



ETB: 1 Peter 4:12-19

THE HOUSE OF GOD

A NEW TESTAMENT
UNDERSTANDING



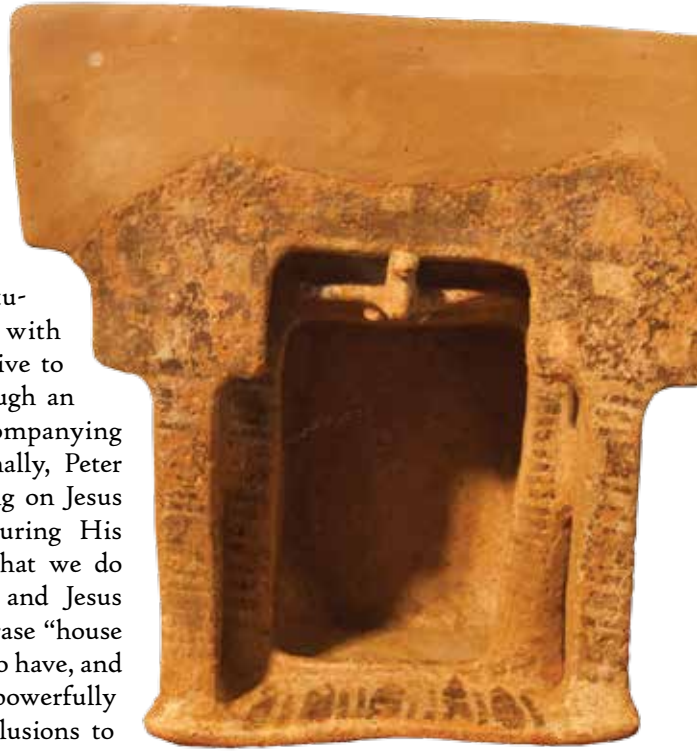
By Paul N. Jackson

WHILE WRITING this article, I am finishing the school semester by administering final examinations. Some things never change; it always feels like judgment day. It is in that holy hour or two that my students have the opportunity to demonstrate they took the course seriously and abided by the instructions in the syllabus. Of course, following instructions is not only for the students—professors are likewise responsible to stay true to their mandates. A good question for every professor is: “Did you also read the assignments, especially the Bible?” No matter the level on which you teach, if you fail to read, most likely your students will know it. So, judgment essentially begins at the spout, with those of us who are charged with guarding and carefully dispensing the precious gift entrusted to us. At the level of being a member of “the house of God,” that applies to each disciple. Judgment always begins at Bethel, “the house of God.”

Old “Bethel”

Like hundreds of other New Testament concepts, “the house of God” finds its roots in the Old Testament. Some debate exists over the background of this image.¹ Questions persist. Is the Greek phrase synonymous with referring to God’s family? If this is the case, the translation “the household of God” suggests this. The other background option is that the phrase

refers to the Jerusalem temple. Peter was most likely playing off of this idea from Ezekiel 9:6-7, where the prophet communicates the ominous destruction of Jerusalem that was already at the doorstep. These “fortunate” victims, along with Ezekiel, were taken captive to Babylon in 597 B.C. through an initial deportation accompanying this prophecy.² Additionally, Peter was most likely reflecting on Jesus cleansing the temple during His earthly ministry.³ So, what we do not have here is Peter and Jesus quoting verbatim the phrase “house of God.”⁴ But, what we do have, and in a sense much more powerfully employed, are intense allusions to the concept of God’s judgment falling first on His own people. What we might miss though, is the purpose of this judgment in the Old Testament. This is crucial because Peter picks up on it and clearly, if not surprisingly, unveils a spiritual reality that transcends all physical temples and deportations. In short, reading through the prophets, even though they themselves struggled mightily with unjust suffering and apparent unchecked evil, makes clear that God disciplined His own people for the sake of His name and glory. In light of painful judgment, God has a plan. After sprinkling with cleansing water, granting new hearts, a new spirit, and a new desire for obedience, God said, “It is not for your sake that I will act” (Ezek. 36:24-32, HCSB). Another fine



Above: Dated to the 10th cent. B.C., a terra-cotta model of a temple. The two pillars are reminiscent of the biblical pillars at

the entrance to Solomon’s temple. The dove represents the deity to whom the model had been dedicated.

example occurs within Habakkuk, and is essential for understanding Peter’s reasoning in 1 Peter 4:12-19. Basically, Habakkuk’s prophecy is composed of two bitter complaints and one prayer of sober praise.⁵ In light of disease, deadly enemies, destruction, and death, God’s shining answer came in the form of a contrast: “Look, his ego is inflated; he is without integrity. But the righteous one will live by his faith” (Hab. 2:4, HCSB). The picture is one of purifying judgment, a theme that further developed as a notion in intertestamental Judaism.⁶

New “Bethel”

The early believers (or “house of God”) picked up this theme by pointing out specific situations where cleansing took place in the form of

NO MATTER WHAT COMES CRASHING INTO OUR EXISTENCE AS GOD’S HOUSE, OUR BEST COURSE OF ACTION IS TO PLACE OUR TOTAL TRUST AND CONFIDENCE IN THE ONE WHO WILL ONE DAY RIGHT ALL WRONGS AND DESTROY EVIL.

unforgettable church discipline. The first occurred right after the astonishing spiritual progress the church experienced—as Luke detailed in the opening chapters in the Book of Acts.⁷ The first word in chapter five, though, is an ominous “but.” After a fresh glowing report, the growing decreased by two. Ananias and Sapphira paid with their lives for lying about the proceeds from the voluntary sale of their property. This story is a curious echo reverberating from the time of the conquest. Immediately after a lopsided victory at Jericho and a summary note of Joshua’s fame and the success of Israel at the end of Joshua 6, the first word in chapter seven is, “but.” Israel suffered a humiliating defeat at Ai, losing 36 soldiers and all their courage. After some wilderness wandering-like complaints, God revealed that Achan caused their loss, and not only did he, but all his family and livestock died from stoning. Interestingly, Luke employed the same Greek term to describe the church couple’s sin

Dead Sea Scroll fragment under regular and infrared light; the text reads, “from Egypt...in silver and gold... between Bethel and...” (Gen. 13:1-3).



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BOB SCHATZ/COURTESY FERRINI AND BIONDI (29/19/7&8)

that the Septuagint used to describe Achan’s sin.⁸ In both cases, the sudden severity of death came because old and new “Bethel” stood at the outset of important chapters in the history of salvation. Judgment begins with the “house of God.”

Also, Paul indicated that some believers had actually died because of gluttony and drunkenness while celebrating the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:29-32). Additionally, although unclear, the details of an earlier episode in 1 Corinthians 5 suggest a man who was having sexual relations with his stepmother, may have died. In a short 13-verse

chapter, Paul called for his exclusion four times. At least one reference says, “Turn that one over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the Day of the Lord” (v. 5, HCSB).

Peter picked up on the “redemptive thread” that originated with Ezekiel by reminding his hearers that “righteous suffering” is positive in that “if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who disobey the gospel of God?” (1 Pet. 4:17, HCSB).⁹ Finally, Peter drew a conclusion that echoed Ezekiel, Habakkuk, and Jesus. His words struck at the heart of the

Partial ruins at Bethel.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BOB SCHATZ (18/27/7)





ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ GB HOWELL (35/59/59)



Above: Model depicting first-century Jerusalem, including the temple. To the left is the royal stoa.

Left: Baked clay plaque depicts an unidentified goddess standing with-

in a shrine; from region of Isin-Larsa near Ur; dated 2000–1600 B.C.

Below: Tetradrachm; obverse features a facade of the temple in Jerusalem; dated A.D. 133.



matter for the “household of God,” old, new, or now; “So those who suffer according to God’s will should, while doing what is good, entrust themselves to a faithful Creator” (v. 19). Essentially, the New Testament communicates that salvation is a process, including

troubling challenges like persecution. (Phil. 2:12) Because of grace, we already have a foretaste of heaven; because we live in a fallen world, we experience a fraction of what hell must be like. So, while we are down here slugging it out, we should remember that we have not yet experienced the fullness of the glories of our salvation; and persecution should not take us by surprise. No matter what comes crashing into our existence as God’s house, our best course of action is to place our total trust and confidence

in the One who will one day right all wrongs and destroy evil. 🕯

1. Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, vol. 37 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 227.

2. “Slaughter the old men, the young men and women, as well as the older women and little children, but do not come near anyone who has the mark. Now begin at My sanctuary [this phrase is much like Peter’s].” So they began with the elders who were in front of the temple. Then He said to them, ‘Defile the temple and fill the courts with the slain. Go!’ So they went out killing people in the city” (Ezek. 9:6-7, HCSB).

3. See Matthew 21:12-13 and also the prediction of the temple’s destruction Matthew 24.

4. The phrase “house of God” appears first in Genesis 28:10-17 where a reassuring “stairway to heaven” dream at Bethel caused Jacob to proclaim upon awakening, “What an awesome place this is! This is none other than the house of God. This is the gate of heaven” (Gen. 28:17, HCSB). The Hebrew term “Bethel” means “house of God.”

5. The complaints (although titled prayers in most Bibles) are in Habakkuk 1:2-4 and 1:12–2:1. God’s answers are in 1:5-11 and 2:2-20. Chapter 3 closes out the book with an awesome expression of Habakkuk’s renewed confidence in God.

6. Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 171. An example from intertestamental Judaism: “For the Lord first judges Israel for the wrong she has committed and then he shall do the same for all the nations” (Test. Benjamin 10:8-9).

7. See Acts 2:41-47 and 4:32-37.

8. The Greek term is *nosphizo*.

9. Peter quoted Proverbs 11:31 as support.

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