

# The Temple of God

## The meaning of temples in Nepal

In chapter three I demonstrated how the cities of the Kathmandu Valley were constructed in a particular way. There was a sharp distinction between the inside and outside of the settlement. On a smaller scale, following the classical Hindu building codes, the approach to the design of temples has been very similar. In constructing a temple the builders are, in a sense, trying to recreate the home of the deity. There is a desire that the deity would come and live among the community. But it is also recognised that the deity is not like us. He is different and that must be demonstrated in the way the temple is constructed. Temples in Nepal have often been built upon a series of plinths and usually surmounted by a number of roofs. From these plinths and roofs the temple gains height and therefore a sense of grandeur and transcendence. The temple is supposed, then, to be the locus for connection to another world—the world where the deity really dwells removed from this world's trouble.

Furthermore, the different nature of the deity is also demonstrated in the rules of access to his temple. Only certain groups are allowed in. At certain temples only those that belong to the community may enter. Everyone else, the outsider [*mlecca*] is excluded. Other temples exclude everyone except those of a certain lineage [*khalah*]. Temples, therefore, just as city walls, were designed to keep outsiders where they belong.

## The burning bush

In the past God revealed himself to people from time to time to instruct them or give them a message to tell. Moses was an Israelite who had been born and brought up in Egypt but had had to flee that land. He was tending his father-in-law's sheep in the desert when he saw a strange sight.

Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up."

When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!"

And Moses said, "Here I am."

"Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." Then he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God. (Exodus 3:1-6)

God spoke to Moses. But Moses had to learn something about God before he could have a relationship with him. God is not like us. We are sinners but God is holy. Therefore he must remain separate from us. Moses could approach God only if he was in a proper state. So he had to remove his sandals.

## **A tent in the desert**

When the people of Israel left Egypt and entered the Sinai desert Moses met the Lord on the mountain and the Lord gave Moses his Law. As part of that Law the Lord gave instructions to build a sacred tent in which he would meet with his people. It was to be a portable temple that could be dismantled when the Israelites left their campsite and set up again when they reached their next one. The sacred tent was to be constructed precisely according to the pattern the Lord gave them. The walls of the tent separated God from the people. Furthermore, the Most Holy Place was separated from the Holy Place by a heavy curtain. No one but the High Priest was allowed to go behind that curtain and he could only go behind the curtain once a year. Moreover, on that important festival, the High Priest had to be in a high state of purity and could only enter with the blood of a sacrifice. Also, none of the priests could enter even the Holy Place without first offering a sacrifice. So the altar on which sacrifice was to be offered was placed in front of the tent entrance. God wanted the Israelites to understand that no one can approach him except by sacrifice.

## **Solomon builds a temple**

After the Israelites were settled in the Promised Land King David's son Solomon built a permanent temple for the Lord in Jerusalem. The design of the temple was the same as that of the sacred tent but larger and grander. God was pleased that Solomon was building a temple for him.

The word of the LORD came to Solomon: "As for this temple you are building, if you follow my decrees, carry out my regulations and keep all my commands and obey them, I will fulfil through you the promise I gave to David your father. And I will live among the Israelites and will not abandon my people Israel." (1 Kings 6:2-6, 10-13)

When the temple was complete the Lord demonstrated his approval by showing his glory to the people. For hundreds of years the temple was the centre of the sacrificial rite. Day after day the priests offered animals as worship to the Lord. But the people were not pure in heart and quickly deserted the Lord who had brought them out of Egypt. So, as we have seen, the Lord brought enemies to attack Jerusalem. They destroyed the city and the temple and carried a large number of the inhabitants away to exile in Babylon.

## **Ezekiel's temple**

It was a dreadful thing to be dragged away from the land where God had made his dwelling place. One of the priests who were taken into exile was Ezekiel. While in Babylon the Lord gave Ezekiel a vision of Israel's future. The people of Israel would be restored to their own land. The Lord also gave Ezekiel a vision of another temple. This temple, however, was of such dimensions that it was clearly never intended to be a physical temple like the old temple had been. It was an ideal temple. It was meant to teach Ezekiel and the people of Israel what God's dwelling place should really be like. God's dwelling place among his people should be perfect. It should be glorious and wonderful. Human hands could never build God's perfect dwelling place.

## **The birth of Jesus Christ**

At the middle of history, God entered our world to redeem a people to him.

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus<sup>1</sup>, because he will save his people from their sins.”

All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”<sup>2</sup>—which means, “God with us.” (Matthew 1:18-23)

God is with us! God has made his dwelling with his people by coming to earth in the form of his Son Jesus. His dwelling is no longer restricted to a building. God is now in flesh for all to see. Since the Holy Spirit conceived Jesus he did not share the corrupt nature of other humans like you and I. He was perfect.

## **The veil of temple**

The enemies of the Lord Jesus were determined to kill him. Accusing him of breaking their law they had him tried and executed him by nailing him on a cross of wood. The eyewitness Matthew tells the story vividly:

When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots. And sitting down, they kept watch over him there. Above his head they placed the written charge against him: THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS. Two robbers were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, “You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!”

In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. “He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself! He’s the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants

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<sup>1</sup> Jesus is the Greek form of Joshua, which means ‘the LORD saves’.

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 7:14.

him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.' " In the same way the robbers who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land. About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"—which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split. (Matthew 27:35-46, 50-51)

At the exact moment of Jesus' death the curtain that had hung in the temple and screened the Most Holy Place from the eyes of even the priests was torn in two from top to bottom. What a powerful symbol: just as Jesus' body was torn from him in death, the curtain was torn. Jesus' death fulfils the purpose of the law that kept people from meeting God. The law told the people that God is holy. They could not approach God as they were. But now Jesus' death had opened up a way by which they could meet God without being killed. The temple building in Jerusalem was no longer needed. Anyone could now come directly to God through the veil that was torn.

## **The living temple**

Right at the end of the Bible John recounts his vision of the end of time when the Lord Jesus Christ returns to the earth to consummate his rule as the great king. This is what he saw in his vision:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." (Revelation 21:1-4)

The most amazing fact about this astounding vision, however, was that there was no longer any temple building:

I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. (Revelation 21:22)

The Lord Jesus Christ is the temple of God—the place where God makes his dwelling. “For God was pleased to have all his fulness dwell in him...” (Colossians 1:19). Now that we have the real temple we no longer need the shadows. We now have an invitation to come to God by the blood of Jesus:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. (Hebrews 10:19-22)