



Chapter 5

THE JEWISH PLACE OF EXECUTION IN JERUSALEM

Let us note an important ritualistic principle that dominated Jewish thought in the time when the Temple was in existence. It was that all “unclean things” associated with the Temple, with Jerusalem or with the people of Israel (whether of animals or human beings) had to be dealt with or disposed of *east* of any sacred area. Recall that the sin offerings killed in the Temple had to be taken *east* to the Miphkad Altar for burning to ashes (Leviticus 4:1-21). The bullock and the goat (both sin offerings) which were sacrificed on the Day of Atonement had to be taken *east* to the same altar and burnt into ashes (Leviticus 16:27). Even the live goat (the scapegoat) was led by a fit man into the wilderness *east* of Jerusalem (Leviticus 16:20-22). The sin offering called the Red Heifer was also burnt to ashes at the Miphkad Altar which, of course, was *east* of the Temple and Jerusalem. Even the ashes of all the sacrifices offered at the Altar of Burnt Offering in the Temple itself had to be taken *east* to the same “clean place” called “the *OUTWARD* Sanctuary” (Leviticus 4:12 with Ezekiel 44:1). Ashes were a symbol of repentance and these had to be deposited *east* of Jerusalem in the area where the main animals bearing the sins of

Israel were also burnt to ashes.

There was a definite reason why these things representing “sin” and “sorrow” had to be taken *east*. That is because all things reckoned to be “unclean” were placed *east* of the holy city. In the recently discovered “Temple Scroll” found in the Dead Sea area there was a general reference that “unclean” persons who lived near the ideal city of God as described in the Scroll had to live at designated places *east* of the city.

“And you shall make three places to the EAST of the city, separated one from another, into which shall come the lepers and the people who have discharge and the men who have had a nocturnal emission” (Yadin, *The Temple Scroll*, p.173).

These “unclean” persons had to live “without the camp” and on its *east* side (*ibid.*, p.174). Indeed, Josephus (who was a priest who lived while the Temple existed) said that “persons afflicted with gonorrhoea or leprosy were excluded from the entire city [of Jerusalem]” (*War* 5:227). And in *Antiquities* 3:261 he said that Moses “banished from the city alike those afflicted with leprosy and those with gonorrhoea.” And in the “Temple Scroll” it states that lepers must be kept out of the Temple city. It was necessary for them to reside *east* of the city” (Column 46:16,17).

The “Unclean” had to be East of Jerusalem

There was a special reason why such “unclean” persons had to be kept *east* of the Temple. Professor Yadin provides the answer. “There can be no doubt that the stress that lepers were to be isolated in a separate place *east* of the Temple city was prompted by the belief that this disease was contagious and was carried by the wind. Since the prevailing winds in Jerusalem are westerly, the areas *east* of the city, particularly the eastern slopes of the Mount of Olives facing the Dead Sea, would have been considered least likely to endanger the people in the Temple and city of Jerusalem” (*The Temple Scroll*, p.177). Yadin gave proof of this from an early

Jewish commentary on the Scripture. In the Midrash, Leviticus Rabba 16 it says:

“Rabbi Yohanan said: One is not permitted to pass within four cubits to the east of a leper. Rabbi Simon ben Lakhish said: Within a hundred cubits. There is no contradiction. The one who said within four cubits meant when there is no wind blowing; and the one who said within a hundred cubits meant when there is a wind blowing.”

Yadin reports that in the *Baba Batra* 3:9;13 of the Palestinian Talmud more evidence of this principle is found: “Rabbi Mana would walk with people afflicted with boils. Rabbi Abbaya said to him: Do not walk *east* of him, but rather to the west of him.”

Yadin’s observations on this matter are very interesting because he also calls attention to the New Testament reference that Jesus two days before the Passover stopped off at the village of Bethany on the *eastern* side of Jerusalem at the home of a leper: “And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at table...” (Mark 14:3). Yadin makes the point that this account is important to the matter at hand because the village of Bethany was situated on the *eastern* side of Jerusalem and even on the *eastern* slope of the Mount of Olives. According to Yadin, this is clear proof that lepers lived *east* of Jerusalem in the time of Jesus. This New Testament indication fits the pattern of placing “unclean” things *east* of the Temple and the city of Jerusalem.

Sin Offerings also had to be East of Jerusalem

What does the sacrifice of sin offerings *east* of the Temple have to do with the crucifixion of Jesus? Very much indeed! We will see that all executions of human beings in the Jerusalem area were considered symbolically as sin offerings to the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem. It means that the place of execution for murderers and blasphemers had to be “outside the camp” (like most sin offerings) but in an area that would not affect the sacredness and purity of the Holy City of Jerusalem. All “unclean” things (including the major

sin offerings ordained of God) were sent out *eastward* from the Holy City and the Temple itself. This is because in the theological thinking of the Jewish authorities in the first century, it was determined that each person who committed a capital crime and was executed for his criminal act was reckoned as being a “sin offering” to himself. It was believed that no animal could take the place of such a heinous person but that he (or she) had to be a “sin offering” himself (or herself) for the sins that had been committed. “May my death be an atonement for all my sins,” said the one being executed (Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud*, p.317). In simple terms this meant that no animal sacrifice for sin could act as a substitute for the person but that the individual had to be “his own” sin offering to atone for the terrible sins that had been done. The animals were burnt “outside the camp” because the sin offerings provided the example for a human who was also executed as his own sin offering “outside the camp” (See *Sanhedrin* 42b and especially 52a). The two “offerings” were considered analogous.

The reason this point is important to our present discussion is the fact that all animal sin offerings that were consumed “outside the camp” were offered to God *east* of the Temple near the summit of the Mount of Olives. And since all judicial executions were considered the judgment and wrath of God upon the wrongdoer, such executions were accomplished in the “presence” of God, that is, on the side of the Temple that God faced (its *east* side) when his people were brought before him to be judged.

It is important to realize that each time in the scripture that the phrase “before the Lord” is used in connection with the Tabernacle or the Temple it means that the people or the occasion were always located on the *east* side of the holy sanctuary. Since the sanctuary was considered the house (or palace) of God on earth and the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies was reckoned as the throne of God, he was always depicted as sitting on his throne facing *eastward* where all the entrances of the Tabernacle were situated.

The Judgments of God were Officially performed in His Presence

When Israelites approached God for worship and even for judgment, they were always coming before him on the *east* side of the Holy of Holies (never on the south, west or north of the Holy of Holies because there were no entrances to the inner sanctum on those sides). This is why the three main courts of the Tabernacle only had entrances on their *east* side. And in the time of Jesus the three main judicial courts of Israel to dispense the judgments of God to the people were located within the Temple on its *east* side (Cohen, *Everyman's Talmud*, pp.300-302; *Mishnah, Sanhedrin* 11:2 and *Middoth* 5:4). This allowed all judgments to be given "before the Lord" (that is, in the presence of "God's face"). And indeed, even the sentences of those judgments were also expected to be carried out "in the presence of the Lord." This principle is even found in judgments recorded in the New Testament: "he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone" in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb" (Revelation 14:10). It was common to expect judicial decisions by the courts to be given by God as people came "before him," that is, on the *east* side of the Temple. Women who were accused of adultery were brought "before the Lord" (to the *east* entrance to the sanctuary) for judgment (Numbers 5:16-31). When the two sons of Aaron were judged for offering strange fire "before the Lord" they were judged and punished on the *east* side of the sanctuary (Leviticus 10:1-7). When Korah and his Levites were punished it was on the *east* side of the Tabernacle (Numbers 16:41-50).

Recall that the early Jewish people would *orient* themselves in matters of direction by using the *east* as their standard direction (and even today we use the word *orient* in the same way though most of us now use north as the standard). All directions for geographical purposes in the Bible have their standard based on the *east* (the direction God looked toward from his Holy of Holies in

the Temple). Recall that two Hebrew words were used for “south” (*yamin* and *teman*) and both signified “the right hand” (in this case the standard *orientation* was God on His throne and “the right hand” was that of God sitting in the Holy of Holies). Also, one of the Hebrew words for *east* was *qedem* and this also had the meaning (in several contexts) of “being before” or standing “in front of” someone, and notably, the standard theme for use was standing before God while He sat in His Sanctuary facing *east*.

All Judgments Conducted East of the Temple

Even when it comes time for God to judge the world from Jerusalem, those to be judged will come “before the Lord” which means on the “east side” of God’s throne (Psalm 96:13; 98:9). In a literal sense this means those being judged will have to position themselves on the slopes of the Mount of Olives facing the Temple in which God will then be sitting. In actual fact, the great judgment in the Valley of Jehoshaphat mentioned in Joel 3:2,12 was acclaimed by people in the first century as referring to the Kidron Valley which separated the Mount of Olives from the Temple mount. Since the word “Jehoshaphat” means “God judges” it became common to believe that the final judgment for people in the world will occur on the “eastern” side of the Temple and up the slopes of the Mount of Olives. It is for this reason that this region became known as the Valley of Jehoshaphat.

Indeed, Charles Warren in Hasting’s *Dictionary of the Bible* listed over fourteen Christian authorities (from the Bordeaux Pilgrim onward) who attested to the belief that the Kidron was the actual Valley of Jehoshaphat (vol.II, p.562). This is why it was important, from the Christian point of view, that Jesus died in this eastern region facing the “Valley of Jehoshaphat” which was reckoned the judgment place for all mankind. For Jesus to be judged as dying for the sins of all humanity, Christians thought he had to be judged and sentenced in the place where all mankind were designed to be judged for their sins.

Even Muslims (who inherited many traditional beliefs from the Jews and Christians) firmly believe that the summit and the western slope of the Mount of Olives is also the judgment area for mankind. The *Kitab Ahwal al-Qiyama* (“Book of the Phases of Resurrection”) has an interesting account of Muslim tradition. “All the dead will congregate on the Mount of Olives and the angel Gabriel will move paradise to the right of Allah’s Throne and hell to its left. All mankind will cross a long bridge suspended from the Mount of Olives to the Temple Mount, which will be narrower than a hair, sharper than sword, and darker than night. Along this bridge there will be seven arches and at each arch man will be asked to account for his actions” (for more information giving similar Jewish traditions, see *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. IX, col. 1576). It will be noticed that the Muslim tradition still has reference to the two-tiered arched bridge that spanned the Kidron Valley from the Temple Mount to Olivet.

There is, however, a positive side to this judgment of God. Some of the righteous will be judged as worthy of being resurrected from the dead and to stand before God in glory. For this reason, many Jews and Muslims over the last few centuries have wanted to be buried in this region so that they might be the first of the righteous to be given their rewards when God comes to judge the world. The chief spot in all Jerusalem to be buried, in the eyes of certain Jewish people (and there are numerous tombs there), is on the western slopes of the Mount of Olives facing the Temple so they can be the first to meet God in the resurrection when the judgment takes place. This was considered the prime area for judgment and where the righteous will be rewarded with a resurrection from the dead while the wicked will be sent to the left hand side into Gehenna.

Jesus Was a Sin Offering for the World

What has this to do with the crucifixion of Jesus? It is highly significant to it. Since the New Testament makes it abundantly clear that Jesus bore all the judgments for sin and that he endured the

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wrath of God in place of the whole world (II Corinthians 5:14-21), it was necessary that Jesus bear his judicial punishment in the area where “all the world” is destined to be judged. And too, for Jesus to be executed “in the presence of God” for the sins of the world, he had to bear those sins in the region designed by God for that purpose. This is why the sin offerings that were sacrificed by the priests were carried “outside the camp” to the top of the Mount of Olives in order to be burnt into ashes. This is also why the holiest of sin offerings (called the Red Heifer) was killed and burnt to ashes “outside the camp” at the summit of Olivet directly “east” of the Temple. It was also in this same region (but somewhat to the south, as we will see) where criminals deserving the death penalty were taken “outside the camp” to become a sin offering for themselves.

Thus, in Jesus’ time, we find that the official Jewish place for execution was near the southern summit of Olivet but facing the eastern entrances to the Temple so that the evildoers would be executed “in the presence of God.” Only an area “east” of the Temple (and Jerusalem) will fit all the requirements regarding the judicial execution of criminals.