

THE REBUILDING OF THE TEMPLE IN JERUSALEM

The topic is important to consider because of the imminent return of our Lord Jesus. For many this event is inextricably linked to the rebuilding of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. Indeed the return of our Lord cannot occur, it is taught, until the Temple is rebuilt on the mount where the Dome of the Rock and the Mosque of Omar are now located. This poses a political and security problem, needless to say. Is it also Scripturally warranted ?

A discussion of the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem is strongly colored by one's theological background. It matters little whether one is a layperson or theologically trained. It matters more as to which church or Bible class one has attended or the theological college where one has been trained. Christians are generally respectful of their elders and teachers and tend to adopt their interpretation of Scripture.

In writing this essay I am aware of external influences on my understanding of Scripture. Over the years my position with regard to the rebuilding of the Temple has undergone a change after examining the relevant Scripture passages. I share my thoughts and explain why.

SYMBOLS OF BIRTH, WATER AND BREAD

Read the accounts of Jesus' teaching in the Gospels. You find that his hearers tend to interpret literally what he said. Allow me to quote a few examples.

Jesus told the learned Pharisee, Nicodemus, of spiritual renewal using the analogy of an earthly birth. Jesus explained that he was speaking of 'being born of the Spirit'. To which the astonished man replied, "How can a man be born when he is old?" (John 3 : 1 – 9).

He told the Samaritan woman at the well that 'living water' was available to her who asked. He explained that the well water did not prevent thirst but the water he gave would quench thirst permanently. In fact, his water will become a spring in the person who has drunk it. (John 4 : 4–14)

After the miraculous feeding of the five thousand, Jesus sailed to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Here he met a crowd looking for him. He told them plainly that they sought him 'because you ate of the loaves, and were filled. Do not work for the food that spoils, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you'. The crowd, eager for a meal, referred to the manna from heaven which fed their ancestors (Exodus 16 : 14, 15). Jesus patiently explained that he was, in fact, that manna of God from heaven. "I am the bread of life", he announced.

Still stuck in their literal understanding of 'bread', they grumbled among themselves. Matters were not made easier when Jesus reiterated, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If a man eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."

Sharp argument followed, even among his disciples. They said to each other, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?"

The upshot was that, Scripture records, 'From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.' (John 6 : 25 – 66)

This symbolism continues with the Passion narrative. Jesus declared that 'this is my body which is given for you' and 'the cup poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood'.

Again, after washing of the disciples' feet, Jesus asked of that profoundly symbolic gesture, "Do you understand what I have done for you?"

The examples given are not to disparage the lack of understanding of the symbolism. They are to illustrate the extensive use of symbols in the Bible to reveal spiritual truths underlying them.

AN EARTHLY TEMPLE AS SYMBOL

The second Temple in Jerusalem, which Herod restored, could not, of course, measure up to the splendor of Solomon's first Temple. However its fearful destruction was foretold by the Lord, "I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down." (Matthew 24 : 2) This was fulfilled when the Romans sacked the city of Jerusalem and desecrated the Temple in AD 70, barely 6 years after Herod completed its restoration

Nowhere in the rest of the New Testament is mentioned that there will be a rebuilding of a Temple. This is a significant point, all too often ignored. This fact is tied up with Jesus' teaching of the kingdom of heaven. In his reply to Pilate's question as to why the Jews delivered him up to the Romans, Jesus stated clearly, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, then my servants would be fighting, that I might not be delivered up to the Jews; but as it is my kingdom is not of this realm." (John 18 : 36)

Once the disciples grasped the fact that the kingdom of God was not to be an earthly kingdom there is no further mention of such in the New Testament. Many references to the coming spiritual kingdom with its untold blessings – yes! But no reference to a piece of real estate on earth where Jesus will be installed as monarch presiding over a rebuilt Temple.

Indeed, one may recall that quite early in his ministry when the Jews questioned his authority Jesus replied, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." This bewildered the Jews but John the Apostle wrote knowingly with hindsight, "But the temple he had spoken of was his body." (John 2 : 19 – 22).

The term 'temple' came to be applied by writers of the New Testament letters to Christians as individuals or to the whole body of believers.

"Do you not know," Paul queried the Corinthians, "that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?" (1 Corinthians 6 : 19)

"What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God." (2 Corinthians 6 : 6)

Peter says the same thing, ". . .you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood. . . ." (1 Peter 2 : 5)

Finally, John says, "I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty, and the Lamb, are its temple." (Revelation 21 : 22).

Under the first covenant, the earthly Temple served its divine purpose as a spiritual centre of worship for Israel. There the ceremonial law with its many sacrifices was enacted that foreshadowed the ultimate Sacrifice of the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ for the sins of the world. But the Temple had become, in the unanimous opinion of three Gospels, 'a den of robbers', ruled by men who followed their own traditions rather than the Torah. (Matthew 21 : 13, Mark 11 : 17, Luke 19 : 46).

Significantly this phrase, 'a den of robbers', was first applied by the LORD to the Temple of Jeremiah's time as a rebuke of an apostate Judah led by a conniving priesthood (Jeremiah 7 : 11). A tragic situation that was to repeat itself in the New Testament. The LORD warned that piously mouthing 'The temple of the LORD' while the people were carrying on their sinful ways would not save them from expulsion from the land. The ruins of the first sanctuary at Shiloh was testimony to that.

Therefore one may say that the earthly Temple had served its purpose. In the succinct words of Scripture, 'the Holy Spirit was showing by this way (the annual Atonement ceremony) that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed **as long as the first tabernacle was still standing.** (Hebrews 9 : 8)

The fact is this. That first tabernacle -with its chequered history of being moved around in the Holy Land till Solomon built it in stone– is no longer in existence today. It has been replaced, explains the writer of Hebrews, 'when Christ came as high priest of the good things to come, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation'. (Hebrews 9 : 11)

It is not often realised what became obsolete with the departure of the first tabernacle and what replaced that. Hebrews emphasises our High Priest Jesus 'did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own.' (Hebrews 9 : 24, 25).

Consequently, 'The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming - not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never be, by the same sacrifices repeated year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship . . . **but those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins**, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.' (Hebrews 10 : 1,3,4)

THE TEMPLE TO BE SET UP IN JERUSALEM

In light of what Scripture has said concerning the finality of Christ's sacrifice for sin it would appear that to carry out the sacrificial system of the old covenant **now** violates everything that the new covenant, sealed with his precious blood, has achieved for his people of the new covenant.

Those who advocate the restoration of the Temple in Jerusalem must seriously answer the question as to the purpose of that rebuilding. In my experience they have never answered the question for what it is but have always qualified it by either one or other of the following caveats:

- (1) The sacrifices in the restored Temple are only ceremonial.**
- (2) The nation of Israel today is intent on rebuilding the Temple anyway**
- (3) The fulfillment of 2 Thessalonians 2 : 4 absolutely requires the presence of a physical Temple.**

ARE THE SACRIFICES IN THE RESTORED TEMPLE ONLY CEREMONIAL?

The answer to this question is nothing profound but a matter of common sense. God gave the ceremonies of various sacrifices to Israel because they carry religious significance. They act 'as an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.' (Hebrews 10 : 4). In their performance, they announce beforehand the coming of the greater Sacrifice in Christ Jesus.

So Paul could write to the Galatians: "But when the time has fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive the full rights of sons". (Galatians 4 : 4, 5)

Ceremonies have religious significance or they would not have been instituted and practised in the first place. An incident in the life of the Apostle Paul illustrates this rather dramatically.

Paul was in Jerusalem having brought with him the gift of money from the Gentile churches of Macedonia and Achaia. A potentially dangerous situation developed in the city as a rumour was abroad that Paul was teaching Jews to abandon the Mosaic law and traditional practices. The Jerusalem leadership proposed a solution. They suggested that Paul should complete a purification process of the Nazarite vow by joining four other men who were completing that vow. This public display, it was hoped, would serve to placate the Jews that Paul still kept his Jewish roots.

The Nazarite vow has several stages for its fulfillment. (Numbers 6 : 1 – 21) The earlier part consisted in letting the hair grow long, drinking no wine, and avoidance of ceremonial defilement. The vow was mainly voluntary and was undertaken for special reasons known to the devotee. On his second missionary journey Paul was in Cenchrea, the eastern port city of Corinth. Just before he sailed Paul had his hair cut because of a vow he had taken. (Acts 18:18) Presumably this was the partial fulfillment of a Nazarite vow. We do not have any idea why Paul took this vow at this time. Was it the emotional turmoil at this juncture of his life? Due perhaps to his regret over his angry outburst against the blasphemy of the Jews (18:8) and the subsequent humbling reassurance from the Lord that settled his spirit (18 : 9,10). Was it

thanksgiving for deliverance from danger followed by a rededication to his calling as Apostle to the Gentiles ? We do not know.

In any case the shaving of his hair before he sailed from Cenchrea left the other part of the Nazarite ritual unfulfilled. Thus we find the Apostle in Jerusalem joining with other Jews who were completing their vows at the stage where he had left his. This stage calls for the bringing to the door of the Temple 'a year-old lamb without blemish for a burnt offering, a year-old ewe lamb without blemish for a sin offering, a ram without defect for a fellowship offering' together with other grain and drink offerings. (Numbers 6 : 13 – 15).

The desire to complete his vow, begun in Achaia with the cutting of his hair, would explain Paul's eagerness to reach Jerusalem to complete his vow at the Temple. To the elders in Jerusalem, it would seem opportune for Paul to join four other Jews who were also completing their rites.

Paul acted promptly upon the advice of the Jerusalem elders. "The next day Paul took the men and purified himself along with them. Then he went to the temple to give notice of the date **when the days of purification would end and the offering would be made for each of them**". (Acts 21 : 26)

It is my belief that the Lord stepped in at this crucial stage to preserve the conscience and testimony of his Apostle with regard to Paul's message of salvation in Christ through faith. For we read: "When the seven days were nearly over, some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul at the Temple. They stirred the whole crowd and seized him, shouting, 'Men of Israel, help us! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against our people and our law and this place. . . The whole city was aroused and the people came running from all directions. Seizing Paul, they dragged him from the temple . . . While they were trying to kill him, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole city was in an uproar. He at once took some officers and soldiers and ran down to the crowd. When the rioters saw the commander and his soldiers, they stopped beating Paul." (Acts 21 : 27 – 31).

This episode turned out to be the first step of Paul's long journey to Rome !

Consider this for a moment. If Paul was not been stopped in his tracks by the Lord Jesus, he would have slain a lamb for his sin offering according to the Jewish rite under the Nazarite vow. What a horrendous thing for Paul to have done.

He who in the Spirit wrote sacred Scripture:

"God presented him (Jesus) as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood (Romans 3 : 25)

"But now in Christ Jesus you who were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ".

(Ephesians 2 : 13)

"And through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross." (Colossians 1 : 20)

The Lord in his providential care and supervision of his servant ensured that Paul would not fall into the deadly error of proclaiming a core doctrine of Christianity and then nullifying it by his own action. That is to say, while urging Christian Jews and Gentiles to observe how God has done away with animal sacrifices by virtue of that matchless Sacrifice of his Son by whose blood men receive purification of sin accompanied by salvation, he should then sacrifice a lamb as a sin offering for himself ! This would be an abomination of the first order'

We are told that there will be sacrifices in the Temple in Jerusalem carried out by the restored priestly caste. These are said to be purely ceremonial. Will the brook of Kidron be running red with the blood of countless animals killed on Yom Kippur ? Can you imagine this senseless slaughter done in the presence of the Lord Jesus, who would also be in Jerusalem, according to this particular millennial scenario?

ISRAEL REBUILDING THE TEMPLE

Rumours are rife that Israel has readied all the materials for the new Temple to be built on the Mount once it becomes her possession. Members of the priestly caste are being sought through genealogical records in readiness to perform the religious rites dictated by the Mosaic law.

In the thinking of some, all this is to be the fulfillment of the vision given to the prophet Ezekiel.

The specifications of the Temple and its precincts are found in Ezekiel 40 – 48. In truth the description of the Temple was meant to show what pure worship is. It was a divine rebuke of a corrupt and apostate priesthood residing in the Jerusalem Temple. This is plain from the words the Lord gave to Ezekiel after the exquisite details of the Temple structure were given.

“ Son of man, describe the temple to the people of Israel that they may be ashamed of their sins. Let them consider the plan, and if they are ashamed of all they have done, make known to them the design of the temple – its arrangements, its exits and entrances – its whole design and all the regulations and laws”. (Ezekiel 43 : 10 – 11).

It is as if the LORD is saying, “ Israel, look at how I am that concerned with even the minute details of a beautiful sanctuary. Do you think I care less how you pollute spiritually and morally the divine image in which I have created you ?”

If Scripture states that this is the reason for the elaborate description of the design there is no need to imagine that it is a plan for an actual future millennial Temple.

Nor is there any hint in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah that this was the Temple they were required to build on their return from the Exile.

This is a prime example of taking literally what is meant to be a symbol.

In any case, the projected modern Temple does not follow the specifications of the Ezekiel Temple. In the very nature of its size, space and other requirements it is not possible to reproduce its entirety on today’s Temple Mount. The prophetic fulfillment of Ezekiel’s temple in the closing chapters of his book are best sought in such New Testament passages as John 7 : 37 – 39 and 1 Peter 2 : 4 – 10.

For the church to wage a campaign so that the Mount may be recovered for the rebuilding of a Temple in fulfillment of the Ezekiel prophecy seems misguided at best.

THE FULFILMENT OF 2 THESSALONIANS 2 : 4

This is the key verse espoused by those who believe that there must be a physical Temple for it to happen. “He opposes and exalts himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, and even sets himself up in God’s temple, proclaiming himself to be God”. (2 Thessalonians 2 : 4)

It is readily admitted by most commentators that the interpretation of this passage is problematic. What seems fairly certain is that before the Lord Jesus returns there will be an ‘apostasy’ also called a ‘rebellion’ in some translations. (2 Thessalonians 2 : 3) This is followed by the revelation of a lawless individual whom the Lord will destroy upon his return.

Let us follow the sequence of events step by step, beginning with 2 Thessalonians 2 : 3

“Don’t let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction.” (NIV)

The Greek word in v 3, which the NIV translates as ‘rebellion’ is ‘apostasia’ and is used only twice in the New Testament. The other occurrence is in Acts 21 : 21. ‘Apostasia’ as used in the New Testament means **‘the abandonment of a religious position’**. That is why all three modern versions (NIV, ESV, NASV) translate Acts 21 : 21 to reflect that sense.

“They have informed that you (Paul) teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles **to turn away from Moses**” NIV

“and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles **to forsake Moses.**” ESV

“and they have been told about you, that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles **to forsake Moses.**” NASV

However where the same Greek word appears in 2 Thessalonians 2 : 3, two of the above versions translate ‘apostasia’ as ‘the rebellion’ (NIV and ESV) while the NASV translates it as ‘the apostasy’

The NIV and ESV are being inconsistent here but that is explicable if we assume that they base their judgement of its use on sources outside the Bible where it could mean 'rebellion'. It would be more accurate to translate it as 'apostasy' because just before Jesus returns there will be many turning away from their Christian faith. The Lord himself said so. (Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 21)

My emphasising the consistent translation of 'apostasia' has a bearing on how one understands the historical context of the actions of the lawless man.

Firstly, this lawless individual has the same obsession as Satan to be God (Isaiah 14 : 14) and who tempted Eve to follow suit (Genesis 3 : 15).

Secondly, the phrase 'sets himself up in God's temple' means that he sets himself up in the church of God. 1 Peter 1 : 2 , Ephesians 2 : 21, among other texts, inform us that the whole body of Christians is the temple of God. **This lawless man comes from within the Christian fold.** This follows from the phrase '**that day will not come until the apostasy occurs**'.

Even if the temple were a building, the text does not require that the temple mentioned be the Jewish Temple. That is an inference, though not an unreasonable one. It could be any place of worship, as is evident below from the lawless man's worldwide religious grip.

In that coming age of widespread abandonment of the Christian faith, the man proclaims himself the God of all religions. He exalts '**himself over everything that is called God or worshiped**'. He claims supremacy over the worship in every temple, mosque, shrine, sanctuary, monument, holy place or idol. This would only be possible when there is a worldwide subjugation of peoples and cultures, as suggested by the clause, 'who opposes and exalts himself'.

The control this individual has over the world's peoples is strikingly reminiscent of the description given in Revelation 13 : 16,17. The religious clout he holds will be false signs and wonders thus playing upon mankind's fascination with the supernatural and the spectacular; the political clout is his economic control of livelihood.

CONCLUSION

There appears to be no clear Scriptural warrant for insisting that the Temple Mount must be recovered for a Third Temple to be built. The reasons given that national Israel desires it while it also helps the church to hasten the coming of the Lord Jesus by fulfilling Scripture concerning a particular event described in 2 Thessalonians do not stand up to close scrutiny.

I have tried to reason from Scripture that this insistence does violence to the plain understanding of the Temple's symbolic nature in the New Testament and especially with regard to circumstances attending His glorious return.

The Bible tells us the one way how we can hasten His return.

"Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming." (2 Peter 3 ; 11,12)

Aw Swee Eng
12 November 2012
Singapore