

6. *Zerubbabel is tempted three times, with gold, with freedom, and with the holy treasures of the Temple of Solomon. Discuss the symbolic meanings of these temptations.*

What Can We Learn From Temptation?

So that there is no confusion on the part of the reader, who has presumably either participated in or read the drama of the Fifteenth Degree, Br. Albert Pike begins his lecture in *Morals and Dogma* with a very clear statement as to its purpose: “The leading lesson of this Degree is Fidelity to obligation, and Constancy and Perseverance under difficulties and discouragement” (*M&D*, 237). Indeed, it is relatively easy to fulfill our obligations when the path before us is clear. But when faced with “difficulties and discouragement,” things become a bit less clear. Zerubbabel provides a good example of what it means to “stay the course” when things get complicated. But where else might we find another good example of this...?

Temptations of Christ

Those who study the Bible will recognize in the drama of Zerubbabel echoes of another drama that comes in Chapter 4 of both the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke: the three temptations of Jesus in the wilderness. It is worth noting that in both Gospels the temptations of Jesus come *directly after* he was baptized by John the Baptist, and just before he begins his ministry in earnest. Likewise, we remember that in the preceding Degree (14th: Perfect Elu), we, as candidates, went through the ceremony of “lustration,” or ritual purification by water. So, just as Jesus began his ministry only after first being baptized and then resisting the temptations presented to him in the wilderness, so we begin our journey into the religious/philosophical degrees (and beyond) after lustration, followed by a drama about resisting temptations. It is clear, then, that we are on a Christ-like path, not necessarily in a religious sense, but in that we first go through a ritual of purification by water, followed by a difficult test of our resolve to do our duty, and—if successful—are then better equipped to go into the world as leaders of men, having first conquered ourselves.

That the drama itself mirrors the account of Jesus’ experience with “the Tempter”

is no accident. It admonishes us to keep our eyes focused on the Light of Truth and not let ourselves be distracted. As Pike notes, “We must pass through the darkness, to reach the light” (*M&D*, 240).

Let us look more closely at the three temptations of Zerubbabel at Cyrus’ court, with a comparison of the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness.

Temptation the First

Zerubbabel’s problems begin when he tells King Cyrus that no matter how powerful the King is, he will never be able to extract the secrets of the Order of Architects from Zerubbabel. “A talebearer reveals secrets but the faithful spirit conceals the matter. To faithfully keep our secrets, is the first lesson we are taught. My engagements are sacred. If I can obtain your favor only at the expense of my integrity, the Temple must remain in ruins (Fifteenth Degree Drama, 18). There is more to this statement, of course, than its face value. The underlying meaning is that if a man gains favor (or fame, riches, power, etc.) only at the expense of his integrity, the *Temple of his Character* remains in ruins.

Not used to being told no, Cyrus instructs the Master of the Palace to take Zerubbabel to the treasure chamber and offer him vast wealth in return for the secrets of his order. Showing him the treasure, the Master of the Palace says,

“Gold: it is the king of kings. Before its throne, monarch and peasant bow with unfeigned love. It is the greatest magician; it dries the tears upon the mourner’s cheek. It soothes the pangs of conscience and heals the wounds of injured honor without leaving a scar; it seals the eyes and dulls the sword of justice. It is the mightiest, yet the most obedient, of our slaves. There is a grandeur, a sublimity in its possession. Note the poor wretch crawling along the street as if it were a sin for him to even live. What cares the world whether he lives or dies? But give him gold and see how eagerly the throng swarms around, longing to steal some sweet from out his store” (Drama, 20).

This is a long quote, but it was worth repeating because of what it reveals. First, calling gold the “king of kings” almost smacks of blasphemy, as it takes a phrase usually reserved for Christ and applies it to material wealth, implying that riches are more powerful or important than God. Second, the statement makes clear that wealth gives one license to act in immoral or unethical ways, for it will “soothe the pangs of conscience.” Sadly, many of our current political, religious, and business leaders have fallen for this argument! Third, the image of throngs of people swarming around the rich man, longing to get a piece of his wealth, conjures up images of the crowds that often surround Jesus, highlighting once again that wealth is (or can be) in direct conflict with holiness. Finally, the Master of the Palace says that gold is “the mightiest, yet the most obedient, of our slaves.” Honestly, the way he practically drools as he makes this speech leads one to wonder just who the slave really is. This guy all but makes Zerubbabel’s point for him!

The answer given by our hero ought to bring the blush of shame to the face of the Master of the Palace. “He who sells himself for gold barter for years of earthly joy, eternity in heaven. No, no. Away with it!” (Drama, 20).

Zerubbabel’s first temptation corresponds with the third temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, when the Tempter shows him all the kingdoms of the world in their splendor and says “‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Away with you! . . . Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” (Matthew 4: 8-10). The similarities in the two responses are striking. Clearly, in the question of riches vs. God, the upright man is to choose the latter.

One more note regarding the temptation of gold. As Masons, we know that gold represents not only wealth, but is also a symbol of the sun. In fact, the alchemical symbol for gold, as well as the astronomical symbol for the sun, is a point within a circle. (Think about that!) The sun, in turn, is a symbol of Light, which in turn is a symbol of knowledge. Could it be that Cyrus is tempting Zerubbabel with the very thing God first tempted Adam with in the Garden of Eden myth: knowledge he is not ready for? If so, Zerubbabel passes the test that Adam failed, thereby redeeming Adam’s mistake. This is yet another instance of Zerubbabel as a Christ-like character.

Incidentally, Zerubbabel acknowledges this higher symbolism of gold when,

toward the end of the Degree, he gives a gold coin to Cyrus and says, “This gold does not represent the wealth of kings. It is symbolic of the light of the sun, which to you now represents knowledge of God and yourself. It is hidden from view to remind you that knowledge is progressive and only those fit to receive it should be elevated to the Order just bestowed upon you” (Drama, 30).

Temptation the Second

Having been thwarted by Zerubbabel’s honor when offering him riches, Cyrus then turns to a more spiritual temptation. He offers him the “lost” treasures of Zerubbabel’s people—treasures which have more religious significance than monetary value, as nobody would ever use them to get rich. On orders from Cyrus, the Master of the Palace says,

“Zerubbabel, behold! Here are the gold and silver vessels that were used in the service of the Temple at Jerusalem. Here is the table of shew bread and here the altar, and here the golden candlesticks. All these and more shall be given to you if you will comply with what our Sovereign asks of you. You shall bear them away in triumph to Jerusalem, and be hailed by the people as a deliverer. And now, I will show you that most dear to the heart of every true worshipper at Jerusalem; the most sacred, holy and mysterious of all the furniture that adorned the Temple of the Lord, your God. Behold the Ark of the Covenant! (Drama, 22).

Zerubbabel’s reply, and what happens next, are extremely interesting. He falls down before the Ark of the Covenant and despairs that only his own personal honor is standing in the way of his people basking once again in the very presence of God. He implores God to guide him in his decision. “Speak to me. Yea, You speak and I will hear. The still small voice, which floats to my senses and fills my soul with joy. Speak yet again.” Upon which, a voice off-stage says, slowly and distinctly, “You shall be free, you and your people; you shall yet again see my Temple, reared in proportions majestic; you shall

again be my people” (Drama, 22).

Two things from this scene demand attention. First, it is clear that the voice is not audible to the Master of the Palace. On Zerubbabel’s refusal to budge, the Master of the Palace accuses him of being “stubborn.” Had he, too, heard the voice, he would know that God was speaking to Zerubbabel and would not have called him merely stubborn. Further, Zerubbabel implores “the still small voice” to speak to him, a phrase usually associated with one’s own conscience.

Second, the voice that speaks to Zerubbabel does not actually tell him not to take the treasures! The answer the voice gives is, at best, ambiguous. In fact, the statement that “you shall yet again see my Temple, reared in proportions majestic” could be interpreted as “if you take these treasures, the Temple will be restored to its former grandeur—this is a great opportunity.” Zerubbabel himself chooses how he interprets the message and sticks to his principles. The lesson of this temptation seems to be that you don’t need sacred relics to have holiness. “Relics” can mean outdated dogma that we stubbornly cling to, something that the Scottish Rite strives to free men from.

This episode is related to the second temptation of Jesus, in which the Tempter places him on the pinnacle of the temple and tells him to throw himself down, for the angels will catch him and bear him up (Matthew 4:5-7). The Tempter could have taken Jesus to any high place—a mountain top or even a tall tree—but instead he placed him on the “pinnacle of the temple.” Why? Jesus’ later ministry included many attacks on the religious practices of the day and the Temple hierarchy as it was. His attacks on the Jewish faith as practiced in the Synagogues and Temples were “from the outside.” The Tempter puts him on the pinnacle in Jerusalem to imply that he could have supreme religious authority “from the inside,” as head of the existing church. Jesus refuses, in much the same way we saw Zerubbabel refuse to place more value on mere “things” than on the principles those things stand for.

Temptation the Third

In a final attempt to break Zerubbabel’s resolve, Cyrus combines the other two temptations and adds to them the freedom of Zerubbabel’s people and permission to rebuild their Holy House. He says, “Reflect, my friend, before you finally decide. Your

life and the freedom of your people are in my hand. Are you willing that your Temple shall remain in ruins? If you concede what I desire, I will restore liberty to all your people, and deliver to you the holy vessels of the Temple, and give you permission to rebuild the Holy House. I will make you Governor of Judea and a prince of Persia.”

Zerubbabel replies with a statement all Masons should strive to emulate. “O King, the honors and the rank that are earned by violation of vows, are worthless” (Drama, 24). He elaborates on this sentiment near the end of the Degree when he is talking to his ruler, Hananiah. “The rank and honors that are in the gift of princes, are so commonly undeserved by those who wear them, that a wise man may well look upon them with disdain, or at least with indifference, and bear their loss without grieving. There are dignities much more to be valued that are not the gift of kings, and not always even within their reach, to be worn by themselves” (Drama, 32).

Albert Pike declares as much in the lecture when he writes, “. . .the only question for us to ask, as true men and Masons, is, what does duty require; and not what will be the result and our reward if we do our duty” (*M&D*, 239).

This temptation, as well as Zerubbabel’s reply, are consistent with the first temptation of Jesus, for both pit worldly and bodily comfort against the demands of duty and the will of God. After fasting in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights, Jesus was famished. At this point the Tempter came to him and said, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” Jesus answered with one of the most profound statements contained in the Gospels. “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:1-4). Once again we are dealing with the voice, or utterances, of God, as we did with the “still small voice” above. Pike brings it all together when he declares, without equivocation, “And one of those laws, uttered by God’s voice. . .is that we must be upright and virtuous; that if tempted we must resist” (*M&D*, 239-240).

Although ostensibly about Jesus’ hunger, the idea of “bread” in this verse from Matthew can be expanded to include all material needs (or comforts), worldly honors, riches, power, etc. Jesus’ message here—one that Zerubbabel understands well—is that no matter what you acquire or accumulate in life, none of it matters if you are not following the ethical and moral teachings of God, as you understand them. This is man’s

first duty.

Zerubbabel says as much when describing his Order of Architects to the Master of the Palace. “Kings and princes we know not, neither do we fear them. To God alone we bend the knee. To us, the great man is one who, with firm faith in God, goes forth to fight the battles of the weak, shield the innocent, and protect the poor. The promotion of the brotherhood of man is our chief joy and greatest good” (Drama, 20).

Final Thoughts

Again, the main lessons of the three temptations of Zerubbabel can be summarized as 1) If you must choose between riches and God, choose God; 2) do not cling to religious relics, forms, and ceremonies, for they only hint at the True Religion; and 3) if worldly things tempt us to neglect our duties, we must resist.

One final thing that makes the Fifteenth Degree unique among all other Scottish Rite Degrees is its name. Several Degrees have two names (the 11th, 21st, 22nd, 27th, and 30th), but only the Fifteenth has *three* names. Having looked in detail at the three temptations of Zerubbabel, and how he overcame them, the titles of this Degree start to make more sense.

Knight of the East: As the sun rises in east, shedding its golden rays on the earth, we learn that knowledge of God and our duties are treasure of more worth than gold.

Knight of the Sword: With the sword of justice, so often used as a symbol in the preceding degrees, we learn that fighting for what is right is more holy than holy objects.

Knight of the Eagle: Freedom bought by broken vows is not the freedom of the eagle, a symbol of liberty.

Perhaps Zerubbabel says it best, when he states, “The friends I have love me because I am Zerubbabel. Should I return dishonored, the eyes that now would welcome me would dim with tears. The hands that now would stretch forth in fond embrace, would palsied fall. No, tempt me no more. Life without honor is worthless” (Drama, 22).