

The Temple

From Tent to Temple

The movement of the Ark of the Covenant from the desert to the city of Jerusalem made a few stops along the way. The Tent stopping at Shiloh and Samuel's role in that period have already been mentioned. A military defeat lost the Ark. The Philistines eventually returned it because of tragic events they blamed on the nearness of this foreign God. The Tent lingered with caretakers for some twenty years before David, now king, ordered it brought to his capital in Jerusalem. It proved a shrewd political maneuver as well as a religious one. Jerusalem already hosted his political and military establishment. Now the city would become a religious center. David's power became completely centralized in Jerusalem, Never associated with any revelational event, Jerusalem suddenly became a holy city. People now traveled as pilgrims to satisfy Temple obligations. They arrived on feast days or religious events such as the circumcision of male children.

David sought to transform the covering supplied by a tent into a temple building. The task instead was God-given to his son Solomon. The newly-built Temple created an expression of holiness well beyond the modesty of a tent. A whole complex arose on property purchased by David. It spawned a number of courts as well as the temple building. This ground plan formed an expanded articulation of sacred space. The dynamic suggested increased holiness as one advanced closer toward the building. Gates and fences allowed only those entitled to approach a particular court. Each courtyard featured activities proper to its space. Moving forward implied trending upward spiritually and literally. Steps introduced the next level of holiness. It created a journey up a spiritual arrangement. What was most holy stood most high because most unreachable but also closest to heaven.

It might be helpful to stroll through these courts to inhale some feeling for a worship system quite different from our own, despite interesting similarities. Entrance began through a number of gates. The first series of gates introduced the Court of the Gentiles, the largest of the courts. As other courts, it was surrounded by a fence so that one entered only through the gates. A gatekeeper guarded each entrance point. Probably the Temple Police were gate keepers for the Court of Gentiles. This Court was the least restrictive people-wise and therefore most crowded. Crowds of this size may have needed security guards the most.

People arriving to pray initially joined a very loud and social atmosphere. As an area introducing the sacred, it still contained much of the profane. We might call it a transitional space. Profane things happened in this Court to prepare for more sacred areas to come. Buying and selling took place here. People came to offer animals at the altar sacrifice. Without their own gift, they could line up and buy one here. It also supplied an opportunity to exchange currency. The Temple refused to receive Roman

coins. Only the Jewish shekel was acceptable. This Court offered that necessary exchange.

Atmospherics could be very loud. Animal noises, large lines of people waiting to buy sacrificial offerings for the altar, those waiting to exchange coins. All of this, plus the crowd size, made the air feel somewhat chaotic. The large numbers entering this Court could be expected because pilgrims were not required to be Israelites. Although not born Jews, some Gentiles came to pray at the Temple. They could participate in a distant way in the worship of Israel. Frankly the Court of the Gentiles, situated on the outer rim of the Temple complex, one could call the most secular and least holy. It put on display the business side of religion. Most probably Jesus drove out the money changers in this Court, demanding the animals be removed. One might easily understand how the goings-on might resemble a marketplace. As the largest of the Courts and the least selective, it could attract what at times might feel like a mob.

Less busy and less chaotic, the Court of Women is next. The Temple police probably guarded these gates as well as the previous one. The penalty of death was threatened for anyone entering this gate without being an Israelite. Restrictions began here. Following customs of cultures and regions of that time, men and women worshipped separately. And so a court signaled out just for women. Islam follows that custom today. Pictures of Islam at prayer usually features men kneeling in prayer. One never sees women.

The Court of Women also featured an area where alms boxes were placed for donating the shekels obtained from the previous Court. All Israel carried an obligation to support the Temple. The Palace accepted financial responsibility for the upkeep of the Temple building. The people themselves were held responsible for supporting the priests, Levites, Temple police and whatever workers were needed. The priests and Levites were not prevented from marriage and family. They came from families obliged to work full-time at the Temple, caring for and offering services within the complex. Yet they also carried the obligation of raising their own family.

Priests and Levites were descendants of the tribe of Levi — the only tribe receiving no portion of the promised land. Their role as ministers to the Temple came to them by family inheritance rather than personal choice. They substituted for first-born males of all Israel owed to the Lord. This debit came from the angel of death passing over their own houses while Egypt suffered the loss of their first-born. In return, priests and Levites paid that debt by offering full-time service to the Temple. The tribe of Levi represented every first-born male in Israel. In return, they expected the people to support them. It was seen as a contract. Therefore, tithing became an obligation touching all Israel. Ten percent of one's possessions must be donated to the Temple. Some called it the Temple tax. Part of the tithing obligation could be satisfied in the Court of Women. Alms boxes scattered around this particular Court reminded people of their obligation. It was not merely an opportunity for freely offered charity. This was something more binding.

Entering the Court of Israel opened up onto a space where men gathered. Worship ministers exercised their leadership through prayers and songs. People here were closest to the ritual action — the altar of sacrifice. Its fence defined the nearest laymen could go to the Tabernacle and the Dwelling. Beyond this point, one must be a priest or Levite. This Court offered the nearest Jews could come to the Temple building. The gates from this court to the Court of Priests were probably maintained by Levites. Gatekeeping was a ministry Levites fulfilled. It feels doubtful Temple police would be allowed to go beyond the Court of the Gentiles. They would also be most needed there.

The Court of Priests stood before the Temple building itself. The altar of sacrifice stood here and to the left of the court. Made of bronze, it was hollow inside. Coals would be steadily shoveled inside to keep the fire burning while sacrifices were offered on its grill above. Across the courtyard the laver stood. The laver consisted of a large basin used to supply pans of water needed to wash animals presented for sacrifice. Priests also were required to wash hands and feet before and after each sacrifice. Steadily water flowed into the laver for these necessary washings. Washing implied purification. The priest needed purification before offering anything to the Lord. Because of ritual contact with the Divine, another purification was needed to return to ordinary life. Something contagious was feared in closeness to holiness and required washing. Temple ministers suspected danger when one lingered too long in this intense atmosphere of the Divine..

Then came the Vestibule. One climbed another series of steps to get there. It led into the Holy Place. Steps to climb were added to each Court and needed also for the priest to approach the altar. Step-climbing implied entrance into another degree of holiness. On arrival at the Vestibule, double doors greeted one and not gates. One had now arrived at the Holy Place. Few entered this culmination of Courts. Two columns stood on either side of the doors.

Entering the Holy Place, one experienced light from windows on both sides. At the far end of the room, curtains separated out a small room situated still higher than the room itself. From the Holy Place one very special person climbed these stairs once a year to the Holy of Holies. Outside of these curtains a golden table with twelve loaves of bread stood. Set in two piles of six, they were known as “The Bread of the Presence.” Called such not because of any presence within the bread itself but because of their nearness to the Holy of Holies. Reverence derived from nearness. Placed there by the Levites every Sabbath, priests alone consumed the bread and only there in the Holy Place.

A second golden table supported the altar of incense and the lampstand. Coals from the altar of sacrifice were used to burn incense at the hour of prayer which occurred daily morning and evening — times also when the priest offered the outside sacrifice. The lampstand was lit at the evening service and extinguished in the morning. Its light was to burn all night.

Once a year, the high priest ascended the steps leading to the Holy of Holies to incense the Ark. The occasion was the Day of Atonement. The Holy of Holies consisted of a small elevated room at the rear of the building with no lighting. Inside

stood the Ark of the Covenant. On each side of the chest statues of golden angels stood — cherubim. Cherubim guarded the Garden of Eden after Adam and Eve were removed. Belief supported the notion that they guarded the Ark. They faced each other. The surface of the Ark between the angels were considered the Throne of God. Above that Throne, the invisible God of Israel was most present. This small room kept in darkness held the ultimate expression and the culmination of Courts. In this small room resided the most intense degree of holiness. God was present here as nowhere else.