

24 December 2023

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16
Romans 16:25-27
Luke 1:26-38

The workshop was busy and noisy, craftsmen of various kinds working alongside each other – here one with mallet and heavy chisel carefully fashioning the beginnings of a large jar out of stone, there another pouring molten bronze into a mould depicting a pomegranate, over there someone planing smooth a plank of cedar to replace a worn doorframe. All these and more crafts were employed in the service of the upkeep of the Temple nearby.

Big Oren put down his chisel and laid down the bow of his bow-lathe, wiped the sweat from his brow, and flexed his hands and forearms – the repetitive action required to keep the wood turning had made his muscles taut and sore. He nodded with satisfaction at the candlestick that was taking shape. He slaked his thirst from the jar in the corner of the workshop, then sat down on a nearby bench and drew some dried fruit, bread and cheese out of his knapsack. He looked up and caught Leor's eye, calling him away from his sawing. The younger man hesitated for a moment, then put down his heavy bronze saw, left his work and joined Oren on the bench.

"I hadn't realised there was so much involved in keeping the Temple in good order", sighed Leor, stretching. "Imagine what it must have taken to have built it!" Oren merely grunted. Much older, he had plenty of experience on relatively large projects over the years – including synagogues and that sort of thing. The young buck will have more idea once his apprenticeship is over, he thought. "Gosh," Leor exclaimed through a mouthful of bread, "imagine what it would have taken to build *Solomon's* Temple! They say it was so much grander than this temple of Herod. It must have taken an army of craftsmen. Imagine the cost!"

Oren replied, musing, "I wonder if that's part of why God didn't want a temple?"

"What?! Of course, God wanted a temple. Where else would he dwell?"

Oren went on, thoughtfully. “Well, sure, God *allowed* a temple to be built, and appointed Solomon to do it. But I get the feeling that was a concession to human weakness. At Synagogue last Sabbath the second scroll of Samuel was read – the story of God’s promise to David. Don’t you love that play on words in what God said to David: ‘You are not the one to build me a house, but I will build you and your descendants into a house.’? But before saying that, God had said that he’d never needed a temple, a house, always moving from place to place with his people.”

“But why wouldn’t God want a temple, a place of suitable grandeur befitting his glory, and a convenient place where people can make their sacrifices?” asked Leor, blustering.

“Well, for a start, because he hadn’t asked for one. Just like he hadn’t asked for a king ... but that’s a whole other story. And I can see why he ...”

“Hang on,” Leor burst in. “What do you mean, ‘he didn’t want a king’?”

“What did they teach you in your little village synagogue?” Oren shook his head in mock wonder. “Don’t you remember? The first scroll of Samuel ... the elders go to Samuel asking for a king so they can be like other nations. God sees that they have rejected, not Samuel, but God himself as their leader. God tells Samuel to warn them of the consequences. And haven’t we seen it all down the generations since God granted their desire: kings that have become corrupt, kings with appalling morals; kings imposing taxes; kings press-ganging men into their armies.”

“It’s ironic, isn’t it,” said Benaiah, a stonemason who had laid down his chisel to listen in when he overheard Leor getting a bit heated. “God didn’t really want a king, and yet he allowed one – I guess unfettered anarchy wouldn’t have done any better in providing justice and mercy for his people. And despite not wanting a king he came to bestow particular favour on King David and to make him extravagant promises of an eternal kingship. A pity that vision hasn’t been realised yet. What a proper pickle we’re in as a nation: ruled by the Herods who aren’t even real Jews, and they

themselves in thrall to the heathen Romans who know nothing of the one true God and his ways!”

“So true, brother,” agreed Oren. “But let me return to my point. We were talking about the temple, and I’d noted that God didn’t really seem to want one of those in the first place either.”

“But why?” queried Leor.

“Well, I’m not certain, and the scrolls do not tell us directly...” Oren was looking thoughtfully at the ceiling as if seeking an answer there. “I find myself wondering if it could have simply been a matter of timing. The annals of our people do tell us what a costly endeavour it was – money, materials, labour, attention. Soon King David was having to fight battles, and perhaps God was keeping all these resources in reserve for the right time. And perhaps it was about distraction too: David was in no position to oversee a major building project as soon afterwards he was having to deal with struggle and competition within his own family.”

His gaze moved down from the ceiling and he looked at his companions. “Maybe it wasn’t just about timing: the demand for resources to upkeep a temple lasts as long as the temple does, lest it fall into ruin. We of all people should know that,” he concluded, his gesture taking in the expanse of the workshop.

“I wonder if it’s more than that,” chimed in Benaiah. “I may have a jaded opinion of authority figures, but I find myself a little suspicious of David’s motives. Was this really about God’s glory, or about his? Or was it about, again, making Israel like other nations?”

“Or might it have been an attempt to domesticate God, to keep God close so that we know what he is up to?” Oren said it quietly, and the others looked at him sharply, a little alarmed at the line of thought.

Benaiah cleared his throat. “Well, of course, God has no need of a temple. That was a point that even King Solomon made when the temple was finally dedicated: ‘Will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven cannot

contain him. How much less this temple I have built! But perhaps despite the risks and issues, God also saw some benefit in condescending to have a temple built, a place to remind people of himself and a place where we could encounter him.”

“Imagine if God wanted to be really close?” mused Oren quietly. “Imagine if there is something in that idea of God building David a house, a family line, so that the family could become his dwelling place.” His voice intensified as he warmed to his theme. “What better way for the living, loving, uncontainable God to dwell in the midst of his people! The temple made of wood and stone points the way towards it, but, as we’ve been saying, can easily lead to mistaken ideas and values. How much greater and more effective than a temple it would be if God were to make himself present among his people *as a person*, reflecting God’s image and perfecting it again! And what if this one was also the king, living out God’s wise rule over the people, a man truly after God’s own heart!”

Benaiah cleared his throat again. “I’m not sure these flights of fancy of yours are wise, friend. God as a person, a human being? Don’t be crazy! Don’t you agree, young Leor? You seem to have gone very quiet. You’re finding this as disturbing as I am, are you?”

Leor shook his head thoughtfully. “No ... it’s just a puzzle really ... I can’t get my head around it.”

Benaiah leapt in, confidently. “No, no, it’s quite straightforward. A magnificent temple, such as it is our privilege to maintain, cannot contain God, I’m certain of that. Yet he deigns to presence himself there. But there is just no way that God would stoop so low as to become a human being. It just wouldn’t make any sense at all!”

Leor shook his head again. There was a surprising intensity in the way he looked at his workmates. “I know it doesn’t make any sense, but there is a mystery unfolding and I am starting to wonder if it could be of the nature of what Oren has described. I have an uncle Zechariah who lives in the hill country on the other side of the city. He’s now of a great age, but still serves as a priest in our magnificent temple. He wrote to me the other day, on my birthday; he’s always been kind like that despite

the vast difference in status between us. But this year his letter was full of strange tidings. He is unable to speak at the moment because he was disbelieving of an angelic messenger who visited him in the Temple. Fulfilling the angel's message, Zechariah's wife, my aunt, Elizabeth is expecting a child very soon, despite having been barren and being beyond the years of child-bearing. That's all strange enough. But Uncle Zechariah also writes that a cousin of Elizabeth, a young woman named Mary who lives up north in Nazareth, is too expecting a child – despite not having had relations with the man she is betrothed to. Yes, I know you'll scoff at that – and we all know stories of girls who claim some mystery about how they've gotten in the family way – but Uncle says that Mary seems convincingly sincere. Adding to the mystery is that Mary reports having had herself a visitation from an angel of God, declaring that she was to give birth to a son by the Holy Spirit, one who would be called 'Son of the Most High' and 'Son of God', one who would be given the throne of David and have an everlasting kingdom!"

The other two men gasped and gaped, eyes wide and eyebrows raised in surprise.

"So you're saying," began Oren slowly, "that my musings might be right after all; that God might come and dwell among us and reign as a human being?"

"But how does this answer the ancient promise to David?" Benaiah demanded.

"I'm not sure," answered Leor, "but Uncle did mention that the man Mary is betrothed to comes from David's line. Apparently he is a tradesman too, like us: a village carpenter."

"A carpenter? And this happening to a no-account lass, in a no-account town in Galilee? Not to a priestly or noble family; not in the royal city; not connected with the temple? This is strange indeed. I cannot believe it!" Benaiah was by now quite heated.

He was quiet for a second, and then there was a new realisation. "We might become redundant!" he exclaimed.

“Well, perhaps just redeployed,” proffered Oren.

“How so?” asked Benaiah sharply.

“Well, if God dwells among us in person, then doesn’t that instead elevate us humans and perhaps give us all a role extending his work way beyond the temple among the rest of creation?” suggested Oren.

“I guess we’ll just have to wait and see how it all works out,” said Leor as he returned to his bench and picked up his saw.

Sources

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