

At this point also Solomon, who had been seated on the brazen platform, perceiving that the sign of the divine favor had been made manifest, rose and offered up a beautiful and impressive prayer, one of the finest forms of supplication that have been preserved to us, for it breathes a purity of religious feeling almost unknown before, and reveals, as nothing else has done, the greatness of Solomon's mind, the largeness of his religious views, and the depth of his moral sentiments. And now began the actual consecration of the whole temple by the act of sacrifice. Huge as was the great altar it was too small for the occasion, therefore the court was hallowed for the special purpose. When the altar was filled with victims, Josephus says, "there came a running fire out of the air, and rushed with violence upon the altar, in the sight of all, and caught hold of and consumed the sacrifices." The people prostrated themselves upon the ground, and music and song again burst forth—"He is good for his mercy endureth forever." The feast of Dedication lasted for a week, and the enormous number of 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep were consumed.

The scenes of that week, it seems to me, would have been anything but agreeable to our modern notions of a religious ceremony. The courts of the temple filled with bleating and bellowing sheep and oxen; the pools and streams of blood winding down to the subterranean gutters; the masses of skins and offal; the blazing furnace, with its columns of smoke and steam, and smell of burning flesh—all would make a strange impression upon modern senses.

As the day of bringing in the ark to Jerusalem had been the greatest day in the life of David, so the dedication of the temple was the culminating point in the reign of Solomon. He had now reigned some twelve years, and almost unbounded power, wealth, and prosperity were his, he had attained the zenith of earthly might and glory, and nothing seemed wanting to fill up the measure of his happiness. But alas, from that lofty height he plunged into folly, wickedness and idolatry, and we will sadly draw a veil over his decline and the dark end of his reign.

The temple retained its pristine glory only for about forty years, when much of the gold had to be stripped from the sanctuary to satisfy the demands of Shishak, the Egyptian invader. After undergoing various other pillages and profanations, it was finally destroyed B. C. 588, after having stood 417 years. We will pass on over the disasters which befel the nation, and proceed to view the closing scenes of the great temple of Solomon.

Sennacherib, King of Assyria, with a mighty army on his way to attack Egypt, thought it unwise to leave in his rear such a strong fortress as Jerusalem. He laid siege to the city, and with impious insult demanded the surrender. But suddenly this king of kings, as he called himself, was stripped of his army by a plague or by a tempest, possibly by the simoon of the desert. Certainly by some cause 185,000 of his men perished in a single night. The poet in most graphic language says:—

"The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold,
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold,
And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea
When the blue waves roll nightly on deep Gallilee.

Like the leaves of the forest when summer is green
That host with their banners at sunset was seen,
Like the leaves of the forest when autumn hath blown
That host on the morrow lay withered and strown.

For the angel of death spread his wings on the blast
And breathed in the face of the foe as he passed,
And the eyes of the sleepers waxed deadly and chill,
And their hearts but once beat and forever grew still."

Thus one great deliverance was effected, but we shortly find Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, before the walls, and the feeble, dissolute and ill-governed Israelites make but a weak though most determined resistance. The great strength of the fortifications enable them to hold out for the long period of eighteen months. Round about the walls were reared the gigantic mounds of timber by which eastern nations conducted their approaches to besieged cities, and which were surmounted by forts overtopping the wall. The stores of food became exhausted, and famine ravaged the population. Hebrew fathers and mothers, in their dire extremity, lost the instincts even of the brutes, and devoured the flesh of their own children. But at last the dreadful day came. At midnight a breach was made in the walls, and before the exhausted inhabitants were aware of it, the Chaldean guards silently made their way