HEBREWS 9:6-10: THE "PARABLE" 
OF THE TABERNACLE

by

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The author of Hebrews offers his readers a παραβολή in the middle of ch. 9, apparently to clarify for them certain aspects of the old and new convenant systems. Whether or not it had this effect for the original readers, this παραβολή presents considerable difficulties for the modern exegete. Even the most basic questions concerning the extent and meaning of the παραβολή prove preplexing at first. This study, therefore, is an attempt to answer these questions.

I. The Material for the παραβολή

The Use of πρῶτος in 9:1-14

The first verse of ch. 9 develops a theme from ch. 8 (vv. 7, 13) using the term πρῶτος ("first"), an important term for understanding v. 8. The meaning of this term in 9:1, however, is somewhat ambiguous.¹ Here πρῶτος seems to refer to the first covenant, coming after its use in the previous verse (8:13) where it has this meaning, so the reader naturally makes this connection, at least initially. This interpretation of πρῶτος works well within 9:1 itself, understanding the first covenant as involving regulations for service and a sanctuary, εἶχε μὲν οὖν [καὶ] ἡ πρώτη δικαιώματα λατρείας τὸ τε ἄγιον κοσμικόν ("therefore, the first was also having regulations for service and the earthly holy place"). But in 9:2 the author goes on to talk about "the first tent", and then in v. 3 of a "tent called the Holy of Holies". In v. 2, then, πρῶτος refers to the first tent over against another (second) tent, so that the sense has shifted between ch. 8 and 9:2. This may cause the reader to question

¹ Some manuscripts (e.g. 47, 73, 74, 80, 137, 139) add σχημα to specify that the "first" refers to the tabernacle.
whether the initial understanding of πρώτος in v. 1 as referring to the first covenant holds up under further scrutiny. In fact, the shift in the use of πρώτος from its reference in ch. 8 to the first covenant to its reference in ch. 9 to the first tent does not occur until after 9:1. It is clear that πρώτος is used in v. 2 to describe a σκηνή, but it would be awkward to understand ἡ πρώτη in 9:1 as referring to the tent, since the verse would then read: “Therefore, the first [tent] was also having regulations for service and the earthly holy place”. It would be strange to understand the first tent as having an “earthly holy place”, because the first tent is itself an “earthly holy place”. Therefore, on account of the awkwardness of πρώτος referring to the tent in v. 1, the close grammatical connection between 8:13 and 9:1 (οὖν)² and the lack of any marker of shift in the usage of the term until 9:2, it seems best to understand πρώτος as having the same referent and usage in 9:1 as in 8:13, i.e. the first covenant.³

When the author of Hebrew uses πρώτος to describe the tent in ch. 9, his usage does not necessarily carry the same polemical force as it does when he applies it to the new covenant. That is, πρώτος is used with διαθήκη in the context of one covenant being replaced by another, so that the first belonged to a previous order, while its counterpart, the new, belongs to the present order. In the context of the tents, when the counterpart of the first is the holy of holies, both the first and second belong to the same order. Yet here there is also an aspect of the first tent that makes it inferior to the second tent or holy of holies, just as the first covenant is inferior to the new

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