

Hebrews 9:23

Cleansing Heavenly Things

Opinions from several commentators

Therefore it was necessary for the copies of the things in the heavens to be cleansed with these, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these.

Ἀνάγκη οὖν τὰ μὲν ὑποδείγματα τῶν ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς τούτοις καθαρίζεσθαι
αὐτὰ δὲ τὰ ἐπουράνια κρείττοσιν θυσίαις παρὰ ταύτας.

[Attridge](#)
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Attridge

“...the mythical image of the heavenly sanctuary by this point is obviously being used in a metaphorical or symbolic way. They also correctly suggest that the referent of the metaphor is some aspect of the live experience of the author and his community....In fact that referent is hardly in doubt. As the reflection on spirit and conscience in 9:14 suggests, the heavenly or ideal realities cleansed by Christ’s sacrifice are none other than the consciences of the member of the new covenant, the ‘inheritors of eternal salvation.’”¹

Bruce

It has frequently been asked in what sense ‘the heavenly things’ required to be cleansed; but our author has provided the answer in the context. What required to be cleansed was the defiled conscience of men and women; this is a cleansing which belongs to the spiritual sphere. [Note 152: By the removal of the defilement of sin from the hearts and consciences of the worshippers, the heavenly sphere in which they approach God to worship Him is itself cleansed from this defilement.]²

Cockerill

This verse evokes two questions in the minds of many modern readers: (1) Why must "the heavenly things" be cleansed? (2) Why does the pastor say better "sacrifices" (plural) when he is obviously referring to the sacrifice of Christ, which he unquestionably affirms as offered "once for all" (9:25-10:4)?

An answer to the second question is not only easier but gives some direction for addressing the first. The pastor uses the plural, "better sacrifices," because he is drawing a parallel with the various

¹ Harold W. Attridge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 262.

² F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), 218-219.

sacrifices of the Old Covenant and establishing a general principle before discussing the "better sacrifice" of Christ." Thus, he also refers to the "heavenly things" as being purified by analogy with the necessary cleansing of the earthly "pattern" described in vv. 18-22 (cf. Lev 16:16-19).¹⁰ Christ's sacrifice cleanses the heavenly Sanctuary by analogy with the way in which animal sacrifices cleanse the "pattern." Furthermore, since cleansing was prerequisite to entering the Mosaic Tent, the cleansing of the heavenly appears to have been accomplished by the "once-for-all" sacrifice of Christ which procured his highpriestly entrance.

Those who contend that Hebrews is dependent on the radical heavenly/earthly dichotomy characteristic of Platonic dualism have the most difficulty explaining how the heavenly world required cleansing. [Note 12 – “Had the author wanted to introduce Satan at this point, he surely would not have been so obscure” (MacLeod, ‘Tabernacle,’ 68).] Riegenbach, however, reminds us that it was the sins of the people and not its earthly character that polluted the Mosaic sanctuary. Their sins formed a barrier that prevented them from coming into God's presence and exposed them to his wrath. If sin erected a barrier forbidding entrance into the sanctuary that was a "pattern," how much more did it bar the way into the "true" Sanctuary in which God dwells. Lane is correct when he says, "The writer conceived of defilement as an objective impediment to genuine access to God." [Note 14: Lane, 2:247] Thus by cleansing the heavenly Sanctuary Christ removed this otherwise impregnable barrier and the accompanying threat of judgment. The pastor is not merely repeating what he said about Christ's sacrifice cleansing the “conscience (9:14), and the heavenly Sanctuary is no mere metaphor for human interiority.”³

Harris (quoting Koester)

καθαρίζεσθαι [*katharizesthai*, “to be cleansed” – mw] is understood elliptically from the previous clause.⁴

There is such a close correl. between the earthly and the heavenly that the pollution from the earthly (e.g., the fall) has also affected the heavenly (Lane 2:247); this nuance, however, is not clear from the overall context of Hebrews. A variant is that “[s]ince sin affects all creation, Christ's work extends to all creation” (Koester 421).⁵

Lane

In the concluding paragraph (vv 23-28), the writer elaborates upon the triumphant announcement of vv 11-12. His concern is to specify some of the objective benefits of Christ's blood by reference to the heavenly sanctuary and cultus and to the consummation of redemptive history. The preceding argument in vv 15-22 is clearly presupposed, as the inferential particle οὖν, "then," "therefore," in v 23 indicates,

³ Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 416.

⁴ Dana M. Harris, *Hebrews*, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament (EGGNT) (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2019), 241.

⁵ Dana M. Harris, *Hebrews*, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament (EGGNT) (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2019), 242.

while the axiomatic character of the statement in v 22b explains the necessity (ἀνάγκη) postulated. The canon concerning the application of blood extends not only to the purgation of the tabernacle and its vessels but to the heavenly reality of which the earthly cultus was only an imperfect suggestion. The formulation of v 23a reflects particularly on v 21 and defines the significance of sacrifice in terms of blood as the medium of purgation. The use of καθαρίζεσθαι, "to be purged," shows that the emphasis is placed upon the removal of impurity. Blood provides access to God by the removal of defilement (Johnsson, "Defilement," 329-31).

The additional statement that the heavenly prototypes of the earthly tabernacle and its cultus required cleansing "by better sacrifices than these" clearly implies that the heavenly sanctuary had also become defiled by the sin of the people. Although this implication has been dismissed as "nonsense" (Spicq, 2:266-67; cf. Moffatt, 132; F. F. Bruce, 218; among others), it is consistent with the conceptual framework presupposed by the writer in 9:1-28. His thinking has been informed by the Levitical conception of the necessity for expiatory purification. Sin as defilement is infectious. An individual assumes his part in the community through social relationships and cultic acts. Consequently, the effects of his defilement contaminate society (e.g., Lev 21:15; cf. Heb 12:15-16), the sanctuary where God met with his people (cf. Lev 16:16; 20:3; 21:23; Num 19:20), and even the inanimate vessels used in the cultus (cf. v 21).

That the effects of sin also extend to the heavenly world is a corollary of the solidarity that the writer perceives between ultimate reality in heaven and its reflection on earth. The cultus on earth is inseparably linked to the situation in heaven (cf. 8:5; 9:7, 11-12, 23; 12:18-24). As defilement reaches beyond the individual to taint society and the earthly cultus, it also pollutes heavenly reality. The writer conceived of defilement as an objective impediment to genuine access to God. It made necessary a decisive purgation that was comprehensive in its scope, reaching even to the heavenly things themselves (so also Windisch, 85; Riegenbach, 283; Cody, *Heavenly Sanctuary*, 81-91; Johnsson, "Defilement," 256-61).

The full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice of Christ purified the heavenly sanctuary from the defilement resulting from the sins of the people. The phrase κρείττοσιν θυσίαις παρὰ ταύτας, "by means of better sacrifices than these," has reference to the death of Christ on the cross. The plural form θυσίαις, "sacrifices," is to be explained as attraction to the plural form τούτοις by these means," in v 23a, with which it contrasts (N. H. Young, *NTS* 27 [1980-81] 206). The sacrificial blood with which the former covenant had been ratified and with which the tabernacle had been dedicated and its vessels purged was insufficient to remove the defilement that clung to αὐτὰ τὰ ἐπουράνια, 'the heavenly things themselves.' The superior sacrifice demanded was provided by the self-oblation of Christ.⁶

⁶ William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, Word Biblical Commentary (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1991), 247-248.