

The Interpretation of *ta hagia* in Hebrews 9:8

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Abstract

The Greek word *ta hagia* in Hebrews 9:8 is semantic in nature. Many scholars agreed to some extent that there is indeed a disagreement among the modern English translation of the Bible in translating the word *ta hagia* in Hebrews 9:8. Some modern translations, translate it as “Most Holy Place”, some translate it as “sanctuary” and some even translate it as “Holy Place”. This paper clarifies the importance on looking on the grammatical categories of the word *ta hagia* and its immediate context to determine the correct translation for *ta hagia* which is a study that involves both lexical and literary contextual analysis. From the study, the Researcher found out that *ta hagia* should be translated as “sanctuary” or “holy places” in Hebrews 9:8.

Keywords: *Holy Place, Sanctuary, Hebrews*

Introduction

The Researcher sees the issue of *ta hagia* in Hebrews 9:8 is a result of the fact that there are some challenges in translating the Bible into modern English language since any given word of the ancient language have a range of meaning when it needs to be translated to English. Like what Davidson says, “The most significant challenge to the translation process lies in the inherent structural differences between the original and the modern languages.”¹

In continuation of the issue above, the Researcher made a comparison among the nowadays Bible translation particularly for the word *ta hagia* in Hebrews 9:8. The King James Version translated *ta hagia* as “the holiest of all.” The New American Standard Bible translate it as “the holy place.” The New International Version seems to agree with King James Version by translating the Greek word as “the Most Holy Place.” On the other hand, the New Revised Standard Version translate the particular Greek word into “the sanctuary.” Looking on these different versions of the Bible, it is somehow clear to say that there are some disagreements among the modern English Bible translations. Norman H. Young also points out the fact that there is indeed a considerable confusion among the Bible translation in regard to the translation of *ta hagia* in Hebrews 9:8.²

This study seeks to conduct an exegetical study for the word *ta hagia* in Hebrews 9:8 and its significant by answering the following question: What is the correct translation for *ta hagia*?

¹Davidson M. Richard, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Theological Seminary, 1995), 32.

²Norman H. Young, “The Gospel According to Hebrews 9,” *New Testament Studies* 27 (1981): 198.

Method

This article will use an exegetical study as its main method of discovering the correct translation for *ta hagia*. Through this method, this research paper will do a lexical analysis of the word *ta hagia*. This paper will also include a contextual analysis for the understanding of *ta hagia* in relation to its immediate and larger context. Thus, the correct translation of *ta hagia* will be determined through the study of these two aspects under the exegetical study. The different translation of *ta hagia* may make people have different understanding of Hebrews 9:8. For that reason, this research paper will provide what is to be the correct translation for *ta hagia* so that every Bible student will have one accord of understanding. The word *ta hagia* may be found elsewhere in the Bible. However, in this paper, the Researcher seeks to only focus on the word of *ta hagia* in Hebrews 9:8. Thus, the exegetical study that is done on this paper are particularly limited to gain an understanding for Hebrews chapter 9 only.

Discussion

The View of *ta hagia* in Hebrews 9:8 as “The Most Holy Place”

It is believed that the word *ta hagia* is quite semantic in nature. Some believed that *ta hagia* should be translated as the Most Holy Place or the Holy of Holies. James Swetnam, believes the same way. He said, “the expression *ten ton hagion hadan* refers to the way into the Holy of Holies.³ He supports this matter by saying that:

The contrast is between *ta hagia* and the "first" or outer tent, i.e., the Holy Place. Here the phrase *he prate skene* has the same meaning that it has in 9,2 and 9,6. As long as the first tent had legitimacy as the official cult, the "way" into the Holy of Holies was not yet "revealed" (*phaneroa*). That is to say, as long as the outer tent and all its accompanying ceremonials was legitimate, there was no question of unqualified access to the inner tent, i.e., *ta hagia*.⁴

For him, *ta hagia* should be translated as Holy of Holiest because Hebrews 9:8 has a strong connection in the transition between the earthly sanctuary (outer tent) towards the heavenly sanctuary (Holy of Holiest). Thus, for him the word *ta hagia* is not pointing towards a specific compartment in the Mosaic sanctuary but it is actually referring to the transition of the earthly sanctuary service towards the heavenly sanctuary. Steve Stanley also believes the same way, that the word *ta hagia* is supposed to be understood as a transition of earthly service to the heavenly sanctuary service by proposing a kind of correspondence between “outer tent” as earthly sanctuary and “Holy of Holies” as the heavenly sanctuary.⁵ So, for them, “Holy of Holies” should be the translation of *ta hagia*. Felix Cortez puts some insight from this matter by saying that Hebrews 9:8 is a parable which illustrates “the transition from the ministry of several priest to the ministry of one,

³James Swetnam, “Hebrews 9,2: Some Suggestions about Text and Context”

⁴Ibid.

⁵Steve Stanley, “Hebrews 9:6-10: The ‘Parable’ of the Tabernacle” *Novum Testamentum* 37 (October 1995): 398.

from several sacrifices to one sacrifice, and from unrestricted access to the outer tent to access only ‘through blood’ in the inner tent.”⁶

Norman Young, did not argue that indeed Hebrews 9 has a strong connection to the Day of Atonement in the Old Testament account. For Young, *ta hagia* in Hebrews 9:8 should be translated as “Holy of Holies” for the fact many scholars agree upon that matter and the fact that the text itself gave incontrovertible indication.⁷

It can be seen as well that several modern English translations of the Bible also supports the way Swetnam and Stanly thinks. For instances the King James version translated *ta hagia* as “holiest of all” which carry the same connotation as the Most Holy Place. The New International Version directly translate it as “the Most Holy Place.

Salom prefer to look *ta hagia* in a different perspective. He insists that the author of Hebrews leaned so heavily towards Septuagint: LXX which is the Greek translation of Hebrew Scriptures.⁸ For that reason he believed that, the study from Septuagint: LXX itself can be a great tool to discover the best translation for *ta hagia*. It can be seen that there is a quite disagreement between Salom and the view of Stanley and Swetnam in regards to Hebrews 9:8. For Salom, Hebrews 9:8 may not really based on the Day of Atonement setting, because Leviticus 16 mainly use singular number while the author of Hebrew mainly use plural number.⁹ He continued by insisting that “it seems far more likely for the he (author of Hebrews) was influenced by the general tendency of the LXX (which indicates that *ta hagia* refers primarily to the sanctuary as a whole).”¹⁰ Thus, basically for Salom, the translation for *ta hagia* is best suited to be sanctuary because it is the nature of the LXX to point it out that way.

Thomas Keene seems to be in one track with Salom. Keene points out the fact that *ta hagia* can be an adjective which describe something holy, sacred and dedicated to God.¹¹ He continued by stating that *ta hagia*, “is often used in a more technical sense, to refer to the location most associated with holy activities, the sanctuary.”¹² He believes that *ta hagia* as was plural in number and neuter in gender cannot be interpreted as Most Holy Place for this is singular in number.¹³ The plural in number for the word *ta hagia* is not suitable to be interpreted as focusing only on one location, for instance the Most Holy Place for it should be singular. The fact that *ta hagia* is plural it is best to conclude that it is referring to the whole sanctuary.

Paul Turner was seen to be one way another supports the translation of *ta hagia* as sanctuary. He proposes the idea that the word *ton hagion* in Hebrews 9:8 may refer to the

⁶Felix H. Cortez, “From the Holy to the Most Holy Place: The Period of Hebrews 9:6-10 and the Day of Atonement as a Metaphor of Transition” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 125 (2006): 537.

⁷Young, 199.

⁸A. P. Salom, “Ta Hagia in the Epistle to the Hebrews” *Andrews University Seminary Studies (AUSS)* 5 (1967): 60.

⁹Salom, 62.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Thomas Keene, “Heaven is a Tent: The Tabernacle as an Eschatological Metaphor in the Epistle to the Hebrews” (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 2010), 17.

¹²Ibid., 18

¹³Ibid., 21.

whole heavenly sanctuary.¹⁴ Simply for him, *ta hagia* can be translated either Holies or Holy places.

Despite these views, some of the modern English bible translation also project the same idea. The New Revised Standard Version translated *ta hagia* as “the sanctuary.” English Standard Bible translated *ta hagia* as “the holy places” which can be seen as carrying the same connotations as sanctuary for it is focusing to more than one compartment, in other words the whole sanctuary itself.

The View of *ta hagia* as the “Holy Place”

There was not much claim about the translation of *ta hagia* as “Holy Place” among the scholars. The most famous translation is both “Most Holy Place” or “sanctuary” only. However, the New American Standard Bible choose the path of translating *ta hagia* as “Holy Place.” Instead of pointing to the last compartment of the Mosaic sanctuary, NASB prefer to point the first compartment which is the Holy Place.

Structure of the Book of Hebrews

Examining the structure of Hebrews can be a very helpful method in understanding the message of the book. According to Stanley, the structure of Hebrews can be seen in the following way:

Prologue 1:1-4

- I. Jesus superior to the angels 1:5-2:18
 - A. Superior in divinity (1:5-14)
 - B. Warning (2:1-4)
 - C. Superior in humanity (2:5-18)
- II. Jesus a faithful Priest 3:1-4:13
- III. Jesus a merciful Priest 4:14-5:10
- IV. Digression (Readers’ unpreparedness for teaching on the subject announced because of immaturity) 5:11-6:20
- V. Jesus in the order of Melchizedek 7:1-28
- VI. Jesus a cause of eternal salvation 8:1-10:39
 - A. A unique Priest which the readers have (8:1-10:18)
 - B. The consequent responsibility which the readers have (10:19-39)
- VII. Jesus as an example of obedience 11:1-13:19
 - A. Faith (11:1-12:3)
 - B. Endurance (12:4-29)
 - C. Sacrifice (13:1-19)

Benediction 13:20, 21

Epistolary closing 13:22-25¹⁵

This structure of Hebrews, project the fact that the word *ta hagia* is belong to chapter 9 which mainly concerns about the unique priest which the readers have. Thus, the overall context of Hebrews 9 is limited to the discussion of Christ Priestly ministry in heaven. To be more particular, Stanley states the fact that, in the section about the “unique priest,” chapter 8 is mainly introducing about Christ’s role as a priest in the sanctuary and this

¹⁴Paul A Turner, “The Sanctuary of Hebrews 8-10” (Senior Research Projects, Southern Adventist University, 2017), 13.

¹⁵Steve Stanley, “The Structure of Hebrews from Three Perspectives,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 45.2 (1994): 261.

discourse was continued until chapter 9 and 10.¹⁶ In fact Gundry also propose the same structure with Stanley. Both of them, groups chapter 8-10 as discussion about the heavenly realities of Christ’s priesthood in heaven which is superior over Aaron and the Aaronites.¹⁷

Lexical and Literary Contextual Analysis

Following are the Greek translation of Hebrews 9:8, “τοῦτο δηλοῦντος τοῦ πνεύματος τοῦ ἁγίου, μήπω πεφανερῶσθαι τὴν τῶν ἁγίων ὁδὸν ἔτι τῆς πρώτης σκηνῆς ἐχούσης στάσιν.” It this verse it can be seen that the term used for the sanctuary or Holy Place, or Most Holy Place is actually *ton hagion*. According to the proposed structure of the book of Hebrews, since this text falls under the subject regarding a unique Priest that the audience of Hebrews have, then it should share a strong connection with Leviticus 16 which discusses about the unique ministry of the high priest during the Day of Atonement. According to the Septuagint: LXX, the word used for the sanctuary/Holy Place/Most Holy Place in Leviticus 16:2, is *to hagion*, and it is the same word used in Leviticus 16:3, 16, 20, 23, and 33. However, Leviticus 16:27 point out the dative case translation for Most Holy Place and it is τῷ ἁγίῳ transliterated as *to hagio*. The Researcher finds that *to hagio* is a correct translation for Most Holy Place since the text is very clear in Leviticus 16:27, “The bull and the goat for the sin offerings, whose blood was brought into the Most Holy Place to make atonement, must be taken outside the camp; their hides, flesh and intestines are to be burned up (NIV).” For indeed the blood of the sacrifices, is not brought up to the Holy Place only, but it is brought up to the Most Holy Place then the atonement will be done. For that reason, *to hagio* cannot be translated other than Most Holy Place.

To serve as another details, the Researcher made a summary upon the occurrences of *ta hagia* in Leviticus 16, based on the Septuagint: LXX. The summary is as follows:

Table 1: Occurrences of *ta hagia* in Leviticus 16 based on the Septuagint

Greek Word	English Translation
<i>To Hagion</i> (Leviticus 16:2)	Most Holy Place or holy Places
<i>To Hagion</i> (Leviticus 16:3)	Most Holy Place or holy Places
<i>To Hagion</i> (Leviticus 16:16)	Most Holy Place or Holy Places
<i>To Hagion</i> (Leviticus 16:20)	Most Holy Place or holy Places
<i>To Hagion</i> (Leviticus 16:23)	Most Holy Place or holy Places
<i>To Hagio</i> (Leviticus 16:27)	Most Holy Place
<i>To Hagion</i> (Leviticus 16:33)	Most Holy Place or holy Places

¹⁶Stanley, 267.

¹⁷Robert H. Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2012), 505.

From this rough summary many of the occurrences of *ta hagia* in Leviticus 16 can only be translated as either “Most Holy Place” or “holy places.” According to the immediate context of verses 2, 3, 16, 20, 23, and 33, it is suitable to translate them either “Most Holy Place” or “holy places” and not “Holy Place.” Between the translation of “Most Holy Place” and “holy places” it can be seen that the grammatical category of *to hagian* is neuter in gender, and singular in number. The fact that *to hagian* is singular in number, it is not suitable to translate it as “holy places” because this translation projects plural in number. Thus, *to hagian* is correct to be translated as “Most Holy Place.”

In connection to the explanation above, the Researcher propose a revised summary for the lexical study of the occurrences of *ta hagia* in Leviticus 16 as follows:

Table 2: Lexical study of the occurrences of *ta hagia* in Leviticus 16

Greek Word	English Translation
<i>To Hagian</i> (Leviticus 16:2)	Most Holy Place
<i>To Hagian</i> (Leviticus 16:3)	Most Holy Place
<i>To Hagian</i> (Leviticus 16:16)	Most Holy Place
<i>To Hagian</i> (Leviticus 16:20)	Most Holy Place
<i>To Hagian</i> (Leviticus 16:23)	Most Holy Place
<i>To Hagio</i> (Leviticus 16:27)	Most Holy Place
<i>To Hagian</i> (Leviticus 16:33)	Most Holy Place

From this summary the Researcher conclude that, the aspect of number whether a particular Greek word is singular or plural in number, is very crucial in determining the correct translation for *ta hagia*.

Looking back to Hebrews 9:8, the Greek word that was used is again *ton hagian*. The grammatical and syntactical categories for the word *ton hagian* in Hebrews 9:8 are Genitive, with the gender neuter and the number is plural and this is actually an adjective.¹⁸ It is important to note the fact that this word is rigidly neuter and plural in number.¹⁹ Since it is not singular in number, then it notes the fact that *ton hagian* is probably pointing to something that is more than one thing in number. For that reason, if *ton hagian* is translated as the Holy Place then it is not an accurate translation, because Holy Place is singular in number while *ton hagian* is plural in number. Thus, through this lexical analysis it can be conclude that the correct translation for *ta hagia* in Hebrews 9:8 is either “the sanctuary” or “the holy places.”

The Researcher is aware that there might be a contradiction between the immediate context and the aspect of number in any given Greek word. Hebrews 9:2 serves as the suitable example of a contradiction that occur between the immediate context and the aspect of number. In Hebrews 9:2 the word used for Holy Place is *hagia*. The Researcher

¹⁸Eberhard Nestle, *Novum Testamentum Graece* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012), 671.

¹⁹Ibid.

finds that this is a correct translation since the text itself is mentioning about “the lampstand and the table with its consecrated bread.” However, if this is Holy Place then why the grammatical category of *hagia* is neuter in gender and plural in number? Holy Place is supposed to be singular and not plural. Thus, there is a contradiction between the immediate context and the aspect of number itself in the grammatical category of the given Greek word which is *hagia* in Hebrews 9:2.

However, the Researcher upholds the rule that the immediate context should be the final determiner of meaning. The Researcher argues that these items, “the lampstand and the table with its consecrated bread” are indeed only found in Holy Place and not found in other compartment or outside of the sanctuary. Thus, Hebrews 9:2 is mainly talking about Holy Place even though the word *hagia* is plural in number. This is why “Holy Place” in Hebrews 9:2 is a correct translation for *hagia*.

Looking on verse 3, “Behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place.” The Greek word used for Most Holy Place is *hagia hagion* in other words, the Holy of Holies. This is a correct translation because verse 4 and 5 provide the supporting details for verse 3 which said:

Which had the golden altar of incense and the gold-covered ark of the covenant. This ark contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron’s staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant. Above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover. But we cannot discuss these things in detail now. (Hebrews 9:4 & 5 NIV).

All the items mentioned in verse 4 and 5 are indeed only found in the Most Holy Place and thus it shows that “Most Holy Place” is a correct translation for *hagia hagion*.

Other occurrences of *ta hagia* is found in Hebrews 9:12 which the Researcher think should be translated as holy places or sanctuary even though some English translated is as Holy Place and Most Holy Place for instance NRSV and NIV respectively. The Greek translation of Hebrews 9:12 are as follows, “οὐδὲ δι’ αἵματος τράγων καὶ μόσχων διὰ δὲ τοῦ ἰδίου αἵματος, εἰσῆλθεν ἐφάπαξ εἰς τὰ ἅγια, αἰώνιαν λύτρωσιν εὐράμενος.” The Researcher translate it in this way, “and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy places once for all, having obtained eternal redemption.” The correct translation for *ta hagia* in this verse is “holy places” or “sanctuary” because Christ indeed will enter the Holy Place and Most Holy Place once and for all to complete His ministry of redemption. The connotation of “holy places” or “sanctuary” suggest the fact that Christ will enter both compartment which is the Holy Place and Most Holy Place to complete the redemption. Plus, the word *ta hagia* in this verse is plural in number which made it suitable to be translated as “holy places” or “sanctuary.”

From the analysis above, the Researcher summarize the occurrences of *ta hagia* in Hebrews 9 as follows:

Table 3: Occurrences of *ta hagia* in Hebrews 9

Greek Word	English Translation
<i>Hagia</i> (Hebrews 9:2)	The Holy Place
<i>Hagia Hagion</i> (Hebrews 9:3)	Most Holy Place
<i>Ta Hagia</i> (Hebrews 9:12)	Holy places or Sanctuary

From the presentation above, it is clear that *ton hagion* (the Genitive form of *ta hagia*) in Hebrews 9:8 is rightly to be translated as “holy places” or “sanctuary.” Therefore, according to the Researcher the correct translation for Hebrews 9:8 is in this way, “The Holy Spirit is signifying this, that the way into the holy places has not yet been made manifest while the first tabernacle is still standing.”

Based on the study of Leviticus 16 and Hebrews 9 itself, the Researcher finds that it can be summarized as follows:

Table 3: Summary of the study of Leviticus 16 and Hebrews 9

Greek Word	Grammatical Categories	Translation
<i>To Hagion</i> (Lev 16)	Gender: Neuter Number: Singular	Most Holy Place
<i>Ton Hagion</i> or <i>Ta Hagia</i> (Heb 9:8 and 12)	Gender: Neuter Number: Plural	Sanctuary or holy places

Thus, *ton hagion* in Hebrews 9:8 is to be translated as “holy places” or “sanctuary.” Because the aspect of number in the grammatical categories and the immediate context as final determiner of meaning supports the fact *ta hagia* in Hebrews 9:8 is to be translated as “sanctuary” or “holy places.”

Summary and Conclusion

Summary

The Researcher sees the issue of *ta hagia* in Hebrews 9:8 as a result of the fact that there are some challenges in translating the Bible into modern English language. The King James Version translated it as "the holiest of all". The New American Standard Bible translate it as 'the holy place'. The New International Version seems to agree with this translation while the New Revised Standard Version translate the particular Greek word into 'the sanctuary'. Norman H. Young also points out that there is considerable confusion among the Bible translation in regard to the translation of *ta hagia*.

It is believed that the word *ta hagia* is quite semantic in nature. Some believe it should be translated as the Most Holy Place or the Holy of Holies. For Norman Young, *ta hagia* in Hebrews 9:8 should be translated as "Holy of Holies" for the fact many scholars agree upon that matter and the fact that the text itself gave incontrovertible indication.

Steve Stanley also believes the same way to be understood as a transition of earthly service to the heavenly sanctuary service. It can be seen that several modern English translations of the Bible also supports the way Swetnam and Stanly think. In regards to Hebrews 9:8, Thomas Keene argues that the word *ta hagia* may refer to the whole heavenly sanctuary. This is contrary to the view of Stanley and Swetnam who believe that it refers primarily to the location most associated with holy activities, the sanctuary. For Salom, the translation for *ta hagia* is best suited to be sanctuary because it is the nature of the Septuagint: LXX to point it out that way.

The New American Standard Bible choose the path of translating *ta hagia* as "Holy Place". Instead of pointing to the last compartment of the Mosaic sanctuary, NASB prefer to point the first compartment which is the Holy Place.

According to the immediate context of verses 2, 3, 16, 20, 23, and 33, it is suitable to translate them as "Holy Places". In Hebrews 9:8, the Greek word that was used is again *ton hagion*. It is important to note that this word is rigidly neuter and plural in number. In Hebrews 9:2 the word used for Holy Place is *hagia*. The Researcher argues that these items, "the lampstand and the table with its consecrated bread" are indeed only found in Holy Place.

This is a correct translation because verse 4 and 5 provide the supporting details for verse 3 which said: Which had the golden altar of incense and the gold-covered ark of the covenant. In Hebrews 9:8, *ton hagion* (the Genitive form of *ta hagia*) is rightly to be translated as "holy places" or "sanctuary" because Christ will enter both Holy Place and Most Holy Place once and for all to complete His ministry of redemption. The Researcher think the correct translation in this verse should be Holy Places or Sanctuary even though some English translations translate it as Holy People or Holy Places.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, this research paper has provided the answer upon the statement of the problem which is asking about the correct translation for *ta hagia* in Hebrews 9:8. This research paper clarifies that *ta hagia* is to be translated as either "sanctuary" or "holy places."

The structure of the book of Hebrews projects the idea that the word *ta hagia* has its occurrences also in Leviticus 16 which talks about the special duty of the high priest during the Day of Atonement. In Leviticus 16, according to the Septuagint: LXX majority of the Greek word is written as *ta hagion*. The grammatical categories and the immediate context of the word *ta hagion* suggest the fact that it is to be translated as "Most Holy Place." The Researcher used the same application in studying the word *ta hagia* in Hebrews 9:8 which is looking upon the grammatical categories and focusing on the immediate context as the final determiner of meaning. The Researcher finds out that the word *ton hagion* in Hebrews 9:8 is neuter in gender and plural in number, which is suitable to only be translated as "sanctuary" or "holy places" because this translation is in accordance with the plural aspect of the Greek word grammatical categories.

Thus, *ta hagia* in Hebrews 9:8 is not suitable to be translated as Most Holy Place or Holy place. The correct translation is "sanctuary" or "holy places."

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