CHAPTER FOUR

THE TEMPLE IN FIRST-CENTURY CE JUDAISM

Among the many aspects of the Jews and Judaism that seemed odd to non-Jews in the ancient world, worship through offerings and sacrifices in the Temple in Jerusalem was not included. Greeks and Romans found Jews amusing, occasionally admirable, and (sometimes) disgusting, because of their strange customs, such as stopping work on the Sabbath, their distinctive food laws, and the circumcision of males (Stern 1974–84; Feldman 1993). But the attitudes of Greeks and Romans to the Jerusalem Temple in the final century of its existence, after it had been rebuilt magnificently in the Roman manner by Herod the Great, was primarily admiration (Tacitus, Histories 5.8.1). To worship through offering sacrificial animals, libations, and incense on special altars in areas consecrated and purified by dedicated priests was standard religious behaviour for almost everyone in the ancient world (Beard, North and Price 1998). It was also not just part but the centre of the religious life of the Jews, a fact whose importance has faded somewhat over the past two millennia as both Jews and Christians (and, later, Muslims) have learned other ways to worship, without a Temple.

The Jerusalem Temple is in fact, or at least should be, much better known than any other temple system in the ancient world precisely because these later Jews and Christians preserved so much evidence about the way that the Temple operated. For no other temple does there survive a record of sacrificial ritual as detailed as the lengthy discussions in the Mishnah and the Tosefta. For no other temple do we have a long first-hand description by a priest who had known the cult from the inside, as Josephus did. The happy chance that so much literary material about the Temple was kept by these two different religious traditions—rabbinic Judaism and Christianity—provides a unique opportunity to gauge in what ways the Temple mattered to ordinary Jews in the generations immediately prior to its destruction (Sanders 1992: 47–169, 305–14; Hayward 1996).

That the Temple was, in some sense at least, of supreme significance to the vast majority of Jews may be surmised from a single
traumatic episode which occurred some thirty years before its demise. Both the contemporary philosopher Philo and the (slightly younger) historian Josephus narrate the reaction of Jews worldwide when the crazy emperor Gaius Caligula attempted to install in the Temple a statue of himself so that he might be worshipped there as divine (Schürer 1973: 388–96). Philo, who was in Rome at the time as part of a delegation which had come to the capital to seek redress for his home community in Alexandria in the diaspora after they had suffered pogroms, switched his efforts to try to counter this far more serious threat to the whole Jewish nation. Agrippa I, grandson of Herod the Great, a royal adventurer who had contrived to gain the friendship of Caligula, risked both that friendship and his life by protesting against the sacrilege. The Jews of Judaea and Galilee staged a sit-down strike to prevent a Roman army marching on Jerusalem with the statue. In the event, calamity was averted by the assassination of the tyrant emperor, but not before Jews all over the Roman world had been spurred into collective outrage in a way not recorded either in earlier crises or in the national traumas of the two later great revolts in Judaea in 66–70 and 132–135 CE or the diaspora uprising of 115–117 CE.

Precise details of the appearance of the Temple just before 70 CE are much debated, not for lack of information but because the evidence of Josephus (Ant. 15.410–20; War 5.184–227; Apion 2.102–109) does not cohere in all respects with that in the Mishnah (Avigad 1984). Excavations around the Temple site have brought clarity only to a small selection of the resulting problems of interpretation. The most probable explanation of most of the discrepancies is not that either source is wholly wrong but that the lay-out of the building changed over time (Levine 1994): one extra item of knowledge which is furnished by archaeology is that Josephus’s references to structural work on the building having continued almost up to the outbreak of the Great Revolt in 66 CE seem to be correct.

But if details are sometimes hazy, the general picture is not. The Temple was huge compared to other shrines in the Roman empire—rivalled by the great temples of Egypt—for the good reason that whereas devotees of other cults built local shrines, Jews, with few exceptions, directed their pious offerings to just the one place. The main impression in the main courts was space—where the enclosed perimeter of a normal pagan temple had trees, votive offerings and statues, the Jerusalem shrine had a vast piazza for worshippers to