

THE TEMPLE – study 2

The Ordering of the Temple

“The family from which I am derived is not an ignoble one, but has descended from the priests; and as nobility among several people is of different origin, so with us to be of the sacerdotal [priestly] dignity, is an indication of the splendour of a family.” [Josephus]

Both priests and Levites served in the Temple, their calling and office being passed down from father to son. All were drawn from the tribe of Levi. Aaron (the first High Priest and brother of Moses) and his male descendants were to serve as priests whilst the male offspring of the other clans of Levi were to serve as Levites or lesser clergy. (Ex.28v1,41; 29v9; Num.1v47-54; 8v18-19; 1 Chron.Ch.24). Consecrated to God and symbolically representing the whole nation set apart for Him, it was expected that the priests and Levites would be supported by the rest of the people (Num.8v8-13,20), through tithes and through receiving a share of the sacrifices offered.

Estimates vary as to the exact number of priests and Levites, anything from 10,000 - 20,000. They were divided into 24 courses or divisions which served for one week twice a year and at the three annual compulsory pilgrim festivals. Tradition has it that over 500 priests were assigned to assist the High Priest on the Day of Atonement (1 Chron.24v4). These priestly courses were subdivided into “father's houses” which served one day in the week, their duties and service determined by lot (e.g.Lk.1v8-10). Their role included performing the regular daily sacrifices, inspecting the animals to be offered for sacrifice, and the general maintenance of the ministry of the Temple.

Whilst the priests were charged with carrying out their specific priestly functions, the roles and responsibilities of the Levites were broader. They provided the support mechanism by which worship could occur. So they were the singers and door-keepers, the Temple police force and even, according to Philo, the rubbish clearers. The Levitical choir in particular seems to have held an honoured place and Josephus records that just before the destruction of the Temple they were granted the privilege of wearing linen robes similar to those worn by the priest.

Rival Temples

In spite of the reverence with which the Temple was regarded by most of the Jewish world, (Deut.12v5; 16v2;26v2), there were a number of other places that had set themselves up as rivals.

The first and most provocative, not least because of its nearness to Jerusalem, was the Samaritan holy site at Shechem on Mount Gerizim. Originally a temple had stood on this spot – claimed by the Samaritans to pre-date Solomon's Temple at Jerusalem, and indeed even to have been visited by Abraham. Subsequently destroyed by the Hasmonean king John Hyrcanus in 108 BC, Mount Gerizim continued to exert a strong draw for the Samaritan people [Jn.4v19-20].

Another temple was to be found in Qumran. Here there was no actual holy building but rather the community understood itself as having the effect of the Temple, atoning for the sins of the land with good deeds and prayer in the place of sacrifice (cf Eph.2v19-22; 1 Ptr.2v4-5,9).

The High Priest

The head of the priestly caste and indeed the head of the nation. In a true theocracy he was the single most important man in the land and even in the debased and politicised world of Herod the Great and the Roman governors, he was still a power to be reckoned with. Between them the High Priest and the priests represented continuity and the old order, the illusion at least of independent leadership, a Jewish voice in an increasingly Gentile world.

The tribe of Levi (in place of the whole nation) was chosen by God to serve at the Tabernacle (Num.3v12-13,40-51). It was Aaron, from the tribe of Levi, who became the first High Priest and from his family alone were the priests to be drawn (Ex.28v1; Num.18v1-7). Aaron's High Priesthood passed to one of his sons, Eleazar, and the High Priesthood was held henceforth by Eleazar's family (Num.20v25-29). At some stage the High Priesthood passed temporarily out of this line but it was restored to them under King Solomon who appointed Zadok as High Priest (1 Kngs 1v36). For many years the Zadokites enjoyed an unbroken High Priestly succession until their reign was ended when the Maccabees took to themselves the dual role of priest-king under Jonathan Maccabee in 153 BC.

By the time of King Herod, the position of High Priest had become a political appointment, obtainable by bribery and / or by having powerful connections, where anyone from a priestly family might be elevated. Traditionally the High Priests were drawn from one of the three leading priestly families.

As the people's representative before God, the High Priest's role in the well-being of the nation was crucial and the majesty and "otherness" of his calling could not be overstated. One worshipper pictures him at the climax of the Temple Service, "...We were greatly astonished, when we saw Eleazar engaged in the ministrations, at the mode of his dress, and the majesty of his appearance, which was revealed in the robe which he wore and the precious stones upon his person...He was girded with a girdle of conspicuous beauty, woven in the most beautiful colours. On his breast he wore the oracle of God, as it is called, on which twelve stones, of different kinds, were inset, fastened together with gold..each one flashing forth in an indescribable way its own particular colour. On his head he wore a tiara, as it is called, and upon this in the middle an inimitable turban, the royal diadem full of glory with the name of God inscribed in sacred letters on a plate of gold...Their appearance created such awe and confusion of mind as to make one feel that one had come into the **presence of a man who belonged to a different world.**"

The special vestments for the High Priest are described in detail in the Bible Ex.Ch.28 & 39]. There were eight items:-

- the ephod, a tight fitting sleeveless garment
- the breastplate
- the Urim and Thummim, "the means of making decisions for the Israelites"
- the robe, a blue exterior sleeveless tunic, reaching down to the ankles
- the woven tunic, worn as an undergarment next to the skin
- the crown shaped turban, upon which was attached -
- the plate engraved with the words "holy to the Lord"
- the sash, traditionally very long, in blue, purple and scarlet.

Tradition had it that Adam had been clothed with the vestments of the High Priest on his expulsion from Eden, which in itself had been the original "Holy of Holies". These vestments were the same ones that Aaron had received on his ordination to the High Priesthood. It is no wonder that their spiritual descendants were kept in safekeeping by the Roman authorities, only released on special occasions and immediately returned.

Even after leaving office the High Priest retained his title and his authority and influence. Annas (High Priest AD 6-15) is shown in John's Gospel (18v13,24), in Acts (4v6) and in Luke (3v2) to be very much the power behind the throne. Indeed Annas had neatly sown up the hierarchy of the Temple. He himself was the ex High Priest; his son-in-law Caiaphas was the present incumbent (AD 18-37), whilst Annas' own son Jonathan was the Captain of the Temple and then briefly High Priest in his own right.

THE TEMPLE ITSELF

For many Jews, not just the High Priest but the Temple itself was representative of something greater, corresponding in some sense to the whole universe. And if the Temple was significant for all mankind, then the sacrifices offered within it must be equally significant.

Three inter-related beliefs developed around this idea:-

- that the sacrifices offered at the Temple were in direct continuity with the sacrifices offered first by Adam and subsequently by Noah.
- that the offering of the sacrifices in the right way and at the right time was essential for the harmony of the nation and of the whole world.
- that these sacrifices corresponded in some manner to worship offered simultaneously to God in heaven.

Through Adam's fall, sin had been unleashed upon the world. This disharmony found its destructive climax in the Flood. But by sacrifice the negative effects of sin could be held in check and even reversed, securing and ensuring harmony and peace in creation. After his expulsion from Eden it was believed that the first thing which Adam had done was to offer sacrifice to God. After the Flood, the first thing that mankind's second ancestor Noah did was also to offer sacrifice (Gen.8v18-22). By this offering he secured *harmony* – never again would the world be destroyed by water and *continuity* – there would always be seedtime and harvest. And the sacrifices which Israel offered, it offered for itself and for the whole world (cf Rom.ch.9).

But more than that..

When Moses had been told how to construct the Tabernacle, God had told him to make it after the pattern shown to him on the mountain (Ex.25v8-9,40; Heb.8v5). This was interpreted as meaning that there was an original Temple in heaven and the worship offered on earth directly corresponded to worship happening simultaneously in heaven – as in heaven, so on earth. Thus the matter of establishing accurate dates and following correct calendars was crucial. If it was only worship that ensured harmony and continuity on earth, part of that true worship required it to take place *at the same time* as the worship in heaven was occurring, the priests acting as the earthly counterparts of the angels in heaven both offering continual and continuous sacrifice to God (cf Ex.28v38-43).

It is this matter of offering sacrifice not simply in the *right way* but at the *right time* by following the *right calendar*, that appears to underlie much of the Essene community's hostility towards, and rejection of, the Temple service as it was offered in Jerusalem. In their eyes the Pharisees were condemned because it was due to their influence that the solar calendar had been rejected in favour of a lunar one. Equally the priests and Sadducees stood fatally compromised. Instead of being the guardians of orthodoxy, ensuring that the sacrifices were offered to God on the right occasions (i.e. by following the solar calendar), they had colluded in the establishment of a Temple service based upon a false model, that of the lunar calendar.

Some in Israel took their rejection of the Temple in Jerusalem still further. In the Book of Exodus God had given Moses precise directions for building the Tabernacle, based "*exactly like the pattern I [God] will show you*" (Ex.25v8). Logic demanded therefore that any subsequent Temples should be built to those same precise specifications. So any Temple, whether it be Solomon's, or the one built by Haggai and Zechariah, or Herod's magnificent edifice, could not possibly be acceptable to God and to any true worshiper because it was not built according to the original and only divine blueprint that had been given uniquely to Moses.

But for most Jews the Temple in Jerusalem was sublime, the meeting place of heaven and earth, where for a brief moment the door into heaven was open. In the age to come Mount Zion would play a special role, "*for the hallowing of the earth: through it the earth will be purified from all its guilt and uncleanness..*", but even now it was the link between the underworld (an idea given further emphasis by the number of subterranean caverns beneath the Temple Mount), the earth on which they stood, and heaven above.

And Israel also had a special role. It was God's vine, (Ex.15v17; Ps.80v8,14; Jer.2v21; 6v9; 8v13; Ezek.15v1-8; 17v6-8; 19v10-14; Hos.10v1; 14v7) planted both as a link between these three regions and as that which held the very universe together. Israel was nothing less than the unifying force in the created order, the cosmic "glue." For Israel to be destroyed would mean the unravelling of the world. To abandon Israel was to abandon the world.

The Captain of the Temple Guard (e.g. Acts 4v1 and 5v24,26)

A number of senior priestly officials, unlike the twenty four priestly courses, worked full-time at the Temple. The most senior of these, ranking just below the High Priest, was the Captain of the Temple.

His duties included assisting the High Priest at various ceremonies, e.g. on the Day of Atonement and he was there again at the offering of the daily sacrifices. It may have been customary for him also to be held in readiness as the substitute for the High Priest should illness or uncleanness prevent him from officiating on the Day of Atonement. Literally and metaphorically the Captain was the High Priest's right hand man and very probably a person could not be elected High [priest] if he had not first served as Captain of the Temple. He had responsibility for the oversight of worship, for the courses of priests and for the security of the Temple. He may also have had responsibility for the Jerusalem markets. It was the Captain of the Temple who in AD 66 made the decision to cease the daily sacrifice for the Emperor and so in effect declare war upon Rome.

Other Senior Priests

Beneath him were the other priests engaged full-time in the work of the Temple. There was the leader of the twenty four courses. There were the seven Temple Overseers or Supervisors, who were responsible for all that occurred within the Temple precincts, holding the keys to the gates allowing access into the inner courts. And there were one (or three) Temple Treasurer(s) whose task was to oversee and administer the huge wealth that poured into the Temple from many sources. The Temple was maintained by a compulsory two drachma / half shekel tax on the approx. 4.5– 5.5 million male Jews living in Israel or elsewhere, plus people would make gifts as acts of piety and of thanksgiving.

It is estimated that Jerusalem may have had a population of around 50,000 in Jesus' day, many of whom derived a living directly or indirectly from the Temple. There were the makers of incense and of the vessels and basins used in worship: the families who supplied the ritual bread and ritually pure oil, the flour and the wine, the wood for sacrifices and the straw for the sacrificial animals: there were the makers of cloth and the builders busy in repairs or improvements and extensions to the buildings - carpenters, stone masons and metal smiths: there were the innkeepers, owners of food shops and the souvenir makers. So when Jesus spoke about the Temple being destroyed in three days or of worship ceasing to be offered at the Temple (Lk.21v5-6; Jn.4v21), He was well on the way to making 50,000 immediate enemies!

The Priests and Levites

Finally, in their twenty four courses, came the priests and Levites. (cf Lk.1v8-9).

The duties of the Levites were three-fold:-

- They were responsible for providing the choir and the musicians to accompany the worship.
- They were there as servants to the priests, to aid them in their duties.
- They were there as guards for the Temple to enforce regulations and prevent anyone or anything unwelcome and unseemly.

The Organisation of the Temple

The Roman Prefect

The High Priest and the High Priestly Families

Administrative Personnel

Prefect
"Police" (Levites)

Economic Personnel

Overseers
Accountants
Treasurers
Scribes
Moneychangers

Ritual Personnel

Priests
Levites -
Singers
Gate Keepers

Judicial Personnel

Judges
Lawyers
Scribes

Functions

Temple order
Temple purity
Judicial decisions

Functions

Provisioning
the Temple
Banking
Storage (treasuries)

Functions

Sacrifice &
Purification
Liturgy & Prayers
Music

[The Temple Sacrifices

Burnt Offering
Cereal Offering
Peace Offering
Purification Offering
Reparation Offering
Thank Offering

Lev.1v1-17; Pss.20v3; 66v13,15
Lev.2v1-16; Pss.20v3; 96v8; Dan.9v21
Lev.3v1-17; 1 Kngs 3v15; Amos 5v22;
Lev.4v1-5,13; 2 Kngs 12v16; Ezek. 42v13
Lev.5v14-6v7; 19v20-22; Ezek. 46v20
Lev.7v11-14; Neh.12v27; Pss.107v22; 116v17

Materials for the Temple Sacrifices

Item

Rams
Calves
Sheep
Doves
Incense
Flour, Wine
Oil
Salt
Water

Primary Source

Nabatea
Sharon
Hebron
Mount of Olives
Arabia, Mesopotamia
Judaea
Galilee
Sodom (Zoar)
Jerusalem (cisterns, Pool of Siloam, aqueducts)

