

Feature Article: JAF3405

WAS THERE A JEWISH TEMPLE IN ANCIENT JERUSALEM? Exposing Islamic Ahistoricism and Mythicism

by Craig A. Evans

This article first appeared in the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, volume 40, number 05 (2017). For further information or to subscribe to the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL go to:
<http://www.equip.org/christian-research-journal/>

SYNOPSIS

Historical minimalists raise the bar of proof very high. In their view, literary evidence is rarely sufficient, no matter its quantity and quality, and physical evidence, such as what is recovered through archaeology, often is disputed and sometimes dismissed out of hand. Mythicism is an extreme form of minimalism, in which most or all historical evidence is rejected. In recent years, some Islamic apologists have adopted this approach with respect to the two Jewish temples, the one that Solomon built (the First Temple) and the second one that was built after the exile (the Second Temple). This is called "Temple Denial."

Arguments against the existence of the two Jewish temples ignore a mountain of evidence. This evidence is archaeological and literary. The archaeological evidence is substantial and continues to grow, thanks to ongoing excavation in Jerusalem, south of the Temple Mount where the Dome of the Rock stands today. The literary evidence also is substantial, and it is not limited to Jewish and Christian sources, but comes from Greek and Latin pagan sources as well. Some of this literary evidence dates back to the time when the Second Temple was still standing. Accordingly, mythicist arguments are not scholarly but arise from shocking ignorance and cynical propaganda. Temple Denial impedes dialogue and understanding in the Middle East.

Historical minimalism raises the bar of proof very high. Literary evidence is rarely sufficient, no matter its quantity and quality, and physical evidence, such as what is recovered through archaeology, often is disputed and sometimes dismissed out of hand.

For example, there continues to be doubt about the existence of King David (notwithstanding the appearance of David's name on an eighth century BC Syrian

inscription), doubt that there ever was an ancient kingdom of Israel (notwithstanding the findings of recent archaeology in Jerusalem and elsewhere), and doubt about literacy in the tenth century BC adequate for recording the history of David and his successors (notwithstanding the evidence of the tenth-century Qeiyapha Ostrakon).

Given how the archaeological record supports the literary record, as we have it in the books of Samuel and Kings, the skepticism of the Old Testament minimalists is hard to explain and, in the opinion of many historians and archaeologists, impossible to justify. Their skepticism strikes many as a form of special pleading, in which the evidence — no matter how compelling — is brushed aside.

MYTHICISM AND THE REJECTION OF EVIDENCE

This leads me to mythicism, which might be described as minimalism on steroids. Mythicists make extraordinary claims. Best known are the mythicists who claim that Jesus did not exist. To make this claim, it is necessary to reject the Gospels and all other supporting testimony (Christian or otherwise) and indulge in a very strained and unnatural interpretation of Paul's letters, in which Jesus is referenced as a person who died on a Roman cross. Thankfully, properly trained historians do not take these mythicists seriously.

The most outlandish mythicist theory comes from Muslim apologists and propagandists who claim that there never was a historical Israel and that there never was a Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. This does not mean that everything in the Old Testament is rejected; several Old Testament characters are mentioned in the Qur'an. These include several of the patriarchs. The existence of Jesus (called Isa) also is affirmed. Indeed, Jesus is regarded as a great prophet. But this does not mean that the Jesus story of the first-century Gospels is accepted.

In the Qur'an, we do find some mythicism, with respect to Christian origins. The Qur'an denies that Jesus died on the cross, claiming that it "only appeared" that He did so (Qur'an 4.157–158). The confession that Jesus was the Son of God, whose death on the cross makes it possible for humanity to be reconciled to God, is rejected explicitly in the Qur'an and in all subsequent Islamic teaching. That the Qur'an denies the crucifixion itself may come as a surprise to many. Of course, no specialist in the field doubts the crucifixion of Jesus.¹

But the most extraordinary denial in Islamic tradition concerns the very history of the Jewish people, particularly in reference to the Jewish temples that stood on the Temple Mount (aka Haram esh-Sharif) in Jerusalem for approximately one thousand years. Although at times in the past, Muslims acknowledged the existence of the Jewish temples, today it is widely voiced in Islamic circles that there never was a Jewish temple in Jerusalem, a claim sometimes called "Temple Denial."²

ISLAMIC ASSERTIONS THAT NO JEWISH TEMPLES EVER EXISTED

Some may recall that in the year 2000, Yasser Arafat claimed that a Jewish temple existed near Nablus but not in Jerusalem.³ The most recent and shocking statement comes from Muhammad Ahmad Hussein, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem. Hussein, appointed by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in 2006, claims that an Islamic mosque stood on the Temple Mount “since the world was created,” adding that there was “never anything other than a mosque.”⁴ Disappointingly, though perhaps not too surprising, some in the news media who ought to know better reference Temple Denial as though it is a legitimate matter of scholarly dispute. The utter silliness of Hussein’s assertion is not criticized. No specialist in the field doubts the existence of the two Jewish temples. Islamic denials are little more than propaganda.

Western thinkers need to understand that peace talks between Israel and her Muslim neighbors are complicated by Islam’s refusal to acknowledge historical reality. The rejection of Israel’s pre-Islamic history, including the denial of the existence of Israel’s two temples that at one time stood where today the medieval Dome of the Rock stands, is the principal factor behind the Muslims’ insistence that the Jewish people and the state of Israel have no right to exist in the Holy Land.

In a recent op-ed in the London-based *Al-Hayat Al-Jadida*, an anti-Jewish periodical, columnist Jihad Al-Khazen asserted in reference to the Jewish people and the Temple Mount: “All of their news is a crime or lies....I challenge them daily to bring me one Jewish archaeological remnant from Jerusalem, or to show us a rock from the alleged Temple.”⁵

These bold assertions are not limited to print. They can be very personal and confrontational. In June 2016, while standing before the Dome of the Rock and discussing the thousand-year history of the Jewish temples, a Muslim approached and rebuked me and our Israeli tour guide: “Why are you lying? Why don’t you tell your people the truth? There never was a Jewish temple here!” I have visited Israel almost every year for twenty-five years, and have never encountered such audacious rudeness and ignorance.

Mr. Al-Khazen wants to see some evidence for the existence of the Jewish temples of Jerusalem. This is not difficult. The evidence for the existence of Israel’s two temples is substantial. It is literary (from both Jewish and non-Jewish sources) and archaeological. Coherence of literary and archaeological evidence forms the foundation on which the study of history, especially the history of antiquity, rests. Moreover, it is the coherence of archaeology and biblical literature that creates the discipline called “biblical archaeology.” Apart from such coherence, this discipline would not exist. The evidence for the existence of the two Jewish temples offers textbook examples of this coherence.

EVIDENCE FOR THE EXISTENCE OF THE FIRST JEWISH TEMPLE

According to the ancient biblical narratives, Israel once worshipped God in a leather tent known as the Tabernacle (Exod. 40:33–34). After settling in the land of Canaan,

which became Israel's homeland sometime in the middle of the second millennium BC, the Jewish people built a "house of God" at Shiloh (Judges 18:31; 1 Sam. 1:24). It is not clear how long this house stood and when it was destroyed (see Jer. 7:14; 26:6, 9).

It was not until the reign of David's son Solomon, in the tenth century BC, that Israel finally built a permanent temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 6–8). Not only is there extensive literary evidence for this temple — its construction, dedication, centuries of use, and then its destruction at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians — there is also significant archaeological evidence.

Because the First Temple was destroyed more than 2,500 years ago and its dressed stones either became part of the foundation of the later Temple Precincts or were recycled and used in later buildings, it is not possible to identify with certainty the stones that belonged to it. There are supporting archaeological finds nevertheless.

The first is the small ivory pomegranate with the paleo-Hebrew (i.e., ancient Hebrew script) inscription that reads "(Belonging) to the House of Yahweh, holy to the priests." Although some skeptics claimed the inscription was a modern fake, recent scientific testing and epigraphical study have confirmed the authenticity of both the artifact and its important inscription.⁶ It is widely believed that the ivory pomegranate at one time was mounted atop a priest's staff. The paleography of the inscription points to the eighth century BC. The words, "House of Yahweh," are an unmistakable reference to Israel's First Temple (see, e.g., 1 Kings 8:63–64).

A second important artifact is the so-called Jehoash (or Joash) Temple Inscription. The gray sandstone tablet, likely excavated and discarded during work on the Temple Mount in 1999,⁷ contains several lines of paleo-Hebrew that speak of repairs of Israel's ancient temple ("I renovated the breaches of the Temple"). The paleo-script, the scorching, and the imbedded microscopic globules of gold strongly argue for authenticity. The inscription itself requires an eighth century BC date, in the time of the reign of King Joash (2 Kings 12:1–6, 11–17).

A third artifact relates to the priests of the Jewish Temple. In 1979, archaeologist Gabriel Barkay found two miniature silver scrolls at Ketef Hinnom, southwest of the old city wall of Jerusalem. These scrolls, written in paleo-Hebrew and dated to the seventh century BC, contain portions of the priestly blessing found in Numbers 6:24–26, which in part reads, "May the Lord bless you, keep you. May the Lord make his face shine upon you and grant you peace" (partially restored). The scrolls are displayed in the Israel Museum.

There are other artifacts that do not relate directly to the First Temple but do attest to the presence of the Jewish people in Jerusalem in the Iron Age. They offer additional examples of coherence between the narratives of Israel's ancient Scripture and the remains of ancient material culture.

Perhaps the most famous of these artifacts is the Siloam Inscription, found in 1880 in the tunnel that channels water from the Gihon Spring to the Pool of Siloam in the southeast of Jerusalem.⁸ This is the tunnel constructed by King Hezekiah in the eighth century BC, to ensure a supply of water, should the city of Jerusalem be besieged

(2 Kings 20:20; 2 Chron. 32:30). The paleo-Hebrew inscription, which is housed in the Archaeological Museum of Istanbul, describes the work involved in hewing the tunnel.

Archaeologists have found bullae (i.e., clay seals) that mention the names of Jewish administrators at the end of the First Temple period and in the Second Temple period. One bulla, written in paleo-Hebrew and dating to the seventh century BC, mentions the village of Bethlehem, the village of David, immediately to the south of Jerusalem.

Archeologists and volunteer excavators have found Jewish coins in and around Jerusalem that reach back to the Hellenistic period (fourth through second century BC) that bear the stamp “Yehud,” the Persian name for Judea, where the Jewish people were allowed to return during the Persian period (sixth through fourth century BC). The names of more than fifty historical persons — Jewish and non-Jewish alike — mentioned in Israel’s ancient scriptural narratives, reaching back to the tenth century BC, have been confirmed by archaeological discoveries.⁹ Evidence like this shows that the history of the Jewish people and the kingdom of Israel preserved in these narratives is not fiction.¹⁰

EVIDENCE FOR THE EXISTENCE OF THE SECOND JEWISH TEMPLE

Archaeological finds relating to the Second Temple are more numerous; so are the references to it in the non-Jewish literature of late antiquity. For example, Tacitus, the Roman historian (c. AD 110), writes of Jerusalem’s Second Temple: “In that place (Jerusalem) was a Temple of immense wealth” (*Hist.* 5.8.1). Older contemporary Josephus (c. AD 37–100) describes the Second Temple in great detail (*J.W.* 2.293; 5.210–11, 222–24; *Ant.* 14.105, 110; 15.395; 17.264–65).¹¹

As we should expect, Jewish Scripture speaks of the building of the Second Temple (c. 500 BC; Ezra 3:10; 4:1; 5:14–15; 6:5; 7:7; Neh. 2:8; 6:10). Josephus recounts the rebuilding of the Second Temple by Herod the Great in the eighteenth year of his reign (c. 20 BC; see *Ant.* 15.380–409).¹²

The New Testament Gospels and Acts often speak of the beautiful Temple built by Herod the Great. As a youth, Jesus visited the Temple (Luke 2:46). He demonstrated in the Temple (Mark 11:15–17), He taught in the Temple (Mark 12:35; 14:49), and He prophesied the Temple’s destruction (Mark 13:1–2). This prophecy formed part of the accusation that was brought against Jesus (Mark 14:58). The leadership of the early Christian movement frequently came into conflict with the Temple priesthood (Acts 4:1).

In the summer of 2011, archaeologists Ronny Reich and Eli Shukron found a small golden bell, formed to look like a pomegranate. It was found in an ancient drainage channel close to the Western Wall of the Temple Mount, where Jewish people hid when the Romans captured Jerusalem in AD 70. The bell was worn by the high priest, as required in Scripture (see Exod. 28:34; 39:26, “A bell and a pomegranate round

about upon the skirts of the robe for ministering”), when he entered the Holy of Holies.¹³

During the same excavation, a crude etching of the Second Temple’s menorah (seven-branch lamp) was found.¹⁴ The iconic menorah is represented in a variety of forms on Jewish tombs, ossuaries (bone boxes), and decorated stones found in Galilean synagogues.¹⁵ Most famously, the menorah, along with other sacred utensils looted from the Second Temple when it was destroyed in AD 70, is depicted in a stone relief inside the Arch of Titus, erected in the ‘80s in Rome’s ancient Forum, to commemorate the Roman victory.¹⁶ Many Jewish ossuaries and monumental tombs in and around Jerusalem depict architectural and artistic motifs intended to recall the Temple. Pillars, pediments, pilasters, colonnades, gates, and menorahs, supported by a tripod, adorn ossuaries and tombs.¹⁷

Important inscriptions relating to the Second Temple have come to light. They include a Greek inscription on a limestone slab found in 1871. The inscription warns Gentiles not to get too close to the Temple: “Let no Gentile enter within the partition and barrier surrounding the Temple; whosoever is caught shall be responsible for his subsequent death.”

The inscription is housed in the Archaeological Museum of Istanbul. Its pre-AD 70 date is disputed by no one. That it presupposes the existence of the Temple is obvious. A second, fragmentary copy of this inscription was found in 1935 outside the wall around Jerusalem’s Old City. It is housed in the Israel Museum. Josephus tells his Gentile readers of this inscribed warning, posted in several places in the Temple Precincts (*J.W.* 5.193–94; *Ant.* 15.417). Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BC–AD 50) mentions the warning also (*Embassy* 212). The apostle Paul was attacked in the Temple Precincts (c. AD 57) because it was (wrongly) believed that he “brought Greeks” too close to the Sanctuary (Acts 21:27–36, esp. v. 28). It is to this barrier that separates Jews from Gentiles that Paul alludes metaphorically when he says that in Christ “the dividing wall” is broken down (Eph. 2:14).

Another important inscription was found on a dressed stone in 1968 during excavations below the southwest corner of the Temple Mount. In Herodian-era Hebrew, the inscription reads: “To the place (lit. *house*) of trumpeting to dis [tinguish],” that is, to distinguish the beginning and ending of the Sabbath day. This meaning is made clear in Josephus who tells his readers that there was a place at the southwest corner of the Temple Mount “where one of the priests stood and gave a signal, with a trumpet, at the beginning of every Sabbath, in the evening twilight, as also at the evening when the day was finished, giving notice to the people when they were to cease work, and when they were to go to work again” (*J.W.* 4.582).

Pre-AD 70 ossuaries also provide evidence of the Jewish Temple. One ossuary inscription refers to “Simon the builder of the Temple.” Another ossuary inscription refers to “the sons of Nicanor who built the doors.” The reference is to the doors of the “Gate of Nicanor,” according to the Rabbis (*b. Yoma* 19a and 38a) and Josephus (*J.W.* 5.201).

I have surveyed the best literary and hard archaeological evidence for the existence of the two Jewish temples, from the time of Solomon to Jesus. Many more examples could be cited. Temple Denial, much like Holocaust Denial, exhibits remarkable ignorance and contempt for history. Temple Denial, moreover, will make peace negotiations in the Middle East more difficult and very unlikely to succeed.

Craig A. Evans, PhD, DHabil, is the John Bisagno Distinguished Professor of Christian Origins at Houston Baptist University. He is the author of *Jesus and the Remains of His Day* (Hendrikson, 2015) and, with Jeremiah J. Johnston, coauthor of *Jesus and the Jihadis: Confronting the Rage of ISIS* (Destiny Image, 2015). His website is www.craigaevas.com.

NOTES

- 1 For critical discussion of the Qur'an's denial of the crucifixion of Jesus, see James A. Beverley and Craig A. Evans, *Getting Jesus Right: How Muslims Get Jesus and Islam Wrong* (Pickering, Ontario: Castle Quay Books, 2015) 171–81, 303–6.
- 2 Temple Denial continues despite the publication of studies that provide substantial documentation. See Hershel Shanks, *Jerusalem's Temple Mount: From Solomon to the Golden Dome* (New York: Continuum, 2007).
- 3 At the Camp David summit.
- 4 As reported in Jeremy Sharon, "Grand Mufti: There Was Never a Jewish Temple on Temple Mount," *The Jerusalem Post*, 27 October 2015, <http://new.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Grand-mufti-There-was-never-a-Jewish-Temple-on-Temple-Mount-430131>.
- 5 This op-ed is available online at http://www.palwatch.org/main.aspx?fi=157&doc_id=17924 (26 April 2016). The insistence that "a rock from the alleged Temple" be produced is ironic, given how Muslim authorities do not permit any archaeological work on the Temple Mount.
- 6 See *Biblical Archaeology Review* 42, 2 (March/April 2016): 50–57.
- 7 Some four hundred truckloads of debris were hauled away and dumped at various sites, mostly in the Kidron Valley. Supervision by archaeologists was not permitted. Some of this debris was later sifted and a number of artifacts, including coins, were recovered.
- 8 The stepped pool was discovered by archaeologist Eli Shukron in 2004.
- 9 The discoveries are listed and briefly described in Lawrence Mykytiuk, "Archaeology Confirms 50 Real People in the Bible," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 40, 2 (March/April 2014), 46–47; idem, "Archaeology Confirms 3 More Bible People," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 43, 3 (May/June 2017): 48–52.
- 10 For many examples of correspondence between the biblical text and archaeology, see Amihai Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible 10,000–586 B.C.E.* (New York: Doubleday, 1990).
- 11 In *Antiquities* 14.111–19, Josephus cites various ancient historians who comment on the wealth of the Second Temple. For a compilation of non-Jewish authors of late antiquity that discuss the Jewish people, Jerusalem, the Temple, and Jewish beliefs and practices, see Menahem Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism* (3 vols., Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1974, 1980, 1984).
- 12 The chronology of Josephus is uncertain. In *J.W.* 1.401, he says, "Herod rebuilt the Temple in the fifteenth year of his reign."
- 13 For a report of the discovery, along with photograph, see *Israel National News* (July 21, 2011).
- 14 Ronny Reich, "A Depiction of a Menorah Found Near the Temple Mount and the Shape of Its Base," *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins* 130 (2014): 96–101.
- 15 Of special interest is the stone found in the pre-AD 70 synagogue at Magdala.

- 16 Steven Fine, Peter J. Schertz, and Donald H. Sanders, "True Colors: Digital Reconstruction Restore Original Brilliance to the Arch of Titus," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 43, 3 (May/June 2017): 28–36, 60–61.
- 17 The author personally has examined several tombs in Jerusalem and has viewed hundreds of ossuaries housed in the Israel Antiquities Authority storage facility in Beth Shemesh.