

THE MAJOR RENOVATION OF THE SECOND TEMPLE BY HEROD “THE GREAT”

20 BC After 18 years as “King of the Jews” in Jerusalem, Herod (53 yrs) felt the need to completely renovate the Jewish Temple. Before being able to do so he had to convince the vast majority of Jews to grant him permission for such an ambitious project. Josephus recorded his appeal to them.

“I think I need not speak to you, my countrymen, about such other works as I have done since I came to the kingdom, although I may say they have been performed in such a manner as to bring more security to you than glory to myself; for I have neither been negligent in the most difficult times about what tended to ease your necessities, nor have the buildings I have made been so proper to preserve me as yourselves from injuries; and I imagine that, with God’s assistance, I have advanced the nation of the Jews to a degree of happiness which they never had before; and for the particular edifices belonging to your own country, and to your own cities, as also to those cities that we have lately acquired, which we have erected and greatly adorned, and thereby augmented the dignity of your nation, it seems to me a needless task to enumerate them to you, since you well know them yourselves; but as to that undertaking which I have a mind to set about at present, and which will be a work of the greatest piety and excellence that can possibly be undertaken by us, I will now declare it to you.

“Our fathers, indeed, when they were returned from Babylon, built this temple to God Almighty, yet does it want sixty cubits of its largeness in altitude¹; for so much did that first temple which Solomon built exceed this temple: nor let anyone condemn our fathers for their negligence or want of piety herein, for it was not their fault that the temple was no higher; for they were Cyrus, and Darius the son of Hystaspes, who determined the measures for its rebuilding; and it hath been by reason of the subjection of those fathers of ours to them and to their posterity, and after them to the Macedonians, that they had not the opportunity to follow the original model of this pious edifice, nor could raise it to its ancient altitude; but since I am now, by God’s will, your governor, and I have had peace a long time, and have gained great riches and large revenues, and, what is the principal thing of all, I am at amity with and well regarded by the Romans, who, if I may so say, are the rulers of the whole world, I will do my endeavor to correct that imperfection, which hath arisen from the necessity of our affairs, and the slavery we have been under formerly, and to make a thankful return, after the most pious manner to God, for what blessings I have received from him, by giving me this kingdom, and that by rendering his temple as complete as I am able.”²

¹ The overall dimensions of the Tabernacle shrine building (the Most Holy Place & Holy Place combined) was 10x10x30 cubits (15 feet wide x 15 feet high x 45 feet long feet).

In Solomon’s Temple, the shrine building (the Most Holy Place & Holy Place combined) was 20x30x60 cubits (30x45x90 feet). [There were also three stories of auxiliary rooms located on both sides of the shrine building, bringing its overall dimensions to roughly 30x30x60 cubits (45x45x90 feet).] However, there was also a very impressive, 20x120x10 cubit (30x180x15 feet) façade – a.k.a., “ the porch” – immediately in front of the Temple, rising above it like a huge platform, four times the height of the shrine building itself.

According to the original decree of King Cyrus of Persia in 537 BC – a decree reissued by King Darius in 519 BC (Ezra 6:1-12) – the towering façade of the “Second Temple,” built by Zerubbabel, was to be 60 cubits (90 feet) high and wide, much less impressive than Solomon’s, being only half the height. [Presumably the shrine (Most Holy Place & Holy Place combined) would have been the same size as Solomon’s Temple.] Thus, restoring the height & glory of Solomon’s original façade was a major thesis of Herod’s plan.

For local reference, the famous Notre Dame “Golden Dome” is only 17 feet taller than the façade of Herod’s Temple, while the Notre Dame library building (the one with the “Touchdown Jesus” mural) is only 30 feet taller than the façade.

² Antiquities 15.11.1.

According to Josephus, the people were skeptical that Herod would be able to pull off such a feat. But he allayed their fears by vigorous preparation for the project, promising not to begin renovation on the shrine building until he had all the supplies & trained worker-priests needed to immediately finish it.

“And this was the speech which Herod made to them: but still this speech affrighted many of the people, as being unexpected by them, and because it seemed incredible, it did not encourage them, but put a damp upon them, for they were afraid that he would pull down the whole edifice, and not be able to bring his intentions to perfection for its rebuilding; and this danger appeared to them to be very great, and the vastness of the undertaking to be such as could hardly be accomplished. But while they were in this disposition, the king encouraged them, and told them he would not pull down their temple till all things were gotten ready for building it up entirely again. And as he promised them this beforehand, so he did not break his word with them, but got ready a thousand wagons, that were to bring stones for the building, and chose out ten thousand of the most skillful workmen, and bought a thousand sacerdotal garments for as many of the priests, and had some of them taught the arts of stone cutters, and others of carpenters, and then began to build; but this not till everything was well prepared for the work.”³

19 BC [Probably around the start of the year] After a period of preparation, actual construction on the shrine building began.

Josephus went on to state that some of the stones used in the building of this new shrine building measured 25x8x12 cubits (37.5x12x18 feet). Of course, all these stones were torn down during the AD 70 destruction of the Temple, exactly as predicted by Jesus (Matthew 24:1-2), so we are unable to verify his figures. However, archaeologists have been able to evaluate other Herodian stones still in place within the subsurface retaining walls of the Temple complex (specifically within the Western or “Wailing” Wall). The largest of these huge stones found to date measures roughly 28x7x9 cubits (about 42x11x14 feet) – very close to Josephus’ dimensions – and weighs an amazing 660 tons. (For comparison, the largest stones within the Great Pyramid only weigh about 80 tons.)

Josephus mentions some spectacular artistic touches which adorned the massive double doors which opened through the 180-foot high façade into the shrine building itself.

“The temple had doors also at the entrance, and lintels over them, of the same height with the temple itself. They were adorned with embroidered veils, with their flowers of purple, and pillars interwoven: and over these, but under the crown-work, was spread out a golden vine, with its branches hanging down from a great height, the largeness and fine workmanship of which was a surprising sight to the spectators, to see what vast materials there were, and with what great skill the workmanship was done.”⁴

“Its height extended all along to ninety cubits [135 feet] in height, and its length was fifty cubits [75 feet], and its breadth twenty [30 feet]; but that gate which was at this end of the first part of the house was, as we have already observed, all over covered with gold, as was its whole wall about it; it had also golden vines above it, from which clusters of grapes hung as tall as a man’s height;”⁵

³Antiquities 15.11.2.

⁴Antiquities 15.11.3.

⁵Wars 5.5.4.

18 BC [Probably just after Yom Kippur, on the King's royal anniversary]⁶ The shrine building was finished & dedicated to service amidst great celebration.

“But the temple itself was built by the priests in a year and six months,—upon which all the people were full of joy; and presently they returned thanks, in the first place, to God; and in the next place for the alacrity the king had shown. They feasted and celebrated this rebuilding of the temple: and for the king, he sacrificed three hundred oxen to God; as did the rest, everyone according to his ability: the number of which sacrifices is not possible to set down; for it cannot be that we should truly relate it; for at the same time with this celebration for the work about the temple, fell also the day of the king's inauguration, which he kept of an old custom as a festival, and it now coincided with the other; which coincidence of them both made the festival most illustrious.”⁷

The completion of this project is actually mentioned in John 2:20. At that time (Passover AD 30) the Jewish authorities stated that it had been 46 years since the shrine building “had been built.”⁸

Herod also refurbished “The Tower” of the Hasmoneans, the ancient stronghold located just north of the Temple complex, renaming it after his deceased friend, Mark Anthony.

“Now on the north side [of the temple] was built a citadel, whose walls were square, and strong, and of extraordinary firmness. This citadel was built by the kings of the Asamonean race, who were also high priests before Herod, and they called it the Tower, in which were repositied the vestments of the high priest, which the high priest only put on at the time when he was to offer sacrifice.

“These vestments king Herod kept in that place; and after his death they were under the power of the Romans, until the time of Tiberius Caesar...they were kept under the seal of the high priest, and of the treasurers, of the temple; which treasurers, the day before a festival, went up to the Roman captain of the temple guards, and viewed their own seal, and received the vestments; and again when the festival was over, they brought it to the same place, and showed the captain of the temple guards their seal, which corresponded with his seal, and repositied them there....but for the tower itself, when Herod the king of the Jews had fortified it more firmly than before, in order to secure and guard the temple, he gratified Antonius, who was his friend, and the Roman ruler, and then gave it the name of the Tower of Antonia.”⁹

More than likely, Jesus' Roman trial before Pontius Pilate took place within the fortified walls of the Tower of Antonia (John 18:28ff).

The apostle Paul also spent time within the Tower of Antonia after his arrest during a riot within the Temple complex (Acts 21:34ff).

⁶ Herod captured Jerusalem on Yom Kippur of 37 BC. He most likely began his official reign a day or so later.

⁷ Antiquities 15.11.6.

⁸ Despite some of the English versions giving the impression that the building project was still going on in Jesus's day, the verb form used both here, in the N.T., & in the Antiquities of Josephus, is that of an aorist (past) tense, meaning that the basic renovation work on the shrine building was finished in 18 BC. Additional adornments were continually being added, which may have been the thrust of the Jews' response to Jesus – “It's been 46 years that this completed shrine has stood here, being adorned and adored in its magnificent state, and you think you could rebuild it in three days?”

⁹ Antiquities 15.11.4.

19-12 BC [During an eight year period] Herod expanded the Temple mount by building huge retaining walls and adding unbelievable amounts of fill. This provided a spacious level area upon which he could build a tremendous open courtyard surrounding by huge “porticos” or covered colonnades where large numbers of people could gather daily as part of Temple worship.

The largest part of this outer courtyard was referred to as the “Court of the Gentiles.”

The “pinnacle [literally, “wing”] of the Temple” where Jesus was tempted to throw himself down (Matthew 4:5), was located on the SE corner of the complex, where (because of Herod’s expansion of the Temple mount) there was a sheer drop of several hundred feet to the floor of the Kidron valley below.

“Solomon’s Portico” – where the earliest Jewish believers in Jesus commonly gathered (Acts 5:12) – was located along the eastern border of the complex.

Josephus, who was an eyewitness to the Temple’s destruction in AD 70, described the overall impression of the Temple upon those approaching it from afar.

“Now the outward face of the temple in its front wanted nothing that was likely to surprise either men’s minds or their eyes, for it was covered all over the plates of gold of great weight, and, at the first rising of the sun, reflected back a very fiery splendor, and made those who forced themselves to look upon it to turn their eyes away, just as they would have done at the sun’s own rays. But this temple appeared to strangers, when they were at a distance, like a mountain covered with snow; for, as to those parts of it that were not gilt, they were exceeding white. On its top it had spikes with sharp points, to prevent any pollution of it by birds sitting upon it...”¹⁰

He also mentioned the “dividing wall” which barred Gentiles & un-clean Jews from approaching the shrine building.

“There was a wall of partition, about a cubit in height, made of fine stones, and so as to be grateful to the sight; this encompassed the holy house, and the altar, and kept the people that were on the outside off from the priests.”¹¹

On it was a notice – “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.” Paul used this barrier wall as a metaphor in explaining to Gentiles how God, through Christ’s death, brought them to Himself, past the barrier of their sins (Ephesians 2:11-22).

INTERESTING SITES ABOUT HEROD’S TEMPLE

A retired farmer in England has spent the last 30 years building a 1:100 scale model of Herod’s Temple. There are some great photos of his model at the following website:

<http://www.odditycentral.com/pics/retired-farmer-spends-30-years-building-scale-model-of-herods-temple.html>

The Urban Simulation Team at UCLA has also produced some fantastic computer simulations of Herod’s Temple. You can find some great images & videos of their work at the following website:

<http://www.ust.ucla.edu/ustweb/Projects/israel.htm>

¹⁰Wars 5.5.6.

¹¹Ibid.