

THE TEMPLE – study 1

BACKGROUND

The very first Temple in Jerusalem, planned by David but built by his son Solomon, was an amazing sight. The details of its inception and construction can be found in 2 Sam.7v12-13; 1 Kngs ch.5-8; 1 Chron.ch.17, 28-29; 2 Chron. ch 3-7. Tragically, as the nation fell away from God, judgement came in the most terrible way imaginable. Jerusalem was sacked and the Temple utterly destroyed (2 Kngs 25v13-15; Jer.52v17-19; 2 Chron.36v18).

For seventy years the Temple Mount lay desolate, until a new generation of Jews under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah returned out of exile to rebuild the city and the Temple. Facing many obstacles, the project was finally completed both to great joy but also to great sorrow (Ezr.3v10-13; Ezr. 6v15-18; Hagg.2v1-9). Great as this new Temple was, it was but a pale shadow of its illustrious predecessor.

This “Second Temple”(which lasted about 500 years), once again became the centre of worship, considered to be the holiest place on earth. *“By three things is the world sustained: by the Law, by the [Temple]-Service, and by deeds of loving kindness”* (cf Rom.9v1-5). *“The world is like an eye. The ocean surrounding the world is the white of the eye; its black is the world itself; the pupil is Jerusalem; but the image within the pupil is the sanctuary”* (rabbinic saying).

In 19 BC Herod the Great undertook a huge (re)building project, which basically doubled the size of the existing Temple. Although the major part was completed by around 9 BC, work was still going on during Jesus’ lifetime, alterations and improvements continuing right up to c. AD 62. However, because the building was an addition to the existing structure, the Temple at the time of Jesus is referred to as the “Second Temple” (the first having been Solomon’s). Josephus’ explanation of Herod’s building projects is singularly terse but accurate – *“for being a man ambitious of honour, and quite overcome by that passion, he was induced to be magnificent, wherever there appeared any hope of a future memorial or a representation at present”*.

HEROD’S TEMPLE

The building was a thing of wonder, of beauty and of extraordinary architectural skill. Even the rabbis said that *“he who has not seen the Temple of Herod has never in his life seen a beautiful structure,”* (Mk.13v1). It was a monumental undertaking, employing eighteen thousand labourers and Herod even had a thousand priests especially trained to work on the holy places so that no unauthorised person should defile the holy precincts. It was said that it did not rain for the first seven years so as not to disrupt the building work. *“Now the outward face of the temple in its front wanted nothing that was likely to surprise either men’s minds or their eyes, for it was covered all over [with] plates of gold of great weight, and, at the first rising of the sun, reflected back a great fiery splendour, and made those who forced themselves to look upon it to turn their eyes away, just as they would have done at the sun’s own rays.... But this temple appeared to strangers, when they were at a distance, like a mountain covered with snow; for as to those parts of it that were not gilt, they were exceeding white.”* [Josephus].

Josephus also left an account of the Temple’s construction, and it truly was a massive expansion on the original complex. The east wall, overlooking the Kidron Valley and facing the Mount of Olives was around **1542** feet long; the north wall, dominated by the Antonine fortress, was some **1033** feet; the west wall which looked up to the main part of the city and to Herod’s palace was about **1591** feet in length and the south wall, looking down to the original old city of David, was about **920** feet. In height some of the walls rose to over **100** feet.

The Temple fulfilled the functions of being a place for public gatherings, a teaching forum for itinerant rabbis, and administrative offices. It contained its own synagogue, as well as being a place for the sacrifice and selling of animals. It was the focal point for the religious life of all Israel. By a deliberate act of policy, first Herod and then the Roman governors had sought to transfer political power away from Jerusalem to Caesarea Maritima on the coast. However for devout Jews, Jerusalem and the Temple would always remain the centre of their lives - spiritual, secular and political, a unifying national symbol.

A TOUR AROUND THE TEMPLE

- **EAST**

The Shushan Gate: set into the eastern wall. The gate was only opened once a year on the Day of Atonement and it was through this doorway that the scapegoat was led into the wilderness, taking away the people's sins. A causeway was either specially constructed each year to span the Kidron valley, or there was a permanent bridge in place. Thus the whole procession could safely to pass over the graves around the Mount of Olives without becoming ritually unclean.

Solomon's Porch or Colonnade: running along the inner Temple side of this eastern wall. It was built by the Hasmonean dynasty but so called because it was the most ancient part of the Temple complex. It was a place of walking and talking (Jn.10v23) and various offices were also situated there.

- **NORTH**

Overlooked by the massive Antonine fortress, the strategic key to the whole city. Originally built by the Hasmoneans, the fort was renamed in honour of Mark Anthony by Herod the Great and now housed a Roman garrison. From its walls sentries looked down upon the Temple courtyards and it was to here that the High Priest had to come for his holy vestments, which were held in Roman hands.

In this same area and also beyond the Temple boundary wall, was the Pool of Bethesda (Jn.5v2).

- **WEST**

The Temple's western wall looked up to the main bulk of the city, including Herod's palace and the High Priest's house. A pavement with shops on both sides ran along the entire length of this wall, spanned by a bridge running from the upper city into the Temple ("Wilson's Arch"). This entered the Temple through the *Kiphonus* or "*Rose Garden*" Gate and gave access to the Temple from the Sadducean and High Priestly houses in the upper city.

At the far end of the long western wall, almost at its junction with the southern wall rose another great arched entrance ("Robinson's Arch"). This was not a bridge but a massive staircase some 80 feet high and 50 feet wide and was one of the main entrances into the Temple complex. It was also a popular preaching place for teachers, prophets, politicians and the like, perhaps a bit like a first century Hyde Park Corner.

Towards the end of the west wall as it prepared to turn left, lay the first of a number of *mikveh* or ceremonial baths, fifty more of which also clustered at the feet of the steps leading up to the entrances in the south. Later these baths would most probably be the site of the baptisms at Pentecost.

High above, at the actual junction of the west and southern wall, was the Place of Trumpeting, where the priests sounded the shofars to herald the start of feasts or Sabbaths and where Jesus was tempted by the devil as recorded in Matthew 4 and Luke 4.

- **SOUTH**

The southernmost wall faced the oldest part of Jerusalem, the original City of David and it was here that the rabbis' steps were to be found, where the rabbis (including Jesus) would sit to teach their disciples and the people. There were four gates giving access to the Temple precincts. The two Huldah Gates, named after the prophetess of long ago (2 Kngs 22; 2 Chron.34), and the two principal gateways. These gates led under a second porch and down into long (295 feet) and wide (42 feet) tunnels that eventually came up inside the Temple complex.

This second and greater porch was called the **Royal Porch** and was around 920 feet long and 105 feet wide, with 162 marble columns, 27 feet high set in 4 rows. The Sanhedrin would often meet in this area of the Temple Mount to discuss business (both Solomon's and the Royal Porch appears to have had seats and benches placed within them for conversation and for teaching). It was also in this complex that those providing animals for sacrifice did their trade, making for a very lucrative business for the traders and the priests themselves received a commission on livestock sold. Of course other offerings were also regularly made, besides those of animals, including, wine, oil, frankincense, fine flour, wheat and salt.

This was also where the money changers did their business. Coins for offerings and for purchases had to be made with pure silver Temple tokens. This was because those particular coins were of a good silver content and weight, whilst the local currency had become debased.

Also because many of the coins had what pious Jews would have regarded as graven images, carrying the faces of kings, emperors and pagan gods and goddesses. Most probably the gold and silver coins were therefore collected together and then melted down into ingots before being received into the Temple treasury.

- **THE TEMPLE COMPLEX**

Having passed through the tunnels under the Royal Porch the pilgrim now found himself within the Temple complex proper, in the **Court of the Gentiles**, facing a low wall that surrounded the actual Temple itself. For a Gentile this was as far as they were allowed to go and there were notices posted all around this wall or **soreg**, in Greek and in Roman characters, warning of the dire penalty for going further, “*No gentile is allowed within the wall surrounding the Sanctuary, nor the enclosed courtyard. Anyone apprehended doing so is at the risk of taking his own life into his hands*” (Acts 21v27-29; cf Ezek.44v6-9).

Beyond the Court of the Gentiles and within the *soreg*, were the walls of the various other Courts and the Sanctuary itself, making up a rectangle running west-east. Within these walls were set the various gates south, west and north that gave access for priests and Levites going about their business of ministry in the Temple. On the eastern side was the **Beautiful Gate** (Acts 3v1f). This gate gave access to the **Court of Women** and it was through this entrance that everyone had to pass. Men were allowed to go further, but women and children had to stop at this point. However there was almost certainly a tall structure with balconies in the Court of Women from which the pious could still see all that happened beyond.

There were also various chambers here and the *trumpets / shofars* or alms boxes, shaped like trumpets and used for the upkeep of the Temple and its services (cf Mt.6v1-4; Lk.21v1-5). Giving access to the Court of Israel, the Court of the Priests and to the Sanctuary itself was the great **Nicanor Gate**. This unique feature was made of Corinthian bronze, and both Josephus and the rabbis agreed that although nine of the gates in the Temple were overlaid with gold and silver, one alone was overlaid with bronze and was more valuable than any of the others.

In the **Priest's Court** was to be found the **Temple treasury**. A developing work of the Temple was that of a kind of bank, holding money on behalf of others. Funds from the treasury were also used to finance civil building projects.

The Priest's Court was also a meeting place for the **Sanhedrin**; and held the special quarters where the High Priest stayed for the Day of Atonement. In the open space before the Sanctuary stood the **Great Altar** of uncut stone where the eternal fire burned. This altar was on a platform some 45 feet high reached by a ramp on the southern side. To the right of this Altar lay the area in which the animals were slaughtered, with large marble tables for the carcasses and for the utensils used in the sacrifice.

Dominating all three Courts was the **Sanctuary** building, in which was to be found the **Holy Place** and the **Holy of Holies**. The former was a windowless antechamber holding a golden seven branched candelabra, the table for the shewbread; and the golden altar for incense (cf Lk.1v8f). A curtain acted as a doorway from the Priest's Court into the Sanctuary.

Ancient writers commented that in shape the Sanctuary resembled a crouching lion (cf “*Ariel – Lion of God*” Isa.29v1,2,7) wider at the front (facing east) than at the rear (west). Over the door of the Sanctuary hung a huge vine made all of gold, originally a gift from a grateful queen, which “grew” annually. It was considered an act of piety to donate a leaf or part of a leaf, and the vine had grown so greatly that a special trellis had to be constructed to support the weight.

And finally within the Sanctuary, hidden from sight, was the **Holy of Holies**, a small and empty windowless chamber into which the High Priest entered but once a year on the Day of Atonement. The Holy of Holies was separated from the Holy Place by two strongly woven curtains embroidered with lions and eagles. (Mt.27v51).

So in effect within the *soreg* lay three basic areas. One for Israelite men and women; one solely for Israelite men; and one for the priests. In turn the priest's area was subdivided into three. One for sacrifice; one for the Holy Place; and one for the Holy of Holies.

The Temple is thus the centre of worship and of Israelite life. It is the centre of political and religious power. It is the holiest place on earth.