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Pleroma and Christology

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CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

Pleroma and Christology

HAROLD A. MERKLINGER

**The Relationship Between Dogmatics
and Ethics in the Thought of Elert,
Barth, and Troeltsch**

EDWARD H. SCHROEDER

A Checklist of Luther's Writings in English

GEORGE S. ROBERT

Homiletics

Brief Studies

Book Review

Vol. XXXVI

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No. 11

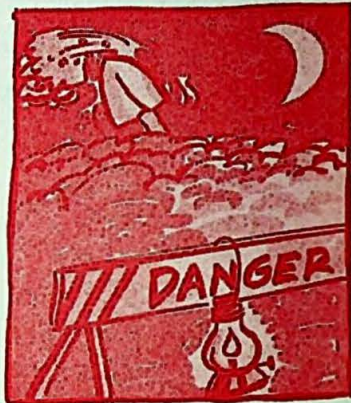
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Pleroma and Christology

HAROLD A. MERKLINGER

Theologically, πλήρωμα¹ is among St. Paul's basic concepts. This is particularly true in his epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians. In them he uses the term freighted with Christological content.

Because of the word's theological importance and because Paul does not elucidate or define in a full theological discussion what he means by Pleroma, the meaning of the term has been debated. The word must have been well understood by the recipients of his letters. This has led some interpreters to assume that Paul borrowed the term from the heretical teachers, particularly the Gnostics. For the last century the Gnostic source theory has predominated in research. Ever since F. C. Baur maintained that Pleroma was a Gnostic word,² many commentators have held that Paul obtained the term from Gnosticism, the heresy Paul was alleged to have been combating in Ephesians and Colossians.

Paul had no need to appropriate the

word Pleroma from those who were disturbing the faith of his addressees. Student of the Scripture that he was, Paul found the roots and basic concept of Pleroma in the Old Testament.

The Septuagint used πλήρωμα 12 times to translate the Hebrew nouns מְלֵאָה, מְלֵאָה' or מְלֵאָה. Once the Septuagint renders מְלֵאָה with πλήρωμα.³ In all these cases in the Septuagint "wird das Wort nur räumlich gebraucht."⁴

The Hebrew verb מָלַא, on the other hand, occurs much more frequently, 147 times, and is translated in the Septuagint by either πληρημι⁵ or πληρώω.⁶

Only a small number of these Old Testament passages need be cited: Jer. 23:24; Is. 6:3; Ps. 72:19; Num. 14:21; Ps. 33:5; 119:64.

The first of these is important for our purposes. "Can man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? says the Lord. Do I not fill (מָלַא=πληρώω) heaven and earth? says the Lord." This

¹ In this paper πλήρωμα is written as Pleroma when it refers to the concept. It is written in Greek when exegetical or other contexts demand.

² F. C. Baur, *Paulus, der Apostel Jesu Christi. Sein Leben und sein Wirken, seine Briefe und seine Lehre. Ein Beitrag zu einer kritischen Geschichte des Urchristentums* (Stuttgart: Verlag von Becker und Mueller, 1845), pp. 425ff.

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³ Edwin Hatch and Henry A. Redpath, *A Concordance to the Septuagint and the Other Greek Versions of the Old Testament (Including the Apocryphal Books)*, 2 vols. (Graz-Austria: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1954), I, 1148.

⁴ Gerhard Delling, "πλήρωμα," *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer GmbH, 1959), VI, 298. Hereafter referred to as, Delling, "πλήρωμα," in *TWNT*, VI.

⁵ 77 times. Gerhard Delling, "πληρημι," *TWNT*, VI, 128.

⁶ 70 times. Gerhard Delling, "πληρώω," *TWNT*, VI, 286.

was a favorite passage in rabbinic Judaism to demonstrate the omnipresence and providence of God.

No sin, however done in secrecy and darkness, can escape the eye of him who fills heaven and earth. On the other hand, that wherever we are, and in whatever estate, God is present with us, gives a realizing sense of his providence.⁷

Is. 6:3c states "the whole earth is full of (כְּבוֹד=πλήρης) His glory." This passage shows that something that does not occupy space can fill the earth, namely God's glory. Progressing further along these thought lines, we find in 1 Kings 8: 10, 11 that the cloud (10) and the glory of Yahweh (11) filled (כְּבוֹד=ἐπλήσεν) the temple.

Both these Old Testament passages, and many more, demonstrate that God took control of the objects filled. This was the thought process involved in Paul's use of the word.

Not only is Paul's lexical use of Pleroma taken from the Old Testament, but, more significantly still, the Hebrew Scriptures supplied Paul with the theology for his understanding of Pleroma. The thought of God filling the heavens and the earth (Jer. 23:24; Is. 6:3) is that which Paul expressed in Eph. 1:23 and Eph. 4:10. 1 Kings 8:10 f. and similar passages were the source from which he drew his concept of Christ filling the believers (Col. 2:10; Eph. 1:23b). Paul was steeped in the thought of the Old Testament, as the entire Pauline corpus patently exhibits. His lexicographical and theological thesaurus was

the Old Testament, the storehouse from which he drew the theology he set forth in Ephesians and Colossians, particularly his Christology.

The Christology of Col. 1:19 and 2:9 is among the richest Paul proclaimed. Human language can hardly convey more precisely or more comprehensively the conviction that *all that God is Christ is* than Paul's careful, succinct expression: ἐν αὐτῷ κατοικεῖ πᾶν τὸ πλῆρωμα τῆς θεότητος σωματικῶς.

However, there is more to the Christology of Col. 1:19 and 2:9 than a mere affirmation that Christ Jesus was and still is true God and true man. Paul is telling the Colossians that Christ Jesus is the temple of God.

Paul was not the first to equate Christ with the true temple. That Jesus had done Himself, as John reports in his Gospel (John 2:19-22). Christ's σῶμα was the temple.⁸ In Col. 1 and 2 Paul develops Old Testament thinking along the lines of Christ's being the true temple. Col. 1:19 is an amplification of Ps. 67:17 (LXX): εὐδόκησεν ὁ θεὸς κατοικεῖν ἐν αὐτῷ. The ἐν αὐτῷ refers to Mount Zion as the context indicates. Mount Zion according to Ps. 48:2 is called "the city of the great King." The great King is identified as God because the first verse sets "the city of our God" as parallel to "the city of the great King." In Ps. 84:7 the faithful make their pilgrimage to Mount Zion to appear before God. Zion, though origi-

⁸ Admittedly, John's Gospel had not been written when Paul wrote Colossians. However, the words and deeds of Jesus were circulated among the churches by the apostles and, in the case of the Colossians, by Epaphras (Col. 1: 3-8).

⁷ George Foote Moor, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era, the Age of the Tannaim*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, c. 1927), I, 371.

nally a name for the city of David, was the name later given to the temple area. It is in the temple that God dwells, as Solomon's great prayer at the dedication of the temple discloses, 1 Kings 8:27.

Both εὐδόκησεν and κατοικεῖν of Col. 1:19 are words approaching the force of technical terms to express God's will to have His presence take up its abode upon earth.⁹ This is the thought that later Judaism expressed with the term *Shekinah*, a term which John apparently had in mind when he wrote: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt (ἐσκήνωσεν) among us; we have beheld His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father." (John 1:14)

It was John who quoted Jesus as saying that His σῶμα was the true temple. What John is saying is that the incarnate Christ took up His abode among men, and men got a look at His glory, His divinity. This is essentially what Paul is saying — in Christ the full *Gott-Sein* took up His abode (κατοικῆσαι — 1:19) and still dwells (κατοικεῖ ἐν αὐτῷ σωματικῶς — 2:9). Jesus' word σῶμα with reference to His body as the temple Paul expressed with σωματικῶς. God was present bodily, *leibhaftig greifbar*.¹⁰ In the Old Testament temple, God's presence was visible in the form of a cloud (1 Kings 8:10). In Christ the temple, God's presence dwelt σωματικῶς. In the temple of Solomon the priests could not stand to minister in the temple because the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord (1 Kings 8:11). In

⁹ Sverre Aalen, "Begrepet πλήρωμα i Kolosser- og Efeserbrevet," *Tidskrift for Theologi og Kirke*, XXIII (1952), 58.

¹⁰ Ernest Percy, *Die Probleme der Kolosser- und Epheserbriefe* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1946), p. 77.

Christ, the temple, the divine presence dwells σωματικῶς, *greifbar*, physically; it can be touched. For Paul the incarnate Christ is the temple of God.

It can be said, then, as God took up abode in Solomon's temple, filling it with His presence in the form of a cloud, so God took up physical abode in Jesus. And so God was pleased to fill Jesus with all the divine attributes. As the temple was the God-filled, so Jesus Christ is the God-filled. Jesus Christ, the Pleroma of God, is God's temple among men.

Having drawn this conclusion, one still has not exhausted Paul's Christology as he set it forth in his Pleroma-temple concept in Col. 1:19 and 2:9. He applies the Pleroma-temple also to the church, which is likewise Christ's body.

The transition to this further understanding Paul made in Col. 2:10, where he wrote: καὶ ἐστὲ ἐν αὐτῷ πεπληρωμένοι. Christ, the filled, in turn has filled the believers with Himself. As the temple existed (and still exists) in Christ σωματικῶς, so it exists also in the church, which is His σῶμα, His πλήρωμα.

When Paul speaks of the church as Christ's Pleroma (Eph. 1:23), he conveys more than the Old Testament idea of God filling the temple with His presence. In Paul, as in the whole New Testament, the church-temple concept is associated with God's presence in, His filling of, the church through the Holy Ghost.¹¹ Paul made very clear to the Christians in Corinth that they were the temple of God and that the Holy Spirit was dwelling in them (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16 ff.).

¹¹ Delling, "πλήρωμα," in *TWNT*, VI, 303, n. 54.

In the first two of these passages Paul assumed that the Corinthians were quite familiar with the truth that Christians were indeed the temple of God (οὐκ οἴδατε ὅτι ναὸς θεοῦ κ. τ. λ.); for a question asked with οὐκ implies an affirmative reply.

In 1 Cor. 6:19 Paul not only states that the Christians are the temple of the Holy Ghost but designates the temple as σῶμα ὑμῶν. This is what Paul says in Eph. 1:22 f., where he places the church, His body, and His Pleroma, side by side, in apposition to one another.

The concept of the church, Christ's Pleroma, Paul describes in Eph. 2:21, 22 as a ναὸς ἁγιος ἐν κυρίῳ (a temple sanctified through the Lord) and as a κατοικητήριον τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν πνεύματι (a permanent dwelling which God inhabits through the Spirit). The whole portrayal of the church as a holy temple which God fills with His living presence is of one piece with σῶμα-πλήρωμα. The church is the πλήρωμα-ναὸς of God.

When Paul speaks of the growth in knowledge by which the members of the church attain the fullness of Christ and of God (Eph. 3:19; 4:13), he is not violating the spiritual temple picture of Eph. 2:21 f. given above. Through growth in knowledge Christians while still living in this world are to appropriate for themselves increasingly what God has already made them to be—His temple. They are to become what they already are. According to Eph. 2:20 ff. the growth of the members of the church into the temple is still going on (αὐξεῖ, συνοικοδομεῖσθε) even though they are already incorporated in it (ἐποικοδομηθέντες).

The Christology set forth in Paul's con-

cept of Pleroma, based on the Old Testament teaching that the temple was God's dwelling place, can be summarized as follows:

1. Christ Jesus is the temple of God because all the fullness of the divine Being has its permanent dwelling in Him, and
2. The church, as the fullness of Christ, His body, is in turn through the indwelling Christ the temple of God, because God dwells in and among its members.

God's people have become God's holy temple. No longer does God dwell in a temple made with hands. His permanent residence now is in and among His people, whom He has sanctified through the Lord Jesus Christ.

How did this ineffable blessing come about? It became a reality because God in His providence managed the course of salvation that it should be so. At the decisive point in His redemptive history, reaching as it does from before creation to the end of time, God sent His Son into the world to effect the redemption of Jew and non-Jew alike. Jesus Christ accomplished this through His death and resurrection. This redemption He was able to achieve because He possessed then, as now, the very divine functions and powers that God possesses. In fact, in His physical body God was pleased to make His home. Jesus Christ in the flesh was God's temple among men, His Pleroma.

Even though Christ has ascended to His exalted position at God's right hand, God's temple remains among men. Not only is Christ still with His people here on earth, but the community of believers, His church, is His body, for He has filled

it with His love. Thus the members of the church are God's temple. As God was pleased to dwell in Jesus Christ, so God is pleased to take up residence among His people, His Pleroma.

Paradoxical as it may appear, the erection of this temple among men is still going on. Not that the temple is incomplete or that it is not yet a reality. The

"edification" of the temple continues in the members of the church as they grow in love and in the fuller knowledge of God's grace. Through this growth the believers reach complete maturity, which the full knowledge of God in Christ produces. Members of the church are to become what they already are: the Pleroma, the temple of God.

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