CHAPTER 3

The Second Temple of Jerusalem: Center of the Jewish Universe

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For the Judahites of the sixth century BCE, the burning of Solomon’s Temple signified the sudden and catastrophic removal of the seat of YHWH’s presence on earth, which had functioned as the supreme source of national blessing and protection for nearly four hundred years. But the profound attachment between the people and their holy shrine was not to be severed by its physical destruction. The priest-prophet Ezekiel explained that although the earthly temple was gone, God possessed a mobile throne in heaven, beyond the reach of Babylonian might. Far from absent, God himself had become a “small temple” (or “temple for a little while”; miqdash meʿat [Ezek. 11:16]) for the exilic community. Moreover, a day would come when God’s presence would return to a glorious new temple, which would serve as the focal point of the restored nation. A much more concrete expression of attachment to the sanctuary appears in the tantalizing report of Jeremiah 41:5 that shortly after the destruction, in the seventh month of the year, “eighty men came from Shechem, Shiloh, and Samaria … carrying meal offerings and frankincense to present at the House of the Lord,” perhaps in celebration of the Festival of Booths, Sukkot. It cannot be known whether this attempted pilgrimage to the ruined holy site was the norm, but there are numerous indications that sacrifices indeed continued to be offered there.¹

These two reactions to the destruction, Ezekiel’s transcendent visions regarding the divine presence and the temple’s imperishable cosmic significance, and the continuation of the offering of sacrifices atop the ruins of the First Temple, represent respectively abstract and concrete efforts to affirm, in a time of tremendous uncertainty, the continued vitality of the temple as the cornerstone of Jewish religious experience. Whereas the abstract approach focused on the continuity of the notion of the temple as covenantal center and locus of YHWH’s cosmic rule, the concrete approach emphasized the physical – the continuity of worship at and reverence for the chosen site on Mount Zion. As

we shall see, each of these approaches would continue to play a pivotal role in the way that Jews related to the sanctuary throughout the Second Temple period and long after its destruction in 70 CE at the hands of the Romans. The completion of the Temple on Mount Zion in 516 BCE indeed concretized the location's status as the center of Jewish worship and pilgrimage for centuries to come. But the interpretation of the sacred structure and the sacrificial service associated with it within dramatically new social and political contexts evoked continuous and passionate discussion.

1 New Temple, Renewed Temple

From its beginning, the Second Temple would have shared many architectural features in common with its Solomonic predecessor. Given the visibility of the original foundations and availability of the blueprints of 1 Kings 5–7, the sanctuary would have been built on the same spot and with the same tripartite floor plan and dimensions, incorporating the remains of any major walls left standing by the Babylonians. Beyond such tangible connections, the sources testify to early efforts to frame the new building as the legitimate spiritual and functional descendent of the First Temple. For example, in rallying the people to complete the Temple, the prophet Haggai stresses that the Lord's “spirit is still in your midst. Fear not!” (2:5; cf. Zech. 8:3). In fact, the guiding hand of the Lord would see to it that, “the glory of this latter house shall be greater than that of the former one” (2:8). In a similar vein, the first chapter of the book of Ezra provides a detailed inventory of the temple vessels that were taken to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar and returned to Jerusalem by King Cyrus. The message here is clear: the restoration was a complete one and the priestly service conducted in the Second Temple was the legitimate continuation of that conducted in the First.2

Such reassurances appear to veil nagging uncertainties about the Second Temple and its service that should be understood in light of the new socio-political realities of the period.3 The First Temple was built by King Solomon, the “Lord’s anointed,” in his capital city, Jerusalem. Its location adjacent to the royal palace served to underscore divine oversight of the Davidic line of kings and, by extension, the entire Davidic kingdom.4 By contrast, the building of the

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3 See, e.g., Hag. 2:3; Ezra 3:12.
4 See the article by Carol Meyers in this volume.