

The Rebuilding of the Temple

One cannot come to Jerusalem without recalling the temple that stood almost 2000 years ago on the Temple Mount, where the Muslim mosques and shrines now stand. You may have been there on your visit. Did you, though, once think that one day soon the Muslim shrines will be removed and the third temple arise in its place? The idea of rebuilding the temple will probably strike you as absurd or far-fetched, as it does to many Priests and Professors that we have spoken to. Most insist that the Jews will never rebuild their temple.

Their response reminds us of a book we once read, about Zionism, written at the end of the 19th century by a senior French churchman, L'abbé Augustin Lémann, a Jewish convert as it happens, and called "*L'avenir de Jérusalem: réponse aux Congrès Sionistes*". Reasoning from Scripture and Patristics, the author asserts that the Jews will never be allowed to return 'en masse' to inhabit the Holy Land, and will never therefore be in a position to reclaim Jerusalem as their capital. The authorities to whom we have spoken reflect a similar attitude in the Church today, in their refusal to believe that the Jews will rebuild the Temple in its former place, on the Temple Mount.

On the other hand, it is common among Catholic circles these days, especially among those involved in dialogue, to affirm that the Old Covenant has never been revoked¹, and that the observance of the Old Covenant is still salvific for the Jews², and that therefore there is no need for the Jews to be 'targeted for conversion' to Christ³. These affirmations on the validity of the Old Covenant, however, necessarily affirm the need for a temple, since the Temple was an essential part of life under the Old Covenant. By asserting the continuing validity of the Old Covenant, in fact, the Catholic Church is tacitly assenting to the need for the reconstruction of the Temple.

For precisely the same reasons, namely the complete observance of the Torah, the Jews have never given up their intention to rebuild the temple. At present they

¹ The first occasion Pope John Paul II referred to "the people of God of the old covenant never revoked by God" was on 17th November 1980, at Cathedral Museum of Mainz. For a full account of the subject see "The Covenant has never been revoked: Basis of the Jewish-Christian Relationship" by Hans Hermann Henrix at <http://www.jcrelations.net/en/?id=814#24>.

² In an address at the 17th meeting of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee in New York, on 1st May 2001, the President of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, Cardinal Kasper, declared: "The only thing I wish to say is that the Document *Dominus Iesus* does not state that everybody needs to become a Catholic in order to be saved by God. On the contrary, it declares that God's grace, which is the grace of Jesus Christ according to our faith, is available to all. Therefore, the Church believes that Judaism, i.e. the faithful response of the Jewish people to God's irrevocable covenant, is salvific for them, because God is faithful to his promises."

³ In a document called *Reflections on Covenant and Mission* published jointly by a Committee of US Bishops (USCCB) and the Council of Synagogues in August 2002, the Roman Catholic participants proposed that "campaigns that target Jews for conversion to Christianity are no longer theologically acceptable in the Catholic Church". The conclusions of this committee were subsequently challenged by Cardinal Avery Dulles, in an article which can be found at: <http://www.sfarchdiocese.org/dulles.html>.

are unable to observe all the 613 commandments of the Torah, because at least two-thirds of them depend upon the reinstatement of the temple service. In fact, this act represents for them nothing less than the attainment of redemption. Not only have Jews prayed daily for this for nearly 2000 years, but Orthodox Judaism understands the literal rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem as a commandment from God, which will lead to the redemption of the Jews and the restoration of divine order in the whole world (*Tikkun HaOlam*). It is thus a fixed element of their eschatological expectation: by means of the rebuilding of the temple the 'messiah of Judaism' will be definitively identified and its messianic age proclaimed (cf. Maimonides, The Code [*Mishneh Torah*], Book 14: Judges, Treatise 5: Kings and Wars, chs 11-12). Since religiously observant Jews believe that the rebuilding of the temple and the reign of their messiah will be events of salvific importance for the whole world, it is no wonder that, over the last few years several organizations of pious Jews have been making very practical preparations. It is no wonder, either, that a recent survey of the Israeli population found a small majority, some 50-60%, in favour of rebuilding the temple. In this context, our reflections should really focus on the factors that are currently preventing them from realizing this project.

There are, at present, two important obstacles to the realization of this project, the first is 'internal' to the Jewish religious tradition and the second is 'external' and political:

1. Regarding the rebuilding of the temple, there are two slightly different expectations within Orthodox Judaism, as Jewish sources disagree to some extent about who will build it. Some assert that God himself will build the temple and that, in its time, it will come down from heaven without any human participation (e.g. Psalm 127:1, the *Zohar*, Rashi); other sources state that the final temple will have to be built by men (certain *Midrashim*, Maimonides).
2. The place where the temple is due to be built, the Temple Mount, is presently occupied by Muslims, and is regarded by them as the third-most holy place in the world, after Mecca and Medina. They are firmly resolved to prevent any Jewish involvement on the site, and any attempt to change the Status Quo would immediately unite and inflame the entire Islamic community. It would be resisted in the strongest possible way, and without any doubt it would ignite a passionate religious war. The Jews are in no position, at present, to risk such an outcome against the entire Muslim world.

To a large extent the first, or 'internal', obstacle to the rebuilding of the temple by human effort has already been resolved. It is proposed that the temple will be a synthesis of divine and human effort. As expressed in one Hassidic source: "the Jewish people will build part of the temple, as commanded, leaving the loftiest features – which will insure its eternity – for God Himself". As a Halachic authority,

whose ruling on the subject is unopposed, Maimonides essentially resolves the argument as to who will build the temple: it will be built by the Jewish people, in its place on the Temple Mount, under the direction of a leader who will, on its completion, be declared their messiah.

The second 'external', or political, obstacle is much more relevant. The Islamic presence on the Temple Mount is currently the main factor preventing the Jews from rebuilding their temple. The continuation of the Islamic occupation of this site is maintained and supported by the immense religious, demographic, financial, military and political resources of the global Islamic community. It is this fact, above all, that makes it so difficult to believe that the temple will be rebuilt, or to foresee any circumstances that may allow the Jews to replace the Islamic shrines on the Temple Mount with their own temple. On reflection, however, a rapid change in the present situation could be envisaged in one very predictable circumstance: in the case of a regional war resulting in overwhelming political and military victory for the Jewish State and their allies (chiefly the USA). In such circumstances, one can predict a window of opportunity for removing the Islamic shrines, as a sign of Islam's defeat, and rebuilding the temple. In view of the radical Islamic gains in the region, their confident conspiracy to eliminate Israel in the near future, the Iranian drive to manufacture nuclear weapons, it is not surprising that the Israeli Defense Forces were preparing for a regional war as early as Summer 2007.

The anticipated war against a radical Islamic anti-Israel alliance is already awakening comparisons, in the popular press, with the war of Gog and Magog prophesied in Ezekiel 38-39.⁴ For the Jewish faithful, in fact, this is the war that will herald the rebuilding of their temple and their redemption during messianic age.

With the rebuilding of the temple appearing as a real possibility for the near future, Christians should reflect carefully on their response to this. In particular, they should be asking themselves how this third temple fits into the divine plan of redemption, and they can start by examining whether the Jewish understanding of redemption is actually the same as theirs.

It should become evident, fairly quickly, that Orthodox Judaism has an entirely different conception of redemption to that of Christians: the role of the redeemer, the form of repentance, the moral capacity of men, and the nature of sin and evil are all fundamentally different from corresponding elements in Christian theology.

In Orthodox Jewish theology,⁵ sin and evil arise from the 'evil impulse', which is found alongside the 'good impulse' in every human being. Having perfect free will, the Jewish soul (in contrast to the souls of the non-Jews) is able to choose to

⁴ <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3338175,00.html> . About the inevitability of war, see also 'Right On: the Coming Mid-East War', by Michael Freund in the *Jerusalem Post*, 18th October 2006.

⁵ Principle sources are: Rabbi Meir Soloveichik, "Redemption and the Power of Man" (*Azure*, no. 16, Winter 5764 (2004) available at http://www.azure.org.il/magazine/magazine.asp?id=172&search_text ; Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, book 14: Judges; Treatise 5: Kings and Wars, chs 11-12; and Rabbi Menachem Brod, "*The Days of Moschiach*".

follow the good impulses and reject the bad ones, in accordance with the revealed Will of God expressed in the laws of the Torah. If a Jew fails in some way, then he is encouraged to repent, which simply means that he must take a decision to return to observe the laws revealed in the Torah. It is claimed that his soul has the inner capacity to do this, without help from outside itself. Through its own moral effort in overcoming evil impulses the soul earns its reward in the after-life. Redemption refers to the destiny of the Jewish people as a whole, and its realization depends upon their collective repentance, so as to merit the coming of their redeemer or messiah. The messiah is an observant Jew who brings his people back to the observance of the Torah, gathers the dispersed remnants of Israel, conquers all the surrounding nations and rebuilds the temple in its place on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. His leadership is expected to reflect the leadership of Moses, and his arrival is to be announced by a religious leader representing the return of Elijah (cf. Malachi 3:23). Redemption starts only after the temple has been built, and proceeds in an entirely natural way, without miracles or supernatural interventions. Nevertheless, it is believed that the establishment of this historical, Jewish, messianic kingdom in Jerusalem will bring about peace in the whole world (*Tikun HaOlam*). At an unknown time in the future, it is said that this kingdom will undergo a supernatural transformation resulting in the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment and the life of the world to come.

In this Jewish view of redemption, there is no place for a divine and personal saviour (Jesus) who dies for the remission of sins, and returns at the end of history to eradicate evil and perform the final judgment. The Christian Gospel is as foreign to Orthodox Jews now as it was when it was first preached 2000 years ago.⁶ Now, as then, their messiah is a worldly leader who restores full national and political sovereignty to the Jewish people. Most important of all, though, he enables them to return to the full performance of their religious obligations under the Sinaitic Covenant, through the rebuilding of their temple in its place. Not surprisingly, the establishment of the State of Israel (1948), the immigration of Jews from all over the world and the conquest of the Temple-Mount and East Jerusalem (1967) are all interpreted as necessary preparations for the imminent coming of their messiah and redemption.⁷

From the Christian point of view, then, the political 'redemption' so eagerly desired by the Jews is a false redemption, and their long-awaited messiah is nothing but a false messiah⁸ – a worldly imitation and antagonist of Jesus Christ.⁹ It would

⁶ Jesus is still understood as a failed messianic contender who attempted a military uprising against the Roman Authorities; for a recent presentation of this view by an Orthodox Rabbi, see "Discovering the Jewish Jesus" by Shmuley Boteach, published in the Jerusalem Post, 7th December 2005, at:

<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1132475699597&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull> .

⁷ The final obstacle in the realization of this plan is the Muslim presence on the Temple Mount.

⁸ Catechism of the Catholic Church 675-676.

⁹ In Christian prophecy and tradition he is often called the 'Antichrist'.

be dangerously mistaken to support this as a valid means of salvation. So the Church must absolutely avoid statements suggesting that the Old Covenant provides, or can be reconstituted so as to provide, a valid means of salvation for the Jews, or anybody else.¹⁰

So we return to the question of what the future rebuilding of the temple can mean for Christians. Here they are helped by their own Scriptures. There are at least four relevant passages in the New Testament: Mt 24,15-29 (paralleled by Mk 13,14-27); 2Thess 3,3-12, and Ap 13,13. Each of these prophecies alludes to the establishment of a kind of false worship in the temple area, in the period immediately preceding the second coming of Christ. It should be noted though, that although Christian prophecy anticipates the restoration of some kind cultic activity on the Temple Mount, it follows Daniel in regarding this as an 'abomination causing desolation'. This is particularly clear in Matthew 24, where the setting up of this 'abomination' in the Holy Place will mark the onset of a brief period of tribulation immediately preceding Christ's second coming. In 2Thessalonians, St. Paul explains this enigmatic prophecy as the full and final manifestation of evil: a man who seats himself in the (restored) temple and demands to be worshipped as God. The Islamic presence on the Temple Mount can readily be identified with the 'restraining power' (2Thess 3,6-7) of which he speaks, which will be removed by God at the appropriate time. It is the Apocalypse, however, which gives us the fullest description of this pseudo-cultic activity on the Temple Mount. In Ap 13 it is described as an idolatrous personality cult of the false messiah, inspired by Satan and instituted forcefully by the false prophet. In perfect agreement with St. Paul (cf. 2Thess 3,11-12), this blasphemous activity is explained as a crucial part of the Final Judgment, resulting in the eternal condemnation of those who are deceived or coerced into worshipping the false messiah.

Whichever way we look, then, either to current regional political, religious, and military developments, or to New Testament prophecy, the Christian faithful must be alert to the possibility that God himself, at the time of His choosing, will permit the rebuilding of the temple in its place. Although this is to be understood as the 'abomination causing desolation', it must be accepted in faith as a divine test for mankind at the end of history. Those who pass this test by adhering to the true messiah, and by refusing to worship the false messiah will be rewarded with a share in the New Heavens and the New Earth.

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¹⁰ See note 5 above, for example.