

## IMPERIAL HOLINESS

### A Devotional Meditation on Terumah (Offering)

Exodus 25:1-27:19; 1 Kings 5:12-6:13, 12:1-19

1 Corinthians 6:18-19; James 1:27

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Vienna is a city that breathes the essence of empire. I sensed that while admiring the imposing stone buildings that once housed the Hapsburg emperors and the vast imperial court that served them. The Hapsburgs fell from power in 1919, at the end of World War I, after a millennium of shaping history as one of the most powerful royal families on earth.



*The Münster (Cathedral of Our Lady) in Ulm is Germany's largest Protestant church, and one of many majestic structures reflecting the influence of Western Christian Civilization. Photo: Armin Appel, CC0, [via Wikimedia Commons](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ulm_Minster.jpg).*

That kind of power thrilled me wherever I found it, and I found it nearly everywhere I looked. It's easy to see in cities like Amsterdam, Beijing, Berlin, Istanbul, and Washington. It's not

only in government buildings and monuments, but also in religious structures. Great churches like Notre Dame in Paris and the Münster in Ulm, Germany, testify to the power of Western Christianity and the civilization that grew out of it. That, too, is a kind of power that thrilled and inspired me. A younger me, that is – the me that had not yet learned to look behind the great structures and beneath the grand monuments to discover the price of imperial power.

That price is not paid in gold and silver, but in the blood, sweat, and tears of humans pressed into service of the great powers. Nations and empires have always been able to acquire human capital for whatever they desired. Often that service was willingly given in exchange for a day's wages, but just as often the labor was taken by force from slaves, criminals, and foreigners. Such laborers could be set to work for minimal expense other than food, clothing, and shelter. The greatest cost might not be the laborers themselves, but the task masters set over them who would expect some form of payment for their services.

Is this really how the world's great churches were built? We would like to think they were built by labor freely given as acts of worship by willing servants of the Most High. That's the ideal, and it's what God desires, but our reality says otherwise. It's been our reality from the beginning, as we understand in the record of Scripture. We see it in the way Solomon presided over building the Temple of God in Jerusalem:

King Solomon also imposed forced laborers from all Israel—the levy was 30,000 men. He sent them to Lebanon, in shifts of 10,000 a month: they would stay a

month in Lebanon, then two months at home. Adoniram was over the forced labor. Solomon had 70,000 porters, and 80,000 stonecutters in the mountains, besides Solomon's chief officers that were over the work—3,300 who supervised the people who were doing the work. Then the king commanded, and they quarried great stones, costly stones, to lay the foundation of the House with cut stones.

1 Kings 5:13-17 (27-31) TLV

Solomon wasn't the first ruler to resort to forced labor in his public building projects. His father-in-law, Egypt's Pharaoh, did the same, just as his predecessors had done with Solomon's ancestors when the Hebrews still lived in Egypt. When his conscript labor force was done with the Temple, Solomon employed them in building his own palace, and on other projects throughout the kingdom.

It's fair to ask why Solomon chose this means of recruiting laborers. Were there no willing men and women who would devote their time to construction of God's house? Did Solomon even bother to ask for volunteers, or did he immediately resort to the usual methods of conscripting unfree labor? What about the materials used in the construction? Considering what happened after Solomon's death, it's fair to conclude that he did exactly what any tyrant would have done by taking whatever he needed or wanted, by force if necessary. That's why half of Israel rebelled against Solomon's son Rehoboam when he refused to ease the burden of forced labor and taxation as they asked.

We wonder whether the division of the kingdom would have happened had Solomon followed the example of Moses instead of the example of Pharaoh. In building the Tabernacle in the wilderness, Moses did as God directed:

*ADONAI* spoke to Moses saying, "Tell *Bnei-Yisrael* [children of Israel] to take up an offering for Me. From anyone whose heart compels him you are to take My offering. These are the contributions which you are to receive from them: gold, silver and bronze; blue, purple and scarlet cloth; fine linen and goat hair; ram skins dyed red, sealskins, acacia wood; oil for the light, spices for the anointing oil and for the sweet incense; onyx stones and setting stones for the ephod and for the breastplate. Have them make a Sanctuary for Me, so that I may dwell among them. You are to make it all precisely according to everything that I show you—the pattern of the Tabernacle and the pattern of all the furnishings within—just so you must make it."

Exodus 25:1-9 TLV

Later we read that the people willingly gave much more than enough for the work, and that the laborers who built it were "the wise-hearted men in whose minds *ADONAI* had set wisdom, along with everyone whose heart stirred him up to come do the work." (Exodus 36:2) If Moses could do that with volunteers and donations, why couldn't Solomon? For that matter, why can't we?

To be fair, God provided everything for the Israelites in the wilderness. The materials for the Tabernacle came from the riches given by the Egyptians when they thrust the Hebrews out after the ten plagues. As for the labor, maybe there was nothing else going

on in the desert, so the workers volunteered simply to have something to do. Or maybe, just maybe, that's why God put them in the wilderness.

There is irony in the fact that God's Shekinah glory was visible in Solomon's Temple just as it was in the Tabernacle. It's a testimony to the grace and mercy of our God that He still uses imperfect and corrupt works. Of course, that Temple did succumb to abomination and desecration, as did the Temple constructed after it and finished by another tyrant king called Herod. The Third Temple will face the same fate, likely for the same reasons. Before we judge, though, we should consider what's still resident in the temples of our bodies in addition to the Holy Spirit. Are we in the business of religion to make a profit, satisfy our egos, and belong to the right group, or are we genuinely motivated by devotion to our Creator? That's a question the prophets and apostles consistently address, and which James answers:

Pure and undefiled religion before our God and Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

James 1:27 TLV

It's the world that seeks self-promotion through exploitation of others, whether on an imperial scale, or in a marriage. That's why the levels of crime, poverty, and marital infidelity are better measures of societal godliness than showy religious displays. A society truly devoted to God doesn't have to be forced to demonstrate their devotion. That's the difference between imperial holiness, and genuine holiness.