

## The Temple at Jerusalem

*“When the time came for the mother’s purification, according to the law of Moses, they took the Child to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord” (cf. Holy Rosary, fourth joyful mystery).*



View of the Temple Mount from “Dominus Flevit”, the spot where, according to tradition, Jesus prophesied the destruction of the Temple. Photo: Leobard Hinfelaar.

For Christians Jerusalem, the Holy City, holds the most precious memories of our Savior’s life on earth, because it was here that Jesus died and rose again from the dead. It was also the scene of his preaching and miracles, and of the intense hours leading up to his Passion – the hours when he instituted the “madness of Love” that is the Blessed Eucharist. In the same place – the Cenacle – was born the Church, which, gathered around Mary, received the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

### History of the Holy City

But the leading role played by Jerusalem in the history of salvation had begun long before, in the reign of King David, between 1010 and 970 BC. Because of its geographical position, the city had been for centuries a Jebusite enclave which the Israelites who were taking over their Promised Land had been unable to overcome. Jerusalem occupied the crest of a series of hills arranged like ascending steps. In the south part of the highest area, still known today as Ophel or the City of David, stood the Jebusite stronghold; in the north part was Mount Moriah, which Jewish tradition believed to be the place of the sacrifice of Isaac (cf. *Gen 22:2* and *2 Chron 3:1*).

The high ground, which stood an average of 760 meters above sea level, was girded by two deep rivers: the Cedron on the eastern side, separating the city from the Mount of Olives, and the Hinnom or Gehenna to the west and south. These two rivers joined a third, the Tyropoeon, which crossed the hills from north to south.



The Cedron river from the Mount of Olives. Photo: Alfred Driessen.

When David took Jerusalem he established himself in the stronghold and set about raising several buildings (cf. *2 Sam* 5:6-12) and at the same time made the city the capital of his kingdom. As well as that, he brought the Ark of the Covenant, which was the sign of God's presence among his people (cf. *2 Sam* 6:1-23), and resolved to build a temple for it (cf. *2 Sam* 7:1-7; also *1 Chron* 22:1-19; 28:1-21; and 29:1-9), thus making Jerusalem into the religious centre of Israel. According to the Bible, his son Solomon began building the Temple in the fourth year of his reign, and consecrated it in the eleventh (cf. *1 Kings* 6:37-38), i.e. around the year 960 BC. Although it is not possible to find archaeological evidence for all this because of the difficulties of excavating in that area, the building of the temple, and its splendour, are described in detail in Sacred Scripture (cf. *1 Kings* 5:15 – 6:36; 7:13 – 8:13; and *2 Chron* 2:1 – 5:13).

### Meeting-place with God

The Temple was the place for meeting God through prayer and, mainly, through sacrifices; it was the symbol of God's protection over his people, where the Lord was always ready to listen to petitions and help those who came to him in their needs. This is what comes through in the words God spoke to Solomon:

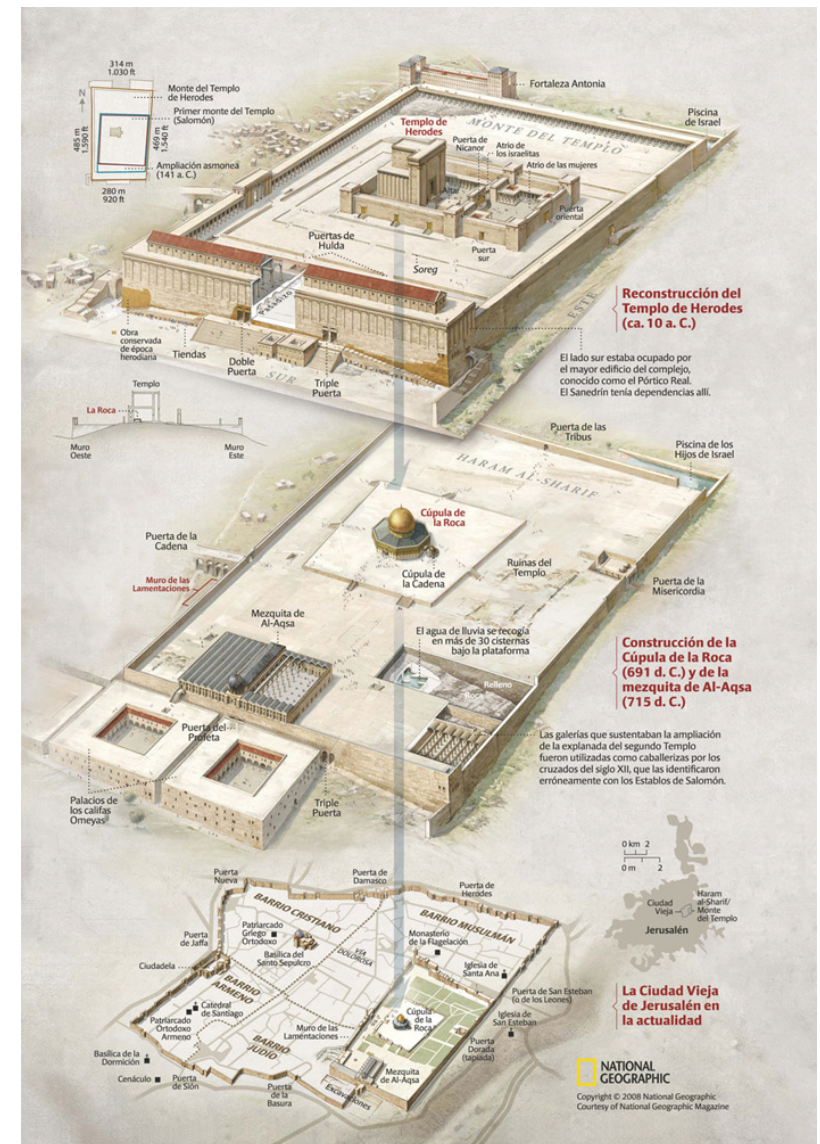
*Then the Lord appeared to Solomon in the night and said to him: "I have heard your prayer, and have chosen this place for myself as a house of sacrifice. (...) Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayer that is made in this place. For now I have chosen and consecrated this house that my name may be there for ever; my eyes and my heart will be there for all time. And as for you, if you walk before me, as David your father walked, doing according to all that I have commanded you and keeping my statutes and my ordinances, then I will establish your royal throne, as I covenanted*

*with David your father, saying, 'There shall not fail you a man to rule Israel.' But if you turn aside and forsake my statutes and my commandments which I have set before you, and go and serve other gods and worship them, then I will pluck you up from the land which I have given you; and this house, which I have consecrated for my name, I will cast out of my sight, and will make it a proverb and a byword among all peoples. And at this house, which is exalted, every one passing by will be astonished, and say, 'Why has the Lord done thus to this land and to this house?'" (2 Chron 7:12-21. Cf. 1 Kings 9:1-9).*

The history of the following centuries shows how these words were fulfilled. After Solomon's death the kingdom was split into two: the kingdom of Israel in the north, whose capital was in Samaria, and which was conquered by the Assyrians in the year 722 BC; and the kingdom of Judah in the south, whose capital was Jerusalem and which was captured by Nebuchadnezzar in 597 BC. His army finally destroyed the city, including the Temple, in 587 BC and most of the population of Jerusalem was deported to Babylon.

Before the destruction of Jerusalem God sent prophets who denounced the formalism of the Jews' worship, and their idolatry, and urged them to undergo a deep inner conversion. Afterwards, too, prophets recalled that God had made his presence in the Temple conditional on the people's faithfulness to the Covenant, and exhorted the Jews to keep up their hope in a restoration that would be final and lasting. In this way God inspired the people with a growing conviction that salvation would come through the faithfulness of a servant of the Lord who would take the sins of the whole people upon himself in obedience to God.

## The second Temple and the Roman occupation



Graphic courtesy of "National Geographic":  
<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com>

Not many years passed before the Israelites again experienced God's protection: in the year 539 BC, Cyrus, king of Persia, conquered Babylon and gave the Jews freedom to return to Jerusalem. On the site of the first Temple a second one was built, more modest in size, and dedicated in the year 515 BC. Israel's lack of political independence over the next two hundred years did not prevent them from developing their religious life intensely. This relative peace continued after the invasion by Alexander the Great in 332 BC, and also during the rule of the Egyptian Ptolemaic dynasty that succeeded him.

The situation changed in 200 BC, when Jerusalem was conquered by the Seleucids, a dynasty originating in Macedonia that had settled in Syria. Their efforts to impose hellenization on the Jewish people, culminating with the profanation of the Temple in 175 BC, provoked a rebellion. The success of the revolt by the Maccabees not only enabled them to restore the Temple in 167 BC, but brought their descendents, the Hasmoneans, to the throne of Judea.

In 63 BC Palestine fell to the Roman general Pompey, initiating a new era. Herod the Great had himself appointed king by Rome, which put an army at his disposal. In 37 BC, after strengthening his position with great brutality, he conquered Jerusalem and began to embellish it with new buildings. The most ambitious of all was the restoration and enlargement of the Temple, which was done from 20 BC onwards.

### **The Holy Family's route to the Temple**

Our Lady and St Joseph had been to Jerusalem on pilgrimage ever since they were children, and so they already knew the Temple when the days of purification came to an end and they took Jesus there to present him to the Lord (*Lk 2:22*). It took several hours, on foot or riding on a donkey, to cover the ten kilometers between Bethlehem and the Holy City. Perhaps they were impatient to fulfill a law whose real meaning few could have suspected: "the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple shows him as the First-born Son who belongs to the Lord" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 529). In order to

commemorate the people's liberation from Egypt, the Law of Moses decreed that every first-born male was consecrated to God (cf. *Ex* 13: 1-2 and 11-16); their parents had to redeem him with an offering consisting of a sum of silver equivalent to twenty days' pay. The Law also laid down the purification of mothers after giving birth (cf. *Lev* 12:2-8); Mary Immaculate, ever-Virgin, chose to submit to this precept without protest, although in fact she was not bound by it.

The road from Bethlehem to Jerusalem follows the line of the hills gradually downwards. As they came close to the City they could see the Temple Mount standing against the horizon. Herod's builders had doubled the area of the courtyards and built enormous containing walls – some of them four and a half meters thick – around them, leveling the sloping ground by filling it with earth or supporting it on a series of underground arches. In this way they had constructed a roughly rectangular platform whose sides measured 485 meters on the west, 314 on the north, 469 on the east and 280 on the south. In the center, surrounded by another wall, was the Temple itself: an imposing structure 50 meters high, covered in white stone and sheets of gold.



Pilgrims usually reached the Temple from the southwest.  
Photo: Alfred Driessen.

The road from Bethlehem led to the Jaffa Gate, on the western side of the city wall. From it a number of little streets ran in almost straight lines up to the Temple. Pilgrims would enter from the south flank of the Temple Mount. At the foot of its walls were plentiful little shops or stalls where St Joseph and Mary could buy the offering for the purification prescribed by the Law for poor people: a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons. Climbing one of the broad stairways and going through the entrance known as the Double Gate, they reached the courtyards through some monumental underground passages.



Area of archeological excavation to the south of the Temple Mount.  
Photo: Leobard Hinfelaar.

These brought them first into the Courtyard of the Gentiles, the largest open space in the whole of this huge area. It was divided in two: one part was the enlargement decreed by Herod, and the other was the original courtyard, whose limits had been carefully observed. It was constantly humming with the voices of the crowds, since it was open to anyone who chose to go there, foreigners and



Israelites, pilgrims and inhabitants of Jerusalem. To this hubbub was added the noise of the builders, who were still working on many parts that had yet to be completed.

### The entrance to the Temple: meeting Simeon

St Joseph and Mary did not linger there. Passing through the wall that divided the courtyard by the Huldah gates, and leaving behind the *soreg* – the balustrade around the part that Gentiles were forbidden to enter on pain of death –, they finally arrived at the wall of the Temple, which was entered on the eastern side. Probably it was here, in the Courtyard of the Women, that the old man Simeon approached them. He had come there *led by the Spirit (Lk 2:27)*, sure that he would see the Savior that day, and was looking for him among the crowd. “*Vultum tuum, Domine, requiram* – thy face, O Lord, shall I seek!” – as St Josemaria would often repeat towards the end of his life, to express his desire for contemplation.



Photo: Leobard Hinfelaar.

“I cannot honestly deny that I’m moved by a desire to contemplate the face of Christ. *Vultum tuum, Domine, requiram*. I will seek your face, O Lord. I like to close my eyes and think how the time will come, whenever God wills, when I will be able to see Him, not as in a glass darkly ... but face to face (cf. 1 *Cor* 13:12).” (St Josemaria, speaking in a family gathering, 10 April 1974; published in *The Man From Villa Tevere*, Scepter, 2011, chapter 19, p. 357).

“This Gospel scene,” the Pope tells us, “reveals the mystery of the Son of the Virgin, the consecrated One of the Father who came into the world to do his will faithfully (cf. *Heb* 10:5-7). Simeon identifies him (...) and announces with prophetic words his supreme offering to God and his final victory (cf. *Lk* 2:32-35). This is the meeting point of the two Testaments, Old and New. Jesus enters the ancient temple; he who is the new Temple of God: he comes to visit his people, thus bringing to fulfillment obedience to the Law and ushering in the last times of salvation” (Benedict XVI, Homily at Vespers for the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, 2 February 2011).



Photo: Leobard Hinfelaar.

Some researchers consider that the Dome of the Rock was built on the spot where the Temple of Jerusalem formerly stood. The stairway and the entrance with five arches shown in the photograph would be the one that led to Nicanor's Gate.

Simeon blessed the young couple and said to Mary: “Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed” (*Lk* 2:34-35). In the atmosphere of light and joy surrounding the arrival of the Redeemer, these words completed what God had made known to them so far: they showed that Jesus was born to offer a perfect and unique sacrifice, the Sacrifice of the Cross (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 529). As for Mary, “her role in the history of salvation did not end in the mystery of the Incarnation but was completed in loving and sorrowful participation in the death and Resurrection of her Son. Bringing her Son to Jerusalem, the Virgin Mother offered him to God as a true Lamb who takes away the sins of the world” (Benedict XVI, Homily at Mass on the Feast of the Presentation, 2 February 2006).

### **The Purification of the Virgin Mary**

Still astonished by Simeon’s words, and by the subsequent encounter with the prophetess Anna, St Joseph and our Lady made their way to the Gate of Nicanor, between the Courtyard of the Women and the Courtyard of the Jews. They went up the fifteen steps of the semicircular stairway to present themselves before a priest, who received their offerings and blessed the young mother with a ritual sprinkling with water. This ceremony meant that the Son was ransomed and the Mother purified.

“Just think,” wrote St Josemaria, contemplating the scene: “she – Mary Immaculate! – submits to the Law as if she were defiled. Through this example, foolish child, won’t you learn to obey the Holy Law of God, regardless of any personal sacrifice? Purification – you and I surely do need purification! Atonement, and more than atonement, Love. Love as a searing iron to cauterize our souls’ uncleanness, and as a fire to kindle with divine flames the wretched tinder of our hearts” (*Holy Rosary*, fourth joyful mystery).

The Church sums up the different aspects of this mystery in the Collect prayer in today's liturgy: "Almighty ever-living God, we humbly implore your majesty that, just as your Only Begotten Son was presented on this day in the Temple in the substance of our flesh, so, by your grace, we may be presented to you with minds made pure." (Cf. *Roman Missal*, Collect for the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord).

### **The destruction of the Temple**

Jesus Christ prophesied that not one stone of the Temple would be left on another (cf. *Mt* 24:2; *Mk* 13:2; *Lk* 19:44 and *Lk* 21:6). His words were fulfilled in 70 AD, when the Temple was burnt down during the assault by the Roman legions. Fifty years later, after crushing a second rebellion and expelling all Jews from Jerusalem under pain of death, the Emperor Hadrian ordered a new city to be built on the ruins of the old one, naming it Aelia Capitolina. On the ruins of the Temple were raised monuments with statues of Jupiter and the Emperor himself.

In the fourth century AD, when Jerusalem became a Christian city, many churches and basilicas were built at the Holy Places. Nevertheless, the Temple Mount was left unrestored, although Jews were permitted access to it on one day a year to pray at the foot of the western wall, known today as the Wailing Wall.

The expansion of Islam, which reached Jerusalem in 638, six years after the death of Mohammed, changed everything. The first Muslim rulers concentrated on the Temple courtyards. According to Islamic tradition, Mohammed had ascended to heaven from that point. Soon two mosques were built: in the centre, on the spot which may formerly have been the site of the Holy of Holies, was the mosque called the Dome of the Rock, completed in 691, which still preserves its original structure; and to the south, where the Great Gate of Herod's Temple had stood, was the Al-Aqsa mosque, completed in 715, which has undergone major restructurings in the course of its history.

From then on, except for the short-lived Crusaders' Kingdoms in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the Muslims have always owned this area. They call it Haram al-Sharif – the Noble Sanctuary – and consider it the third holiest place of Islam, after Mecca and Medina.

\* \* \*

The *Acts of the Apostles* contain numerous testimonies of how the Twelve Apostles and the early Christians would go to the Temple to pray and bear witness about the Resurrection of Jesus to the people (cf. *Acts* 2:46; 3:1; 5:12; 5:20-25). At the same time, they would gather in their houses for the breaking of the bread (cf. *Acts* 2:42 and 2:46), i.e. the celebration of the Eucharist. From the very beginning they were aware that “the era of the Temple is over. A new worship is being introduced, in a Temple not built by human hands. This Temple is his body, the Risen One, who gathers the people and unites them in the sacrament of his body and blood.” (Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth Part Two. Holy Week: from the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection*, pp. 21-22.)

*By J. Gil*