

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE 'CLEANSING OF THE TEMPLE'.

HAVE we an agreed estimate of the scope and importance of the 'Cleansing of the Temple'? There are two possibilities. It may have been of minor importance, an incident almost negligible as to any effect upon the development of events. Or it may have been in reality of more importance than appears on the surface; its influence upon the events of the last week may have been great, and it may offer the only explanation of certain features of the history.

In January 1921 the *Quest*—the principal journal in English devoted to the study of Mysticism—a very learned Christian Jew, Dr Robert Eisler, makes out a strong case for assigning a very high importance to this event. His position is indicated in the title of his article, *Jesus and the Blood-sacrifices*. It is just here, he urges, that the Christian separation from the sacrificial system of Judaism finds its justification in the action of Jesus: a justification which is hereby made positive and not merely negative; direct, and not by implication or inference.

I would submit the question raised to the judgement of New Testament scholars. Dr Eisler is a man of encyclopaedic learning, but I have not noticed any endeavour to deal with the case he puts forward. This must be my excuse for offering some restatement of it as it appears to me, as one whose studies have lain in other areas of Theology.

At the outset, in favour of assigning a greater importance to the Cleansing than is traditional, one thinks of the marked way in which the Sadducean officials of the Temple almost rush to the front in the closing stage of the opposition to our Lord. This is generally allowed, of course: but is it adequately accounted for?

Then there is the rapidity with which the officials were able to draw over to their side the multitude assembled at Jerusalem for the Passover festival, and to excite them to indignation and even fury. The prominent jibe is not against a supposed heretical opponent of Moses and the Law: it is not 'Ah, thou that breakest the Sabbath!' but 'Ah, (thou) that destroyest the Temple!' It suggests a situation parallel to that later one at Ephesus: a Temple and its system imperilled.

To have accomplished such a result something very momentous must have occurred. But a protest against so mild an offence as the desecration of sacred precincts by the introduction of business transactions connected with provision of the animals required for sacrifice, or of the

special coinage needed for payment of Temple dues is scarcely an adequate cause for the hostility evoked, passionate as this evidently was. Nor does the addition of a correction of malpractices in connexion with these transactions raise the protest to sufficient degree of importance. Further, Dr Eisler declares that some of the leading terms used have been misread: especially that the word for 'thieves' should be translated 'slaughterers', and so our attention should be transferred to a quite different category of unfitness for the sacred courts: the unseemliness of a house of prayer being turned into a scene of butchery. On this, I would suggest that too much must not be made of a repugnance of an aesthetic kind such as we ourselves feel if we endeavour to set out the scene: the temple area occupied with cattle and sheep awaiting slaughter; the dying animals; the streams of blood; 'the shambles of the Temple' (Nairne). To call it 'the greatest sacred abattoir the world has ever seen' as Mr Mead, the learned Editor of the *Quest* has done, goes too far. We have only to read our *Odyssey* and its recurring gloatings over the slaughter of animals in presence of the guests as a prelude to great banquets to learn how far from repugnant mere slaughter was in those days. And Dr Eisler corrects Mr Mead's phrase by referring to the contemporary hecatombs at Heliopolis, Baalbec, Pergamon, and other religious centres. But if the intrusion of business, plus the introduction of malpractices, plus any aesthetic repugnance are the sufficient cause we are looking for, the ground seems to be clear for bringing into account a much greater possible event, viz. an attack upon the sacrificial system itself.

There is another ground of protest of a minor kind: the action may have been a reproach against the intrusion by the Temple officials upon the area of the Temple intended for the use of worshippers. It would seem that in the Court of the Gentiles the sacrifices took place: here the worshippers met for prayer and instruction. The use of it for the cattle was an intrusive interference with the quiet and solemnity of the people's court. If so, the protest would be rather concerned with an abuse than directed against anything that was radically wrong.

What had been the attitude of Jesus to the Blood-sacrifices previously to the last week? In the daily life of Himself and His followers it had not been necessary to take action in the regions at a distance from the scene to which all the sacrifices were confined. But on the visits to Jerusalem, more prolonged than they have usually been thought to be (as is now, I understand, being inferred from the Johannine Gospel), He must either have acquiesced by respectful attendance or have avoided them; which was it? I cannot find any certain evidence. Regular resort to the Temple does not prove participation, or even acquiescence. The Jewish people at that time contained religious parties who had passed

adverse judgement on the sacrifices: notably the Essenes who had withdrawn from participation in them, though they had not carried their rejection so far as to offer opposition to others continuing the observance or to refrain themselves from presenting gifts to the Temple. Jesus and His followers would not have been singular in resorting to the Temple for Prayer and Preaching apart from the sacrifices.

The injunctions to the lepers who had been healed are not in point. These healings, both of the solitary and of the ten, took place far away from the Temple. The priests to be visited would seem to have been local priests empowered to discharge various ritual functions; what was to be offered to them was a δῶρον (Matthew), and the εἰς μαρτύριον αὐτοῖς seems, as Dr Eisler suggests, to signify that the purpose was to make it his first business ('See thou tell no man') to procure an official certificate which would re-admit to ordinary social intercourse.

On the other hand we have the commendation of the disparagement of sacrifices uttered by Hosea centuries before, twice recorded by Matthew. But there is a very notable absence of records of discussions of the subject either with the priesthood or raised by questionings on the part of disciples, if we contrast this with the keenness of the interest in the observance of the Sabbath; of Fasting; in the comparative value of Commandments; in Divorce; in the Resurrection. Dr Nairne's phrase 'Little interest is shewn in the Temple sacrifices' (*Epistle of Priesthood*, 139 n.) is too weak: there seems to have been no interest at all.

And yet the disappearance of regard for the sacrificial system from the mind of the Church in the Apostolic period was so nearly complete¹ as to lead us to expect that at some time or other our Lord must have declared Himself upon it in relation to the Kingdom of God. If we look farther afield, as Mr Mead does (*Quest*, July 1920), we find clear and emphatic repudiation of this element in Religion by Pythagoras and by Gautama in Buddhism. In the absence of recorded spoken rejections in either the Synoptics or John, there does seem to be a lacuna which could well be filled up if we can take this action in the Temple at its maximum of significance: a vehement protest against the continuance of the sacrifices themselves. If the attitude to them had been scarcely expressed whilst there was but little contact with them, it might well have been that on this visit to Jerusalem our Lord, filled with the sense of approaching catastrophe, decided that open conflict was required, and that drastic treatment could no longer be avoided: the final crisis had arrived: the hour had come.

Referring to some details, something can be learned by comparison

¹ The necessity for the Epistle to the Hebrews is a sign that it was not quite complete: there were still groups to which the abolition presented a difficulty.

of the variations in the records of the 'Cleansing'. Luke reduces it to a protest against business in the sacred precincts, and that on its least objectionable side, the changing of money. Matthew and Mark add reference to the selling of doves. John is the most comprehensive: besides the money-changers and the doves, there are the sheep and the oxen. Luke's reduction is on a par with his frequent elimination of features which had no interest for non-Jewish Christians; Matthew and Mark's inclusion of the doves introduces reference to animal-sacrifice in its least offensive features, but how these should remain in memory while the more conspicuous sheep and oxen are unnoticed is to me inexplicable. Surely we have in John the complete scene.

But besides the objection to business in the sacred enclosure—which is all that John takes note of (*ὄγκος ἐμπορίου*)—there is the reference to 'robbers' in the Synoptists: malpractices and dishonesty in the business transactions. Upon this Dr Eisler puts forward a remarkable correction, which I must give in his own words:—

'Jesus did not speak the language of the Greek heathen in the precincts of the Sanctuary. What he said is a literal quotation, not from the Septuagint, but from the Hebrew of the prophets Isaiah (lvi 7) and Jeremiah (vii 11). And there the words "den of thieves" or "den of robbers", as the A.V. says in Jeremiah, read *me'arat parišim*. Now the stem PRŠ does not in the least apply to any offence against property, as "stealing" is "robbing" (stealing by violence); it means "to break, dismember, lacerate" something, and is said of human criminals as well as of carnivorous animals and birds of prey. What the prophet means to say is "a cave of murderers" (the *Mördergrube* of the Luther bible), or even a den of slaughterers. Accordingly, if Jesus contrasts the whole world's "prayer-house" of Isaiah with Jeremiah's "den of slaughterers", this blood-smearred word alone suffices to show that Jesus *does* contrast the "pure offering" of prayers throughout the whole world (Mal. i 11), the bloodless spiritual cult of the already world-embracing Synagogue (*beth thepilah*) with the dire Deuteronomic monopoly-slaughter-house of the blood-deluged Mount Zion.'

On the difficulty arising from John's assigning the event to an earlier visit to Jerusalem which would quite prevent the higher valuation of its importance and influence I am persuaded of the correctness of the opinion that there were two somewhat similar 'cleansings'. But they were similar only superficially. The first was a minor protest, and it attracted only slight attention; it neither astounded His followers nor excited the priesthood. It attacked only minor abuses, and has therefore been correctly designated a 'cleansing', and it might very well have been regarded as a defence of the system, and have met with a wide approval. It did not, however, seem sufficiently important for the Synoptics to record. Whereas the second, radical and momentous, John found already recorded in its place. But to him the earlier one

was of service as an example of a quite early claim to a measure of authority for action as well as for teaching, and in this way akin to our Lord's action in His miracles. There is a difficulty, however, in the vehement character with which John invests the action, which does not accord with ascribing a minor importance to it. I do not see how we can avoid acknowledging that there is some confusion of the events, and I must fall back upon Dr Brooke's opinion (Peake's *Commentary: in loco*) that the Johannine writer misplaced what was 'the real cause of the final conflict' and having 'used it up' in relation to the early claim for authority omitted it in his account of the last week, although it lay before him in the Synoptic tradition.

The points in Dr Eisler's article which I would submit to the judgement of scholars are:—

The meaning of the Hebrew term: robbers or butchers?

The extent to which the Temple provided a banking system, regarded as quite legitimate, and providing the revenue for the enormous cost of the Temple and its officials;

The assertion that there could have been no actual market in the Temple Court: but only that animals would be necessarily led through on the way to the places of slaughter near the altars.

In conclusion. The readiness of the Jewish mind to dispense completely with the Blood-sacrifices after the destruction of the Temple is a psychological change which it is hard to believe had not been in incubation for a long time. That the writer of *Hebrews* had to face a strong conservative attitude in favour of the system is a fact of small dimensions in comparison with the conservative attitudes to Circumcision and to consorting with Gentiles which had to be faced by St Peter and St Paul. The higher estimate of the event we are here considering would enable us to see that the abandonment of the sacrificial system, apparently without reserve or regret, had its clear authority in a conspicuous and definite action of our Lord.

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