

Savior-Shaped Shadows

Hebrews 10:1-18

At one of our Christian-Muslim discussion evenings a Muslim man asked me: “If the only way a person can be forgiven of his sins is by believing in the blood of Jesus, then how were people who lived before the time of Jesus, during the Old Testament era, forgiven?” To answer this question, we turned to Hebrews 10 to show how, in the Old Testament era, there were shadows, Savior-shaped shadows, which pictured in very simple, sketch-like (素描般的) form how God would, at some point in the future, forgive His peoples' sins. These shadows were God's way of teaching His people during the Old Testament era both *that* He would forgive sins at some point in the future and *how* He would one day forgive their sins. Let's consider the powerless shadows and the powerful Savior.

1. The Powerless Shadows

What is a shadow? It is an image of sorts, but of course it is not a very exciting image. It has no color; it is just a dark shape, some shade of gray or black. And it's not three-dimensional but just flat. But most importantly, it is not a real, physical object! It is just a colorless image cast on the ground by an object that is blocking light.

We can learn a little more about a shadow by asking, “What can a shadow do?” All a shadow does is shows the general shape of something. By looking at a shadow, you can tell whether you are looking at the shadow of a tree or the shadow of a house or the shadow of someone's hand. But you cannot tell whether the tree-shaped shadow is the shadow of an oak tree or a beech tree (山毛榉); you cannot tell whether the house-shaped shadow is being cast by new home or an old one; and you cannot tell whether the hand-shaped shadow is the shadow of a man's hand or a woman's hand, a child's hand or an adult's hand, an Asian person's hand or a Caucasian (高加索的) person's hand. Even more important is this: these shadows are powerless to do anything. The shadow of a maple tree is powerless to give sap (树汁). The shadow of a house is powerless to give you shelter from a storm or heat in the winter. And the shadow of a hand is powerless to pick anything up off the ground or bring food to your mouth. Shadows cannot do anything. They are powerless. But this does not mean they are pointless.

Hebrews 10:1 tells us that *the law was a shadow*. The phrase “*the law*” refers not to the moral law (ie. the ten commandments as found in Exodus 20 & Deuteronomy 5) but to the many ceremonial laws (礼仪律) which taught the Israelites how to worship God (found throughout the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy). Ceremonial laws specified what kind of sacrifices to offer, when to offer sacrifices, and how many to offer; what kind of religious festivals (节期) to hold; what kind of foods could be eaten and what kinds of foods were forbidden. Such laws, the author of Hebrews says, are just shadows. In Colossians 2:17 the Apostle Paul writes that all these laws “are but a shadow of things to come, but the substance is found in Christ.”

A question we must consider is: “How did these Old Testament laws present a shadow of Jesus Christ? What was the shape of these shadows?” There are many shadows we could consider. We will consider just two: the tabernacle-shaped (会幕形状的) shadow and the animal-shaped shadow.

To see how the tabernacle is a Savior-shaped shadow, we need to recall something about the way this tent-like structure was constructed. The inside of the tabernacle consisted of beautiful, brightly-colored curtains made of red, blue and purple linen with artistically-designed cherubim (基路伯) woven in to the design. Think of the contrast this presented the Israelite worshiper. Amid the deadness, dullness and lifelessness of their relatively colorless existence in the wilderness, the tabernacle provided a bright, beautiful, colorful, Eden-like setting. It was a picture of what was lost with the fall into sin and what it was like to live in the presence of God. There was beauty for the eyes to behold; bread for the tongue to taste; incense for the nostrils to smell. But to see how the tabernacle itself was a Savior-shaped shadow, we need to consider how its outer part was constructed.

If you have ever gone camping, you will know that our tents have a one-layered "wall" made of canvas 帆布 (if it's an old tent) or some kind of synthetic (合成的) material if it's a newer tent. But unlike our tents, the tabernacle consisted of a four-layered wall. The first layer was the bright, beautiful inner curtains decked out with cherubim. But on top of this first layer were three more layers. You could say the tabernacle was much more like our modern homes than our tents. The walls of our homes consist of at least four layers: first, drywall (the material the paint or wallpaper adheres to); second, wooden studs to provide structure and an insulation barrier (绝缘屏障); third, exterior sheathing to provide racking strength; fourth, the brick or siding to provide protection from the elements.

The tabernacle had a similar construction: first, the inner curtain; second, a layer of goat skin; third, a layer of ram's skin; fourth, a layer of badger skin (Exodus 26:7,14). Skin, skin, skin. Three layers of skin! Why all this skin?

True indeed, the skin served a practical purpose: it prevented the fine linen curtains on the interior of the tabernacle from being damaged by the harsh desert conditions. But these layers of skin also taught something by way of symbolism (象征性).

To understand the symbolic teaching, let's remind ourselves: What was the tabernacle? It was God's house, God's earthly home. Once the tabernacle had been built, we read in Exodus 40 that the cloud of God's presence filled the Tent of Meeting and covered the tabernacle. God came down from heaven to earth and tented or tabernacled among His people in a tent of skin. Doesn't that sound a lot like what happened on the first Christmas day? The eternal God came down from heaven to earth and lived in what? A human body which the Apostles Paul and Peter speak of as a tent of skin (cf. 2 Cor.5:1 & 4; 2 Pet.1:13). This connection between the Old Testament tent called a tabernacle and the New Testament God-Man named Jesus Christ may sound like a bit of a stretch to our ears, but it is a connection every Jew who read John 1:14 would have immediately made. English translations obscure (使...模糊) this connection with the word 'dwelt', but if you hear a literal (字面上的) translation of John 1:14, you'll immediately see the connection: "The Word became flesh and tabernacled (or tented) among us." The almighty, eternal, all-knowing, everywhere-present God entered into our humanity by "tenting" in a human body, a tent of skin!

The tabernacle of the Old Testament era was a beautiful, Savior-shaped shadow, a tent of skin that God lived in while His people wandered in the wilderness. It pointed to Jesus Christ, the true tabernacle of God,

who inhabited a tent of skin in the Incarnation (道成肉身) . But the tabernacle, a mere shadow, was powerless to actually bring people back into the presence of God. And the tabernacle worship made clear to the Israelites that it was powerless to do so.

The Israelites knew that God was present in the tabernacle because in Exodus 25:22 God promised that “there [in the tabernacle] I will meet with you & I will speak with you from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are on the ark of the Testimony.” And in chapter 40:34-35 we read of this promise being fulfilled, for the cloud of God's presence descended and *rested over and filled* the tabernacle on day was completed.

But guess what? Hanging in front of the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place were big, beautiful curtains. And they acted as giant “KEEP OUT!” signs. They blocked the Israelites from seeing or entering into God's presence in the tabernacle. And only the high priest was allowed to enter the Most Holy Place (至圣所) , and only one time per year, and only if he brought with him the blood of a sacrificial animal. (Death would be the penalty for breaching 破坏 protocol 议定书 here.) God's presence was off limits for the people of God because they were sinful, unholy. And sinful people cannot enter into the presence of a sinless God.

That's the first Savior-shaped shadow, the tabernacle. But within the courtyard of the tabernacle another Savior-shaped shadow was constantly being cast on the ground: an animal-shaped shadow.

Many animals were sacrificed in the tabernacle courtyard each day. They were all Savior-shaped shadows, and they all taught numerous truths about sin and salvation by means of their symbolism. The killing of the animal taught that the wages of sin is death 罪的工价乃是死 (Romans 6:23a). But before the animal was killed, there was an important symbolic action that was to be performed. The worshiper was to lay his hands on the animal's head. In so doing, the worshiper was essentially saying two things: “This animal represents me” and “My sins are now being transferred to this animal.” Then, when the animal was killed and the worshiper continued to live, God taught His people that the gift of God is eternal life through substitutionary atonement 代赎(Romans 6:23b).

Many animals were sacrificed, and they all foreshadowed (预示) Jesus. But there was one sacrificial animal that cast the clearest, most distinctly Savior-shaped shadow. That was the Passover Lamb (逾越节的羔羊) . From Exodus 12:5 & 46 we see that the Passover Lamb had the following shape: first, it was a male lamb; second, it was to be a one-year-old lamb (ie. in the prime of life); third, it was to be without defect (瑕疵) ; fourth, none of its bones could be broken.

Guess what? This is precisely the shape of the Savior Jesus Christ! In 1 Corinthians 5:7 the Apostle Paul calls Jesus “our Passover Lamb.” When John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him, he said to the crowd of onlookers, “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). And Jesus perfectly fits the shape of the shadow cast by the Passover Lamb. Jesus was a male; He was in the prime (盛年) of life (just over thirty years old) when He offered Himself as a sacrifice; He was perfect (1 Peter 1:18-19); and finally, none of His bones were broken when was sacrificed on the cross (John 19:33,37).

But the Passover lambs offered all throughout the Old Testament period were absolutely powerless to take sin away. The author of Hebrews drives this point home with a threefold repetition in Hebrews 10:1,4 & 11.

These sacrifices could not, would not, and did not take away sin. But Jesus Christ could and would and did because He is not just a shadow, but the very reality that created the shadow. He is the powerful Savior!

2. The Powerful Savior

Why was Jesus powerful enough to remove sin? Because according to God's system of justice, man sinned, therefore man must pay the penalty for sin. Animals are not made in the image of God, therefore they are not acceptable or fitting substitutes. Jesus Christ, however, definitely was and is an image-bearer of God—an image-bearer, therefore He was a fitting and acceptable substitute. Of course Jesus is an image-bearer of God in a far fuller sense than we ever can or will be, for He was and is God (Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3). But He is also an image-bearer in the same sense that we are: He was fully human, as human as we are—except for one important exception—He was without sin.

The author quotes from Psalm 40:6-8 to demonstrate the perfect obedience of Christ. ^{5b} Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, but a body You have prepared for Me. ⁶ In burnt offerings (燔祭) and sacrifices for sin (贖罪祭) You had no pleasure. ⁷ Then I said, 'Behold, I have come—in the volume of the book it is written of Me—to do Your will, O God.'" To do God's will is to obey God. Jesus did that perfectly.

If Jesus was not perfect, then He would have needed someone else to pay for His sin, and we would be no further ahead. The search for a Savior would continue. But because Jesus was perfect, He did not have to pay for His own sin and He could pay for our sin.

We need to remind ourselves: What is it that God really delights in? Not in animal sacrifices, but in obedience (順服). Samuel reminds us of this truth: “Does the Lord delight in burnt offering and sacrifice as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice!” he said to sinful King Saul as a way of rebuking him (1 Samuel 15:22). We do well to remember that the only reason we need sacrifices is because we disobey God.

Sacrifice is not what God really wants. What He really wants from us is obedience. Jesus said that if we love Him, we will keep His commandments (John 14:15, 21, 23). But the reality is, we keep on sinning. We should not sin. We might not want to sin. But we do sin. We sin continually. This is why Jesus had to come.

And the very first thing He did was this: He kept the law. The second thing He did was die for those who do not keep the law. He sacrificed Himself. And in doing so, He actually paid for sin! In Hebrews 10:11-12 & 14 we read, ¹¹ And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹² But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God.... ¹⁴ For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified.” And what amazing effect Jesus' perfect obedience and selfless sacrifice have: God says in verse 17, “Their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more!”

It is true that the Old Testament shadows pictured a future day when sins would be paid for (cf. Zechariah 3:8-9). But the Old Testament shadows served first and foremost as a reminder of sin and a reminder of the consequence of sin, namely death (Hebrews 10:3).

In contrast, the New Testament serves first and foremost to remind us of salvation. That sin has been paid for and that God remembers our sin no more (Hebrews 10:17). This is because when the New Testament

era arrives, the Light of the world—which is Jesus Christ—has fully come (John 8:12). Just as when the sun is fully out in the middle of the day, the shadows disappear, so when Jesus Christ the Son of God arrives as the presence and power of God on earth, the shadows disappear. Jesus is the reality, the Person that the Savior-shaped shadows were created by!

If you believe that Jesus lived a perfect life and died a cursed death to save you from your sins, then He stamps the record of all your sins with the words: “PAID IN FULL! Love, Jesus!” (cf. Colossians 2:13-14).

Hebrews 9:26 says, “But now, once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sins by the sacrifice of Himself.” Because of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, God remembers our sins and our lawless deeds no more (Hebrews 10:17). Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!