

Converting the First Temple in Pre-Exilic Jerusalem

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The many and diverse ancient incarnations of the Jerusalem Temple—such as those articulated in Ezekiel, Josephus, the Temple Scroll, and the Book of Revelation—have provided much grist for the mill of the historian of religion. Studies of the relationship between these various Jerusalem Temples and their “original” model, Solomon’s Temple, have revealed a variety of theological, cultural, and political forces at work in their development and have attempted to grasp the specific power of architecture that drives their composition. Particularly revelatory in such studies are the differences in the conversion from original to copy, the “deviations” from the norm established by Solomon and his architects that yield information about the uses—conceptual or practical—to which the building was put.

Rarely, however, have studies challenged the idea of a singular original or attempted to complicate the notion of a First Jerusalem Temple as something other than a pristine antecedent of the Second Temple(s), with the result that the early history of the so-called Solomonic Temple has been elided. The present paper looks at “the” original as itself a multiply-converted site—the product of centuries of architectural and conceptual changes and identity struggles, many of which anticipate the types of architectural conversions seen in later Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

After noting the debate over a pre-Solomonic temple, the paper utilizes the theoretical work of, among others, Lindsay Jones on the hermeneutics of sacred architecture in order to focus on three specific aspects of conversion. First, the architecture and iconography were adapted from an intercultural, generally polytheistic style that required the balance of international and local concerns, and, to the extent that the temple would become the quintessential symbol of Judean religion, the conversion was a successful one. Second, the process of incorporation involved not only the conversion of foreign elements, but also the situation of the Temple within the Israelite matrix, the relationship forged between Temple and other, ostensibly earlier ideas and institutions, such as Sinai and the Tabernacle. This also involved direct manipulation of the temple, such as changes in access and iconography, in response to political and other aims. Third, the process of conversion is one that can be seen to have happened in more individualized encounters with the architecture, such as those expressed in various psalms.

In the course of examining these processes in the pre-exilic temple, it becomes clearer that the conversion of space is not an accidental phenomenon but rather is fundamental to any experience thereof. The case of “the first” Israelite temple, then, is valuable for the study of spatial conversion not only in its launching of subsequent iterations (both imaginary and real), but also in the way it challenges the notion of singular construction on virgin soil. It shows the process of conversion of sacred space to be a continuous one, operative even before initial construction takes place.