphor for the great sovereign who from the exalted throne room extends the royal presence and the royal concern”¹⁰ to His subjects. While this interpretation fits quite nicely into the context of an Israelite kingship ideology, there are other possible interpretations that help to augment our understanding of this verse. These additional aspectual interpretations take into account other facets of ancient Israel’s theology.

Transcendence

Another rendition of the phrase שכן ער is “abides forever.”¹¹ שכן can be translated “to reside,” which implies a stationary condition. The following word, ער, was cited before as implying perpetual continuation. This second word could be seen as clarifying and intensifying the first verb. Thus, the phrase in its entirety can be used to show the eternal and unchanging nature of God. This particular principle is expressed by a number of biblical authors. The author of Psalms wrote, “from everlasting to everlasting, you are God” (Ps 90:2), and “you [God] are the same, and your years have no end” (Ps 102:27). Elsewhere, God says, “For I the Lord do not change” (Mal 3:6). As an eternal being, God is not subject to the vicissitudes of mortality; he is not subject to death or any other type of change.

This particular interpretation of the phrase שכן ער gives a different meaning to the verse. Instead of bringing to mind a royal setting, it now stresses the unchangeable nature of God. Whereas a king can be seen in relation to his subjects, a transcendent¹² and unchangeable being would

10. Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40–66* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 180–86.

11. Ronald E. Clements, ed., *New Century Bible Commentary: Isaiah 40–66* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 210.

12. Homer Hailey, *A Commentary on Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985), 468.

have difficulty relating to those who are constantly changing. Isaiah touched upon this concept in an earlier chapter: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa 55:8–9). The “high and holy place” of God’s residence mentioned in Isaiah 57:15, in this view, is nowhere on earth, but in heaven.¹³ One scholar, however, attempted to reconcile this view of God as unchanging with the view of God as a type of king. In his synthesis, he stated, “[God] has always sat enthroned.”¹⁴ This view includes the royal imagery, while maintaining God’s permanence. This interpretation would have allowed the audience to conceptualize God as a tangible ruler. However, the psychological distance between a king and his subjects in antiquity still would have left the impression of a deity who is somewhat removed from his people.

The Tabernacle

While God possesses eternal characteristics, the words used in this verse do not necessarily describe a completely static or unreachable deity. The verb שָׁכַן can mean “to dwell.” However, this word does not necessarily imply “the notion of a static remaining,” but can also mean a “transition into a spatially and temporally as yet unspecified condition.”¹⁵ It can also be translated as “to rest,”¹⁶ which implies some sort of transition. The word used for the Israelite tabernacle (מִשְׁכַּן) is derived from the root letters שָׁכַן. The tabernacle was a temporary structure that was moved many times during Israel’s journey in the wilderness. Sometime after Israel was settled in their promised land, they built a permanent place for their God: the temple. The temple was not referred to as a מִשְׁכַּן, but as a הַכֹּלֵל, a בַּיִת, or a מִקְדָּשׁ. The

13. Hailey, *Commentary on Isaiah*, 468.

14. H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Isaiah*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1971), 280.

15. Brotterweck et al., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 14, 694.

16. Aaron Pick, *Dictionary of Old Testament Words for English Readers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publishers, 1977), 211.

visible difference between the words used to describe the transitory tabernacle and the stationary temple helps to further demonstrate the implications of the word שְׁכִינָה.

An interesting parallel is found in the New Testament. The Greek word σκηνή means “tabernacle.”¹⁷ In the prologue to John’s gospel, it states: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:1, 14). The word translated as “lived” is εσκηνωσεν which literally means to “tent” or “tabernacle.” Further associations can be made with the words Isaiah used because some “suggest that the LXX translators may have favored this particular Greek term for ‘tabernacle’ because its consonants [σ-κ-ν] correspond to the Hebrew consonants for the Shekinah [ש-כ-נ], God’s presence.”¹⁸ Here in John 1, a transcendent and eternal being is seen as transitioning from an eternal realm to a temporal realm. The language used in these New Testament verses appears to be referring to Israel’s exodus. God was not static or utterly transcendent during the sojourn in the wilderness; He was seen as a dynamic deity who regularly made contact with his people. By means of the tabernacle, God transitioned from his heavenly realm to an earthly dwelling place, where he associated with Israel. John applied this imagery to Jesus, as a God, transitioning from heaven to earth, just as the God of Israel had done in the past. The presence of this imagery in John’s writings argues for the existence of such a view among some Jews in the second temple period.¹⁹

17. Willem A. VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 1133.

18. Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 408. The Shekinah, or “God’s presence,” was the verbal representation of God’s presence in the tabernacle, where he communed with Israel.

19. George Arthur Buttrick, *The Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 8 (New York: Abington Press, 1951), 473.

A Temple Perspective

When these differing translations are all seen in light of the temple, a harmonious description of God emerges. He is a perpetual King, who rules his people with constancy and equity. Even though he is transcendent, he can be approached by humanity in his holy palace, the temple. The temple is a place where sacred space meets sacred time. The verb שָׁכַן, as mentioned earlier, refers to dwelling in a certain place. The place where God dwells is considered sacred, as can be seen in Genesis when altars and memorials were erected at places where God appeared (Gen 26:24–25, 28:12–18, 35:1). Related to the concept of sacred space is the element of time implicit in the word עֵרָב. God sets apart sacred time, as shown in the Ten Commandments: “Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy . . . therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it” (Exod 20:8–11).

The Holy of Holies combined both the elements of sacred space and sacred time. It was the most holy place within the tabernacle and temple (Exod 26:34), and was to be entered by the high priest once a year on the holiest day, the Day of Atonement (Exod 30:10). It was in the Holy of Holies that the Eternal God would appear on his “throne” above the mercy seat to “commune” with Israel (Exod 25:22; see also 1 Sam 4:4).

Conclusion

The people of Israel were profoundly affected by the events and aftermath of the Exodus. The symbolism of the tabernacle, the evidence of God among his wandering people, permeated their very language. In describing God as One who “inhabits eternity,” Isaiah used words that reflected his understanding of deity. The particular words used by this prophet depict God in terms of the tabernacle: God was the divine king of his people Israel, whose rule was constant. This God was not utterly transcendent; he condescended to visit his people. Even after their sojourn through the desert, God continued to visit this people in the temple that they

built for him.²⁰ Both the tabernacle and the temple became the symbol for the place where this celestial sovereign manifested Himself as the God of Israel. The seemingly small phrase שֶׁכֶן עַד embodied each of these fundamental attributes of God and conveyed to Israel the majesty of their God who truly “inhabits eternity.”

20. This is vividly depicted in the dedication of Solomon's temple in 1 Kings 8:10–12.