**The Veil**

**Introduction**

There are several words in both Hebrew and Greek that can be translated as veil. However, the words translated as **veil** in the context of The Tabernace and The Temple are specific and only used for that one purpose.

In the Old Testament the Hebrew word used for the veil is **poroketh** which means *separation, a curtain* (Strong’s H6532) and is only used to describe the veil in The Tabernacle or The Temple.

In the New Testament the Greek word used for veil is **katapetasma** which means *that which is spread out* (Strong’s G2665) and is only used to describe the veil in The Tabernacle or The Temple.

**The Construction of the Veil**

The construction of the veil is given to us in Exodus 26:31-33. Of course, this was the veil for The Tabernacle in the wilderness.

Solomon’s Temple was 60 cubits long, 20 cubits wide and 30 cubits (45 feet) high (1 Kings 6:2). However, the Holy of Holies was only 20 x 20 x 20 cubits (1 Kings 6:19-20). So, the height of this veil could not be more than 20 cubits (30 feet).

To confuse matters, the First Century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, mentions both the temple and the veil with differing dimensions to what is recorded in the Bible.However, we need to remember that the Temple in Josephus’s day was the Second Temple built after the Babylonian captivity.

Josephus refers to this in:

* The Antiquities of the Jews 3:7:7 (183)
  + Here he gives symbolic meanings to the veil.
* The Antiquities of the Jews 15:11:1 (385-386)
  + Here he says that the Second Temple was smaller in height than Solomon’s Temple.
* The War of the Jews 5:5:4 (207-214)
  + Here he gives the dimensions of the Temple.
* The War of the Jews 5:5:5 (215-219)
  + In 215 he says that the length was 60 cubits but partitioned after 40. Therefore, the Holy of Holies must have been 20 cubits long; as we know it was a cube and the dimensions are given as 20x20x20 cubits in 1 Kings 6:19-20 we can safely say that these dimensions hadn’t changed even if the Temple dimensions had changed.
    - God did not give dimensions for the Temple, but He did for the Holy of Holies.
  + In 219 Josephus says that the Holy of Holies was empty.

The images of cherubim woven into the veil symbolised the presence of God and were woven by skilled workers (Exodus 26:31). In the Bible cherubim served a guardian role from their first appearance where they guarded the way to the tree of life (Genesis 3:24). This is the First Mention of cherubim in the Bible.

Elsewhere, the cherubim are present at man’s meeting with God (Exodus 25:22; Numbers 7:89). Cherubim are described as the winged throne upon which God sits to fly (2 Samuel 22:11; Psalm 18:10). God instructed Moses to make two cherubim out of hammered gold (Exodus 25:18). They were to be arranged in such a way as to face each other (Exodus 25:20). They were the guardians of the Mercy Seat.

*Perhaps the cherubim on the veil similarly served as a visual reminder that they were guarding the way to the Ark of the Covenant within the holy of holies.*

**The Thickness of the Veil**

Much has been said about the thickness of the veil being four inches. Some have attributed that to the writings of Josephus. However, neither the Bible nor Josephus mention that the veil was four inches thick. So, where does it come from? From my studies I have come to the following conclusion.

Alfred Edersheim (7th March 1825 – 16th March 1889) was a Jewish convert to Christianity and a Biblical scholar known especially for his book, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (1883). In this book, Edersheim does not specifically mention the veil’s thickness but he does refer to it from the Talmud.

Additionally, Maurice Henry Harris in his work *Hebraic Literature: Translations from the Talmud, Midrashim and Kabbala* (published by M W Dunne in 1901) mentions*: ‘Rabbi Shimon ben Gamaliel declared in the name of Rabbi Shimon the Sagan (of high priest’s substitute), that the thickness of the veil was a handbreadth…’*

A handbreadth was considered to be four inches (the width of the palm). So, this is where the four-inch thickness of the veil originates.

What then is the significance of the palm (of the hand)? The only two verses in the Bible where *palm* and *hand* are used together are in Leviticus 14:15, 26. This passage is where the priest puts oil in his hand and sprinkles it before the Lord on the eighth day as a sign that the leper has been cleansed and can re-enter the community. (The second time it is mentioned is for the poor.)

So, the palm of the hand (a handbreadth or four inches) is associated with acceptance after separation. Don’t forget that the Hebrew word for veil, **poroketh** means separation. This, I believe is the meaning of the veil – it separates a holy God from unholy (unclean) people but when they are clean, they are received. We can see the Gospel story here – the sinner is accepted after their sins are cleansed by the blood of Jesus.

The Hebrew word for *palm* is **kaph** which coincidentally starts with the letter **kaph** (represented by the English letter **k**). Just like the English word *bee* starts with the letter *b*.

The Hebrew letter **kaph** is important in the forgiveness of sins as several Hebrew words connected with forgiveness start with the letter **kaph**. For example, Priest = kohen; Atonement = kippur

**The Purpose of the Veil**

The veil’s primary function was to separate the holy place from the holy of holies (Exodus 26:33). This separation is at the heart the sacrificial system to separate between the unclean and the clean (Leviticus 11:1-45).

As we have seen, the unique workmanship required for the veil is directly related to the presence of cherubim on the veil. They were the guardians of the Mercy Seat.

The veil, then, was a physical barrier that both represented and enforced the separation from the holy presence of the enthroned God within from Aaron and his sons - the violation of which brought death (Numbers 18:7). Exception for entering the holy of holies was made only in the context of the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:11-28) when the high priest would take the offering behind the veil as a sin offering. Here the blood was taken into the holy of holies and sprinkled on the ark (Leviticus 16:14).

On the Day of Atonement, the high priest was to use the blood of the sin offering to purify and consecrate the altar (Leviticus 16:19).

*It would appear that the veil also served as a physical and visual barrier, protecting the priest from the lethal presence of the enthroned Lord and reinforcing the separation between God and humankind.*

Worshipers in the old covenant were restricted in their access to God in the temple, and could approach Him only through sacrifice and prayer, and not at any time they chose. Only a high priest who was ritually pure and without defect could approach Yahweh without being put to death.

The severity of this punishment primarily concerned the holiness of God Himself and the sanctity of objects directly related to worshiping him (Exodus 33:19-23). Even Moses was forbidden to see the face of the Lord because man may not see the face of God and live (Exodus 33:20).

**Ripped from Top to Bottom**

The veil was ripped from top to bottom signifying that God was doing this, not man. The size and thickness of the veil make the events occurring at the moment of Jesus’ death on the cross so much more amazing as it would have been impossible for a person to rip it in two.

Matthew and Mark tell us that not only was the veil ripped from top to bottom but that it was ripped in two (Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38). The significance of this event is explained in the Book of Hebrews (Hebrews 8:5; 10:1).

The things of the temple, including the veil, were shadows of things to come, and they all ultimately point us to Jesus Christ.

**Jesus was the veil to the Holy of Holies, and through His death we now have free access to God (Hebrews 10:19-20).**

Here we see the image of Jesus’ flesh being torn for us just as God was tearing the veil for us. The veil was symbolic of Christ Himself as He is the only way to the Father ([John 14:6](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/John%2014.6)). The veil in the temple was a constant reminder that sin prevented people from coming into the presence of God. The fact that the sin offering was offered annually, and countless other sacrifices repeated daily, showed clearly that sin could not be atoned for by animal sacrifices. Jesus Christ, through His death, has removed the barriers between God and man, and now we may approach Him with confidence and boldness ([Hebrews 4:14-16](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Heb%204.14-16)).

**Back to Paradise**

The veil was torn in two and could no longer perform the function for which it was intended. This means that there is no longer a physical barrier to God.

Sin now does not separate people from God (despite popular theology). Sin was dealt with at the cross. Jesus has already forgiven every person. What separates people from God is a reluctance to receive the forgiveness that Jesus freely offers to everybody.

John 3:18 tells us: He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

Remember, even in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve sinned, God still fellowshipped with them (Hebrews 8:6 tells us that we have a better covenant).

The veil wasn’t ripped in two just to give us access to God until we next sin. No, the veil is still ripped which means we can have access to God all the time. Think about this – *if sin denied us access to God, when we sin how could we get access to God to ask for forgiveness from the sin that was denying us access to God?* Maybe you might need to read that again.

*Imagine being locked out of a house and the only way in was to use the key. But the key was inside the house and it was impossible to get in the house to get the key which enabled you to get in the house. How would you get in? You couldn’t unless someone let you in.*

That is exactly what the ripped veil does, it allows us into the presence of God. The veil is still ripped – it doesn’t close every time we sin.

**Sin though does give the devil access to us and he often tries to prevent us from coming to God to ask for forgiveness.** Just as he did with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The angelic guardians which we have just read about are disarmed as it were and re-entry into the Edenic presence of God is again permitted for the first time since the Fall of Adam. What the first Adam did, the last Adam (Jesus) has undone.

Hebrews 9:5 tells us that we cannot speak about the cherubim which are over the mercy seat. But why? Because the cherubim no longer have a purpose of guarding the way to God.

As we have seen, the veil is torn in two and we have access into the presence of God.

I know this scenario couldn’t happen, but if a cherub came in our way now and tried to stop us from entering into the presence of God, we could say, “Move out of my way, the way to God is open through the blood of Jesus”. The cherub would then have to move. Wow, that’s awesome. Adam and Eve couldn’t do that.

Jesus is our High Priest (Hebrews 4:14). So, we don’t need the old priestly order or the veil or the Ark of the Covenant, or the Holy of Holies anymore. We can come into God’s presence anytime, not just once a year, because the veil is still ripped and the way to God is open for us.

The ripped veil signified that now the way into the new Holy of Holies was open for all people, for all time. When Jesus died and the veil was torn, God moved out of that temple never again to dwell in a temple made with human hands ([Acts 17:24](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Acts%2017.24)).

God had finished with that temple and its religious system. The temple in Jerusalem was left desolate when it was destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70, just as Jesus said in [Luke 13:35](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Luke%2013.35). So long as the temple stood, it signified the continuation of the Old Covenant. [Hebrews 9:8-9](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Heb%209.8-9) refers to the age that was passing away as the new covenant was being established (Hebrews 8:13).

Now, Jesus Christ is our superior High Priest, and we can now enter the Holy of Holies of God’s presence through Him. As we have seen, [Hebrews 10:19-20](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Heb%2010.19-20) says, **“we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body”**.

So, let us partake daily of this wonderful privilege of coming into God’s presence through the veil of Jesus Christ. Amen.