

# A Temple's Golden Anniversary

By Peter J. Schertz and Steven Fine

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As the 50th anniversary approaches of the by-now canonical model of Herod's Jerusalem Temple, it is time both to honor its creator, the great Israeli historian and archaeologist Michael Avi-Yonah, and to call attention to some of its uncertainties.

Avi-Yonah completed the model in 1966 after devoting four years to its creation<sup>1</sup>. The Temple model is part of a larger act of scholarly recreation and imagination, which was to construct a model of the entire city of Jerusalem as it may have existed shortly before the Romans destroyed it in the summer of 70 C.E., in the First Jewish Revolt (66–74 C.E.). Commissioned by Hans Kroch for the then Holyland Hotel in Jerusalem, the project was no doubt influenced by the model of imperial Rome now in the Museum of Roman Civilization in Rome. Interestingly, Avi-Yonah created his model in the very years that Robert Moses created a model of New York City, now in the Queens Museum.



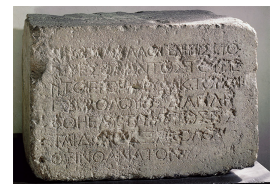
Avi-Yonah actually had relatively few visual clues to go on. He pieced together scattered references to the Temple in the writings of the Jewish/Roman historian Flavius Josephus (who had served in Herod's Temple as a priest and had witnessed its destruction) as well as by memories preserved in the New Testament, Roman sources and in later rabbinic literature, especially the Mishnah (redacted c. 200 C.E.). Avi-Yonah combined the literary testimonia with the sparse archaeological remains of the Temple and his deep knowledge of both Herodian architecture at such sites as the Temple Mount<sup>2</sup> in Jerusalem, the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron, Masada, Herodium, Caesarea Maritima and Sebastia and of Roman architecture and architectural writings from the age of Herod and his patron Augustus.<sup>2</sup> He also incorporated his understanding of depictions of the Temple in Jewish sources, most notably on coins issued during the Second Jewish Revolt (132–135 C.E., known as the Bar Kokhba Revolt) and in the wall paintings of the Dura Europos synagogue, completed in the years prior to 256 C.E. Finally, Avi-Yonah looked to the architecture of other contemporaneous temples in the Near East. The resulting model was so successful that it has become the standard image of the Second Temple for Jews and Christians alike.



The Temple compound was divided into three sections—following the precedent of the Biblical Tabernacle and Solomon's Temple (with definite Near Eastern parallels). These sections were defined largely by their degree of exclusivity, which moves from a broad plaza open to Jews and gentiles alike to the inner sanctum, which only the High Priest could enter on the holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur.

The model includes an enormous rectangular plaza or *temenos* surrounded by covered porticoes on all four sides. Within the plaza was a smaller section marked off by a balustrade (called the *soreg* in rabbinic sources) with inscriptions in both Greek and Latin warning gentiles not to enter. Archaeological discoveries around the Temple Mount have revealed examples of these inscriptions, which resemble the injunctions associated with a number of Greek and Roman sanctuaries. Within this second section stood the walled Temple complex consisting of a forecourt and additional buildings. The forecourt, called the Court of Women by the rabbis, was open to both Jewish men and women and served as the primary entrance for the priests to the Court of the Israelites, which only Jewish males could enter. This open air plaza included a large altar for sacrifices and a smaller area that only priests could enter. The focal point and heart of these increasingly exclusive and sacred spaces was the "holy of holies" within the Temple (*naos*) itself, which only the high priest could enter.

After the Roman destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., Josephus came to reside in Rome, associated with the court of the Flavian emperors. His most significant writings there were *The Jewish War* completed around 75 C.E. and *The Antiquities of the Jews* completed around 90 C.E. Each work includes lengthy, discursive descriptions of the architecture of the Temple compound. Neither description, however, allows for a wholly accurate architectural reconstruction, and there are a number of inconsistencies between Josephus's two accounts of the Temple. The fact is Josephus was no architect and certainly no Vitruvius, the author of the classic handbook on Roman architecture written in the late first century B.C.E. Rather, Josephus's descriptions were a kind of paper memorial to the shrine that was lost, a literary attempt to preserve the Temple in words.



Based on these varied sources, Avi-Yonah's model is both highly fanciful and also highly probable. Take, for instance, the nine gates to the Temple. Josephus gives their measurements in cubits; one cubit is probably about 1.5 feet. According to Josephus, each gate had two doors that were 49 feet high and 24.5 feet wide. The doors were set in towered

gatehouses, 49 feet wide and deep and rising up 65.5 feet (*Jewish War* 5.203). To get some idea of the comparative size of these Temple gates, using Josephus's measurements, they were slightly larger than both the gates of the Senate House in the Roman Forum (dedicated in 28 B.C.E., which still survive as the doors of the Basilica of St. John Lateran in Rome) and the doors of the Pantheon in Rome (dedicated 118–125 C.E.). In short, though Josephus is sometimes thought to exaggerate, the gates he describes are thoroughly in keeping with the scale of other structures of the period.

According to Josephus, eight of the nine Temple gates were overlaid with gold and silver, but the most costly gate was made of Corinthian bronze. It is not certain which gate was Corinthian bronze, but Avi-Yonah associated it with the gate between the Court of the Women and the Court of the Israelites. Josephus states that this gate was more costly than all the others, and other ancient writers, such as Cicero and Pliny the Elder, also refer to the value attached to Corinthian bronze. The exact nature of this material remains theoretical, since no examples of it have been identified, though scholars believe it was an alloy of copper with gold. According to Dan Levene and Beno Rothenberg, "The purpose of alloying with precious metals was to produce extraordinary silvery or golden surface colorings for prestigious cast objects."<sup>3</sup>



More controversial is the form of the Temple façade. Josephus describes it as being 100 cubits square but makes no mention of the form of the roof. Typical Greek and Roman temples had gabled roofs, like the roof of the Parthenon in Athens. Avi-Yonah chose to show the Temple with a flat roof supported by four columns. The flat roof stands in contrast to the typical Greek and Roman temples. The flat roof, however, is typical of Near Eastern temples, and one model for Avi-Yonah was the recently destroyed temple of Bel in Palmyra, built in the same period as Herod's Temple and in a major city on the periphery of the Roman world. Avi-Yonah also based his reconstruction on the Temple façade depicted on Jewish coins issued during the Bar Kokhba revolt, some 60 years after the destruction of the Temple. These coins show a façade with four columns and a flat roof. Avi-Yonah also



drew upon the depiction of a similar flat-roofed structure painted above the Torah shrine on a fresco at Dura Europos. While a shrine adhering to Near Eastern conventions may appear incongruous in a Greco-Roman *temenos*, it may well reflect Herod's balancing act in stone as a monarch who was heavily dependent on the imperial government of Augustus and, either by inclination or necessity, was sensitive to the closely held traditions of his Jewish subjects. Avi-Yonah's model of the Temple façade is thus a cautious attempt to imagine Judaism's holiest site in keeping with the conventions of its Near Eastern milieu but still a building of its age, an extraordinary Roman building in every way.

How much gold decorated the Temple is also a matter of debate. Josephus describes the Temple façade as covered with "massive plates of gold" and writes that a large golden vine hung with golden fruit above the large door leading to the inner sanctum. The exact areas covered with gold are unclear, and the question is further obscured by Josephus's observation that the Temple appeared from a distance as a snow-topped mountain (*Jewish War* 5.222–223). Avi-Yonah took a rather conservative stance toward gold, using it for external trim, but not as a facing for the Temple, nor did he include the golden vine in his reconstruction.



In contrast to Avi-Yonah, Leen Ritmeyer, the former architect of the archaeological excavation below the Temple Mount, has taken a rather maximalist approach to the Temple gold. His model (now at the Yeshiva University Museum in New York) covers the entire façade with sheets of gold. While the use of gold for architectural decoration was widespread in Rome, no imperial building is said to have been decorated this lavishly in Herod's time.



From his two visits to Rome, Herod would have been familiar with the gilded roof tiles of the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, Rome's principal cult site located on the Capitoline Hill. Literary sources also suggest that the homes of the wealthy were sometimes covered with gold, most famously the gilded walls and vaults of the Domus Aurea, Nero's "Golden House." Evidence of the partially gilded ceiling of this structure has recently been discovered.



Avi-Yonah, building an architectural model, did not address other key elements of Josephus's description of the Temple, most notably the interior decoration of the *naos*, the shrine. According to Josephus, the interior of the shrine was hidden from view by an exquisite purple curtain. This hall contained the menorah and the table of showbread and the altar of incense. Josephus describes these as the "three most wonderful works of art, universally renowned" (*Jewish War* 5.216). Images of both the showbread table and the menorah appear as early as a lepta coin minted by the last Hasmonean king, Mattathias Antigonus, in the course of his unsuccessful struggle against Herod (37

B.C.E.). In two other significant depictions—one on a piece of stone plaster discovered in Jerusalem<sup>a</sup> and the other on a recently discovered ashlar (a fine cut masonry piece) from Migdal on the Sea of Galilee<sup>b</sup>—the menorah is portrayed. It also appears on the Arch of Titus in Rome, where in 2012 we discovered that it was colored a shade of yellow ochre. While the form of the menorah and the table of the showbread may be regarded as unique to the Jerusalem Temple, lampstands and tables were common furnishings in all ancient temples. Whereas sculptures of deities and cult objects were brought to Rome as spoils of war in the case of Roman victories elsewhere, in the case of Titus's victory against Jerusalem, the Romans displayed in their victory parade (and then on the Arch of Titus) only the holy vessels from the Temple which for the Romans represented not only the Temple, but also the Jews and their God. Even the curtain can be paralleled by similar objects in the temples of Ephesian Artemis and Olympian Zeus (Pausanias 5.12.2).



Avi-Yonah's model of the Herodian Temple is but one of hundreds of imaginings in art and literature of a structure that was utterly destroyed 2,000 years ago. Through the depth of his scholarship and grandeur of his conception, Avi-Yonah created a thought-provoking model of Second Temple Jerusalem that educates even as it inspires. For 40 years, it stood on the grounds of the Holyland Hotel. In 2006 the entire model of ancient Jerusalem was moved to the Israel Museum and beautifully restored. There it continues to delight visitors, inspiring both Jews and Christians alike as they imagine the Jerusalem of Herod, Hillel, Jesus—and Josephus.



#### Footnotes:

- a. See Strata, "[Magnificent Mosaic Menorah](#)," **BAR** 42:01.
- b. Joey Corbett, "[New Synagogue Excavations in Israel and Beyond](#)," **BAR** 37:04.

#### Endnotes:

1. See Michael Avi-Yonah, *Pictorial Guide to the Model of Ancient Jerusalem at the Time of the Second Temple in the Grounds of the Holyland Hotel, Jerusalem Israel*, rev. ed. Yoram Tsafrir (Herzlia, Israel: Palphot, 1993); Michael Avi-Yonah, "The Facade of Herod's Temple: An Attempted Reconstruction," in J. Neusner, ed., *Religions in Antiquity: Essays in Memory of Erwin Ramsdell Goodenough* (Leiden: Brill, 1968), pp. 326–335; David Amit, *Model of Jerusalem in the Second Temple Period* (Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 2009). On the historiographic context of this model: A.J. Wharton, *Selling Jerusalem: Relics, Replicas, Theme Parks* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 220–223; Maya Balakirsky Katz, "Avi-Yonah's Model of Second Temple Jerusalem and the Development of Israeli Visual Culture," in Steven Fine, ed., *The Temple from Moses to the Messiah* (Boston: Brill, 2011), pp. 349–364; Yoram Tsafrir, "Designing the Model of Jerusalem at the Holyland Hotel: Hans Zvi Kroch, Michael Avi-Yonah and an Unpublished Guidebook," *Cathedra* 140 (2011), pp. 47–86, Hebrew. Unfortunately, Avi-Yonah did not write a full narrative describing his process.
2. For a summary statement, see Hillel Geva and Nahman Avigad, "Jerusalem: Second Temple Period," in E. Stern, ed., *New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Carta, 1993, 2008), pp. 717–757 and the various reports in vol. 5, pp. 1,806–1,826. More recently, see Ehud Netzer, *The Architecture of Herod, the Great Builder* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006); Silvia Rozenberg and David Mevorah, *Herod the Great: The King's Final Journey* (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 2013); Orit Peleg-Barkat, *The Herodian Architectural Decoration in Light of the Finds from the Temple Mount Excavations*, Ph.D. Dissertation (Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2007), Hebrew.
3. Dan Levene and Beno Rothenberg, *A Metallurgical Gemara: Metals in the Jewish Sources* (London: University College, 2007), p. 70.



Steven Fine

*THE VERY MODEL OF A MODERN ANCIENT TEMPLE. Drawing on the Bible, Josephus, the Mishnah, Roman literature, archaeological discoveries and an extensive knowledge of Herodian architecture, Michael Avi-Yonah designed this Second Temple model to be as accurate as possible. Since its completion in 1966, it has become canonical although some elements are debated.*



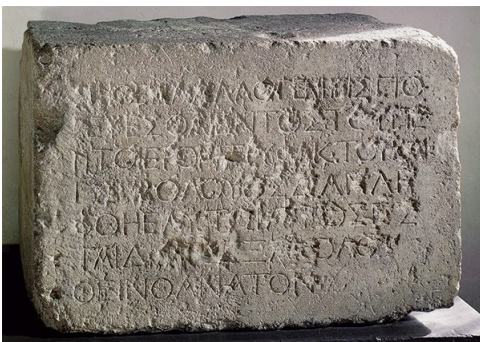
Steven Fine

*TURNING 50. Avi-Yonah's Temple model was originally commissioned by Hans Kroch for the Holyland Hotel in Jerusalem, but was moved to the Israel Museum in 2006. It sits within a model of Second Temple Jerusalem and is built to a 1:50 scale.*



Steven Fine

*MY WHAT BIG DOORS YOU HAVE.* Avi-Yonah designed his model doors based on the description in Josephus who stated that each door was 49 feet high and 24.5 feet wide. Josephus is known for exaggerating at times, and that is perhaps the case with his description of the doors of the Second Temple. Yet doors of this extreme size are not unknown in the ancient world, as can be seen here by the doors of the Senate House in the Roman Forum—now in the Basilica of St. John Lateran in Rome.



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*STAY OUT!* The Temple included a large plaza with a small section walled off with what the rabbis later call *æoreg* (balustrade). On the *soreg* were inscriptions in Greek and Latin warning gentiles not to enter. This one, in Greek, is one of two that has survived.



"Pantheon (Rome) entrance" by Wknight94 is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0

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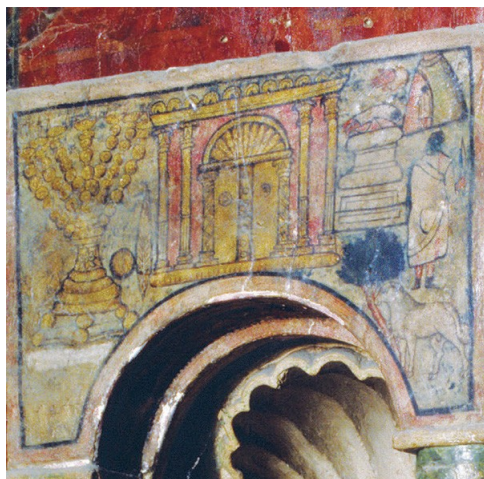
"Temple of Bel, Palmyra, Syria" by James Gordon is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0

*A FLAT ROOF.* Avi-Yonah did not reconstruct his Temple model with a typical Greek or Roman gabled roof. Instead, he used a flat roof typical in Near Eastern temples, like the one at the Temple of Bel in Palmyra (shown here).



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*Avi-Yonah did not reconstruct his Temple model with a typical Greek or Roman gabled roof. Instead, he used a flat roof typical in Near Eastern temples. A coin from the Bar Kokhba revolt depicts the Temple with a flat roof.*



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*Avi-Yonah did not reconstruct his Temple model with a typical Greek or Roman gabled roof. Instead, he used a flat roof typical in Near Eastern temples. A wall painting on the Torah shrine in the Dura Europos synagogue depicts the Temple with a flat roof.*



Steven Fine

*HOW MUCH GOLD? Avi-Yonah's model (shown here) depicts highlights of gold. This is in contrast to Josephus who claimed that the façade was covered in gold with a large golden vine with fruit that hung above the door. This decision was probably made because no imperial building was known to be so extravagantly decorated during the time of Herod.*



Leen Ritmeyer

*In contrast to Avi-Yonah's model, archaeological architect Leen Ritmeyer has created an alternative model for the Yeshiva University Museum that does follow Josephus's description of the Temple that is sheathed in gold.*



Steven Fine

*MISSING MENORAH. Because Avi-Yonah was building an architectural model, objects, like the menorah that stood in the naos are not depicted. The menorah became an important Jewish symbol that was used throughout the ancient world as a cultural identifier, however. It is shown here as depicted on the Arch of Titus in Rome, to commemorate the Roman victory of the destruction of the Jewish Temple.*

**Magazine:** Biblical Archaeology Review, January/February  
2016

**Volume:** 42

**Issue:** 1

**Source URL (modified on 2017-02-10 21:29):** <https://www.baslibrary.org/biblical-archaeology-review/42/1/8>