

BOOK REVIEW

Jerusalem: The Temple Mount

Leen and Kathleen Ritmeyer



By Mark A. Hassler

This volume constitutes “the first modern guide to the Temple Mount for visitors of all religions” (back cover). For decades the Ritmeyers have made significant contributions to biblical archaeology and the study of ancient architecture. Such contributions include Leen’s *magnum opus*, *The Quest: Revealing the Temple Mount in Jerusalem* (Carta, 2006). Resources and information about their firm, Ritmeyer Archaeological Design, appear on their website (www.ritmeyer.com).

The book contains three chapters. Chapter one surveys the history of the Temple Mount from pre-temple times to the present day. Chapter two takes the reader on a guided tour of the Temple Mount’s walls and tunnels. Color-coded headings help distinguish the various walls and tunnels. In chapter three, the tour transitions to the Temple Mount platform and its numerous structures.

Visual aids help one envision the scenes. One-hundred ninety maps, drawings, plans, photos, or illustrations enrich almost every page. “Useful Information” boxes provide up-to-date visitor information for tourists. Sidebars address questions like, “What is the difference between a *Menorah* and a *Hanukiah*?” (22), and “Why did Herod’s Temple continue to be called the Second Temple?” (27). Four appendices appear in the back: (a) “Two Plans of New Testament Links to the Temple Mount,” (b) “Plan of the Cisterns and Underground Structures,” (c) “Plan of Muslim Buildings,” and (d) “Glossary of Archaeological and Architectural Terms.” The second of these appendices invites readers to explore “the vast world that lies beneath the Temple platform” (8). The volume concludes with a select bibliography of twenty entries, an index of ancient sources, and a general index.

The Ritmeyers excel at painting pictures with words in a manner reminiscent of George Adam Smith’s *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land* (3rd ed., Hodder & Stoughton, 1895). A brief excerpt illustrates their use of descriptive language: “One’s first impression on entering the Temple compound is that it is an oasis of calm in the midst of the congested Old City. A vast and dazzling paved area (the size of 24 football fields), with the looming golden Dome of the Rock at its heart, greets the eye. Clumps of trees provide welcome shade and here and there water tinkles from fountains” (95).

Frequently the authors relate the Temple Mount to the biblical text. For instance, they suggest that Abraham offered the animal sacrifice of Genesis 15 on Mount Moriah, a supposition based upon Moriah’s proximity to “the King’s Dale” mentioned in 14:17 (14). Abraham’s binding of Isaac “must have taken place against the backdrop of a bustling city on the southern slopes below” (14). The Ritmeyers elucidate Paul’s circumstances on the staircase of the Antonia Fortress in Acts 21–22 (110), and the attempted stoning of Jesus on Solomon’s Porch per John 10:22–39 (119).

Fascinating facts about the Temple Mount populate the pages. Three examples shall suffice. First, enormous ashlar blocks occupy the Master Course of the Herodian Western Wall. The largest ashlar weighs about two-hundred tons and spans 44 ft (13.45 m), longer than a modern bus (52). Second, near the Golden Gate lies a pile of cedar beams that date as far back as Solomon’s Temple and Herod’s Temple. Some of the beams may have even supported the temples (117). What a shame these beams currently lie exposed to the elements. Third, by observing the architectural evidence, the Ritmeyers pinpoint the location of the Holy of Holies built by Solomon and the resting place of the ark of the covenant (133–35).

The tour guides dispel popular misconceptions about the Temple Mount. For example, Herod the Great, not Solomon, built the Western Wall (45). The Dome of the Spirits covers a Herodian paving slab rather than the foundation stone of the Holy of Holies (128). Araunah’s threshing floor lay slightly east of Mount Moriah’s peak rather than on the peak itself (131–32). The Beautiful Gate, where Peter healed the lame beggar (Acts 3:2, 10), probably refers to the Double Gate rather than the Golden Gate (116).

Tourists, locals, or anyone interested in the Temple Mount can garner valuable information from this accessible work. Some readers, such as this reviewer, will especially appreciate the meticulous architectural reconstruction sketches. Readers seeking a guidebook that encompasses not just the Temple Mount but all Israel may consult Jerome Murphy-O’Connor’s *The Holy Land: An Oxford Archaeological Guide, from Earliest Times to 1700* (5th ed., Oxford University Press, 2008).

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