

THE TEMPLE MOUNT

The Jewish Temple was the center of Israel's national and religious life, being located in Jerusalem on a prominent crest overlooking the Kidron Valley known as Mount Moriah. The religious value of the Temple Mount (that is, the location where the First and Second Temples stood) is recognized by all three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) as being the location of significant events described in the Bible and in Islamic tradition.

For Judaism, it is the holiest place—where Abraham offered up his son Isaac (Genesis 22:2,9) and where two Jewish Temples stood, built during the time of Solomon, during the time of Zerubbabel, and during the time of Herod the Great. For Christians, it is the place where Abraham offered his son Isaac, the area where Christ taught and ministered to the people, and the mountain crest on which Christ was crucified outside the city gates in the first century. For Muslims, the Temple Mount is the third holiest site in Islam (after Mecca and Medina), to which it is believed that Muhammad and his winged horse (El Burak) made his “Night Journey” (Surah 17:1) from Mecca; Jerusalem is where Islamic tradition says Muhammad ascended to heaven and spoke with Allah concerning prayer.

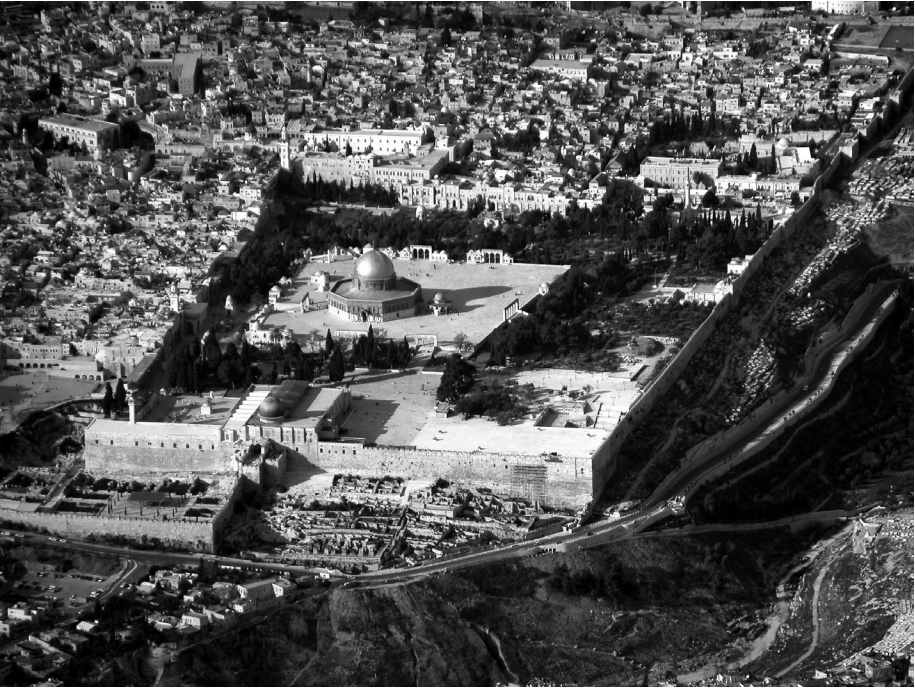
In the Hebrew language, the approximately 38-acre platform and its surrounding walls today called “Temple Mount” is known as *har ha-bayit* (the Mountain of the House). The same location is known in the Arabic tongue as *haram al-sharif* (the Noble Sanctuary).

History of the Temple Mount

From Abraham Through the Babylonian Destruction

The long history of the Temple Mount begins in Abraham's day (2050–1850 BC), when he is told by God to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice on a mountain in the land of Moriah (Genesis 22:1-14). Abraham traveled to his destination and built an altar on

which he laid the wood and his son Isaac, but when Abraham was about to plunge the knife into his son, God intervened to halt the sacrifice.



Temple Mount in Jerusalem is the location of the silver-domed Al-Aqsa Mosque (bottom) and the gold Dome of the Rock (center). Some propose that the First and Second Jewish temples were located in the same location as the Dome of the Rock. (Photo by Todd Bolen/BiblePlaces.com.)

This location would again factor in prominently in the eleventh to early tenth century BC, when we are told in 2 Samuel 24 that God was angered by David's decision to take a census of the people of Israel and subsequently punished him with national pestilence, which killed about 70,000 Israelites in three days. In order to avert God's plague from Jerusalem, David was commanded by Gad to purchase the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite located on what is now the Temple Mount in order to erect an altar of sacrifice to the Lord (2 Samuel 24:15-25). Therefore, David purchased the parcel of land and the oxen for 50 shekels of silver (2 Samuel 24:24).

Soon after, David would begin collecting the materials that his son Solomon would use to build the first Temple for the Jewish nation (1 Chronicles 22:5), near the location of David's altar. First Kings 5 tells of Solomon's need of lumber and his request to Hiram (the king of Tyre, also known as *Eiromos*) for building materials such as cedar and cypress trees. Hiram's existence has been confirmed by a bronze bowl inscription discovered in

Cyprus that bears his name and title as “Hiram, king of the Sidonians.” Josephus also refers to Solomon and Hiram and some letters that were exchanged between them, letters that may have still been in existence during the first century AD.¹

First Kings 6:1 describes the very year that Solomon began his construction of the First Temple: It was 1) 480 years after Israel left Egypt, 2) in the fourth year of Solomon’s reign, and 3) in the month of Ziv (second month of the fourth year). In 586 BC, some 400 years later, during the reign of Babylonian vassal king Zedekiah, the Babylonian Chronicles tell of King Nebuchadnezzar II’s (605–562 BC) capture of Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 36:17) in which Solomon’s Temple would be destroyed (2 Chronicles 36:19).

The First Temple: Archaeological Support

Lending additional support to the existence, dating, and function of the First Temple are the “Three Shekels” and “House of God” ostraca (clay pottery fragments). The former ostrakon surfaced on the antiquities market during the 1990s and consists of a ninth- to seventh-century BC receipt containing a Hebrew inscription describing three shekels of silver that were donated to Solomon’s Temple—literally “the House (or Temple) of Yahweh” (*Beit Yhwh*). The artifact has been confirmed for authenticity by independent sources, who have examined the pottery, ink, language, and even the patina—the microscopic microbial residue that covers most ancient objects.² Though some have suggested that the text could be referring to another Jewish temple location than the one in Jerusalem, it nevertheless is consistent with the existence, date, and function of a Jewish Temple.

The “House of God” Ostrakon is a similar text discovered in Arad (an ancient Jewish city in the Negev) among dozens of similar shards dating to the early sixth century BC. Arad served as a fortress of the Judean monarchy and an administrative center in the Negev for some 300 years (from the ninth to the sixth century BC). The text, written in ink by a professional scribe using Hebrew script, is addressed to “Elyashib” at Arad; in the text the “House of God” (presumably in Jerusalem) is mentioned. Besides the “Three Shekels” Ostrakon, this inscription is one of the earliest archaeological finds referencing the Jewish Temple outside the Bible.



The “Three Shekels” Ostrakon.
(Photo by Zev Radovan.)



The “House of God (Yahweh)” Ostrakon discovered in Arad. (Photo by Zev Radovan.)

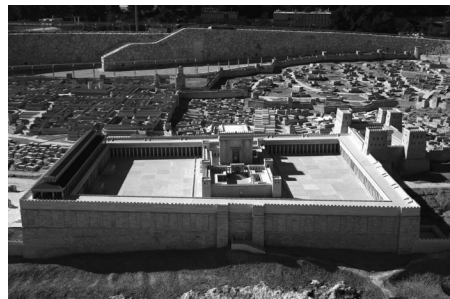
Reconstruction Under Zerubbabel and Herod the Great

After Israel's 70 years of Babylonian captivity came to an end (Daniel 9:2) when the Medes and Persians under Cyrus (see Isaiah 45:1-7) conquered Babylon,* efforts led by Zerubbabel and Jeshua the priest to rebuild "the altar of the God of Israel" (Ezra 3:2-6:18) marked the beginning of the Second Temple's construction. The Second Temple structure would be finished in the sixth year of the reign of the Persian king Darius (c. 515 BC), leaving the Temple Mount platform and city walls to be rebuilt by Nehemiah (c. 444 BC).



The Arch of Titus was built in Rome adjacent to the Roman Forum by Titus's brother, Emperor Domitian, to commemorate the victories of Titus, which included the successful siege of Jerusalem in AD 70. The sculpture on the inner panels of the arch depicts Roman soldiers carrying away temple treasures such as the priestly trumpets, golden menorah, and other valuable articles.

This reconstructed Temple would serve the Jewish nation until Herod the Great began his ambitious project to remodel the Temple structures (c. 20 BC; John 2:20) and greatly expand the Temple Mount platform and its retaining walls. This enormous project would enlarge the Temple Mount area to twice its size by building outward toward the north, south, and west. Eastern expansion was not possible since Solomon's eastern wall was already perched atop the Kidron Valley crest. Josephus mentions Herod's work on the Temple as an "extraordinary"



Herod's renovated and expanded Temple Mount looked much like this replica displayed at the Israel Museum.

* The Cyrus Cylinder (see Isaiah 45:1-7), written after the capture of Babylon by the Medes and Persians under Cyrus in 539 BC, tells of the freeing of all captives. This decree brought an official end to Israel's 70 years captivity in Babylon (see Daniel 9:2). See more in chapter 20.

undertaking that Herod hoped would ensure his legacy and for which he would be remembered by future generations.³ This newly remodeled structure would eventually become the largest man-made structure in the world by the time of Christ.

Roman Destruction and New Construction

Only 100 years after Herod began his remodeling project, the Jewish revolt against Rome (AD 66–70) would lead to the destruction of the Temple and its buildings (Matthew 24:1-2) in AD 70 by the Roman army under Titus. The Roman destruction was total; it involved the violent dismantling of all structures upon the sacred platform.

After the Temple's destruction and the subsequent diaspora of the Jews, the Temple Mount structures and the old city walls would lie in ruins for the next 700 years. However, the Temple Mount area would again change in the Islamic era, in the late seventh and eighth century AD. The construction of the Dome of the Rock took place in the late seventh century AD under the Umayyad caliph Abd al-Malik.* Al-Malik desired to pattern the gold-domed structure after a fourth-century AD Christian building (located on the adjacent Mount of Olives) that was dedicated to the ascension of Christ. The rock protruding from the floor beneath the dome is the tip of Mount Moriah and is revered by Muslims as the place where Muhammad ascended to heaven to receive instructions from Allah concerning prayer.

The significance of the domed structure is found in the fact that caliph Abd al-Malik



The Dome of the Rock resides at the center of the Temple Mount complex and marks the spot revered by Muslims as the place from which Muhammad ascended to heaven.



The Al-Aqsa Mosque, built in AD 705, is located on the southern Temple Mount platform where the Royal Stoa (also known as the Royal Colonnade or Royal Basilica) once stood as part of Herod's renovated Temple Mount.

* The Dome of the Rock structure has been restored several times in the twentieth century by the Hashemite kingdom (Jordan). In 1922 to 1924 the outer wooden dome was replaced with an aluminum gold-coated dome in order to stop water leakage. In 1952 to 1964 the earlier restoration to stop water leakage failed and was remedied again along with restoring the lost luster to the dome itself. In 1969: emergency repair and restoration were made to the twelfth-century AD stepped platform (*minbar*) inside the structure after it was set on fire by an Australian tourist in 1969. In 1992 to 1994 King Hussein spent nearly nine million dollars for an Irish construction company to refurbish the building and strengthen its supporting structure. This included adding thousands of glittering gold plates to the dome, rebuilding the roof supports, restoring the *minbar*, and fireproofing the Temple Mount compound. See the Jordanian government report on these restorations in "The Hashemite Restorations of the Islamic Holy Places in Jerusalem," accessed at www.kinghussein.gov.jo/islam_restoration.html.

intended the site to be 1) a rival sacred location to Mecca and Medina, 2) a sacred location commemorating Muhammad's ascension to heaven as equal to or greater than Christ's ascension, and 3) a direct challenge to Christianity and its assertion that Jesus Christ was the Son of God.* To the south of the Dome of the Rock is located the silver-domed Al-Aqsa Mosque (meaning "the farthest"), which was initially built in AD 705 and then improved with the addition of its dome in AD 1035. According to Islamic tradition, the mosque was built on the southernmost site of the Temple Mount where Muhammad stood. Today, the Al-Aqsa Mosque, including its outdoor surrounding space, can accommodate over 300,000 people at one time kneeling in prayer.

Archaeological Features Around the Temple Mount

The Southern Wall and Gates

Additional improvements were made during the Islamic and Crusader eras (seventh to twelfth century AD) to the surrounding areas below the Temple Mount, especially to the southern wall and southwest corner beneath the Al-Aqsa Mosque. Here were located the Umayyad and Crusader administrative centers, as well as visible remnants from Herod's expansion of the Temple Mount platform and walls. For example, in the southern wall (directly beneath the Al-Aqsa Mosque) there remains Herodian architecture in the form of a double gate that would allow worshippers to access the Temple Mount from the south. Once through these gates the worshipper would be led gradually up to the Temple Mount platform through a long subterranean passageway with arched ceilings. Though the gate itself was filled in with a stone wall during the Crusader period, a subtle lintel and relieving arch can still be seen. At the base of the exposed portion of the double gate, a Herodian master course of stone supports the structure; it originally also provided the gate with a doorjamb.

Moreover, archaeologists have exposed 30 steps at the base of the southern Temple Mount wall that were carved out of the natural stone ascent to the Mount. These steps,

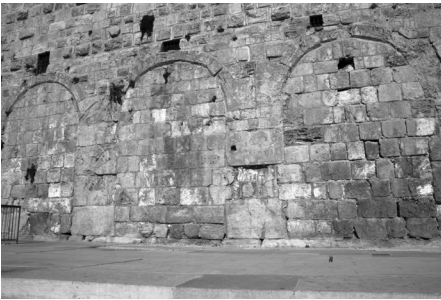


The remains of the Double Gates can be seen immediately above the protruding arch in the form of a half lintel and subtle arch. The wall made of small stones located to the left of the arch was constructed by the Crusaders in about AD 1099.

* The second and third points are supported by the style of the architectural structure and the story line of the ascension, which was said to have occurred nearly 700 years after Christ's ascension. In addition, Arabic literature embedded in the inner decorative walls of the Dome of the Rock structure attests to its theological challenge to Christianity and the deity of Christ. The inscription reads: "There is no God but God; Muhammad is his Prophet; Jesus is also his Prophet, but God has no Son: He neither Begets nor is Begotten." It is also debatable whether the caliph intended the Dome of the Rock structure to commemorate the ascension of Muhammad, since no inscription or dedication to Muhammad or the ascension story was ever found there. It would seem strange to have omitted reference to the "Night Journey" and ascension story from its structure if this had been one of the primary reasons for revering the site and building the structure. To explain this omission, the story of Muhammad's ascension to heaven was most likely created at a later time within Muslim tradition.



The rock from which the southern steps were carved can still be seen, along with modern stone additions toward the upper steps. These are the same steps Jesus and His disciples would have climbed to access the Temple from the south through the Double Gates.



The Triple Gates.



Herodian masonry featured in the Temple Mount construction regularly displays finely crafted margins with a smooth raised boss (face). (Photo by Zev Radovan.)

dating to the time of Christ, were used to bring worshippers up to the double gates, where they could access the Temple Mount platform. They are still visible today, but the visible portion represents only a part of their total width, which has been estimated to be over 200 feet.

Further Herodian remains can be seen in the eastern section of the Temple Mount's southern wall (the same wall that contains the double gates).^{*} Located about 200 feet to the east of the double gates are the triple gates. Though the three stone arches and their gates have since been filled in with stone, most likely during the Crusader period, one can view the beveled Herodian door jamb, which is set in a master course of stone laid by King Herod.

The Herodian identification of the many gates and structural features of the Temple Mount was fairly simple to make due to Herod's masonry style. Archaeologists noticed a signature pattern in the courses of stone used, which contain nicely embossed borders with a smooth finished (or sometimes unfinished) raised face. Depending on where and how the stone was used, ornamented detail such as beveling would be used, especially as the stones adjoined gates as doorjamb.

Evidence from Wall and Platform Stones

One significant find at the southwest corner of the Temple Mount was a large angular corner stone that had been thrown down from the top of the Temple Mount wall (perhaps by the Romans in AD 70). The stone, found among other Temple Mount stones dating to

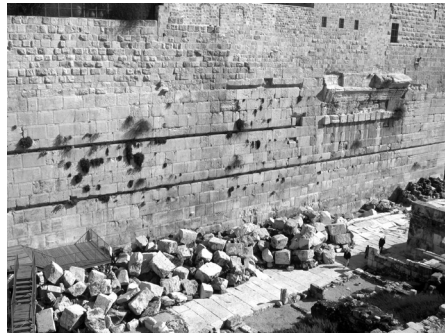
^{*} Josephus mentions that there were gates facing south in the middle of the southern wall (*Antiquities of the Jews*, 15.411). These are most likely the current double and triple gates located by archaeologists at the same location.

the first century, was handcrafted as a parapet (that is, a special beveling that provides a small level niche that prevents one from falling over the rail). This rare stone has been called the “Trumpeting Stone” since a partial Hebrew inscription was found on its rail that reads: “to the place of trumpeting....” Apparently, this stone was designated by Herod’s masons to be placed in a specific location on the Temple Mount so it would not be confused with other stones designated for a similar location. The inscription indicates that the priests were to announce with the trumpet the beginning and ending of Sabbath and holy days, as well as using various blasts to announce other important times relating to the Jewish religious calendar. According to Josephus, the priest would communicate with the people of Jerusalem through specific trumpet blasts in order to give notice of when to cease working and when it was time to resume labors.⁴ The Mishnah speaks of dozens of trumpet blasts throughout the day as warnings related to the Sabbath and other crucial time periods.⁵ What is more, the trumpets (along with other Temple implements, including the menorah) used by the priest are depicted on the first-century AD triumphal Arch of Titus located southeast of the Roman Forum near the Coliseum in Rome.

Additional building stones and debris were uncovered at the base of the western side of the southwest corner of Temple Mount; some of these stones bear testimony to Jesus’ prophecy in Matthew 24:1-2 that not one stone would be left upon another. These include stones from a first-century AD street, vendor shop niches that served as the supporting piers



The Trumpeting Stone with its Hebrew inscription was most likely toppled from the top southwest corner of the Temple Mount.



Evidence of the Roman destruction of the Temple Mount structures (AD 70) are still visible under the protruding stub of Robinson’s Arch in piles of stones discovered on the pavement of a first-century street.



The southwest corner of the Temple Mount features some of the largest Herodian stones visible above ground. As the builders placed these massive stones one upon another, they carefully made sure that each stone was set back about one inch from the lower stone it rested upon. This ensured that the enormous weight and pressure from the fill material placed on the other side of the wall would not cause the wall to collapse.

for Robinson's Arch* (a stepped arch leading from the street level that would offer an ascending entrance into the Royal Stoa located on the Temple Mount), stones from ritual baths for purification (*mikva'ot*), massive Herodian Temple Mount retaining wall stones, and discarded building stones (found in situ at street level); all these were thrown down by the Romans in their destruction of the Temple in AD 70.

Jesus' prophecy of Jerusalem's destruction also came with a warning—namely, to flee Jerusalem and run for the mountains when the city was facing imminent siege by the Romans (Matthew 24:15-22; Mark 13:14-20; Luke 21:20-24). According to church historian Eusebius of Caesarea (c. AD 260–340), Jesus' Jewish followers acted on His warning and fled to the mountainous area known as Pella prior to the Roman destruction in AD 70.⁶



The ruins of Pella, located about 20 miles south of the Sea of Galilee in modern-day Jordan. Pella served as the place of refuge during the Roman siege of Jerusalem and total destruction of the Temple in AD 70. Though some Roman buildings still remain (bathhouse, necropolis, odeon, and so on), the site is dominated by Byzantine-era construction.

In regard to the Temple Mount, of architectural importance is the discovery of huge ashlar stones (hewn or squared stones), still clearly visible today, that were placed by Herod at the southwest corner of the Temple Mount wall. Some of these enormous stones were cut to nearly 40 feet in length, nearly 8 feet wide, and over 3 feet tall. The extraordinary weight of some of these well-placed stones reaches 50-plus tons. Further excavations along the western wall of the Temple Mount (accessed through the rabbinic tunnels) near the Antonia Fortress (and Herod's rock quarry) have unearthed some of the largest set stones known to date, which were used in Herod's expansion of the Temple Mount. These include stones measuring more than 44 feet long and standing over 10.5 feet high!

The Western Wall

A vast portion of this western retaining wall section (known as the “Wailing Wall”) has been exposed and reserved as a place for Jews desiring to pray and study the Hebrew Scriptures.[†] Currently, this tightly guarded sacred location is partitioned into two areas,

* Refers to the remains of a protruding arch (50-plus feet wide) on the western side of the southwest corner of the Temple Mount wall discovered by American archaeologist Edward Robinson in 1838. The remains of the arch bulge from the wall at about 30 feet above street level.

† The Wailing Wall Plaza (that is, the western retaining wall of the Temple Mount), as well as all of Jerusalem, was under the control of foreign powers until the final hours of the Six-Day War in 1967, when Israel's army once again took control of Jerusalem after bitter fighting with Jordanian and Arab forces. Soon after Israel's victory, nearly 250,000 Jews visited the site for the first time since the Temple's destruction in AD 70. Currently, Israel has reserved this sacred location for the study and practice of Judaism, while simultaneously allowing the Temple Mount precincts to be administered by the Islamic Waqf.

one side for men and the other for women.* Since religious Jews rarely, if ever, enter the Temple Mount area for fear of unknowingly treading upon the holy place and sparking violent reactions from Muslims, who despise their presence, they have found the Western



The Western “Wailing Wall” with its two partitioned areas for men and women. Today, the western wall remains one of the many archaeological confirmations of King Herod’s architectural renovations of a massive structure the Bible describes as the Jewish Temple.

Wall Plaza to be a more appropriate place of meditation. It is the closest one can come to the Temple and conveniently gather with others without actually entering the Temple Mount itself.

Prior to the 1967 war, Christian pilgrims and Jews visited the remains of the wall in small numbers to pray. The narrow confines and dilapidated abandoned dwellings located at the base of the wall greatly limited the number of visitors at the site. This was remedied by Amihai Mazar after the Six-Day War by removing the abandoned structures, leveling the plaza area, and considerably lowering the street level. This move exposed multiple courses of large, precisely carved stones placed by Herod to give the western side of the Temple Mount support. Each stone has about a one-inch setback from the stone below it, giving the wall added strength.

* Non-Jews and tourists are welcome to enter both sections with a head covering and appropriate attire.

Archaeological Artifacts and Features on the Mount

Up until this point, we have surveyed some of the more significant features surrounding the Temple Mount area, all of which appear consistent with the biblical statements concerning the existence, function, and destruction of the Jewish Temple. The architectural remains, coinage, ritual purification baths, inscriptions, historical records (Josephus, Mishnah, Babylonian Chronicles, and so on), Roman triumphal monuments (Arch of Titus), and destruction debris are all consistent with the cultural and religious climate described in Scripture.

However, we must also ask whether there is evidence from the Temple Mount *itself* or its surrounding area to support the Bible's statements concerning the existence and location of the Temple. This evidence has been difficult to obtain since it is not legal to carry out archaeological digs on the Temple Mount itself. However, from time to time excavations occur that are not supervised by an archaeologist, such as the recent expansion of the lower portions of the Al-Aqsa Mosque; the digging of trenches for utilities (with heavy equipment) on the surface of Temple Mount; and other controversial restoration and construction projects. These types of unsupervised construction projects have been criticized due to the risk of destroying high-value artifacts and structures.

Stamp Seals

The risk of destruction was especially acute when Temple Mount authorities (and the Israel Antiquities Authority—IAA) allowed the unsupervised expansion (that is, no senior archaeologist present) of the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the careless discarding of rich archaeological soil. Jerusalem archaeologists Gabriel Barkay and his then student Zachi Zweig petitioned for a permit to retrieve the abandoned soil; it is currently being carefully examined by the Temple Mount Sifting Project (located on Mount Scopus) staff and volunteers for artifacts of high historical value. Among the fascinating finds are a bronze coin minted during the Jewish war with the Romans (AD 66–70) that bears the



Among the Temple Mount rubble from a construction project, archaeologists Gabriel Barkay and Zachi Zweig discovered a charred stamp-seal impression that bears a partial Hebrew inscription. When translated it reads, "Belonging to Ga'alyahu son of Immer." The well-known priestly family of Immer is mentioned in the Bible as living during the end of the First Temple period (Jeremiah 20:1; Ezra 2:37,59; 10:20; Nehemiah 3:29; 7:40,61; 11:13; 1 Chronicles 9:12; 24:14). (Photo by Zev Radovan.)

inscription “Freedom of Zion,” arrowheads, mosaics, jewelry, Egyptian scarabs dating to the second millennium BC, and a Hebrew stamp seal (*bullā*), among other items.⁷

Of particular importance is, as described in chapter 20, a sixth-century BC Hebrew-inscribed stamp seal that contains the name of the biblical priestly family *Immer*, who had administrative power over the Temple Mount during the tumultuous days of the prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 20:1) and who was responsible for the beating and imprisoning of the prophet (Jeremiah 20:2-3). The seal itself was not in this case attached to a letter as was customary, but rather was fixed to a cloth sachet, as the wavy pattern impressed on the back of the seal indicates. The seal is important in at least two ways: 1) It offers support to Jeremiah’s record of a family named Immer who existed in Jerusalem during his time period; and 2) it confirms that the Temple Mount was an important administrative center at the end of the First Temple period as indicated in the biblical text. Other individuals mentioned by Jeremiah who are associated with the Temple Mount and are mentioned in Scripture have been historically confirmed through the identification of their personal stamp-seal impressions such as Jeremiah’s scribe, Baruch, who penned the book of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 36:4-32). Moreover, the seals have been identified of both “Gemaryahu (Gemariah) ben Shaphan” who was an official secretary described in Jeremiah 36:10-12, and “Yehuchal (Jehuchal) ben Shelemyahu” who was sent by King Zedekiah to Jeremiah in order to ask him to pray (Jeremiah 37:3; 38:1).*

Locating Solomon’s Temple Mount

Examinations of structures and features open to the naked eye can offer fruitful results, as seen in the previous discussion of the Herodian reconstruction of the Temple. For example, visible at the base of the northwestern steps are large pre-Herodian stones that some (such as Leen Ritmeyer, 2006) propose to be the northwesternmost edge of Solomon’s raised Temple Mount platform. Moreover, Herodian platform paving stones are visible; these would have provided adequate space for worshippers and non-Jews as they circulated around the open Temple Mount area. In addition, cisterns for washing and ritual cleansing and the Temple Mount retaining walls themselves (though most of the middle and upper courses of stone contained in the walls were placed during the Islamic and Crusader periods) are visible.



This final landing step includes pre-Herodian stone set at an angle parallel to the central portion of the current eastern wall (which is located in the same place as Solomon’s eastern wall). This has led archaeologist Leen Ritmeyer to believe that this stone course forms the western wall boundary of Solomon’s square temple platform.

* See our chart “Seal Impressions of People in the Old Testament” in chapter 19 for a listing of various individuals mentioned in the Hebrew Scriptures whose stamp seals have been found.

Perhaps the most telling feature involving the Jewish Temple is the sacred rock that is covered by the Dome of the Rock structure, known as *es-Sakhra* (Arabic for *rock*), where Muhammad is said to have ascended to heaven. Recent analysis (from 1968 to 2006) of the Temple Mount data by leading expert and archaeological architect Dr. Leen Ritmeyer has led him to identify the location of the Solomonic and Herodian Temples as the place where the Muslim Dome of the Rock stands today. Among other theories of where the First and Second Temples were located, dating back to Melchior de Vogue's northern theory in 1864, Ritmeyer's proposal is distinguished by hard literary and archaeological research. His participation with Israeli archaeologist Benjamin Mazar of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in excavations from 1968 to 1978 of the southwest corner and surrounding areas of the Temple Mount have made him the world's foremost expert on the Temple topic; he possesses the most current archaeological research pertaining to the location of both Temples. His research on this important and fascinating topic was published in *The Quest: Revealing the Temple Mount in Jerusalem* (2006).

Ritmeyer explains that according to the measurements of the size of the Temple Mount found in Josephus and the second-century AD Mishnah,⁸ combined with current archaeological data, the original raised Temple platform constructed by Solomon was 500 cubits by 500 cubits (approximately 750 feet by 750 feet) square. According to Ritmeyer, confusion exists as to the location of Solomon's square Temple Mount because of the misapplication of key texts in Josephus and the Mishnah *Middot*:

The principal error made by most researchers is to equate the square Temple Mount, described by both Josephus and Middot, with that built by Herod the Great. Such a position cannot be maintained, as neither of the measurements given in these two sources can be reconciled with the dimensions of the present-day Temple Mount [constructed by Herod].⁹

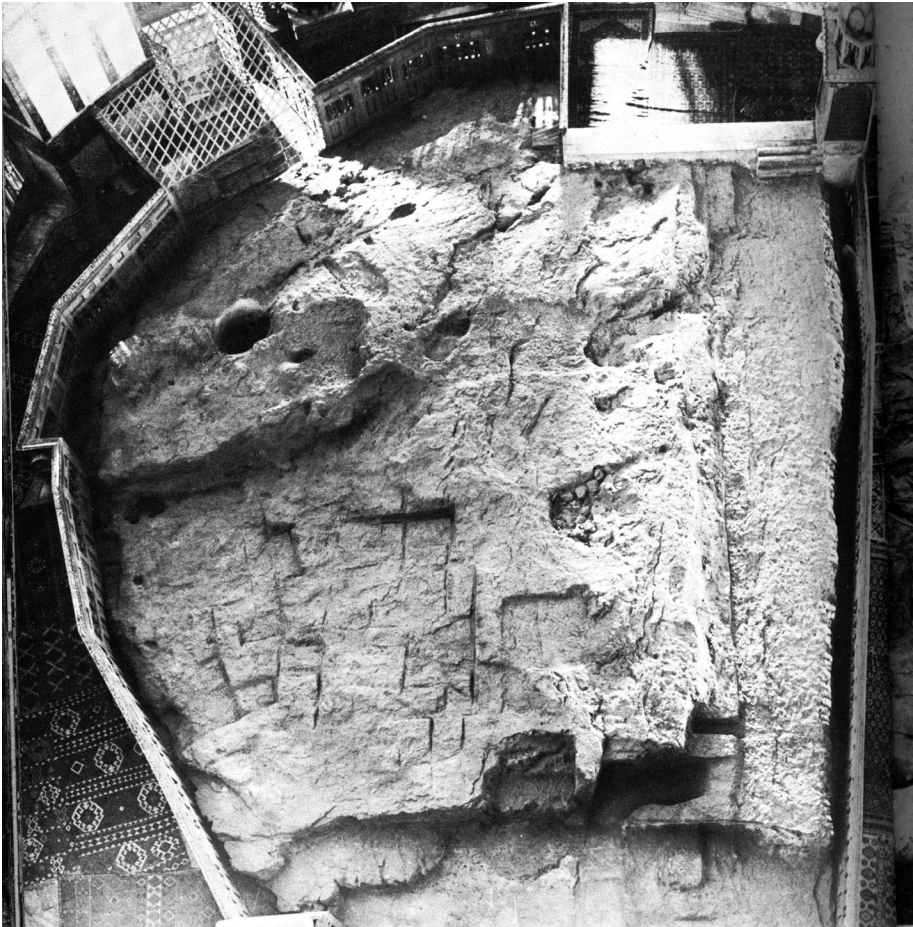
Ritmeyer has established these measurements not only from the literature, but from hard facts on the ground, specifically the bottom step comprised of a line of pre-Herodian stones (laid in a north-south direction) located at the northwestern corner descending from the current raised platform. His identification of their unique angle—that is, that they are parallel to the central section of the eastern wall that overlooks the Kidron Valley (which is believed to be in its original location from the time of Solomon), and end exactly at the northern edge of the current raised platform—has led him to believe that these large step stones formed one of the three sides of Solomon's square Temple Mount.¹⁰ Ritmeyer proposes that these step stones, which sit on bedrock, form part of the 500-cubit *western wall* course of Solomon's Temple Mount. From this data it is easy to mark out the 500 cubits by 500 cubits square mentioned in the *Middot*.

The Possible Site of the Temple

In addition to his discoveries of the proposed pre-Herodian western wall boundary and surrounding Temple Mount walls and structures, Ritmeyer has on various occasions sought to research the relationship between the protruding rock (*es-Sakhra*) covered by

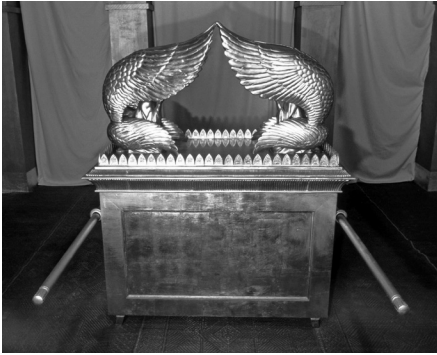
the Dome of the Rock structure and the Temple itself. In order to achieve this, he carefully examined the markings found on the rock, which has helped to offer archaeological evidence supporting the site as the location of both the First and Second Temples.

First, Ritmeyer noticed flat areas forming the foundation trench carved into the southern side of the rock itself, and a rock scarp on the northern end, which he proposes to be the foundation locations for the northern and southern walls of the Holy of Holies. The surface of the northern scarp, according to Ritmeyer, was cut down in size by Crusaders, forming a flat area on which to place two shrines that would complement the Crusader altar built on the rock. According to 1 Kings 6:20, Solomon's inner sanctuary was 20 royal cubits long by 20 royal cubits wide by 20 royal cubits high. Ritmeyer measured between the two trenches a distance of 34 feet, 5 inches, which is exactly 20 royal cubits.¹¹



Es-Sakhra is also known as the “Rock of Binding,” referring to Abraham’s offering of his son Isaac. (Photo by Zev Radovan.)

Second, Ritmeyer discovered a natural rock edge (scarp) on the western side of the rock, which would provide the natural back end and western support structure for a western wall of the innermost sanctuary.



The Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 25:10-22; 37:1-9), which was placed in the Holy of Holies, was the most revered artifact ever made. It was a rectangular wooden chest measuring 2.25 feet wide by 3.75 feet long made of *shittim* wood (acacia) that was overlaid with gold. Its lid (called the mercy seat or atonement cover) was made of solid gold, with golden cherubim fashioned from the same piece of gold sitting atop the lid with outstretched wings. It was from between the two cherubim on the mercy seat that God would speak to Moses (Exodus 25:22; Numbers 7:89). Since the Ark was not to be touched, special poles (wood overlaid with gold) were used to transport it from location to location until it was placed in its final, permanent location in Solomon's Temple. Inside the Ark were placed the two tablets of the Law given by Moses (Exodus 25), Aaron's rod that budded (Numbers 17:10; Hebrews 9:4), and finally the golden jar of manna (Exodus 16:33; Hebrews 9:4). The model shown is from the "Wilderness Tabernacle," located in Kibbutz Almog, near the Dead Sea. (Photo by Zev Radovan.)

Third, if the northern, southern, and western walls could be identified, there should be no foundation markings 20 royal cubits to the east side of the Holy of Holies, since the Scriptures say Solomon used a wooden partition made of olive wood and overlaid with gold (1 Kings 6:31) between the inner sanctuary and the Holy Place. The later Herodian Temple used a curtain (veil), according to the Bible (Matthew 27:51), Josephus, and Jewish sources (Mishnah *Yoma* 5.1ff). After examining the rock, Ritmeyer discovered the presence of Crusader quarry marks but found no evidence of trenches on the eastern side of the inner sanctuary!

Fourth, Ritmeyer noticed a rectangular depression in the exact center of the Holy of Holies area.* After measuring the dimensions (1.5 cubits/2.25 feet wide by 2.5 cubits/3.75 feet long) of the depression he discovered it was the same dimensions as the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 25:10)! First Kings 6:19-21 is consistent with these markings since it describes the innermost sanctuary as the location where Solomon *prepared* a special place for the Ark.

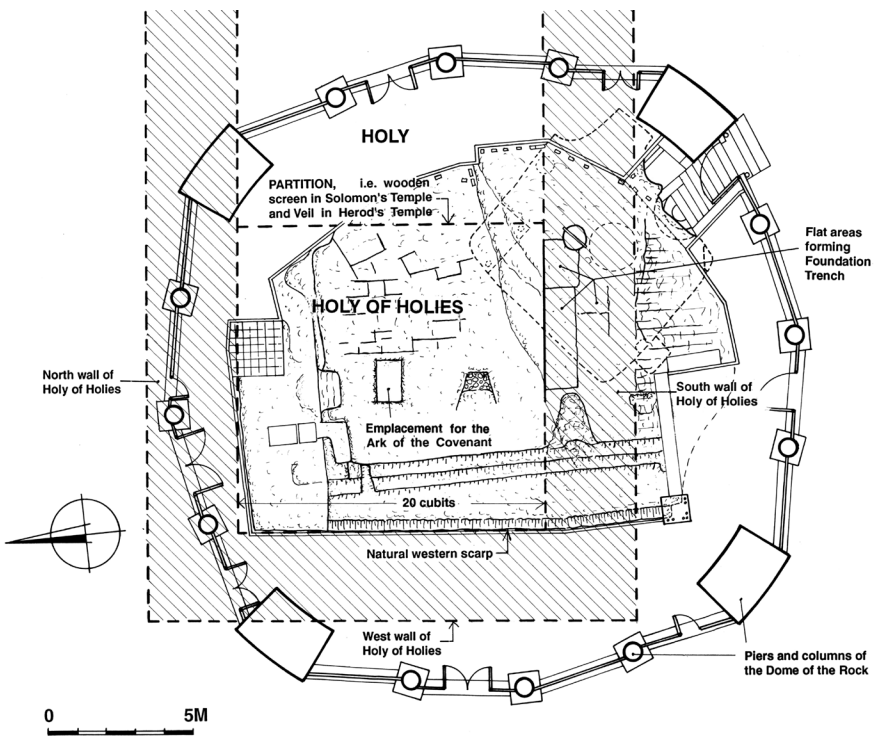
This special preparation is also confirmed in 1 Kings 8:6-8,20-21, where it says, "There I have *set* a place for the ark..." According to Ritmeyer, the Hebrew verb *sim*, translated "set," can

* Leen Ritmeyer, *The Quest: Revealing the Temple Mount in Jerusalem* (Jerusalem: Carta Jerusalem and the LAMB Foundation, 2006), 247. Ritmeyer treats objections to his proposals in a convincing manner (pages 247-250), offering literary, geological, and archaeological evidence supporting his claims. He indicates that the construction of the Dome of the Rock in the late seventh century AD—and the extreme reverence with which the Muslims (and Christians for a short time during the Crusades) have treated the site—has protected the rock through the centuries from the natural elements and vandalism, making these Temple markings discernible. Even during the Crusader period, the rock (and its markings) appeared to have been protected since the entire western half of the rock was overlaid by stone steps and a platform that served as part of the Crusader Church.

also mean “put” or “make,” which would fit the archaeological evidence visible on the rock itself.¹² In this case, Ritmeyer suggests translating *sim* as “made,” rendering the Solomon’s statement as “I have *made* there a place for the Ark...” The preparation made by Solomon to stabilize the Ark on Mount Moriah’s rocky surface ensured that the Ark would not tilt, wobble, or slide to one side in an undignified manner.¹³ The value of the biblical passages cannot be underestimated, for without their descriptions we would not have recognized the rock markings and dimensions (1 Kings 6:20) for what they really were.

Features of and Surrounding the Temple Proper

After identifying the Holy of Holies, Ritmeyer’s proposal for the location of the sacrificial altar is relatively simple to mark as immediately east and southeast of the Holy Place. Some have suggested the altar was located on the rock (*es-Sakhra*) itself. However, Ritmeyer has eliminated this location. Since the altar was originally located on the threshing floor of Araunah, which was most likely a flat circular area, it would not have made sense to place it on the top of the rock (or the tip of a mountain). This would not



THE LOCATION OF SOLOMON'S TEMPLE

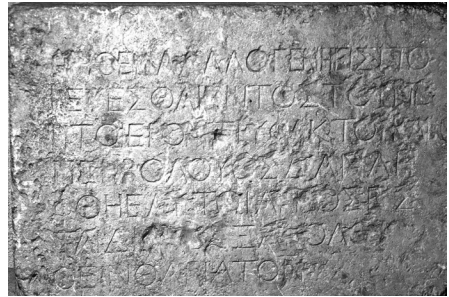
© Leen Ritmeyer

have been practical for oxen to walk on nor for the separation of wheat and chaff. On the Mount itself, the topography in relation to the bedrock and an analysis of the Mishnah *Middot* (chapter 3) favor Ritmeyer's placement of the altar as east and off-center, slightly to the south of the Holy Place and the current Muslim Dome of the Chain.

As one begins to move east from the Holy Place through Herod's Temple, beyond the Temple Court (Azarah) and the altar of sacrifice are two narrow areas known as the Court of the Priests and the Court of the Israelites. Moving eastward through the Nicanor Gate one would encounter the 15 semicircular steps where the Levitical choir would sing out into the Court of the Women (the Treasury); there four giant lamp stands would illuminate the area. From here moving east the worshipper would exit the Temple compound through the Eastern Gate into the Temple Mount plaza/platform area.

According to the *Middot* (2.3), the space immediately surrounding the Temple sanctuary was a protected area that allowed the presence of only Jews. No Gentiles were allowed past the *soreg*, which was a low-lying wall (about three to five feet tall) marked with warnings in Greek, Hebrew, and Latin that no Gentile was allowed to pass through the *soreg*, upon penalty of death.¹⁴ At least two Greek-language warning markers have been discovered in secondary use, like the one pictured here. The typical warning reads, when translated,

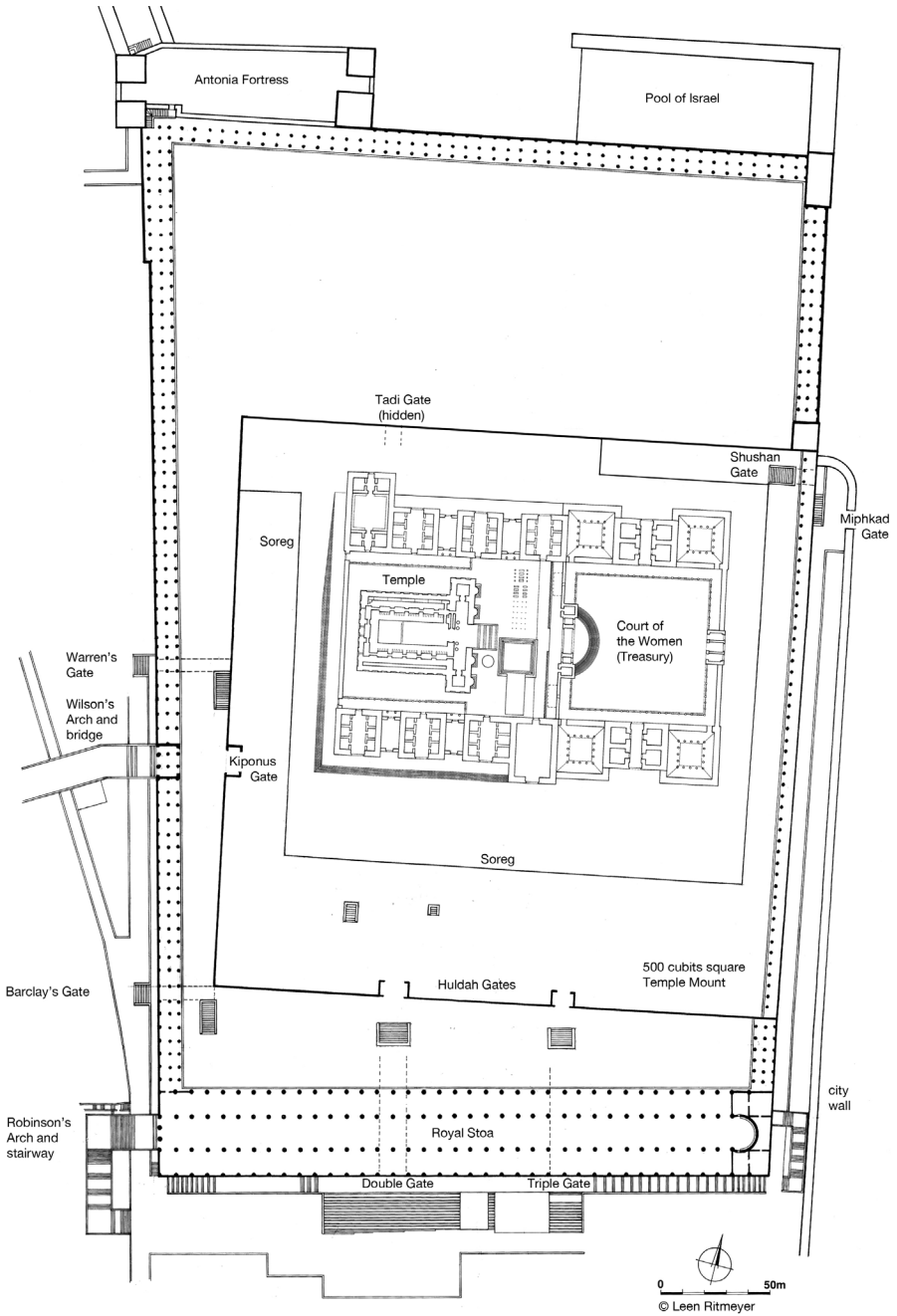
No Gentile may enter
beyond the dividing wall
into the court around the
Holy Place
Whoever is caught
will have himself
to blame for his
subsequent death



This Greek-inscribed Temple warning marker and others like it would be placed at each entry point along the *soreg* boundary surrounding the Temple sanctuary. (Photo by Zev Radovan.)

The *soreg* line marked the innermost boundary between the outer retaining walls of the Temple Mount built by Herod and the Temple sanctuary itself, located at the center of the Mount. The area between the *soreg* boundary wall and the outer Temple Mount walls is known as the Court of the Gentiles (outer court); non-Jews could freely move about there through the colonnades and open expanse. Interestingly, Acts 21:28-31 appears to be consistent with the existence of the *soreg* and its strict penalty when it describes the riot that ensued after Jews mistakenly believed that the apostle Paul had taken a Gentile into this forbidden area. Paul's letter to the Ephesians (2:13-14) portrays this kind of separation barrier as having been overcome by Christ's finished work on the cross: "Now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation" (NKJV).





First-century Temple Mount structure. (© Ritmeyer Archaeological Design.)

The archaeological and literary evidence supporting the biblical record of the existence, location, function, and personnel associated with the First and Second Temples are strong, especially in light of the recent archaeological data provided by Ritmeyer, Mazar, and others.* Any attempt to dismiss the Jewish presence or the religious functions held sacred by Israel appears to be at odds with a mountain of data that confirms the reliability of the biblical statements about the Temple Mount, its religious and administrative functions, and the renovations and reconstructions through the centuries.

* Even minute details are being uncovered which are confirming the historical nature of the Scriptures. For example, in June 2012, Ronny Reich and Eli Shukron discovered a tiny gold bell measuring about one-half inch in diameter while excavating in Jerusalem adjacent to the Temple Mount. The bell has curved vertical ridges and a loop at the top for fastening. The excavators suggest that it may have been worn by a high official or attached to the priestly garments as described in Exodus 28:33-35.