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Jesus at the Altar: Discovering a Friend among Strangers

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If you present your offering on the altar and there recall that your brother (or sister) has something against you, leave your offering there in front of the altar and go. First be reconciled to your (sister or) brother and then come present your offering. (Matt. 5:23-24)

Many present-day readers of the Gospels—and of the Scriptures generally—make the mistake of assuming that these ancient writings are addressed directly to us and that the Scriptures are directly applicable to our modern-day situations. In reality, each of the books contained in what we now call the Bible were written for people very different from ourselves, people who are separated from us in terms of time and worldview and, for most of us, in terms of place and language as well. We would seem quite strange to the original recipients of the Pauline epistles and quite foreign to the communities for whom the Gospels were written, just as they would seem alien and bizarre to us.

So long as we fail to appreciate the distance between ourselves and the original audiences for whom the the books of the Bible

were written, we are doomed to having a muddled and distorted understanding of what the Scriptures are all about. On the other hand, those readers who recognize that the Scriptures were not written for us are better equipped to carry over the intention of the Scriptures from the ancient contexts in which they were embedded into the contexts to which we belong. Recognizing and respecting the distance from, and differences between, the original contexts of Scripture and our contexts today is, paradoxically, the very thing that enables us to draw closer to the Word of God. Instead of naively skipping over the gap that separates their context from ours, wise readers of the Scriptures will plumb the depths of that difference, so that by understanding Jesus in his context, we can follow him in ours.



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The quotation from the Sermon on the Mount about presenting offerings at the altar with which this essay opened is one particularly acute example of the paradox we are discussing. It could not be clearer that in these verses Jesus is not addressing anyone living today. We live at a time when the sacrificial altar no longer exists, when the Temple in which the altar functioned no longer stands, when the Aaronic priesthood is no longer trained in the ancient rituals of sacrifice. Even if all of these things were miraculously to be reinstated, only a small minority of Jesus' followers today are the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, so most of us would still be unable to directly apply his instructions about offering sacrifices.[\[*\]](#) Overlooking the

factors that separate us from the original recipients of Jesus' teaching can only lead to confusion as to what Jesus meant by these instructions. It will certainly prevent us from intelligently pondering whether and how these instructions can inform our conduct today.



Lambs set aside for the Passover sacrifice on Mount Gerizim.

In his teaching on sacrificing at the altar Jesus confronts us as a stranger, or, rather, we discover ourselves to be foreigners to him. We are the outsiders listening in on a conversation Jesus intended for others. Jesus' instructions are not for present-day non-Jewish Christians; his teaching about how to approach the altar is addressed to a Jewish audience for whom offering animals as bloody sacrifices was a familiar expression of religious devotion. Far from condemning this ancient style of worship, Jesus assumes that it is a natural, familiar and legitimate act of faith for his audience.

Properly gauging Jesus' otherness with respect to ourselves and our own foreignness with respect to him opens up new possibilities for understanding Jesus' teachings in general, and for approaching his instructions regarding sacrifice in particular. It

is no longer necessary, for instance, to relate this teaching to the forms of worship with which we are accustomed, such as participation in the Lord's Supper. Instead, we can take seriously the Jewish elements of Jesus' teaching by asking ourselves, "Why did Jesus make a connection between sacrificial worship, which is directed to God, and reconciliation in human relationships?" Such questions lead us to examine how other ancient Jewish sources describe the function of the sacrificial altar.



A Samaritan man prepares a fire for roasting the Passover sacrifice on Mount Gerizim.

According to rabbinic sources, a primary function of the altar was to make peace between the people of Israel and their Father in heaven. The rabbinic sages used this conciliatory function of the altar to explain why God required the altar to be constructed from whole stones (אֲבָנִים שְׁלֵמוֹת [*ʾvānim sh^lēmōt*]; Deut. 27:6)—rough boulders unshaped by tools. The sages explained that the altar is to be made from *avanim shlemot* ("whole stones") because the offerings create *shalom* (שָׁלוֹם [*shālōm*, "peace"]) between God and Israel. As we have discussed elsewhere on the **Whole Stones** blog,[\[1\]](#) there is good evidence that this homiletical interpretation of the whole stones of the altar goes

back to the period before the destruction of the Temple. We can now take this observation one step further by suggesting that this [midrashic](#) interpretation of Deut. 27:6 stands behind Jesus' teaching in Matt. 5:23-24. The connection Jesus made between offering sacrifices and reconciliation in human relationships was based on a well-known tradition that the altar was for making peace.

In rabbinic sources the homily on the whole stones of the altar is applied to more than one situation. One version of the homily urges the disciples of the sages to hold themselves to the highest possible standards:

Behold, it says, *[With] whole stones* [אבנים שלמות; *ʿvānim shēlēmōf*] *you shall build the altar of the LORD your God* [Deut. 27:6], that is, stones that establish peace [שלום; *shālōm*]. And is it not a matter of [qal vahōmer](#) [i.e., Shouldn't we draw an inference by analogy from a small matter to a big one—JNT]? If the Omnipresent One said of the stones of the altar—which neither see nor hear nor speak—"Let them be perfect [שלימות; *shēlēmōf*] before me," simply because they establish peace between Israel and their Father in heaven, how much more in the case of the Sons of Torah [i.e., disciples of the rabbinic sages—JNT], who are peace in the world, that they should be perfect [שלימים; *shēlēmim*] before the Omnipresent One? (t. Bab. Kam. 7:7; cf. Semaḥot 8:16)

This version of the whole stones homily plays on the various nuances of the Hebrew root ש-ל-מ: "wholeness," "completeness," "peaceableness," and "perfection." If inanimate stones should be "perfect" merely because their purpose is to make peace

between God and Israel, how much more ought the pupils of the sages to be perfect, seeing that they are the ones who keep God truly happy with his chosen people?



A Samaritan man prays fervently ahead of the Passover sacrifice on Mount Gerizim.

In this parenetic adaptation of the whole stones homily, the construction of the altar and the conduct of the disciples of the sages are parallel images; the two do not intersect. There is an analogy between the function of the altar and the function of the sages and their followers, but the two never actually meet in time or space. This version of the homily does not draw a specific conclusion about how the rabbinic disciples are to conduct themselves when worshipping God in the Temple. In fact, it is altogether likely that this version of the whole stones homily was adapted for a time when a real altar constructed of whole stones no longer existed. Under those circumstances it was easier and more desirable to draw a timeless and universally applicable lesson from the altar of whole stones.

An earlier use of the whole stones homily reflects the social upheaval that characterized the period leading up to the destruction of the Temple, when Jewish militant extremists assassinated their fellow countrymen and women who advocated for peaceful solutions to Israel's subjugation by the Roman Empire. For these Jewish extremists the Temple became a nationalist symbol, but Yohanan ben Zakkai, an advocate for peace, claimed that the extremists made a mockery of everything the Temple stood for:[\[2\]](#)

Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai says, "Behold, it says, *[With] whole stones* [אבנים שלמות; *vānim shēlēmōt*] *you shall build [the altar]* [Deut. 27:6]. That is, stones that establish peace [שלום; *shālōm*]. And it is a matter of [gal vahōmer](#): if the Holy One, blessed be he, said, *Raise no iron against them* [Deut. 27:5] of the stones of the altar—which neither see nor hear nor speak—simply because they establish peace between Israel and their Father in heaven, how much more in the case of a human being who establishes peace between one person and another, or a man and his wife, between one city and another, or one people and another, between two families, or between two governments, that for such a person no retribution should come to him?" (Mechilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, *BaḤodesh* §11 [ed. Lauterbach, 2:352-353]; cf. Sifra, *Kedoshim* §10 [ed. Weiss, 92d])

In other words, if the peace-making stones of the altar are to remain whole (*shlemot*)—uncut by iron tools—how much more ought peace-making human beings to be left whole (*shlemim*)—unharmd by militant extremists with the weapons of war? In contrast to the first rabbinic application of the whole stones

homily, with its universal and timeless message, Yohanan ben Zakkai's use of the homily is very much tied to specific historical-political circumstances. Moreover, the imagery of the altar is not merely parallel to the image of human peacemakers, the two concepts intersect in Yohanan ben Zakkai's argument that the peacemakers, rather than the militants, correctly understand the Temple and its symbolism.



A fire for roasting the Passover lambs offered on Mount Gerizim.

Compared to the parenetic and polemical versions of the whole stones homily preserved in rabbinic literature, Jesus' use of the whole stones homily is most at home in the daily routine of the Temple as it must have existed in his own time. From a feature of the Temple's architecture (the altar) Jesus draws a moral lesson for worshippers in the Temple: like the whole stones of the altar that make peace between God and Israel, Jewish worshippers ought to make peace between their sisters and brothers.

Creating and maintaining whole, healthy relationships with one's fellow human beings, has a direct bearing on the wholeness and health of one's relationship with God.

Jesus' use of the whole stones homily in Matt. 5:23-24 is one expression of what some scholars of the Second Temple period

have referred to as a “new sensitivity” in Judaism.^[3] This new sensitivity reflects the insight that a person’s spiritual life operates on two inter-dependent axes: a vertical axis between oneself and God, and a horizontal axis between oneself and one’s fellow human beings. According to the “new sensitivity” in Judaism, a person’s standing with God is affected by that person’s human relationships. A person cannot have toxic relationships with his or her neighbors without negative consequences for that person’s relationship with God. And, likewise, a person’s close relationship with God will inevitably be reflected in that person’s merciful and just treatment of his or her fellow human beings. Loving God and loving one’s neighbor are inextricably tied.

This “new sensitivity” had begun to awaken within Judaism long before the time of Jesus. Already in the Hellenistic period the Jewish sage Ben Sira (ca. 180 B.C.E.) expressed the two axes of spiritual growth in terms similar to those we find in the teachings of Jesus:

Forgive your neighbor the wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray. Does a man harbor anger against another, and yet seek for healing from the Lord? Does he have no mercy toward a man like himself, and yet pray for his own sins? If he himself, being flesh, maintains wrath, who will make expiation for his sins? (Sir. 28:2-5; RSV)

In the wake of the persecutions under Antiochus Epiphanes,^[4] the “new sensitivity” took on greater urgency and relevance as faithful Jews gained a new appreciation for the balance that must be struck between the ritual demands of the Torah and the need

to preserve human life. For unless the Jewish people survives there is no one to observe the commandments. On the other hand, the Jewish people ceases to exist when the Torah is forgotten. These insights led to a less rigid, more humane approach to the commandments. It is an approach that Jesus fully embraced, and which we see reflected in his teaching on bringing sacrifices to the altar. In his version of the whole stones homily, Jesus correlates one's relationship to God with one's relationship to fellow human beings. According to Jesus, sacrificial worship was necessary and good, but only inasmuch as it was in harmony with one's attitude toward one's human brothers and sisters. A person cannot be at peace with God while at enmity with his sister or her brother.



A Samaritan man feeds the fire for roasting the Passover lambs.

Having charted the distance between Jesus and ourselves, and having explored the meaning of Jesus' teaching within his particular context, we are better equipped to bring Jesus' teaching to bear on our own present-day contexts. We do not offer animal sacrifices on the altar of whole stones, but our relationships to God continue to be affected by our relationships

with our fellow human beings. Inasmuch as we are estranged from any of our brother sons of Adam or our sister daughters of Eve we will be alienated from God. We cannot build walls and maintain barriers between ourselves and other human beings made in God's image without simultaneously digging a chasm between ourselves and our Creator. Praising God, singing choruses, clapping our hands and dancing before him, or however else we might go about worshipping God, is not what makes us close to him. Bridging the gap between ourselves and those who are different from us—especially those we instinctually fear or resent or despise—is what truly makes us children of our heavenly Father. Those who learn to discern the divine image in the people most unlike themselves are the ones who are granted the clearest vision of the invisible God.

There is something else we gain from respecting the distance between ourselves and the original recipients of the Scriptures: humility. We humans have a tendency toward self-centeredness, to assume that we are the norm and that others are the aberration. By honoring the difference between ourselves and the original audiences for whom the Scriptures were written, we discover that it is we who are the outsiders. We are the foreigners, the newcomers. But though we find ourselves on the outside looking in, there is a stranger on the inside who is ready to receive us: Jesus, our own dear savior and friend. The humbling experience of discovering ourselves to be the foreigners and Jesus the welcoming stranger might just help us to be compassionate toward the people we regard as outsiders and newcomers. Perhaps the welcome we continually receive

from Jesus will make it easier for us to reach out to those seeking to enter the communities to which we belong.



Click [here](#) to return to the [Whole Stones](#) blog.

Notes

[*] The photos included in this essay were taken in 2007 on Mount Gerizim at the Samaritan's Passover. The images are a reminder and recognition that some people continue to worship the God of Israel with animal sacrifices. I am deeply grateful to the Samaritan community, which welcomed foreigners and outsiders like me to witness their Passover celebration.

[1] See "[Whole Stones That Make Peace](#)."

[2] For a parallel case of anti-militant polemics in the writings of the apostle Paul, see Peter J. Tomson, "Romans 9-11 and Political Events in Rome and Judaea with Some Thoughts on Historical Criticism and Theological Exegesis," *Zeitschrift für Dialektische Theologie* 33.1 (2017): 48-73.

[3] See David Flusser, "A New Sensitivity in Judaism and the Christian Message," in his *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1988), 469-493.

[4] On the persecution of Jews under Antiochus IV Epiphanes, see "[Tyrants Disappearing—A Hanukkah Meditation](#)."