

Herod and the Temple

Bible History Online

The Construction of Herod's Temple & Rebuilding the Second Temple

None of the restorations or extensions of the Second Temple of Zerubbabel could compare with the work begun by King Herod I (the Great) at the beginning of 19 BC. Herod complained that the Temple of Zerubbabel was built like a fortress and was shorter than that of Solomon's Temple by about 90 feet because of a decree made by Darius, the Persian king. King Herod no doubt wanted to be remembered forever as the builder of the greatest temple of the Jews.

Although the reconstruction was equal to an entire rebuilding, still the Herodian Temple cannot be spoken of as a third Temple, for Herod even said himself, that it was only intended to be regarded as an enlarging and further beautifying of that of Zerubbabel's.

The work of rebuilding the Temple began in 19 BC which was the 18th year of King Herod's reign. There were 10,000 skilled laborers and according to Josephus (Ant. 15.11.2) the laity could not enter certain parts of the building, therefore 1000 Levites were specially trained as builders and masons, and carried out their work so efficiently and carefully that at no time was there any interruption in the sacrifices and other services. The work was started by leveling larger portions of the Temple Mount, so that the new building might be erected on a broader base. It was also made much taller, so that the white stone gleamed in the bright Palestinian sun and could be seen from miles away.

Wealthy Jews of the dispersion (those living outside Israel) sent costly offerings to enhance the magnificence of the place.

The construction began with the Holiest building in the Temple called The Holy Place, which contained the Holy of Holies. Then closest to the Holy Place was the portion set aside for the altar of burnt offering and the officiating priests. Next to it was the court for the Israelites who came to watch the service. By the side of that was the court of the women, and behind it was the court of the Gentiles with the royal porticos of Solomon. All around the Temple Mount beautiful marble porticos were constructed.

A wall surrounded the whole area and a small portion of it remains to this day, known as "The Wailing Wall."

Two large bridges connected the Temple with the city on the west.

While the main part of Herod's rebuilding was completed before his death in 4 BC, the work went on for more than 60 years after that. When Jesus visited the Temple at the first Passover of his ministry it was said that the place had by then been under construction for

46 years. The work was not entirely finished until 63 AD, only 7 years before the destruction of the entire Temple in 70 AD.

The following words appear on the website of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs:

"From the times of King Solomon to the return from the Babylonian exile and the Hasmonean period (tenth to first centuries BCE), the Temple Mount in Jerusalem was a relatively small platform built on top of Mount Moriah and its highest point was the Stone of Foundation; this was the site of the Temple. King Herod's greatest building project was to double the area of the Temple Mount by incorporating part of the hill to the northwest (which had to be leveled and on which he built the Antonia Fortress) and by filling up parts of the surrounding valleys. Herod transformed the Second Temple into an edifice of splendor and surrounded the Temple Mount on its four sides with massive retaining walls. The walls, founded on bedrock, were built of large ashlar stones with beautifully dressed margins. Each course was set back about 2 - 3 cm. from the course below it; the stones weigh some five tons each, the corner blocks tens of tons....