

The Temple in the Olivet Discourse and Other New Testament Texts: A Brief Evaluation of Nondispensational Understandings of NT Temple Imagery

INTRODUCTION

How nondispensationalists handle New Testament statements using temple imagery can often confuse dispensationalists. Certainly, most nondispensationalists hold that many of the references to the temple in the Gospels should be understood as the concrete Jewish temple of the first century. Furthermore, there are other places in the New Testament where dispensationalists would readily agree with their theological counterparts that temple language is used to describe the Church or Church Age believers. However, at this point there is a divergence which at times causes the two camps to talk past each other. Nondispensationalists seem to use the fact that temple imagery sometimes describes the Church to read New Testament ecclesiology into other “temple” passages, especially ones that have an eschatological context. Such an approach appears to be consistent with a kind of replacement theology in which national Israel is now dead and gone, while the Church has become the recipient of the blessings implied in the context of many temple passages.

One example of this nondispensational treatment of temple language can be found in Knox Seminary’s *Open Letter to Evangelicals*.¹ Proposition VII says the following:

Jesus taught that his resurrection was the raising of the True Temple of Israel. He has replaced the priesthood, sacrifices, and sanctuary of Israel by fulfilling them in his own glorious priestly ministry and by offering, once and for all, his sacrifice for the world, that is, for both Jew and Gentile. Believers from all nations are now being built up through him into this Third Temple, the church that Jesus promised to build.

This rather interpretive statement goes well beyond the exegetical facts. Certainly, Jesus made the following statement to the Jews within the temple precincts: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19). The Apostle John adds the explanatory note in the text, “But he was speaking of the temple of His body.” Thus, Jesus does use the language of the temple to teach his own resurrection.

Theologically, what are we to make of such a statement? It is certainly metaphorical. Jesus uses the temple, which is the place of God’s presence, as a metaphor for his own physical body, which is clearly another place for God’s presence in light of the incarnation. In other words, the Jewish temple becomes an analogy for the body of Jesus Himself. However, the Open Letter’s proposition goes beyond this recognition in the words and suggests that the metaphor theologically means that “Jesus taught that his resurrection was the raising of the True Temple of Israel.” On what grounds is this statement made? The exegetical facts that can be observed in this text do not suggest that Jesus was teaching the replacement of a false Jewish temple with his own resurrection body as a “true” temple (even if the replacement is done by fulfillment).

¹ As of 20 July 2005 the Open Letter is still posted on the seminary’s website under the heading *The Wittenberg Door*. I have responded to this nondispensational document in Mike Stallard, “A Dispensational Response to the Knox Seminary Open Letter to Evangelicals,” *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 7 (Fall 2003): 5-41.

The proposition goes further in its expansion of the actual text by referring to the Church as the “Third Temple.” We have already noted that dispensationalists believe that the New Testament often uses temple imagery to describe the Church (we will look at that later). However, the New Testament never refers to the Church with the phrase “third temple.” Presumably, the progression according to the intent of the proposition is the first Jewish temple, the second temple which is the body of Jesus, and the third temple which is the Church. This is a theological conclusion that depends upon the prior understanding of a nondispensational viewpoint rather than a compelling conclusion forced by the text itself.

Not all nondispensationalists argue exactly this way about temple imagery. The label *nondispensationalism* is a broad category which includes a wide range of opinions. However, the example above should suffice to show that the use of temple imagery in the New Testament is one of the many points of disagreement that highlight the hermeneutical barriers that exist between the two camps in general. Where dispensationalists often see analogous language, nondispensationalists see theological conclusions that favor the replacement of Israel by the Church. With that in mind, we want to examine a few of the key passages in which temple imagery occurs: Matthew 24:2, 2 Thessalonians 2:4, and Revelation 11:1-2. Other passages will be brought in along the way.

THE TEMPLE IN MATTHEW 24:2

Perhaps the most famous reference to the temple can be found in the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24:1-3; Mark 13:1-4; Luke 21:5-7). Preterists and most dispensationalists agree that Jesus spoke of Herod’s temple that would be destroyed in 70 A.D. when He predicts that “not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down” (Matt. 24:2). The difference between the preterists and the dispensationalists is their understanding of the timing of the events in the eschatological discourse about the tribulation period which follows these words of Jesus (Matt. 24:4ff). The preterists see the tribulation period as being fulfilled in the years prior to and leading up to 70 A.D. (already fulfilled).² On the other hand, dispensationalists are committed futurists who see the rest of the discourse yet to be fulfilled at some point after the coming rapture of the Church. What this means is that dispensationalists usually see two separate time frames in the passage, an earlier destruction of the temple and the later tribulation period. At this point in history we can say that the two are separated by over 1900 years.

The dispensationalist must at this point consider the preterist charge of inconsistency about this particular matter. On what basis, the preterist asks, does the dispensationalist interpret the first two verses of the passage to refer to a first-century event while at the same time taking the rest of the passage to refer to an event that is at least as far in the future as the 21st century? Is not this a form of intellectual gymnastics that is forced upon the passage by a wrong-headed and theologically driven interpretation?

A few dispensationalists have handled the charge by affirming that there are not two different time frames in the Olivet Discourse. Under this minority interpretation, the temple that Jesus slates for destruction is the end-time temple of the tribulation period, not Herod’s temple that was to be

² For a preterist presentation of the Olivet Discourse, see R. C. Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 27-48. I have responded to Sproul’s presentation in Mike Stallard, “A Review of R. C. Sproul’s *The Last Days According to Jesus: An Analysis of Moderate Preterism*, Part I,” 6 (March 2002): 55-71 and “A Review of R. C. Sproul’s *The Last Days According to Jesus: An Analysis of Moderate Preterism*, Part II,” 6 (August 2002): 184-202.

destroyed in 70 A.D.³ This approach automatically eliminates the preterist charge of inconsistency, since everything in the passage is now made to refer to events associated with Daniel's Seventieth Week.

However, the vast majority of dispensationalists have not gone this direction in light of one or more exegetical observations. First, it really can be said in all honesty that Matthew 24:1-2 describes a different time and issue than the later verses of the discourse.⁴ There is nothing that requires that the temple in verse two be eschatological. The issue put forward by the disciples about the magnificence of the temple looks at a current state of affairs. Jesus' prediction seems to deal with this current state of affairs while the further questions (Matt. 24:3) lead to the eschatological discussion to follow. Thus, it may more properly be said that the interchange between Jesus and the disciples about the temple in 24:2 is the *introduction* to the eschatological discourse and not part of the discourse itself.

Second, dispensationalists usually take quite literally the words of Jesus in Matthew 24:2. When Jesus asks, "Do you not see all *these* things?" (emphasis added), he was referring to the parts of the magnificent temple edifice and surroundings which the disciples were then beholding. The phrase "all these things" does not refer to something in the distant future. Someone might complain that the dispensationalist gives this kind of interpretation for verses later in the discourse (Matt. 24:34 – "this generation will not pass away until *all these things* take place" – emphasis added). However, there is a distinct difference. The events in later portions of the discourse (like verse 34) are clearly in the future, even for a preterist. There is nothing that the current disciples are visually looking at that can be described with these words. Thus, it is not unreasonable for Jesus to be talking to them as if they are representatives of a future generation who will see the things mentioned in the context. This, however, is not the case with "these things" in Matthew 24:2. Moreover, the case is strengthened when Jesus adds the words "not one stone *here*." Jesus appears on the surface to be dealing with the actual temple edifice before them and predicts its absolute destruction to the disciples' utter amazement.

Third, dispensationalists usually point out the connection between this passage and the text of Daniel. Daniel indirectly describes a Jewish temple relative to the end-time tribulation in Daniel 9:27 when the stopping of sacrifices by the Antichrist is mentioned along with the allusion to the abomination of desolation (cp. Matt. 24:15). In addition, there may be another less detailed allusion to the temple at the end of Daniel 11 when the Antichrist "will pitch the tents of his royal pavilion between the seas and the beautiful Holy Mountain" (11:45). Finally, the end-time desolation of abomination is mentioned in 12:11 to show another association with a tribulation temple.

³ J. B. Hixson, "The Olivet Discourse in the History of Dispensational Thought" (Unpublished paper, Ph.D. Studies, Baptist Bible Seminary, August 2003), 10-11. In a recent phone conversation with the present author (18 July 2005), Hixson suggested that he may no longer agree that this is the best approach to handle the passage. The particular view that Jesus is predicting the destruction of the tribulation temple can be found in a dissertation which Hixson cites: John F. Hart, "A Chronology of Matthew 24:1-44" (Dissertation, Grace Theological Seminary, 1986), 70-72. See also David L. Turner, "The Structure and Sequence of Matthew 24:1-41: Interaction with Evangelical Treatments," *Grace Theological Journal* 10 (1989): 3-27. In the past Turner has identified himself as a progressive dispensationalist (see David L. Turner, "The New Jerusalem in Revelation 21:1-22:5: Consummation of a Biblical Continuum" in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church* edited by Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992], 264-92, which is a scholarly presentation by progressive dispensationalists on various topics). Turner in the first article characterizes his position as the traditional preterist-futurist view which sees the abomination of desolation mentioned in Matthew 24 as having a double reference to the temple which came to be destroyed in 70 A.D. and the Antichrist's ultimate abomination later on during the tribulation.

⁴ I will deal primarily with the text in Matthew, but the parallel passages in Mark and Luke would have to be taken into account as well. It is my opinion, that nothing in Mark or Luke changes the conclusions I am suggesting.

However, Daniel also speaks of a temple that is destroyed between the 69th and 70th weeks of Daniel. After the 69th week and before the 70th week, the vision predicts two events: (1) the death of the Messiah (9:26); (2) the destruction of Jerusalem and its Jewish temple. In the case of the latter, the text says that the “people of the prince who is to come” (i.e., the Romans) “will destroy the city and the sanctuary.” This takes place before the signing of the treaty that starts the last seven-year period of Daniel’s Seventy Weeks (9:27).

What is the significance of these observations for our discussion about the temple in Matthew 24:2? It means that there already exists a prior and parallel passage in Daniel that speaks of the destruction of a Jewish temple at an earlier time when there is also apparently a second Jewish temple which becomes the scene of the abomination of desolation at a later time. It is important to remember that all of this is in the same passage, one that contains only four verses in the total presentation of the 70 Weeks. That means that dispensationalists do not have to change their thinking when the preterist suggests it is an inconsistency to have two separate time frames and two separate temples in Matthew 24. On the contrary, the dispensationalist can point out that Matthew 24 is following the overall pattern in Daniel 9:24-27. Matthew 24:2 is Herod’s temple after the 69th week and before the 70th week, while the allusion to the abomination mentioned by Jesus in 24:15 concerns the tribulation temple. This means that dispensationalists do not have to resort to the view that both 24:2 and 24:15 refer to the same tribulation time frame and temple in order to have biblical consistency.

THE TEMPLE IN 2 THESSALONIANS 2:4

A second controversial mention of temple imagery in the New Testament is found in 2 Thessalonians 2:4. In 2:3, Paul teaches the Thessalonian saints that the day of the Lord (tribulation period) will not come until two things happen: the apostasy and the revelation of the man of lawlessness (Antichrist). The Antichrist, according to verse four, “takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God.” The dispensationalist understands the word *temple* in a straight forward way in this end-time context as a *Jewish* temple. One particular kind of argument is given by the dispensationalist Hiebert who notes: “For a Jew ‘the temple’ (*ton naon*) could only denote the holy place of the Jerusalem Temple, that portion into which the priests alone could lawfully go.”⁵ This kind of argument is not overly compelling when one realizes that the Apostle Paul used the Greek term *naos* to refer to the church (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21) and to the bodies of individual Christians (1 Cor. 6:19).⁶ Hiebert is on more solid ground when he emphasizes the presence of the article in 2 Thessalonians – “the” temple – which contrasts with the absence of the article in all of the other uses.⁷

However, a more fruitful avenue of discussion from a dispensational point of view would involve a study of the various Antichrist texts, especially in the Old Testament, which show a relationship to Jewish affairs and/or elements related to a Jewish sanctuary. When all of these passages are taken together the case for identification of an eschatological Jewish temple is bolstered.⁸ This is not the reading of Old Testament texts into 2 Thessalonians, but simply the recognition of an

⁵ D. Edmond Hiebert, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Revised ed., Chicago: Moody, 1992), 334.

⁶ For a helpful review of Pauline use of temple imagery, see J. Randall Price, *The Coming Last Days Temple* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1999), 283-306.

⁷ *Ibid.* Hiebert suggests in the end that one’s preconceived eschatology may be the deciding factor for your interpretation of the temple in 2 Thessalonians 2:4.

⁸ It should be noted that the other Pauline references to the concept of temple do not involve an eschatological context as does 2 Thessalonians 2:4. This is significant in light of the allusions the text makes to Old Testament (especially from Daniel) teaching on the Antichrist and end-time events.

antecedent theology which helps to ground the understanding of the passage within the progress of revelation. Later on, New Testament passages also help to confirm this interpretation. The chart below shows a correlation of the various Antichrist texts and relates them to Jewish elements that are sometimes linked to the Jewish sanctuary.⁹

The Antichrist (1 John 2:18-22)				
Designation & Main Passage	Exalts Himself as God	Relationship to Jewish Temple & Law	Deception	His Destruction
Little Horn <i>Dan. 7:7-28</i>	A mouth uttering great boasts (v. 8); Boastful words (v. 11, 20)	Will intend to make alterations in times and law (v. 25)	--	The beast was slain and given to the burning fire (v. 11, 26)
Prince Who Is to Come <i>Dan. 9:24-27</i>	--	He will put a stop to sacrifice and grain offering (v. 27)	Breaks his treaty with Israel (v. 27)	A complete destruction ... is poured out on the one who makes desolate (v. 27)
Willful King <i>Dan. 11:36-45</i>	He will exalt & magnify himself above every god, and will speak monstrous things against the God of gods (v. 36)	He will pitch the tents of his royal pavilion between the seas and the beautiful Holy Mountain (v. 45)	--	He will come to his end and no one will help him (v. 45)
Beast <i>Rev. 13</i>	There was given to him a mouth speaking arrogant words and blasphemies (v. 5)	Compare Rev. 11 & 12: "Rise and measure the temple of God" (11:1) "outside the temple" (11:2) The image of a woman as Israel (12:1-17)	Deception through the false prophet: he deceives those who dwell on the earth because of the signs (v. 14; cp. Rev. 20:20)	These two (beast and false prophet) were thrown alive into the lake of fire (Rev.19:20)
Man of Lawlessness, Son of Destruction <i>2 Thess. 2:3-10</i>	Who opposes & exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship; displaying himself to be God (v. 4)	He takes his seat in the temple of God (v. 4)	With all power and signs & false wonders, and with all deception (v. 9-10)	The Lord will slay...and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming (v. 8)

Notice that all the listed texts describe the destruction of the Antichrist. In all but the few verses of Daniel 9:24-27, the boasting and self-exaltation of the man of lawlessness is presented. The two strongest Antichrist texts yielding mention of the Jewish temple are Daniel 9:27 and 2 Thessalonians 2:4, our passage under consideration. However, in the other three passages, wording relates the Antichrist to Jewish elements. In Daniel 7 it is his intention of altering times and laws. While Jewish aspects here may not be the only target of the Antichrist's efforts, two factors require that the Jewish temple be part of the mix. First is the fact that the passage is associated with other Daniel texts which are Jewish in nature (e.g., the Seventy Weeks of Daniel 9; the mention of the Beautiful Land in Daniel 11:41). Even though the little horn of Daniel 7 has world-wide impact, to divorce the passage from

⁹ An original version of this chart has been provided as part of my commentary on 1 & 2 Thessalonians that has been submitted to Mal Couch for publication with AMG Publishers. I have made some minor modifications for this article.

any Jewish concerns would, therefore, be quite arbitrary. Second is the probable reference of “alterations in times and laws” to changes in religious observance including calendar adjustments and the diminishing of religious freedom. All of this is consistent with the data in other Antichrist texts and would negatively impact worship in a Jewish context. Furthermore, while there is no mention of a Jewish temple in Revelation 13 where the overview of the Antichrist is given, the two prior chapters relate to a Jewish temple, witnesses, and persecution. In Revelation 11, a temple is clearly mentioned. This passage will be discussed later. For now, it will be assumed that this temple is Jewish in nature. Also found in the same chapter are the two witnesses, which are clearly described with Jewish images (e.g., olive trees, ministries like Moses and Elijah). The Jewish nature of the context is reinforced by the next chapter’s use of the picture of a woman who is the nation of Israel. This woman is persecuted directly by Satan himself throughout the chapter. While much more could be said, the context suggests, for our purposes here, that Jewish elements are not absent in the career of Antichrist who is empowered by Satan, the one who has a tribulation hit list that includes the Jews. What does all of this mean? The correlation of Antichrist texts guarantees that it is quite proper to interpret the word *temple* in 2 Thessalonians 2:4 as the Jewish sanctuary that will be rebuilt and exist during the coming tribulation period.

On the other hand, nondispensational treatments of 2 Thessalonians have been varied. Morris, who interprets generally from the Reformed perspective, understands a certain amount of literalism to the concept of temple in the passage. He argues that, rather than seeing the temple here as a reference to the Church, it must be some formal shrine or sanctuary, a material building that will serve as the literal place where the man of lawlessness will claim deity for himself.¹⁰ However, he falls short of seeing it as a *Jewish* shrine or sanctuary within the end-time days. His focus seems to ignore the definite article and the correlation to other Antichrist texts in the Bible. Instead, Morris seems to concentrate on a kind of pagan temple idea.

Perhaps more typical of nondispensational understandings of 2 Thessalonians 2:4 would be Beale’s equation of the temple with the Church.¹¹ He usually argues his position from within the context of replacement theology, although he gives several precise reasons for his position. Our interaction with Beale’s position will treat the following general headings for his arguments: (1) the relationship of 2:3 to 2:4; (2) theological reasons for the identification of the word *temple* as the Church; and (3) his reactions to objections to his view.

First, Beale argues that the temple in 2 Thessalonians 2:4 cannot possibly be a rebuilt end-time Jewish temple because of the connection of this temple to the apostasy of 2:3. It is theoretically possible that a dispensationalist can believe the apostasy which is mentioned in 2:3 is associated in some way with Antichrist’s sitting in the Jewish temple. Most likely Antichrist’s actions would be seen as the pinnacle of a developing rebellion against faith in the one true God.¹² However, Beale as a nondispensationalist sees this connection as damaging to the view of a Jewish temple. The apostasy, he notes, is not centered in a “geographically conceived Israel.”¹³ He takes 2:3 to be “alluding to a yet

¹⁰ Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Revised ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 223-24.

¹¹ G. K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 207-11. I have found Beale’s commentary useful overall even if I disagree with his eschatological interpretations.

¹² While dispensational discussions have increased about the meaning of *apostasia* as departure in the sense of the rapture of the church rather than a certain end-time rebellion from faith in the one true God, I am still more comfortable with the latter. For a discussion concerning the former, see H. Wayne House, “Apostasia in 2 Thessalonians 2:3: Apostasy or Rapture?” in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, eds. Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1995), 261-96.

¹³ Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, 207.

future massive falling away in the community of faith, the church, throughout the world.”¹⁴ Beale would argue then that since the falling away is about the church (not Israel) and that the temple imagery of verse 4 is tied to that apostasy, the best conclusion that one can draw is that the word *temple* is referring to the Church. However, this comes across as arguing from the theological system of replacement theology. What precludes the possibility that the Antichrist is the culmination of a long apostasy-filled development of a one-world church while at the same time using the Jewish temple as his world headquarters to blaspheme God and declare his own identity? The passage can easily be taken as allowing this development. Connecting the apostasy of verse 3 so absolutely with the temple in verse 4 as Beale does is not required by the text. At best, it is one way of viewing the text. Its conclusion seems to flow from theological commitments elsewhere and not from the exegetical details of the actual verses themselves. If we link to other passages for help, the Antichrist texts alluded to earlier would be potential candidates. The little horn of Daniel 7 has an anti-God stance of world-wide scope (cp. Rev. 13) yet is still associated with the Jewish temple in other Daniel texts (Dan. 9:27; 11:45).

Second, Beale argues that the word *temple* in 2 Thessalonians 2:4 cannot possibly mean a literally rebuilt Jewish temple in the tribulation period because the phrase God’s temple “almost always refers either to Christ or the church.”¹⁵ Beale’s approach is unambiguous: “This reference to the temple shows that the church community is the place where end-time prophecies about Israel and its temple will take place.”¹⁶ This particular nondispensational argument makes special note of Paul’s use of the word *temple*.¹⁷ The New Testament data is fairly clear. Outside of 2 Thessalonians there is no reference to a Jewish temple in Paul’s writings using the same term. Romans 9:4 points to the activities of the Jewish temple although a different word is used.¹⁸ In two passages, Paul uses the word *temple* to refer to a pagan edifice (1 Cor. 8:10, 9:13). In one text, the apostle uses the term twice, once for a pagan temple and once by comparison to speak of the Church (2 Cor. 6:16). In at least one passage, Paul uses the term *temple* to describe the physical body of an individual believer (1 Cor. 6:19). In Romans 2:22, 1 Corinthians 3:16-17, and Ephesians 2:21, Paul decidedly uses the expression to speak of the Church. These are all undisputed facts.

However, the dispensationalist responds that these set of facts do not make the equation of temple equals Church an obvious interpretation for 2 Thessalonians 2:4. Interpretation is never about majority vote of terms, even within the various writings of the same biblical author. The question at hand that must be addressed is the uniqueness of the term from 2:4 in its own context. Earlier we had alluded to Hiebert’s focus on the presence of the definite article in 2:4 (*the* temple), something not found in any of the other examples. Beyond this detail stands another significant observation. Out of all of the passages described above in which Paul uses temple imagery, this is the only one that has an eschatological end-time context. In that light, it is better to see the parallel Old Testament Antichrist texts on the same exact subject as informing the apostle’s thinking concerning an end-time Jewish temple. In those texts, Antichrist is leading the world astray religiously and abusing the end-time Jewish temple. Paul’s treatment in 2:4 is no different. Non-eschatological texts should not be the basis for understanding Paul in 2 Thessalonians. There is no compelling reason, either exegetical or theological, to associate the word *temple* in this text with the Church. Dispensationalists are prone to see the use of the word for the Church in other Pauline passages as analogous, an approach that is not

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 208.

¹⁶ Ibid., 207.

¹⁷ The word under consideration is *naos*.

¹⁸ The word is *latreia* which means “religious service or worship.”

unexpected coming from a trained Jewish teacher who has become a Christian. The word *temple* in 2:4 would stand on its own in context as the eschatological Jewish end-time temple of the tribulation period.

In addition, Beale goes on to argue that the word *temple* in 2:4 refers to the Church based upon similarity of wording in certain other parallel passages found in Paul and in other biblical writers.¹⁹ For example, he notes that Paul's earlier depiction of the church at Thessalonica which is drawn in 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8 has similarities to the temple imagery for the church found in 1 Corinthians 6:18-19. On the face of it, this is a weak linkage to support the point. In both passages the issue is the body of the individual believer as the temple or person who possesses the Holy Spirit who helps in a sanctified life. The issue is not the church at large over which the Antichrist will one day come to power and deceive many. Beale seems to assume that the eschatological passage of 2:4 is being conditioned by the statements of 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8. It must be pointed out that the word *temple* does not occur in the earlier passage. A linkage between two passages that do not really use strong temple language as a parallel that is then linked with 2 Thessalonians 2:4 to decide the meaning of *temple* is not compelling.

Another of Beale's arguments from similarity of wording (this time directly to 2 Thess. 2:4) is the connection of 2:4 to Revelation 11:1-7 and 13:6. In Revelation 11, Beale sees the saints as being "pictured as a sanctuary and lampstands in it."²⁰ Certainly the word *temple* is used twice in 11:1-2. In Revelation 13:6, the Bible describes Antichrist as blaspheming God's name and His *tabernacle*. That tabernacle is defined in the verse with the words "those who dwell in heaven." The conclusion which Beale draws is that these references to temple imagery point to the Church.

However, in Revelation 11, Beale must assume that the two witnesses represent the Church. His commentary on the book of Revelation makes this point clearly: "they [the two witnesses] represent the whole community of faith, whose primary function is to be a prophetic witness."²¹ Revelation 11 will be the next temple passage to be discussed, but for now, it must be stated that such an interpretation is non-literal. No contextual clues actually point in this direction, only a theology of the Church as a presumed backdrop. Therefore, dispensationalists will generally not accept this approach. In Revelation 13:6, the dispensationalist also points out that if the passage is equating tabernacle with Church, then the Church comprises only the saints in heaven. To say more is to go beyond the actual text. Is this what Beale really wants to say? In general, dispensationalists would feel uneasy about the lack of precision in the argumentation. If there are questions about his interpretation of Revelation temple passages, there can be little confidence in an interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2:4 based upon them.

Nonetheless, Beale goes on to suggest a strengthening of his argument from the parallel to the Revelation temple/tabernacle texts. The argument runs like this: the identification of the temple in 2 Thessalonians 2:4 as the Church is strengthened in relation to the Revelation texts because both sets of texts (2 Thess./ Rev.) are "apocalyptic in nature and allude to and interpret Daniel's eschatological opponent prophecies."²² What Beale calls "opponent prophecies" this article earlier labeled "Antichrist texts." There are two points at which issue must be taken. First, to say that the New Testament texts "interpret" Daniel's Antichrist texts is a form of reading the New Testament into the Old. The conclusions about the temple as Church that have hitherto been argued in this scheme

¹⁹ Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, 208.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 573.

²² Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, 208.

become the interpretation of the Daniel Antichrist texts. It is preferable and methodologically sound to go the other direction. The Daniel Antichrist texts or opponent prophecies inform the New Testament texts. Following Beale's wording, it seems that a reading of the Church is forced back into passages, many of which deal with developments within national Israel. Second, our earlier conclusions must be upheld. The Antichrist texts in Daniel taken at face value are consistent with all other Antichrist texts in the New Testament (see the earlier chart). This is true of the details about the character and end of the Antichrist and also about the relationship he has to Jewish elements in the end-times, including a temple. Beale's position cannot be held unless these Old Testament texts are spiritualized so that Jewish elements do not factor into the discussion.

In addition, Beale goes on to suggest that the "fulfillment of the Daniel 11 prophecy has begun unexpectedly (from an Old Testament reader's vantage point) within the church and thus further identifies the church with the temple, since Daniel foresees these events as inextricable linked to the temple."²³ The grounding for this is his interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2:6. The spirit of lawlessness is currently in this age being held back. Although Beale does not flesh out the exact correlation, presumably the forces arrayed against the Antichrist in the Daniel 11 prophecy would open the door to a present fulfillment within a kind of already—not yet approach. One wonders if there is circularity to the overall argument. The New Testament idea of Church is read back into the Old Testament texts, but the Old Testament texts are viewed as parallel passages which strengthen the language that allegedly leads to the conclusion that temple imagery is about the Church in 2 Thessalonians 2:4.

Before leaving this issue, one more nondispensational strategy is found in Beale's approach. He suggests that objections to his view that the temple in 2 Thessalonians 2:4 is the Church inadequately consider several pertinent issues:

1. There has been a shift from OT Israel to the true Israel (Church) in the Gospels;
2. National Israel has come to an end;
3. The Church scattered throughout the world is a better target for the apostasy than a literal temple in a single small nation;
4. The messianic claims of the Antichrist are more likely to be made within the Church (the current believing community) rather than the old covenant community which has rejected Him (Israel);
5. Jesus predicted that many would turn from the faith, which presumably would not make sense if only the Jewish nation were in view.²⁴

Points 3 & 5 make the erroneous assumption that an end-time Jewish temple cannot be used by an Antichrist who is having a world-wide religious impact. In other words, too much is made of the connection between the apostasy of 2:3 and the temple in 2:4. Points 1, 2, and 4 are really aspects of a replacement mentality. Israel and any associated Jewish elements can no longer be construed to be part of eschatological fulfillment passages since the Church has replaced Israel. This is of course at the heart of the distinction between dispensationalism and nondispensationalism. Nondispensationalists feel compelled to de-Judaize various texts. In this debate, at stake is the significance of earlier Old Testament texts for their original audiences since most New Testament fulfillment has moved to different territory.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 208-209. The list is in my own words although I am dependent upon Beale for aspects of the wording.

THE TEMPLE IN REVELATION 11:1-2

A third passage containing temple imagery that is highly debated is Revelation 11:1-2. In the vision John is given a measuring rod and commanded to measure the temple of God, the altar, and those who worship in it (11:1). John is told not to include the outer court because it is given to the nations who will “tread under foot” the city of Jerusalem (holy city) for 42 months (11:2). Dispensationalists take the word *temple* literally, while seeing it contextually referring to the future, tribulation temple. After all, that is what the entire book of Revelation is about if a traditional late date for the book is accepted (90s) and the outline of the book in 1:19 is understood in a straight-forward way with its futurist component (“the things which you have seen, the things which are, and the things which shall take place after these things”). Nondispensational interpretations are legion. Below a brief outline of three specific views will be given: (1) the preterist approach; (2) a futurist view from a nondispensational perspective; and (3) an idealist view.

Preterists, like dispensationalists, also see a literal temple. They see such imagery as referring to the first-century Jewish temple that was destroyed in 70 A.D. This would only be possible if the book of Revelation was written before that time.²⁵ However, there is a major problem with the preterist understanding of the temple in 11:1-2 as the first-century Jewish temple of 70 A.D. – the context of the next chapter. In chapter 12, Israel, symbolically portrayed as a woman who gives the Christ-child to the world, is supernaturally delivered by God.²⁶ This supernatural deliverance of Israel is in harmony with Old Testament evidence that God’s ultimate plan is her national as well as spiritual restoration (e.g., Joel 3:1-21; Amos 9:11-15; Zech. 12-14; Isa. 11). It is hard to imagine a more difficult problem for preterists to handle. They have no future and ultimate deliverance for national Israel. Instead, Christ returns to judge Israel in 70 A.D. with utter destruction by the hands of the Romans. Thus, Revelation 12 with its deliverance of the Jews lends credence to the idea that the temple in 11:1-2 cannot be the temple which is destroyed in the first century.

Nondispensationalists have also argued from a futurist perspective even though it is not dispensational. One form of this view is the position of George Ladd. Ladd argues that the passage, while not necessarily speaking of a literal temple to be rebuilt in the tribulation, nonetheless speaks of the spiritual preservation of the remnant of believing Jews. John’s vision uses temple imagery to promote this promise for those in the last half of the tribulation. Ladd is clear that the Church is not in view when he relates Revelation 11:1-2 to Paul’s teaching in Romans 9-11: “It is difficult to interpret these three chapters symbolically of the church – the spiritual Israel. They teach that literal Israel is yet to be included in spiritual Israel.”²⁷

While this interpretation is far superior to the preterist position, it nevertheless falls short by not taking the reference to the temple literally. Ladd’s reason is that the passage contains symbolic language throughout so there is no reason to see the temple imagery any differently.²⁸ Yet, Ladd maintains the Jewish elements of the passage because of the mention of the temple and Jerusalem. In addition, the implied contrast with the Gentiles who trample the city in 11:2 forces the conclusion that

²⁵ For the preterist arguments for an early date before 70 A.D., see Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus*, 131-49. For a dispensational summary of reasons for a later date in the 90s, see Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 20-22.

²⁶ The identification of the woman as national Israel is based on the description of her that is borrowed from Genesis 37:9-11, the OT references to Israel as a travailing woman (Is. 26:17-18; Jer. 4:31), and the reference to the ark of the covenant in Revelation 11:19. For a complete discussion, see Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8-22: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 116-21.

²⁷ George E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 150.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

the literal city is probably in view. The literalness of the city cannot be questioned due to several lines of evidence. The city must be on earth since the temple is on earth (11:1).²⁹ The city is the place where the Lord was crucified which is literally the middle-eastern Jerusalem (11:8). Furthermore, many dispensationalists argue for the likely scenario that the accounts of 11:1-7 end at the midpoint of the tribulation with its abomination of desolation.³⁰ The seventh trumpet which follows would then be the marker of this time. If this is so, then the literalness of both the city and the temple is strengthened because of the backdrop of Daniel 9:27. Other dispensationalists see the seventh seal as the midpoint of the tribulation.³¹ Regardless, if the literal city is in view, as the preponderance of the exegetical evidence suggests, it is likely that the temple is literal also.

Ladd's modified futurism also possesses the same weakness of the preterist view when it does not see the connection to national Israel in chapter 12. The preserving of a remnant of Jews in Ladd's system has no national component. Physical Israel (i.e., the Jews) will be included in spiritual Israel (i.e., the Church as the collection of all the saved).³² This approach, like most nondispensational understandings, fails to preserve the promises scattered throughout the Bible concerning Israel's glorious kingdom restoration in its land. That national elements can be dropped so easily is due most likely to a measure of replacement ideology.

The third kind of nondispensational treatment of temple imagery in Revelation 11:1-2 is the idealist approach which can be represented by Beale. We have already seen that the word *temple* in 2 Thessalonians is a reference to the Church in Beale's interpretation. By "idealist approach" to Revelation 11:1-2 is meant the absence of any time concerns in the past, present, or future. Rather such a passage would be interpreted to set "forth timeless truths concerning the battle between good and evil that continues throughout the church age."³³ At first glance, it would seem that there is some distinction between Beale's handling of 2 Thessalonians 2:4 and his treatment of Revelation 11:1-2. He acknowledges the eschatological end-time context of the former to a large degree. However, as noted earlier he teaches an "already" component of that passage based especially on the holding back of current lawlessness by the restraining influence. This view blends easily with a concern that time is not the major factor

In Revelation 11:1-2, Beale describes his understanding of temple imagery this way: "Rev. 11:1-2 depicts the temple of the age to come as having broken into this present age. If one wants to insist on identifying the sanctuary in 11:1-2 as the earthly temple structure instead of the invisible, heavenly temple, then one must assume that this is a completely unique employment of that concept and a unique use of *ναός* ("sanctuary") within the book."³⁴ Beale further argues that since Christ is the true temple (John 2:19-22 once again) and Christians are united to Him, the Church is identified with the temple.³⁵ Here we face the same problems that existed in our discussion of 2 Thessalonians 2:4. Beale sees the temple in Revelation 11:1-2 as a reference to the people of God (i.e., the Church)

²⁹ Ladd argues that the "most natural meaning of the city is that it stands for the Jewish people" (*Revelation*, 152). Such a conclusion is surprising. How can the natural meaning of a city be anything other than the city itself? There must be contextual reasons for abandoning this for some view of the city which points in a different direction. Thomas argues that the literalness of the temple and that of the city go together (*Revelation 8-22*, 84).

³⁰ This is the general approach of the *Left Behind* Series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins.

³¹ Thomas would hold this view (*Revelation 8-22*, 85).

³² Ladd, *Revelation*, 150.

³³ C. Marvin Pate, "Introduction to Revelation" in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, ed. C. Marvin Pate (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 18.

³⁴ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 562.

³⁵ *Ibid.* Beale appears to be consistent in his arguments for temple as Church in both 2 Thessalonians 2:4 and Revelation 11:1-2.

in light of the fact other occurrences of *naos* in the book of Revelation do not yield mention of a literal, Jewish temple.

However, the arguments as before have limited value. The only time the church is associated with the word *temple* is in Revelation 3:12, the letter to the church at Philadelphia. Here the identification is not absolute. God promises that a believer (overcomer) will be made a pillar in the temple. It is not clear that this means the believer will become a pillar in the Church. The temple here could be the heavenly temple so prominent elsewhere in Revelation. It may simply mean that the overcomer is guaranteed God's full presence one day, since the temple is the place of God's presence. This can be gathered by all the other references to the heavenly temple (Rev. 11:19, 14:15, 17; 15:5, 6, 8; 16:1, 17). In those passages the idea of the heavenly temple is most likely a reminder that the angels and happenings proceeding from it are from the presence of God. This makes perfect sense in light of the fact that in the eternal state, there will be no temple since the full presence of the triune God will be manifested (Rev. 21:1-22).

Nonetheless, one must ask why there is one reference in the midst of all of these in which a literal, Jewish temple is in view. Certainly, the actions associated with this temple are somewhat negative (11:2) and precede the future time when God's full presence declares the end to all other forms of temple imagery. Why not see the Jewish nature of this earlier temple? As argued before, the earlier references to the Antichrist texts compel the conclusion that the end-time period will include references to literal Israel and a literal temple with literal sacrifices. Since the book of Revelation obviously deals with the end-time scenario, why would it be a strange thought to see the literal Jewish temple mentioned in a context where Satan and the Antichrist are also mentioned (Rev. 11, 12, 13)? Furthermore, Jewish elements which can be understood literally exist elsewhere in the book, namely the 144,000 witnesses (Rev. 7:4-8), the two witnesses in our current passage (11:3-7), and the 144,000 witnesses again in 14:1-5 in an earthly scene. Some might object that dispensationalists do not take proper note of the heavenly temple in 11:19 and thus see two different temples in the same chapter. This also is not a strange idea. The scene has moved from the discussion of the two witnesses, the city of Jerusalem, and its temple to the sounding of the seventh trumpet (11:15) and what follows. The progression allows for the two different referents to exist in the same chapter.

CONCLUSION

In this brief survey of three controversial passages using temple imagery to refer to a literal Jewish temple, we have attempted to give some initial arguments showing that the dispensational understanding of the text is reasonable.³⁶ Dispensationalists do not dispute the idea that temple imagery is sometimes used for the Church or for believers in Christ. However, such language is fairly viewed as simple, analogous language. There is no need to pour the theology of Church into every New Testament text that uses the word *temple*. Especially crucial are the Antichrist texts starting in Daniel which demonstrate a consistent interpretation if their Jewish framework is maintained. In light of this, nondispensational understandings of these texts should be jettisoned in favor of a more literal understanding of a rebuilt Jewish temple in the coming tribulation.

³⁶ Due to lack of space and time for this forum, I have not dealt with the important passage in 1 Peter 2:4-9, which deserves consideration. However, most dispensationalists would conclude that Peter, like Paul, is using analogous language when temple imagery is used to describe the church.