

TEMPLE CULTURE

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WHAT HAPPENED AT THE TEMPLE IN JERUSALEM?

The way the Temple operated was described in principle by God to Moses in the first five books of the Jewish Bible, the Torah. From halfway through Exodus on until the end of Deuteronomy, God is detailing to Moses certain types of legislation, a great number of which turn upon issues of offerings to be given to God under different circumstances....The Temple was a place of animal offerings, which makes it completely typical of any temple in Mediterranean antiquity. That's what happened in temples. Animals were offered, cereals were offered, there were liquid offerings. There were pigeons that were offered. It's also a place of prayer. It's also a place where the Psalms are chanted by the Levites. And where the Priests do their work.

But the Temple is something that is publicly available in two ways to all of the Jewish people. First, Jews would go up and worship at the Temple. But also, thanks to the text of the Bible, Jews hear about how the Temple works by hearing the Torah read usually on a weekly basis on the Sabbath. And in that sense, the Temple is an interior and religious reality to any Jew anywhere in the Empire. They know what goes on in the Temple because they have the description, in principle, that's granted in the Torah.

COULD PEOPLE WHO WEREN'T JEWISH GO TO THE TEMPLE?

Most temples in antiquity encouraged the respect and patronage of as many people as possible. It's simply good business. And again, in this respect, the Temple in Jerusalem was no different. Gentiles had an area within which they could penetrate the sacred precincts of the Temple. They were certainly permitted to give offerings.... The Temple was organized in terms of degrees of sacred space, and the most sacred space was occupied only by the Priest. But the gentiles, who could bring offerings, would pass it over so that eventually the offering would be offered by the Priest on behalf of the gentile who was making the offering.

PASSOVER

In Judaism, described in the Bible, there are three pilgrimage festivals. One is in the fall, and two are in the spring. The biggest holiday that would bring in pilgrims from all over the known world is the holiday of Passover. It resonates historically with the liberation of the children of Israel from Egypt. So it has a tone of national liberation. There's a political aspect to the holiday. But also, Jews everywhere, if they chose to, if they were pious, would put aside part of their income. You'd put aside tithing money ... and that money or whatever it is from your property that you would put aside was explicitly to be spent having a party in Jerusalem. And you would spend that saving[s] when you went up to celebrate a pilgrimage holiday.

PASSOVER

People from all over the Empire went to Jerusalem on Passover. It's one of the most populated times in the whole city. And there are certain things that would be required if you wanted to go and be at the Temple. You'd have to eat your Passover lamb in a state of purity, which would require certain things, for example, if you were a woman in a family who were traveling and you happened to get your period,... you couldn't actually go into the Temple area. But your husband would really be the person required to show up in the Temple area, because he would be the one who would have to sacrifice the Pascal lamb that would be the centre of the meal that you would have with your family. You'd go up, probably a week beforehand, to make sure that everybody would be in a state of purity. Purity is not an ethical metaphor in first century Judaism. Purity is a state. It's almost like a physical state that has metaphysical consequences. If you are menstruating, for example, or for a man, a common way of contracting impurity would be through ejaculation ... semen transmits impurity. There's nothing morally wrong with you. It just means that while you're in that state, you shouldn't enter a zone of holiness. So pilgrims frequently went a week before Passover actually started so that they could undergo certain rituals of purification, and take part in the slaughter of the lambs for Passover that happens the night before Passover begins. And then go back with people living in tents or people in outlying villages.

There are reminiscences of this in the gospel writings. Jesus enters with the flock of pilgrims going into Jerusalem the week before Passover. That's what the triumphal entry is staged as in the gospel. And he teaches at the Temple in the week before Passover. The reason everybody's there is because everybody, I assume Jesus, too, is undergoing the ritual purification that's required so people can be in the correct state. Not just morally or religiously, but actually with purity. So that they can eat the Pascal lamb as God mandated it when he spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai.

Impurity is assumed by Jewish Law. It's a natural phenomenon. People move in and out of states of purity and impurity because much impurity is tied to biological rhythms. You incur impurity by doing things that God actually enjoins Jews to do, like having babies, or having sexual relations with a marriage partner. Bearing the dead, which is one of the most important religious commandments within the religion, then as now, is something that, because of contact with the corpse or even being in the same room as the corpse, one would be in a state of impurity. The remedy for impurity is rituals of purification. And in Judaism, as...in most religions that are concerned with this kind of way of making sense of the world, water is one of the great media for purifying. Throughout the land of Israel [at] different archaeological sites that you can see to this day. You see it on top of Masada, you see it in the excavations in Jerusalem, you can see it in digs in the Galilee, there are immersion pools. Herod, even though he had a very complicated family life and very unfortunate political habits with how he dealt with sons or other perceived rivals, nonetheless, in the palaces he built for himself, built pools to purify himself.... Being concerned with purity is one of the normal things that a Jew who chose to be religious would involve themselves with. And water purification ritual is part of the way of taking care of impurity.

THE PRIESTS

Passover would be one of the very busiest times in Jerusalem. Because of the swollen population of Jews coming, not only from territorial Israel, but also from the Diaspora, also interested gentiles, as well. Big holidays always draw crowds. Roman troops who were usually stationed on the coast in Caesarea, would come up to Jerusalem and also be in the city specifically as a kind of crowd control while all these pilgrims were present. Meanwhile, the Temple itself was a focus of ferocious activity. The requirement of Passover was that the Passover lamb be sacrificed. There was a census reported in Josephus in which tens of thousands of lambs were slaughtered. And it all has to be done in at a particular period just on the cusp of the very beginning of the holiday. It's not like these lambs can be slaughtered over the course of the week, frozen and then given to different customers.... Josephus estimated that one lamb would be good for...ten men. And so it's hundreds of thousands of people are in Jerusalem on Passover.

The ultimate responsibility for making sure that things were done correctly ... that the sheep themselves were perfect, ...that the Temple itself was ready and correct, to be a medium for this act of piety and religious enthusiasm, and to make sure that the slaughter of the animals was done correctly [fell to] the Priests.... There would be extra teams of Priests, rotations of Priests who would come up to Jerusalem. They would be working in the Temple and it was on their shoulders that the ultimate responsibility for the correctness of this unbelievably frenzied scene would rest... It would be physically exhausting work. Made exhausting not for the least reason that most Jews had very strong opinions on whether the Priest was doing his business properly or not.... Sometimes reading ancient sources is like overhearing family quarrels in a distant room... I mean, people who weren't priests at all would have absolutely firm opinions on how the Priests should be doing their business. A Priest who would be a member of a particular group, say a Priest who had a Pharisaic orientation, might think something should be done one way, and a Priest who didn't have that orientation would think it would be done another way. Everybody is looking at the Bible and then on the basis of tradition and improvisation, doing what he thought was the correct way to do it....

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