

# The Templars

The History and the Myth

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 HarperCollins e-books

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# Introduction

**The Templars were founded in Jerusalem on Christmas Day 1119 at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, on the spot which marks the crucifixion, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. A religious order of fighting knights, their headquarters was on the Temple Mount, that vast platform rising above the city where King Solomon had built his Temple two thousand years before. Surrounded by these potent historical and sacred associations, the Templars assumed their responsibility to protect pilgrims visiting the holy shrines and to defend the Holy Land.**

The Templars soon became a formidable international organisation. Vast donations of properties were made in Europe to maintain this elite taskforce overseas, and special rights and privileges were granted by popes and kings. Dressed in their white tunics emblazoned with a red cross, they became the West's first uniformed standing army and also pioneered an extensive financial network that reached from London and Paris to the Euphrates and

the Nile. As an order they became powerful and wealthy, but as individuals their existence was simple and austere. Their bravery was legendary, their dedication was absolute and their attrition rate was high; at least twenty thousand Templars were killed, either on the battlefield or after being taken captive and refusing to renounce their faith to save their lives.

Yet in the end the Templars were destroyed not by the Muslims in the East but by their fellow Christians in the West. On Friday 13 October 1307 the Templars were arrested throughout France and soon elsewhere throughout Europe. They were charged with heinous heresies, obscenities, homosexual practises and idol worship; many were tortured and confessed. The end came in 1314 when the Templars' last Grand Master was burnt alive at the stake.

The shock and mystery of their downfall has excited interest in the Templars for seven centuries since. Some historians have conjectured that the Templars' sojourn in the East brought them into contact with Gnosticism, the ancient heresy embraced by the Cathars of France, while the Freemasons have drawn a line of occult knowledge transmitted from the Temple of Solomon via the Templars to themselves.

Never has speculation about the Templars been more feverish than today. Did the Templars carry out excavations beneath the Temple Mount and find something extraordinary that explains their rise to power and wealth

and, according to some, their continued but clandestine existence to this day? Was it some vast treasure? Or the Ark of the Covenant? The Holy Grail? The secret to the life of Christ and his message? And where did this secret travel when the Templars were suppressed? To Scotland, to America?

What is certainly true is that the rise and fall of the Templars exactly corresponded to the two centuries of the crusading venture in the East, where after a series of outrages against Western pilgrims and Eastern Christians, and in the face of renewed aggression which threatened all of Europe, the First Crusade was launched in 1095 to recover Asia Minor, Syria and Palestine from Muslim occupation. Simultaneously, the struggle was being fought in the Iberian peninsula where the Templars eventually helped liberate Spain and Portugal. But the crusading effort in the East, with the Templars at its heart, was never enough to withstand the overwhelming Muslim forces that could be brought into the field when they were united by the likes of Saladin or the Mamelukes. In 1291 when the Mamelukes drove the last Frankish settlers out of the Holy Land, the Templars lost the main purpose of their existence, and soon they fell victim to the rapacious greed and tyrannical ambitions of the King of France.

One of the great Templar mysteries has always been the role played by the Papacy in the downfall of the order. The Pope was meant to be their protector and to the Pope alone the Templars owed obedience, yet to judge from the



apparently supine acquiescence of the Papacy to the demands of the King of France, the Pope either betrayed the Templars or believed them guilty of terrible crimes. These conjectures took a dramatic turn in 2007, when the Vatican published a facsimile edition of a parchment recording the Templar leaders' testimony to Papal investigators at Chinon in 1308. This document had been discovered in the Vatican Secret Archives and revealed—seven hundred years too late to save the lives of James of Molay and countless other knights—that the Pope believed the Templars innocent of heresy.

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### ***About this book***

There are seven parts to this book. The first four cover the historical narrative. They begin with the origins of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem—from which the Templars took their name. And they continue with the rise of Christianity and the challenge of Islam—the context for pilgrimages and the Crusades which became the *raison d'être* for the Templars. The narrative then proceeds through the foundation of the Templars, their rise to power and their dramatic fall as the Holy Land was lost to the Muslims, and it concludes with their trial. Part Five deals with the aftermath of the Templars' dissolution, their various survivals, and their co-optation by Freemasons and

conspiracy theorists.

The books' last two parts include guides to the most interesting Templar sites and buildings to be seen today in the Middle East and Europe, and to the emergence of Templarism—the adoption of Templar history and myth in popular culture, from fiction to computer games, as well as reviews of the best Templar books and websites.

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# ***Part 1***

## **The Contexts**

# The Temple of Solomon

## *Three Temples and a Vision*

The story of the Templars must begin with that of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, where the Dome of the Rock stands today. For it was here that Solomon's Temple was built—the legendary, lost temple of the Jews, from which the Templars, as guardians of the Holy Land, took their name, and on whose site they created their military and spiritual headquarters. Sacred to Judaism, Christianity and Islam, no world site has greater resonance; nor, as home of the Ark of the Covenant, such enduring myth.

Physically, the Temple Mount takes the form of a vast platform, which was constructed over a natural hill by Herod the Great to support his gigantic temple—built around 25–

10 BC on the site of Solomon's original temple of a thousand years earlier. It is Herod's Temple that is referred to in the *Gospel of Mark 13:1–2*, when a disciple says to Jesus, 'Master, see what manner of stones and what buildings are here!', to which Jesus replies, 'Seest thou these great buildings? There shall not be left one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down.' And it was this temple that, duly bearing out the prophecy, was destroyed by the Roman emperor Titus in AD 70 in the course of putting down a Jewish rebellion.

## [The Temple of Solomon](#)

Though nothing survives of Herod's Temple, the exposed western retaining wall of the Temple Mount platform, famously known as the Wailing Wall, has come to symbolise not only the lost Temple of Herod but the first temple built on this same spot three thousand years ago, the Temple of Solomon.

Solomon, the son of David and Bathsheba, became King of Israel in about 962 BC and died in about 922 BC. During the forty years of his reign, he expanded trade and political contacts, centralised the authority of the crown against tribal fragmentation, and engaged in an elaborate building programme. His principal building works were the royal palace and the Temple in Jerusalem.

Almost all that we know about the planning and

building of Solomon's Temple comes from the Old Testament, in particular the books *2 Samuel*, *1 Kings* and *1 Chronicles*. We also know from *2 Kings* about the Assyrians' capture of Jerusalem in 586 BC, and how they destroyed the city, burnt down Solomon's Temple, and sent the population into exile at Babylon where their lament is recorded in *Psalms 137:1*: 'By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.'

We are told by the later *Book of Ezra* that after the Assyrians were overthrown by the Persians, the Persian King Cyrus the Great gave permission for the Jews to return home from their captivity in Babylon and to rebuild their temple. Begun in 520 BC and completed five years later, this Second Temple, also known as the Temple of Zerubbabel, stood on the same spot as the Temple of Solomon and probably followed its plan, but owing to the reduced condition of the Jews at the time it was not possible to reproduce the magnificence of Solomon's decorations.

Jerusalem remained part of the Persian Empire for two hundred years. But when Alexander the Great defeated the Persian King Darius III at the battle of Issus in 333 BC the entire Middle East came under the rule and cultural influence of the Greeks. In time the Greeks were superseded by the Romans, though much of Greek culture remained. Palestine, as the Romans called it, became part of the Roman Empire in 63 BC, but it was given complete autonomy under Herod the Great, a Jew who had proved

himself loyal to Roman interests and was installed as King of the Jews in 37 BC.

By Herod's time the Second Temple had suffered five centuries of wear and decay, but it would have been sacrilege for him to have torn it down. Instead he incorporated the Second Temple in his plans, enlarging and refurbishing it on a grandiose scale; in effect it was a third temple, though it still counted as the second. But in less than a century Herod's Temple too was destroyed.

There was yet another temple, and though it never really existed it was described in great detail in the Old Testament *Book of Ezekiel*. The prophet Ezekiel was among those deported to Babylon where he had a vision that Israel was restored to its former glory and that Solomon's Temple had risen again from its ruins. Ezekiel's Temple was the expression of a yearning for the Temple of Solomon, a symbol of a lost ideal. In that sense, and not only for Jews, but for all peoples, the Temple of Solomon has become one of the great legendary buildings of the world, a monument that has inspired imaginations for thousands of years.

The New Testament adds another dimension to Ezekiel's symbolism of the Temple. After prophesying the destruction of the Temple, Jesus announces in the *Gospel of John 2:16*, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up', words which are taken as referring to his own death and resurrection, so that in place of the destroyed earthly Temple, Jesus becomes an everlasting divine

Temple. For Christians the resurrection, the cornerstone of their faith, was expressed in this vision of Jesus as the new Temple, and of Paradise as the new Jerusalem.

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## ***The Bible and History***

Everything we know about the First Temple at Jerusalem comes from the Old Testament, and the same applies even to the existence of the Kingdom of David and Solomon. There are no accounts by outsiders, nor is there any material evidence—not helped by present-day religious and political sensitivities about archaeological digs at the Temple Mount. This has led some to argue that there is no historical basis for the ancient kingdom or the original Temple. But there is too much circumstantial evidence—political, economic and cultural—to dismiss the biblical account. For example there are the details of the complex commercial relationships between Solomon and King Hiram of Tyre (also called Hiram in some parts of the Bible), who is an independently attested historical figure.

The existence of Israel as a people and a place was already mentioned by the ancient Egyptians as early as c1209 BC, during the reign of Merneptah, son of



Ramses II. And within a century of Solomon's reign (c962–c922 BC), events and figures in the Bible find corroboration in Assyrian inscriptions, and thereafter in contemporary Persian, Greek and Roman texts.

But it is also true that the books of the Old Testament were often written much later than the events they describe. For example four centuries had elapsed before an account of the construction of the First Temple was given in *1 Kings*, and indeed by then it had already been destroyed and its most sacred object, the Ark of the Covenant, had long since disappeared. When *1 Kings* was written, the Jews were a broken and oppressed people who seemed to have somehow lost the favour of God, and at least part of its purpose was to remind them of a time when they had been powerful and united in the presence of God, who had dwelt among them in the splendour of the Temple. More than a historical account, *1 Kings* was a book of desire and hope, an injunction to return to pious ways to restore what had been lost.

Here are the dates of composition, as generally agreed by biblical scholars, of those Old Testament books which describe the reigns of David and Solomon and the period of the First Temple.

**2 Samuel:** written during the Babylonian exile, sixth century BC, but working with earlier sources.

**1 and 2 Kings:** as *2 Samuel*.

**1 and 2 Chronicles:** written in the latter half of the fourth century BC, ie 350–300 BC.

**Ezra:** Ezra himself arrived in Jerusalem in 397 BC, but the book was written a half century later by the same authors or compilers as *Chronicles*.

**Psalms:** though ascribed to David by tradition, in fact they were composed and collected over six centuries, with some in their original form perhaps dating to the First Temple period and all of them collected after the Babylonian exile.

**Ezekiel:** Ezekiel went to Babylon in 597 BC, and he may have written all or part of his book while there, but it is also possible that it is a third century

pseudepigrapha, that is a fake written to look three hundred years older.

**The books of the New Testament:** Often written long after the event, these likewise have purposes beyond the historical. For example, the *Gospel of Mark* was written in tumultuous times, during or immediately after a Jewish rebellion against Rome which was put down by the Emperor Titus in AD 70 when he also razed the Second Temple to the ground, and so the words ascribed to Jesus probably owe less to prophecy than to hindsight. The same is true of the words uttered by Jesus in the *Gospel of John 2:16*, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' These are taken as referring to the death and resurrection of Jesus, which occurred in about AD 30, whereas John's Gospel was written no earlier than AD 85.

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## [Sacred Origins of Jerusalem](#)

Long before there was a Temple, and before Jerusalem, there was the Ophel hill. Tombs dating to 3200 BC have been found on the Ophel hill, which was to become David's city, but no traces of habitations have been discovered, no

signs of urban life. To the west the land of Canaan fell away to the Mediterranean coastal plain, an avenue of trade, and to the east was the Jordan river valley, where even then stood Jericho, one of the oldest cities in the world. But few people lived in these highlands of Judah in the region of the Ophel hill. Jerusalem, which was to assume such significance for the Jewish, Christian and Muslim worlds, began as a remote mountain site off the beaten track.

Nevertheless, some settlers were attracted to the Ophel hill for the natural protection that it offered and because of the Gihon Spring, which flowed from its eastern flank, so that by the end of the nineteenth century BC the hill was encircled by a defensive wall, a fortress was constructed at its northern end, and houses built on artificial terraces climbing up the slopes of the citadel. By now the Egyptians knew of its existence; among the names of nineteen Canaanite cities which have been found inscribed on Twelfth Dynasty potsherds is one called Rushalimum, meaning 'founded by Shalem'. Hills and mountains in the ancient Middle East were associated with the divine because they reached into the sky, and Shalem, who was a Syrian god identified with the setting sun or with the evening star, had chosen to manifest himself on the Ophel hill. From the moment of its foundation, Jerusalem was a sacred place.

Six hundred years later, in about 1200 BC, Jerusalem was in the hands of the Jebusites, a people who had recently settled in Canaan. These were turbulent times,

marked by dramatic climate change and the vast migration of the Sea Peoples who originated somewhere beyond the Black Sea and irrupted southwards through Asia Minor, the Middle East, the Mediterranean and even as far as the shores of Libya and Egypt. In the course of the Sea People's disruptive wanderings entire civilisations were overthrown, including the Mycenaeans of Greece and the Hittites, whose empire had extended over Asia Minor and most of Syria. The Jebusites were probably remnants of the Hittite empire who sought refuge in the highlands of Judah, even as the Philistines, who were probably Sea Peoples beaten back from Egypt, settled along the coastal lowlands of Canaan. But at the same time another people were establishing themselves in the highlands of Canaan: the Israelites, whose tribes soon encircled Jebusite Jerusalem.

## [The Promised Land](#)

According to the Bible, the Israelites came from Mesopotamia and for a time settled in Canaan. But then in about 1750 BC famine drove the twelve tribes of Israel to Egypt where they were reduced to slavery. Their famous Exodus from Egypt began in about 1250 BC when under the leadership of Moses they escaped into the wilderness of Sinai, from where they were directed by their god Yahweh to the fertile lands of Canaan. Moses did not live to see his people enter the Promised Land, an event dated to

about 1200 BC; instead under Joshua, his successor, the tribes of Israel stormed into Canaan, taking the entire country by the sword, all except the walled hill city of the Jebusites, Jerusalem.

But modern scholarship is sceptical about the biblical account of the Exodus. In a stele dating to the reign of the Nineteenth Dynasty pharaoh Ramses II, mention is made of a people called the Apiru who are employed as labourers in the building of his new capital, Pi-Ramesse. There used to be speculation that Apiru (or Habiru/Hapiru) referred to the Hebrews whom the Old Testament describes as engaged in building works immediately before the Exodus. The scholarly view nowadays, however, is that Apiru does not describe an ethnic group but was a term used in both Syria and Mesopotamia to describe mercenaries, raiders, bandits, outcasts and the like, while in Egypt the term Apiru, from the verb *hpr*, meaning 'to bind' or 'to make captive', probably referred to the Asiatic prisoners employed in state building and quarrying projects.

In a stele dating to 1209 BC during the reign of Ramses' son Merneptah, there is a brief entry reading, 'Israel is laid waste, his seed is not'. This is the only non-biblical reference to Israel at this time and refers to Merneptah's successful campaign against the allied tribes of Ephraim, Benjamin, Manasseh and Gilead, collectively known as Israel, in the hill country north of Jerusalem. Nothing in these Egyptian records supports the story of an Exodus, which in any case was only written down sometime

between the ninth and fifth centuries BC. Indeed, except for a few scholars of a generally fundamentalist kind, the broadly accepted view is that there was no Exodus from Egypt, though a few Israelites who were also Apiru may have escaped to Canaan where their account added drama to a more pedestrian reality—namely that the Israelites were a disruptive outsider caste of mercenaries, bandits or whatever, already living in the mountainous parts of Canaan, who gradually took over the whole of what they called their Promised Land.

### King David's City

At a later date, around 1020 BC, the biblical figure of Saul became the first king of the loosely organised group of northern tribes called Israel. After Saul's death, in about 1000 BC, the elders of Israel went to David, who had first served under Saul but then later rebelled against him. David, born the son of a Bethlehem farmer, had since established his own kingship over the tribes of Judah to the south, and the elders of Israel now asked him to be their king also. Entirely encircled by the united Kingdom of Israel and Judah was the alien Jebusite enclave of Jerusalem.

The capital of the Kingdom of Judah was at Hebron, twenty miles south of Jerusalem. Hebron had powerful associations as it was believed to be the burial place of Abraham and other ancestors of the Israelites. David was

thirty when the elders came to him at Hebron and made him king of both Judah and Israel, and for seven years he remained there before conquering Jerusalem. For all the symbolism of Hebron, David made Jerusalem his new capital, from where he ruled over 'all Israel', as the Bible puts it, for another thirty-three years.

If Jerusalem's citadel and walls, and its sacred origins, played some part in David's decision to make the city the capital of his united kingdom, it is likely that the overriding reason was that it belonged to neither Judah nor Israel, and that none of the twelve Israelite tribes had any historical or religious claims on the city. In fact Jerusalem after the conquest was a mixed city; instead of expelling the original Canaanite and Hittite inhabitants, the Israelites dwelled among them. Jerusalem was the perfect choice for an independent capital from where the king could bring the tribes of Israel and Judah under his central control.

## [The Ark of the Covenant](#)

God had told Moses on the mountain in Sinai that the Israelites must build an Ark, a covered chest of acacia wood overlaid with gold, to serve as a mobile container for the Ten Commandments. Carried by the Israelites throughout their wanderings in the desert and over the river Jordan into the Promised Land, the Ark was the most sacred embodiment of their beliefs and represented the



presence of God. When at rest, the Ark was housed in an elaborate tent, the Tabernacle, which served as a gathering place for worship. Now that David had conquered Jerusalem, he thought that the Ark of the Covenant should be brought into the city and given a permanent home.

Not only would Jerusalem be the centre of David's political authority; he would also make it the centre of his people's religious life. And so dressed in the linen loincloth of a priest and 'leaping and dancing before the Lord' (2 *Samuel* 6:14), David led the Ark of the Covenant to the Gihon Spring just outside the walls of Jerusalem where it was placed within a tent-like shrine and received the allegiance of all the tribes.

But David's proposal that the Ark should have a permanent home within the walls met with an unexpected rejection when the prophet Nathan announced that God had not needed a temple when the tribes were wandering in the desert and he did not want one now. Instead of David building a house to God, continued Nathan, God would establish a house of David, that is a dynasty, from which the Messiah would come. In any case God's refusal was only temporary; David was not a suitable person to build the Temple because he was a warrior king with blood on his hands, but he was permitted to choose the Temple site, to collect the materials and to draw up the plans, while the honour of building the Temple would go to Solomon, his son.

## The Threshing Floor of Zion

Just north of David's city, which stood on the Ophel hill, there was a yet higher summit named Zion where a Jebusite called Araunah had his estate (*2 Samuel 24:15–25*; *1 Chronicles 21:15–28*). When a plague struck David's kingdom, killing seventy thousand people in three days, an angel appeared to him; it was standing on the threshing floor of Araunah at the summit of the mount. There, decided David, he must build an altar and sacrifice to God to avert the plague. Araunah, who may have been Jerusalem's last Jebusite king, offered to give up the threshing floor for nothing, but David insisted on making payment. And when Araunah wanted to give the oxen for the first burnt sacrifice, David paid for them as well. It is likely that David recognised the sacredness of the site, for as well as separating the chaff from the wheat, the Jebusites used their threshing floors for prophetic divination and for the fertility cult of their storm god Baal. But by paying Araunah for his land and oxen, David was ensuring that the sacrifice would be made without obligation to anyone but Yahweh, his god.

From the moment of David's sacrifice the future site of the Temple was marked out. Scholars debate the exact plan and position of the Temple, but Orthodox Jews place the holy of holies, the innermost sanctum of the Temple, on that great rock which can still be seen today behind the

grille in the Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount, the spot where Muslims say Mohammed ascended on his Night Journey to Paradise, and where once the Jebusites had likely made sacrifices to their own gods. As if to bind the place more closely to Jewish tradition, it was also identified in something of a biblical afterthought as the Mount Moriah where Abraham was commanded to sacrifice his son Isaac (*2 Chronicles 3:1*). But for the time being the Ark of the Covenant remained where David had left it when he brought it to the city, just outside the walls, down by the Gihon Spring.

## [The Empire of David and Solomon](#)

While David was bringing the Ark into Jerusalem and acquiring the future site of the Temple atop Mount Zion, he was also creating a small empire. Already the combined kingdoms of Judah and Israel were greater in extent than the state of Israel today, for they covered both banks of the river Jordan and extended northwards well beyond the Golan Heights. At about the time that he conquered Jerusalem, David defeated the Philistines who lived on the coast in the region round Gaza and became his vassals. In his later years he subdued the kingdoms of Edom and Moab in the east, while in the north he brought Damascus under his control, so that what is today western Jordan, southern Lebanon and central Syria were all part of David's

empire.

The main threat to David's empire came from within. As David lay dying, his son Adonijah, backed by disgruntled senior military and religious figures from Hebron who wanted to assert Judah's dominance within the united kingdom, had himself crowned just outside Jerusalem. But in one of his last acts, David gave his support to a faction led by Bathsheba, his Jebusite wife, and by Nathan the prophet and Zadok the high priest. They led Solomon, David's son by Bathsheba, down to the Gihon Spring where in the potent presence of the Ark of the Covenant he was crowned king, and Adonijah's attempted usurpation immediately collapsed.

During Solomon's reign the empire of the Israelites reached its apogee of power and wealth. He continued David's centralising policy of weakening the old tribal ties and further assimilating the Canaanite population. He equipped his powerful army with a corps of chariots and cavalry that operated out of chariot cities in the realm, and he established a fleet at Ezion-geber at the head of the Gulf of Aqaba which ventured throughout the Red Sea. He traded horses with Egypt and Cilicia, obtained timber from Lebanon, and his ships sailed in search of spices, metals and precious stones as far as Yemen, home of the Queen of Sheba, who visited Jerusalem and lavished gifts upon the city and the King. And so eager were the Egyptians to seal an alliance with Solomon that he was granted the rare favour of marriage to the pharaoh's daughter (I Kings 9:16).

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## ***Solomon: Wise Man, Mystic and Magician***

When Solomon, whose name means peace, was raised to the throne of Israel and Judah, he was asked by God what he desired, and Solomon answered, 'Give thy servant an understanding heart to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and bad'. God was pleased that Solomon had asked for understanding and not for riches nor for a long life, and he answered him saying, 'Lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart; so that there was none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee. And I have also given thee that which thou has not asked, both riches and honour: so that there shall not be any among the kings like unto thee all thy days' (*1 Kings 3:5–14*). Indeed, according to the Bible, Solomon's reign was marked by prosperity and prestige, and his wisdom was said to excel even all the wisdom of Egypt (*1 Kings 4:30*), and he has come down to us as the wise man par excellence.

In Islam Solomon is also the paragon of wisdom; he is the author of the saying that 'the beginning of wisdom is the fear of God', and he is also accounted wise for his knowledge of the unseen. As Suleiman and as a

Muslim he is portrayed in the Koran as being in communion with the natural world and speaks 'the language of the birds' (*Koran 27:17*). God has also given him dominion over the spirit world: 'We subjected the wind to him, so that it blew softly at his bidding wherever he directed it; and the devils, too, among whom were builders and divers and others bound with chains' (*Koran 38:35–36*). Among those builders were the *jinn*, or spirits, whom Solomon commanded to build the Temple for him.

Solomon is also the epitome of the mystical love of women as in the *Songs of Solomon* in the Old Testament. In Islam this mystical love is expressed in the story of Belkis, the Queen of Sheba, who was converted from paganism by Solomon. He taught her the difference between illusion and the One Reality as expressed in the *shahadah*, 'there is no God but God', and thus became his consort. The Queen of Sheba was the expression of cosmic infinitude complementing Solomon who was the expression of wisdom or self.

In both Jewish and the Islamic traditions, Solomon is associated with stories of the marvellous. He became the subject of rabbinic and kabbalistic lore in which he

is portrayed as a fabulous figure, a master magician possessing occult powers. In one kabbalistic legend Solomon orders a demon to convey Hiram, the King of Tyre, down to the seven compartments of hell so that on his return he can reveal to Solomon all he has seen in the underworld. Solomon also appears in *The Thousand and One Nights*, where in the *Tale of the Fisherman and the Jinn* he has used his seal-ring to imprison an evil spirit in a jar for 1800 years.

The Seal of Solomon, the device adorning his seal-ring, is said to have come down to Solomon from heaven. The design consisted of two interlaced or intersecting triangles, one pointing up, the other down, and these were placed within two concentric circles between which was engraved the words 'the most greatest name of God'. In alchemy the upward-and downward-pointing triangles represent fire and water, and they symbolise the combination of opposites and hence transmutation. There are some who see a sexual symbolism in these triangles, and indeed in Egyptian hieroglyphs the V-shape does seem to be taken from the shape of the female pubis, while if the upward-pointing triangle is taken to be a phallus, then the fusion of the two can symbolise harmony in the universe and between the sexes. Be that as it may, the device has been a frequent motif used on coins in the

Islamic world and as a decoration. Also known as the Star of David, it is the six-pointed star on the flag of the modern state of Israel.

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## Solomon Builds the Temple

Solomon doubled the size of Jerusalem by extending the city northwards from the Ophel hill to include Mount Zion where he embarked on an ambitious construction programme on Araunah's old estate. He built a vast palace complex (*1 Kings 7–8*) which included a massive palace for himself complete with a huge harem for the 700 princesses and 300 concubines who were the gifts of foreign rulers, and he built a grand palace for his Egyptian wife. He also built a cedar-panelled armoury called the House of the Forest of Lebanon, a treasury, a judgement hall containing his magnificent ivory throne, and on the ancient threshing floor he built the Temple.

Building the Temple was a fantastic undertaking, according to the Bible (*1 Kings 5–8*). It tells of Solomon raising a levy of 30,000 Israelites who were divided into groups of 10,000, each group working in shifts, cutting wood in Lebanon for a month then working for two months in Jerusalem. Additionally 80,000 men were sent into the mountains to quarry stone for the foundations of the Temple and another 70,000 porters carried it down to Jerusalem,



with 3300 supervisors overseeing operations. There is no need to take these numbers literally; they are meant to express the magnificence of Solomon and his works.

Construction of the Temple began in the fourth year of Solomon's reign and took seven years and five months in all, that is from the spring of about 958 BC to the autumn of about 951 BC before the rainy season set in. We are told in the *Book of Kings* that in plan the Temple was a rectangle oriented east and west and measuring 60 cubits in length, 20 cubits in width, and 30 cubits in height (*2 Chronicles 3:4* says it was 120 cubits high, but that is an impossible figure probably indicating a corrupt text). A cubit is the length of a man's arm from the elbow to the tip of the middle finger, which is generally taken to be about half a yard or half a metre, so the Temple of Solomon was about 30 yards long, 10 yards wide and 15 yards high.

The purpose of temples in the ancient world was to provide a dwelling place for the god, and so just like all other temples in the East the architectural plan of Solomon's Temple was based on that of an ordinary house. The Temple was divided into three chambers which became more private, more intimate, more holy the farther inwards one progressed. The outermost chamber was the *ulam* or the porch, an entrance hall rather like the porch or narthex of a church. Beyond this was the *hekal* where cult objects were kept, including a gold altar, ten candelabra, various lamps, goblets, cups, knives, basins and braziers. The *hekal* led directly into the *debir*, a windowless chamber

20 cubits long, wide and high, that is a perfect cube. This was the Holy of Holies, closed by folding doors, where Yahweh, who had declared that he would 'dwell in the thick darkness' (*1 Kings 8:12*) was symbolised by the Ark of the Covenant. Flanked by two huge statues of golden cherubim, the Ark resided at this spot untouched by human hands for over three hundred years, as contact with such a powerfully sacred object without taking the proper precautions caused immediate death (*1 Chronicles 13:10*).

Yet for such a celebrated building the Temple was hardly of any size at all, being only about a third as long and half as wide as the Parthenon built atop the Acropolis in Athens five hundred years later. Indeed Solomon's own palace, at 100 cubits long, 50 cubits wide and 30 cubits high, was four times the size of the Temple and took a good deal longer to build. But then what was most impressive about the Temple, apart from its sanctity, were its costly and finely worked materials and decorations, and for these Solomon relied on his friend and ally King Hiram of Tyre.

### [King Hiram of Tyre](#)

Tyre on the Mediterranean coast of Lebanon was already a very ancient place, its origins going back to the early centuries of the third millennium BC. From about 1500 BC it came into the sphere of influence of New Kingdom Egypt

with which it carried on a lucrative trade. But its moment of greatest prosperity and power coincided with the rule of King Hiram I, a contemporary of Kings David and Solomon.

By Hiram's time, at the beginning of the first millennium, the powerful centralised authority of the New Kingdom had broken down, and Egypt was divided between rule by the high priests of Amun in the south of the country at Thebes and by the pharaohs of the Twenty-First Dynasty in the north at Tanis in the Delta. Asserting Tyre's economic independence against a weakened Egypt, Hiram developed Tyre's harbours, created a formidable merchant marine, established commercial colonies in Sicily and North Africa, and in cooperation with Solomon sent a combined trading fleet to Arabia and East Africa. But the lifeblood of Tanis was also maritime trade, and though Egypt had long ago lost its influence to Lebanon, the pharaoh Siamun (c978–c959) was at least able to engage in limited military actions against his commercial rivals the Canaanites and to consolidate his position in the region by marrying off one of his daughters to Hiram's friend King Solomon at Jerusalem.

Though King David had been prevented from building the Temple himself, he had amassed a great amount of treasure to pay for its construction, he had collected materials, and he had given Solomon detailed plans to follow (*1 Chronicles* 22:2–5, 28:11–19). What is more, when building his own palace, David had received help from Hiram, and now Solomon turned to Hiram too (*1 Kings*

5; 9:11; 10:11; 2 Chronicles 2). The highlands of Solomon's kingdom were barely forested, but the slopes of the mountains of Lebanon were covered with pine, juniper and cedar, all tall trees valuable in construction. Similarly Egypt was a treeless country, and it was the forests of Lebanon that had made that country so attractive to the Egyptians for the last two thousand years. Indeed the Pyramids of Giza were built with the aid of cedar beams from Lebanon, and the pharaoh Cheops' magnificent solar boats buried at the base of his Great Pyramid were also made of Lebanese timber. Now Hiram provided Solomon with the cedar for his Temple, and he also provided the craftsmen who panelled the interior of the Temple with cedar, lined the Holy of Holies with pure gold, and then overlaid the entire exterior with more gold.

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### ***Mystery of the Lost Art***

During the nearly four centuries following the construction of the First Temple, the Ark remained untouched in the Holy of Holies. Yet these were often times of trouble and crisis, when the kings at Jerusalem were obliged to reach into their storehouse of treasures in order to meet the exactions of foreign conquerors—the pharaoh Sheshonk I (Shishak in the Bible) who ruled from Tanis in the Egyptian Delta (1

*Kings 14:26*); Ben-hadad, King of Damascus (*1 Kings 15:18*); and Tiglathpileser the Assyrian (*2 Kings 16:8*). Nevertheless, and though covered in valuable gold, the Ark survived these depredations and is mentioned in the Bible (*2 Chronicles 35:3*) on the occasion of the reform of Yahweh worship during the reign of Josiah (640–609 BC). That is its last appearance; there is no mention of the Ark at the sack of the Temple by the Babylonians in 586 BC (*2 Kings 25:13–15*), though the view generally taken by historians is that the Ark was probably destroyed at this time.

But according to *2 Maccabees 2:4–8*, which is consigned to the Apocrypha by the Hebrew and Protestant Bibles though included in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Bibles, the Ark was saved by the prophet Jeremiah on a signal from God. Jeremiah went to the top of Mount Nebo, from which Moses glimpsed the Promised Land, and placed the Ark, the Tabernacle and an incense altar within a dwelling–cave, then blocked up the entrance, refusing to mark the spot. ‘The place shall remain unknown until God finally gathers his people together and shows mercy to them. Then the Lord will bring these things to light again, and the glory of the Lord will appear with the cloud, as it was seen both in the time of Moses and when Solomon prayed that the shrine might be worthily

consecrated.' If something like this did happen, it is not impossible that the Ark still survives, for recent archaeological discoveries in the Judaeian desert have provided remarkable evidence of how perishable materials thousands of years old may be preserved in certain conditions.

The belief that the Ark was hidden before the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians gains support from other sources. Among these is the *Mishnah*, ancient oral traditions set down in writing by rabbis around 200 BC, which mentions the Ark and other items from the First Temple being hidden by Jeremiah but not stating where. This is given support and amplification by the discovery in 1952 of the Copper Scroll among the Dead Sea scrolls at Qumran. Etched on the Copper Scroll is what is thought to be an inventory of treasures from the First Temple which are described as having been hidden in a desolate valley, under a hill on its east side, forty staves deep.

This 'desolate valley' has been identified by some as the Valley of the Kings in Egypt, a theory that allows the identification of the Ark of the Covenant and other objects from the Temple with treasures discovered in the tomb of Tutankhamun. (Another fanciful version of

this Egyptian theme was presented in the hugely popular 1981 film *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, the first of the Indiana Jones series, directed by Steven Spielberg.) But for those still looking, the most persistent belief is that the Ark of the Covenant lies somewhere within the Temple Mount.

According to one rabbinic legend Solomon foresaw the destruction of his Temple by the Babylonians and so had an underground chamber built below the Temple in which the Ark was eventually hidden. This is supported by some rabbis today who believe on the basis of *midrash*, an esoteric interpretation of biblical texts, that the Ark was hidden directly below its original position in the Holy of Holies. Indeed the chief rabbi of the Ashkenazi community in Israel objected to excavations at the Mount in the late 1960s because he feared that the archaeologists might actually uncover the Ark—with dangerous results, because neither they nor anyone else would be able to handle it with safety as only the long-dead priests of the vanished Temple possessed the ritual purity to touch the Ark and not defile it nor be destroyed by the contact.

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The most remarkable of all the work done at Solomon's Temple was the casting of the enormous basin known as the Sea of Bronze and both of the huge bronze pillars known as Jachin and Boaz. This large-scale casting was difficult and technologically advanced, and the man sent by King Hiram to undertake the work is singled out in the Bible by name. A man 'filled with wisdom and understanding', he too was called Hiram, and he is described as 'a widow's son' (*1 Kings 7:13–14*).

The Sea of Bronze, an ablutions basin used by the priests, rested on twelve bronze oxen and stood near the southeast corner of the Temple. At 10 cubits in diameter and 5 cubits high, it held 10,000 gallons of water, sufficient for over 2000 baths. The oxen were in groups of three and faced the cardinal points; possibly they suggested fertility, as they did in the Canaanite and Egyptian worlds, and the basin was meant to suggest the sacred lakes of Egyptian temples.

The two hollow bronze pillars, each 18 cubits (nine yards) high, were placed on either side of the entrance porch. The pillars were free-standing and supported nothing, but they were surmounted with capitals five cubits high and of elaborate design, opening out into lotus or lily forms adorned with garlands of pomegranates. Hiram the widow's son gave them each a name, calling the one on the south side of the porch Jachin, meaning 'He shall establish', and the one on the north side Boaz, 'In it is strength'. Most likely the names were meant to be read



together, as something like 'He (Yahweh) shall establish (the Temple) in its strength', or perhaps the message was that both God and David's dynasty would endure, 'Yahweh will establish his throne forever. Let the king rejoice in the strength of Yahweh'. The pillars themselves may have served as incense burners or torch holders; or they may have been symbolic, pointing godwards like the Egyptian obelisks raised to the sun god, or representing the tree of life.

These gigantic bronze objects were cast in the Jordan river valley where there was suitable earth to make the moulds, water in abundance and wind to operate the draught of the furnaces. Then with great difficulty they had to be transported to Jerusalem. These things we know about Hiram the widow's son, but with the completion of the Temple the Bible lets him quietly leave the scene and tells us nothing more—though the widow's son and Jachin and Boaz would capture imaginations and appear in legends for thousands of years to come.

## [A House for the Name of God](#)

When the Temple was finished it was dedicated by Solomon, who said he had 'built the house for the name of the Lord God' (2 Chronicles 6:10). The Temple did not contain God, for God was without bodily form; he was everywhere and could not be contained. For the same

reason the God of the Jews could have no image, and so the Temple possessed no image of God. This was unheard of in the ancient world, where every shrine contained an image to be worshipped. But at Jerusalem the only thing residing in the Temple was the name of God.

At first the presence of God was symbolised by the Ark, which was kept in the Temple's innermost and holiest recess, but by the time the Assyrians destroyed the First Temple in 586 BC the Ark had disappeared, therefore the Second Temple, begun in 520 BC and later vastly enlarged by Herod, was entirely empty. Instead it had become the house of a completely spiritualised deity, a God beyond all form and description, a place where God's presence was perceived and acknowledged only through the utterance of his name.

## [The End of the Temple](#)

The Second Temple was destroyed during the First Jewish Revolt against the Romans, which broke out in AD 66. When Titus, the Roman emperor, finally put down the insurrection in AD 70, the Temple was accidentally destroyed by fire, and the prayers and sacrifices practised there came to an end.

During the Second Jewish Revolt the rebels occupied Jerusalem in AD 132 and intended to rebuild the Temple, even striking coins bearing its image. But the Romans

returned in force and crushed the revolt completely. Jerusalem became a pagan city, Colonia Aelia Capitolina. All traces of the Temple were obliterated in AD 135 and statues of Hadrian the conqueror and of Jupiter were erected on the site. This was the final end of Yahweh's Temple. Thereafter Jews were forbidden by official Roman decree to enter Jerusalem, though from time to time tacit permission was given for them to enter the precincts of the former Temple. Nothing remained, only the desolate rock, and here the Jews poured libations of oil, offered their prayers, and tore their clothes in lamentation.