

What was Herod's temple?

<https://www.gotquestions.org/Herod-third-temple.html>

When David was king, he asked God if he could build a temple (1 Chronicles 17:1-15). God told him no but allowed him to gather the materials his son Solomon would need to build it (1 Chronicles 22:2-5). Solomon's temple was destroyed and ransacked by the Babylonians in 586 BC (2 Kings 25:9). King Cyrus of Persia allowed the temple to be rebuilt (Ezra 1:2) under the leadership of Zerubbabel.

Over the next four hundred years, a series of Gentile rulers alternately built up and defiled the second temple. The cycle culminated in a 39 BC battle in which King Herod took control of the temple, slaughtering many of the priests and defenders in the process, but also keeping the Roman soldiers from entering the sanctuary. Herod proposed to renovate the temple in 20-19 BC, his reason being the post-exilic temple was sixty cubits shorter than Solomon's original. Despite the Jews' fears that he meant to tear it down and never rebuild, the main work on the temple was completed in one-and-a-half years, and the outer courtyard in eight years. Finishing touches continued until AD 63. Herod's temple, then, was a restoration and expansion of Zerubbabel's second temple.

On the eastern edge of Jerusalem, just west of Gethsemane and northwest of the Kidron Valley, sat the temple of Herod. The dimensions of Herod's temple court were 1,550 feet by 1,000 feet—about 35 acres. On the far northwest corner sat Antonia Fortress, the home of the temple garrison that stayed alert for disturbances in the temple—disturbances that the governor was quick to quell so as not to attract unwanted attention from Rome.

Two gates provided entry into the court of Herod's temple from the south; four from the west; and one, the Golden Gate, from the east; also, an underground passage led to the

court from Antonia Fortress. Just inside the walls ran porticoes—roofed walkways flanked on the outside by the great walls and the inside by rows of tall marble pillars. The northern approach to the temple was the most level and easiest to climb, but the southern gates (the double Huldah and the triple Huldah) were the most frequently used. Because a ravine lined the southern wall, great staircases led to the actual gates. Tunnels passed through and into a honeycombed underground area called “Solomon’s Stable.” More stairs led up to the southern section of the Court of the Gentiles. The eastern portico was named for King Solomon, and it was somewhere along this wall that the twelve-year-old Jesus debated with the scholars (Luke 2:46). It’s possible that the highest corner of the eastern wall was where Satan took Jesus in Matthew 4:5.

Herod’s temple sat skewed in the center of the large courtyard so that its entrance might better face due east. A balustrade—a low wall of stone posts and caps—defined the inner boundary of the Court of Gentiles. It was this courtyard, between the balustrade and the outer walls, where Gentiles could go to worship. It was also this court where Jesus drove out the money changers in Matthew 21:12. It was unlawful for any Gentile to go past the balustrade, an offense punishable by death (see Acts 21:27-32).

Within the Court of the Gentiles, getting closer to Herod’s temple, was the Court of the Women, accessed through the Beautiful Gate. Here were thirteen trumpet-shaped containers for voluntary offerings. Into one of these a widow donated her last two mites, an act that Jesus noticed in Mark 12:41-44.

On the west side of the Court of the Women were fifteen steps that led up to the Gate of Nicanor, where Mary brought the Baby Jesus at the time of His presentation (Luke 2:22-24). Passing through the Nicanor Gate would lead one into the Court of Israel,

accessible only to ceremonially clean Jewish men. A low balustrade and another staircase separated the Court of Israel from the Court of the Priests; three gates, one each from the south, west, and north, provided priests more direct access from the outer courtyard.

In the Court of Priests was the altar for the burnt offerings. Forty-five feet on each side and twenty-two feet high, the altar was made of uncarved stone. In an earlier time, the nearby area where the animals were slaughtered was fitted with a trough of running water, fed by a spring and underground cisterns to wash away the blood. It's possible this was retained in Herod's restoration. Also in the Court of Priests was a large basin called the brazen sea or the laver, resting upon twelve bulls cast in bronze. Beyond these fixtures was yet another staircase leading to a curtain embroidered with a map of the known world that covered the entrance to the temple proper. Only the priest on duty was allowed to advance beyond that curtain.

Inside Herod's temple things were set up similarly to the tabernacle of Moses. Beyond the first veil was a hall containing the golden altar of incense, the golden table of showbread, and the golden lampstand. It was this lampstand, the seven-armed menorah, which was said to have miraculously stayed lit during the eight-day rededication of the temple after the Maccabean victory in the second century BC.

Only the high priest could go beyond the final veil to the Holy of Holies, and that only once a year, on the Day of Atonement. The floor, walls, and ceiling of this room were plated with gold. Because the Ark of the Covenant had been lost years before, Herod's temple had no furnishings in the Holy of Holies, although it is possible a stone held the place of the ark. It was this veil, leading into the Holy of Holies, that tore from

the top down when Jesus was crucified (Matthew 27:51). Around the Holy of Holies, to the south, west, and north, were three stories of interconnected rooms. Openings from the story immediately above the Holy of Holies allowed workers to be lowered into that room to make repairs without touching the floor.

Herod's temple lasted until AD 70, which marked the end of the second temple era. At that time, after a long war between the Jewish Zealots and the Roman authorities, four Roman legions, led by Titus, besieged Jerusalem and burned down the temple. As the temple burned, the gold and silver ornamentation melted and seeped between the cracks in the stones. In their zeal for a stipend, the Roman soldiers took the temple apart, stone by stone, fulfilling Jesus' prophecy in Matthew 24:1-3. The Jewish people were scattered in the Diaspora, and did not return en masse to Israel until after World War II. The temple mount, where Herod's temple stood, is now home to the Islamic Dome of the Rock. All that remains of Herod's work on the temple mount is the Western Wall, a 1,600-foot-long portion of the retaining wall Herod had constructed to expand the temple mount.