



ISSN: 0976-3376

Available Online at <http://www.journalajst.com>

ASIAN JOURNAL OF
SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Asian Journal of Science and Technology
Vol. 09, Issue, 03, pp.7808-7811, March, 2018

RESEARCH ARTICLE

RECONSIDERATION OF ALTAR BUILDING AND TOWER BUILDING APPEARING IN PREHISTORY

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 24th December, 2017
Received in revised form
29th January, 2018
Accepted 10th February, 2018
Published online 30th March, 2018

Key words:

Altar, Tower, Prehistory,
Cain, Abel, Noah.

ABSTRACT

There are full of many parts of the prehistory(=primeval history) appearing in the bible which are difficult to understand with scientific words. It is because by reading with the confessing words of the people who share the same religious belief, we are able to understand the proper meaning. Also, it is possible to read on without distorting the whole story by understanding the meaning and each parts of the main subject in the story. I am willing to have a look at the original meaning of the first stories in the Bible which has commonly appearing subject "Building Altar and Building Tower" from each stories in the pre-history and apply them properly in modern society and the churches.

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INTRODUCTION

The story of Cain and Abel(Gn 4), The flood in Noah's era(Gn 6-9) and the story of Babel Tower(Gn 11), all have an unusual subject "Altar building and Tower building" which appears in comparison. The story of the Altar which Cain and Abel built shows that God doesn't receive all the memorial service from human. The Altar which Noah built shows the idea of "The First Remnant" from the Old Testament. The story of Babel Tower which is the closing of the prehistory, introduces the tragedy caused from human which at first gave up the "building of Tower" then later focused on it. The Study is willing to introspect the essentials of Christianity that the modern society and the churches have lost by the subject of "Men Building Altar and Tower in Modern Society".

The altars of Cain and Abel

The Reason Cain's Service was denied

The First Man and Woman Adam and Eve, gave birth to two sons named Cain and Abel. Then they are the first to be born from human. Although the genealogical link to Genesis 3, we must take the story by itself. It is yet another perception of our fractured human world (Brueggemann, Genesis, 55). The Bible describes them as follows: Abel a shepherd, Cain a farmer. Shepherd and farming is the most popular occupation in the Ancient Near East. It implies that at the time the story was written, the people were divided into two groups of nomads and settlers.

As Cain and Abel become a young man, they serve God with their sacrificial offerings. It is the first worship shown in the Bible. But what's strange about it? The Lord received the offering of Abel but not Cain. Why should it be? If we look into the Bible, even the appearing order of Cain and Abel is strange. Surely Cain was the first born than Abel, but Abel is introduced first then Cain (Gn 4:2). This cannot be a coincidence. The First offering was by Cain then later Abel but in the Bible it is introduced the other way around. Abel is always the first to be described. Why should it be? The answer is simple. The Lord was pleased with Abel. The Lord did not simply receive "the offering" of Abel. The Lord received "Abel" and "his offering". The daily life of Abel was his offering to The Lord which cannot be fully contained with the limited writing of the Bible. In the other hand, The Lord wasn't pleased with Cain at all. Therefore, God didn't receive "Cain" and "his offering". Of course, this means that God is not asking for men-killing sacrifices, but that his own life for sacrifice should be made available to God (Kim, "God-pleasing Sacrifice", 248). It is said that what comes first in Man serving God is himself. St. John said 'Cain is affiliated to the wicked' (1 John 3:12). And the author of the Hebrews mentioned Abel as "the righteous" who served God with the better offering than Cain (He 11:4). Serving God with time, property, and ability is precious because not every human being can do it. Anyway, there are not many belongings of human that we can serve God with. Prophet Micah said, we don't have many offerings to serve God (Mic 6:6-7). But Man serving "himself" to God has a different meaning. That means being conscious to the Lord in daily life and living in a right way. In that way Abel was the offering first served to God. What we have "to serve God" is what comes afterwards.

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What is the offering that Cain served the Lord with? It is the outcome from the earth. He was a farmer. Therefore he served God with grains. What did Abel serve God with then? He was a shepherd, for he served the first born lamb and its oil to God. The reason God didn't receive what Cain served is not because he liked meat diet. Is it because there is no blood in the offering from Cain? It is not because rites without blood cannot be the Whole rites. In fact, in the period of the Old Testament there were cases that grains were served to God as offering. For example, shaking a bundle of grains which is wave offering (Wave Offering: Ex 29:24; Lv 7:30; Nu 6:20) is relevant to the product on land. On the other hand, the First lamb and its oil Abel served, develops to the best offering to God that Israel people could serve as moving on to the next generation (Ex 13:2; Dt 15:19; Lv 3:3-4).

This best offering is usually called 'the first fruit of the tree'. However, the first fruit doesn't simply mean the one came first in time. Between Cain and Abel, Cain is not called as the first fruit. Though he was born later the reason Abel is the First Fruit is because his life remained the best to God. On the other hand, Cain was not to be called the First Fruit as he wasn't able to live the best life to God. Eventually, the reason God didn't receive Cain and his offering is not because there were problems in it but surely his normal life didn't please the Lord. His life was uneven even after the offering. Cain beats his brother Abel to death for not being received to God. How can he kill his brother only because of the offering? The name of Abel means 'breeze' and 'vain'. Like his name, Abel comes across his vain death in the hands of his brother.

Avoiding Responsibility

Cain's evil act continues after the offering. Cain killed his brother Abel on the field by throwing a rock to him. The question God asked to Cain who killed his brother is the same question "Where are you?" (Gn 3:9) which He asked to the criminal Adam. Lord wouldn't have missed the first murder on land like he knew and asked Adam of the first crime in the Garden of Eden. It is because God heard the blood of Abel wailing from the ground. God asks Cain of his crime though He knows what he has done. That is because He wanted Cain to recognize what he had done and ask for forgiveness. However, Cain thoroughly avoids God. He lies that he doesn't know about it. He avoids responsibility implying the occupation of his brother he killed. As Adam and Eve avoided responsibility and imputed their fault to someone else, Cain tells a lie that it's something he doesn't know about and even loses his temper. Eventually, Cain like his parents is punished by God. God tells Cain, being a farmer he would get nothing on land and he will be wandering around away from land. Cain had to go far away from where he settled and made products by farming and was afraid of not being able to deal with his punishment. God didn't give up Cain going away shaking with fear. Even if his normal life was evil, killed his brother and in the end told a lie to God, He promised to look after him giving him a sign which we don't know of (Gn 4:15).

The Category of the Altar must be expanded

The offering story of Cain and Abel tells us that the category of offering should be expanded. Worship is not completed at the altar (= church). Building an altar means the mind of worship continues outside the church.

The fact that God received Abel's offering means that his normal life was given to God as the righteous offering. Many Christians today attend many worship services. They are used to many altars and many worship services. But what is important is building an altar God is pleased to receive. Worship is when the person who attends the worship is equally given to God. A person equally given in worship is not limited to a worship given in the church. In Samuel 15, there is a scene which Saul the first King of Israel is being scolded by prophet Samuel. Saul, being his sin discovered made excuses to Samuel to hide his crime of not burning the spoils of war after winning, to serve God. He says those are remained to be given to God as the offering. At the time, Samuel reproves Saul saying, 'listening' and 'obeying' to God is better than any other offerings (1 Sam 15:22). It is translated as 'obey' and 'listen' in English but in Hebrews, the two words are the same. They both use the verb '*shama*'. *Shama* means 'hear', 'listen' but it also has a meaning of 'obey'. Listening to God and obeying His words is not something different. Listening to His words inside the church and obeying them outside the church is the completion of the Altar and worship.

Noah's altar

Noah's era and Modern Society

The second Altar in the Bible appears at the end of the story of Noah which the Lord judged the whole land with the flood. After Cain killed his brother and Adam had third son between Eve, the author of Genesis is writing about the population growth. Like the order given to Adam to conquer and rule the Land, the land became full of people. However, the life of these people were evil to God. It is said in Genesis 6, people at the time were evil and it is full of lament of God seeing those evil actions of them (Gn 6:5-7, 11-13). It is a big issue that the crime in Noah's era was acted in group whereas Adam and Eve, and their son Cain's crime was individual. "Being hard and cruel" in Hebrews is '*hamas*'. It has the meaning of social violence. The sin of human became a very structural thing that Man can't do anything about it on his own. The Lord laments the world He created. The author must have reflected the time he lived to the time of Noah's generation. It is not limited to Noah's generation how rebellious people were at that time for God to lament. Certainly this is how the modern people are living these days. Like the Noah's time for sure these days are the time God will lament. Actually, the modern society is even more obscene and the social violence has spread out.

The Remnant

However, the Bible doesn't end the story of Noah with the lament of God. It is not an issue that the generation and the situation being evil. Human, whether or not they want, are ruled by the surrounding environment. What matters is "Are we able to receive grace from God even if we're living in an evil generation?" Living in an evil generation, Noah was the right man and the perfect man at the time (Gn 6:9). How was it possible for Noah to protect his belief in God and please the Lord in his life? It is because God blessed Noah (Gn 6:8). It is because God blessed Noah not because Noah was a fine man. We are to be in God's plan of rescuing lives not because of our acts or moral rights but because the grace God chose. In the story of Adam and Cain's murder, we saw the punishment of God corresponding to the crime of human.

God punished the people who dumped their responsibility to each other and deported them out of the Garden of Eden. Also God asks responsibility to Cain who murdered his brother and pretending not to know, made him wander around from where he used to live. However, the stories from the beginning of history does not simply finish with God punishing the criminals. God did not hesitate to give blessing even to the people being punished of crime. He gave leather clothes to Adam and Eve who were being deported and gave a sign of protection to Cain. We aren't able to know what the leather clothes is or the sign of protection is. Even the author of bible doesn't explain anything about this part. It is not what kind of leather clothes is or the sign of protection is that the author wants to tell us about. The symbol of God's grace and love shown as the leather clothes and the sign of protection is still valid to the people being punished of their crime. Also, in the story of the Flood in Noah's era, God punishes the social violence by the Flood. It is the total punishment followed by the total corruption. But still, God's blessing continues. The World continues to live and breathe, and to establish families and nations, because God makes a gracious, unconditional commitment to stay with the world, come what may in the wake of human sinfulness. (Birch et. al., Theological Introduction, 58) That is selecting Noah and his family as the 'Remnant' in the world without being destroyed and made them build an Ark (Gn 7:23).

The New Creation

'Ark' in Hebrews is called '*tebah*' meaning box. The Ark which Genesis is describing is also a huge box made of 300 cubit in length, 50 cubit in width, 30 cubit in height. There is another *tebah* as we go on to Exodus. The basket which carried Moses on the River Nile is also called *tebah*. What could be the common feature of these two *tebahs*. That is the role of rescuing the life inside it. It is usually said that this Ark is the first model of the church. Even if the world is turbid the church is the community of people who wore blessing of God, and the faith that the Lord will continue His history of rescuing lives in the world. That is the responsibility of the Ark. It is a holy responsibility of rescuing life. The Ark is not a scary warship. It is not a grand merchant ship but only a lifeboat. This is the biggest responsibility of the church. Genesis describes there are only eight people in the Ark. They are Noah and his wife, and their three sons, and three daughter in laws. These eight people have to clean all the excretion from all kinds of animals continuously. In the raining season without air just like sauna from the third floor basement sweating right to the top. There must have been tremendous noise from all kinds of animals. How difficult it must have been. Building an Ark must have been hard and breathing inside it must have been even harder. It is same with the churches these days. Though the life inside the church is hard, the church is the plan of God to rescue us which is the Ark in this generation. Nevertheless there is a holy responsibility which remains the same. It is *tebah* which is saving lives of this generation. This *tebah* is not an Ark that moves with Manpower. God built it from the beginning. God planned everything of the Ark. God led people into the Ark, closed the Ark, let it float, and finally opened the Ark. God thoroughly controls the beginning and the end of the Ark. Then what could be the Noah's role? Noah thoroughly obeyed to the sovereignty of God and to His words (Gn 6:22; 7:5).

When the Ark is on Mt. Ararat and the Flood went away finally everyone inside come out to see the land. Noah came out of the Ark to build an Altar for God. Noah builds the Altar with the clean animal and bird as the offering (Gn 8:20). And God 'takes the scent of it' and promises never to curse the land of people again. Before and after the story of Noah building the Altar, God calls to Noah and his family and all the living creature that had been together with them and gives his unbelievable words to Noah. That is "Grow and develop and be fully ready to the earth"(Gn 8:17; 9:1,7). The reason His words are meaningful is because it was the blessing God gave to the First created man (Gn 1:28). When the Land was judged with The Flood, Noah was given the huge responsibility of The New Creation. Here we can see the responsibility of church. That is rescuing a life and being responsible to The New Creation. The act of Noah building the Altar is as important as building the ark. As the role of the ark was saving living creature, the Altar Noah built was the role of leading God's covenant on land. God promises Noah and his sons never to destroy living creature with flood again (Gn 9:11), and show them the rainbow as the proof of his covenant. The fact that the Lord kept the rainbow behind the clouds doesn't mean that there was no rainbow on land before the event. The Rainbow might have been, or might not have been there before The Flood. What is important is that the rainbow is remembered as the proof of the covenant after the Altar of Noah.

The Babel Tower

The story of Babel Tower tells us the story of the people who left God and created a new civilization. In other words, it shows the civilization that Men achieved and the religious relationship with God and finally the whole history of Genesis is ended by the judge of the Lord. The story of the Babel Tower begins at the Shinar Plain. The story begins as the Nomads arrive at the Shinar Plain and become the settlers. Shinar is the southern part of Iraq today. The Shinar which is the lower region of River Euphrates and River Tigris, is also named 'Mesopotamia' meaning the land between the two rivers Euphrates and Tigris. Geologically, there aren't many rocks in the region of Shinar. Instead, when there was flood on these two long rivers and the river overflowed, a lot of mud came down from the upper region. Therefore, there were a lot of mud in this area. The people who settled in the region made a highly productive invention at the time which is heating mud in the fire and making solid brick out of it (Gn 11:3). In the region there are short of rocks, people made mud bricks instead, and used bitumen which is similar to asphalt today to put them together, to achieve the World First creation of civilization of city. This is how the fetal movement of the Mesopotamian civilization which is one of the cradle of civilization began. Four plans are made by the men who lived on the Shinar Plain (Gn 11:4). Firstly, they want to build a castle which means building a city. Secondly, they want to build a tall Tower that reaches the sky in the middle of the city. To build such a high tower in this way to the sky is the pride of man to become like God, and it is interpreted as invading the realm of God's residence (Wenham, Genesis 1-15, 239). Third plan was to make names of people, and finally the fourth plan was to live together without being parted. Then what could have been the problem among these four plans that made their civilization become the target of the Lord's judge and not a blessing?

The plan to build a city and live together without being separated shows the rapidly advancing civilization and socialization of men as the intelligence and knowledge of human improves. As long as we don't reject the civilization itself, the plan of Shinar Plain itself is not a problem. But, they don't stop here and wish to build a Tower that goes straight up into the sky. Making mud bricks and using bitumen, men that achieved advanced civilization of technology were willing to build a city and in the middle of it, a tall Tower. These were the descendant of Noah who got over with The Flood with his belief in God. However, they didn't believe in what the Lord said about The Flood, that He will never judge his people by water again and even if it happens again, they thought it would be safe being up high where God is. And they were mistaken themselves for God. Their third plan "Let's have our name" also means that now they can live without God. It is of special significance to name in Genesis. In Genesis, God names humans and humans make animals. In the relationship between man and other creatures, as human beings make the names of other animals, God is the one who makes human names in relation to God. It is the expression of pride that man names himself, rejecting the authority and sovereignty of God(Park, The Understanding of Old Testament World, 358). So their plan means that they reject to their Owner and Creator, the Lord. Finally, the higher the Tower became, the further Men became in their relationship with God. The Lord looked at how foolish the people acted (Gn 11:5) and made them not understand each other in language, spread them all out on Earth, and stopped their civilization (Gn 11:8).

Conclusion

The story of Altar building and Tower building in the original history is also the story of us, modern people living today in the modern society. The building of Altar is not limited to a moment of worship. It is only possible when it is continued in life.

It is far more important for Christians to win every day of religious struggle than to attend worship services on Sunday and devotional worship and offering as much as possible (Chang, "The Story of Cain and Abel I", 21). The Tower building in the middle of Shinar Plain had a high tower made of science and technology from the first community as said in the bible. However, there was no God in their minds. Intelligence and knowledge of Man, improved civilization could be no help in a successful plan without God. When the relationship with God is severed, the relationship between people is ruptured and even all the civilization and culture of human is cut off. The expression that people didn't understand each other in language, couldn't be that suddenly they started using different languages, but it might be an implication of an obstinate society which people couldn't communicate with their truthful heart. It is important to build a productive community with advanced culture and civilization. However, building a community with one's heart to God without man's plan and greed is even more important.

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