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# Surrey Tabernacle Pulpit.

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THE ROD OF AARON.

A SERMON

PREACHED ON SUNDAY MORNING, SEPTEMBER 5, 1869.

By MR. JAMES WELLS,

AT THE NEW SURREY TABERNACLE, WANSEY STREET.

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“ And the Lord said unto Moses, Bring Aaron's rod again before the testimony, to be kept for a token against the rebels ; and thou shalt quite take away their murmurings from me, that they die not.”—Numbers xvii. 10.

PERHAPS there is no scripture that throws more light upon the personal internal causes of the rebellions of the Israelites than that which saith, “ This people do always err in their hearts ; they have not known my ways ; ” and as we learn from other scriptures, they had no will to learn the Lord's ways. It seems strange to us that they should be brought out of Egypt as they were, and sustained as they were, and yet not understand their position, but be perpetually rebelling against God, and attributing all their trouble to Moses, blaming him for bringing them out of Egypt, and not dealing with them as they had anticipated, instead of looking at the wilderness as being that path which the Lord had appointed,—in a word, they had no heart, no will, no desire to listen to God's truth. Hence it was, the same spirit in the Saviour's day, when he saith, “ Ye will not come unto me, that ye might have life.” You are willing, of course,—every one is,—to escape hell, and to go to heaven ; there is no person that is not willing in that respect ; but then, to be made willing in the Lord's own way, so as to listen to his truth, and thereby to learn what is godliness and what is not ; thereby to learn what is pleasing to God and what is not ; and thereby to learn the reasons of all the chastisements and tribulations of which we are, while passing through this world, the subjects,—this is a thing that requires divine teaching to enable us to understand. There is an unfathomable deep in the sovereignty of God in suffering the enemy so to prevail ; and our comfort is amidst it all that the counsel of the Lord shall stand, and he will do all his pleasure.

Now there are in our text four parts which I will try and say, in all simplicity, a few things upon. Here is, first, the *testimony*. Here is, secondly, a *token for and against* ; for while this rod was to be a token against the rebels, it implies it was to be a token on behalf of those who were not rebels. Thirdly, *contentment* ;—“ thou shalt quite take away their murmurings from me.” Fourthly, *the reason*,—“ that they die not.”

First, *The testimony*. Though these tokens are themselves little things,  
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they represent infinite realities, they represent the ponderous and eternal realities which concern more or less every man. This rod being thus laid up in the ark is said to be before the testimony, I think for three reasons. First, because the tables of the law, which were in the ark, are again and again called the testimony; they are very frequently called the testimony, because God's law is a testimony. and, as we sometimes say, that law appears in every one of the threatenings of the Bible; there is not a threatening of the Bible anywhere that is not included in the idea of law, or God's testimony against all unrighteousness and ungodliness of men. "By the law is the knowledge of sin." Let us dwell here for a moment, for the sake of getting a solemn view of this matter. If in the first place, we take the fall of man, what a tremendous circumstance is that,—involved in sin, dead in tresspasses and in sins, and brought under almighty and eternal wrath, having souls that can never, never die, but must for ever live, in rapture or in woe. Then if we come on to the personal conduct even of the best among men, what have we all done? We have indeed fulfilled all of us, whether we know it or not, the words of Mr. Hart, when he says, "Man, born bad, grows worse and worse." We have added innumerable sins to our original sin; we have added innumerable penalties to the penalties in which we were involved by the fall of man; and now we await that solemn moment when we must close our eyes to all that is seen; when we must appear at the bar of the great Creator; and oh, how tremendous is his testimony, how tremendous is his judgment. It may well be said of fallen angels that are reserved in darkness, "They believe and tremble." Ah, when God is pleased to open up to a sinner his terrible majesty, his terrible judgments, the certainty of those judgments, oh, how it cuts the sinner up and cuts him down. There is not then any worldly or natural advantage that can make that man otherwise than miserable. Ah, he says, this sin is a miserable thing, these judgments are dreadful penalties, death is a terrible thing. And as to language and similes, all language falls infinitely short, and all the similes we could use fall infinitely short, to point out that eternity of woe to which we stand exposed. And then mark another thing in relation to this matter. If we were not depraved, blinded, atheistical and infidel in our nature as we are, we should tremble more than we do, even we that are Christians, at the solemn judgments of the great God. And the Lord will bring all his people more or less to see and understand this. Then, when the sinner is broken down, comes in the oil and the wine. "To this man will I look, that is poor, of a contrite spirit, and that trembleth at my word." Now this rod of Aaron is a symbol of power; the symbol of the power of two things,—the power of the priesthood of Christ, and the power of the gospel. Allusions are made sometimes in the scriptures to this rod, which perhaps I may presently notice. Now this rod was set over against this testimony of the law. Oh how sweet the thought; I wish I could find language to set forth the blessedness of this second thought,—namely, that the obedient life and atoning death of Jesus Christ is set over against the law. It has met the law; it was intended to meet the law. "He shall magnify the law, and make it honourable;" and the Lord is well pleased for his righteousness' sake. I felt much impressed while you were just now singing that "his death is our eternal gain." How true that is. Why, it was the atoning death of an incarnate God; as I feel much pleasure in from time to time saying it was an atoning death that in its extent was deeper than hell, high as heaven, broader than the sea, and longer than the earth; it was a death that compassed all our sins, swallowed up the whole; they are gone; not one of these Egyptians shall be seen again for ever; taking away even the very sting of death. I am sure, friends, those of you that are the most acquainted with the achievement of Jesus Christ in his atoning death, you know but very little of either what he

suffered, or what he achieved, in comparison of what he did suffer and what he did achieve. Ah, those that know the law, and know where they stand when tested by that law, know how they stand by that law before God. Oh how will such embrace with eagerness this Rock of Ages for shelter; how will such listen with intensity to the tidings that show up the substitution of Christ as having thus met our sins, met the law, met justice, and settled everything. I apprehend this to be one of the reasons why the rod was set over against the testimony, to show that Christ's priesthood is set over against the law. Don't attempt to set anything else over against God's law to meet that law; Jesus, and Jesus only could do this mighty work; so true are the words that "none but Jesus," consequently, "can do helpless sinners good." That then I think is one part of the meaning. And granting that I am right, is it not a very solemn and at the same time a very pleasing meaning? These matters are not fables or fancies; we are dying creatures, and what we want is for the Holy Spirit to give us such an experimental acquaintance with the substitution of Christ, as thereby to know that God is on our side; and if God be for us, then everything is for us; and if God be not for us, then everything is against us. If we have prosperity apart from his grace, and without his being on our side, the intention of that prosperity is our destruction; and if we have adversity without the Lord being on our side, the intention is our deserved destruction; the intention of death is our destruction. But if believers in Jesus, and receivers of him as the substitute, then the Lord being on our side, if he give prosperity, it is for our good; if he give adversity, it is for our good; if he suffer enemies to come against us, it is for our good; and if he bless us with friends, it is for our good; and if he call us to die, it is for our good;—"to die is gain;"—and when he shall call us out of the grave at the last day, it will be for our good; and when he shall, at the last of all, say, "Come, ye blessed, inherit the kingdom," it will be for our good. There is, therefore, a blessed truth in the words, "All things work for good to them that love God, and that are the called according to his purpose." I know not, friends, how it may be with you, but religion appears to me to increase wonderfully in value as we go on; that other things decrease in value, and that the truth of God, the Christ of God, and the things of God, increase in value, not in themselves, but in their relation to us. The apostle might well call it precious faith; he might well call the promises precious promises; he might well say the Saviour is precious unto them that believe; and the Psalmist might well say, "The redemption of their soul is precious, and it ceaseth for ever," for aught the creature could do. But this rod represents the gospel as well; that I will for the present pass by.

Secondly, the ark itself was called the testimony, and this rod, that represented the priesthood of Christ, and the gospel of Christ that was to include this priesthood,—this rod was set over against the ark of the covenant. Here is another sweet thought. What is it? Why, to teach us this delightful truth, that the new covenant is a testimony,—God's testimony declared throughout the Scriptures. "As for me, this is my covenant," saith the Lord, "My spirit that is upon thee." I can never, when in my right mind, read these words without looking to God. O God, give me more of that spirit that was upon Christ; ah, the more we have of that Holy Spirit, the more power we have with God, the more access we have to him, and enjoyment of him. "This is my covenant with them," saith the Lord, "My spirit that is upon thee, and my words which I have put in thy mouth"—the Father speaking to the Saviour—"shall not depart out of thy mouth;" and the people shall be taught to value the words and keep them, that is, the truths of the gospel. "Nor out of the mouth of thy seed, nor out of the mouth of thy seed's seed," saith the Lord, "from henceforth for ever." Now the rod, then, being set

over against the testimony, against the ark, is to teach us that the promises of the everlasting covenant are to be carried out by the priesthood of Christ. Did he not carry them out in his humiliation? Dost not the apostle say that Christ came to confirm the promises made unto the fathers? Let me here just for a moment distinguish between the two covenants. The Jews were under a conditional covenant, and they had to carry out that which was written therein, in order to obtain the temporal advantages of that covenant; but they failed, and if the Lord had placed the new covenant upon creature grounds, so that the new covenant was to be carried out by the creature, it never would have been carried out, and not a soul could be saved. But the dear Redeemer carried out this covenant, and what does he himself say of it? He saith, "It is my meat," for what is the covenant but the testamentary will of God? "It is my meat to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work." And when he came to the instituting of that ordinance we have to attend to this afternoon, he said, "This is my blood in the new testament." Also again, to refer to our first hymn—I felt much impressed while thinking of that line—"Worthy the Lamb that once was slain." Ah, what must be his love to stand by us to be slain? What must be his love to stand by us amidst all the persecutions and mockeries, and amidst all the adverse powers, the priestly, the civil, and the military powers, and mob powers, all against him; our sins upon him, the flaming sword of justice awaiting him; yet so determined and so decided was he to carry out this everlasting covenant that Isaiah, bringing forward this position, makes use of this wonderful declaration, "He shall not fail nor be discouraged." And by his having carried out this covenant in his humiliation, the people of God are declared to be complete; they are declared to be all fair and without spot. This then, I think, is one thing meant—the rod thus set over against the testimony of the ark, the rod representing the power of Christ's priesthood, to show that the new covenant is to be carried out by the priesthood of Christ. But the rod not only implies the power of the priesthood of Christ, but the power of the gospel, which, after all, is the same thing in another form. This power of the gospel made the apostle say, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth." I just now observed that there were references in the holy Scriptures to this rod. This rod is sometimes called—very singular, but it is so—a rod of iron; in another place it is simply called a rod. In the 2nd Psalm this rod of power is called a rod of iron. "Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession. Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel." Well, say you, this is not the gospel. Yes it is, friends. When the gospel met Saul of Tarsus, it met him with such power that it dashed him to pieces as a potter's vessel. In what way? Why, dashed him to pieces in all his false confidences, in all his self-righteousnesses, and in all his enmity and malice against God. Like a potter's vessel—a poor, worthless sort of thing that no one would care to pick up; and so the sinner is made sensible, as saith one of old, "I am like a broken vessel." The iron rod of Christ's victorious power has brought the sinner down; he wonders what it means, he trembles; but this is nothing else but the carrying out of this everlasting covenant by the rod of his power. You have then this rod referred to again very beautifully, always in connection more or less with his priesthood, in the 110th Psalm: "The Lord shall send the rod of thy strength out of Zion; rule thou in the midst of thine enemies. Thy people shall be willing." Take the iron rod of the 2nd Psalm, then take the rod of the 110th Psalm, and put the two together; they throw a light one upon the other. When a sinner is brought down by the mighty power of the gospel, then he is willing to listen to the gospel; he is willing to receive the gospel; he is willing to

be instructed by the gospel; he is willing to be saved by the gospel. "Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power, in the beauties of holiness." Ah, saith the poor sinner, the beauties of holiness. Why, I possess nothing but the blackness of sin; where can I get holiness that can beautify me? Am I to be beautified with holiness? How can I be beautified with holiness? And we soon get the answer; the blood of Jesus Christ, God's dear Son, cleanseth us from all sin. There, then, is the beauty of holiness. Again, "I will beautify the meek with salvation;" and again, "I will give beauty for ashes; the oil of joy for mourning." So that the next clause explains the former; the ashes there represent the mourning, and the beauty there means the joy. And while he will give beauty for ashes, and joy for mourning, these are the beauties of holiness. And, ah, what a change it works. How shall I describe it? Here is a load on your conscience, and a word of mercy from and by the Lord Jesus Christ takes that load away; here are fetters, the soul is in bondage, and the power of the gospel takes that bondage away. "Loose him and let him go." Here, then, is the priesthood of Christ, not only meeting the law; here is the gospel in its power, not only informing us how the law is met, but here is the priesthood of Christ carrying out the everlasting covenant by his priesthood and by the gospel. What more shall I say? Many things more might be said; but I will now notice, thirdly, that while the law is called a testimony, and the rod placed where it was to denote that Christ should meet that law; and while the ark of the covenant is called a testimony, and the rod placed where it was to show that by the priesthood of Christ and by the gospel of God, including therein of course the Spirit of God, that covenant should be carried out; in the third place, the tabernacle in which the Lord dwelt is called a testimony,—the tabernacle of testimony. Now does not this tabernacle represent the church of God, and will not the church of God to all eternity be a standing testimony of God's electing grace? will not the church to all eternity be a standing testimony of the stability of God's covenant? will not the church to all eternity be a standing testimony of the efficacy of Emmanuel's blood, of the glory of his righteousness, of the truth of the gospel, and of the mercy of God? Doth not the Lord view the people in this very light when he saith, "Ye are my witnesses?" We shall be a standing testimony to all eternity of the power of the priesthood of Christ, and of the power and truth of the gospel, together with all those blessings that make up our everlasting welfare; and gladly will all the people of God bear testimony, making that the great centre, "Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and hath made us priests and kings to God, and we shall reign for ever and ever." Well might the apostle say of the testimony of Christ in relation to the Corinthians: "The testimony of Christ was confirmed in you." The testimony is, he came to save sinners; he hath saved you, and that confirms his testimony; so that they themselves shall be witnesses, they themselves shall be a testimony. He that believeth thus hath the witness in himself; yea, he himself is a testimony. Hence when the Lord would speak of his people individually, what does he say? "I will make him," that receives the victory Christ has wrought, and thereby overcomes,— "I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out;" and then the Saviour goes on to describe the threefold inscription which that monument of mercy shall bear. Thus then see how much is conveyed by this simple circumstance of the rod of Aaron that budded, and brought forth buds, that bloomed blossoms and brought forth almonds, to show which was the true priesthood, to instruct the earnest inquirer, and to confound those who would set aside God's great institution, and put something of a creature kind in the place thereof;—see how much gospel lies in these things. I could not but think this morning in looking at it what a wonderful mine

the Bible is. You may dig, and dig, and dig, go on and on; and if we were to live a thousand years, I believe at the end of a thousand years, though we went on hearing and preaching the gospel all the time, there would be the same freshness, even in our present state of comparative nonage, that there is now. There is nothing wears like the gospel; there is nothing wears like true religion; there is nothing will stand fire, or stand water, or stand life or death, or shine in judgment, like true religion; the Lord give us an increase thereof.

But, secondly, *This rod was to be a token for and against.* It was to be a token against the rebels; that implies that it should be a token for those that were not rebels. I will not here stop to note their peculiar rebellions, or the terrible judgments that followed thereupon; but will bring some scriptures to show the spiritual meaning of this. The doctrine that you have here is just the same as where the apostle saith, "We are unto the one a savour of life unto life; unto the other a savour of death unto death." Now the gospel is a token, a witness, against the rebellious. The Saviour saith, "This gospel shall be preached for a witness to all nations." Now their rebellions were against the essentials, especially against the priesthood; and we see how determined the great God was on behalf of his people; how determined he was on their behalf to maintain the priesthood, and to maintain the truth. Rather than his children should be led astray by the others, the earth shall open and swallow them up; and they shrieked, and screamed, and cried, and groaned as the earth rent, and they began to sink, and the people fled from the cry of them. Ah, awful as this is, I will not suffer the enemy so to prevail as to delude my children; I will show my infinite disapprobation of anything that would set that aside that is essential to the welfare of my children. "I will give people for thee, and men for thy life." We have not half faith in the blessed God; his interpositions are on behalf of his people; he maintains the truth on behalf of his people. And then comes the false priests with their censors,—two hundred and fifty,—We shall be as much accepted as Aaron. They rush into God's presence. But rather than his children should be deluded, rather than his children should be misled, rather than they should miss the only way of access to God, miss the only way in which God dealt with them, and they with God, fire shall come out from the Lord and consume the men there and then. The next day the people rise up again against Moses, determined to prevail. Well, the Lord still held on;—therefore, rather than my children shall be deluded, rather than my people shall be misled, I will destroy the whole of your enemies. And so the plague began, and slew thousands; and Aaron hastened, and took incense, ran between the living and the dead, entreated God to stay his judgments, and the plague was stayed. Ah, then, the rebels were those that rebelled against God's truth, laboured to set that aside, and the gospel is a witness against them. Think you, friends, that the martyr's blood doth not continue to bear testimony against their adversaries? Think you that the souls under the altar, that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held, think you that they have ceased to cry? Ah, think you that the groans, and sighs, and sufferings of the martyrs are forgotten by the great God, who hath said concerning his own, "He that toucheth you toucheth the apple of his eye," And above all, think you that the Saviour's blood ceases to bear testimony against his crucifiers? Oh, how awfully was that prayer fulfilled when they said, "His blood be upon us." Let us ask, then, are we a part of those that are treading under foot the Son of God, and counting the blood of the covenant a common thing? Are we among those that would do despite unto the Spirit of his grace, lift up our voice against free grace truth, and put something else in the place thereof? Now though you will not be lost for not savingly receiving Christ, yet you by opposing his truth augment your condemnation; you shall re-

ceive the greater damnation; as the apostle saith concerning the Jews, "the wrath of God is come upon them even to the uttermost." The rebels then are those that are thus enemies. Now I may, for aught I know, be speaking to some this morning who are still rebels against God, and you are by some mysterious feeling brought here this morning, not because you like to be here, but some feeling has brought you; and hitherto you have been a rebel. Well then, I shall just say this to you;—I will just give you a scripture, if you have any feeling for it, and would like to receive it and understand it. You will find it in the 68th Psalm, and the words read thus:—"Thou hast ascended on high, thou hast led captivity captive;" that is, Jesus Christ hath led that rebellion captive which hitherto has led you captive; and on the ground of having done so, he hath ascended on high; "thou hast received gifts for men; yea, for the rebellious also, that the Lord God might dwell among them." Now, poor rebellious creature, if thou shouldst be led to see that, then you will say, If I have been a rebel hitherto, and am a rebel now, it doesn't follow that I may continue to be an enemy, that I may continue to be a rebel. This scripture saith that he received gifts for the rebellious, and who can be more rebellious than Saul of Tarsus was? So the poor thief was rebellious up to the last; but Jesus received gifts. And if you ask what these gifts were, the New Testament will answer,—that "he is exalted a prince and a Saviour to give repentance unto Israel." Ah, say you, but this is only unto Israel. Well, as soon as you are brought to see that you are a sinner, and believe in him, that instant you are reckoned an Israelite, that instant you are reckoned the seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and thus become an Israelite. "He is exalted a Prince and a Saviour, to give repentance unto Israel, and remission of sins." And the Apostle Paul,—I can hardly venture to enter into his feelings, for my experiences are very contracted and very shallow in comparison of his, but I have no doubt he uttered the words with great depth of feeling, and especially mingling with that depth of feeling his Jewish feeling; for the apostle Paul was a Jew, and he had a very strong Jewish feeling; and if there were any difference,—I am not going to say there was, but if there was any difference in earnestness in the apostle's preaching the gospel, perhaps it would be in preaching to the Jews. Oh, how earnestly he spoke of, and could wish that he himself were accursed from Christ for his brethren, his kinsmen according to the flesh. Therefore I have no doubt upon this very point of bringing the rebels down to the Saviour's feet, the apostle Paul showed great depth and earnestness of feeling when he said, "Men and brethren,"—there is kindly feeling, you see; men,—why, you are men; don't treat yourselves as though you were beasts, and when you died there were no more of you; you are men; you have a judgment and a God to meet; don't look at yourselves as some of the Sadducees would have you; because the Sadducees believed not in angel nor spirit, nor resurrection hereafter. But the apostle said,—Not so, you are men; the spirit of the beast when he dieth goeth downward to the earth with him, and there is an end of it; but the spirit of man goes to God, and there is not an end of him.

" Life's in earnest,  
And the grave is not the goal;  
Dust thou art, to dust return,  
Was never spoken to the soul "

"Men and brethren,"—I have a kindly feeling for you,—"be it known unto you that through this man is preached unto you;"—not offered to you, but proclaimed to you, leaving the matter to the Lord to apply the word as in his sovereign pleasure he thought proper,—"is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins;" and as he is God as well as man, inasmuch as the Creator is greater than the creature, so the Saviour is much greater than you are—as the Creator is greater than the sinner; and, therefore,

through such a wonderful person as this we can preach unto you the forgiveness of sins. "And by him," then came the offensive part; the apostle left that to the last in that part of his address; because he would preach the gospel prudently; he would not try to be offensive, and to give rise to any unnecessary opposition in the mind; but after reminding them that through this man was preached unto them the forgiveness of sins, then he brought in what he knew they would not like; "and by him all that believe are justified from all things from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses." Now he knew that would rather enrage them;—Why, here is this Paul speaking against Moses again; he is setting this Jesus of Nazareth above Moses, and giving us to understand that simple faith in him will do more for us than the law of Moses could do. They were so bigotted for the law of Moses; therefore the apostle saith, "They have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. For they, being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God."

Now as this rod represents the priesthood of Christ, and the gospel, and is a token and witness against all that live and die enemies, yet it is at the same time a token and a witness on behalf of those that are the friends of the gospel. When the Lord made a positive promise to Abraham in relation to carrying out the mercies of the new and everlasting covenant, Abraham believed, and he became the friend of God. That is the way the gospel recognises people as friends, when they submit to the gospel. The language of the gospel of free grace is, "Blessed is he who-soever is not offended in me." Thus then the rod carries out the threefold testimony,—meeting the law, carrying out the covenant, coming into the Church, and constituting the Church a living and eternal testimony of a covenant God; hereby his name is glorified for ever; and that the priesthood of Christ stands as a witness against its enemies, and is a witness for its friends. If that atonement speak for you, how puny is every voice raised against you. If the voice of atoning blood be speaking for you, how puny and how futile will any attempt ever be to lay anything before God to your charge; Christ's righteousness speaking for you. I like the words you sometimes sing,—

"For me he pleads the atoning blood,  
For me the righteousness of God."

Ah, then, can you this morning bear testimony that if you have any hope, it is founded upon the only foundation that God has laid in Zion; and that you would not knowingly set aside anything pertaining to the glory of Christ's priesthood, no, not for a thousand worlds? But I must hasten to the other two points, and close.

Thirdly, *Contentment*;—"Thou shalt quite take away their murmurings from me." Here is the contentment. I must merely dwell upon the fact here just for a minute. Why, some of you have got as far as that. You know what is written,—"They that erred in spirit shall come to understanding, and they that murmured shall learn doctrine." After I was concerned for eternal things I murmured at election; but I do not murmur at it now, because I see I could not be saved without it. I murmured at particular redemption, Christ laying down his life for the sheep; I do not murmur at it now, because I see I could not be saved without it; I murmured at the certainty of regeneration, or effectual calling; I do not murmur at it now, because I see I could not be saved without it; I murmured at a covenant ordered, in all things and sure, and said, Who is to understand that? I do not murmur at it now. I trust hundreds of you can say with the people of God of old, that is, taking the words spiritually, and taking them to mean the whole range of the blessings we have in Christ,—"We shall be satisfied with the goodness of thy house, even of thine holy temple."