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Andrew Teasdale

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# Herod the Great's Building Program

Andrew Teasdale

Herod the Great, although remembered principally in Christian circles for his slaughter of the infants as stated in Matthew's gospel, also left his mark on the world's memory as an ambitious builder. Herod finally consolidated power in 37 B.C. and immediately began an extensive building program—one perhaps unequalled in the history of ancient Israel. Ehud Netzer declares that “Herod the Great's building projects in W Palestine constitute the most prominent in the country, for any single specific period or personality.” Herod's construction sites were located mainly in Western Palestine but also included places such as Antioch, Beirut, Damascus, and Rhodes.<sup>1</sup> The scope of his projects varied from simple monuments to public works, fortresses, palaces, and the magnificent temple in Jerusalem.

Our knowledge of Herod's building activities comes principally from archaeological remains, the writings of Flavius Josephus, and, in the instance of the temple in Jerusalem, the Mishnah. Several structures built by Herod are closely related to significant New Testament events, beginning with Zacharias's vision in the temple in Jerusalem and perhaps ending with Paul's departure to Rome from Herod's city of Caesarea.<sup>2</sup>

## Herodium

Rising from the Judean wilderness and located just three miles southeast of Bethlehem is Herodium. Strategically placed at the apex of a small hill, Herodium is one of the palace fortresses Herod constructed as a security measure. The fortress was circular, just over two hundred feet in diameter. An exterior wall with four



towers rose approximately one hundred feet above the original hill. The highest tower rose an additional fifty feet above the exterior wall. Huge quantities of soil were dumped around this exterior wall, creating a cone-shaped peak that gave the fortress the appearance of a volcano.<sup>3</sup>

This fortress dominated Bethlehem's skyline during New Testament times and remains a prominent feature of the region to this day. It certainly was, weather permitting, a landmark that Mary and Joseph would have looked for as they approached Bethlehem. Herodium may also have quartered the soldiers that carried out Herod's infant-extermination order.

### **Machaerus**

Machaerus is another palace fortress with New Testament significance. It is located about twelve miles south and three miles east of the Dead Sea's northern shore. Upon Herod's death, Machaerus became the property of Herod's son Antipas, who ruled a split realm that included the area east of the Dead Sea and also the area around the Sea of Galilee's western shore. Sometime before Jesus began his ministry, Antipas fell in love with his niece, Herodias, who was also his half-brother's wife, and later married her—a flagrant breach of Jewish law. One outspoken critic of Antipas's action was John the Baptist. Matthew records that Herod Antipas imprisoned John and wanted to execute him, but he was worried about the reaction of the people who viewed John as a prophet. However, in the fortress palace of Machaerus, Antipas was finally persuaded to take action:

But when Herod's birthday was kept, the daughter of Herodias danced before them, and pleased Herod. Whereupon he promised with an oath to give her whatsoever she would ask. And she, being before instructed of her mother, said, Give me here John Baptist's head in a charger. And the king was sorry: nevertheless for the oath's sake, and them which sat with him at meat, he commanded it to be given her. And he sent, and beheaded John in the prison. (Matt. 14:6-10)

### **Jericho**

Jericho, another palace complex related to New Testament events, is located about thirteen miles from Jerusalem





Terrace of the Northern Palace. This impressive structure is just one of Herod's many building projects at Masada.

and approximately one mile southwest of the Old Testament Jericho. With its mild winters, Jericho served as a winter palace for Jewish rulers and also as a crossroads and an agricultural center.

Construction of this complex was initiated by the Hasmoneans, who built several grand estates, the beginnings of a palace, gardens, bathhouses, swimming pools, and multiple channels to conduct water from the nearby springs. Herod made improvements to the Hasmonean structures and added three palaces, a theater, a reception hall, a sunken garden, a horse and chariot racing course, and possibly a gymnasium.<sup>4</sup>

Although only thirteen miles from Jerusalem, Jericho is more than 3,200 feet lower in elevation. In fact, Jericho has the distinction of being the lowest city on the earth's surface—approximately 825 feet below sea level. This phenomenon gives added meaning to Jesus' statement introducing the parable of the good Samaritan: "A certain man went *down* from Jerusalem to Jericho" (Luke 10:30; italics added).



Jesus visited Jericho at least once. The synoptic gospels record that he visited Jericho on his final ascent to Jerusalem (Mark 10:46). It is recorded that there he healed a blind man, stayed with short-statured Zacchaeus, and delivered the parable of the pounds (Luke 18:35-19:27).

### **Caesarea Maritima**

Another of Herod's projects was the city that he constructed and named Caesarea Maritima. He named it Caesarea in honor of Augustus Caesar; currently the qualifier *Maritima* is used to distinguish the city from Caesarea Philippi. Caesarea is located on the Mediterranean coast about fifty-five miles north-northwest of Jerusalem. It took from ten to twelve years to build the city, which was inaugurated in 10/9 B.C.<sup>5</sup> Caesarea was a large city (164 acres within the city wall) that included a theater, hippodrome, Roman temple, and more.<sup>6</sup> Josephus provides the best contemporaneous description of the city:

And when he observed that there was a place near the sea, formerly called Strato's Tower, which was very well suited to be the site of a city, he set about making a magnificent plan and put up buildings all over the city, not of ordinary material but of white stone. He also adorned it with a very costly palace, with civic halls and—what was greatest of all and required the most labour—with a well-protected harbour, of the size of Piraeus, with landing-places and secondary anchorages inside.<sup>7</sup>

To supply water for the city, Herod constructed an aqueduct upheld by a six-and-one-half-mile line of arches. This aqueduct carried water from a spring near the base of the Carmel mountain range to Caesarea. However, the spring did not provide sufficient water for the city. Herod's solution to the fresh-water problem was to combine the water from two sources. To supply the additional water, a tunnel was constructed from the head of the aqueduct through six miles of limestone foothills to another source of fresh water creating a twelve-and-one-half-mile aqueduct—six miles tunneled and six and one-half miles over arches.<sup>8</sup>

Herod also put the tidal action of the Mediterranean Sea to good use. He constructed the city with a sewer system open to the





Aqueduct for Caesarea. The portion of the aqueduct supported by arches was six and one-half miles long. To supply water to Caesarea, Herod also tunneled six miles through limestone hills. The Mediterranean Sea is in the background of this view.

sea and used the high tides to flush the sewer. This measure certainly cut down on the city's appeal as a seaside swimming resort but was an effective and labor-saving way to keep the city clean.

The harbor constructed at Caesarea was, like many of Herod's projects, massive as well as innovative. It was entirely artificial—the first of its kind in the ancient world. It extended some fifteen hundred feet into the Mediterranean Sea and actually consisted of a smaller harbor nested inside a larger one. The southern and northern breakwaters were approximately two hundred feet wide and one hundred fifty feet wide respectively. The sixty-foot-wide entrance was located at the northwestern portion of the harbor.<sup>9</sup>

Josephus records that the breakwaters were constructed by submerging massive stone blocks.<sup>10</sup> Archaeological excavations have revealed that in addition to large blocks forms and underwater concrete were used in the breakwaters' construction. One form thus far examined was forty-nine feet by thirty-nine feet by five feet. After the form was built, a type of underwater concrete



was used to fill the form. As each section was raised above sea level, the next section further out to sea was undertaken.<sup>11</sup>

Caesarea is the location of several significant New Testament events and has the distinction of being the first city where it is recorded that the gospel was preached to the Gentiles. Cornelius, the Roman centurion, was stationed in Caesarea when he had the vision that directed him to send for Peter. Peter responded by visiting Caesarea, preaching the gospel, and baptizing Cornelius and several of his associates (Acts 10).

There is an additional feature of Caesarea that is significant. Just to the south of the previously mentioned harbor, Herod built a seaside palace atop a small peninsula. Surrounded on three sides by water, this palace had a fresh-water pool as its central feature. The water for this nearly Olympic-sized pool (115 feet by 59 feet) was provided by channels cut into the rock at its eastern end. In the pool's center was a pedestal that probably supported a statue. A dining room was situated just east of the pool. This room had a beautiful multicolored tiled floor and an apse with a semicircular fountain. The palace also featured a Roman-style bath, colonnaded halls, and various serving rooms.

It is possible that this palace was the location of an important episode of Paul's life—his encounter with Agrippa.<sup>12</sup> After Paul's arrest in Jerusalem, he was brought to Caesarea. Several days later, Paul and his Jewish accusers met there before Festus, where Paul successfully defended himself against their charges and testified of Jesus' resurrection (Acts 25:18-19). Festus then offered Paul the opportunity to return to Jerusalem and defend himself there. But Paul, knowing of the Jewish plans for his murder and also knowing that he should go to Rome (Acts 23:11), asked to have his case tried before Caesar. Festus related these events to Agrippa, who was intrigued by what had happened and commanded that Paul appear before him:

Then Agrippa said unto Festus, I would also hear the man myself. To morrow, said he, thou shalt hear him. And on the morrow, when Agrippa was come, and Bernice, with great pomp, and was entered into the place of hearing, with the chief captains, and principal men of the city, at Festus' commandment Paul was brought forth. . . . Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Thou art permitted to speak for thyself. Then Paul stretched forth the hand, and answered for himself. (Acts 25:22-23; 26:1)



Paul then gave a stirring account of his vision and missionary labors and of the persecution he received at Jewish hands. Paul's testimony was such that Agrippa was convinced of his innocence (Acts 26:32) and even professed, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian" (Acts 26:28). Paul then embarked from the harbor at Caesarea for Rome.

## The Temple Complex at Jerusalem

Without doubt, the greatest of Herod's construction projects was the temple complex in Jerusalem and the platform on which it rested. The temple platform was a massive structure that dominated Jerusalem in New Testament times and was the largest structure of its kind in the Roman world.

**The Platform.** The temple platform rests at the top of a ridge that runs north-south through Jerusalem. The Kidron Valley borders on the east, and the Tyropoeon Valley on the west. The ridge slopes down to the south and has a gentle rise as it continues to the north. The platform as originally constructed by Solomon was nearly square and about 861 feet on each side. A later addition, added by the Hasmoneans in the second century B.C., extended the platform roughly 130 feet to the south.<sup>13</sup>

Herod constructed an enormous expansion of this platform. Due to the precipitous drop of the Kidron Valley, Herod did not extend the platform to the east. He did, however, extend the platform in all other directions. When completed, it measured approximately 172,000 square yards.<sup>14</sup> The extensions to the south and west required the most effort because in these areas the hill's downward slope required the construction of massive retaining walls and a series of arches to support the platform. The retaining walls "towered more than 80 feet above the roadways . . . and reached over 50 feet below street level."<sup>15</sup> It is generally thought that one of these corners is the pinnacle of the temple where the second temptation occurred (Matt. 4:5-7).<sup>16</sup>

Many New Testament events occurred on this platform including Simeon and Anna's identification of the Messiah (Luke 2:25-38), Jesus' teaching of the doctors (Luke 2:46-49), many events of Jesus' ministry, and Peter and John's healing of the lame man (Acts 3:1-8).



**The Royal Portico.** Across the southern end of the platform, Herod built a royal portico, or stoa. There are no archaeological remains of this structure, as it was completely destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70.<sup>17</sup> However, Josephus did provide an excellent description of this building:

The fourth front of this (court), facing south, also had gates in the middle, and had over it the Royal Portico, which had three aisles, extending in length from the eastern to the western ravine. . . . Now the columns (of the portico) stood in four rows, one opposite the other all along—the fourth row was attached to a wall built of stone,—and the thickness of each column was such that it would take three men with outstretched arms touching one another to envelop it; its height was twenty-seven feet, and there was a double moulding running round its base. The number of all the columns was a hundred and sixty-two, and their capitals were ornamented in the Corinthian style of carving, which caused amazement by the magnificence of its whole effect. Since there were four rows, they made three aisles among them, under the porticoes. Of these the two side ones corresponded and were made in the same way, each being thirty feet in width, a stade in length, and over fifty feet in height. But the middle aisle was one and a half times as wide and twice as high, and thus it greatly towered over those on either side. The ceilings (of the porticoes) were ornamented with deeply cut wood-carvings representing all sorts of different figures. The ceiling of the middle aisle was raised to a greater height, and the front wall was cut at either end into architraves with columns built into it, and all of it was polished, so that these structures seemed incredible to those who had not seen them, and were beheld with amazement by those who set eyes on them.<sup>18</sup>

This building possibly served as a meeting place for Jewish leaders and may have been a regrouping area after their verbal forays with Jesus. It is also probable that this building was the banking center for the temple and the location of the money changers; hence it was presumably through this building that Jesus stormed with his scourge and overturned the money changers' tables.<sup>19</sup>

**The Antonia Fortress.** At the northwestern corner of this platform, Herod constructed the Antonia Fortress. Because this building was also destroyed by the Romans, once again Josephus provides the details about the building.<sup>20</sup> The fortress was roughly rectangular in shape and built upon a rock escarpment. Its appearance was "that of a tower with other towers at each of the four corners; three of these turrets were fifty cubits high, while that at the



south-east angle rose to seventy cubits, and so commanded a view of the whole area of the temple."<sup>21</sup> The Antonia provided the Roman soldiers garrisoned there an excellent view of the platform and the crowds that often assembled below. As the temple platform was an assembly place for the Jewish people, there were many skirmishes there between the Roman soldiers and the Jewish crowds. One of these skirmishes involved Paul.

And all the city was moved, and the people ran together: and they took Paul, and drew him out of the temple: and forthwith the doors were shut. And as they went about to kill him, tidings came unto the chief captain of the band, that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. Who immediately took soldiers and centurions, and ran down unto them: and when they saw the chief captain and the soldiers, they left beating of Paul.

Then the chief captain came near, and took him, and commanded him to be bound with two chains; and demanded who he was, and what he had done. And some cried one thing, some another, among the multitude: and when he could not know the certainty for the tumult, he commanded him to be carried into the castle. And when he came upon the stairs, so it was, that he was borne of the soldiers for the violence of the people. For the multitude of the people followed after, crying, Away with him. And as Paul was to be led into the castle, he said unto the chief captain, May I speak unto thee?

Who said, Canst thou speak Greek? Art not thou that Egyptian, which before these days madest an uproar, and leddest out into the wilderness four thousand men that were murderers?

But Paul said, I am a man which am a Jew of Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city: and, I beseech thee, suffer me to speak unto the people.

And when he had given him licence, Paul stood on the stairs, and beckoned with the hand unto the people. And when there was made a great silence, he spake unto them in the Hebrew tongue. (Acts 21:30-40)

Paul, standing on the stairs of the Antonia, then proceeded to tell his conversion story. The Jews were enraged by his words, and the uproar prompted the chief captain to bind Paul and deliver him into the Antonia to be scourged. At this point, Paul played his trump card and informed the captain that he was a Roman citizen. A short time later, Paul was removed from the Antonia and taken to Caesarea.

It is possible that the Antonia served as the location of another significant New Testament event. Although Caesarea was



the official residence for the Roman procurator, many times he governed directly from Jerusalem during the Jewish holidays, which were often marked by violent outbursts against the Romans. While visiting Jerusalem, Pilate resided at Herod's palace in the upper city or, when there was concern of a possible outbreak, in the Antonia. It is therefore possible that Pilate lodged in the Antonia during the Passover season just days after Jerusalem welcomed a new Jewish king.

Late Thursday night or early Friday morning before that fateful Passover, Jesus was arrested by the Jews in a garden just east of the temple. He was taken to Caiaphas's palace and there found guilty of blasphemy and worthy of death (Mark 14:64). Jesus was subsequently delivered to Pilate, and it may have been at the Antonia, just beyond the temple's shadow, that Pilate declared, "I find no fault in this man" (Luke 23:4). Later, Pilate offered the people the choice of freeing either Jesus or Barabbas, and the temple courtyard rang with the cry, "Crucify him" (Luke 23:21).

**The Temple.** The showpiece of the complex certainly was the Jewish temple. It was a massive structure, rising over 200 feet above the surrounding platform with an exterior at least partially covered in gold.



Computer-generated model of Herod's Temple, southern view



The exterior of the building wanted nothing that could astound either mind or eye. For, being covered on all sides with massive plates of gold, the sun was no sooner up than it radiated so fiery a flash that persons straining to look at it were compelled to avert their eyes, as from the solar rays. To approaching strangers it appeared from a distance like a snow-clad mountain; for all that was not overlaid with gold was of purest white.<sup>22</sup>

The temple's front facade was about 172 feet high and 172 feet broad—the same as the length of the temple. The entrance was ornamented with golden vines and oversized grape clusters.<sup>23</sup> In front of the doors to the temple hung a “Babylonian tapestry, with embroidery of blue and fine linen, of scarlet also and purple, wrought with marvelous skill.”<sup>24</sup>

This tapestry hung in front of two sets of double doors that opened into the holy place. The holy place was just over thirty-four feet wide, sixty-nine feet long, and sixty-nine feet high (twenty cubits by forty cubits by forty cubits) and contained three items: the golden lampstand (or menorah), the table of shewbread, and the altar of incense.

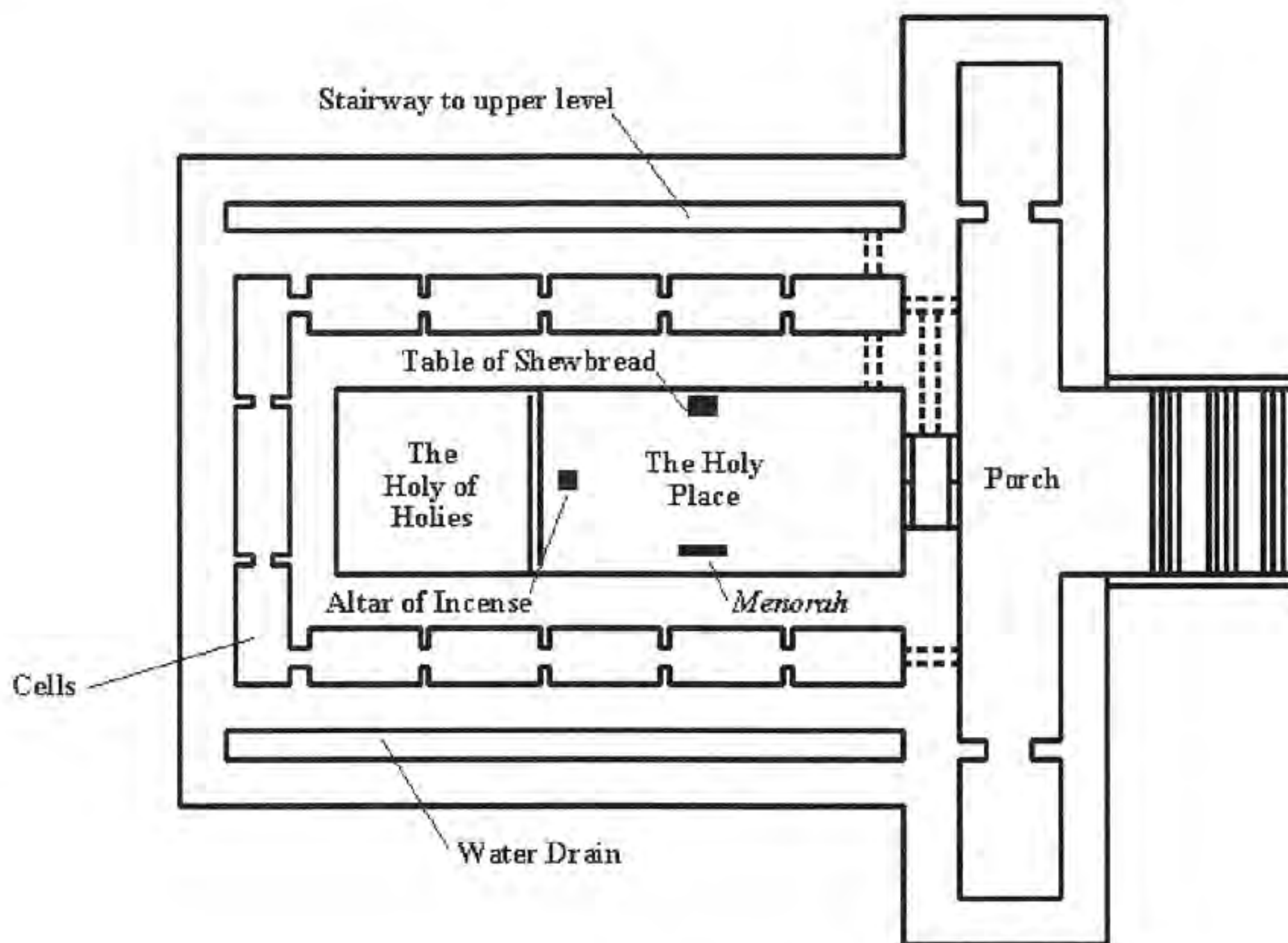
The holy place was separated from the Holy of Holies by two veils. The Holy of Holies was empty during New Testament times. In Solomon's temple, this room held the Ark of the Covenant, but by the time of Christ the Ark had been lost.

Around the Holy of Holies and the holy place were storage rooms, a water drain, and a stairway that provided access to the upper floor. The upper floor contained two rooms with the same dimensions as the holy place and Holy of Holies.

Although Jesus never entered the temple,<sup>25</sup> he initially recognized it as his father's house (John 2:16) and later claimed it as his own (Mark 11:17). The temple was the location of the first recorded New Testament event:

There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judaea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were now well stricken in years. And it came to pass, that while he executed the priest's office before God in the order of his course, According to the custom of the priest's office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into





Herod's Temple

the temple of the Lord. And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense. And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. (Luke 1:5-11)

When the angel visited him, Zacharias was standing before the altar of incense in the holy place of the temple that had been built under Herod's direction.

## Conclusion

From the angel's visit to Zacharias until Paul's departure from Caesarea to Rome, Herod's buildings provided the setting for many New Testament events. Netzer observes, "No doubt Herod had a deep understanding for building and architecture. The wide range of original ideas, the buildings' outstanding locations, and the unique combination of functions (such as at Herodium and Jericho's hippodrome) are clear evidence of Herod's personal role in the initiative as well as the implementation of these vast building activities."<sup>26</sup> Herod's architectural skill ensured that his buildings would endure



for many ages, and it is entirely possible that some of these structures will yet provide the setting for significant future events for Israel and Christendom.

Andrew Teasdale is a graduate student at Utah State University.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See Ehud Netzer, "Herod's Building Program," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3:169-72.

<sup>2</sup>For a complete listing of other structures built by Herod, see Josephus, *Antiquities* vol. 8, appendix D, 579.

<sup>3</sup>See Ehud Netzer, "Herodium," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 3:176-180.

<sup>4</sup>See Ehud Netzer, "Jericho," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 3:723-40.

<sup>5</sup>Josephus, *Antiquities* 15.341.

<sup>6</sup>See Robert J. Bull, "Caesarea Maritima: The Search for Herod's City," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 8 (May-June 1982): 27.

<sup>7</sup>Josephus, *Antiquities* 15.331-32.

<sup>8</sup>Bull, "Caesarea Maritima," 29.

<sup>9</sup>See Robert L. Hohlfelder, "Caesarea beneath the Sea," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 8 (May-June 1982): 44.

<sup>10</sup>Josephus, *Jewish War* 1.411-12.

<sup>11</sup>See Linley Vann, "Herod's Harbor Construction Recovered Underwater," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 9 (May-June 1983): 10-14.

<sup>12</sup>Barbara Burrell, Kathryn Gleason, and Ehud Netzer, "Uncovering Herod's Seaside Palace," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 19 (May-June 1993): 50-57, 76.

<sup>13</sup>See Leen Ritmeyer, "Locating the Original Temple Mount," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 18 (March-April 1992): 24-45, 64-65.

<sup>14</sup>Approximately 1,550 feet (north-south) by 1,000 feet.

<sup>15</sup>Ehud Netzer, "Temple, Jerusalem" in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6:365. Netzer also points out that the platform's retaining walls were made of stone blocks varying in size. The largest block discovered thus far measures more than forty feet long. It is estimated that this stone weighs more than 100 tons (for comparison, the largest stone at Stonehenge weighs 40 tons).

<sup>16</sup>Traditionally, the southeast corner has been identified as the location for the second temptation. I believe the argument is stronger for the southwest corner. Since a possible focus of the second temptation was that of worldly recognition, the southwest corner makes better sense. An individual falling without harm from this corner would have been in full view of all the people in the busiest areas surrounding the temple platform, whereas the same event happening at the southeast corner would have been seen by a much smaller population.

<sup>17</sup>The royal portico rested atop Herod's extension of the platform's southern end. Although the portico was completely destroyed, much of Herod's extension remains to this day. Ritmeyer believes that his study of this extension has



provided sufficient information to determine the longitudinal axis of the three rows of pillars (the fourth row was part of the portico's southern wall) that supported the portico's roof. See Leendert Petrus Ritmeyer, "The Architectural Developments of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Manchester, 1992), 237-52.

<sup>18</sup>Josephus, *Antiquities* 15.411, 413-16.

<sup>19</sup>It is interesting to note that the animals were probably held at the north end of the temple platform as the pools in which the animals were washed were located just to the north of the platform. The cleansing of the temple was not a small incident. It could have ranged across the entire length of the platform.

<sup>20</sup>Due to political sensitivities and the fact that buildings have been constructed over the previous location of the Antonia Fortress, it is not possible to conduct any archaeological excavations in the area. However, Michael Burgoyne has located what he believes to be a wall (over thirteen feet thick) remaining from the Antonia Fortress. See Michael Hamilton Burgoyne, *Mamluk Jerusalem: An Architectural Study* (London: Published on behalf of the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem by the World of Islam Festival Trust, 1987), 204.

<sup>21</sup>Josephus, *Jewish War* 5.242.

<sup>22</sup>Josephus, *Jewish War* 5.222-23.

<sup>23</sup>Josephus, *Jewish War* 5.210.

<sup>24</sup>Josephus, *Jewish War* 5.212.

<sup>25</sup>There are several reasons for presuming that Jesus did not enter the temple itself. First, according to Jewish law, Jesus did not hold the proper priesthood office to enter the temple. If he had entered the temple, mention of this event and the corresponding outrage by the Jewish leaders probably would appear in the Gospels. Second, two Greek words with significant differences in meaning have been translated simply as "temple" in the King James Version. The Greek word *naos* most often refers to the actual temple structure. The Greek word *hieron* refers to the "temple at Jerusalem, including the whole temple precinct w.[ith] its buildings, courts, etc." Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), s.v. "*hieron*." For example, in Luke 1:9, Zacharias burned incense in the *naos*. In Matthew 21:12, Jesus went in to the *hieron* to cast out those who "sold and bought," meaning he did not enter the temple itself but the surrounding precinct. The word *hieron* is used in the references to Jesus being in the temple.

<sup>26</sup>Netzer, "Herod's Building Program," 3:172.