

***Building the Third Temple:
A Historical Exploration of Three Attempts to Build
the Third Temple in the First Millennium after the
Destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE***

By: F. M. LOEWENBERG

Jewish tradition, both in the Bible and in the later rabbinical writings, leaves no doubt that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the forefathers of the Jewish people, worshipped on Mount Moriah, the future site of the Temple in Jerusalem.¹ When Jacob was forced to spend a night on Mount Moriah, he said, “How full of awe is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of Heaven” (Genesis 28:17). Rashi (France, 1040–1105), the most important medieval Bible commentator, taught that *the gate of Heaven* means a place of prayer from which prayers ascend to Heaven. Similarly, Nahmanides (Spain, 1194–1270, Jerusalem), another important Bible commentator, comments that *the house of God* refers to the Temple from where prayers and sacrifices go directly to Heaven.

Many historians have suggested that Jews abandoned the Temple Mount after the Roman armies destroyed the Second Temple in the year 70 CE. Some of these scholars proposed that at first, they shifted their central worship site to the Mount of Olives and later, to the Wailing

¹ See, for example, Rashi’s comment on TB *Pesahim* 88a. The Sages in *Pirkei d-Rabbi Eliezer*, Chapter 31, note that the altar on which Adam, Cain and Abel, and Noah and his sons offered sacrifices was located on Mount Moriah.

F. M. Loewenberg is professor emeritus of the School of Social Work, Bar Ilan University. He served in the US Navy during World War II, received his bachelor’s degree in history from Harvard, an MSW from Columbia, and a doctorate in sociology from Wayne State. He taught in several US universities until he and his family made Aliyah in 1971. Since retirement in 1993 his research focused on the history of Jerusalem, and especially on the history of the Temple Mount. His recent publications have appeared in *Hakirah*, *Segula*, *Australian Journal of Jewish Studies*, *New York History*, and other journals.

(Western) Wall.² This view simply does not correspond to the facts on the ground as I have shown in some of my earlier publications.³ In fact, Jews never deserted the Temple Mount. Of course, there were extended periods of time when Jews did not ascend to the Temple Mount—generally because they were prevented from doing so by foreign rulers who had occupied the city. Rabbi Shlomo Goren, the late chief rabbi of Israel and previously chief rabbi of the Israeli Army, discovered in his monumental research study on the Temple Mount that from the time of the destruction of the Second Temple until three hundred years ago, Jews did not cease to pray on the Temple Mount.⁴ Even among those who know of this continued Jewish connection with the Temple Mount, there are many who are not familiar with the three separate attempts to rebuild the Temple on Mount Moriah in the first millennium after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. These three projects will be discussed below.

The First Century of Roman rule (70–170 CE)

The Jews of the Roman province of Palestine made their last stand against Roman armies on the summit of the Dead Sea fortress of Masada three years after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. Only with the fall of Masada in 73 did the Roman armies succeed at long last to put an end to the Great Rebellion that the Jews of Palestine had started six years earlier. Once the revolt had been put down and the country pacified, Jews were again permitted to visit and pray on Mount Moriah, the site where the Temple had stood only a few years earlier. This “liberal” policy may seem strange to contemporary observers, but it made eminent sense in the ancient world of empire and idolatry. After they had conquered and pacified a country, the Roman conquerors usually permitted various freedoms to the indigenous population if they paid taxes and did not revolt. Idol worshippers, as were the Romans, had no difficulty in adding yet another god to their pantheon. There was no theo-

² See, for example, Eli Schiller, *Kipat ha-Sela v-Even Ha-sh'tiyah* [The Dome of the Rock and the Foundation Stone] [Hebrew], (Jerusalem: Ariel, 1976), pp. 19–28.

³ See, for example, my publications “Did Jews Abandon the Temple Mount?” *Middle East Quarterly* 20, 3 (Summer 2013), pp. 37–48; “Where Jerusalem Jews Worship: Tracing the changing location of the ‘holiest’ site in Judaism,” *Hakirah*, vol. 16 (Winter 2013), pp. 213–231; “Ascending through the Ages,” *Segula*, no. 61 (May 2022), pp.16–25.

⁴ Shlomo Goren, *Sefer Har Ha-Bayit* [Book of the Temple Mount] [Hebrew], rev. ed. (Jerusalem: 2004), p. 31.

logical problem for them if the local population wanted to continue to worship (what the Roman conquerors considered) their local god. The Romans had not destroyed the Jerusalem Temple because they wanted to eradicate the worship of the “Jewish god,” but rather because they believed that the hub of the political and military rebellion against their empire was located on Mount Moriah. As far as the Roman government was concerned, once the rebellion had been suppressed, there was no longer any impediment to the resumption of Jewish worship on the Temple Mount.

A great number of stories in the Talmud testify to the fact that many Jews, including many of the leading rabbis, continued to visit and pray at the site of the now desolate Temple. One of these stories concerns four of the greatest rabbis of the second generation after the destruction (around fifty years after the Temple was destroyed), who went up to the Temple Mount to mourn the destruction of the Temple and pray for its speedy rebuilding:

Rabban Gamliel of Yavneh, Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah, Rabbi Yehoshua, and Rabbi Akiva once went to visit Jerusalem. When they reached Mount Scopus, they tore their garments (as a sign of mourning). When they arrived on the Temple Mount, they saw a fox running from the place where the Holy of Holies once stood. Three of the rabbis started to weep when they saw this, but Rabbi Akiva started to laugh. They asked Rabbi Akiva, “Why do you laugh?” But he asked them, “Why do you weep?” They replied, “Should we not weep when we see a fox run from the place about which it is written (Numbers 3:10), ‘The stranger who enters it shall die!’?” He answered, “I laugh because it is written (Isaiah 8:2) ‘and I will take unto Me faithful witnesses to record, Uriah the priest, and Zechariah the son of Jeberechiah.’ Why is Uriah joined with Zechariah? Did not the former live during the First Temple and the latter during the Second? It was because the passage joins the prophecy of Zechariah with the prophecy of Uriah. Uriah said (Micah 3:12): “Therefore for your sake Zion shall be ploughed up as a field...,” while Zechariah said [8:4]: “...There shall again sit old men and old women in the streets of Jerusalem...” Until the prophecy of Uriah was fulfilled, I feared lest the prophecy of Zechariah will not come to be realized. Since I now see that Uriah’s prophecy has been fulfilled, I am sure that Zechariah’s prophecy will also be fulfilled in the near future.” Then they said to him: “Akiva, you have consoled us, you have consoled us!” (TB *Makkot* 24b)

Rebuilding the Temple was foremost in the thoughts of these four rabbis, but there is no indication that they took any practical steps to make this happen.

For at least one of the four sages, Rabban Gamliel of Yavneh, this was not his first visit to the Temple Mount. Rabban Gamliel had been appointed *nassi* (chief justice) of the *Sanhedrin* (something like the Supreme Court, but with broader jurisdiction than most contemporary courts) about ten years after the destruction of the Second Temple. Even though the *Sanhedrin* had abandoned its traditional venue on the Temple Mount forty years before the Destruction, the *nassi* continued to have an office there for many years afterwards.⁵ In one story in the Talmud, we read how Rabban Gamliel frequently went to his office on the Temple Mount and (among other things) dictated letters to his secretary who then sent them to Jewish communities throughout the world.⁶

Ascent to the Temple Mount was not limited to rabbis. One account relates that “Ben Zoma once saw a [large] crowd on one of the steps of the Temple Mount” (TB *Berakhot* 58a). We learn from these and other stories that the sages of Yavneh as well as the common people continued to enter the Temple Mount for many years after the destruction.⁷ According to most authorities, walking on the Temple Mount at this time was halakhically permissible because the ashes of the Red Heifer were available for many generations after the destruction of the Temple, thus making it possible for everyone to go on the Temple Mount in ritual purity.⁸

Some scholars have suggested that sacrifices continued to be offered on the Temple Mount on an altar that had survived the destruction of the Temple. A Mishnah reported in the name of R. Yehoshua that “one may offer sacrifices [on the place where the Temple used to stand], even though there is no House [Temple]” (M *Eduyot* 8.6).⁹ Some rabbinical authorities indicate that only the Pascal lamb was offered at this time, while others embrace the view that some other sacrifices were also offered. There are those who imply that the sacrificial services continued

⁵ TB *Shabbat* 15a; see also TB *Rosh Ha-Shanah* 31a.

⁶ TB *Sanhedrin* 11b.

⁷ Mordecai Fogelman, *Beit Mordecai* [Hebrew], (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 2009), p. 205.

⁸ Eliezer Brodt, *Likutei Eliezer* [Hebrew], (Jerusalem: 2010), Chapter 2, on “*Efer Parah* (Ashes of the Red Heifer).” Entering the holy precincts of the Temple requires a high degree of ritual purity which can only be attained when ashes of the Red Heifer are available.

⁹ See also Rambam, *H. Bet Ha-Behirah* 6:15.

almost without interruption for 65 years after the Temple's destruction, while others suggest that the sacrificial services were only resumed during the three years (132–135) that Bar Kokhba's forces controlled Jerusalem.¹⁰ For example, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin (the Netziv) (1816, Russia–1893, Poland) wrote that “even though the Temple is destroyed, nevertheless it may be possible (even nowadays) that the altar be in place and that sacrifices can be offered on it—as actually happened after the destruction of the Second Temple. From the time of the destruction (in 70) until the destruction of Beitar (in 135 at the end of the Bar Kokhba rebellion) the altar was still standing, and the Pascal sacrifice was offered on it ...”¹¹

The First Attempt to Rebuild the Temple in the Days of Emperor Hadrian

Hadrian (76–138) ruled as Roman Emperor from 117 to 138. Following the turbulent reign of Emperor Trajan, Hadrian sought to consolidate the empire's boundaries and promote a policy of cultural integration among the many peoples that made up the Roman Empire. Among the many projects that he initiated, his plan to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple is of particular interest for us.

In the years that followed the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, the relationship between the Jewish population and the Roman authorities remained strained. Hadrian's proposal early in his reign to reconstruct the Jerusalem Temple might have been intended as a token of goodwill, aiming to integrate Jewish ritual practices more fully within the framework of Roman religious tolerance. However, Hadrian's intentions are shrouded in ambiguity. Some scholars believe that Hadrian was genuinely interested in gaining the cooperation of the Jews. Others think this was meant as a first step in Hadrian's goal to have the rebuilt temple dedicated to Jupiter or to another Roman deity.

An immediate result of Hadrian's innovative policies was that Jews who had been banned for decades from living in Jerusalem were now

¹⁰ A number of rabbinical authorities of the 18th and 19th centuries held that sacrificial services continued during the first period after the Destruction. Among these were R. Yaakov Ibn Tzur (known as Yabetz, Morocco, 1673–1753), R. Tzvi Hirsch Chayot (Galicia, 1805–1855), and R. Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin. However, others, including R. Chaim Nathanson (19th century, Germany) rejected this view; see Chaim Nathanson, *Avodah Tamah* (Altona, 1872).

¹¹ R. Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, *Haamek Davar* commentary on Leviticus 26:31.

allowed to return to the city. When he visited Jerusalem in the year 118, he ordered the rebuilding of the Temple that the Roman legions had destroyed less than half a century earlier. The Jews had great expectations as they made organizational and financial preparations to rebuild the Temple. But before long Hadrian went back on his word. A Midrash described this first attempt to rebuild the Temple as follows:

In the days of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Ḥananyah (a Mishnaic sage who lived c. 50–131), the evil empire (that is, Emperor Hadrian) decreed that the Temple should be constructed. Papus and Lulyanus set tables from Akko to Antioch, and they provided those ascending from the exile with silver and gold, and all their needs. (Genesis Rabbah 64.10)

Papus and Lulyanus were two wealthy Jewish brothers living in Roman Palestine. They provided the many Jews returning to Jerusalem with “silver and gold, and all their needs.”

The Midrash continues by describing how the Samaritans interfered with the rebuilding project by telling the emperor that the Jews were planning a rebellion against him. When Hadrian asked them how they could make such a charge, the Samaritans suggested the following test: the emperor should order the Jews to shift the building site by five cubits (just over two meters, a very small change in the building plans). The Samaritans added that if the Jews refused to follow this command, this would be proof that they were rebellious. The Jews refused to comply with this order because they believed that the location of the Temple was fixed by Divine decree. They were willing to forgo the rebuilding of the Temple rather than build it in the wrong place. The ancient conflict between the Jews and the Samaritans centered to some extent on the location of the Holy Temple—whether on Mount Gerizim (according to the Samaritans) or on Mount Moriah (according to the Jews). Therefore, the Samaritans who saw the rebuilding effort as an attack on the centrality of their sanctuary on Mount Gerizim vigorously opposed the rebuilding effort.

Historians differ on the question of who the potential builders of this first Temple-rebuilding project were. Most say the Jews took the lead, while others suggest that it was the Romans or their slaves that were the builders. The latter scholars cite as proof *The Epistle of Barnabas*, a Christian apocryphal writing believed to have been composed between 70 and 130, which states:

Behold they that pulled down this temple themselves shall [re]build it.
So it cometh to pass; for because they went to war it was pulled

down by their enemies. Now also the very servants of their enemies shall build it up.¹²

Whatever the actual reason for the decision, Hadrian's positive relationship with the Jews soured and the Temple rebuilding project was cancelled. But Hadrian continued his efforts to assimilate Jews to become good idol-worshipping Romans. He outlawed the practice of circumcision. He accelerated his plan to turn Jerusalem into a pagan city, an effort which the Jews regarded as an abomination. These and similar measures led in 132 to the three-year Bar Kokhba Revolt. After he put down this rebellion, Hadrian ordered that the Temple Mount be ploughed under and that the only remaining altar be destroyed.

Hadrian's decision to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple, whether sincere or not, reflects the complexities of his policies in the region. This initial gesture could be seen as an attempt at conciliation, yet his later actions reveal a profound misunderstanding of the religious and cultural significance of the Temple for the Jewish people. Ultimately, his decisions left a lasting scar on Jewish history. His legacy in Judea is remembered as one of destruction rather than of transformation of Jerusalem into a Roman city. Hadrian's reign is not remembered for his initial promise of restoration, but for the final rupture between the Jewish people and the Roman Empire. Ever since, Jews have added to Hadrian's name the curse "may his bones be crushed."

This was the end of the unsuccessful first effort to rebuild the Temple. At the same time, this decision also marked the end of sacrificial offerings on the Temple Mount. Nevertheless, despite Hadrian's drastic decrees to destroy whatever ruins of the Temple remained, there is evidence that pilgrimages to Jerusalem and the Temple Mount continued long after the fall of Beitar.¹³ The International Commission for the Wailing Wall, appointed by the British Government in 1930, noted that "from and after the year 333 CE ... there is a more or less continuous tradition about the Jews' devotions at the ruins of the Temple or its environs."¹⁴

¹² *The Epistle of Barnabas*, 16.3–4, translated by J.B. Lightfoot, archived at <https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/barnabas-lightfoot.html>.

¹³ Michael Avi-Yonah, *The Jews of Palestine: A Political History from the Bar Kokhba War to the Arab Conquest* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1984), pp.79–80.

¹⁴ *Report of the Wailing Wall Commission*, December 1930, p. 11.

The Second Attempt: Emperor Julian and His Plan for Building the Third Temple

In 311 CE, Emperor Constantine (272–337) became the first Roman emperor to designate Christianity as a “tolerated religion.” This designation resulted in the cancellation of all discriminatory laws that previously had been legislated in the Roman Empire against the Christian religion and its followers. Within a generation of this declaration Christianity became the official state religion of the Roman Empire. A steep increase in the persecution of Jews throughout the empire was a direct consequence of this recognition. Even after Constantine converted to Christianity later in his life, paganism continued to be popular both among the common people and among part of the nobility. Paganism remained the majority religion in most every city in Palestine. Jerusalem was the only city in Roman Palestine that was entirely Christian—and this only because all its Jews had been expelled by imperial decree.

This was the situation when Constantine’s nephew Julian (born in 332) became emperor in 361. He had been raised as a Christian, but as an adult rejected this religion. Because of this he is known in the Christian world as the “apostate” emperor. He felt a deep revulsion toward Christianity from an ethical-religious viewpoint. He also believed that the recognition of Christianity was a political disaster for the Roman Empire and epitomized a sickness in the body politic.

Soon after becoming emperor, he issued an edict of universal religious toleration that extended freedom and equal rights to all sects and beliefs: pagan, Jewish, and Christian. He gave practical expression of his antagonism to Christianity by creating a new pagan cult in which he served as the high priest. His plan to rebuild the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem was another tactic designed to attack the established Christian church.

Within a year after becoming emperor, Julian left Constantinople to lead a military expedition against Persia. Upon arriving in Antioch (on the eastern side of the Orontes River, near the modern city of Antakya, Turkey), he took time out to meet with “the chiefs of the Jews.”¹⁵ Julian wanted to form a common cause with the Jews in his fight against Christianity, as well as enlist Jewish help to support his army in their conquest of Persia. One of the inducements was his promise that he would do his utmost to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. The following dialogue is

¹⁵ The details of this meeting are found only in Christian sources. See Avi-Yonah (1984), p. 191, for a discussion of these sources.

reported to have taken place between Emperor Julian and the Jews of Antioch:

Julian asked, “Why do you not sacrifice to God, as required by the Law of Moses?” The Jews replied, “We are not allowed by our Law to sacrifice outside the Holy City. How can we do it now? Restore to us the City, rebuild the Temple and the Altar, and we shall offer sacrifices as in the days of old.” Julian: “I shall endeavor with the utmost zeal to set up the Temple of the Most High God.”

He felt strongly that the restoration of the Temple would demonstrate the falsity of the Christian claim that the Church was the true Israel, and that the Temple’s destruction and the subsequent exile was a just punishment for the Jewish people’s participation in the Crucifixion. He abrogated the gamut of anti-Jewish legislation and exempted the Jews from paying the special obnoxious taxes that had been imposed on them by his predecessor. Julian’s promise to abolish anti-Jewish laws and to rebuild the Temple were publicized in his *Letter to the Jewish Patriarchate*.¹⁶ Some scholars question the authenticity of this letter. However, the text of the letter was known as early as the fifth century when large parts of it were cited by Christian church historian Sozomenus (c. 400–450). Both Heck and Levy have carefully examined the letter and suggest that it is genuine.¹⁷

Among Diaspora Jews, Julian’s plan to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple was greeted with great enthusiasm. A Christian observer noted, for example, that the Jews of Nisibis “were seized by a frenzied enthusiasm, blew the *shofar* and rejoiced.” Another wrote that the Jews of Asia Minor were ready to leave their homes and travel to Jerusalem to participate in the Temple-building efforts.¹⁸ Many Jews contributed large sums of money to this project. Numerous Jews believed that Julian was a savior, but others wondered whether it was wise to place all their hopes on one man who was here today but would be gone tomorrow. Most Jews also found it difficult to think of the Roman Empire as their benefactor; they

¹⁶ *The Works of the Emperor Julian*, edit. and trans. by Wilmer Cave Wright, Loeb Classical Library, vol. III, 1923, Letter 51, archived at: <https://avande1.sites.luc.edu/jerusalem/sources/julian-epist-25.htm>.

¹⁷ M. Heck, “Is Julian’s Proclamation a Forgery?” *Yavneh*, 2, 118–139 [Hebrew], (1940); Y. Levi, “The Emperor Julian and the Rebuilding of the Temple,” *Zion* 6, 1–32, [Hebrew] (1941).

¹⁸ Ephraem the Syrian, transl. A. Rucker, *Bibliothek der Kirchenväter*, 20, 1919, First Song, 16. Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration 4 (second Invective Against Julian), §§ 87–88. (*Oratio IV, Contra Julianum II*) (GCS 35, c.668).

continued to remember it as Amalek, the traditional enemy of the Jewish people.

The Sages were generally hesitant. They remembered the severe persecutions that Jews suffered after the failure of the uprising against Gal-lus a decade earlier (351); that revolt had been to protest the increasing number of discriminatory anti-Jewish laws that had recently been enacted by the Roman Empire. Some of the Sages may have hesitated to encourage the building of the Third Temple prior to the arrival of the Messiah. Another reason for their ambivalence may have been their fear that the rebuilding of the Temple would cause a societal revolution which would radically change the structure of Jewish public life. Some feared that they would lose their leadership positions to the priests who would serve in the rebuilt Temple.¹⁹

Julian appointed his best friend Alypius, a pagan native of Antioch, to implement his plans for Jerusalem and the Temple Mount. Under his direction, Jews returned to the city “legally.” According to the Christian historian Philostorgius (Greek, 368–c. 439), the returning Jews erected a synagogue on the Temple Mount. The building of the new temple started under most auspicious conditions. The imperial treasury supplied large sums of money, as well as all building materials, including timber, stone, and lime.

One account of the attempted rebuilding of the Temple is found in the *Ecclesiastical History* written in Greek by Salamanius Hermias Sozomenos (also known as Sozomen). He was born ca. 400 into a wealthy Palestinian family in Bethelia, a small town near Gaza City. He died ca. 450. Even though he wrote his books during the years 443–450, that is, 80 or more years after the events he described, he claimed to have received all his information from eyewitnesses. His writings indicate that he thoroughly disliked both the Jews and Julian.

Many Jews came to Jerusalem to assist the skilled craftsmen and masons. The first step was the removal of the existing foundations. According to Sozomen, this involved the removal of the remaining ruins from the Second Temple. Christian observers reported with great glee that the Jews voluntarily completed the destruction that was started by Titus; however, Avi-Yonah thought it more likely that what they removed were the ruins of Hadrian’s Jupiter Temple.²⁰

¹⁹ Avi-Yonah (1984), p. 196; G. Stemberger, *Jews and Christians in the Holy Land—Palestine in the Fourth Century*, (Edinburgh: Clark, 2000), p. 208.

²⁰ Avi-Yonah (1984), p. 200.

When construction began, progress was slow and work on rebuilding the Temple's foundation advanced only haltingly. Christian residents of the city gathered daily in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher to pray for the termination of the Jewish Temple reconstruction. Soon after the building was begun, mysterious balls of fire kept erupting and killed many workers at the construction site. All work was now halted abruptly. Jerusalem's Christians were delighted by this unexpected turn of events and saw in it a great miracle and further proof of the correctness of their religion. Many Jews, on the other hand, suspected Christian arson.²¹ Other sources suggested that the construction of the new Temple came to a sudden stop when the country was hit by a major earthquake in May 363. Some Jews viewed these underground eruptions as a sign of Divine disapproval of the construction project.²² Still others indicated that the building efforts came to an abrupt end when Julian was killed on the Persian front in June 363, less than two years after he was crowned. His successor, a devout Christian, cancelled the Temple-rebuilding project immediately after ascending the throne.

Some scholars have suggested that the entire story of Julian's Temple restoration project was a fanciful fable "invented" by the Christian theologian Gregory of Nazianzus (Asia Minor, c. 325–389) or by the fourth-century Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus (c. 325–395) who accompanied Julian on the Persian expedition. Subsequently it was repeated by several Church chroniclers, all of whom were bitter enemies of Julian. On the other hand, many contemporary or almost-contemporary Christian sources, including the Syriac-language hymns against Julian, written by Ephraem (c. 306–373) immediately after Julian's death, took note of these events. Archbishop John Chrysostom (Greece, c. 347–407) treated the episode extensively in his fifth speech against Julian (composed around 380).

Julian's project was not mentioned in any contemporary Jewish source. Some have suggested that a statement by R. Aha, a contemporary of Emperor Julian, that "the Temple will be rebuilt before the appearance of the Davidic kingdom" (TJ *Ma'aser Sheni* 29b) alluded to Julian's Temple-rebuilding project. Most scholars, however, discount the relevancy of this citation and state that there are no specific references to Julian's project of rebuilding the Temple in either of the two Tal-

²¹ See Robert Panella, "The Emperor Julian and the God of the Jews," *Koinonia*, 23, (1999), pp. 15–31, for a fuller discussion of this event.

²² K. W. Russell, "The Earthquake of May 19, AD 363," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, 238, 1980, pp.47–64.

muds. Levenson has made available a critical inventory of more than fifty Christian, Jewish, and heathen sources that mention Emperor Julian's attempt to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple. The earliest Jewish source cited by Levenson did not appear until the 16th century.²³

By the latter part of the fourth century, the Temple Mount had disappeared from the landscape of Christian Jerusalem. Egeria, a Gallic woman who came on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the early 380s, gave a detailed description of the city in letters that she sent to her friends back home. From these letters it appears that she was oblivious to the fact that there was a Temple Mount in Jerusalem.²⁴ A 7th-century Armenian pilgrim to Jerusalem provided a detailed description of all the city's holy places, but made no mention of the Temple Mount.²⁵ The attempt to erase the Temple Mount from the Christian world was so successful that the mosaic map of Madaba which depicts Jerusalem in great detail omits the Temple Mount altogether. This sixth-century map was part of a floor mosaic in the early Byzantine church of St. George in Madaba, Jordan. It included the oldest surviving original cartographic depiction of the Holy Land and especially of Jerusalem.²⁶ The elimination of the Temple Mount from the Christian purview lasted until the capture of Jerusalem by the Crusaders in 1099.

Jews, on the other hand, never forgot the Temple Mount, even though no remnant of the actual Temple building remained. Wherever Jews lived, they faced Jerusalem three times every day to pray for the restoration of the Temple and for the renewal of the sacrificial service. In 438, Roman Empress Eudocia allowed Jews to pray again at the site of the destroyed Temple. The Jews of the Galilee optimistically declared that this is "the end of the exile of our people."²⁷

²³ David B. Levenson, "The Ancient and Medieval Sources for the Emperor Julian's Attempt to Rebuild the Jerusalem Temple," *Journal for the Study of Judaism*, 35, 4, 2004, pp. 409–460.

²⁴ Hagith Sivan, *Palestine in Late Antiquity*, (London: Oxford U. Press, 2008), p. 210.

²⁵ E.W. Brooks, "An Armenian Visitor to Jerusalem in the Seventh Century," *English Historical Review* vol. 11, issue 41, 1896, pp. 93–97.

²⁶ See also Michael Avi-Yonah, *The Madaba Mosaic Map*, Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1954; and Yoram Tsafrir, "Jerusalem in the Madaba Map," *Eretz Yisrael b-mapat Midba* [Eretz Yisrael in the Madaba Map] [Hebrew], eds. Gavriel Barkai & Eli Schiller, no.166 (Jerusalem: Ariel, 1996), pp. 67–73.

²⁷ Avraham Yaari, *Iggerot Eretz Yisrael* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, 1943), p. 46.

The Third Attempt during the Persian Conquest (614–628)

King Khosrow II of Persia (born 570, ruled 591–628) invaded Palestine in the second decade of the seventh century as part of his attempt to re-establish the ancient Achaemenid Empire. Prior to embarking on this operation, King Khosrow was said to have made a treaty with the *Reish Galuta*, the head of Babylonian Jewry. Some historians doubt whether there actually was such a treaty; according to others, there was a treaty which called upon the Jews to raise a force of 30,000 soldiers for the Persian army. In return, the Jewish soldiers were given permission to participate in the capture of Jerusalem—which they successfully did in 614.

In Palestine, the local Jewish population had suffered for centuries from discrimination and persecution as part of the Byzantine's efforts to force all the empire's inhabitants to become Christians. Jewish life had become nearly impossible. Now the Jews were eager to aid and abet the Persian army wherever it appeared. There were many reports of Jews helping the Persian army in the capture of Damascus and Jerusalem.

When the Christian population of Jerusalem conspired and rebelled against their new rulers after the Persians had conquered the city in 614, local Jews assisted the Persian troops in putting down the revolt. Even before the Persians had conquered Jerusalem, the Jews of Palestine seemed to have obtained a formal promise that a Jewish governor would be appointed to rule over the city and that the Temple would be rebuilt on Mount Moriah. Nehemiah, son of Hushiel, who had commanded the Jewish soldiers in the Persian army was appointed governor of the city. Some suggest that he was the son of the *Reish Galuta*.

Rabbi Eleazer Kalir (c. 570–c. 640), one of the earliest and most prolific of Jewish liturgical poets, lived in Jerusalem at the time of the Persian conquest. In one of his many poems, he provides a description of how the Jewish community benefitted from the new rulers:

When Assyria [Persia] came to the city ... / he permitted the
reestablishment of the Temple / and they built there the holy altar
/ and offered upon it holy sacrifices / but they did not manage to
build the Temple / because [the Messiah] had not yet come.²⁸

There are several historical documents that confirm that an altar was erected and sacrifices were offered on the Temple Mount during the

²⁸ Ezra Fleisher, "Towards a Resolution of the Time and Place of Rabbi Eleazar son of Kalir's Activities" [Hebrew], *Tarbitz* 54, 1985, p. 401. The poem cited by Fleisher is not found in the liturgy but was found in the Cairo Genizah.

first years of the Persian occupation of Jerusalem.²⁹ Building an altar and offering sacrifices thereon was traditionally the first step in building the Temple. King Solomon built the First Temple on the site where King David had earlier erected an altar (I Chronicles 22:1). After Ezra returned from Babylon, he first erected an altar and only later built the Second Temple (Ezra 3:2–6). Neḥemiah, son of Hushiel, evidently followed these precedents.

Three years after Neḥemiah was appointed governor of Jerusalem, the Persians removed him for reasons that were never clearly stated. Perhaps the Persians feared the messianic pretensions of the governor. Or they made a strategic decision that the support of the larger Christian population was more valuable than the support of the smaller number of Jews living in Palestine. Another reason for Neḥemiah's dismissal may have been the failure of his Jewish soldiers to capture Tyre, the only city that held out against the Persian army in their otherwise successful conquest of Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Asia Minor. For whatever reason, the Persians decided to expel the Jews from Jerusalem after three years of Jewish rule. Neḥemiah tried to resist the Persians but was defeated and executed. Now the Persians forbade Jews from settling within a three-mile radius of Jerusalem.³⁰ Jews were no longer able to offer sacrifices on the altar located on the Temple Mount. Nor were they able to continue their plans for rebuilding the Temple.

However, the Persian control of Jerusalem did not last long. Byzantine emperor Heraclius (575–641) waged a bitter war against the Persians to regain his lost provinces of Syria, Egypt, and Palestine. His army successfully destroyed the Persian army in 628, and in the following year he marched into Jerusalem at the head of this army. Though he had promised amnesty to Jerusalem's Jews, the Christian clergy of Jerusalem convinced him that this promise was invalid. Subsequently, the Byzantines massacred nearly all the Jews of Jerusalem, accusing them of cooperating with the Persian conquerors. But the Byzantine rule of Jerusalem was

²⁹ *Sefer Zerubabel*, in Even Shmuel (Kaufman), Yehudah, *Midrashei Geulah*. (Tel Aviv: Mossad Bialik, 1943) [Hebrew], pp. 55–88; Bekkum, Wout Jac van, "Jewish Messianic Expectations in the Age of Heraclius" in Gerrit, J. Reinink and Stolte, Bernard H., *The Reign of Heraclius (610–641)*, (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), pp. 95–112. See also Salo Wittmayer Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, Vol. 3, High Middle Ages: Heirs of Rome and Persia, 2nd ed., revised and enlarged, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1957), p. 23 and p. 239, n25.

³⁰ Simon Seba Montefiore, *Jerusalem, the Biography* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2012), p. 197; Baron (1957), vol. 3, p. 23.

also a short one, ending in 638 when a Muslim army conquered all of Palestine.

Summary

The three attempts to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem during the six centuries following its destruction in 70 CE share certain similarities but also differ significantly. What were the similarities of these attempts? What were the differences? What lessons can or should future generations learn from these attempts?

Similarities

► **Initiation.** Each of the three attempts were devised or sponsored by a foreign ruler who used the Temple rebuilding project to further his political goals or to gain control over the Jewish population of Jerusalem. **Hadrian** sought to integrate Jewish identity into the broader Roman cultural framework and possibly intended to co-opt Jewish aspirations for loyalty to the Empire. **Julian** intended to undermine Christianity (that a generation earlier had been declared the state religion) and re-establish paganism as the official religion of the empire. He aimed to rebuild the Temple to undermine Christian theology, which saw its destruction as a fulfilled prophecy. The **Persians** initiated the Temple rebuilding project as a way to gain Jewish support in their war against the Byzantine Empire.

► **Religious Significance.** For the Jews, the rebuilding of the Temple was a deeply symbolic act, central to their hopes for religious renewal and national restoration. Three times each day Jews throughout the world pray for the rebuilding of the Temple, but they lacked the means and power to implement their dream on their own.

► **Lack of Success.** Though the specific reasons for failure differed, the three attempts to rebuild the Temple were not successful.

Differences

► **Intentions of the Initiator.** **Hadrian** (reigned 117–138 CE) initially appeared sympathetic to Jewish aspirations. His plan to rebuild the Temple was aborted in part because of the active opposition of the Samaritan population of the Holy Land. But Hadrian, whose motives for this project were rather ambiguous, may have utilized the Samaritan opposition because over time he became more interested in establishing a Temple dedicated to Jupiter rather than building a Jewish Third Temple.

In the end, the Jews were expelled from Jerusalem, and the first Temple-rebuilding effort was cancelled. **Julian the Apostate** (reigned 361–363 CE) wanted to rebuild the Jewish Temple as part of his efforts to undermine Christianity. His plan to rebuild the Third Temple was stalled because of the violent opposition of Jerusalem's Christian population and clergy. When he was killed in battle less than two years after his coronation, his replacement, a devout Christian, immediately cancelled the Third Temple project. During the **Persian occupation** (614–628 CE), the Persian Empire under King Khosrow II initially allied with the Jews of the region and granted them permission to rebuild the Temple. Their motivation was largely tactical, so when they realized that the support of Jerusalem's Christian population was more advantageous than Jewish support, they stopped the Temple-building project and expelled the Jews from the city.

► **Religious and Cultural Contexts.** The Roman Empire under **Hadrian** was dominated by paganism, with no strong monotheistic challenge to its cultural hegemony. His reign is remembered for the suppression of Jewish religious practices. **Julian** ruled an empire where Christianity was the recognized state religion. His policies were aimed to reverse the recognition of Christianity and make idolatry once again the state religion. His support for rebuilding the Temple was meant to be a direct challenge to Christianity. The **Persian occupation** occurred in an age when Christianity was the dominant religion of the Byzantine Empire. The Persians sought to use Jewish discontent with Byzantine discriminatory policies against the Jews to enlist their support for their goal of defeating the Byzantine Empire.

► **Outcome and Circumstances of Failure.** **Hadrian's** plan ended in failure because in time, competing plans became more important for him. Ultimately, he enacted a series of anti-Jewish laws that led to the Bar Kokhba revolt (132–135 CE). After crushing this revolt, Hadrian banned Jews from Jerusalem and made no further attempts to rebuild a Jewish Temple. **Julian's** plans were abandoned following his sudden death in 363 CE. Some contemporary accounts suggest that natural disasters, such as an earthquake and fires, may have hampered construction efforts because they were believed to support Christian claims of divine intervention. During the **Persian occupation**, the Temple rebuilding effort came to a sudden end when the Persians decided that the support of the local Christian population was more beneficial than Jewish support.

► **Jewish Involvement.** Under **Hadrian**, Jewish participation was limited because within a short time Hadrian changed his mind and can-

celled the project. Under **Julian**, Jews participated enthusiastically, seeing his support as a genuine opportunity to restore the Temple. During the **Persian occupation**, Jews likely played a significant role in the initial planning efforts, but before substantial progress was made, the Persians decided against continuing the building project. The support of the rabbinical leadership of the Jewish community for the Temple rebuilding projects was much more hesitant than the enthusiastic lay support, but the reasons for their reluctance varied over time.

Conclusion

The three attempts reflect different intersections of political power, religious agendas, and historical circumstances. While all were initiated by foreign rulers, the motivations, levels of Jewish involvement, and reasons for failure varied significantly. The question arises why, after three (unsuccessful) attempts to rebuild the Temple in the six centuries following the destruction of the Second Temple, there were no further attempts in the following fourteen centuries. What are possible explanations for this?

The rabbis who taught in Palestine in the centuries after the destruction of the Second Temple discussed the question whether Jews were commanded to build the Third Temple. They concluded that "... any generation in which [the Temple] is not rebuilt is considered as if it had destroyed it" (Jerusalem Talmud *Yoma* 1:1).

Almost a thousand years later, Maimonides (1138–1204), in his comprehensive halachic compendium, wrote:

It is a positive commandment to construct a House for God, prepared for sacrifices to be offered within it. We [must] celebrate there three times a year, as it states: "*And you shall make Me a sanctuary.*" [Exodus 25:8] (Maimonides, *H. Beit Ha-Beirah* 1:1)

Earlier, Maimonides had written in his *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*:

... we are commanded to build a Temple, a choice house for Divine service, in which there will be sacrifices and an eternal burning of fire;... (Maimonides, *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, Positive Commandment 20)

Since the time of Maimonides, there have appeared many volumes that enumerate and explain the 613 Biblical commandments. Every one of these books, without exception, lists the building of the Third Temple as a positive commandment. The *Sefer Ha-Hinukh*, written in 13th-century Spain by an anonymous "Levi of Barcelona," perhaps the best-known of these accounts, brings the following:

To build a house for the sake of God, meaning to say that we would bring Him sacrifices there and that pilgrimage and yearly gathering of all of Israel be there, as it is stated (Exodus 25:8), “And let them make Me a sanctuary.” ... And this commandment is practiced at the time that most of Israel is upon their Land. And this is one of the commandments that are not imposed upon the individual, but rather upon the community. When the Temple is built, speedily in our days, a positive commandment will be fulfilled. (Commandment 95)

And yet, to this very day, Jewish history does not record even one Temple rebuilding effort after the 7th century Persian period. Several possible explanations for this lack of activity have been suggested.

1. For long periods of time, Jews were prohibited from entering Jerusalem or settling there. Christian crusaders and Muslim rulers, each for their own reason, banned Jews from Jerusalem. Later, when Jews regained the right to live in Jerusalem, they were strictly prohibited from setting foot on the Temple Mount.
2. One rabbinical theory suggests that the Temple rebuilding would occur only after the Messiah made his appearance. The Kaliri (R. Eleazer Kalir), who lived in Jerusalem at the time of the Persian invasion, mentioned this theory in one of his poems (see above). Over time this theory is mentioned increasingly frequently. Opinions differ whether the Third Temple will descend from Heaven ready for immediate use after the Messiah’s arrival or whether the Messiah will direct humans how to build the Temple. Either way, supporters of this theory indicate that Jews should desist from building the Temple now.
3. The space where the Third Temple will be located is now occupied by the Dome of the Rock, a most sacred site for the believers of Islam. This was not the case when the three Temple-rebuilding projects discussed in this paper were initiated. Any attempt to remove the Dome of the Rock will inevitably result in a very hostile response from the Muslim world.

There may have been other explanations over time. But the fact is that during these fourteen centuries the rebuilding of the Third Temple was not (and is not now) on the Jewish agenda. ❧