

## *The temple doomed*

**Towards the end of His time on earth, Jesus predicted the temple's total destruction: "Do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down" (Matt. 24:2). Forty years later His words came to pass in a gruesome episode of rapine and pillage whose infamy is partly offset by the incredible courage and self-sacrifice of temple defenders. Two thousand years later His words still ring with a jarring freshness and urgency.**

**David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel; nor shall the priests, the Levites, lack a man to offer burnt offerings before Me, to kindle grain offerings, and to sacrifice continually.**

***Jeremiah 33:17-18***

**G**ESSIUS FLORUS, PROCURATOR OF Judea, described by Josephus as "most barbarous" and "impudent", outdid most of his predecessors for sheer evil. Josephus added, "... nor could anyone outdo him in disguising the truth; nor could anyone contrive more subtle ways of deceit than he did". When Eleazar the priest, Captain of the Temple, incensed the leaders of the Roman occupation force by stopping the daily sacrifice for the emperor's health, Gessius, rejoicing inwardly, retaliated by confiscating seventeen talents from the temple treasury. He had wanted an excuse to provoke the Jews into rebellion in order to preempt Jewish appeals to Caesar to rid them of this nasty man. It worked.

In gleeful response to the uproar that followed, Gessius allowed his soldiery free reign of their lusts, whereupon they "forced themselves into every house, slaying its inhabitants". Jerusalem's citizens reacted by setting fire to palaces and public buildings, capturing the fortress of Antonia overlooking the temple, and slaying many of its Roman garrison. Thus began a spiral of tit-for-

tating that ended, to all intents and purposes, four years later with the destruction of the temple.

Throughout the four years, numerous battles were fought, with the tide of advantage sloshing back and forth. Jewish defenders fought with valor in the face of heart-breaking privation, equaling the World War Two defenders of Stalingrad for determination, bravery and endurance. When the Romans built earthen banks around Jerusalem for mounting weapons of siege warfare, doughty insurgents spilled out of the city, openly assaulted one bank of weapons and succeeded in setting fire to the lot. Many Romans retreated in panic to camp, insurgents in hot pursuit. Both sides suffered enormous losses in the hand-to-hand combat that followed. When Titus launched a retaliatory assault, so much dust was kicked up in the melee neither side could tell friend from foe.

Jewish valor was ably assisted by cunning strategy. Unbeknownst to the besiegers, the mole-like defenders scratched out a labyrinth of tunnels under a threatening siege bank, propping them up with timber beams. When they set fire to the beams, the entire bank with its engines of war collapsed.

Back and forth went the score. But on Passover, 70 AD, after four years of on-again-off-again war, the Romans under Titus closed the gaps and hunkered down for the final siege. One hundred and thirty four horrifying days later it was all over.

On the 84<sup>th</sup> day animal sacrifices ceased — they had run out of sheep and oxen.

Soon after, the Romans succeeded in taking back the fortress of Antonia overlooking the Temple, giving them a major strategic advantage. Thousands of women and children had gathered in the temple's spacious courts in the hope, if not belief, that none would dare desecrate its sacred precincts. Titus called a council of war where it was decided that the temple must be "taken alive"; Roman soldiers were forbidden to harm it. No restriction was placed on killing, however. Days of bloody combat ensued. Blood swamped the temple's pavements; corpses of men, women and children were stacked in the marbled colonnades where Jesus had walked and taught and longed for Israel's repentance forty years earlier.

On the 105<sup>th</sup> day — the ominous 9<sup>th</sup> of Ab — calamity struck. Paradoxically, the dering-do of Jewish fighters proved Jerusalem's undoing. Despite Titus's orders the Roman soldiery, pushed to breaking point by the insane intensity of the defenders' determination, went berserk. Titus was called from his bed to witness a scene unparalleled in history unfold before his eyes.

Implacable, unrestrainable, Roman troops poured out of the Antonia fortress casting flaming brands in all directions, even up onto colonnade roofs. Standing serene towards the western wall of the enclosure, and until now aloof from the clamor surrounding it on three sides, was the sanctuary God had departed. For six hundred years it had stood there, inspiring millions. Titus had decreed its preservation. Jesus had said that Jerusalem and the temple would be forsaken by God (Matt. 23:38) and that not one stone would be left standing on another (Matt. 24:2). Jesus won. He wept, but He won.

Titus watched with horror as two crazed soldiers carrying a blazing oil-soaked stump in hand approached the low wall protecting the sanctuary from unauthorised entry. He gasped when one mounted the shoulders of the other and flung the torch over the wall and through the golden doorway into the Holy Place. Seeing the Holy Place ablaze, Titus shouted at the top of his lungs and waved his arms wildly in an attempt to get his men to quench the flames. Either they could not hear, or would not hear.

The pathetic, demoralised, fast-diminishing remnant of the house of Israel looked on

with unbridled terror as flames and smoke licked at the walls of the sacred edifice, first staining them ominous black then turning them to rubble and dust as the intense heat from the burning wooden lining within caused the stone to crumble then collapse. Bearded priests clung to the walls till they lost consciousness from the acrid fumes or were overpowered by the heat. Some climbed to the roof to hurl down pinnacle pieces onto the growing number of infidels below.

Metres away human self-sacrifices gradually piled up around the altar of burnt offering as Jewish insurgents fought to the last to defend the holiest spot they were permitted to come near. Their blood flowed in front of the steps leading up to the grill.

Titus had won the war but lost the trophy he had hoped to preserve as a monument to Roman pre-eminence. God had willed the temple's destruction; no Roman emperor could frustrate the divine decree. As a consequence of this drama, "The wolf and the hyena foraged by night through this mountain of decay where mighty kings and governors had once driven in state and a rich priesthood had held pompous sway" (Schofield 1959, p. 117).

The siege of Jerusalem may well be history's most horrifying — at least until the sieges of Leningrad and Stalingrad. Untold thousands of Jews were crucified in succeeding days. Were the people slaughtered and the temple razed to the ground to prove that shadows had lost all value, that animal sacrifice no longer smelt sweet in God's nostrils?

### **History repeats itself**

Had these people not learned the lesson inflicted on their ancestors about 650 years earlier? Solomon's temple — the more magnificent predecessor of the structure whose collapse they had just witnessed — had suffered an identical fate at the hands of the Babylonians. Did the defenders of Herod's temple deem their cause a righteous one? They should have listened to the apostles who had often repeated Jesus' warning prophecy. They should have read Jeremiah's sobering words to the people of his time, the prophet's equivalent of Jesus' stone-upon-stone alarm. If they had, they would never have placed their confidence in a superstition — that a building would save them:

*Do not trust in these lying words, say-*

ing, "The temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD are these." For if you thoroughly amend your ways and your doings, if you thoroughly execute judgment between a man and his neighbor... then I will cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers forever and ever (Jer. 7:4-7).

Since the days of Micah, God's true servants had been warning for years against any kind of false confidence. They called upon the people to amend their ways; only then they could trust in God to protect them. They harangued against the false prophets who had maintained that Israel's God would always protect His sole dwelling place on earth.

Many opportunities to repent had been given. Towards the very end, Nebuchadnezzar conducted two dry runs before the final, fatal visit, on each occasion robbing the temple of sacred items. The people excelled at ignoring opportunities. Finally, in 586 BC the Babylonian juggernaut smashed its way into the temple precincts, broke down Jachin and Boaz and the bronze laver, plundered all the remaining valuable vessels, then set the skeleton ablaze. After hundreds of years of spurning warnings, the people discovered the prophets had been truly inspired. Jeremiah lamented:

*The Lord was like an enemy. He has swallowed up Israel, He has swallowed up all her palaces; He has destroyed her strongholds, and has increased mourning and lamentation in the daughter of Judah. He has done violence to His tabernacle, as if it were a garden; He has destroyed His place of assembly; the LORD has caused the appointed feasts and Sabbaths to be forgotten in Zion. In His burning indignation He has spurned the king and the priest. The Lord has spurned His altar, He has abandoned His sanctuary; He has given up the walls of her palaces into the hand of the enemy. They have made a noise in the house of the LORD as on the day of a set feast (Lam. 2:5-7).*

As it had been, so it was again.

## Why destroyed?

Had God decided that He no longer loved the temple in 585 BC and then again in 70 AD? That could not possibly be:

*I have consecrated this house which you have built to put My name there forever, and My eyes and My heart will be there perpetually (1 Kin. 9:3).*

This verse shatters the notion that the temple's sole function was to serve as a shadow of some greater reality. Yes, the temple was a shadow, but it was built when the vertical reality — the heavenly temple — already existed. The temple and the gospel are not mutually exclusive. Christians can learn much from temple design. Were it to stand, they could benefit mightily from its ministrations.

To understand the true reason for its demise we need only read what Jesus taught in the temple hours before He foretold its

devastation. The very last words He spoke in the sacred precincts before His crucifixion should have sent a shudder up the spine of any who heard:

*Therefore you are witnesses against your-*

*selves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers' guilt. Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell?... Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate... (Matt. 23:31-38).*

Jerusalem's inhabitants were to face their Maker in judgement for their stubborn sinfulness and spirit of murder. In mercy, He allowed them almost forty more years to repent, but neither those who heard Jesus' words at the time, nor their children or grandchildren, paid any heed to their Messiah.

Was Solomon's temple destroyed because its days as a shadow were done? The shattering event shocked the populace of the time, their lament well expressed in Psalm

74:1-11:

*O God, why have You cast us off forever? Why does Your anger smoke against the sheep of Your pasture? Remember Your congregation, which You have purchased of old, the tribe of Your inheritance, which You have redeemed — this Mount Zion where You have dwelt... The enemy has damaged everything in the sanctuary. Your enemies roar in the midst of Your meeting place; they set up their banners for signs. They seem like men who lift up axes among the thick trees. And now they break down its carved work, all at once, with axes and hammers. They have set fire to Your sanctuary; they have defiled the dwelling place of Your name to the ground. They said in their hearts, "Let us destroy them altogether." They have burned up all the meeting places of God in the land. We do not see our signs; there is no longer any prophet; nor is there any among us who knows how long. O God, how long will the adversary reproach? Will the enemy blaspheme Your name forever? Why do You withdraw Your hand, even Your right hand? Take it out of Your bosom and destroy them.*

Considering the endless string of prophetic warnings they had been given one staggers at their plaintive query "Why do you withdraw your hand?" a genuine inability to comprehend why. Few accounts match Jeremiah 5:11 for totality of condemnation:

*Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem; see now and know; and seek in her open places if you can find a man, if there is anyone who executes judgment, who seeks the truth, and I will pardon her.*

The nation was corrupt through and through, worse for its rejection of the numerous pleas and warnings from God to mend its ways.

To suggest that the First Temple was smashed because of Israel's stubbornness while the Second met the same fate for "theological reasons" strains credulity, particularly in light of an amazing "coincidence" — they both were destroyed on the same day in the biblical calendar, the 9<sup>th</sup> of Ab.

Rabbis of a later age saw a difference in cause between the Babylonian and Roman

versions of judgement. They believed the First Temple was destroyed because of "idolatry, immorality, bloodshed." As for the Second Temple, their explanation went, "Because therein prevailed hatred without cause. That teaches you that groundless hatred is considered as of even gravity with the three sins of idolatry, immorality, and bloodshed together" (Morris 1992, p. 46). Right or wrong in detail, they correctly identified human sin rather than new-found irrelevance as the cause.

### **Decree of hardening**

Believers are seriously challenged trying to explain a puzzling Bible teaching. The numerous opportunities given Israel to repent had a second function of hardening the people and rendering them fully worthy of the catastrophe that was to strike. Think deeply on Jesus' words and Paul's commentary:

*And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says: "Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, and seeing you will see and not perceive" (Matt. 13:14)*

*What then? Israel has not obtained what it seeks; but the elect have obtained it, and the rest were blinded. Just as it is written: "God has given them a spirit of stupor, eyes that they should not see and ears that they should not hear, to this very day" (Rom. 11:7-8).*

The Amorites had been given four hundred years to either repent or harden their hearts still further (Gen. 15:16). Following the same modus operandi, God gave forty years after Jesus' warning to Jerusalem's leaders and inhabitants to repent. Their refusal turned this opportunity to repent into a heart-hardening exercise, making them fit for the slaughter prophesied by Zechariah in what is regarded by some as the most enigmatic prophecy in Scripture (Cohen 1948, p. 314):

*Thus says the LORD my God, "Feed the flock for slaughter... For I will no longer pity the inhabitants of the land," says the LORD. "But indeed I will give everyone into his neighbor's hand and into the hand of his king. They shall attack the land, and I will not deliver them from their hand" (Zech. 11:4, 6).*

Many of Jerusalem's defenders were brave, selfless heroes who fought with a fe-



Jewish insurgents succeed in setting fire to Roman siege equipment

rocity rarely matched in the annals of warfare and who would today receive the highest awards possible for valor in battle. But God sees the true impulses of human thought; courage is not sufficient to offset treachery against Him and hatred of one's fellows.

### **Blame people, not Jews**

The responsibility for Christ's death lies at the feet of *mankind*, not at the feet of *any nationality*. We killed Jesus, not *they* killed Jesus. Jesus Himself said that the significance of His person and mission was "hidden from their eyes" because they did "not know the time of their visitation" (Luke 19:42-44). The Jewish people of that time were guilty indeed, as were the Roman soldiers who mocked and beat Him. All mankind stands equally convicted.

The 2004 movie, "The Passion of the Christ", has provoked massive debate. Deeply troubling to many is its alleged portrayal of Jews as "God-killers". Centuries ago Christendom pinned the blame for Christ's death on all generations of Jews; they, and they alone, are responsible for killing the Son of God. This old plague is excused on the grounds that the people had responded, "His blood be on us and on our children" (Matt 27:25) when Pilate declared Jesus innocent. But these words meant nothing more than that "they did not take seriously any suggestion that Jesus was an innocent man... the mob had been completely taken in by the propaganda of the high priests" (Morris 1992, p. 707).

### **Getting it straight**

The temple crumbled and the enclosure's stones were torn apart as a result of God's

judgement on the people for their intransigent ways, not because temple ceremony had outlived its usefulness. The temple's destruction amounted to *judgement upon the people, not upon the temple*. The people no longer deserved its many mighty benefits.

Shortly before His crucifixion, Jesus stormed the temple. Many people think He did it to herald a new age of freedom for its stewards from the onerous burden of pointless ritual. Quite the contrary, Jesus upheld the sanctity of temple service. His act amounted to passing judgement on its stewards and announcing the future freedom, ultimately, of temple service from defilement by its corrupt officers. Because the people and their leaders would not accept the reality of God's presence in Christ, they were judged unworthy of serving as stewards of its shadow any longer.

At the moment of Jesus' death, God miraculously intervened to symbolically demonstrate its meaning for the holy edifice. To show that His death had introduced a new age in which Israelites would at last be able to come to God if they chose, the veil barring access into the Holy of Holies ripped down the centre. The restraining old covenant was dead. If Jesus had died to bring an end to ceremony, the entire temple would have collapsed into a pile of fine rubble. Think about it.

Would God plan a barbaric death for hundreds of thousands of His people, including the elderly, infirm, and children, to announce that the age of shadows had come to an end? The folly of this idea is made as plain as can be by one simple fact — the end was not the end, merely a setback. The temple, and its ceremony, will rise again! Its demise was not due to fading relevance.

**One of Jesus' last acts before His crucifixion was to cleanse the temple. Coming out of the temple, He saw a fig tree in the distance in full leaf — a sure sign of fruit. When He discovered it was in fact barren, He announced that it would bear fruit no more. The leaves quickly withered.**

**The linking of this incident with the cleansing of the temple hints at imminent judgement upon the people whose addiction to temple worship gave them the appearance of godliness, just as a lush leaf cover gave the tree the appearance of fruitfulness. When judgement befell the fig tree, its outward sign of fruitfulness withered away. When judgement befell the people, the token of their godliness was taken from them.**