The Temple of Solomon
How was the ancient Israelite Temple constructed?

According to the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible, the first Jewish Temple in Jerusalem was built by King Solomon, the successor of King David, around 950 BCE. The Temple was the central location for Jewish worship and the center of Jewish life where the Sabbath and other holy days were celebrated. People would travel from all over the Jewish world to celebrate the three pilgrimage festivals of which observance is commanded in the Torah.

A complete archeological survey of the site of the Temple has not yet been achieved. The ground where the Temple stood is presently the site of a Muslim holy shrine and therefore, is off limits to archaeological excavations. However, historians have been able to reconstruct what the Temple may have looked like through detailed descriptions of its construction provided in the Tanakh. Its length, height, and width were in a 3:2:1 ratio. According to the detailed description given in the Tanakh, it was built to the exact dimensions of the tabernacle, or tent, that the Torah states the Israelites carried with them during their years in the desert after being freed from Egypt. In fact, some historian scholars believe that the tabernacle was set up inside the Temple.
According to the Tanakh, the layout of the Temple had four parts arranged in increasing levels of sacredness. The largest was a public courtyard surrounding the Temple. In the inner courtyard, priests conducted most religious rituals. The courtyard had an altar and a large ceremonial washbasin. Inside the Temple building, there were two rooms. The outer room had a lamp and other ritual objects. The smaller, inner room, called the Holy of Holies, was the most sacred location in Judaism. In Solomon’s Temple, the Holy of Holies contained the Ark of the Covenant holding the Ten Commandments. The high priest only entered the Holy of Holies once a year, on Yom Kippur, to pray on behalf of all Israel.

The Babylonians destroyed Solomon’s Temple and the Jewish people rebuilt the Second Temple when they were allowed to return 70 years later. Many years later, Herod significantly expanded and remodeled the Temple before it was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, leaving only one retaining wall intact. Today, that wall is known as the Western Wall.

Comparing the account in the Tanakh with what is known from archaeology, it is clear that the design of the Temple had many features in common with earlier religious structures in Egypt and Mesopotamia. This is not surprising, as the First Book of Kings relates that King Solomon hired a builder from Tyre, a Phoenician city, to supervise the construction of the Temple. The
design of Solomon’s Temple also influenced the Second Temple and future Jewish temples and synagogues, as well as the religious buildings of Christianity and Islam. Therefore, the religious structures of all three faiths share elements of the architectural traditions of earlier ancient religions, as well as those of Judaism.

About this Image

A reconstruction of Solomon's temple in Jerusalem. King Solomon ruled Israel between 970 and 930 B.C. He perfected the work of organizing the central government begun by his father David, he developed trade in distant places, and achieved fame as a sage and poet. He also undertook a vast building program dictated by defense needs. This temple, on which Solomon spent lavishly, was an attempt to centralize the cult of Yahweh in Jerusalem. In its inner chamber was the Ark of the Covenant. This is one of many conceptions of the temple.
About this Image

A reconstruction of a Chaldean Ziggurat (temple). The Chaldeans, or Neo-Babylonians, who ruled until 539 B.C., were the last of the Babylonian dynasties. They were called Neo-Babylonians because they tried to revive the cultural and religious practices of the ancient Sumerians. Temples such as this were built beginning around 2000 B.C. and were common to the Sumerians, Babylonians, and Assyrians. They were constructed by stacking cubic blocks of sun-dried bricks on a great raised platform. A wide stairway ascends to this temple’s second platform, which is the site of its most sacred building, a rectangular edifice called the Haram.