**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**EZRA-002. ALTAR AND TEMPLE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. And when the seventh month was come, and the children of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered themselves together as one man to Jerusalem. 2. Then stood up Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brethren the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and his brethren, and builded the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings thereon, as it is written in the law of Moses the man of God. 3. And they set the altar upon his bases; for fear was upon them because of the people of those countries; and they offered burnt offerings thereon unto the Lord, even burnt offerings morning and evening. 4. They kept also the feast of tabernacles, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number, according to the custom, as the duty of every day required; 5. And afterward offered the continual burnt offering, both of the new moons, and of all the set feasts of the Lord that were consecrated, and of every one that willingly offered a freewill offering unto the Lord. 6. From the first day of the seventh month began they to offer burnt offerings unto the Lord. But the foundation of the Temple of the Lord was not yet laid. 7. They gave money also unto the masons, and to the carpenters; and meat, and drink, and oil, unto them of Zidon, and to them of Tyre, to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea of Joppa, according to the grant that they had of Cyrus king of Persia. 8. Now in the second year of their coming unto the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, began Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and the remnant of their brethren the priests and the Levites, and all they that were come out of the captivity unto Jerusalem; and appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upward, to set forward the work of the house of the Lord. 9. Then stood Jeshua with his sons and his brethren, Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah, together, to set forward the workmen in the house of God: the sons of Henadad, with their sons and their brethren the Levites. 10. And when the builders laid the foundation of the Temple of the Lord, they set the priests in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the Lord, after the ordinance of David king of Israel. 11. And they sang together by course in praising and giving thanks unto the Lord; because He is good, for His mercy endureth for ever toward Israel. And all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. 12. But many of the priests and Levites and chief of the fathers, who were ancient men, that had seen the first house, when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, wept with a loud voice; and many shouted aloud for joy: 13. So that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people: for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the noise was heard afar off."*

*Ezra 3:1-13*

What an opportunity of picturesque writing the author of this book has missed by his silence about the incidents of the march across the dreary levels from Babylon to the verge of Syria! But the very silence is eloquent. It reveals the purpose of the book, which is to tell of the re-establishment of the Temple and its worship. No doubt the tone of the whole is somewhat prosaic, and indicative of an age in which the externals of worship bulked largely; but still the central point of the narrative was really the centre-point of the events. The austere simplicity of biblical history shows the real points of importance better than more artistic elaboration would do.

This passage has two main incidents--the renewal of the sacrifices, and the beginning of rebuilding the Temple.

The date given in verse 1 is significant. The first day of the seventh month was the commencement of the great festival of tabernacles, the most joyous feast of the year, crowded with reminiscences from the remote antiquity of the Exodus, and from the dedication of Solomon's Temple. How long had passed since Cyrus decree had been issued we do not know, nor whether his first year was reckoned by the same chronology as the Jewish year, of which we here arrive at the seventh month. But the journey across the desert must have taken some months, and the previous preparations could not have been suddenly got through, so that there can have been but a short time between the arrival in Judea and the gathering together as one man to Jerusalem.

There was barely interval enough for the returning exiles to take possession of their ancestral fields before they were called to leave them unguarded and hasten to the desolate city. Surely their glad and unanimous obedience to the summons, or, as it may even have been, their spontaneous assemblage unsummoned, is no small token of their ardour of devotion, even if they were somewhat slavishly tied to externals. It would take a good deal to draw a band of new settlers in our days to leave their lots and set to putting up a church before they had built themselves houses.

The leaders of the band of returned exiles demand a brief notice. They are Jeshua, or Joshua, and Zerubbabel. In verse 2 the ecclesiastical dignitary comes first, but in verse 8 the civil. Similarly in Ezra 2:2, Zerubbabel precedes Jeshua. In Haggai, the priest is pre-eminent; in Zechariah the prince. The truth seems to be that each was supreme in his own department, and that they understood each other cordially, or, Zechariah says, the counsel of peace was between them both. It is sometimes bad for the people when priests and rulers lay their heads together; but it is even worse when they pull different ways, and subjects are torn in two by conflicting obligations.

Jeshua was the grandson of Seraiah, the unfortunate high-priest whose eyes Nebuchadnezzar put out after the fall of Jerusalem. His son Jozadak succeeded to the dignity, though there could be no sacrifices in Babylon, and after him his son Jeshua. He cannot have been a young man at the date of the return; but age had not dimmed his enthusiasm, and the high-priest was where he ought to have been, in the forefront of the returning exiles. His name recalls the other Joshua, likewise a leader from captivity and the desert; and, if we appreciate the significance attached to names in Scripture, we shall scarcely suppose it accidental that these two, who had similar work to do, bore the same name as the solitary third, of whom they were pale shadows, the greater Joshua, who brings His people from bondage into His own land of peace, and builds the Temple.

Zerubbabel (Sown in Babylon) belonged to a collateral branch of the royal family. The direct Davidic line through Solomon died with the wretched Zedekiah and Jeconiah, but the descendants of another son of David s, Nathan, still survived. Their representative was one Salathiel, who, on the failure of the direct line, was regarded as the son of Jeconiah (1 Chron. 3:17). He seems to have had no son, and Zerubbabel, who was really his nephew (1 Chron. 3:19), was legally adopted as his son. In this makeshift fashion, some shadow of the ancient royalty still presided over the restored people. We see Zerubbabel better in Haggai and Zechariah than in Ezra, and can discern the outline of a strong, bold, prompt nature. He had a hard task, and he did it like a man. Patient, yet vigorous, glowing with enthusiasm, yet clear-eyed, self-forgetful, and brave, he has had scant justice done him, and ought to be a very much more familiar and honoured figure than he is. Who art thou, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel thou shalt become a plain. Great mountains only become plains before men of strong wills and fixed faith.

There is something very pathetic in the picture of the assembled people groping amid the ruins on the Temple hill, to find the bases, the half-obliterated outlines, of the foundations of the old altar of burnt offerings. What memories of Araunah's threshing-floor, and of the hovering angel of destruction, and of the glories of Solomon's dedication, and of the long centuries during which the column of smoke had gone up continually from that spot, and of the tragical day when the fire was quenched, and of the fifty years of extinction, must have filled their hearts! What a conflict of gladness and sorrow must have troubled their spirits as the flame again shot upwards from the hearth of God, cold for so long!

But the reason for their so quickly rearing the altar is noteworthy. It was because fear was upon them because of the people of the countries. The state of the Holy Land at the return must be clearly comprehended. Samaria and the central district were in the hands of bitter enemies. Across Jordan in the east, down on the Philistine plain in the west, and in the south where Edom bore sway, eager enemies sulkily watched the small beginnings of a movement which they were interested in thwarting. There was only the territory of Judah and Benjamin left free for the exiles, and they had reason for their fears; for their neighbours knew that if restitution was to be the order of the day, they would have to disgorge a good deal. What was the defence against such foes which these frightened men thought most impregnable? That altar!

No doubt, much superstition mingled with their religion. Haggai leaves us under no illusions as to their moral and spiritual condition. They were no patterns of devoutness or of morality. But still, what they did carries an eternal truth; and they were reverting to the original terms of Israel's tenure of their land when they acted on the conviction that their worship of Jehovah according to His commandment was their surest way of finding shelter from all their enemies. There are differences plain enough between their condition and ours; but it is as true for us as ever it was for them, that our safety is in God, and that, if we want to find shelter from impending dangers, we shall be wiser to betake ourselves to the altar and sit suppliant there than to make defences for ourselves. The ruined Jerusalem was better guarded by that altar than if its fallen walls had been rebuilt.

The whole ritual was restored, as the narrative tells with obvious satisfaction in the enumeration. To us this punctilious attention to the minutiae of sacrificial worship sounds trivial. But we equally err if we try to bring such externalities into the worship of the Christian Church, and if we are blind to their worth at an earlier stage.

There cannot be a temple without an altar, but there may be an altar without a temple. God meets men at the place of sacrifice, even though there be no house for His name. The order of events here teaches us what is essential for communion with God. It is the altar. Sacrifice laid there is accepted, whether it stand on a bare hill-top, or have round it the courts of the Lord's house.

The second part of the passage narrates the laying of the foundations of the Temple. There had been contracts entered into with masons and carpenters, and arrangements made with the Phoenicians for timber, as soon as the exiles had returned; but of course some time elapsed before the stone and timber were sufficient to make a beginning with. Note in verse 7 the reference to Cyrus grant as enabling the people to get these stores together. Whether the whole preparations, or only the transport of cedar wood, is intended to be traced to the influence of that decree, there seems to be a tacit contrast, in the writer's mind, with the glorious days when no heathen king had to be consulted, and Hiram and Solomon worked together like brothers. Now, so fallen are we, that Tyre and Sidon will not look at us unless we bring Cyru's rescript in our hands!

If the years in verses 1 and 8 are calculated from the same beginning, some seven months were spent in preparation, and then the foundation was laid. Two things are noted--the humble attempt at making some kind of a display on the occasion, and the conflict of feeling in the onlookers. They had managed to get some copies of the prescribed vestments; and the narrator emphasises the fact that the priests were in their apparel, and that the Levites had cymbals, so that some approach to the pomp of Solomon's dedication was possible. They did their best to adhere to the ancient prescriptions, and it was no mere narrow love of ritual that influenced them. However we may breathe a freer air of worship, we cannot but sympathise with that earnest attempt to do everything according to the order of David king of Israel. Not only punctiliousness as to ritual, but the magnetism of glorious memories, prescribed the reproduction of that past. Rites long proscribed become very sacred, and the downtrodden successors of mighty men will cling with firm grasp to what the greater fathers did.

The ancient strain which still rings from Christian lips, and bids fair to be as eternal as the mercies which it hymns, rose with strange pathos from the lips of the crowd on the desolate Temple mountain, ringed about by the waste solitudes of the city: For He is good, for His mercy endureth for ever toward Israel. It needed some faith to sing that song then, even with the glow of return upon them. What of all the weary years? What of the empty homesteads, and the surrounding enemies, and the brethren still in Babylon? No doubt some at least of the rejoicing multitude had learned what the captivity was meant to teach, and had come to bless God, both for the long years of exile, which had burned away much dross, and for the incomplete work of restoration, surrounded though they were with foes, and little as was their strength to fight. The trustful heart finds occasion for unmingled praise in the most mingled cup of joy and sorrow.

There can have been very few in that crowd who had seen the former Temple, and their memories of its splendour must have been very dim. But partly remembrance and partly hearsay made the contrast of the past glories and the present poverty painful. Hence that pathetic and profoundly significant incident of the blended shouts of the young and tears of the old. One can fancy that each sound jarred on the ears of those who uttered the other. But each was wholly natural to the years of the two classes. Sad memories gather, like evening mists, round aged lives, and the temptation of the old is unduly to exalt the past, and unduly to depreciate the present. Welcoming shouts for the new befit young lips, and they care little about the ruins that have to be carted off the ground for the foundations of the temple which they are to have a hand in building. However imperfect, it is better to them than the old house where the fathers worshipped.

But each class should try to understand the other's feelings. The friends of the old should not give a churlish welcome to the new, nor those of the new forget the old. It is hard to blend the two, either in individual life or in a wider sphere of thought or act. The seniors think the juniors revolutionary and irreverent; the juniors think the seniors fossils. It is possible to unite the shout of joy and the weeping. Unless a spirit of reverent regard for the past presides over the progressive movements of this or any day, they will not lay a solid foundation for the temple of the future. We want the old and the young to work side by side, if the work is to last and the sanctuary is to be ample enough to embrace all shades of character and tendencies of thought. If either the grey beards of Solomon's court or the hot heads of Rehoboam's get the reins in their hands, they will upset the chariot. That mingled sound of weeping and joy from the Temple hill tells a more excellent way.