

Wednesday Night Lenten Simple Meals Program, FFPC Fenton, 3/13/19

Bethlehem and Jerusalem, Bringing Sheep to the Temple

Video at the beginning of area around Jerusalem and raising sheep
https://youtu.be/dslzobZDI_8 (3:01min)

Last week on Ash Wednesday, we started the season of Lent, the preparation time leading up to Easter in a few short weeks. We'll walk where Jesus walked by watching some videos and showing pictures of where Jesus' final week took him in and around the area of Jerusalem. Tonight we'll go to Bethlehem where the Passover sheep were raised. And we'll go up to the Temple in Jerusalem built by Herod, where the lambs were sacrificed.

Some of my favorite memories growing up are from summer backyard BBQ's. The amazing smell of grilling carne asada steak for tacos makes my mouth water even just thinking about it now. As the people would enter Jerusalem and come up the hill into the city, they would smell the roasting lamb over the fires at the Temple.



When you think of lamb, you and I might think of the tiny cuddly little lambs just hours after their born hopping and skipping through the green grass. The lambs that were brought up to the temple would have been one year old lambs that were born the previous spring. They had been raised through the winter and fattened up on the new green spring grass.



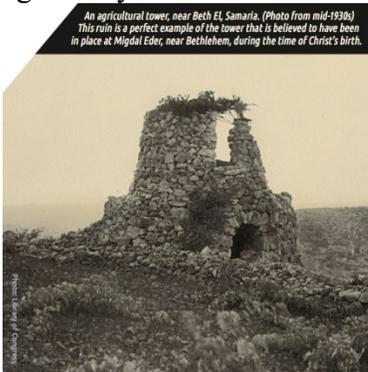
The shepherds of Bethlehem were in charge of raising sheep for the temple sacrifices. According to the laws of the time the sheep that were used for the offerings had to be a one-year-old male sheep that had been outside for 365 days (one-year). Since these sheep needed to remain outside the shepherds were also outside, not using the cave during the awful winter (rainy

season). You can see this in Luke 2: 8, “That night some shepherds were in the fields outside the village, guarding their flocks of sheep.” Once the sheep were of age the shepherds would bring them to the city of Jerusalem to be sacrificed for the Sabbath (Friday).



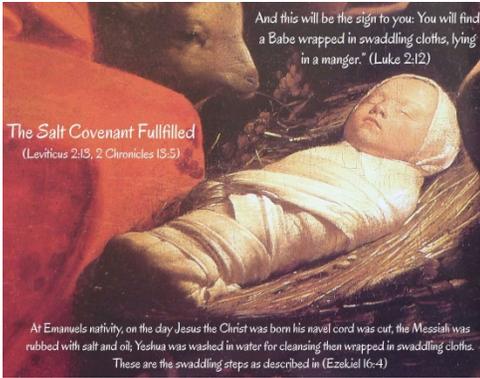
It was unusual for shepherds to tend large flocks near towns and villages. There was a reason for this. The odors of very large flocks fouled the air so badly that people could not breathe. So these large flocks were confined to areas far from the places where the general populace resided. However, the village of Bethlehem was an exception. For thirty days, one time a year, an enormous flock of one year old lambs were allowed to graze near Bethlehem, and that time of year was the thirty days prior to the feast of Passover.

The sizes of these flocks of lambs required a great host of shepherds that worked in shifts. Some watched the sheep while the others slept. Bethlehem, itself, was/is a very interesting place. In the time of Jesus it was a picturesque place. It sits on a high cliff composed of limestone, and for that reason Bethlehem can be seen for miles in all directions. The grazing fields where the Temple shepherds tended these flocks are in the valley south and east of this town beneath the limestone cliff. In the middle of this grazing area was a structure known as the Migdal Eder or the “Tower of the Flock.” This tower was used by the priests who oversaw the shepherds. By remaining in the Migdal Eder the priests were able to keep themselves from becoming ritually defiled.



*An agricultural tower, near Beth El, Samaria. (Photo from mid-1930s)
This ruin is a perfect example of the tower that is believed to have been
in place at Migdal Eder, near Bethlehem, during the time of Christ's birth.*

The shepherds that attended them were actually shepherd-priests. These men had been designated from the time they were very young to be the ones who would be assigned the task of "keeping watch" over the Temple's flocks. One of their tasks was to make certain that none of these lambs were blemished while being birthed. According to the Mishnah, these lambs were immediately wrapped in "swaddling cloths" after their births to protect them from injury, since baby lambs tend to thrash about and harm themselves in their first couple of hours of their lives. The shepherds who attended these lambs, being under special rabbinical care, were also required to keep their birthing caves ritually clean.



In a society fanatical about cleanliness, shepherds stood aside. They were never fully clean; it was impossible. They were constantly walking about in excrement and touching dead things, and both activities left them in a state of ritual impurity. Because of their defiled conditions, shepherds were not allowed to go to the Temple, to offer sacrifices, or to go to the synagogues, so any religious experience a shepherd might enjoy had to be between himself and God.



The sheep that grazed in that particular location belonged to the High Priest and his family. Every lamb had been declared by the priests to be unblemished and they were separated to be sacrificed in the Temple in Jerusalem or eaten as Passover lambs. It was important that the sheep that was to be sacrificed did not possess any blemishes (broken legs, or injuries) to fulfill God's commands and to be an acceptable sacrifice. One person from each family would offer the lamb on behalf of their whole family.



The altar was a cooking surface, a barbecue, so to speak, where the animal was "cooked." Burning up or "over-cooking" the sacrifices in the altar fire marked out the specialness of the food offerings. Sacrifice is not a do-it-yourself activity in Leviticus. Rather, priests are required to bring about the transfer and transformation of the offering. Not only are they expert in the proper procedures, but they also bear the risk of moving into God's presence. One way to think about ancient sacrifices is as "gifts" given to God. When they performed sacrifices, ancient

Israelites gave to God some of what they believed God had given them, expressing their close relationship with God and seeking to deepen that bond.

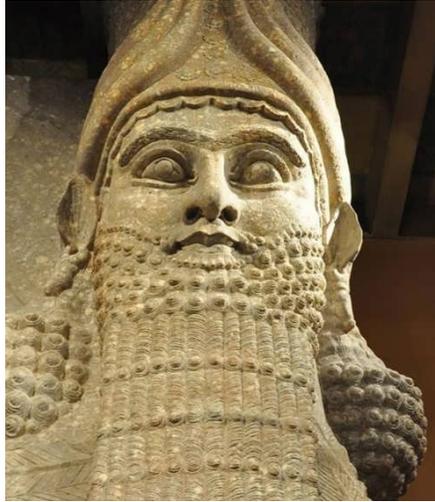


In the Hebrew Bible, sacrifice always involves *transformation*. One of the most common ways to *transform* something is to *destroy* it. Destruction removes the animal from the ordinary realm and transfers it to a transcendent one. Biblical texts tell us that God received the *smoke* of the burning sacrifice as a “pleasing odor” (Lev 1:13). As modern people, who do not do our own butchering of the beef, chicken or fish that we eat, we sometimes look down upon these ancient practices as barbaric. Like us, the Jewish people were very concerned about raising the animals in a humane way that would lead to a healthy animal. They were concerned about killing the animal in the quickest and least painful way possible, which most of us don’t consider or even think about. They were concerned about using every part of the animal, unlike our modern aversion to the less choice cuts of meat. And they were concerned with even the life blood and fat of the animal being treated in a special way. I wonder if they would think we were less civilized in our treatment of our food?



Solomon’s Temple 966BC-586BC

The 1st Temple was constructed in Solomon’s time. It was begun in 966BC (I Kings 6:1), and it was used for nearly 400 years until it was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar II, the longest reigning and most powerful monarch of the Babylonian Empire in 586BC (2 Kings 25:1-12). The 2nd Temple was constructed by Herod, who was something of a megalomaniac—bigger was



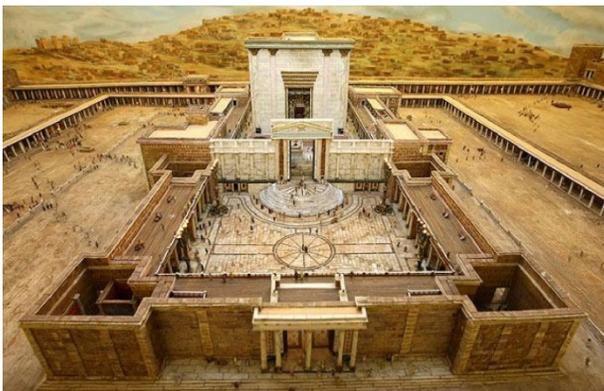
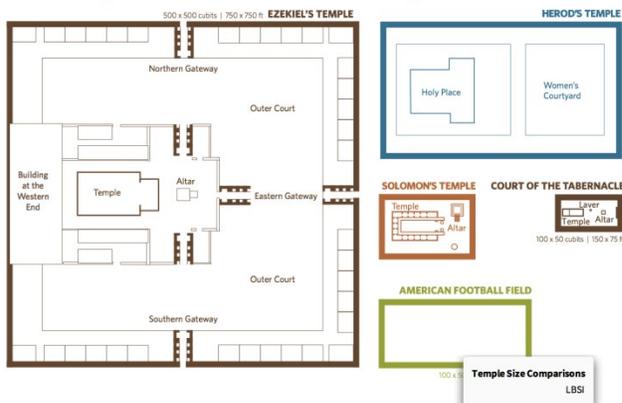
definitely better in his mind.

<https://wanderlord.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Babylonian-King-Nebuchadnezzar-II.jpg>

(Temple size comparisons, Logos Bible Software <https://www.catholicconvert.com/wp-content/uploads/Screen-Shot-2013-12-13-at-12.08.30-PM.png>)

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Temple Size Comparisons

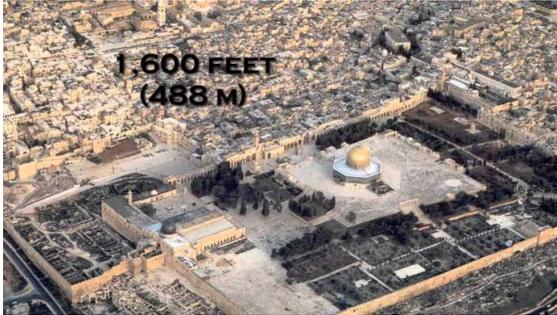


Herod's Temple 20BC-70AD

The 2nd Temple was destroyed in 70AD by the Romans, who demolished the temple by knocking down the retaining wall piece by piece. But the stones from the top tumbled down and formed a protective barrier that preserved the wall's lower portions. Currently only the Western wall remains visible, and this is where Orthodox Jews gather in devotion and prayer before the remnant of that wall—a ritual that perhaps first occurred in the 4thC AD and has been practiced

continually since the early 16th C, after the Ottoman conquest of Jerusalem. The Islamic Dome of the Rock and courtyards cover most of the site.

(<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/what-is-beneath-the-temple-mount-920764/>)

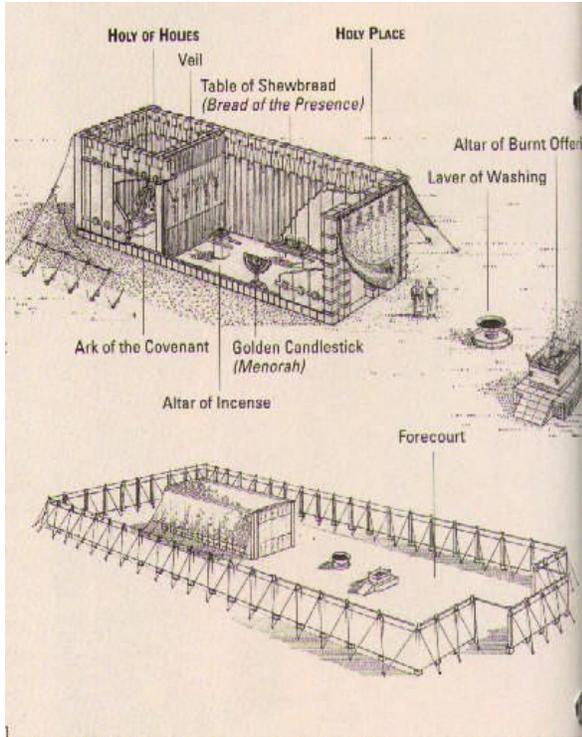


<http://thejewishlink.com/amazing-western-wall-tunnels-tour-part-i/#sthash.xZGGnQVg.dpbs>

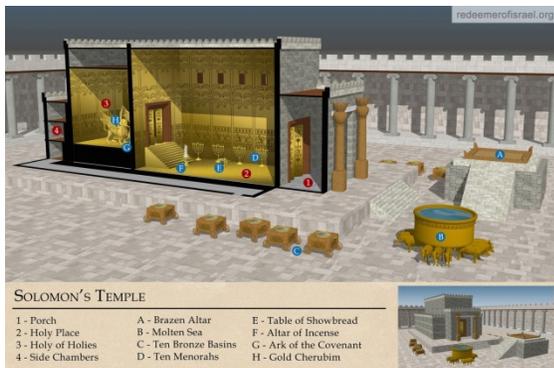
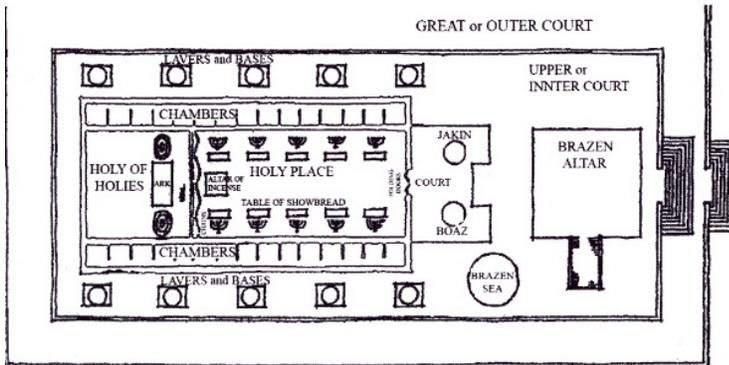
I want us to turn now about what it would have been like to walk up into the huge Temple complex that Herod created 20 years before Jesus was born (20BC). Everyone entering the Temple would have to go up because it was on top of the ridge and had massive staircases. It was not for the faint of heart, and even active people would get winded. [video]



The Temple was God’s dwelling place on earth. It was “God’s house,” and it had furnishings like a house, such as lamps and menorahs, and tables. In so doing, God enjoyed a fellowship meal with human beings in God’s dwelling on earth—the temple.

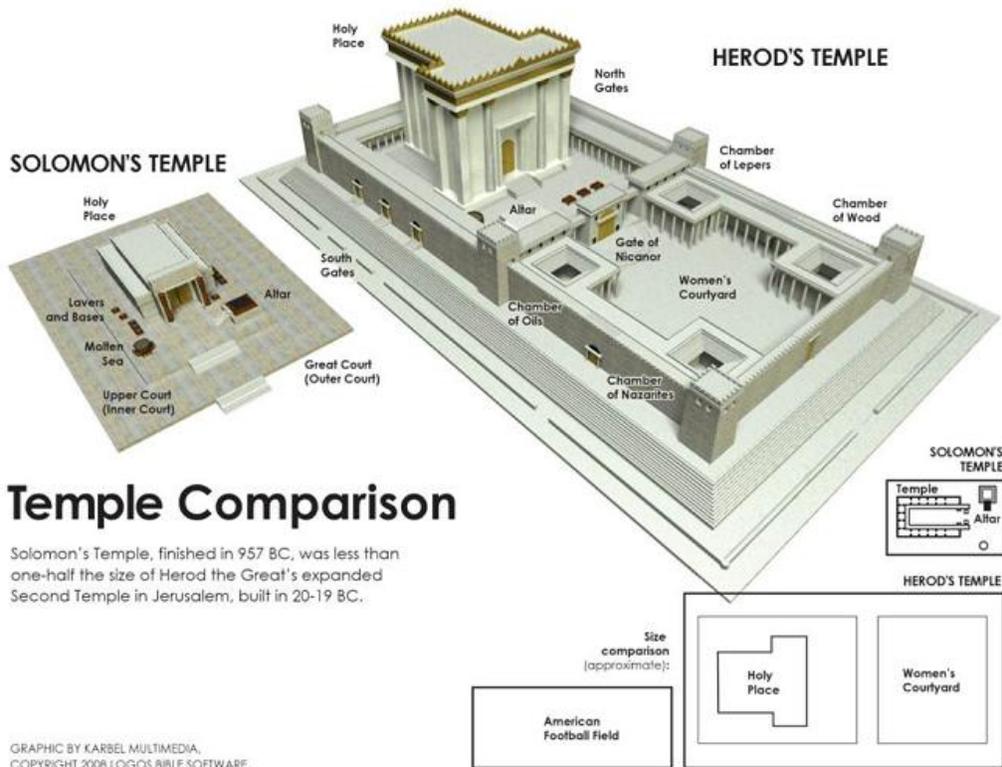


<https://www.chronologicalbibleblog.com/2011/02/page/2/>



<http://www.biblestudy.org/biblepic/interior-layout-of-temple-large-picture.html>

temple-large-picture.html



What Bethlehem looks like now with a chapel and a lambing cave

<https://youtu.be/fhvwZdKJ5qE> (2:53min)