

# [First and second temple essay](https://assignbuster.com/first-and-second-temple-essay/)

According to tradition both the First and Second temple were built on‘ Mount Moriah’, the site on which Abraham offered Isaac to G\_d. King Davidbuilt an altar to G\_d on the site and a generation later his son, Solomonbuilt the First Temple as a permanent resting place for the Ark of theCovenant. Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, destroyed King Solomon’s Templein 586 B. C. E. When Herod became king he decided to rebuild the Temple in 19B. C. E. It cannot be said that the rebuilding of the Temple was a sign ofany real religious virtue on Herod’s part for he is well known as a crueland vicious king who murdered his wife, son and countless others includingHigh Priests without regard. Despite Herod’s violent reign, and the generaldisregard for him felt by the Sanhedrin and High Priests, the second Templeonce again became the centre for Jewish religious life. To understand theeffects that the destruction of the Second Temple had on the Jews ofPalestine we must first understand the role that it had played in Jewishlife up to that point. Many of the developments of religious thought andpractice after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C. E, can be seen toreflect rituals being practiced in Second Temple times. Therefore tounderstand why these changes and reinterpretations occurred we must beinformed of some of the preceding traditions.

The Second Temple served many functions for the Jewish community, andeven those living in the Diaspora would pray in the direction of the Templeas a sign of their engagement and awareness of it’s importance. It was boththe centre for sacrificial rituals, the meeting place of the Sanhedrin, andthe destination of pilgrims during festival times. Ancient authors indicatethat most of the Jewish people supported all aspects of Temple worship.

Philo wrote that throughout the empire Jews ‘ collect(ed( money for sacredpurposes’1 and sent it to Jerusalem. According to Josephus the Jews inMesopotamia made ‘ dedicatory offerings’2 to the Temple in addition to thetemple tax of one- half shekel.

Inside the wall of the Herod’s Temple, which was more than 400 metreslong, was an enclosed area where the business of the Temple-sacrifice wascarried out. In the open air there was a large altar, a basin, a shambles(where the animals were butchered) and cooking facilities. These weredirectly in front of the roofed sanctuary, which was not much used. It wasdivided into two chambers. The outer one contained another altar and acandelabrum, the inner was empty. Only the High Priest entered this innersanctum , and he only once a year, on the Day of Atonement. Thus the Templearea consisted of areas of increasing sanctity and admission wasprogressively restricted. Purity was so strictly observed that priests hadbuilt the inner area of the Temple complex. This reveals that purity lawshad been developed. The ideas of holiness and separation, which allowedonly the most pure to come near, informed the entire arrangement of theTemple and it’s rites. The Temple was not only holy because G\_d wasworshipped there, but also because G\_d was there. Jews did not think thatG\_d was there and no where else, nor that the Temple confined him. Since hewas the creator of the universe, he could be approached in prayer at anyplace. Nevertheless, he was in some special sense present in the Temple. Asthe author of II Maccabees expressed it, ‘ He who has his dwelling in heavenwatches over that place (the Temple( itself and brings it aid’.

Every day, without exception, the community as a whole provided two maleyearling lambs that were offered to G\_d as burnt sacrifices, along withflour, oil and wine3, one in the morning, to open the temple service, andone in the evening, just before it’s conclusion. On the Sabbath thesesacrifices were doubled. The community offered additional sacrifices tomark each new moon, and on the major festivals and the annual fast (YomKippur) there were still further community sacrifices. The Torah does notspecify the precise purpose of most of the community sacrifices. It wouldhave been simple to interpret the daily burnt offerings as atoning, sincethe temple tax was called ‘ atonement money’, and its purpose was ‘ to makeatonement’4. These terms, however were not applied specifically to thetwo lambs. Philo regarded thanksgiving as the purpose of the dailyofferings.

Festivals were very much a part of ancient life, and Jewish pilgrims wereprepared to endure crowds of between 300, 000 to 500, 000 people, especiallyduring Pesach. Josephus gives some fantastic figures for the number ofpeople present at two different Pesachs’. Cestius, he says, ordered thechief priests to estimate the population, so that he could impress Nero.

The priests counted 255, 600 Pesach lambs as being slain. Josephus estimatesthat ten people shared each lamb, and, rounding the total up, concludedthat there were 2, 700, 000 people at that Pesach5. Although these figuresare most certainly an exaggeration, it does provide an example of howcentral the temple was to worship at the time, both for Jews living inJerusalem and those making pilgrimages from the diaspora. Large caravanscame overland from Babylonia and caravans and ships brought other groups ofpilgrims from Syria, Asia Minor and North Africa. There were three pilgrimfestivals : Pesach, Shavu’ot, and Succot. The Torah requires all Israelitemales to attend each of these festivals6. Josephus put it this way: Let them assemble in that city in which they shall establish theTemple, three times in the year, from the ends of the land which Hebrews shall conquer, in order torender thanks to G\_d forbenefits received, to intercede for future mercies, and to promote bythus meeting and feastingJosephus’ summary of the Mosaic legislation reveals the obviousinterpretation that Jews who resided abroad were exempt from the biblicalrequirement to attend three festivals each year (pilgrimage was requiredonly from the land the Israelites conquered.) many Diaspora Jews did makethe pilgrimage, but it is doubtful that many came more than once in theirlifetime.

During Second Temple times we know of three main parties: Sadducees, Pharisees and Essenes. As High Priests, appointed by Roman legates orkings, the Sadducees controlled the Sanhedrin . The Sadducees representedthe aristocracy and were in support of Rome. When the temple was destroyedthe aristocracy began to decline, the priestly aristocracy soondisappeared, and the Sadducees dropped from sight. Their entire existencehad been based around temple worship, and with the destruction of thetemple their role became redundant.

The Jews’ Great Revolt against Rome in 66 C. E proved to have acatastrophic effect on Jewish life. At the beginning of the Common Era, anew group arose among the Jews: the Zealots. These anti-Roman rebelsbelieved that all means were justified to attain political and religiousliberty. So when the insane emperor Caligula, declared himself to be adeity, and ordered that his statue be erected in every temple in the RomanEmpire, the Jews with their firm disgust for idolatry, refused. Thisrefusal led to a war with Rome and after a brief success the Zealots andthousands of other Jerusalem Jews were killed, and their precious and mostsacred of sites destroyed in an orgy of violence on the ninth of Av in thesummer of 70 C. E. It is estimated that as many as one million Jews died inthe Great Revolt against Rome.

The impact of the destruction of the temple was nothing short ofdevastating, with thousands killed, many of their towns in ruins, theirtrees and crops laid to waste, and a higher tax burden imposed by Rome tocompensate for the war, there was a great sense of despair and desolation.

The Talmud speaks of Jews who went into a permanent state of depression, who: Became ascetics, binding themselves neither to eat meat nor to drinkwine. Rabbi Joshua got intoa conversation with them and said to them: ‘ my sons, why do you noteat meat nor drink wine?’They replied: ‘ Shall we eat meat which used to be brought as anoffering on the altar, now that thealtar is no more? Shall we drink wine which used to be poured aslibation on the altar, but now nolonger?’ He said to them: ‘ If that is so, we should not eat breadeither, because the meal offeringshave ceased.’ They said: ‘(That is correct, and( we will manage withfruit.’ ‘ We should not eatfruit either, (he said( because there is no longer an offering offirstfruits.’ The ascetics respondedthat they would manage with other fruits. Rabbi Joshua said, ‘ But weshould not drink waterbecause there is no longer any ceremony of the water libation.’ Tothis they had no answer, whereupon the pragmatic Rabbi Joshua advised them: “ My sons, come andlisten to me. Notto mourn at all is impossible, because the blow has fallen. To mournovermuch is also impossible, because we do not impose on the community a hardship which themajority cannot endure.” Hetherefore suggested three ways Jews should mourn for the Temple’sdestruction. ‘ A man maystucco his house, but he should leave a little bare… A man canprepare a full- course banquet, buthe should leave out an item or two… A woman can put on all herornaments, but leave off one ortwo.” 7This quote from Bava Batra (see footnote also) accurately portrays two ofthe outstanding modes of thought after the destruction, one of sheerdesperation and one of hope. Rabbi Joshua provides us with an image of thenew direction that Judaism was beginning to take. The previous dependenceon the temple could have meant an end to Jewish religious practice had itnot been for the Pharisaic tradition and more directly Rabbi Yochanan benZakkai. Yochanan ben Zakkai was a leader of normative Judaism for manyyears before and after the destruction of the Temple. Rabbi Yochanan livedin Jerusalem in 70 C. E when the city was under siege. Rabbi Yochanan didnot approve of the uprising against Rome, and when the Zealots refused tolet anyone leave the city, on threat of death, Rabbi Yochanan devised acunning plan of escape. Upon leaving the city he went to the camp of theRoman general, Vespasian and surrendered. Vespasian was so pleased by thesurrender of one of Israel’s greatest religious leaders that he granted himone request. ‘ Give me Yavneh and it’s sages’ he asked, the granting of thisrequest was to be the salvation of Judaism.

The loss of the Temple resulted in a sudden termination of pilgrimage andsacrificial cult, which created a vacuum in the religious life of thepeople. The need for a substitute that would replace the old cult with newforms of religious expression was keenly felt. Yochanan objected to themost obvious step in this direction, the continuation of the sacrificialcult in places outside Jerusalem. His antagonism for the priestly caste mayhave lead at least partially to his concept of establishing a new centrefor Jewish religious thought at Yavneh. Rabbi Yochanan was to succeed intransforming a territorially centred nation and a central Temple theology, dominated by a hereditary priesthood, into a universal faith. Yochananrealised that the Temple centric nature of Jewish worship had left theJewish people in a state of religious disillusionment, to save the faith ofthe Jews and Judaism itself, Rabbi Yochanan decided that massive reform wasneeded. This reform or reinterpretation if you like, was to develop out ofYavneh, near the Judean seacoast, with it’s assembled group of Pharisaicsages and scribes, a rabbinic blueprint for Jewish survival wasarticulated.

One of the major contributions Rabbi Yochanan made to Judaism was hisintroduction of formal ordination. This was a new form of semikah, thelaying-on of hands which symbolized the transference of the Holy Spiritfrom master to disciple. This was the ultimate challenge to the hereditarypriestly aristocracy of the Sadducees and brought its authority to a close.

Yochanan created what is called the “ rabbinite”, a new authoritative bodywhich possessed the democratic virtue of being a meritocracy in which aperson did not hold authority by virtue of his birth to a priestly father, but by virtue of his knowledge and competence.

A second important contribution was Rabbi Yochanan’s insistence thatcertain rites previously practiced only in Jerusalem should be legitimateat Yavneh. He did not seek this prerogative for the sacrificial system.

More important was his replacement of Jerusalem as the centre of authorityby the academy of Yavneh, with the implication that wherever there was anacademy with recognized and ordained scholars there was authority.

Consequently, a multiplicity of equally legitimate authorities arose, resulting in a worldwide proliferation of Judaic intellectual existence andthe preservation of the diversity and heterogeneity of Judaic religiouslife. The scholars who presided over these schools and synagogues wereordained and given the title “ rabbi”, and this ordination signalled thebirth of Rabbinic Judaism.

Yochanan ben Zakkai and his Yavnean associates did nothing less thanrestate the theology of Judaism with Hosea 6: 6 as their motto: ‘ It is loveI desire not sacrifice’. The sacrificial system and the priesthood weresuperseded, sins were to be expiated by loving deeds and prayer. Prayerworship was referred to as abodah8 , the term normally used for thesacrificial system. Prayer was no longer a concession to the Diaspora, buta G\_d ordained form of worship. Hence Yavneh was the centre for greatliturgical development. Prayers of old were brought together, recast andjoined with newly composed prayers.

Some of the more important measures that Yochanan took to adjust thepreviously Temple-centred worship to suit the new conditions are asfollows: When Rosh Ha-Shanah fell on a Sabbath, the shofar was blown in theSanctuary but not in the provinces. After the Temple was destroyedRabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai ordained that it be blown any place wherethere is a court. 9Midrash on Rosh Ha-Shanah also records that after the destruction of theTemple, Yochanan ben Zakkai ordained that the Lulav be carried in theprovinces seven days, as was the custom in the Temple, whereas in theprovinces they formerly carried it for one day only. The reason given forthis is ‘ in memory of the Temple.’ Other practices such as bringing thefruits of the fourth year to Jerusalem, was also suspended, under theunderstanding that it be resumed upon restoration of the Temple. In Templetimes witnesses to the new moon were permitted to transgress the Sabbath(by travelling on that day to report their observation of the new moon) forall months. After the destruction of the Second Temple, Yochanan ben Zakkairestricted this permission to the months of Nisan and Tishri. The reasongiven for this measure was that since there was no longer a sacrificialcult, the permission regarding the other months lost its justification.

The new rabbis that came out of Yavneh had already been functioning as‘ proto-rabbis’10 for over two centuries, and during this period they haddeveloped a set of principals which they then applied at Yavneh Theseprincipals allowed them to affirm the divine revelation of Scripture, andsimultaneously to legislate new halakah, interpret and transform oldhalakah, dispose of obsolete practices, and innovate new ones.

The real revolution that occurred at Yavneh was to require obligatorycommunal worship with a group of ten. It is not clear how much of thisreform was achieved by Yochanan and how much was actually carried forwardby his successor Gamaliel II. It is clear however that Yochanan ben Zakkaiset in motion the mechanism of consolidation and the reinstatement ofJewish theology. The replacement of Judaism’s central worship point at theTemple in Jerusalem , with synagogues all over Judea, was essential to asociety whose most sacred of sites had been destroyed, and around which, as we have seen, daily life revolved. Yavneh was to provide a model forsynagogues which soon spread throughout Judea, and were not restricted anymore, in usefulness, to the diaspora. This new movement was as much aboutplacing religious truth and exaltation within the reaches of the commoncitizen as it was about reconstructing a method for practicing worshipwithin the confines of the new situation.

The Rabbinic tradition is generally believed to have grown out of thePharisaic sect. The long-term conflict between the Sadducees and thePharisees came mainly from the Pharisaic distaste with the hierarchical andhereditary line of the priestly class. They saw the position of the HighPriests as being compromised by Roman influence. This was not their onlyobjection though, the Pharisees did not agree with a class system which putdivine knowledge in the realm of only the privileged. When the Rabbinictradition led by Yochanan ben Zakkai, established a new understanding ofsignificant concepts within Judaism, it was of utmost importance to placethis knowledge within reach through the processes of study and observance.

This new scholarly focus was also to change and shape the nature of Jewishcivilisation. No longer was the importance of daily life placed on tendingthe crops and working the farms to provide all the appropriate sacrificesfor G\_d. For during the Second Temple period farmers could not have hopedto ever lead a service in their most holy of sites. With the spread ofsynagogues they could study at centres such as Yavneh and eventually becomerabbis themselves.

By presenting and thus comparing Second Temple religious practice with theradical theological reforms instigated by Yochanan ben Zakkai it can beseen that the Jews of Palestine responded to the challenge of survivalafter 70 C. E with such innovative zeal as to save them from the fate ofassimilation. The question of the survival for the Jews after thedestruction of the Second Temple seemed to be answered by Yochanan benZakkai and his group of sages at Yavneh. The Rabbinic tradition ensuredthat the previously Temple dependant faith could be reinterpreted to fitthe new situation. All of the methods of survival; the legislation of newHalakah, the adjoining of old prayers with new, the reassignment of thereligious centre from Temple to Synagogue, the abolition of the priestlycaste and replacement with a meritocracy and thus the ordination of rabbis, and probably the most important development, the replacement of Templesacrifice with loving deeds and prayer, can be said to have redesignedJudaism. Without the direction so boldly taken by Rabbi Yochanan benZakkai, it is impossible to say whether Judaism would have survived as aseparate faith to Christianity or even Islam. The steps that were takenalmost certainly heralded a new age for the Jews of Palestine, if not theirRoman rulers as well. The Jews of Palestine developed such a richinterpretive and questioning culture and scholarship as to always providethem with a multitude of answers to any future questions of survival.

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