



The Second Temple at the Time of Jesus

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A short description of the Second Temple that was destroyed in 70 CE.

The Second Temple at the Time of Jesus

By Shelley Cohney

What stopped the rampaging Roman army? Which structure was built of stones weighing up to 400 tons and capable of accommodating up to one million people? The answer to these questions is the Temple of Jerusalem. The Second Temple was not only awe inspiring because of its religious significance, but also for its physical dimensions, its grandeur and its beauty. Thus as the Roman generals sat surveying Jerusalem and considering the Temple's future they hesitated before ordering its destruction. Jesus cried at even the thought of its destruction, many Jews from that day to this have yearned and prayed for its rebuilding, and tourists and religious people alike have come to behold the site on which it once stood.

Unfortunately our impressions of the Temple are at best incomplete. Since its destruction by the Romans in 70 CE¹, the only available sources of information about the Temple have had some religious or political bias. The New Testament, the Mishna [the rabbinical exegesis of the Old Testament, and the works of the Judeo-Roman historian Josephus provide the bulk of our knowledge of the Temple. These in association with archeological evidence at the site all point to a building so wondrous that even today its construction remains a mystery.

An appreciation of the Temple is enhanced by a clearer understanding of the geographical and historical setting in which it was extended. During the period in question, Jerusalem was under Roman rule but remained the capital of Judea and the international centre of Judaism. Normally a city of 100 to 200 thousand people, three times a year on the pilgrim festivals of Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles, Jerusalem's population swelled to 1 million souls (the exact number depending on the source of population estimates). On these occasions this small ancient city had to cope not only with the throng of people but also their sacrificial animals and offerings, necessitating temporary increases in food supplies, accommodation, ritual bathing facilities, and all aspects of commerce. It was Herod, installed by the Romans as governor of Jerusalem, who faced these logistical problems, and who consequently set about renovating the city and the Temple to accommodate this massive periodic influx.

In order to meet the enormous increase in capacity the Temple required for these festivals and to comply with the limitations placed on its dimensions by Jewish law, Herod built a great plaza around the Temple. This plaza is the Temple Mount of today where the Dome of the Rock and the El Aqsa mosque stand. To construct this platform, Herod built a box around Mount Moriah and filled it in. The plaza covered this box and expanded the available land at the peak of the mountain. The plaza is approximately 480 x 300m (about the size of six football fields). The retaining walls of this box were themselves cause for wonder and the "Kotel" or Western Wall (the holiest site in modern Judaism) is one part of the western retaining wall (but not actually a wall of the Temple proper). The walls are 5m thick and made up of enormous stones weighing

between 2 and 100 tons (there is even one that weighs 400 tons) with an average stone being about 10 tons. There is no mortar between the stones and they sit so closely together that not even a piece of paper can fit between them. Such fine maneuvering of the stones is incomprehensible given that even today's modern machinery cannot move such heavy stones.

Also worthy of comment was the overall appearance of the walls which were about the height of a 20 storey building. Normally, standing at the base of a twenty storey building an illusion is created in which the building appears to be falling down on top of the viewer, but standing at the base of the Temple's retaining walls this did not happen. It was prevented by the fact that the margins carved around the edge of the stones differed, being slightly wider on the bottom than on the top. In addition, each level was staggered with successive courses of stones indented 3 cm relative to the course below. The precision with which stones weighing over 100 tons were placed 2000 years ago is astounding and mystifying. Furthermore, these stones were merely part of the retaining walls that supported the plaza on which the Temple stood and thus only a prelude to the even more incredible sight of the Temple itself.

Before work began on the Temple, Herod spent eight years stockpiling materials for its construction. Then, a workforce of over 10,000 men began its construction including a contingent of 1,500 specially trained priests who were the only ones permitted to work on the innermost and holiest parts of the Temple. Building continued for a further twenty years, though the Temple was in a sufficiently ready state within three and a half years of its commencement to be dedicated.

If one was a pilgrim coming to Jerusalem, one would probably first go to the bank to change money as the coins of the realm, engraved with the head of Caesar were unacceptable for use in the Temple. The central "bank" in Jerusalem and some of the Law courts could be found on the Temple mount platform in a building called the royal portico or stoa. To reach this building (from which there was no direct access to the rest of the plaza) one climbed the stairs to an overpass that crossed over the main road and the markets that ran by the western wall. This overpass was another unique feat of engineering being the width of a four lane highway and possessing an arch made with stones having a combined weight of over 1,000 tons. In order to build this overpass the workers had to literally build a hill, construct the overpass on it, and then remove the hill leaving the overpass standing. Josephus describes the stoa that one reached via the overpass as follows: "...It was a structure more noteworthy than any under the sun. The height of the portico was so great that if anyone looked down from its rooftop he would become dizzy and his vision would be unable to reach the end of so measureless a depth..."; this from a man who had seen Rome in all its glory. He also describes the one hundred and sixty two columns that stood in the stoa as being so large that three men standing in a circle could just hold hands around one of their bases.

After changing money and before entering the Temple, the people were required to immerse themselves in a ritual bath. Despite the arid climate and meager natural water sources there were many such baths in the city, filled using a series of aqueducts and pipes that stretched over 50 miles, 80km. After ritual immersion the Temple was then accessed via the southern or Hulda gates. These gates led to tunnels built under the plaza that then emerged on to the plaza itself. The walls of these tunnels were lined with candles and the ceilings were carved and painted with intricate geometric designs simulating a Persian carpet.

Despite the magnificence of all that has already been detailed, undoubtedly the centrepiece of this majestic complex was the Temple itself. A building of shining white marble and gold, with bronze entrance doors, it was said that you could not look at the Temple in daylight as it would blind you. The attention to detail in its construction is exemplified by the placing of gold spikes on the roof line of the building to prevent birds sitting on the Temple and soiling it.

On their arrival pilgrims could hear the sounds of the Levites who sang and played musical

instruments at the entrance. The pilgrims would circle around the Temple seven times and then watch the various rituals, sit under the columned porticos that surrounded the plaza and listen or talk to the rabbis. The Temple area was divided into various areas for study, sacrifices, libation etc. and further divided according to a social hierarchy for gentiles, women, Israelites, Levites and Priests. Finally, in the centre of the Temple was the holy of holies, the innermost chamber of the Temple where the ark of the Law was kept. Only the High Priest was allowed to enter this inner sanctum, and then only once a year, on the Day of Atonement. So strict was the law governing entry to the holy of holies that the High Priest had to wear a belt around his waist so that in case of his unexpected death he could be pulled out without anyone else entering.

In the construction of the Temple nothing was overlooked. For example, in order to stop the inevitable crowding at the gates that would follow the conclusion of a service, the exiting stairs were designed to encourage people to spread out over a larger area. This attention to detail and the extraordinary feats of engineering were mirrored in the planning of the remainder of the city and its unique surrounds. The roads were made of paving stones weighing up to 19 tons, so stable that they hardly moved even when the massive stones from the walls above fell on them during the Temple's destruction. Beneath these pavements was a complex sewerage and water system that enabled collection of the run off water and conserved a resource whose scarcity and value was accentuated by its requirement for ritual bathing and the performing of sacrifices.

This abbreviated description of the Second Temple can only convey a semblance of the majestic sight that must have greeted the people of its time. Although it is impossible to recapture their experience in its entirety, the opportunity to visit the site in today's Jerusalem should not be missed.

The Destruction of the Second Temple
Flavius Josephus:

The Romans, though it was a terrible struggle to collect the timber, raised their platforms in twenty-one days, described before stripped the whole area in a circle round the town to a distance of ten miles. The countryside was a pitiful sight; for where once there had been a lovely vista of woods and parks there was nothing but stumps of trees. No one - not even a foreigner - who had seen the Old Judea and the glorious suburbs of the now set eyes on her present desolation, could have helped sighing and groaning at so terrible a change; for every beauty had been blotted out by war, and nobody who had known it in the past and came upon it suddenly would not have recognized the place: when he was already there he would still have been looking for the City. (Flavius Josephus, Jewish War, p. 303)

These Romans put the Jews to flight, and proceeded as far as the holy house itself. At which time one of the Jews, without staying for any orders, and without any concern or dread upon him at so great an undertaking, and being on by a certain divine fury, snatched some what out of the materials that were on fire, and being lifted up by a soldier, he set fire to a golden window, through which there was a passage to the rooms that were round about the house, on the north side of it. As the flames went upward, the Jews made a great clamour, such as so mighty a noise required, and ran together to prevent it; and now they spared not their lives any longer, nor suffered anything for their force, since that holy house was perishing . . . thus it was the holy house burnt down . . . Nor can one imagine anything greater or more terrible than this noise; for there was at once a shout of the Roman Legions, who were now gathered together, and a sad clamour of the seditious, who were now surrounded with fire and sword . . . the people upon their consternation, made sad moans at the calamity they were under . . . Yet was the misery itself more terrible

disorder; for one would have thought that the hill itself, on which the Temple stood, was seething hot, as full of fire, and that every part of it. (Josephus, Antiquities xi. 1.2)

To give a detailed account of their outrageous conduct is impossible, but we may sum it up by saying that no one has ever endured such horrors, and no generation in history has fathered such wickedness. In the end they brought the

Hebrew race into contempt in order to make their own impiety seem less outrageous in foreign eyes, and conceal the painful truth that they were slaves, the dregs of humanity, bastards, and outcasts of their nation.

. . . It is certain that when from the upper city they watched the Temple burning they did not turn a hair, though

Romans were moved to tears. (Josephus, The Jewish War, p. 292)

As the flames shot into the air the Jews sent up a cry that matched the calamity and dashed to the rescue, without

now of saving their lives or husbanding their strength; for that which hitherto they had guarded so devotedly was disappearing before their eyes. (Josephus, The Jewish War, p. 323)

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Source: [Gesher](#)