

First and second temple essay



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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 David built an altar to G_d on the site and a generation later his son, Solomon built the First Temple as a permanent resting place for the Ark of the Covenant.

Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, destroyed King Solomon's Temple in 586

B. C. E. When Herod became king he decided to rebuild the Temple in 19 B.

C. E. It cannot be said that the rebuilding of the Temple was a sign of any real religious virtue on Herod's part for he is well known as a cruel and vicious king who murdered his wife, son and countless others including High Priests without regard. Despite Herod's violent reign, and the general disregard for him felt by the Sanhedrin and High Priests, the second Temple once again became the centre for Jewish religious life. To understand the effects that the destruction of the Second Temple had on the Jews of Palestine we must first understand the role that it had played in Jewish life up to that point. Many of the developments of religious thought and practice after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C. E, can be seen to reflect rituals being practiced in Second Temple times. Therefore to understand why these changes and reinterpretations occurred we must be informed of some of the preceding traditions.

The Second Temple served many functions for the Jewish community, and even those living in the Diaspora would pray in the direction of the Temple as a sign of their engagement and awareness of its importance. It was both the centre for sacrificial rituals, the meeting place of the Sanhedrin, and the 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 heaven watches over that place (the Temple) itself and brings it aid’.

Every day, without exception, the community as a whole provided two male yearling lambs that were offered to G_d as burnt sacrifices, along with flour, oil and wine³, one in the morning, to open the temple service, and one in the evening, just before its conclusion. On the Sabbath these sacrifices were doubled. The community offered additional sacrifices to mark each new moon, and on the major festivals and the annual fast (Yom Kippur) there were still further community sacrifices. The Torah does not specify the precise purpose of most of the community sacrifices. It would have been simple to interpret the daily burnt offerings as atoning, since the temple tax was called ‘atonement money’, and its purpose was ‘to make atonement’⁴. These terms, however, were not applied specifically to the two lambs. Philo regarded thanksgiving as the purpose of the daily offerings.

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

The priests counted 255,600 Pesach lambs as being slain. Josephus estimates that ten people shared each lamb, and, rounding the total up, concluded that there were 2,700,000 people at that Pesach⁵. Although these figures are most certainly an exaggeration, it does provide an example

of how central the temple was to worship at the time, both for Jews living in Jerusalem and those making pilgrimages from the diaspora. Large caravans came overland from Babylonia and caravans and ships brought other groups of pilgrims from Syria, Asia Minor and North Africa. There were three pilgrim festivals : Pesach, Shavu'ot, and Succot. The Torah requires all Israelites to attend each of these festivals⁶. Josephus put it this way: Let them assemble in that city in which they shall establish the Temple, three times in the year, from the ends of the land which Hebrews shall conquer, in order to render thanks to G_d for benefits received, to intercede for future mercies, and to promote by thus meeting and feasting Josephus' summary of the Mosaic legislation reveals the obvious interpretation that Jews who resided abroad were exempt from the biblical requirement to attend three festivals each year (pilgrimage was required only from the land the Israelites conquered.) many Diaspora Jews did make the pilgrimage, but it is doubtful that many came more than once in their lifetime.

During Second Temple times we know of three main parties: Sadducees, Pharisees and Essenes. As High Priests, appointed by Roman legates or kings, the Sadducees controlled the Sanhedrin . The Sadducees represented the aristocracy and were in support of Rome. When the temple was destroyed the aristocracy began to decline, the priestly aristocracy soon disappeared, and the Sadducees dropped from sight. Their entire existence had been based around temple worship, and with the destruction of the temple their role became redundant.

The Jews' Great Revolt against Rome in 66 C. E proved to have a catastrophic effect on Jewish life. At the beginning of the Common Era, a new group arose

among the Jews: the Zealots. These anti-Roman rebels believed that all means were justified to attain political and religious liberty. So when the insane emperor Caligula, declared himself to be a deity, and ordered that his statue be erected in every temple in the Roman Empire, the Jews with their firm disgust for idolatry, refused. This refusal led to a war with Rome and after a brief success the Zealots and thousands of other Jerusalem Jews were killed, and their precious and most sacred of sites destroyed in an orgy of violence on the ninth of Av in the summer of 70 C. E. It is estimated that as many as one million Jews died in the Great Revolt against Rome.

The impact of the destruction of the temple was nothing short of devastating, with thousands killed, many of their towns in ruins, their trees and crops laid to waste, and a higher tax burden imposed by Rome to compensate 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 drink wine. Rabbi Joshua got into a conversation with them and said to them: ‘ my sons, why do you not eat meat nor drink wine?’ They replied: ‘ Shall we eat meat which used to be brought as an offering on the altar, now that the altar is no more? Shall we drink wine which used to be poured as libation on the altar, but now no longer?’ He said to them: ‘ If that is so, we should not eat bread either, because the meal offerings have ceased.’ They said: ‘(That is correct, and(we will manage with fruit.’ ‘ We should not eat fruit either, (he said(because there is no longer an offering of first fruits.’ The ascetics responded that they would manage with other fruits. Rabbi Joshua said, ‘ But we should not drink water because there is no longer any ceremony of the

water libation.’ To this they had no answer, whereupon the pragmatic Rabbi Joshua advised them: “ My sons, come and listen to me. Not to mourn at all is impossible, because the blow has fallen. To mourn too much is also impossible, because we do not impose on the community a hardship which the majority cannot endure.” He therefore suggested three ways Jews should mourn for the Temple’s destruction. ‘ A man may stucco his house, but he should leave a little bare... A man can prepare a full- course banquet, but he should leave out an item or two... A woman can put on all her ornaments, but leave off one or two.’ This quote from Bava Batra (see footnote also) accurately portrays two of the outstanding modes of thought after the destruction, one of sheer desperation and one of hope. Rabbi Joshua provides us with an image of the new direction that Judaism was beginning to take. The previous dependence on the temple could have meant an end to Jewish religious practice had it not been for the Pharisaic tradition and more directly Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai. Yochanan ben Zakkai was a leader of normative Judaism for many years before and after the destruction of the Temple. Rabbi Yochanan lived in Jerusalem in 70 C. E when the city was under siege. Rabbi Yochanan did not approve of the uprising against Rome, and when the Zealots refused to let anyone leave the city, on threat of death, Rabbi Yochanan devised a cunning plan of escape. Upon leaving the city he went to the camp of the Roman general, Vespasian and surrendered. Vespasian was so pleased by the surrender of one of Israel’s greatest religious leaders that he granted him one request. ‘ Give me Yavneh and its sages’ he asked, the granting of this request was to be the salvation of Judaism.

The loss of the Temple resulted in a sudden termination of pilgrimage and sacrificial cult, which created a vacuum in the religious life of the people. The need for a substitute that would replace the old cult with new forms of religious expression was keenly felt. Yochanan objected to the most obvious step in this direction, the continuation of the sacrificial cult in places outside Jerusalem. His antagonism for the priestly caste may have led at least partially to his concept of establishing a new center for Jewish religious thought at Yavneh. Rabbi Yochanan was to succeed in transforming a territorially centered nation and a central Temple theology, dominated by a hereditary priesthood, into a universal faith. Yochanan realized that the Temple-centric nature of Jewish worship had left the Jewish people in a state of religious disillusionment, to save the faith of the Jews and Judaism itself, Rabbi Yochanan decided that massive reform was needed. This reform or reinterpretation if you like, was to develop out of Yavneh, near the Judean seacoast, with its assembled group of Pharisaic sages and scribes, a rabbinic blueprint for Jewish survival was articulated.

One of the major contributions Rabbi Yochanan made to Judaism was his introduction of formal ordination. This was a new form of semikah, the laying-on of hands which symbolized the transference of the Holy Spirit from master to disciple. This was the ultimate challenge to the hereditary priestly aristocracy of the Sadducees and brought its authority to a close.

Yochanan created what is called the “rabbinite”, a new authoritative body which possessed the democratic virtue of being a meritocracy in which

a person 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 that certain rites previously practiced only in Jerusalem should be legitimate at Yavneh. He did not seek this prerogative for the sacrificial system.

More important was his replacement of Jerusalem as the centre of authority by the academy of Yavneh, with the implication that wherever there was an academy 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 and the preservation of the diversity and heterogeneity of Judaic religious life. The scholars who presided over these schools and synagogues were ordained and given the title "rabbi", and this ordination signalled the birth of Rabbinic Judaism.

Yochanan ben Zakkai and his Yavnean associates did nothing less than restate the theology of Judaism with Hosea 6: 6 as their motto: 'It is love, not sacrifice'. The sacrificial system and the priesthood were superseded, sins were to be expiated by loving deeds and prayer. Prayer worship was referred to as *avodah*, the term normally used for the sacrificial system. Prayer was no longer a concession to the Diaspora, but a God-ordained form of worship. Hence Yavneh was the centre for great liturgical development. Prayers of old were brought together, recast and joined with newly composed prayers.

Some of the more important measures that Yochanan took to adjust the previously Temple-centred worship to suit the new conditions are as follows: When Rosh Ha-Shanah fell on a Sabbath, the shofar was blown in the Sanctuary but not in the provinces. After the Temple was destroyed Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai ordained that it be blown any place where there is a court. ⁹Midrash on Rosh Ha-Shanah also records that after the destruction of the Temple, Yochanan ben Zakkai ordained that the Lulav be carried in the provinces seven days, as was the custom in the Temple, whereas in the provinces they formerly carried it for one day only. The reason given for this is 'in memory of the Temple.' Other practices such as bringing the fruits of the fourth year to Jerusalem, was also suspended, under the understanding that it be resumed upon restoration of the Temple. In Temple times witnesses to the new moon were permitted to transgress the Sabbath (by travelling on that day to report their observation of the new moon) for all months. After the destruction of the Second Temple, Yochanan ben Zakkai restricted this permission to the months of Nisan and Tishri. The reason given for this measure was that since there was no longer a sacrificial cult, 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 had developed a set of principals which they then applied at Yavneh. These principals allowed them to affirm the divine revelation of Scripture, and simultaneously to legislate new halakah, interpret and transform old halakah, dispose of obsolete practices, and innovate new ones.

The real revolution that occurred at Yavneh was to require obligatory communal worship with a group of ten. It is not clear how much of this reform was achieved by Yochanan and how much was actually carried forward by his successor Gamaliel II. It is clear however that Yochanan ben Zakkai set in motion the mechanism of consolidation and the reinstatement of Jewish theology. The replacement of Judaism's central worship point at the Temple in Jerusalem, with synagogues all over Judea, was essential to a society whose most sacred sites had been destroyed, and around which, as we have seen, daily life revolved. Yavneh was to provide a model for synagogues which soon spread throughout Judea, and were not restricted anymore, in usefulness, to the diaspora. This new movement was as much about placing religious truth and exaltation within the reaches of the common citizen as it was about reconstructing a method for practicing worship within the confines of the new situation.

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

This new scholarly focus was also to change and shape the nature of Jewish civilisation. No longer was the importance of daily life placed on tending the crops and working the farms to provide all the appropriate sacrifices for G_d. For during the Second Temple period farmers could not have hoped to ever lead a service in their most holy of sites. With the spread of synagogues they could study at centres such as Yavneh and eventually become rabbis themselves.

By presenting and thus comparing Second Temple religious practice with the radical theological reforms instigated by Yochanan ben Zakkai it can be seen that the Jews of Palestine responded to the challenge of survival after 70 C. E with such innovative zeal as to save them from the fate of assimilation. The question of the survival for the Jews after the destruction of the Second Temple seemed to be answered by Yochanan ben Zakkai and his group of sages at Yavneh. The Rabbinic tradition ensured that the previously Temple dependant faith could be reinterpreted to fit the new situation. All of the methods of survival; the legislation of new Halakah, the adjoining of old prayers with new, the reassignment of the religious centre from Temple to Synagogue, the abolition of the priestly caste and replacement with a meritocracy and thus the ordination of rabbis, and probably the most important development, the replacement of Temple sacrifice with loving deeds and prayer, can be said to have redesigned Judaism. Without the direction so boldly taken by Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, it is impossible to say whether Judaism would have survived as a separate faith to Christianity or even Islam. The steps that were taken almost certainly heralded a new age for the Jews of Palestine, if not

their Roman rulers as well. The Jews of Palestine developed such a rich interpretive and questioning culture and scholarship as to always provide them with a multitude of answers to any future questions of survival.

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 ESSAY TOPIC: Analyse how the Jews of Palestine responded to the challenge of survival following their defeat at the hands of the Romans and the destruction of the Second Temple. How did the observance change after 70 CE?—
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