

*Haram al' sharif* is its name in Arabic. The name means 'the noble enclosure'. It is known to us as 'The Temple Mount'. It is in the site of the second Temple. It is a vast space, generally flat with some trees giving welcome shade.

'Eleven football pitches' is the standard equivalence used by guides and guide books. To create this space, the engineers of King Herod the Great had to lop off the top of a mountain and join it to a mountain next door by building a huge hidden network of arches, which still support this massive structure.

Dominating the whole space is the great Shrine of the Rock, with its glimmering golden dome, real gold,. At present politics mean it is closed to visitors. However I was able to enter on my previous visit to the Land in the 1980s. Then I saw the bare, black rock, directly beneath the Dome, where it is said, Abraham laid Isaac and took a knife to offer him as a burnt offering as God had commanded him.

So it was said, Mount Moriah, where Abraham was directed to his grizzly, unwelcome task was the same as Mount Zion, where Solomon built The Temple to the One God, and sacrifice was offered on the place where Abraham sacrificed a ram in place of his beloved child.

That Temple was destroyed by Nebuchadrezzar and his Babylonian forces in 587 BCE, This catastrophe should have marked the end of the story. As it was it was the real beginning, as the Books we know as Torah and the historical works and much of the Prophetic books came to a final form at the time of Exile and soon thereafter. A new Temple was built attributed to Zerubbabel, a good Babylonian name for a descendant of David. He soon disappears from history; and his Temple disappointed. Those who remembered the Temple of Solomon wept.

It was King Herod, known as 'the Great', whose recent ancestors had been forcibly converted to Judaism, who made the Temple a wonder of the ancient world and a vast space for the great pilgrimage feasts. The Temple made Jerusalem a wealthy and a vibrant place. Work began in 18 BCE and continued until 63CE. Throughout that time the sacrifices continued everyday. In 70CE the Romans destroyed it. The Western Wall remains standing, where Jews can again lament the fate of God's House. The huge stones that make up that wall, more are now in visible in the archaeological park where they fell, show the skill of the builders, and how they meant this edifice to stand for all time. It survived only seven years.

Luke has a great interest in Jerusalem and in the Temple. His story opens in the Temple with the aged priest Zechariah, offering incense at the afternoon service. His Gospel ends in the Temple with the disciples rejoicing and giving thanks to God. From Jerusalem the Word will go out to the ends of the world, via Rome, the world's capital. In his account of Jesus' Temptations he reverses Matthew's order of temptations 2 and 3 so that the Temple, and the pinnacle of the Temple, is the climax.

By the time he is writing Luke is well aware of the fate of Jerusalem, and the Temple. He gives a good description of the siege works the Romans employed. He knows sacrifice is at an end, replaced for Christians by prayer, fellowship and the breaking of bread? So why does he emphasise the role of a destroyed place of worship? Perhaps because of that stone where it was said Abraham had been willing to sacrifice his beloved son in obedience to God's command. That this association is part of the evangelist's thinking is shown at Jesus' baptism, an event which signposts his death. When the heaven's are torn apart the voice of the Father speaks, saying, "This is my beloved son", a clear reference to the Isaac-story.

Luke, who many think was either a Jew or a proselyte, a convert to Judaism, was an educated, literary man. As such he would have been familiar with the writings of this period, many of which re-tell the story of Abraham's 'sacrifice' of his son – which the Jews call the '*Accedah*, the Binding of Isaac. From the second century before Christ onwards this story became very popular though it had little resonance in the Hebrew Bible itself.

In the re-telling Isaac becomes a willing accomplice in his own sacrifice. (After all how could a man over a hundred years old, hold down a youth able to carry wood up a mountain?) This interpretation is taking place at the time of the persecution of the Jews by the Syrian king Antiochus IV Epiphanes who sought to destroy the Jewish faith by making its practices a capital offence. This created many martyrs for whom the willing Isaac became a role-model.

Isaac was the first born of Abraham by Sarah. Israel, the nation was frequently called the first born of God, not least in the context of the slavery in Egypt. Release then came through the sacrifice of a lamb, whose blood is smeared on lintel and doorposts, protecting the first born of the Israelites from 'the Destroyer, who killed the the first born of Egypt. Isaac, the willing victim, at this time also becomes associated with the Passover lamb.

In Christianity these ideas also take hold. So Jesus is the Lamb of God, condemned at the hour the slaughter of the lambs for Passover began in the Temple. And Jesus who goes willingly to his death, in sight of the place where Abraham was willing to offer his own beloved son in sacrifice, will become a new Isaac. Both carrying the wood for their destruction. Father God and Father Abraham give their most important possession for a higher cause.

Luke knew that the action of Abraham and the willingness of Isaac to accept his Father's will had abiding importance as it foreshadowed the death of Christ. So the Temple had to be remembered. In fact in the early centuries of Christianity it was left as a rubbish tip. The Christian focus was and remains up the hill at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the place of Jesus' death and Resurrection, now housed in the most disappointing holy place in the world. But Luke's instincts were right. We understand the New by knowing what has gone before. The *Accedah* will continue to resonate throughout this season of Lent and whenever / wherever people reflect on the sacrifice of a Son to the will of his Father.