

TEMPLES

of the First Century



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By Don H. Stewart

THE BASIS FOR THE CONCEPT of temple in the New Testament comes from Solomon's temple in the Old Testament. The first temple was predated by the tabernacle, which provided the scriptural foundation for understanding the function and purpose of the temple for Jews. From the time of the exodus, the tabernacle housed an empty mercy seat on top of the ark of the covenant in the holiest place—rather than an idol. That empty seat symbolized of God's presence. It provided a framework for the theology of God portrayed in the Old Testament. Throughout the centuries, Judaism, with Levitical ritual, was anchored to the tabernacle and the temple. These places of worship were tangible reminders that God is present always with His people.

The Temple of the Jews

When God authorized the construction of the temple, He did so in response to the desires of King David. Solomon constructed that temple on the sacred high place in the heart of Jerusalem, the capital city of

Israel. The site had been the threshing floor of Araunah (2 Sam. 24:18-25) on top of Mount Moriah (the mountain to which God led Abraham to offer up Isaac, Gen. 22:2). Jerusalem was the city David took from the Jebusites and likely was originally the city of Salem, the city of "Peace" (see 2 Sam. 5:6-9; Ps. 76:2).

In Acts 17:22-31, the apostle Paul explained the theology behind the Jewish use of the temple in Jerusalem and showed how the Jews' use differed from the Greco-Roman use of pagan temples across the empire. At that time, the sacred structure in Jerusalem was Herod's enlarged and beautified temple, the one that had taken 46 years to build (see John 2:20). Neither Herod's, Solomon's original temple, nor Zerubbabel's second temple (see Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah) functioned as anything other than the place dedicated for ritual sacrifices. The temple and its holy rituals were designed to remind the people of God's presence, His promise, and His peace. The empty mercy seat in the holy of holies at the heart of Israel's temple made that declaration concrete.

The Temples of the Greeks and Romans

The wood, metal, or stone idol for whom each pagan temple was built was the center of attention in his or her temple. The god or goddess was accessible primarily when the worshipers were in the presence of the idol in the temple. Worshipers at Corinth would have

LESSON REFERENCE

BSFL: 1 Corinthians 3; 6; Ephesians 2

Interior of the Pantheon in Rome. The structure was originally constructed to honor the seven gods of the seven planets recognized by the state religion of Rome. Although the building has been revised several times through the centuries, it has been in continual use since its construction.

Left: Acropolis at night. Atop the acropolis are the remains of the Parthenon, which served as the temple to Athena, the patron goddess of Athens. Completed in 438 B.C., the Parthenon remained the most important Greek temple for a thousand years.





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gathered in the temples of Apollo, the most popular god of medicine, law, and shepherds,¹ and Aphrodite the goddess of love. During his second journey, however, Paul established the church in Corinth and challenged the citizens' limited view of God.

Approximately 60 miles to the east, one can visit the temple of Athena on the Acropolis in Athens. The word *acropolis* means the "high city"; and the high place in most Greek and Roman cities was reserved for the patron god or goddess of that community. The Areopagus, Mars Hill, on which Paul preached to the philosophers in Acts 17:22-31, was beside the Acropolis. The location provided Paul an opportunity to contrast the idols of the Greeks and Romans with the God of the Jews and Christians. He used the temple imagery to draw the comparison.

When Hellenism was at its height, the concept of interaction between men and the gods was prevalent among the intellectuals. Greeks thought of the gods as superhuman, and temple architecture reflected

religious systems that encouraged men to negotiate directly with the gods in an effort to buy divine favor. Convenient access to the idols was important. This was accomplished by providing open architectural designs for the temples and by erecting multiple temples to the same gods and goddesses. These temples were located in population centers stretched across the empire to provide maximum accessibility.

At times a single temple would house multiple gods or goddesses. For instance, the Parthenon in Athens housed the idol of Athena and a number of other idols. In Rome, the Pantheon was the temple honoring all gods, although it actually housed statues of the seven "deities the Romans associated with the heavens—including [but not limited to] Mars, Mercury, Venus, and Jupiter."² A statue of each deity was located in its own large niche along the interior wall of the circular Pantheon.

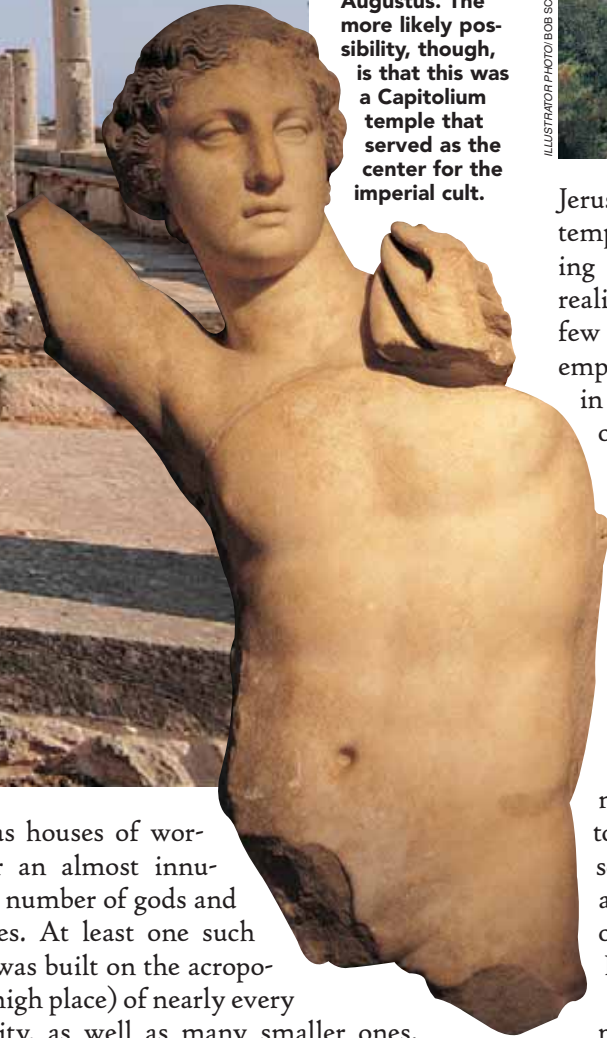
In the environment of the Greco-Roman world, a burgeoning number of beautifully appointed temples

Ruins of the temple of Apollo at Cyprus.

Below: A marble statue of Apollo dating from the Hellenistic period: 2nd cent. B.C. Apollo, the Greek's sun god, was also the patron god of musicians and poets.

Right: Columns at Corinth's Temple E. The identity of deity worshiped at this temple is unknown. The two main suggested possibilities rely partially on Pausanias's description. The first possibility is that the temple honored Octavia, the sister of Augustus. The more likely possibility, though, is that this was a Capitulum temple that served as the center for the imperial cult.

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served as houses of worship for an almost innumerable number of gods and goddesses. At least one such temple was built on the acropolis (the high place) of nearly every major city, as well as many smaller ones. Most communities had a patron god or goddess. The Greeks and the Romans of the first-century A.D. world were “extremely religious in every respect,” which was how Paul described the Athenians (Acts 17:22, HCSB). The Romans followed the Greeks' lead. They extended the Greek passion for building religious temples and did so wherever the gods or goddesses had not been honored before.

The Temple of the Body

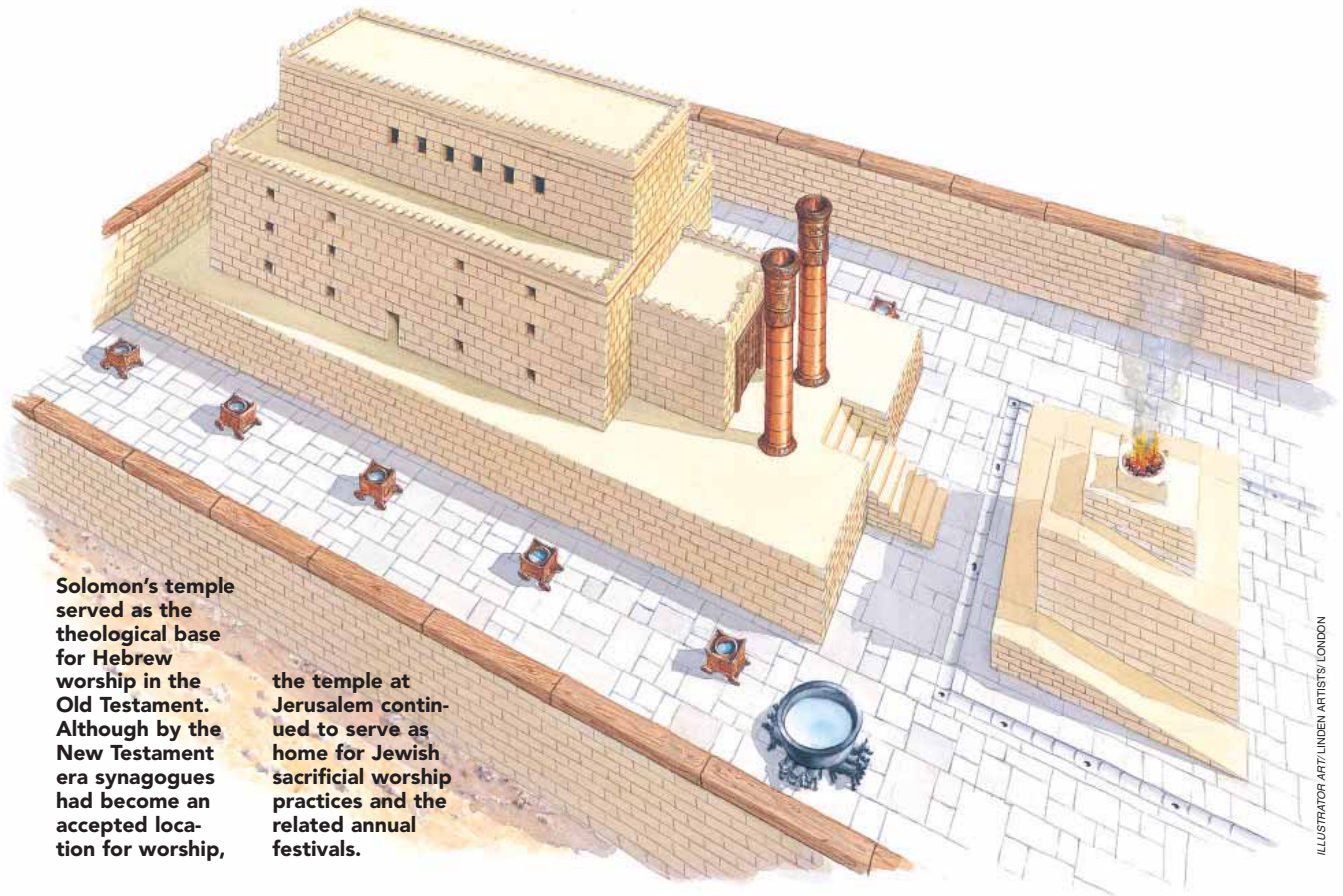
Jesus initiated the use of temple imagery as a metaphor for understanding that the body of each believer serves as a temple for God (see John 2:19-21). While in

Jerusalem, Jesus referred to Herod's temple as being temporal and limited and predicted its approaching destruction. When that destruction became a reality under Rome's General Titus in A.D. 70, a few years after its completion,³ the Jews began to emphasize knowing God's Law instead of worshiping in Jerusalem's temple.⁴ Jesus used His prediction of the destruction of Herod's temple as a vehicle for teaching about the crucifixion of the temple of His earthly body and about its resurrection three days later (see Mark 14:58; 15:29; and Matt. 26:61).

Building on Jesus' use of temple imagery, Paul and others expanded the concept. In fact, temple imagery became a tool for communicating some crucial aspects of Christian thought and life in the New Testament.⁵ For instance, Paul wrote Corinthian believers and challenged them to a mature faith, to the rejection of sexual immorality, to the living of sanctified lives (lives set apart for service), to the glorification of God in their bodies, and to the dedication of their bodies as sanctuaries of the Holy Spirit. In making these challenges, Paul used the images of temple practice.

Paul drew a number of metaphors from the practice of temple worship with which both pagans and Jews were familiar. He used these to illustrate truths about the Christian church and the relationship of individual believers to the Father through the Son. As a Pharisee, a faithful participant of the rituals of temple worship, Paul understood the theology of the Jewish temple and the limitations associated with its function. Since he was born and reared in Tarsus, a Gentile Roman colony, he was familiar, as well, with the obvious parallels and theological differences found in pagan temple practices.

For instance, the careful maintenance of the temples of the first century, pagan and Jewish, and the need for orderliness and cleanliness in worship for both,



Solomon's temple served as the theological base for Hebrew worship in the Old Testament. Although by the New Testament era synagogues had become an accepted location for worship,

the temple at Jerusalem continued to serve as home for Jewish sacrificial worship practices and the related annual festivals.

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provided an appropriate metaphor for emphasizing the need for order and purity in the lives of individual believers (1 Cor. 6:18-20). The need for cleanliness and order in worship in the church as a whole was accomplished through the purification of the individuals, according to Paul (see 3:16-17). In these two passages Paul called the church the temple of God (“sanctuary,” HCSB) and recognized the believers were the temple, not the houses in which they worshiped.

The Temple of the Church

In writing to the church at Ephesus from his house arrest in Rome, Paul seems to have been recalling his confrontation with Judaism at the temple in Jerusalem (Acts 21:29). He was falsely accused of taking a Gentile, Trophimus, who was from Ephesus, into the court of the Jews. He told the Ephesian church that the “wall of hostility” (Eph. 2:14, HCSB) that had divided the temple in Jerusalem and separated Jews from Gentiles did not exist in the church. The body of Christ, the Christian equivalent of the temple, was not divided (1 Cor. 12:25,27). Rather, Paul wrote, the church is a “holy sanctuary in the Lord” (Eph. 2:21). His words brought under judgment the corruption found in first-century Judaism’s handling of the temple. The abuses Paul had in mind were those that had caused Jesus to cleanse the temple (see John 2:13-17).

Interestingly, the final use of the word “temple” in the New Testament is in Revelation 21:22. In the Book of Revelation, Jesus, through John, declared Himself to be the temple in heaven, following the establishment of the new heaven, the new earth, and the new Jerusalem. No other temple will be needed. An unrestricted encounter with the Father in heaven is really as it always has been, through the Person of the Son. Remember Jesus’ words to Phillip in John 14:9, “The one who has seen Me has seen the Father” (HCSB). In the final analysis, Jesus is the One who houses the perfect presence of the Father and makes Him available to all who choose to believe. Jesus is the temple in whom the Father dwells. The Father dwells in the believers because Jesus chooses each of them to be His temple. **B**

1. Daniel C. Browning, Jr. “Gods, Pagan” in *Holman Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Trent C. Butler (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991), 565. Some ruins from the temples of Apollo and Aphrodite still stand in Corinth today.

2. *Empires Ascendant: TimeFrame 400 BC–AD 200*, ed. in chief Jason McManus (Alexandria, VA: Time-Life Books, 1987), 93.

3. See “Jewish Institutions, Groups, Movements” in *Holman Bible Handbook*, gen. ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1992), 524.

4. W. Shaw Caldecott and James Orr, “Temple” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, gen. ed. James Orr, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 1939), 2939.

5. *Ibid.*

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