

Herod's Temple

Today's Catholic

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A history of the new temple built by King Herod the Great

The history of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, where King Herod's temple stood, goes back to Abraham, the father of the Jewish religion, in the 18th century B.C. On this mount where God ordered Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, God intervened and a ram was sacrificed instead. This event sanctified for all time the steep rocky summit we call the Temple Mount.

Eventually King David (1000-970 B.C.) captured Jerusalem and placed there the ark of the covenant, a portable chest on top of which the presence of God dwelt between two angels facing each other. This ark was housed in a tent. When King David built himself a beautiful palace, he felt the ark should not just be housed in a small tent, but in a grand temple. David's son Solomon (970-930 B.C.) eventually built the first temple for the Israelites. This temple was destroyed by the Babylonians from southern Iraq in 587 B.C. Many Israelites were taken into exile in Babylon.

When the Persians from Iran conquered Babylon in 538 B.C., they allowed the Israelites who wished to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. This new temple of Zerubbabel, a Judean prince who organized the rebuilding, was begun in 537 B.C. and dedicated in 515 B.C.

Father John McKenzie says the temple of Zerubbabel was of the same dimensions and structure as the temple of Solomon, but much inferior in the richness of its decorations. Eventually, with the Jewish conflict with their Seleucid or Syrian rulers like Antiochus IV (175-164 B.C.), the temple was probably severely damaged. This temple stood until the beginning of Herod the Great's new temple in 19 B.C.

The temple of Herod was built on massive quarried blocks still visible today at the Wailing Wall or Western Wall in Jerusalem where many Jews congregate to pray. Often they write out a prayer intention on a small piece of paper and place it in a crack in the wall. Baedeker says that politically Herod wanted to gain the favor of his Jewish subjects, so he rebuilt the temple by combining the requirements of the Jewish religion with elements of the Graeco-Roman style. He extended the area of the temple to its present size of 985 feet by 1,575 feet.

The outer forecourt was for temporal business and open to anyone. The inner forecourt was on a higher level and only Jews were allowed access. It was divided into three parts: the Women's Courtyard, the Courtyard of the male Israelites with the incense offering, and the Priests' Courtyard with an altar on which animals were sacrificed. In the center was the temple with a white marble façade and golden capitals. The temple of Herod

maintained the threefold division of Solomon's temple: the vestibule, the holy place and the holy of holies.

The holy place contained the altar of incense, the seven-branched lampstand, and the table of the shewbread or consecrated unleavened bread. The holy of holies was empty and dark and entered only by the high priest once a year on the Day of Atonement, the 10th day of the seventh month.

Father McKenzie says King Herod put 10,000 men to work and trained 1,000 priests as masons so they could work on the most sacred parts of the temple. The building was begun in 19 B.C. and finished in 10 years, but the work of decoration was not completely finished until A.D. 64. Six years later in A.D. 70, the Romans burned down and destroyed the temple at Jerusalem and it has never been rebuilt since.

Later on the Christian emperor Justinian (A.D. 527-564) built a church to the Blessed Virgin Mary on the Temple Mount.

The Muslim caliph Al Walid I (A.D. 705-715) turned Justinian's church into the El Aqsa Mosque that is there today. Earlier his father the Muslim caliph Abd el Malik (A.D. 687-691) built the Dome of the Rock over the spot where Abraham tried to sacrifice Isaac. This golden-domed structure is there today. The Muslims say that from this rock Mohammed ascended into seven heavens and then returned to Mecca

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