The Jewish Connection: Judaism, Jerusalem, and the Temple

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THE JEWISH CONNECTION: JUDAISM, JERUSALEM, AND THE Temple

Jerusalem’s intrinsic holiness within Judaism has its roots in the history and mythology of the religion. Even as the world was created, Jerusalem was intended to be the sacred site for the Temple. Scriptural accounts often reverence that future site as a place for divine experiences to occur. In time the holy Temple was built, finally allowing the Jews a chance to worship. Yet, the magnificent structure was destroyed and the Jews scattered, destroying the Jewish dream. Continuing until today, the Temple and the city of Jerusalem have remained holy in Judaism.

INTRODUCTION

“If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget [her cunning]. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy” (Psalm 137:5-6)* Such were the sentiments of the Psalmist almost three millennia ago, and these feelings are still carried within the soul of the religious Jew to this very day. Rabbinic tradition teaches that “there is no beauty like that of Jerusalem,” and that, “of the ten measures of beauty that came down from heaven, Jerusalem received nine.” Additionally, whoever has not seen Jerusalem in all its splendor has never seen a beautiful city in his or her life. From the time it began its greatest rise in prominence during the reigns of King David and Solomon (c. 1000-950 B.C.E.), Jerusalem has been the center of Judaism both physically and spiritually. In fact, at least twice each day the orthodox follow the example of Daniel when they face Jerusalem to pray. The sacred character of the city is simply unparalleled within the faith.

Three of the world’s most influential religions—Christianity, Judaism, and Islam—all revere Jerusalem with the warmest affection. Christianity and Islam share a common thread in that the greatest individuals within both faiths participated in their most significant spiritual experiences there. Within the minds and hearts of the followers of Jesus of Nazareth, it was the ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection of their Lord and Savior that forever imbued the city with absolute holiness. For Muslims, the spiritual prominence of Jerusalem was established as a result of the night-vision of Muhammad, who was carried from Mecca, across the Arabian desert, and ascended into the highest heaven from Mount Moriah (where the al-Aksa mosque and the Dome of the Rock are currently located). This event later established Jerusalem second only to Mecca in importance within Islamic tradition. Although Abraham is often viewed as the father of Judaism, practically speaking the role of founder was filled by Moses when he became their great prophet and priest. For all intents and purposes, the Jewish religion was born

*All biblical scriptures are quoted from the King James Version of the Bible, unless otherwise noted.
at Mount Sinai, where he received the divine law that would come to govern their lives to this very day.

If the Jewish nation was born at Sinai, then the forty-year journey through the barren wilderness was the babe’s cradle, Canaan was its childhood, and Jerusalem would become its highest school of learning. Even today, it provides and teaches the most difficult lessons of human life. The events that took place anciently provided Jerusalem’s inhabitants and the Jews in general with extreme tests of faith. Today, even when all the other issues seem to have a possible resolution, Jerusalem is the biggest sticking point in negotiations. Thus, the city remains a crucible in the sometimes painful tests of one’s faith. What is most important to this discussion, however, is that, unlike Christianity and Islam, the place where the foundational event in Jewish history took place. Mount Sinai, is not given the greatest veneration. Granted, this may have a lot to do with the fact that no one knows for sure exactly where Mount Sinai is, that the Sinai peninsula is currently controlled by an Arab nation, or even, as David Goldstein suggests, that it may be due to the original prohibition against drawing close to the mountain (Exodus 19:12, 21–24). Regardless, the fact that Mount Sinai is not given the most veneration remains true nonetheless. Then what is it that sets Jerusalem apart from the rest of the world? The holiness and sanctity of Jerusalem within the Jewish psyche can be attributed to its most sacred shrine—the Temple.

**Jerusalem in the Jewish Cosmos**

“The concept of ‘holy site,’ with the exception of Jerusalem and the Temple, hardly figures in early rabbinic literature,” observes Goldstein. This is most certainly true, and where there are exceptions, they almost always deal with temple-types, such as Mount Sinai and the tabernacle. Jewish lore and legends are rich in discussions of the cosmological significance of Jerusalem (i.e., the geographical layout of this planet and the entire universe in relationship to the city). These traditions provide us with some of the most vivid proofs that the Temple is the axiom around which the holiness of Jerusalem spins within Judaism. Therefore, I would like to begin by reviewing several examples, each of which have become models or paradigms that illustrate the centrality of the Temple and by extension, Jerusalem. As Joshua Leibowitz observes, “When the universal character of the center of divine worship is emphasized, . . . there is no clear distinction between the Temple and the city.” These are not to be taken as literal presentations of the way things physically are, though it is almost certain that anciently many individuals accepted them as such. Rather, this is meant to present a spiritual or philosophical understanding of the relative importance of Jerusalem, and, in particular, the Temple, to the rest of creation.

Our first legend is based upon a biblical idiom dealing with interpersonal relationships, which has even carried into the modern Hebrew language. This phrase is scattered throughout the scriptures, and it speaks of finding favor in the eyes of another, whether the other is an individual or even God. Tucked within the legends surrounding the creation of Adam, Louis Ginzberg reports a tradition that says that “the world resembles the ball of his [God’s] eye: the ocean that encircles the earth is like unto the white of the eye, the dry land is the iris. Jerusalem the pupil, and the Temple the image mirrored in the pupil of the eye.” In Western tradition, the eye has become “the window” to one’s soul. In modern Hebrew, to find favor in the eyes of someone is typically used in context of the expressions of affection between a man and a woman. The eye is the organ which provides the ability to visibly perceive the world. If the Temple is mirrored in God’s eye, that means it is ever-present in His eyes. The implication should be clear, then, that in the eyes of the Lord, the most holy and significant spot on earth is the Temple of Jerusalem.

The Temple of Jerusalem is also viewed as that which provides nourishment and order to the rest of the world. In other words, without the sustenance which flows from the Temple, the world would be in utter chaos and eventually die from “starvation.” A pseudepigraphic writing attributed to Philo called Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum (LAB) presents this concept through a fascinating metaphor. Moses pleads on behalf of the Children of Israel following the golden calf incident:

 Thou art God who has planted one vine, and hast set its roots in the abyss, and hast stretched out its branches up to Thy highest seat. . . . And now, if Thou be angry with Thy vine, and uproot it from the abyss and dry up its branches from Thy highest and everlasting seat, never again shall the abyss come to nourish it, nor shall Thy throne come to refresh that vine of Thine which Thou hast burned. For Thou art He who art all light, and hast decorated Thy house with precious stones and with gold, and also with perfumes, spices and balsam-wood, and cinnamon, and with roots of myrrh and costum Thou hast...
Jerusalem and the Temple are inseparable, so are these. If therefore Thou hast no pity on Thy vine, O Lord, all things have been made for nothing, and Thou shalt not have anyone to glorify Thee. . . For if Thou shouldst abandon the world completely, then who will perform for Thee what Thou hast spoken as God?

Notice that, in this passage, the concept of the vine of Israel is intertwined with the Temple. Just as Jerusalem and the Temple are inseparable, so are these two ideas. In fact, the Bible supports the notion that this concept did actually originate at the time of the Exodus. In a song of triumphant exultation after the Children of Israel miraculously passed through the Red Sea, they proclaimed, "Thou [God] shalt bring them [the Israelites] in, and plant them in the mountain of thine inheritance, in the place, O Lord, which thou hast made for thee to dwell in, in the Sanctuary, O Lord, which thy hands have established" (Exodus 15:17, emphasis added). Thus, the vine could never be fully planted without a sacred shrine, or in other words, holy ground in which to plant it. Furthermore, not only is Israel dependent upon this planting, but the vine is also the link between the three cosmic zones—the abyss or underworld, the earth, and the heavens. It is essentially an axis mundi, or center around which the world rotates, and if God removed it, the world would cease to exist.

Hayward sums up the intimate connection between the Temple, the vine, and the physical world this way: "If Israel is uprooted, the earthly sanctuary which Moses has been ordered to construct according to an heavenly exemplar will never be built, and then creation will have been in vain, to no purpose, for God will have no one to glorify Him. The vine-symbol belongs firmly in the realm of beliefs about the Temple." In later verses, the LAB also teaches that after the Fall of Adam, chaos was unleashed into the world, and order was only re-established following the Flood through the sacrificial offerings made by Noah. Further, the sacrifices of Noah were simply precursors to those prescribed in the Law of Moses, which can only be properly performed in a temple. Thus the festivals, along with their sacrificial rites, both of which took place at the Temple, were viewed not only as providing seasonal harmony and agricultural success, but order to the entire world. If the vine were to be cut down and, as a result, the Temple left desolate, it would then mean "the end of the world as they knew it," because as long as the Temple "stands, and the Service is maintained, Jews provide for non-Jews an order providing the food and sustenance without which human life would be impossible.

This tradition becomes even more intriguing when placed next to one of our oldest firsthand descriptions of the Temple given by Aristeas, a Greek courtier of Ptolemy II (285–246 B.C.E.). The Temple has always been perceived as a conduit, so to speak, reaching into the heavens and carrying forth the petitions of humankind, which is the reasoning behind praying in the direction of the Temple. It is as if one's prayer traverses horizontally until it reaches the Temple where it is then carried upward into the celestial realms. However, the Temple's opposing connection to the abyss or underworld has not always been as clear. The vine metaphor mentions that its branches stretched high into the heavens, and its roots reached deep below into the watery abyss, which has often been associated with the chaotic waters of creation from which the world was created and land first emerged. Whether he intended to or not, Aristeas helps provide a possibility for the missing link. He writes that the Temple had an "endless supply of water, as if indeed a strongly flowing natural spring were issuing forth from within." He appears to be absolutely awestruck and then describes in some detail the underground reservoirs which flowed in and around the foundations of the Temple.

When water is mentioned in a mystical or religious context, there are often two dichotomous symbols that emerge. John Lundquist points out that "water has a two-fold imagery, life-giving and destructive." Isaiah uses the concept of water to teach that whoever is not in line with the "sure foundation" or cornerstone of the Temple will be swept away by destructive waters (Isaiah 28:16–17). Ezekiel's prophecy, on the other hand, illustrates the life-giving power of water as it flows from the Temple eastward and heals the most mineral encumbered liquid on the planet—the Dead Sea (Ezekiel 47). Aristeas' description seems to illustrate both concepts at once; that life-giving waters flow forth from the Temple to the rest of the earth, as well as the notion that the Temple was founded upon the waters of chaos from which the earth was created. Therefore, the Temple has its roots in the primordial waters of creation, which provide the cosmos with nourishment, as previously noted by Philo in his vine metaphor. This leads nicely to the most vivid cosmological models of all—certainly they have become the most famous—each of which may be placed within the category of Jewish creation mythology.

Whether it be the world itself, a city, a sacred shrine, or even one's home, Mircea Eliade argues that
"a universe comes to birth from its center; it spreads out from a central point that is, as it were, its navel . . . every construction or fabrication has the cosmogony as paradigmatic model." Hebrew tradition supports this paradigm stating that "The Most Holy One created the world like an embryo. As the embryo grows from the navel, so God began to create the world by the navel and from there it spread out in all directions." Where is the navel of the earth? According to the Midrash, "As the navel is set in the middle of a person so is Eretz Israel the navel of the world, as it is said: 'That dwell in the navel of the earth' [Ezekial 38:12]. Eretz Israel is located in the center of the world. Jerusalem in the center of Eretz Israel, the Temple in the center of Jerusalem, the heikhal in the center of the Temple, the ark in the center of the heikhal, and in front of the heikhal is the evan sheetyah ("foundation stone") from which the world was started." Though it is debated amongst scholars, one will notice the implication here that Ezekiel is the source of this concept. Regardless of the source, the ultimate center of centers is the stone upon which the ark of the covenant was placed in the Holy of Holies. One end of the umbilical cord of the earth is connected to the Temple: the opposite end is connected to its source of life—the heavens. One Rabbi summarized the idea this way: "It is called the Foundation Stone of the Earth, that is, the navel of the Earth, because it is from there that the whole Earth unfolded."

Ginzberg helps explain the source and reasoning behind this myth. He writes that the Holy Land was "created before all other parts of the world . . . Instead of Palestine in general, Jerusalem . . . or the site of the temple is designated as the beginning of creation. The widespread popular notion that the earth came into being as a result of a stone which God had thrown into the water . . . was subsequently brought into relation with the view that creation began with the site of the temple; hence the legend that creation began with the stone found in the holy of holies."

Seth Kunin spends some time in his book God's Place in the World debating the question of whether or not Jerusalem is holy intrinsically or contextually. In other words, did the Temple imbue the city with holiness (contextually) or is it holy in and of itself (intrinsically), regardless of whether or not the Temple was built there? Kunin argues against the notion of Jerusalem’s intrinsic holiness. However, if these myths carry a kernel of truth, they, along with other historical events will mention later, would certainly indicate otherwise.

In modern Hebrew, there are several verbs used to describe movement from one location to another. To go somewhere is to balalah. To travel somewhere, as on a trip, is to navi. However, there are unique verbs used to describe going to and from Jerusalem. The word used for going there is alah, which literally means to go up or ascend. It is from this root that the noun aliya comes, which is emigration to Israel from any other country. The verb used to describe leaving the city, regardless of destination, is yarid, which literally means to go down or descend. Therefore, one does not simply go to the city of Jerusalem—one ascends to the city of Jerusalem. This can best be seen in the Book of Psalms, where the author asks, "Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? or who shall stand in his holy place?" (Psalm 24:3), which is a clear reference to the Temple. The reasoning for this is two-fold. First, the Temple Mount actually is a hill one may physically ascend from all sides. Even more importantly, according to tradition, Jerusalem is the highest spot on earth, and, by extension then, when individuals leave, no matter where they are going, they always descend from the city.

This notion has its roots in the legends that associate the Temple Mount with the primordial mound and cosmic mountain. "In ancient Israel . . . it was the first solid material to emerge from the waters of creation, and it was upon this stone that the deity effected creation." Donald Parry notes the following: "Identified as the consecrated topos, the primordial mound represented order and definition amidst the unruly chaotic waters." Logically, the first land to emerge as the waters receded would have been the tops of the mountains, they being the most physically high. It stands to reason that they would also be viewed the highest spiritually because of their proximity to the heavens. The top of the mountain is the highest point on earth and the lowest point in the heavens, and therefore it serves as the meeting place between the two—the place where the human may commune with the divine. In fact, according to "the ancient Hebrew conception of the universe, God was thought to reside near the North Star, 'the point around which the constellations turned, where was located the summit of the heavenly mountain and the throne of the Most High.'" This heavenly prototype came to be known as Mount Zion; Isaiah, having had direct and personal interaction with God in the temple built there, beautifully intertwined the concept of a mountain-building when he called it "the mountain of the Lord's house" (Isaiah 2:2).
Whether or not the above legends are historically, cosmologically, or astronomically accurate is not important. Myths, legends, and symbols reach beyond the scientific mind, filling the soul with concepts that greatly enhance one’s awareness, and in this particular case, reveals Jerusalem’s hierophantic nature within Judaism. Each model serves to heighten the cosmic sacrality of Jerusalem psychologically. When Jews speak of the sanctity of the city, they do so with the idea that philologically the ultimate center of the world itself is the foundation stone upon which the ark of the covenant rested in the Holy of Holies. It is the naval of the earth, linking the heavens, the earth, and the underworld as an umbilical cord or vine, providing all creation with physical and spiritual nourishment. In fact, it is the very place from which all creation sprang forth, including human-kind. According to tradition, Adam himself was formed out of the dust of Jerusalem. Therefore, in every way conceivable, Jerusalem’s Mount Zion is the center place. 

JERUSALEM’S HISTORICAL TRADITION

As I have just mentioned, according to one rabbinic tradition, the father of the human race was not simply created from dust of the earth, but rather, as expected, the dust of Jerusalem’s Temple Mount. An original and somewhat unique Rabbinic tradition states that “Adam was created from the dust of the place where the sanctuary was to rise for the atonement of all human sin, so that sin should never be a permanent or inherent part of man’s nature.” Adam is also viewed as the first high priest in a line of succession reaching all the way down to Aaron, whose family carried the burden of performing all the sacrificial rituals of the temple. Lastly, not only was Adam created in Jerusalem and later offered sacrifice on an altar there as the first priest, he was laid to rest there as well. The Encyclopedia of Freemasonry notes a prophecy that says Adam’s body was to be kept above ground “till a fullness of time should come to commit it to the middle of the earth by a priest of the most high God.” According to tradition, this apparently came to pass as the body of Adam was “preserved in a chest until about 1800 B.C., when Melchizedek buried the body in Salem (formerly the name of Jerusalem), which might very well be the middle of the habitable world.”

If Adam’s birth, life, and death all centered in the area of Jerusalem and the Temple, what might that imply about the Garden of Eden? Ancient texts written by Jesus ben Sira and the Book of Jubilees both, “in their different ways, bring Adam into direct association with the Temple understood as Eden.” However, Ezekiel is apparently the earliest author to provide a possible connection. Speaking to the King of Tyre metaphorically as if the King were Adam, he wrote: “Thou hast been in Eden the garden of God. . . . Thou art the anointed cherub that covereth; and I have set thee so: thou wast upon the holy mountain of God. . . . Thou wast perfect in thy ways from the day that thou wast created, till iniquity was found in thee. . . . therefore I will cast thee as profane out of the mountain of God.” There is clearly an implied connection between the holy mountain, which is the Temple Mount, and the Garden of Eden. Donald Parry has summarized succinctly the association of the Garden with the cosmic mountain and the Temple.

The temple became “the architectural embodiment of the cosmic mountain.” More importantly, however, the temple building was constructed upon a mountain or hillock of known importance. The temples of Jerusalem . . . all being constructed upon the identical mount, were part of a continuing tradition of sacred events that occurred there. What once was a sacred topos now became a sacred topos with a sacred architecture superimposed upon it.

Thus, from Adam’s days in the Garden of Eden, the Temple Mount in Jerusalem was established as the holiest spot for Judaism.

The theme of the Book of Jubilees centers in and around the Israelite calendrical and sacrificial system. One of its unique characteristics is that it draws upon the lives of the ancient patriarchs to provide an implied timing for the institution of the ritual practices that eventually became part of the Law of Moses. Thus, the author seems to imply that the lives of the individuals mentioned have a strong connection to the temple or temple worship. For example, Enoch “burnt the incense of the sanctuary, (even) sweet spices, acceptable before the Lord on the Mount. For the Lord has four places on the earth, the Garden of Eden, and the Mount of the East, and this mountain on which thou [Moses] art this day, Mount Sinai, and Mount Zion (which) will be sanctified in the new creation for a sanctification of the earth; through it will the earth be sanctified from all (its) guilt and its uncleanness throughout the generations of the world” (Jubilees
4:25–26). Notice that although four holy places are mentioned, it is from Mount Zion that purity will flow, cleansing the whole earth. This reference has clear implications connecting the offering made by Enoch to the most holy day of the year within Judaism, the Day of Atonement, during which offerings were made for the benefit of the entire world.

The Book of Jubilees goes on to teach that Noah "knew that the Garden of Eden is the holy of holies, and the dwelling of the Lord, and Mount Sinai the centre of the desert, and Mount Zion—the centre of the navel of the earth: these three were created as holy places facing each other" (Jubilees 8:19). Therefore, it is understood that even Noah recognized the importance of the Temple Mount, seeing it as the center of the world. The Tamid, or the "continual" sacrifice offered in the morning and evening each day in the Temple, is also linked to Noah, along with several other sacrificial rites in the Law of Moses. Hayward summarizes:

When the . . . Tamid is sacrificed, therefore, the writer of Jubilees expects his readers to recall, first, Noah's sacrifice on leaving the ark and its biblical consequences; second, the covenant which Noah made not to eat blood; third, the covenant renewed with blood by Moses on Mount Sinai; fourth, the Feast of Weeks on which this covenant was ratified; and fifth, the forgiveness which the Tamid itself implores from God."

The suggestion that is important is the connection between the sacrifices offered in the Temple and those offered by the ancient patriarch, which were viewed as bringing order to the entire universe. Once again it illustrates the prominence of the Temple with its connected rituals; just as one cannot separate Jerusalem from the Temple when speaking of the city's sanctity, one cannot speak of the Temple without its constituent ordinances. Thus, the Temple adds to the city's intrinsic holiness to the Jewish psyche.

Many years later, Melchizedek ruled in the Jerusalem area. The Old Testament provides us with precious little information about Melchizedek other than the fact he was the king of a city called Salem, as well as the fact that "he was the priest of the most high God" during the days of Abraham (Genesis 14:18). The extra-biblical sources, rabbinic literature, and modern scholars all provide ample support for the thesis that Salem and Jerusalem are the same city. According to Jerusalem: The Eternal City, "there is an apparent connection between the name-title Shalem and Salem, where Melchizedek . . . reigned as king in a city called 'Peace.' The toponym Salem seems to be a short form of the later Jerusalem." What does this have to do with the Temple that was built there some 800–1000 years later? One Jewish legend says, "Melchizedek, priest of God, King of Canaan, built a city on a mountain called Sion, and named it Salem." Mount Zion was destined to become the future location of Solomon's Temple. This is significant when considered together with the mountain-building typology I have already noted, along with the following statement by Josephus: "But he who first built it [Jerusalem] was a potent man among the Canaanites, and is in our tongue called [Melchisedek] the Righteous King, for such he really was; on which account he was [there] the first priest of God, and first built a temple, [there, and] called the city Jerusalem, which was formerly called Salem."

Perhaps, then, the Temple of Solomon wasn't the first "architectural embodiment of the cosmic mound" to be constructed on that site. Apparently, physical temples were the center of Jerusalem long before him.

Next is one of the most important events within the history of Judaism—Abraham and Isaac (Genesis 22). The ultimate sacrifice of Isaac was never required, therefore "the episode in Jewish tradition is called the binding (Akedah) of Isaac, not the sacrifice of Isaac." Regardless of the reasoning behind why God put Abraham through one of the most agonizing experiences imaginable, it is viewed in "the Jewish mind as the supreme example of perfect faith." If the act was the supreme example of faith, then what can be said about the location where it took place? Abraham was over 100 years old, living in Beersheba at the time, which was at least several days journey south of Mount Moriah. Clearly there had to be something significant, even sacred, about the place God had designated. I will first note the biblical tradition. When the events of that day were complete, Abraham renamed the place, "Jehovah-jireh [The Lord-Will-Provide]: as it is said to this day, In the mount of the Lord, it shall be seen [provided]" (Genesis 22:14). A vicarious sacrifice, a ram, was provided. Notice also, as with the previous traditions, there is a reference to "the mount of the Lord."

As with Melchizedek's city of Salem, the extra-biblical legends about this event are replete. Goldstein says that "the actual site of the altar which Abraham

had constructed was the very same place where Abel and Noah had offered their sacrifices, and the very site of the Temple that was to be erected in years to come. The famous Jewish Sage Rambam (Moses Maimonides) was even more specific when he explained the crucial significance of the altar's location: “The location of the altar is pinpointed with extreme precision and it may never be moved to another place...” [for] we have a universally recognized tradition that the place upon which David and Solomon built the altar... is the exact place upon which Abraham built the altar and bound Isaac upon it.” It should be very clear with this statement alone, that no other location could possibly carry such significance, bolstering the notion that the Temple Mount has profound intrinsic sacredness.

This may prompt a question: if Melchizedek had built a temple on the same spot, why doesn't the Bible mention it, and why wasn't Abraham instructed there to offer the sacrifice there? Within Jewish tradition there is simply no answer. I am aware of only one dogma that provides a possible explanation. According to the doctrine of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, just as Enoch “was not; for God took him,” translating him with his entire city (Genesis 5:24; see also Hebrews 11:5; Moses 6-7), thus removing them physically from this world, the city of Melchizedek also “wrought righteousness, and obtained heaven” (JST Genesis 14:34). Therefore, because of the holiness of the city of Melchizedek, its people (city and temple included) may have been translated (that is, removed from this world and taken into a higher spiritual realm of existence). It may even be possible that this took place while Abraham was in Egypt. If this is true, the mount would have been left barren but would have retained its qualitative sanctity as a holy place, and therefore, at least figuratively, Abraham was instructed to go to the Temple to endure his soul-defining test.

Genesis chapter 28 recounts the fascinating experience of Jacob, as he began a journey to Haran in search of a wife in his family's homeland. One night, as he slept, he had a dream or vision in which he saw a ladder, which was likely a step-pyramid type of temple, that had angels ascending and descending on it. One can easily recognize the obvious models mentioned already, such as the primal mound, the axis mundi, and the sacred space which is the meeting place between heaven and earth. To understand the significance of the vision the most important thing to notice is what happened when Jacob woke up the next morning. He said, “How dreadful [awesome] is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven” (Genesis 28:17). He then set up the stone which he had slept on as a pillar, poured oil on it, consecrated the stone as holy, and then named the site Bethel—The House of God. What is so fascinating to me about this is that there was no physical building at all, simply “sacred topos,” to use Parry’s words. Yet, he called it the House of God. Menachem Haran has argued that “in general, any cultic activity to which the biblical text applies the formula ‘before the Lord’ can be considered an indication of the existence of a temple at the site, since this expression stems from the basic conception of the temple as divine dwelling-place and actually belongs to the temple’s technical terminology.” Thus, the experience with deity makes the space around it holy, and it is in this way that “the idea or meaning of the Temple transcended its ephemeral form.” However, as has been illustrated so far, this particular space had long since become sacred, and it should come as no surprise that, according to Jewish legend, the stone upon which Jacob slept and afterward setup as a pillar is the very same foundation stone which effected creation and upon which the ark of the covenant would one day rest.

Following the four-hundred-year slavery of the Children of Israel in Egypt, their subsequent exodus to the Promised Land, and the era of the judges, Jerusalem was still significant in the time of King David and Solomon (c. 1000 B.C.E). Prior to David's conquest of Jerusalem, the Jebusites were using the area of Mount Zion as a threshing floor: "Then Solomon began to build the house of the Lord at Jerusalem in mount Moriah, where [the Lord] appeared unto David his father, in the place that David had prepared in the threshingfloor of Ornan the Jebusite" (2 Chronicles 3:1). The fact that the Jebusites were using the sacred site as a threshing floor is significant when one considers the traditions of the times. First of all, a threshing floor is a place where stalks of wheat are piled up to crush and separate out the chaff. This in and of itself carries with it a tremendous amount of religious symbolism (Psalm 35:5; Isaiah 5:24 ). Secondly, Lundquist and others have noted a fascinating statement by the scholar Ad de Vries which says, “The threshing floor is an omphalos, at once a navel of the world (with the hub of ears in the middle) and a universe-emblem (a round piece of earth, with the earth in the middle, and the sun-oxen going round).” That David may have had these symbols in mind when he selected the location is certainly an intriguing possibility, and it is even more interesting given the fact that in the ancient Near East Temple sites are always revealed by deity.
Certainly, the God of Israel had long since placed his stamp of holiness upon the site. Thus, it was several centuries after entering the Promised Land before the Children of Israel finally put “the capstone” of their society in place. As is elaborated so beautifully by John Lundquist in his article “The Legitimizing Role of the Temple,” the state, as we presently understand that term as applying to archaic societies . . . did not come into being in ancient Israel—indeed, could not have been perceived to have come into being—before and until the temple of Solomon was built and dedicated. Solomon’s dedicatory prayer and the accompanying communal meal represent the final passage into Israel of the “divine charter” ideology that characterized state polities among Israel’s ancient Near Eastern neighbors.42

Leibowitz sums the importance this way: “The conception of the eternity of Jerusalem in the Bible is related to the monarchy of the House of David, and must be understood as part and parcel of it. During the reign of Solomon, the unique status of Jerusalem as the royal city was established by the erection of the Temple, which invested the monarchy, as well as the site, with an aura of holiness.”40 The central focus of worship throughout the forty years wandering in the wilderness and the settling into their lands of inheritance was indeed a temporary temple—the tabernacle—but that was simply a preparation for what their God had been anxiously anticipating: a permanent house on earth.

This was certainly a watershed moment in the history of Israel. Unquestionably, the entire Land of Eretz Israel was considered sacred space, for it was all part of the divinely decreed Land of Promise. However, as soon as the Temple of Solomon was built, the psyche permanently changed. Leibowitz observes further that “the Temple is perceived as the eternal seat of the Lord . . . and there is no doubt that this conception of a double eternity—that of the dynasty of David and that of the symbolic residence of the Lord—imparted sanctity to the whole city.”44 In the minds of the Israelites, the holiest city became Jerusalem and the most sacred plot of land became the Temple Mount. Although the nation of Israel had been somewhat established and the tribal lands of inheritance had long since been assigned, according to the vine typology, if they would have stopped there, this would have only completed their physical gathering. The full planting of God’s chosen people in their promised land requires a spiritual gathering as well. As mentioned previously, according to Exodus 15:17, this would have never taken place unless the temple had been erected. Therefore, the kingdom of Israel was not fully established (and will not be in modern times) until the temple was (or is) built and dedicated. Their King could not fully claim his right to the throne until a “footstool” for the throne of their Heavenly King was built.

That is not to say, as I have suggested above and as Kunin would argue, that the Temple Mount has a contextual sacredity—that it was only after the building of the Temple that the site became holy. Rather, this actually serves to solidify its sacral character, once again illustrating the reason for the city’s sanctity within the Jewish consciousness. Maimonides (1135–1204 C.E.), who has been characterized as “the most illustrious figure in Judaism in the post-talmudic era, and one of the greatest of all time,”40 strongly concurs that the city has carried intrinsic holiness since the morning and evening that became known as “the first day” (Genesis 1:5). He summarized this chain of sacred events as follows:

By a universal tradition, we know that the Temple which David and Solomon built stood on the site of Araunah’s threshing floor; and that is the place where Abraham had built an altar to sacrifice his son Isaac; and that is where Noah built an altar when he emerged from his ark; and that Cain and Abel offered sacrifices on the altar there, and that Adam offered a sacrifice there when he was created, and that indeed, it was from that spot that he was created . . . and why do I say that the original sanctity of the Temple and Jerusalem applies forever? Because it stems from the Divine Presence, and the Divine Presence is never abrogated.”

This brief summary of several events from the ancient past—from before God created the world until the construction of Solomon’s Temple—has again solidified the continual sanctity of the Temple Mount throughout Jewish history.

DESTRUCTION & EXILE, RETURN & REBUILDING

Following the death of Solomon in 921 B.C.E., the northern tribes of Israel declared themselves independent from the Davidic Dynasty of the southern tribes. The northern Kingdom was continually

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plagued with internal and external turbulence, and exactly two hundred years later, they were destroyed and taken captive by the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians were known for their policy of trans-population, which is exporting one population and importing a replacement set of immigrants. The southern Kingdom of Judah had submitted to Assyria rather than fight. Therefore, they were spared a similar fate and remained somewhat autonomous for the time being. However, one hundred thirty-five years later (586 B.C.E., almost four hundred years since David moved the Israelite capital to Jerusalem and Solomon constructed the religious icon par excellence), the city fell to the Babylonians led by King Nebuchadnezzar, and the Temple was left in ruins.

And he [Nebuchadnezzar] carried out thence all the treasures of the house of the Lord, and the treasures of the king's house, and cut in pieces all the vessels of gold which Solomon king of Israel had made in the temple of the Lord, as the Lord had said. And he carried away all Jerusalem, and all the princes, and all the mighty men of valour, [even] ten thousand captives, and all the craftsmen and smiths: none remained, save the poorest sort of the people of the land.

(2 Kings 24:13-14)

Thus, not only was the city and the Temple destroyed, but the majority of the population was exiled to Babylon.

The lament of Lamentations centers in and around the Babylonian exile. Two themes dominate the text: the mourning of the pathetic condition of the Israelites and the yearning to return to their Promised Land. “The ways of Zion do mourn, because none come to the solemn feasts: all her gates are desolate: her priests sigh, her virgins are afflicted, and she [is] in bitterness” (Lamentations 1:4, emphasis added). Why were none able to come to the solemn feasts? The answer is that there was no temple in which they could perform the sacrificial rites associated with the festivals. The female in the verse is the city of Jerusalem, and that very dilemma—not being able to completely live the law exactly as it was revealed to Moses because there is no temple—still faces the Jews today. As if that was not bad enough, “The adversary hath spread out his hand upon all her pleasant things: for she hath seen [that] the heathen entered into her sanctuary, whom thou didst command [that] they should not enter into thy congregation” (Lamentations 1:10, emphasis added). The sentiment of the loss of the Temple is further presented in the following verses:

And he hath violently taken away his tabernacle, as [if it were of] a garden: he hath destroyed his places of the assembly: the Lord hath caused the solemn feasts and sabbaths to be forgotten in Zion, and hath despised in the indignation of his anger the king and the priest. The Lord hath cast off his altar, he hath abhorred his sanctuary, he hath given up into the hand of the enemy the walls of her palaces: they have made a noise in the house of the Lord, as in the day of a solemn feast. (Lamentations 2:6–7)

The defeat and deportation of many people within the southern Kingdom was a tremendous blow in and of itself, but nothing wrenched their hearts more than the desecration and destruction of the Temple. The bitter irony here is that it was Israel's own God that was responsible for the defeat because of his extreme displeasure with their actions. In other words, they were unable to save that which meant the most to them because they had already desecrated it.

Amidst the changes that took place culturally and religiously amongst the Jews during the next sixty years in Babylon, one thing never changed: their yearning to see the Temple rebuilt. Certainly there were many who had grown accustomed to life in a foreign land and who were as content to remain there as return, but this attitude did not reflect the majority. By 538 B.C.E., Cyrus II of Persia had established the largest empire in the Near East to that point, and he defeated the Babylonians without shedding one drop of blood. The Persian rulers were much more beneficent and humane to their subjects and even allowed local autonomy and freedom of religion. The Bible records that

in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord [spoken] by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and [put it] also in writing, saying, Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, All the kingdoms of the earth hath the Lord God of heaven given me; and he hath charged me to build him an house in Jerusalem, which [is] in Judah. Who [is there] among you of all his people? The Lord his God [be] with him, and let him go up. (2 Chronicles 36:22–23)

According to Galbraith, Skinner, and Ogden, authors of Jerusalem: the Eternal City, "few events in all of ancient Near Eastern history can parallel in
importance the events that Cyrus set in motion. "

The first chapter of the Book of Ezra indicates that
the primary concern of the exiles upon returning
was the Temple. As soon as they set foot in the city
they immediately ascended the Temple Mount, re-
built the altar, and resumed all the sacrificial rites:
"From the first day of the seventh month began they
to offer burnt offerings unto the
LORD. But the foun-
dation of the temple of the LORD was not [yet] laid" (Ezra 3:6). Even before they built homes for their
own families, they began work on rebuilding the
most important house of all.

The work on the Temple was antagonized by
the Samaritans, who wanted to participate but were
rejected by the Jews. The Samaritans, remnants of
the northern tribes, were viewed as nothing more than
half-breeds who had intermarried with the Assyrian
peoples imported into the area when the Israelite
tribes were deported to the north. The Samaritans
took their issues to the courts but were eventually
defeated by King Darius himself. Following a search
for the original proclamation of his father (Cyrus),
Darius decreed, "Let the work of this house of God
alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of
the Jews build this house of God in his
place" (Ezra 6:7). The work then continued, and the Temple was
constructed under the leadership of Zerubbabel.
Unfortunately, the structure wasn't nearly as impressive
or beautiful as its predecessor. Nonetheless, exactly
seventy years after their exile they completed the
building, and the dedication took place in 515 B.C.E.
Assuming Josephus's statement about the Temple of
Melchizedek to be true, Zerubbabel's Temple would
become at least the third formal structure to grace the
Temple Mount and once again firmly establish God's people in their land of divine inheritance.

The last of the Hebrew prophets was Malachi
(c. 400 B.C.E.). He indicated that by this time temple
worship had become entirely corrupted: "But ye are
departed out of the way; ye have caused many to
stumble at the law; ye have corrupted the covenant
of Levi, saith the Lord of hosts" (Malachi 2:8).
Nonetheless, with very few exceptions, for the next
four hundred seventy years, the Temple Mount re-
mained in Jewish hands. This was a time of signifi-
cant changes within the Jewish faith, most of which
are well out of the scope of this article. Hellenistic
cultural influences, the creation of the governing
body of elders that would later become the San-
hedrin, changes in the priesthood lines of succession,
the evolution of a number of Jewish sects, and the
emergence of the synagogue all played key roles in
Jewish life during these years. In 20 B.C.E. Herod,
famous for his building programs throughout the
Holy Land, began an incredible construction project
on the Temple Mount that would last nearly eighty
years. During his lifetime, he nearly doubled the size
of the Temple Mount through a massive landscaping
project and completely re-constructed Zerubbabel's
Temple. By the time it was finished, "no other temple
complex in the Graeco-Roman world compared with
it in expansiveness and magnificence." It even
surpassed Solomon's Temple, but unfortunately its
physical prowess did little to add anything of spiritual
significance.

Amidst the ever-changing face of the religion
and the landscape, Jerusalem remained the center of
Judaism politically and spiritually. That the Temple
maintained its sacred status can be seen in the life of
Paul the apostle: he was almost killed by the Jews, be-
cause they thought he had brought a Gentile into the
Temple precincts (Acts 21:26–30). Nevertheless,
the city as a whole remained relatively stable until
about 55 C.E. A band of assassins, known as the
Sicarii, initiated fifteen years of political and military
upheaval in Jerusalem and the cities in the Judean
countryside. By the summer of 69 C.E., the Jews
found themselves in a full-scale revolt against the
Roman Empire. The following year, the most power-
ful Roman legions were sent in to squelch the rebel-
lion. By mid-August, the Romans sieged the Temple
Mount, and on August twenty-eighth (the ninth of
Ab), they burned the holy sanctuary to the ground.
Notice especially the reaction of the Jews in Josephus's
summary.

As the Temple burned, frenzy gripped both
attackers and defenders. Roman shock troops
burst through, and Titus was able to dash
into the Temple just long enough for brief
look; then heat forced him out. His soldiers
continued burning whatever could be
kindled, and killing all they could reach,
whether combatants, women, or children.
Many Jews flung themselves into the fire and
perished with their Temple. Others, hiding in
corners, were burned to death as Roman
torches set new flames. [Emphasis added]"

Within a month, the upper and lower por-
tions of the city were razed to the ground, and the in-
habitants were either massacred or taken captive. The
only parts of the entire Temple Mount left intact were
the huge retaining walls that supported the forty acre
platform. One of those walls is the southern most sec-
tion of the western retaining wall, which serves as
an outdoor synagogue today, a place where Jewish
pilgrims come to worship, mourn the loss of the Temple, and pray for its rebuilding. These lamentations led to its nickname—The Wailing Wall.

The ninth of Ab subsequently came to be an annual day of mourning. It has also come to be associated with several other devastating events, such as the day in which Solomon's Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians: "Grief greater than words could express afflicted the faithful as they recalled what had been the fate of their temple and its defenders. Some rabbis were said to have suffered permanent facial wounds, so furrowed were their cheeks by tears shed for the temple. . . . A sorrow that seemed to grow with passing generations became part of the memorial of the vanished temple." When the city is glorified, it is glorified because of the Temple. When it is mourned, it is mourned because of the Temple. There has been no mourning like this expressed for the loss of any other city or religious shrine. The only thing that might come close in comparing with such sorrowful sentiments is Yom ha'Shoah, or Holocaust Day, in which the six million victims of Hitler's genocide are remembered each year. "My heart is in the East [where the Jerusalem is and the Temple should be], while I remain in the depths of the West," wrote the twelfth-century Jewish poet Judah Halevi. Truly, there is simply nothing that adequately compares to the yearnings for the Temple.

LOOKING INTO THE FUTURE

As we have seen so far, the reason for the incomparable adulation by the Jewish people for Jerusalem is unquestionably a result of the Temple. It would be expected that the future hopes and dreams for such a city centers around it as well. The prophecies of such prominent Jewish prophets as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah, and others provide some of the most vivid examples of Judaism's eschatological and esoteric aspects. According to Leibowitz, "all the prophets share the expectation of an exalted future for Jerusalem—a loftiness which includes both physical splendor and a sublime religious—spiritual significance." Though most modern Jews don't concern themselves with such prophecies, they are nonetheless real and therefore impact the Jewish consciousness just as much as the legends and traditions of the past. Just as the historic statements link the Temple with Jerusalem, so also the prophetic utterances inseparably connect the two. Additionally, the prophecies include a unique aspect—the long-awaited Messiah.

Speaking of the Messiah, Zechariah prophesied, "And speak unto him, saying, Thus speaketh the LORD of hosts, saying, Behold the man whose name [is] The Branch; and he shall grow up out of his place, and he shall build the temple of the LORD; Even he shall build the temple of the LORD; and he shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule upon his throne; and he shall be a priest upon his throne: and the counsel of peace shall be between them both" (Zechariah 6:12–13). In contrast to bringing about the city's destruction and the people's exile, as He did when the Babylonians conquered it, in the last days, a Messianic figure will arise and lead the construction of the final Temple. In his concluding statements, Zechariah wrote that the Lord would step forward as Israel's battle master and bring peace to the city: "And it shall be in that day, [that] living waters shall go out from Jerusalem; half of them toward the former sea, and half of them toward the hinder sea: in summer and in winter shall it be. And the Lord shall be king over all the earth: in that day shall there be one Lord, and his name one. . . . And [men] shall dwell in it, and there shall be no more utter destruction: but Jerusalem shall be safely inhabited" (Zechariah 14:8–11). Just as the vine of Israel provides the world with nourishment when it is planted in the holy ground of the Temple Mount, the establishment of the city and its Temple provides order and peace to the entire world.

As mentioned previously, Ezekiel also discussed the concept of living and healing waters which flow forth from the Temple:

These waters issue out toward the east country, and go down into the desert, and go into the sea: [which being] brought forth into the sea, the waters shall be healed. And it shall come to pass, [that] every thing that liveth, which moveth, whithersoever the rivers shall come, shall live: and there shall be a very great multitude of fish, because these waters shall come thither: for they shall be healed; and every thing shall live whither the river cometh. (Ezekiel 47:8–9).

As a matter of fact, a significant amount of Ezekiel's writing deals directly with his tour or vision of what turns out to be veritable blueprints for this magnificent structure that is yet to be built (Ezekiel 40–44). Clearly both he and the Lord are very concerned with this future edifice yet to be built. Lastly, from the prophet Malachi comes this powerful statement: "Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall
suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the Lord of hosts" (Malachi 3:1). As he appeared on Mount Sinai to Moses and the seventy elders of Israel when the nation of Israel was born, the Lord will personally visit the final Temple to establish his people once and for all. Simply put, every major event associated with the last days—the final wars, the coming of a Messiah, the judgment day, and the resurrection—are all intertwined with reestablishment of the last Temple.

CONCLUSION

Jerusalem is one of the most intriguing cities in the world. It is uniquely held sacred by three of the world's great religions. Historians have suggested that more blood has been spilt over this city than any other. Even today, it is the impossible barrier to peace between the Arab-Palestinians and Israelis. The city is also unique, because, in the midst of the turmoil and centuries of Diaspora, and perhaps even to a certain extent because of it, it has maintained its sacral character within the Jewish psyche. In fact, if one has lost their bearings and is in doubt as to which direction they should pray, "then they should incline their hearts towards the Holy of Holies." Jewish traditions provide ample evidence to support the idea that the past, present, and future of Jerusalem are bound up in the establishment of the Temple. According to Jewish theology, in the last days God's chosen people will once again build a temple on Mount Zion, which will coincide with the coming of the long-awaited Messiah. This will usher in an era, which will finally fulfill the city's long-awaited destiny to live up to its name-sake—The City of Peace.

ENDNOTES

1 I must take a moment to make clear one vital point regarding Judaism in general. It should be understood at the outset that in discussing the significance of the city of Jerusalem to Jewish people, in no way do I assume or assert that all Jews feel the same way. I learned early on in my Judaic studies that to ask the question "What do the Jews believe about such and such?" is extremely open-ended and subject to any number of responses—not very wise to say the least. It would be much more proper to ask, "What do halachic Jews believe about such and such?" I know of only one dogma that is universal among all Jews, and beyond that, everything becomes subjective. The single belief held in common by all Jews is this: there is a God. Therefore, let me make it clear that when I speak of the sentiment of the Jewish people towards anything, I am speaking in very broad terms, but particularly of religious or orthodox Jews. If this paper were written in the 1600s, perhaps I could speak generally with a little more confidence, but after the major movements such as Hasidism, the Enlightenment, and the Reform, beginning a statement with "Jews believe . . ." or "Jewish people feel that . . ." has become more or less impossible.


4 Ibid., 15.


8 Ibid., 160–61.

9 Ibid., 167.

10 Ibid., 28.


12 Ibid., 6–7, 11.


14 Ibid., 44, emphasis added.


16 For further arguments, see Seth D. Kunin, God's Place in the World: Sacred Space and Sacred Place in Judaism (New York: Cassell, 1998), 38; see also Hayward, 176 n. 7.

17 Eliade, 44.

18 Ginzberg., 5:14.

19 Kunin, 38–42.

20 Lundquist, The Temple, 6 (cf. 6–10); see also Donald W. Parry, ed., Temples of the Ancient World (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1994), 86.


Eliade, Hierophany is a term coined by Mircea Eliade to describe an object in the physical world, which, for whatever reason, is revealed as sacred. Thus a stone may be simply a stone to one person, while to another, it reveals something divine or transcendent.

Ginzberg, 5:39.


Hayward, 90.

Parry, “Garden of Eden,” 137.

Hayward, 95.


Ibid., 27.

Ibid., 35 n. 12.

Josephus, Wars of the Jews, 6.10.1. Brackets are original, emphasis added.

Goldstein, 57.

Ibid.

Ibid., 58.

Galbraith, 35 n. 9.

Haran, as quoted by Parry, in “Garden of Eden,” 144–45.

Galbraith et al., 8 n. 4.

Lundquist, The Temple, 7.


Ibid., 9:1550.

Ibid., 11:754.

Qtd. in Galbraith et al., 9 n. 25.

Ibid., 119.

Ibid., 186.

Ibid., 215.

Ibid., 217.


Goldstein, 13.