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## WHAT ALTAR ?

## AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF A DIFFICULT TEXT.

BY THE VEN. J. H. THORPE, M.A., B.D., ARCHDEACON  
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*"WE have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle. For the bodies of those beasts, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the High Priest for sin, are burnt without the camp."*—Hebrews xiii. 10.

This text is commonly quoted as meaning "We Christians have an altar (i.e. the Lord's Table) whereof they, the Jews, have no right to eat." Even so careful a scholar as Canon Daniel in his handbook *The Prayer Book, etc.*, a book very widely used by students, referring to the expressions used in the Prayer Book for the Communion Table, writes: "The word 'altar' was abandoned not because it is unscriptural, for it is employed in the Epistle to the Hebrews ('We have an altar,' xiii. 10), etc." "Now, the first thing to be pointed out is that there is no ground whatever for quoting this passage as *certainly* applying to the Holy Table or furnishing any grounds for applying to it the term 'altar' with its really grave implications (of priest and sacrifice). It is quite true that the early Fathers sometimes use the term in this way. But we must remember that they had not before them the controversies of later days, and especially they knew nothing of the decrees of the Council of Trent. In the Canons of 1640 it is said that the word 'altar,' as applied to the communion table 'does not imply that it is, or ought to be esteemed, a true and proper altar, wherein Christ is again really sacrificed; but it is and may be called an altar by us, in that sense in which the primitive Church called it an altar, and in no other.'" But the Canons of 1640 have in themselves no legal force or currency. "Lucian's prison was his church; and his own breast his altar to consecrate the eucharist upon for himself and those that were with him in confinement" (Bingham, Book XV, Sect. X, "Antiquities").

Now, while some respectable names may be quoted in support of the view that "altar" means "Holy Table" (such as Corn. a Lapide, Ebrard, Stier, etc.), yet a much weightier list can be produced advocating other interpretations. Thus, Suicer, Wolff, Cyril of Alexandria, and others contend the "altar" means Christ Himself. Others again, the heavenly place where Christ now "offers" His blood. Perhaps the greater number understand the Cross—Thomas Aquinas, Esthius, Bengel, Bleek, Alford, etc. (see Alford for interpretations and authorities). Nothing is more certain than that this is a passage about which there is grave disagreement amongst authorities and that, in consequence, to quote it to unlearned people for the controversial purpose of supporting

certain sacramental views is of doubtful honesty. Not to be aware of the divergencies of interpretations which exist implies a lack of exegetical knowledge. And it may be pointed out that controversial honesty is a very real department of Christian morals as well as a part of true wisdom. For no house was ever strengthened by rotten beams, and no cause is helped by unsound arguments. Yet it is often a temptation, even to good men, to use arguments in support of doctrines they hold strongly without looking too closely into their truth or relevance.

In the face of so much disagreement in interpretation the writer offers the following considerations with a certain amount of diffidence, but at the same time as representing the view which he has adopted after a good deal of reading and thought. His main object is to "make to cease," so far as he can, the confident and dogmatic use of the passage in the interests of sacramental teaching which he believes to be unsound and which he is certain is not the doctrine of the Church of England as Catholic and Reformed.

The first question to be decided in interpreting this passage is—Is there here any contrast between Christians as such and Jews as such, or between a Jewish and a Christian altar? I suggest there is not. The origin of the idea of a contrast lies, I believe, in the false emphasis which the Authorized Version seems to lay on the personal pronoun "We." This word is not in the Greek original. It occurs in our translation as the sign of the first person plural of the Greek verb. If any emphasis is laid it would appear it ought to be on "an altar," not on "We." The contrast, to begin with, is imported as an assumption into the passage. No argument can be rested on it. Who then are referred to by "We"? Canon Nairne, D.D. (whom we had for too short a time the honour of numbering amongst our Chester clergy) seems to put this beyond question in his *The Epistle of Priesthood*. He writes (p. 20): "So we conclude that the author has been brought up in Judaism; that he wrote to a little company of friends who had been brought up in Judaism; that the title 'To Hebrews' may be accepted as a fair description of these men, if we take it in its later general sense instead of confining it to Jews of Jerusalem, or at any rate Hebrew-speaking Jews." "The broad clear view we get is of Hellenistic Jews, now imperfect Christians, who are exposed to some particular temptation to give up their new faith and make common cause with their nation. The letter is written to prevent this, etc." I believe also the date of the Epistle, or at least the date of its original form, has an important bearing on our understanding of the passage. Was the Temple still standing and its ritual practised? I believe it was. Here again, if I understand Dr. Nairne rightly, he considers the weight of evidence points to a time when as yet Jerusalem had not been overthrown, although that overthrow was already looming. "The Jewish war with Rome was beginning. Appeal was being made to all Jews to band together in defence of Jerusalem and the ancient creed. This involved a Messianism which was contrary to the tradition of the Christian Church, and

Christian Jews could not consent to it. These 'philosophic liberals' who had never thoroughly embraced the Christian tradition were moved by the appeal, etc." (*ibid.*, p. 22). I think this view is also borne out by what is clearly the main purpose of the Epistle and the drift of the argument.

The immediate argument runs thus : "We have an altar whereof they have no right to eat which serve the Tabernacle." Then follows the reason : "For the bodies of those beasts whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burnt without the camp." Where is the relevancy of the reason ? How would it prove that the Jews have no right to eat of the Lord's Table, or to partake of the benefits of the Cross, because in some sacrifice of their own, the victim was burnt and not eaten ? The proposition stated in the tenth verse is not proved by the fact stated in the eleventh.

But this is only a part of the main argument. The Epistle is addressed to Hebrew Christians—converted Jews—who were in danger of reverting to Judaism. The object of the writer is to show them they would gain nothing by such a return and the key-word of the Epistle is "better"—a better Covenant, a better hope, etc. is provided by the Gospel. Against the danger they are warned in the 9th verse : "Be not carried about with divers and strange doctrines, for it is a good thing that the heart be established with grace, not with meats." Judaism, he had told them in Chapter ix. 10, "Stood only in meats and drinks, and divers washings, and carnal ordinances imposed on them until the time of reformation." His main object is to show that participation in these things is now (by comparison) worthless, for they "could not" (like the Gospel) "make him that did the service perfect, as pertaining to the conscience." Two arguments are advanced, each drawn from the Hebrew ritual, and therefore likely to have weight with Hebrew Christians. The first is the unprofitableness of meats, even when they were eaten. The second is the impossibility in a certain case of eating them at all. The Levitical law of meats was clear. From all sin offerings, the blood of which was sprinkled on the horns of the altar of burnt offering, certain portions were to be eaten by the priests alone. Other sacrifices of a less holy kind, were to be partaken of partly by the priests, and partly by the offerers. Both classes are condemned under the generic terms of meats—"Meats which have not profited them that have been occupied therein."

The second argument goes farther. It is no longer the unprofitableness, but the impossibility of eating which he advances—"We have an altar whereof they have no right (or power—Greek) to eat, for the bodies of those beasts, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned without the camp." The whole trend of the argument points to a Jewish altar well known to those who are addressed by the writer of the Epistle. In confirmation of this I think we must consider the fact that nowhere else in Scripture is the word "altar" used in any other than its plain

literal meaning. The only other place in this Epistle where it occurs (ch. vii. 13) it is employed in its literal sense. The Biblical usage is invariable. I think in this connection we have light cast on the allusion in the 14th verse: "Here we have no continuing city," which I take to allude to the earthly Jerusalem then awaiting her predicted doom. With this impending doom before him, the writer exhorts his brethren (then, or some of them, resident there?) in a double sense to go forth to Jesus without the camp for "here"—that is in Jerusalem that now is "we"—Jews, and Christian *quoad* Jews—"have no continuing city but we seek one to come." If the city referred to in verse 14, as I believe it certainly is, be a Jewish one, in like manner "we have an altar" means a Jewish one—the altar and the city in both cases being "figures of the true."

If then "we have an altar" refers to a Jewish one, what altar is in view? There were two, and only two, under the Levitical law—that of burnt offering, called also the brazen, and that of incense, called also the golden. The whole ritual before the writer's mind appears to be that of the Day of Atonement, the sacrifices peculiar to that Day, and the special ministry by which they were offered. It is reasonable to believe that the altar referred to was the one which was directed to be used on that occasion. In Leviticus xvi, where directions are given, it is described as "the altar that is before the Lord." This was the golden altar of incense which stood in the Holy Place, immediately in front of the second veil, where God dwelt between the Cherubim. This identification of the altar is confirmed by the words "whereof they have no right to eat which serve the Tabernacle," i.e. the priests, not the people generally. This statement would not be true concerning the altar of burnt offering. For of that altar the priests were not only permitted but they were commanded to eat. But in the case of the altar of burnt incense no such right, or power, of eating existed. The bodies of those beasts whose blood was sprinkled upon it on the Day of Atonement were burned without the camp, and therefore could not be eaten at all. It was emphatically true that of this altar "they which serve the Tabernacle" had neither the right nor the power to eat. We read (Acts vi. 7) "that a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith." Now, assuming that the Temple still stood when the Epistle was written, what force there would be in the present "We have." We know that in the early days of the Church its converts from Judaism observed the law of Moses—many of them so earnestly that, if possible, they would have subjected the converts from the Gentiles to that law. At any rate if that was the mental atmosphere in which the Hebrews here addressed thought, the argument of the writer was a very intelligible one and most forcible.

All this also falls in with the main current of the writer's argument. That is, that the heart should be established with grace and not with meats. To this the altar of incense, as used on the Day of Atonement, was specially apposite. For while it shows on the one

hand the inefficacy of meats by their being excluded altogether, it shows on the other the need and sufficiency of grace, as the only ground on which then the High Priest (or any other sinner) could draw near to God. But how does the idea of grace come to be associated with this altar? The position in which the altar was placed and its relation to the Ark of the Covenant explain this. For when the High Priest, on the Day of Atonement, entered into the Most Holy Place, and stood before the Mercy Seat, as the representative of the people, he not only had to pass directly by that altar, but his life would have been actually forfeited, as Nadab's and Abihu's were, had he not lighted the golden censer with fire from it, and burned incense before the Lord. The blood of sprinkling, too, with which it was hallowed, was another element in "grace" whereby he was permitted to approach God and make atonement for himself and the people.

Now, the Mercy Seat upon the Ark was a type of the throne of grace in heaven, and the Altar of Incense, ever burning, was the indispensable means of approach to the Mercy Seat. Thus we see how the idea of grace came to be associated with it, and what an apt symbol it was for the writer's purpose.

If this be so, it would appear that those who hold that the altar here alluded to is a Christian, and not a Jewish, one, not only miss the point of the argument altogether, but run directly counter to it. For if it be said "we Christians have an altar, of which the Jews have no right to eat" the inference is that we have a right to eat of it and so possess an advantage over them. Now, what is this but to say that as a matter of fact, meats do edify or establish the heart, the very thing the writer here negatives most positively? And this ignores the clear confusion of Jews in general with "those which serve the Tabernacle"—i.e. the priests.

In this connection it is to be noticed that the only altar represented as existing in heaven, is the golden altar of incense, the anti-type of that in the Tabernacle, or Temple, on earth (Rev. viii. 3-4). This is most significant. It is only Intercession which is capable of renewal. Sacrifice is finished and over once for all. And not only is the offering of Christ finished, but the oblation of that one offering is also one and unrenovable, as the Church of England plainly teaches in the Prayer of Consecration—"Who made there by his one oblation of Himself once offered, a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world."

To call the Holy Table an altar (except in some remote symbolical sense) and the Sacrament itself a sacrifice for sin and the elements not spiritually and symbolically, but actually, the Body and Blood of Christ, is to take not only a retrograde but a downgrade step in theology; to pervert the teaching of the Church; to overthrow the nature of a Sacrament; to deny the all-sufficiency of Christ's one oblation of Himself once offered; and to fall into the very error against which the writer of this Epistle warns his readers when he

says, "It is a good thing that the heart be established with grace, not with meats."

NOTE.—The writer gratefully acknowledges his obligations to many conversations with an old friend, long since gone to his rest—Rev. F. Dobbin, M.A., Chancellor of Cork Cathedral—and to a valuable pamphlet by him, unfortunately now out of print, *We Have an Altar: Type and Antitype* (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis & Co., Ltd.)

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MAKING THE BEST OF LIFE. By Mrs. Horace Porter. London: H. R. Allenson, Ltd. 2s. 6d. net.

Mrs. Porter has already established her reputation as the author of several volumes which have been written mainly to help those who have been caught in the nets of Christian Science, New Thought and kindred cults, and they have been found most useful. Dr. Handley Moule spoke most highly of her *Christian Science of Prayer*. In her latest work she deals with the very real problem, how to make the best of life, and she discusses life's harvesting, hindrances, conflicts, limitations, glory, progress, etc. It is impossible within the compass of a short notice to give any examples to show the lucidity, charm and spiritual insight with which she writes on these various topics. Suffice it to say that here is a choice volume to put into the hands of those who want to make the most and best of life. As there is a considerable crowd of such persons it should have an extensive circulation.

S. R. C.

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*Rescue Work*, by Edward C. Trenholme, S.S.J.E. (S.P.C.K., 2s. 6d.), is written for the Church Penitentiary Association by a member of its Council. In a Preface the Bishop of London, President of the Association, emphasizes the need of the work, its hopefulness and the great cost which it involves. The book contains an account of the methods and work of the Association, and may well be taken as a guide book in a very difficult branch of Christian activity written by one well qualified to give advice by long experience of its possibilities. While there may not be universal approval of all that is stated here, the book deserves careful consideration by those who are called upon to engage in this work.

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The *Study Bible*, edited by John Sterling, is an original series of commentaries published by Cassell & Co. (3s. 6d. net). An Appreciation of each book and an article on its Significance begin and close each volume. The commentary consists of quotations from writers of all ages on the most important passages. They provide seed-thoughts for preachers.