

THE VEILED THRESHOLD A NARRATIVE INTERPRETATION OF THE TEMPLE IN THE CHRISTIAN REVELATION

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ABSTRACT: The aim of our ethical analysis is to show the biblical meaning of the veil of the Jerusalem Temple and to try to look through this sacred wall as a door to be opened from within. In the First Revelation (Old Testament), the believer must “stand on this threshold”: after Adam’s sin, he cannot see God’s face and “will not die” (Moses). The veil of the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem Temple represents this insurmountable threshold in the books of Exodus and Ezekiel. In the Second Revelation (New Testament), God the Father shows Himself forever in the face of His Son (Incarnation). When Jesus Christ died on the cross, the Veil of the temple was “torn in two from top to bottom” and God revealed Himself beyond the threshold. Every person is now called to cross all thresholds to be saved: righteous/sinner, servant/friend, Jew/Greek, stranger/family member of God.

Lo scopo delle nostre analisi etiche è quello di mostrare il significato biblico del velo del tempio di Gerusalemme e cercare di guardare attraverso questo sacro muro come attraverso una porta che si apre dall’interno. Nella Prima Rivelazione (Antico Testamento), il credente deve “stare in questa soglia”: dopo il peccato di Adamo, non può vedere il volto di Dio e “non morirà” (Mosé). Il velo del Santissimo nel Tempio di Gerusalemme rappresenta la soglia insormontabile nei libri dell’Esodo e di Ezechiele. Nella Seconda Rivelazione (Nuovo Testamento), Dio il Padre si mostra per sempre attraverso Suo Figlio (Incarnazione). Quando Gesù Cristo muore sulla Croce, il Velo del Tempio “diviso in due dall’alto verso il basso” e Dio rivelò Sé stesso oltre la soglia, Ogni persona adesso è chiamata ad attraversare tutte le soglie per essere salvata: retti/peccatori; servi/amici; ebrei/greci, estranei/familiari membri di Dio.

KEYWORDS: Threshold, Jerusalem Temple, Veil, Bible, Revelation

PAROLE CHIAVE: Soglia, Tempio di Gerusalemme, Velo, Bibbia, Rivelazione

1. Introduction: threshold and limit in theology

What is a threshold? What is the difference between threshold and boundary?

We usually know the threshold is considered the entrance line to go from one space to another one, while the boundary is the border beyond which it's not possible to go. Keeping this concept in mind, we're going to transfer the meaning of these two words to an analogy between philosophy and theology. In philosophy, as in Immanuel Kant's definition of the "science of the limit", we have a clear picture of the difference between reason and intellect (see Priest 2002, pp. 71–101; Firestone 2009; Jauernig 2021). The intellect puts limits to reason. In order to explain this concept, Kant mentions the difference between the *phenomenon* and *noumenon*. *Phenomenon* is what we can know as a whole, while *noumenon* is what we are only allowed to think, but not to know.

Between 17th and 18th centuries both philosophy and science focus their theories on the limit between the demonstrable and the impossible. On the other hand, according to theories developed by Galileo and Newton, knowing reality means being able to quantify and objectively to measure any phenomena, in order to guarantee the scientific method. So that both modern philosophy and science clearly put a boundary to the entire body of knowledge. For this reason, we can certainly define theology as the science of the threshold (see Salmann 1986; 2000; De Candia and Nouzille 2018) and of liminality (Carson *et al.* 2021). Why is it?

Knowledge coming out of the thesis of theology, unlike the scientific method, goes beyond the limit of the intellect. As a result of this, we can say theology enlarges the scope of research of what can be known by the studying biblical revelation.

There are two main words for "threshold" in Hebrew: *kaph* and *miphtan*. The first one relates to an ordinary entrance. The second one describes a doorway that is essentially both holy and unsurpassable. In our texts we usually find the second meaning (*miphtan*) which marks the distance from God.

Our research aims to show how we can experience the threshold in theology starting from the people of Israel described in the Bible. In

fact, in Exodus the people of Israel receives a gift: the Law. In this case, the theological limit can be considered as a threshold because the people of Israel is not allowed to cross since God's glory (*kābôd* in Hebrew) cannot be seen.

From here on we will follow a theological-narrative method by analysing Exodus and Ezekiel to explain this dynamic of theophany, which can be summarised in the following three steps:

- standing on this side of the threshold (God's revelation to Moses and the building of the temple in Ezekiel),
- standing on the threshold (the mediation of the cherubim and the role of the Tent of Meeting in the Temple of Jerusalem),
- crossing the threshold (the revelation of the Father's face in Jesus Christ, the "true Tent").

2. On this side of the threshold: marking the distance from the face of God

In Genesis 3, the Fall obscures God's face forever. Adam and Eve are driven out from the Garden of Eden and as a result they are not able to see God's face. They cannot see God's glory, in Hebrew *kābôd*, but they can only hear His voice. This is the reason why, as reported in Exodus, God's Law has been interpreted as a gift of his own voice.

Then, hearing his voice is an opportunity to see his *kābôd*, while the only way to remain alive is to cover our face in front of God (as mentioned in Deuteronomy 5:24). In order to remain alive, the condition for Israel is to stay on this side of the threshold. This condition is firstly revealed when God meets Moses in the Sinai Mount and secondly in the description of the Temple Veil in Ezekiel book.

2.1. Exodus: the revelation of God's name to Moses

The theophany at Sinai is one of the most important texts of the Old Testament. We all know the story. Moses was tending the flock and came to Horeb, as mentioned in Exodus 3:2: "The angel of Yahweh

appeared to him in a flame blazing from the middle of a bush, Moses looked; there was the bush blazing, but the bush was not being burnt up”.

Moses tries to get closer to see the bush blazing, but “when Yahweh saw him going over to look, God called to him from the middle of the bush: ‘Moses, Moses! [...] Take off your sandals, for the place where you stand is holy ground. I am the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob’ (Ex 3:5-6a). So Moses covered his face because “he was afraid to look at God” (Ex 3:6b).

Why does Moses cover his face and the same time he’s afraid to see the face of God?

Moses’ gesture is better explained in Exodus 33. Precisely when Moses is in the Tent of Meeting, which, as we all know, is located far away from the camp. Now let’s read together Exodus 33:18-23:

He then said, ‘Please show me your glory’. The Lord said, ‘I shall make all my goodness pass before you, and before you I shall pronounce the name ‘the Lord’; for I am gracious to those to whom I am gracious and I take pity on those on whom I take pity’. He said, ‘My face you cannot see, for no human being can see me and survive’. Then the Lord said, ‘Here is a place near me. You will and when my glory passes by, I shall put you in a cleft of the rock, the rock and shield you with my hand until I have gone past. Then I shall take my hand away and you will see my back; but my face will not be seen’.

Although Moses can speak to God, he cannot see His face, but only his *kābôd* (“the glory of God”). Between Moses and God there is clearly a boundary which cannot be crossed. Therefore, there is the same one we find in Genesis 3:24: “He banished the man, and in front of the garden of Eden he posted the great winged creatures and the fiery flashing sword, to guard the way to the tree of life”.

So as we know this happening was preceded by the Adam’s Fall mentioned in Gen 3:17. It is important to keep in mind that after Adam’s Fall God puts a cherubim as guardian of the Eden Garden’s threshold. Another example which can be taken as a sign of marking the distance

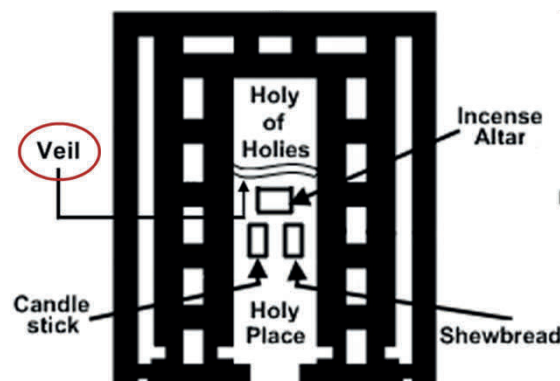
from God is in Exodus 19. Moses is with his people in the desert just in front of the Mt Sinai. The Lord God calls Moses to the mountain, and He gives him two instructions: first to wash the people's clothes and second to mark a threshold as a limit that they are not allowed to cross. Why? Do not forget that "anyone who touches the mountain will be put to death" as mentioned in Exodus 19:12.

This experience of the people of Israel is a repetition of Moses', which he had in Exodus 3, but here it is a spreading to all the priests of Israel. The image of the marked mountain indicates a demarcation line between the visible and the invisible, between man and the inscrutable mystery of God (Blenkinsopp 1992, p. 185).

Moreover, in Exodus 19, according to exegetes, we find a clear reference to the building of the Jerusalem Temple written in Exodus 26:33-34 and in Ezekiel 25-26 and 40-45.

As you can see the plan of the Jerusalem Temple is a clear explanation of what is mention in Exodus 26:33-34 and in Ezekiel 41:3-4.

In both books we find the same explanation about the location of the "curtain" or, as it is called, the Temple Veil⁽¹⁾, in Hebrew *parokhet*: "so that inside behind the curtain, you can place the ark of the Testimony, and the curtain will mark the division for you between the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies" (Ex 26:33-34).



(1) For the meaning of the Veil in the Old Testament see Gurtner (2007, pp. 29-46).

2.2. *Ezekiel: the Temple threshold*

Making reference to the already mentioned (Exodus 19-24) and to the instructions about the building of the Temple (Exodus 25-40), we can find an etiological writing which is to describe the Temple construction and its rituals. All these descriptions, Exodus 19-20 and in Ezekiel 9:3, 10:4 and 10:18, belong to the post-exilic period, namely the 6th and 5th centuries before Christ (Blenkinsopp 1992, p. 10; see Ska 2006, p. 160). We know Ezekiel was a prophet exiled in Babylon. Ezekiel introduces the believer to the theophany of the “glory of God” which is also called “the threshold of the Temple” (Ska 2006, p. 186) as in chapters 8-11 and 40-42. Let’s go through same extract from this book:

Ez 9:3: The glory of the God of Israel rose from above the winged creature where it had been, towards *the threshold of the Temple*. He called to the man dressed in linen with a scribe’s ink-horn in his belt.

Ez 10:4: The glory of Yahweh rose from above the winged creatures, towards *the threshold of the Temple*; the Temple was filled by the cloud and the court was full of the brightness of the glory of Yahweh.

Ez 10:18: The glory of Yahweh then came out over *the Temple threshold* and paused over the winged creatures.

A few chapters later, Ezekiel is given further cultic tasks in the Theophany (ch. 46) and he describes the river flowing eastwards from under the Temple threshold (ch. 47), referring to the Temple in Jerusalem:

Ez 46:2: the prince must go in through the porch of the outer gate and take his position by the doorposts of the gate. The priests must then offer his burnt offerings and his communion sacrifice. *He must prostrate himself on the threshold of the gate and go out*, and the gate must not be shut again until the evening.

Ez 47:1: He brought me back to the entrance of the Temple, where a stream flowed eastwards from under *the Temple threshold*, for the Temple faced east. The water flowed from under the right side of the Temple, south of the altar.

In Ezekiel, the Hebrew term “threshold” is frequently repeated to indicate the unsurpassable Temple’s boundary. This is a clear metaphor

which refers to the gate in Genesis 3 after the Fall⁽²⁾ and to the Moses' experience as mentioned in Exodus 33.

In Ezekiel, the Temple threshold limits the outside from the inside and therefore it cannot be crossed. In chapter 8, Ezekiel describes the sin of Jerusalem, then, in chapter 9, the prophet announces the destruction of the city (9:2) and finally, in chapter 10, namely 10:18-22, Ezekiel describes the Lord's glory leaving the Temple: "The glory of the Yahweh then came out over the Temple threshold and paused over the winged creatures (cherubim)" (10:18). In Ezekiel 10:18-22, the glory of the Lord is now represented by the risen cherubim which come out from the ground of the Temple. So they reveal God's departure from the Temple (10:18-22 and 11:22-25).

What are these cherubim? The cherubim are an expression of God's theophany whose purpose is either to reveal and to conceal the glory of God. In this revelation it is important to mention that angels are considered in all religions to be God's presence guardians and this is clear reference to the building of the Ark in Exodus (Ex 25-26; 36-37).

3. Standing on the threshold: the mediation of the cherubim

As ambassadors of God's glory (of his *kabod*, Gen 3, Ex 25-26, Ezk 10), cherubim take care of the divine inscrutable mystery. They are half beast, half man winged beings and among all the other angels, cherubim are the only ones allowed to stand at the threshold of the Temple. The cherubim preserve the absolute divine otherness and transcendence, thus allowing the believer not to die, and also by allowing God to manifest Himself and keep hidden His mystery.

(2) Blenkinsopp says: "This idea of the exile of the *kābôd* and its eventual return from exile provided the priest-prophet Ezekiel with a way of speaking of divine presence and absence at the time of the deportations (Ezek 9:3; 10:4, 18-19; 11:22-23; 43:1-5). For the P narrator of the wilderness journey it was a way of solving the problem of combining divine transcendence with presence. Moses, therefore, was allowed to see not the face of God but the mysterious divine effulgence (Ex 33:18-23). It filled the mobile tent-sanctuary, and its presence could be either salvific (e.g., Ex 29:43) or ominous (e.g., Ex 16:7, 10-12; Numbers 16), depending on the situation. It expresses the conviction that there can be no guidance for the conduct of life apart from the divine presence in the sanctuary" (Blenkinsopp 1992, p. 169).

3.1. *Exodus: the cherubim in the Ark*

In Genesis 3:24, the cherubim are placed by God on the threshold of the Eden's Gate to guard the Tree of Life by "the fiery flashing sword". In Exodus 25:18 they are at the two ends of the Ark of Testimony with their wings facing each other (Ex 25:18-22).

The cherubim are entrusted with the task to protect the "Ark of the Testimony" by their wings and they receive this clear command: "I shall come to meet you; from above the mercy-seat, from between the two winged creatures which are in the ark of Testimony, I shall give you all my orders for the Israelites" (Ex 25:22).

According to Joseph Blenkinsopp, the British 21st Century exegete, the cherubim are messengers accompanying God or his angels (*mal'ak* in Hebrew) who led Israel out of Egypt (Judges 2:1-5) and guarded Israel on the way (Ex 23:20-33): "The *mal'ak* is therefore not a human agent, but a manifestation or hypostasis of the Godhead. It is closely related to the divine presence (*pānīm*, literally "face") that accompanies Israel on its journey (Ex 33:14; Deut 4:37; *mal'akpānīm*, "the angel of his presence")"⁽³⁾. We also find in Exodus (Ex 26:1; 26:31; 36:8; 36:35) precise instructions on how to draw the "cherubim figures" either on the "purple and scarlet veil" and on the Ark of Testimony. We can read in Ex 37:7-9:

Ex 37:7 [He] modelled two great *winged creatures* of beaten gold, putting them at the two ends of the mercy-seat [propitiatory]

Ex 37:8 at one end and the other *winged creature* at the other end, making the *winged creatures* of a piece with the mercy-seat [propitiatory] at either end.

Ex 37:9 The *winged creatures* had their wings spread upwards, protecting the ark with their wings and facing each other, their faces being towards the mercy-seat [propitiatory].

(3) Blenkinsopp (1992, pp. 169–170) (trad. it. p. 199): "In brief, what we are witnessing in these affirmations about the *kābôd*, the *mal'ak*, and the *pānīm* is the transformation of old mythic representations-the appearance of the deity in the storm cloud, visitation by divine emissaries-into theological symbols of divine presence and assistance".

The two great winged creatures, mentioned in Exodus, are not only part of that decoration (both on the Ark of the Testimony and on two pictures drawn on the Tent), but also a revealed metaphor of God's glory (*kabod*). Only cherubim can stand on the threshold. Therefore, according to Blenkinsopp, "the relationship between sacred time and sacred place is also evident in the care taken to give an exact date for the setting up of the wilderness sanctuary and its cult, the details of which were revealed to Moses in a vision analogous to that of Ezekiel (Ex 24:15a-18b; 40:1-2, 17)" (Blenkinsopp 1992, p. 50; see also Ska 2006, p. 27).

3.2. Ezekiel: winged creatures in the Temple

In Ezekiel, the image of the cherubim is frequently mentioned. The prophet does not look at the face of God (as like as Moses does), but he can see the presence of the cherubim. First Ezekiel sees the throne of God above them (10:1), then the wheels of the chariot carrying the ark above the cherubim (10:2) and the cherubim "were on the right of the Temple" (10:3) and finally "the noise of the winged creatures' wings could be heard even in the outer court, like the voice of God" (10:5).

The cherubim, with the beating of their wings, amidst the smoke caused by the incense, reveal the voice of God and show, under their wings, "like a human hand" (Ez 10:8). Again, the cherubim move the wheels of the ark (Ez 10:16), until "the glory of Yahweh then came out over the Temple threshold and paused over the winged creatures" (10:18). Here we have the ultimate theophany of God. The cherubim spread their wings, lifted themselves off the ground and allowed the glory of God to leave the temple (10:19-22).

The image of the cherubim returns almost at the end of the book, in chapters 40-48. In chapter 41 Ezekiel has a new theophany. This time it is about the rebuilding of the new temple after the exile. The narrative refers to Israel's return to Jerusalem and the promise of the building of a new temple, and again there are cherubim "on the wall from the floor to above the entrance" (41:20) and on the doors (41:25) to separate the outer wooden gate from the inner vestibule.

On the other hand, the German theologian Walther Eichrodt says "in communicating these instructions, the angelic guide of chapters

40-42 [Ezekiel's book] evidently takes a new role which did not originally belong to him, that of serving as an intermediary for laws applying to the temple area" (Eichrodt 1970, p. 560). This is the same role that Moses had been given for the building of the Ark in Exodus and now it is repeated in Yahweh's speech described in Ezekiel 43:11. Once again, the Lord speaks to his prophet through this "divinely sent interpreter of his command", and in this way, "his transcendence is perceptibly heightened" (*ibid.*).

No one is allowed to cross the threshold of the Temple, just as Adam and Eve were not allowed to return to the Garden of Eden after being expelled. The experience of the threshold between God and human is radical, since it shows the experience of the Sacred, of the Mysterious and of the Insurmountable. The prophet Zephaniah, another important prophet of the 7th Century, so before Ezekiel, spoke the following, revealing that crossing the threshold is reserved to God alone:

Zp 1:8-9: On the day of the Lord's sacrifice,
I shall punish the courtiers, the royal princes
and all who dress in outlandish clothes.
On that day I shall punish all who go up the Step [miphtan],
and fill the Temple of their lords,
with violence and deceit.

4. Beyond the threshold: in Jesus Christ's revelation

Christian revelation has developed a paradigm shift to explain God's face and the meaning of his *kābôd* by a different vision. Indeed, in the Gospels we witness a true revolution in the name of Jesus Christ while he reveals himself to humanity both as the "Son of God" and the "Son of Man".

Hebrews 6:19-20 mentions that Jesus Christ was able to go beyond the Veil of the sanctuary and that he was the only one to cross the threshold of the Temple. The whole of Jesus' life, as it is described in the Gospels, is a constant misunderstanding about his divine nature. Jesus frequently names God as "Father" because he is his "Son". This is the reason why Christ says "anyone who has seen me has seen the

Father” (mentioned in John 14:9). So, God’s face is finally revealed via Jesus Christ once.

The subject would be too vast, and so we will pause to analyse how the threshold between the divine and the human is crossed in the Gospels through the symbolic event of the tearing in two of the Veil of the temple. This is the evidence of the new threshold that from now on replaces the role of the Temple and calls every man to cross, this time without fear of his death as per Moses, the threshold between the human and the divine⁽⁴⁾.

4.1. *The Gospels: “the Veil of the Sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom”*

The Temple Veil (in Hebrew *parokhet*) was not an ordinary curtain. In the Jerusalem Temple there were two veils: one was located just in front of the altar of incense and could be entered by the priests every day because it limited the entrance to the temple itself. The second veil separated the area where the Holy of Holies was positioned and could be accessed only by the High Priest just once a year. For this we can make reference to Exodus 26:30.

This exceptional yearly event happened on the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur* in Hebrew, according to Leviticus 23:27-28). *Yom Kippur* is till today considered the most solemn of all Jewish festivals and celebrations.

The Gospels (Matt 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45), already mention the second Veil as the curtain which was torn when Jesus died on the cross. The second Veil is described as an enormous cloth, almost sixty-five feet high and four inches thick. The historian Flavius Josephus says that not even the strength of two horses, one on each

(4) “The year 70 CE is generally considered to mark the end of the Temple. For the early rabbis and other Jews, the Temple now becomes a memory and the target for substitutions such as prayer, charity, and the study of Torah. Yet while most of the NT authors are writing after its destruction they nevertheless cling to the Temple almost as if it were still standing. At the very least they consider it to be a most vivid symbol. It is the model for prayer, closeness to God, and, above all, for following Jesus! If the Temple has not ceased to be a key symbol of these authors and their readers, it certainly continues to occupy the minds of Jews with a sounder Jewish identity. Finally, the narratives, imagery, and ideas of the NT authors attest to the richness of the Temple as an institution and as an inspiring symbol”, Regev (2019, p. 316).

side, could have torn it (Vanhoye 2010, p. 171). In fact, it would have taken dozens of men to pull it down, roll it up and take it to be washed. Even today, the *parokhet* veil is used in synagogues in order to cover the front of the aron *ha-kodesh*, where the Torah scrolls are kept.

At the time of Christ's death, the tearing of the Temple Veil caused simultaneously anxiety and excitement. News of this extraordinary happening spread throughout Jerusalem while the Jews were celebrating the Passover⁽⁵⁾. Imagine the strong impact this happening left to the people.

The evangelist Matthew adds other details to the description of Christ's death. He mentions, for example, an earthquake (Matt 27:51)⁽⁶⁾ and as well the darkening of the sun (Matt 27:45; Mark 15:33). On the other hand, the evangelist Luke writes about an eclipse (Luke 23:45)⁽⁷⁾. We need to emphasize that all the evangelists mention that the Veil was torn "from top to bottom". Let's investigate together why the torn of the Veil can be considered as a supernatural event. From the descriptions we have, it is clear to all that the Veil was torn from top to bottom. We learn from Matthew that there was an earthquake. We all know that earthquakes have the power to break rigid objects whereas a cloth is soft and flexible. In the event of the earthquake the curtain would have remained intact, but it was not like that, since it was completely torn "from top to bottom".

Therefore, the tearing of the Veil came from the top, so it could neither have been caused by a human hand or by an earthquake. The reason why we can define this event as really unique. By analyzing the tearing of the Veil, which happened starting "from top to bottom", we can deduce two important facts. First, despite the Veil's being torn, it didn't fall down, but it remained standing; secondly, no human being could have cut the Veil because as already said only High Priest had access to the Holy of Holies area.

The Fathers of the Church and the ancient exegetes saw in this event the reopening of Heaven⁽⁸⁾, symbolised by the Blessed Sacrament and

(5) As Paul Lamarche has shown, the high priest reacts by tearing his clothes, an act which is not unrelated to the tearing of the Temple Veil. See Lamarche (1962); Regev (2019, p. 123).

(6) See *ibid.*, pp. 149–150.

(7) See *ibid.*, p. 172.

(8) See, for example, the ancient homily for Holy Saturday: *The Lord's descent into hell*.

closed as a result of Adam's sin, for all humanity through the sacrifice of Christ. With the death of the Son of God, the threshold between heaven and earth was crossed by God himself, the door of the temple has opened. This is why Jesus had said: "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9), and so he revealed his divine origin ("The Father and I are one", John 10:30), and finally he showed the face that Moses could not see. Since the death of Jesus, there are no more obstacles between man and God, except those that man himself puts up (Regev 2019, pp. 201–211).

4.2. The Christian chance: the "true Tent" in the Letter to the Hebrews

The Letter to the Hebrews gives an important and final interpretation to this of Christ's mediation, since the author mentions three times the "Veil of the temple". First of all, in Heb 6:19–20, the author lets us understand that God's promise to Abraham is revealed in two moments: when Moses was given God's Law in Exodus, and the second revelation, when God gives clear instructions on how to build the Temple to preserve the Ark as in Exodus and Ezekiel. Both moments can be considered as signs of "the hope" held out to believers. From Jesus' revelation onwards, the believer receives an extraordinary hope since Jesus "has entered as a forerunner on our behalf having become a high Priest forever" (Heb 6:19).

The second mentioning of the Veil of the Temple is reported in Hebrews 8:2–5. The Letter's writer describes Christ in terms of the new priesthood and the new sanctuary.

Therefore, Christ is called "the minister of the sanctuary and of the true Tent". It is important to underline that by comparing the true Tent as the Revelation of Christ to Exodus's Tent built by Moses, we can definitely assume that only the new Tent allows the believer to have a "complete confidence in entering the sanctuary through the blood of Jesus" (Heb 10:19). The preacher of the Letter to the Hebrews proclaims Christ's sacrifice as a new liturgy, and for this reason Jesus is considered the new Tent since no man was able to set it up earlier (Heb 8:1–2).

This description is in contrast to the ancient rituals, that normally happened in a Tent made by human being, since the new liturgy shows

Christ as “mediator”. This concept is mentioned four times in Chapter 9 of the Letter (9, 11, 14, 24, 28). By going into the details, as described in Hebrew 9:1-21 Jesus is the new Tent, the true Tent, “not made by human hands, that is, not of this created order”, but “the greater, the more perfect tent” (Heb 9:11) (see Vanhoye 2018, pp. 131-146).

According to exegete, Albert Vanhoye, in the just quoted Chapter 9 there is a remarkable detail which can be identified as an omission, therefore God’s name is never mentioned. This omission is an implicit challenge to the value of the Old Testament cultural organisation. Moreover, throughout the Letter to the Hebrews, even the cherubim figure disappeared as in the quote that “he did not put the world to come, of which we are speaking, under angels”. This to clarify that since Christ became the only one and true mediator of the New Covenant, the cherubim presence is not any longer needed, since God has already revealed His Glory.

On the other hand, in the Old Testament, both Exodus and Ezekiel frequently describe the Lord by mentioning Him as present and by giving Him a location, where He “sits on the cherubim”.

Finally, the “Veil of the temple” is recalled in Hebrews 10:19-23 for the third time, exactly when, as in Heb 10:20, the entrance of Jesus to the sanctuary is described: “through the blood of Jesus, by a new way which he has opened for us, a living opening through (*διὰ*) the curtain, that is to say, his flesh”. It is clear that the Veil of the Temple is now identified with the flesh, which we all know, is Jesus, God’s Son. This is the reason why we can symbolically interpret Jesus’ body as the entrance to the new Temple and Jesus’ flesh as the new Veil. American theologian Harold W. Attridge says of this Bible verse:

The “veil”, an element derived from the symbolism of the heavenly tabernacle, suggests the point through which one gains access to the divine presence, the realm of truth and “perfection”. Our author ultimately suggests, however, that Christ entered that realm and made it possible for others to do so, not by a heavenly journey through a supernal veil, but by means of his obedient bodily response to God’s will. There may then be a shift in the use of the preposition *διὰ*, from the local sense that operates in the image of Christ’s passage through the veil, to the instrumental sense that operates in the referent of that image. What the image of “flesh” refers to is certainly Christ’s sacrificial death (Attridge 1989, p. 287).

From now onwards, no longer is any sacrifice needed for people to be redeemed, but faithful are asked to be “sincere in heart and filled with faith, our hearts sprinkled clean from bad conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water” (Heb 9:22).

Thanks to faith and to Christian baptism, humanity has access to Jesus the new threshold, moreover Jesus is the symbol of the new sacrificial lamb since he is at the same time the new high priest and the new sacrificial altar itself (Heb 9:11-12). In Hebrews 10:19-23 the author uses the image of the *Yom Kippur*’s liturgy in order to describe the new Christian ritual and it is compared to the useless old sacrifices as mentioned in Exodus and in Ezekiel⁽⁹⁾. Christ is described as “a living opening through the curtain [Veil]” (Heb 10:20). This new opening is represented by the baptism. In this regard Albert Vanhoye notes:

the author actually uses in this oracle the expression ‘a pure water’, which is very rare in the Old Testament, in this oracle; there it is combined with the verb ‘to sprinkle’, when God says: ‘I will sprinkle pure water on you, and you will be cleansed from all your uncleanness’ (Ez 36:25 LXX). This suggests that baptism is the sacrament that brings one into the new covenant (Vanhoye 2010, p. 236).

At the end of the Letter in Heb 12:18-24 we find again the same interpretation about crossing the threshold as represented by the Temple Veil. The author recalls Moses’ given order to Israel during the Exodus to stay on *this* side of the threshold of Mount Sion (Ex 33:20). Furthermore, these lines revoke the new Mount Sion and the new Temple in Jerusalem which, as we know, clearly represent Jesus.

This is the reason why Christ is called as “the mediator of a new covenant and to purifying blood which pleads more insistently than Abel’s” (Heb 12:24). What does it mean that the blood of Jesus “pleads more insistently than Abel’s”?

If Gregory the Great answers that the blood of Jesus does not cry out for vengeance like the blood of Abel, but obtains mercy, Vanhoye observes that “the adverb *kreitton* does not express the idea of goodness,

(9) The cherubim’s figure is not mentioned until Hebrews 9:5 since the Ark and the mercy seat are described.

but that of strength (*kratos*) or courage. The latter expression thus prepares the return to the warning exhortation (vv. 25-29). The author is always attentive to the twofold aspect of the spiritual situation of Christians and draws his listeners' attention to this twofold aspect: the extraordinary grace of God, but also the greater responsibility (cf. 1 Pt 1:17-19)" (*ibid.*, p. 291).

The superior character of Christ's Revelation call for a greater responsibility and, therefore, a severe punishment in case of disobedience.

In Hebrews 12:24-25, the writer describes a universal upheaval by following an eschatological perspective and by using, for this purpose, an oracle which was already reported by the prophet Haggai. In fact, in Haggai 2:6-21, the Lord announces the upheaval of the earth and of the heavens⁽¹⁰⁾. Vanhoye says:

The Christians' religious situation is likened to that of the Israelites when they have arrived at the threshold of the Land. It is no longer a matter of an unending journey, but of taking the final few steps. The moment has come to pass from the wilderness into the kingdom of God. As for lengthy wanderings, far from being an example for the faithful, they constitute the punishment of the faithless, those who refuse the divine invitation to enter. Such people are sent back into the wilderness to roam there indefinitely, until they die (Num 14.33-35). Their fate does not represent Christian life, but damnation [...] It follows that it did not occur to him, in his exhortation, to liken Christian existence to wilderness wandering, but rather to entry into the Promised Land. Certainly, this entry has its difficulties, and Christians must hold firm 'to the end' (3.14; 6.11). However, they should not think of themselves as lost in a vast wilderness. Rather,

(10) Vanhoye (2010) notes: "The interpretation of this passage of the sermon presents more than one difficulty. The preceding context is only consistent if the voice the author contrasts with that of Moses is that of the risen Christ. Seated at the right hand of God "in heaven" (8:1), he now speaks "from heaven". But in v.26 it seems to be the voice of God. In thanksgiving, the author invites us to unite in worshipping God "deep respect" and even "fear", imitating Jesus who prayed with "deep respect" (5:7). God's extreme goodness towards us - he gives us a "kingdom that cannot be shaken" - must not make us forget his greatness and holiness. To forget them would be to lose contact with him. The author ensures the authenticity of this contact by quoting a burning phrase from Deuteronomy: "The Lord your God is a consuming fire" (Deut 4:24; 9:3); he adapts this phrase to his audience by saying: "our God...". This quotation also has the effect of harmonising the end of the passage with the warnings that characterise it", pp. 291-293.

they must awaken to the realisation that the kingdom of God is there, truly accessible, and that they are even now entering into it by faith (Vanhoye 2018, p. 247–255).

5. Conclusion: the threshold's inversion

Thus, the final question is: what is the meaning of the phrase in the Book of Revelation that our panel is named after (“I am standing at the door, knocking!”, Rev 3:20)?

In the Revelation Book, Jesus knocks at the door and speaks to someone. He asks to be heard and to have the door opened. So that a person enters, with the aim finally to dine in the reciprocity of a family.

Rev 3:20: I am standing at the door, knocking. If one of you hears me calling and opens the door, I will come in to share a meal at that person's side.

In this chapter of Revelation, Jesus feels a deep love for everyone. So, as in Exodus Moses, and as in Ezekiel, neither character, by staying on the threshold, could enter because, as already explained, Cherubim did not allow them to look at God's face. But now, in Rev 3:20, we witness the inversion of the threshold's meaning, since God, as the human person of Jesus finds a boundary, namely as a closed door. Jesus says “I am standing at the door”, literally “I knock on the door”, but he waits and this waiting is a clear sign Jesus wants to pass over the threshold. Jesus' voice breaks the continuity of the image not by the sound of knocking, but by his living voice. He wants himself to be heard, in order to have an interpersonal relationship that is obviously immersed in a context of love.

According to the Italian exegete Ugo Vanni, the same quotes that “it is not specified what the voice expresses, but it remains a secret and does not force itself” (vanni 2018, p. 187).

Making reference to exegete Ugo Vanni's studies, we find two different inspirational models for the interpretation of this quote: first, Christ's eschatological return (see Lk 12:37; Jm 5:9); second, Song of

Songs (especially Sg 5:2). While the first model raises some difficulties, the second one seems to be more appropriate to the context:

Sg 5:2: I sleep, but my heart is awake. I hear my love knocking. Open to me, my sister, my beloved, my dove, my perfect one, for my head is wet with dew, my hair with the drops of night.

From the imperative tone of verse 4:19 (“so repent in earnest”) we move to a conditional and delicate style of verse 5:2 (“I hear my love knocking”). From extreme severity we move to surprising tenderness. This time the discourse is addressed to the individual. In the Song of Songs 5:2, the extract where the bride says: “I hear my love knocking”, is followed by a second phase that it is described by a crescendo of images: opening, entrance, banquet, “Christ promises to each overcome the privilege of sitting with him on his throne” (Mounce 1998).

Here there are no thresholds to be crossed any longer, but just the opportunity to open the door as soon as Jesus’ voice is heard. Opening the door metaphorically means going in the depths of the heart. One more time Jesus takes the initiative. Rev 3:20 quotes: “I will come in to share a meal with that person and that person with me”.

The new threshold that seems to have been placed between God and man is no longer the one willed by God in Exodus; from now on, it becomes the believer’s free response, to Jesus’ voice, which is an invitation to step forward in a love relationship (Vanni 2018, p. 188). The believer’s freedom allows him or her to be reached by God’s grace in the Baptism and in the Eucharistic mystery (see Swetnam 1989, pp. 74–94; Just 2005, pp. 75–95) as Granados says: “The Letter to the Hebrews is designed to be read in a liturgical celebration”⁽¹¹⁾. As a consequence, in this case, the threshold is crossed by the revelation of God’s glory through the face of Christ (Granados 2021, p. 4)⁽¹²⁾.

(11) Theologian Harold Attridge says instead that “Eucharistic interpretations of the imagery of blood and flesh are also unconvincing. Hebrews refers not to any sacramental reenactment of the events of the passion, but to the act itself by which the new and living way was opened” (Attridge 1989, p. 287).

(12) The theologian Robert Mounce says about this quote of Revelation Book: “The invitation is addressed to each individual in the congregation: ‘if anyone hears [...] and opens’. The response of Christ to the opened door is that he enters and joins in table fellowship. In Oriental lands the sharing of a common meal indicated a strong bond of affection and companionship.

This inversion of the threshold consists in a continuous oscillation that we find again and again in the New Testament. Knowing oneself to be a sinner and rediscovering oneself to be righteous because saved by mercy, as Luke reports in Lk 5:32. In addition, thanks to the inversion of the threshold, human beings are no longer called “servants” but “friends”. This is revealed by Jesus in the Gospel of John (Jn 15:15). In Paul’s theology, we can link another consideration to the inversion of the threshold, in that it allows the overcoming of the difference between Jews and Greeks (Ga 3:28). This is why from the inversion of the threshold onwards human beings are no longer foreigners but all are God’s family members (Ep 2:19).

St Paul says: “now in Christ Jesus, you who were far off have been brought close, by the blood of Christ” (Ep 2:13). As a conclusion, the work of God is to let humanity cross every threshold, thanks to the baptism and by love of each other. That is why he says, “love is the fulfillment of the Law” (Rom 13:10).

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As such it became a common symbol of the intimacy to be enjoyed in the coming messianic kingdom” (Mounce 1998).

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