

At Night in the Temple

– Alfred Edersheim, (From “The Temple, Its Ministry and Services” – 1874)

“Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments.”– Revelation 16:15

Allusions to the Temple in New Testament

There is a marked peculiarity and also a special charm about the allusions of the “*beloved disciple*” to the “Temple and its services.” The other New Testament writers refer to them in their narratives, or else explain their types, in such language as any well-informed worshiper at Jerusalem might have employed. But John writes not like an ordinary Israelite. He has eyes and ears for details which others would have left unnoticed. As, according to a Jewish tradition, the high-priest read the Divine answer of the Urim and Thummim by a heavenly light cast upon special letters in the names of the tribes grave upon his breast-plate, so to John the presence and the words of Jesus seem to render luminous the well-remembered services of the Temple. This, as we shall have frequent occasion to show, appears in his Gospel, but much more in the Book of Revelation. Indeed, the Apocalypse, as a whole, may be likened to the Temple services in its mingling of prophetic symbols with worship and praise. But it is specially remarkable, that the Temple-references with which the Book of Revelation abounds are generally to minutiae, which a writer who had not been as familiar with such details, as only personal contact and engagement with them could have rendered him, would scarcely have even noticed, certainly not employed as part of his imagery. They come in naturally, spontaneously, and so unexpectedly, that the reader is occasionally in danger of overlooking them altogether; and in language such as a professional man would employ, which would come to him from the previous exercise of his calling. Indeed, some of the most striking of these references could not have been understood at all without the professional treatises of the Rabbis on the Temple and its services. Only the studied minuteness of Rabbinical descriptions, derived from the tradition of eye-witnesses, does not leave the same impression as the unstudied illustrations of St. John.

Fourth Gospel and Apocalypse Written Before Temple Services Ceased

These naturally suggest the twofold inference that the Book of Revelation and the Fourth Gospel must have been written before the Temple services had actually ceased, and by one who had not merely been intimately acquainted with, but probably at one time an actor in them.¹ The argument may be illustrated by an analogous case. Quite lately, they who have dug under the ruins of the Temple have discovered one of those tablets in the Court of the Temple which warned Gentiles, on pain of death, not to advance farther into the sanctuary. The tablet answers exactly to the description of Josephus, and its inscription is almost literally as he gives it.² This tablet seems like a witness suddenly appearing, after eighteen centuries, to bear testimony to the narrative of Josephus as that of a contemporary writer. Much the same instantaneous conviction, only greatly stronger, is carried to our minds, when, in the midst of some dry account of what went on in the Temple, we suddenly come upon the very words which St. John had employed to describe heavenly realities. Perhaps one of the most striking instances of this kind is afforded by the words quoted at the head of this chapter—“*Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments.*” They literally describe, as we learn from the Rabbis, the punishment awarded to the Temple-guards if found asleep at their posts; and the Rabbinical account of it is curiously confirmed by the somewhat naive confession of one of their number,³ that on a certain occasion his own maternal uncle had actually undergone the punishment of having his clothes set on fire by the captain of the Temple as he went his rounds at night.

Night in the Temple

For the service of the officiating ministers was not only by day, but also at night in the Temple. From Scripture we know that the ordinary services of the sanctuary consisted of the morning and evening sacrifices. To these the Rabbis add another evening service, probably to account for their own transference of the evening service to a much later hour than that of the sacrifice.⁴ There is, however, some difficulty about the exact time when each of the sacrifices was offered. According to general agreement, the morning sacrifice was brought at the “*third hour*,” corresponding to our nine o’clock. But the preparations for it must have commenced more than two hours earlier. Few, if any, worshipers could have witnessed the actual slaying of the lamb, which took place immediately on opening the great Temple-gate. Possibly they may have gathered chiefly to join in the prayer “*at the time of incense*” (Luke 1:10). In the modified sense, then, of understanding by the morning sacrifice the whole service, it no doubt coincided with the third hour of the day, or 9 A.M. This may explain how on the day of Pentecost such a multitude could so readily “*come together*,” to hear in their various tongues “*the wonderful works of God*”—seeing it was the third hour (Acts 2:15), when they would all be in the Temple. The evening sacrifice was fixed by the Law (Num 28:4,8) as “*between the evenings*,” that is, between the darkness of the gloaming and that of the night.⁵

Such admonitions as “*to show forth thy faithfulness every night upon an instrument of ten strings and on the psalter*” (Psa 92:2,3), and the call to those who “*by night stand in the house of the Lord*,” to “*lift up their hands in the sanctuary and bless the Lord*” (Psa 134), seem indeed to imply an evening service--an impression confirmed by the appointment of Levite singers for night service in 1 Chronicles 9:33; 23:30. But at the time of our Lord the evening sacrifice certainly commenced much earlier. Josephus puts it down (Ant. xiv. 4, 3) as at the ninth hour. According to the Rabbis the lamb was slain at the eighth hour and a-half, or about 2:30 p.m., and the pieces laid on the altar an hour later--about 3:30 p.m. Hence, when “*Peter and John went up together into the Temple at the hour of prayer, being the ninth hour*” (Acts 3:1) it must have been for the evening sacrifice, or rather half an hour later, and, as the words indicate, for the prayer that accompanied the offering of incense. The evening service was somewhat shorter than that of the morning, and would last, at any rate, about an hour and a-half, say till about four o’clock, thus well meeting the original requirement in Numbers 28:4. After that no other offering might be brought except on the eve of the Passover, when the ordinary evening sacrifice took place two hours earlier, or at 12:30 p.m.⁶

Change of Priests

We can conceive the laborious work of the day over, and the rest and solemnity of night in the Temple begun. The last notes of the Temple music have died out, and the worshipers slowly retired, some after lingering for private prayer, or else tarrying in one of the marble porches. Already the short Eastern day is fading out in the west. Far over the mountains of Gibeon the sun is sinking in that ocean across which the better light is so soon to shine. The new company of priests and Levites who are to conduct the services of the morrow are coming up from Ophel under the leadership of their heads of houses, their elders. Those who have officiated during the day are preparing to leave by another gate. They have put off their priestly dress, depositing it in the appointed chambers, and resumed that of ordinary laymen, and their sandals. For such, although not shoes, might be worn in the Temple, the priests being barefoot only during their actual ministry. Nor did they otherwise wear any distinctive dress, not even the high-priest himself, nor yet those who performed in the Temple other than strictly sacrificial services.⁷

As for the Levites, they had no clerical dress at all, but only wore the white linen (2 Chron 5:12), till they obtained from Agrippa II permission to wear priestly garments—as Josephus rightly remarks, “*contrary to the laws of our country*” (Ant. xx. 9, 6).

The Farewell on the Sabbath

We know that on Sabbaths at least, when one company gave place to another, or, rather, as the outgoing course left the Temple precincts, they parted from each other with a farewell, reminding us of St. Paul's to the Corinthians (2 Cor 13:11), "*He that has caused His name to dwell in this house cause love, brotherhood, peace, and friendship to dwell among you.*" Each of the twenty-four "courses" into which not only the priests and Levites, but also all Israel, by means of representatives, were divided, served for one week, from Sabbath to Sabbath, distributing the daily service among their respective "families" or "houses." For the Sabbath the new ministrants came earlier than on week-days.⁸ As the family whose daily "*ministration was accomplished*" left the Temple, the massive gates were closed by priests or Levites, some requiring the united strength of twenty men. Then the Temple keys were hung up in a hollow square, under a marble slab in the "fire-room" (Beth-ha-Moked), which may also be designated as the chief guard-room of the priests. Now, as the stars were shining out on the deep blue Eastern sky, the priests would gather for converse⁹ or the evening meal.¹⁰ Pieces of the sacrifices and the prepared first-fruits (the Therumoth) supplied the needful refreshments.¹¹ Though the work of the day was over, certain arrangements had yet to be made. For the Levites in charge of collecting the tithes and other business details were wont to purchase in large quantities what each who brought any sacrifice needed for meat and drink-offerings, and to sell it to the offerers. This was a great accommodation to the worshiper, and a source of daily profit to the Temple. On payment of a price, fixed by tariff every month, the offerer received his proper counterfoil,¹² in exchange for which a Temple official gave him what he needed for his sacrifice. Now, the accounts of these transactions had to be made up and checked every evening.

The Night-watches

But already the night-watches had been set in the Temple. By day and night it was the duty of the Levites to keep guard at the gates, to prevent, so far as possible, the unclean from entering. To them the duties of the Temple police were also entrusted, under the command of an official known to us in the New Testament as the "*captain of the Temple*" (Acts 4:1, etc.), but in Jewish writings chiefly as "*the man of the Temple Mount.*" The office must have been of considerable responsibility, considering the multitude on feast-days, their keen national susceptibilities, and the close proximity of the hated Romans in Fort Antonia. At night guards were placed in twenty-four stations about the gates and courts. Of these twenty-one were occupied by Levites alone; the other innermost three jointly by priests and Levites.¹³ Each guard consisted of ten men; so that in all two hundred and forty Levites and thirty priests were on duty every night. The Temple guards were relieved by day, but not during the night, which the Romans divided into four, but the Jews, properly, into three watches, the fourth being really the morning watch. (Compare Matt. 14:25).¹⁴ Hence, when the Lord saith, "*Blessed are those servants whom the lord when he cometh shall find watching,*" He expressly refers to the second and third watches as those of deepest sleep (Luke 12:38).

The Rounds of the Captain

During the night the "*captain of the Temple*" made his rounds. On his approach the guards had to rise and salute him in a particular manner. Any guard found asleep when on duty was beaten, or his garments were set on fire—a punishment, as we know, actually awarded. Hence the admonition to us who, as it were, are here on Temple guard, "*Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments*" (Rev 16:15). But, indeed, there could have been little inclination to sleep within the Temple, even had the deep emotion natural in the circumstances allowed it. True, the chief of the course and the heads of families reclined on couches along that part of the Beth-Moked in which it was lawful to sit down,¹⁵ and the older priests might lie on the floor, having wrapped their priestly garments beside them, while the younger men kept watch. But then the preparations for the service of the morning required each to be early astir. The priest whose duty it was to superintend the arrangements might

any moment knock at the door and demand entrance. He came suddenly and unexpectedly, no one knew when. The Rabbis use almost the very words in which Scripture describes the unexpected coming of the Master (Mark 13:35), when they say, "Sometimes he came at the cock-crowing, sometimes a little earlier, sometimes a little later. He came and knocked, and they opened to him. Then said he unto them, All ye who have washed, come and cast lots" (Mishnah, *Tamid*. i. 1, 2). For the customary bath required to have been taken before the superintending priest came round, since it was a principle that none might go into the court to serve, although he were clean, unless he had bathed. A subterranean passage, lit on both sides, led to the well-appointed bath-rooms where the priests immersed themselves. After that they needed not¹⁶ all that day to wash again, save their hands and feet, which they had to do each time, however often, they came for service into the Temple. It was, no doubt, to this that our Lord referred in His reply to Peter: "*He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit*" (John 13:10).¹⁷

Casting Lots for the Services

Those who were prepared now followed the superintending priest through a wicket into the court. Here they divided into two companies, each carrying a torch, except on the Sabbaths, when the Temple itself was lit up. One company passed eastwards, the other westwards, till, having made their circuit of inspection, they met at the chamber where the high-priest's daily meat-offering was prepared (Lev 6:12-16),¹⁸ according to the Rabbinical interpretation of the law), and reported, "It is well! All is well!" Thereupon those who were to prepare the high-priest's offering were set to their work, and the priests passed into the Hall of Polished Stones,¹⁹ to cast lots for the services of the day. This arrangement had been rendered necessary by certain painful scenes to which the eagerness of the priests for service had led. Altogether the lot was cast four times, though at different periods of the service. It was done in this manner. The priests stood in a circle around the president, who for a moment removed the head-gear of one of their number, to show that he would begin counting at him. Then all held up one, two, or more fingers—since it was not lawful in Israel to count persons—when the president named some number, say seventy, and began counting the fingers till he reached the number named, which marked that the lot had fallen on that priest. The first lot was for cleansing the altar and preparing it; the second, for those who were to offer the sacrifice, and for those who were to cleanse the candlestick and the altar of incense in the Holy Place. The third lot was the most important. It determined who was to offer the incense. If possible, none was to take part in it who had at any previous time officiated in the same capacity. The fourth lot, which followed close on the third, fixed those who were to burn the pieces of the sacrifice on the altar, and to perform the concluding portions of the service. The morning lot held good also for the same offices at the evening sacrifice, save that the lot was cast anew for the burning of the incense.

The First Lot

When the priests were gathered for "*the first lot*" in the Hall of Polished Stones, as yet only the earliest glow of morning light streaked the Eastern sky. Much had to be done before the lamb itself could be slain. It was a law that, as no sacrifice might be brought after that of the evening, nor after the sun had set, so, on the other hand, the morning sacrifice was only to be slain after the morning light had lit up the whole sky as far as Hebron, yet before the sun had actually risen upon the horizon.²⁰ The only exception was on the great festivals, when the altar was cleansed much earlier,²¹ to afford time for examining before actual sunrise the very numerous sacrifices which were to be brought during the day. Perhaps it was on this ground that, on the morning of the Passover, they who led Jesus from Caiaphas thronged so "*early*" "*the judgment-hall of Pilate.*" Thus, while some of them would be preparing in the Temple to offer the morning sacrifice, others were at the same moment unwittingly fulfilling the meaning of that very type, when He on whom was "*laid the iniquity of us all*" was "*brought as a lamb to the slaughter*" (Isa 53:7).

End Notes:

- ¹ Though the arguments in support of our view are only inferential, they seem to us none the less conclusive.
- ² See the account of this remarkable discovery by M. Clermont-Ganneau in his letter to the *Athenaeum*, reprinted in the *Quarterly Statement of the Palestine Exploration Fund* for August, 1871, pp.132, 133.
- ³ Rabbi Elieser ben Jacob. See *Middoth*, I. 2.
- ⁴ The Rabbinical statement about a correspondence between that service and 'the burning of the yet unconsumed fat and flesh' of the sacrifices (which must have lasted all night) is so far-fetched that we wonder to see it in Kitto's Cyclopaedia, while Gratz's assertion that it corresponded to the closing of the Temple gates is quite unsupported.
- ⁵ Sunset was calculated as an average of 6 o'clock P.M. For a full discussion and many speculations on the whole subject, see Herzfeld, *Gesch. d. V. Is.* Vol. iii, *Excurs.* xxiv, par. 2.
- ⁶ Accordingly the Rabbis laid down the principle that evening prayers (of course, out of the Temple) might be lawfully said at any time after 12:30 P.M. This explains how 'Peter went up upon the house-top to pray about the sixth hour,' or about 12 o'clock (Acts 10:9)—or to what was really 'evening prayer.' Comp. Kitto's *Cyl.* iii, p.904.
- ⁷ Those who, being declared physically unfit, discharged only menial functions, wore not the priestly dress. They on whom no lot had fallen for daily ministrations put off their priestly garments—all save the linen breeches—and also performed subordinate functions. But, according to some, it was lawful for priests while in the Temple to wear their peculiar dress—all but the girdle, worn always and only on sacrificial duty.
- ⁸ Probably this had also been the arrangement in the first Temple. See 2 Kings 11:9; 2 Chron. 23:8. Herzfeld, *u.s.* p.185.
- ⁹ The question of evening prayers in the Temple is involved in some difficulty. The curious reader will find it discussed by Herzfeld with almost confusing minuteness.
- ¹⁰ The partaking of sacred things by priests who had been ceremonially unclean is expressly sated by the Rabbis as 'when the stars shone out.'
- ¹¹ The Therumoth, such as oil, flour, etc., in opposition to those *au naturel*, such as corn, fruits, etc., call the Bicurim.
- ¹² Of these there were four kinds, respectively bearing the words 'male,' when the sacrifice was a ram; 'sinner' when it was a sin-offering; and for other, 'calf,' or 'kid.'
- ¹³ The watch at some of the gates seems at one time to have been hereditary in certain families. For this, see Herzfeld, vol. I, p.419; ii, p.57
- ¹⁴ See, however, the discussion in *Jer. Ber.* I. 1.
- ¹⁵ The part built out on the Chel; for it was not lawful for any but the king to sit down anywhere within the enclosure of the 'Priests' Court.'
- ¹⁶ Except under one circumstance.
- ¹⁷ The peculiarities of our Lord's washing the feet of the disciples are pointed out in Lightfoot, *Hor. Heb.* P.1094.
- ¹⁸ According to the Rabbinical interpretation of the law.
- ¹⁹ Or Gazith, where also the Sanhedrim met. The sittings were, in part, built out on the Chel.
- ²⁰ Maimonides, *Yad ha Chazakah*, the tractate on the daily sacrifice, I. 2.
- ²¹ For the three great festivals, in the first watch; for the Day of Atonement, at midnight. See also Lightfoot, *Hor. Heb.* P.1135.