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Author(s): Stephen G. Rosenberg
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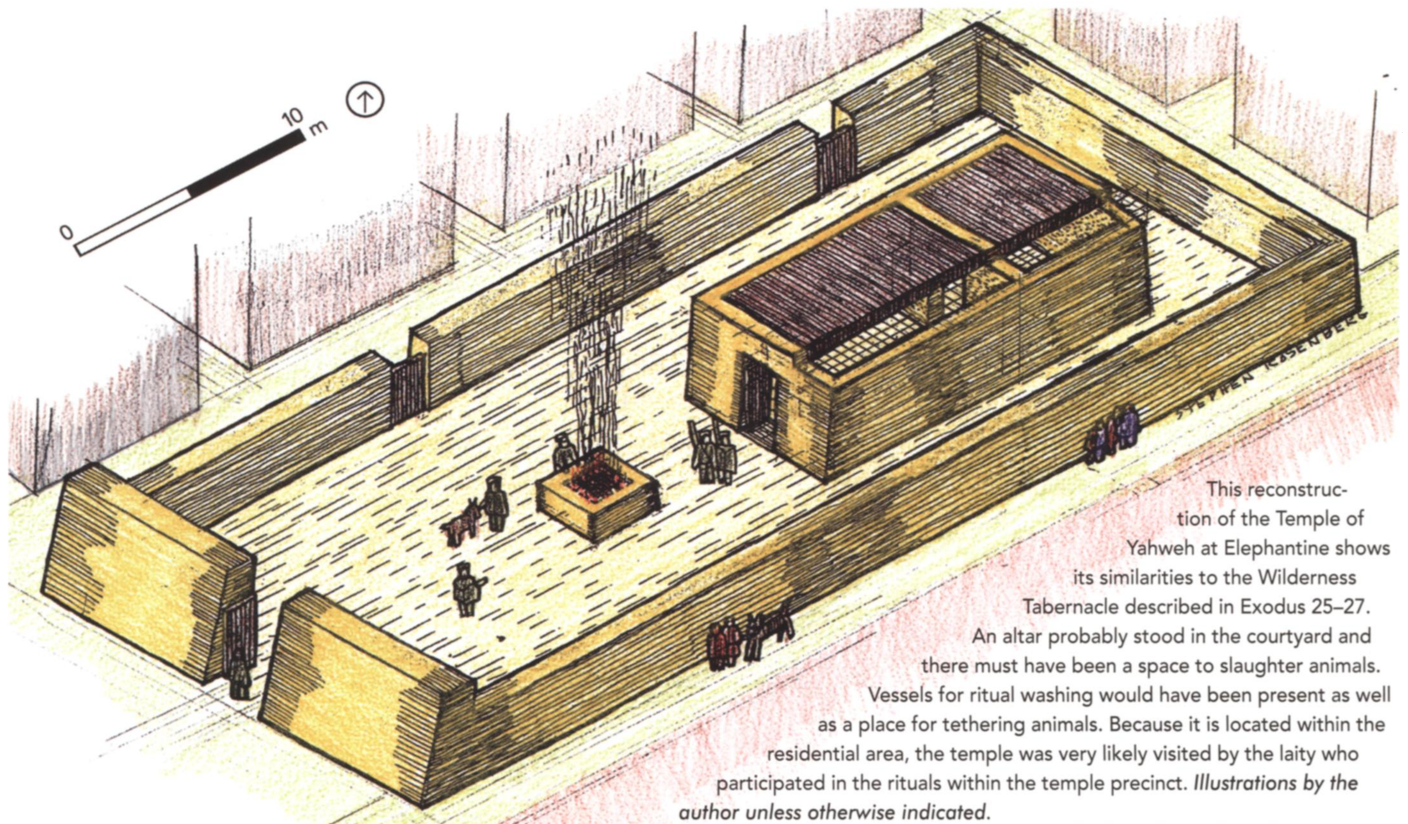
The Jewish Temple at ELEPHANTINE

by Stephen G. Rosenberg



This reconstruction of the Temple of Yahweh at Elephantine shows its similarities to the Wilderness Tabernacle described in Exodus 25–27. An altar probably stood in the courtyard and there must have been a space to slaughter animals. Vessels for ritual washing would have been present as well as a place for tethering animals. Because it is located within the residential area, the temple was very likely visited by the laity who participated in the rituals within the temple precinct. *Illustrations by the author unless otherwise indicated.*

The Jewish military colony at Elephantine Island in southern Egypt is well known from papyri, found some one hundred years ago at Elephantine and nearby Aswan. Describing the lives of a group of mercenaries (in the pay of the Egyptians and later the Persians) who guarded the southern border of Egypt at the first cataract of the Nile in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE, *these contemporary sources tell us that they lived there with their families and had their own temple. Their date of arrival is not known, but they were already well established when Cambyses II of Persia conquered Egypt in 525* BCE.

The papyri, written in Aramaic, are judicial and family documents that list property and marriage contracts and describe the colony's temple, where sacrifices were offered to YHW (Yahweh). One well-known document, known as the Passover Papyrus (dated to 419 BCE), sets out instructions to the colony in the name of Darius II to celebrate the feast of Unleavened Bread on the 14th of Nissan (the first month of Spring) and to drink no beer for seven days. Another papyrus records the destruction of the temple by the Egyptian priests of the nearby temple of Khnum in 410 BCE and the subsequent permission given for it to be rebuilt four years later (Porten 1968: 295).

Since the discovery of some of the papyri in 1893 and the publication of others in 1911, expeditions mounted by German, French and Italian teams, both before and after the First World War, have searched for the Jewish temple, but without success. In 1967, a German team started work at the southern end of Elephantine Island with the aim of identifying the town and

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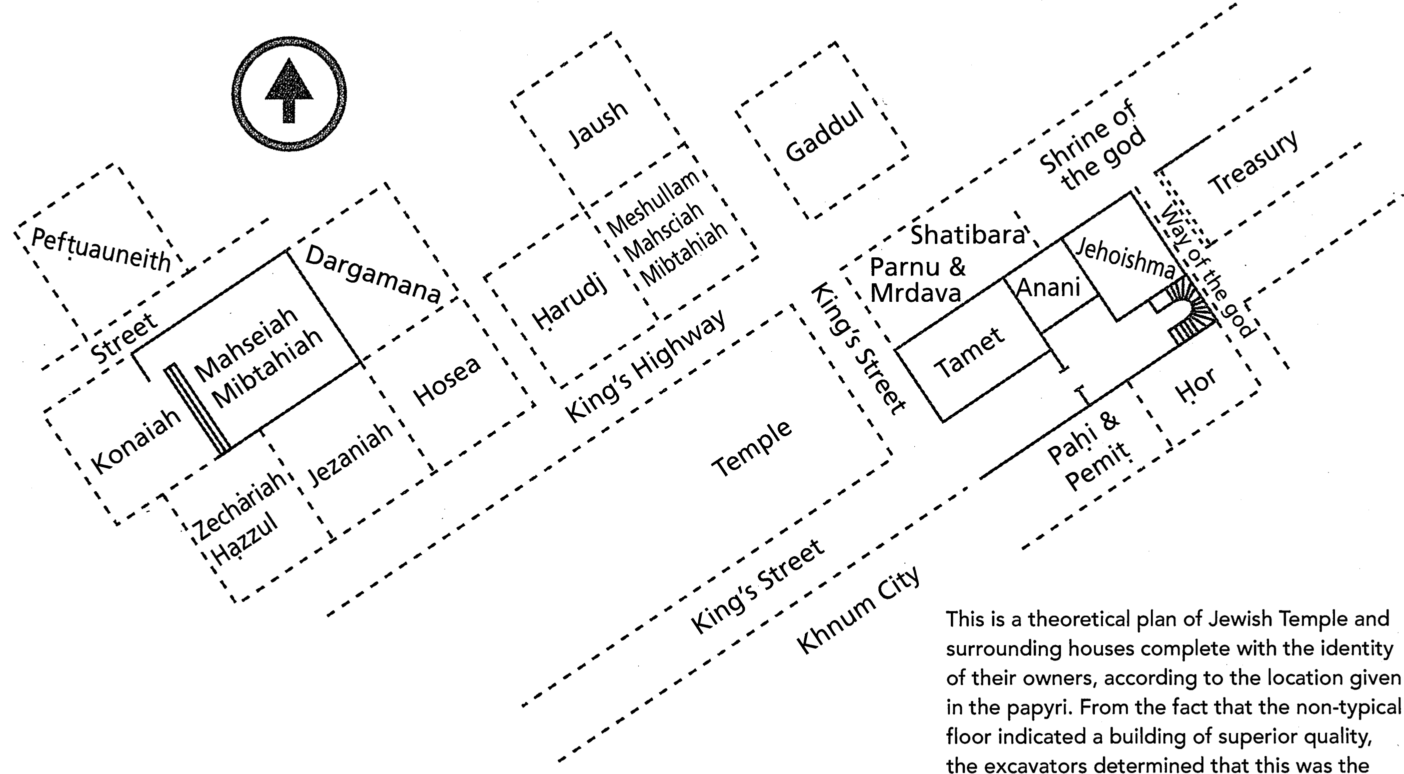
During the New Kingdom and the Late Period in Egypt (ca. 1550 to 332 BCE), the southern end of Elephantine Island was the location of several temple complexes and ritual installations as well as residential quarters. Excavations in this area have uncovered a village dating to the early Persian period that was a Jewish colony. As an island, it was easily defensible. In fact, the ancient town located in the southern part of the island was also a fortress through much of it's history. *After Kaiser (1998: fig. 3).*



This is a theoretical plan of Jewish Temple and surrounding houses complete with the identity of their owners, according to the location given in the papyri. From the fact that the non-typical floor indicated a building of superior quality, the excavators determined that this was the location and remains of the Jewish temple at Elephantine. *After Porten (2003: 83, fig. 12).*

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The Elephantine Papyri

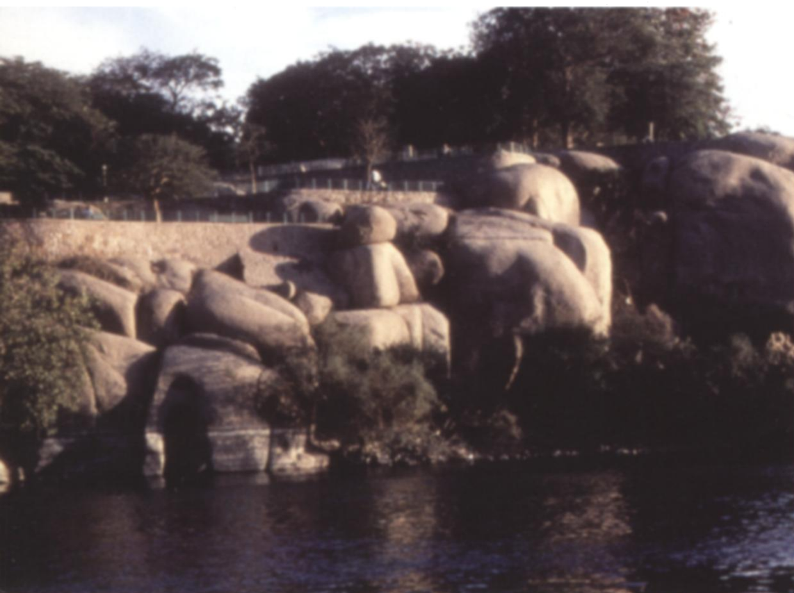
The name Elephantine, called Yeb locally, derives either from the smooth, black, elephant-shaped rocks that surround it and neighbouring Aswan, or from the fact that it was the center of the luxury trade in ivory between Nubia and Egypt (Kraeling 1961: 129). In the fifth century BCE, *the military garrison of Elephantine included a contingent of Jewish mercenaries who formed a colony on the island, some of whose domestic activities were recorded in papyri discovered there some hundred years ago and more.*

In 1893 the American journalist-turned-archaeologist, C. E. Wilbour, traveled extensively in the area and acquired a hoard of papyri from the locals, which he stored in a trunk without much examination. At his death in 1896, the trunk passed to his daughter, who bequeathed the documents to the Brooklyn Art Museum in 1947. Only then were they examined and found to be the family archive of Ananiah, a kind of Levite or "servitor" of the temple of Yahweh on Elephantine (Kraeling 1961: 137). Written in cursive Aramaic, the documents were dated to the period of Persian control over Egypt, assigned to the fifth century BCE, *and eventually were published by Emil Kraeling in 1953.*

The Rev. A. H. Sayce also acquired papyri of this period in Elephantine in 1901, which he presented to the Bodleian Library. In 1903, Lady William Cecil and R. L. Mond acquired more rolls, which went to the Cairo Museum (and one section to the Bodleian). Most importantly, in that year a German archaeological team found a number of additional papyri relating to the Jewish temple. Later they found others, relating to family documents, contracts and inscriptions of the Persian Emperor, Darius II, and a copy of the Story of Ahiqar (an Aramaic folk tale widespread in the neo-Assyrian and later periods in the Near East). This material, found by the Germans, was promptly published by E. Sachau in 1911 (Porten 1995: 58). All the legible Aramaic papyri found up to 1920 were conveniently published by Arthur Cowley in 1923 and later, together with others, by Bezalel Porten in 1968.

The temple is described in the Aramaic documents as an egora *(shrine), which implies an altar in the open air, or a plain shrine, roofed and entered by several doorways. The building was dedicated to Yahweh, to whom animal sacrifices were offered, and served a local community of Jewish militia. A papyrus dated to 407* BCE *claims that it had stood from before the Persian conquest of Egypt by Cambyses (in 525* BCE*), and that he had destroyed many temples but spared the Jewish one (Cowley 1923: 30).*

The papyri gave detailed descriptions of some of the houses of the Jewish colony, as they were handed down from parents to wives and children, and their location in a fairly tight-knit complex around the temple. From this information, Porten was able to prepare a tentative plan of the complex and to suggest that the temple occupied a central site of about twenty cubits by sixty cubits (ten by thirty meters). These measurements, he said, "were reminiscent of Solomon's Temple (1 Kgs 6:2)" and he added that the building was probably smaller, situated in a courtyard measuring sixty by twenty cubits (Porten 1968: 110).



The name Elephantine is derived from the Greek word for elephant. Some scholars believe that the name of the island was inspired by the smooth black rocks that surround the island and neighbouring Aswan. These large boulders in the river near the island resemble bathing elephants, particularly from afar.

its Egyptian temples over the centuries from the earliest times to the Roman era (Kaiser 1998). Their excavations uncovered an "Aramaic" quarter of the 27th Dynasty, the early Persian period, which equates to that of the Jewish colony. Eventually in 1997, at the heart of this village, they found a piece of tiled flooring much superior to that found in the mudbrick houses around. They identified this as the floor of the Jewish temple, which was confirmed by the location given in the documents researched by Porten (1968). Parts of the walls of the temple and the surrounding courtyard were identified, but a large section of the western end of the site had been lost because of the land falling away, due to erosion or subsidence.

No altar was found, but there is literary evidence for animal and, later, cereal sacrifices. The altar may have stood in the area of ground that had fallen away. The documents tell us that the shrine had a roof of cedar wood and five stone-lined doorways with bronze hinges, and this evidence, together with the recent archaeological discoveries of the German team, led by Cornelius von Pilgrim, have enabled me to produce a tentative reconstruction.

History of the Temple

Porten suggested that the Jews may have come to Elephantine as a military garrison in about the middle of the seventh

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The ram-headed god Khnum (pictured on the left in a painting from the Tomb of Nefertari at Luxor) was particularly worshiped at Elephantine as he was credited with directing the annual inundation of the Nile, which was assumed to be controlled from the first cataract. The cemetery of Rams on Elephantine Island (above) indicates the reverence with which the Egyptians regarded the god's sacred animal. The cemetery dates from the Ptolemaic period, but was built on an earlier one. The destruction of the Jewish Temple there may have resulted from the outrage with which the priests of the Khnum temple regarded the Jewish sacrifice of these animals. The priests had reason to resent the Jewish sacrifices, particularly the sacrifice of sheep at the Passover festival.

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century BCE, during the reign of Manasseh in Judah, to aid Psammetichus I in his campaigns against Nubia (cf. Lewy and Lewy 1968: 135) and in an attempt to dislodge the overarching power of Assyria (Porten 1968: 119). This early date would have given the Jewish mercenaries considerable time to get established and set up a communal temple well before 525 BCE. However, it is also possible that the Jews came only after 597 BCE, the date of the first invasion of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, when considerable numbers were exiled (2 Kgs 24:16) or even after 586 BCE, when the Babylonians returned and destroyed the Solomonic Temple. It was then that large numbers fled to Egypt taking the prophet Jeremiah with them (Jer 43:5–7). Such a date still leaves ample time for the Jewish colony to establish itself and build a temple prior to Cyrus' conquest in 525 BCE (Kraeling 1961: 142).

In 410 BCE, the priests of the adjoining Khnum temple solicited the aid of a corrupt Persian official Waidrang, who sent his son Nephayan with Egyptian troops from Syene (Aswan) to destroy the Jewish temple. The papyri relate how they destroyed the doors and roof of the temple and set fire to it after first looting the gold and silver vessels (Cowley

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The multi-storied mudbrick Houses of the "Aramaean Quarter" at Elephantine discovered by the German Team date from the early part of the Persian period (525 to 404 BCE) and were structures with primitive finishes and beaten earth floors.

1923: 30). The papyri describe the temple as having five doors, set on bronze hinges in stone-lined doorways (implying that the rest of the structure was of mudbrick) and roof beams of cedar wood.

The reasons for this destruction are not given, and the explanation may be complex. The simple view is that the priests of the Khnum temple were outraged to see the Jews sacrifice animals, some of which were sacred to their god Khnum. In their work on the island, the German team found a cemetery of rams, the animal sacred to Khnum. It was of the Ptolemaic period but based on an earlier one. The ram-headed Khnum was particularly worshiped at this location (Kaiser 1998: 29) as he was credited with directing the annual inundation of the Nile, which was assumed to be controlled from the first cataract. The priests had reason to resent the Jewish sacrifices, particularly the sacrifice of sheep at the Passover festival, which the garrison observed. A papyrus of Darius II, dated to 418/9 BCE, reminds them to keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Cowley 1923: 21). Why the priests of Khnum waited over one hundred years to vent their anger on the temple is not clear, and there may have been another reason for the destruction.

The discovery of this section of tiled floor in 1997 suggested a building of superior quality. The floor that the German team discovered was about five meters square, in an area between the residential "Aramaean Quarter" of the 27th Dynasty and the north wall of the extended Khnum temple.

At the time, the priests were in the process of extending the Khnum temple northwards where it would be directly across from the courtyard wall of the Jewish temple. Between the two temples lay the main thoroughfare across the island, called "the street of the king" in the documents (Porten 1968: 110) and it would have become dangerously constricted if not actually blocked. When the Jewish Temple was built, part of the road had already been diverted to the north. With the building of their extension, the Khnum priests presumably got permission to restore the street by removing the Jewish temple courtyard wall, and they took the opportunity to destroy the temple as well (von Pilgrim 2003).

The priests had chosen an appropriate moment to attack the Jewish temple—when the Persian Governor Arsames was abroad paying homage to the emperor, Darius II. After three years, the Jews of Elephantine appealed to the Temple in Jerusalem for help, without success. But they did receive permission (possibly verbal) from the Persian governor of Yehud (Judah) to reconstruct the temple, and it was rebuilt shortly

The tile floor of the Jewish Temple was surrounded by mudbrick walls, with a thickness of one meter, and set within a large rectangle of walling around a paved area surfaced in plaster. This portion of the south enclosure wall to the Temple shows part of the courtyard.

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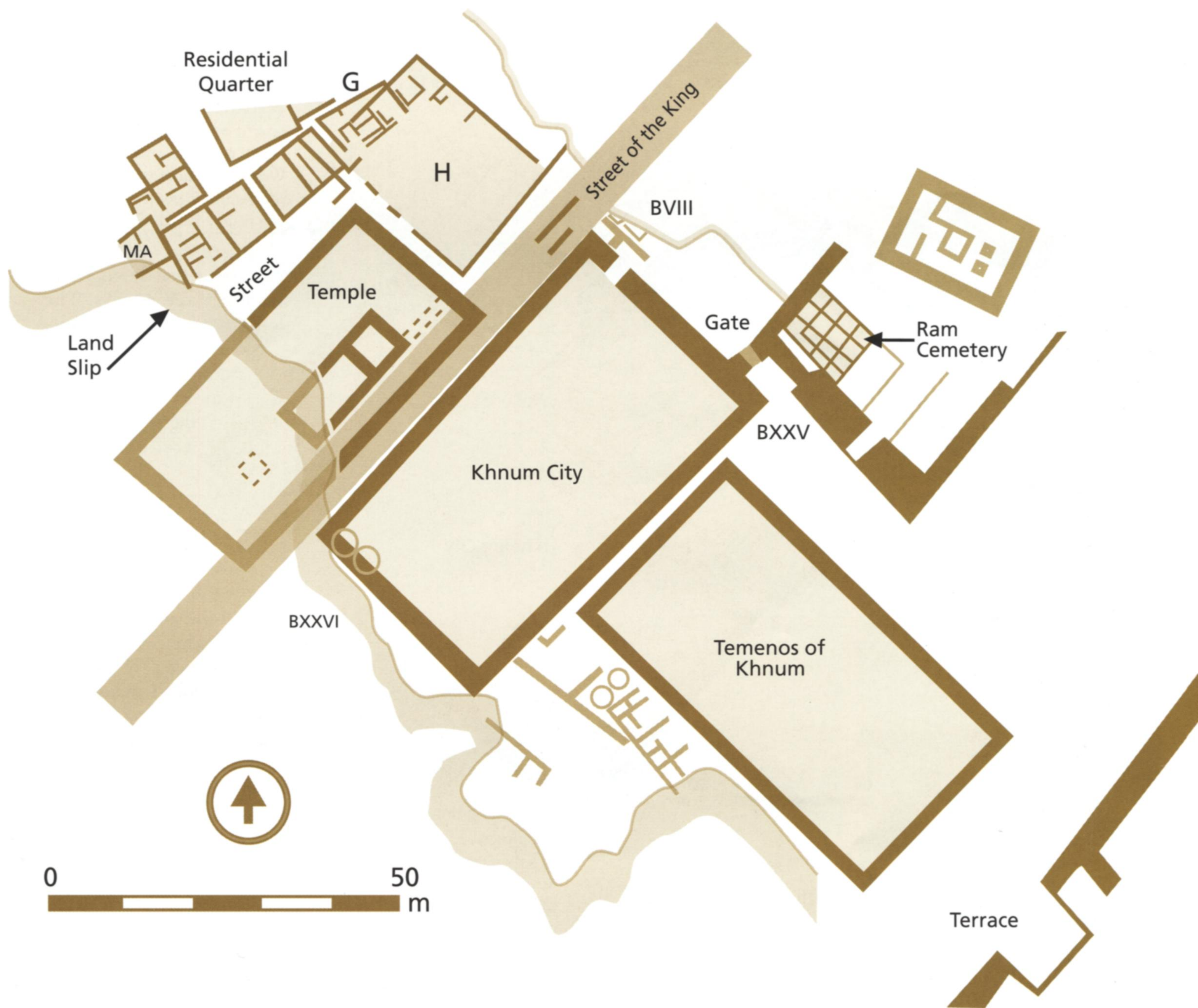

As the German Excavation's plan of the temple (second phase) and Khnum City shows, the length of the flooring and walls were not fully recoverable. The original ground level had fallen away completely on the west side of the site. *Based on von Pilgrim (l999: fig. 17).*

afterwards, on condition that animal sacrifices would not be conducted there, only "meal offerings and incense" (Porten 1968: 292). A second condition required that the courtyard wall of the rebuilt temple had to be clear of "the street of the king." Thus, the rebuilt temple was now asymmetrically placed within its courtyard.

The temple must have been rebuilt sometime before 402 BCE, when it is mentioned in a document of sale of an adjoining house, which stands to the east of the temple (Porten 1968: 295). How long the temple stood after that we cannot say. The papyri documents end in 399 BCE (Porten 1968: 296) but it was not yet destroyed when the Persians were expelled from Egypt around 400 BCE. This is surprising, as the Jews, having served as mercenaries in the pay of the Persians, may have lost their protectors and indeed their *raison d'être* on Elephantine Island. Abandoned it eventually must have been, however, and when the excavators found the tiled floor of the temple, it was covered with animal dung. The second phase of the temple, it seems, was not destroyed but was used as a stable, presumably in an act of deliberate desecration.

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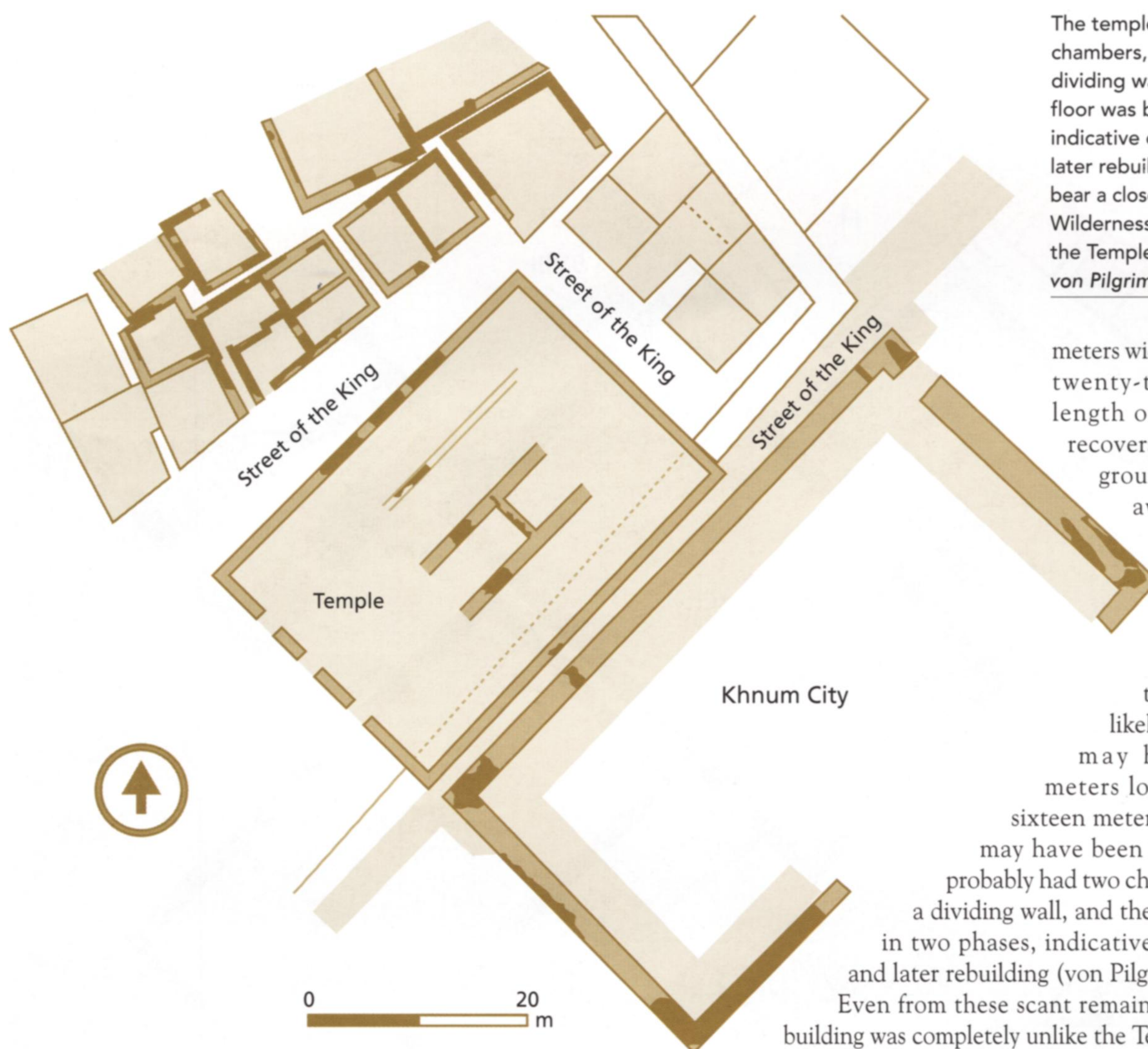

The temple probably had two chambers, as indicated by a dividing wall, and the tiled floor was built in two phases, indicative of destruction and later rebuilding. The remains bear a closer resemblance to the Wilderness Tabernacle than to the Temple in Jerusalem. *After von Pilgrim (2002: fig. 12).*

The Architectural Tradition of the Jewish Temple at Elephantine

The floor that the German team discovered on the site in 1997 was about five meters square, in an area between the residential "Aramaean Quarter" of the 27th Dynasty and the north wall of the extended Khnum temple. The multi-storied mudbrick houses here dated to the first Persian period (525 to 404 BCE) and were structures with primitive finishes and beaten earth floors. The existence of an area of tiled floor suggested a building of superior quality. The floor was surrounded by mudbrick walls, with a thickness of one meter, and set within a large rectangle of walling around a paved area surfaced in plaster. In accordance with the location given in the papyri and Porten's interpretation of them and the fact that the non-typical floor indicated a building of superior quality, the excavators determined that this was the location and remains of the Jewish temple at Elephantine.

It was now clear that the dimensions suggested by Porten (about thirty by ten meters) referred to the courtyard rather than to the building itself. The temple building was only six meters wide and the courtyard twenty-three meters. The length of neither was fully recoverable, as the original ground level had fallen away completely on the west side of the site. From the plan of the residential area and the Khnum temple wall, it seems likely that the courtyard may have been forty meters long and the temple sixteen meters long, though both may have been longer. The temple probably had two chambers, indicated by a dividing wall, and the tiled floor was built in two phases, indicative of the destruction and later rebuilding (von Pilgrim 2002).

Even from these scant remains it is clear that the building was completely unlike the Temple in Jerusalem as described in the Bible (1 Kgs 6 and 2 Chr 3). Elephantine was a small shrine of two narrow chambers set in a large courtyard. Within an open space surrounding it on all four sides, it bore a closer resemblance to the Wilderness Tabernacle or Mishkan (Exod 25) rather than to any description of the Solomonic Temple, which was much larger and did not stand in an open courtyard. Although proponents of the Critical School earlier concluded that the Tabernacle was a "pious fiction" (Cross 1961: 203) and Wellhausen stated categorically that "the truth is that the Tabernacle is the copy, not the prototype, of the Temple of Jerusalem" (1957: 37), later opinion has seen the biblical description as one based on earlier models. In particular Frank Moore Cross, Jr. considers it to have been based on the ceremonial tent of David, as mentioned briefly in 2 Sam 6:17 (1961: 214).

Shiloh's tented shrine, as the covenant sanctuary central to the twelve-tribe amphictyony and the place from which the Ark was taken to fight the Philistines (1 Sam 4:4), would appear to be a more likely model (Josh 18:1; 1 Sam 1:9 and 2 Sam 7:6). To date however, expeditions to Shiloh have recovered no evidence of such a building. According to one excavator, the elaborate Iron Age I pillared structure in Area C, on the west slope of the *tel* may have acted as storerooms beneath an important

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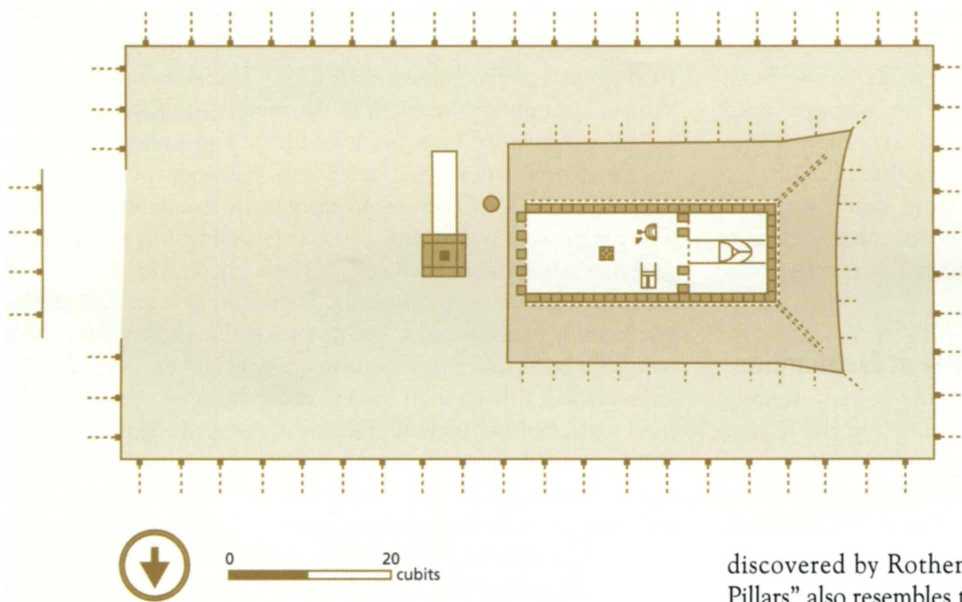

The Wilderness Tabernacle, or Mishkan, of Exodus 25–27 is described as a shrine including both a cella and *naos*, ten cubits wide and thirty cubits long overall (Exod 26:16–22). It stood in a courtyard of fifty by one hundred cubits (Exod 27:11–13), of which the major part, containing the sacrificial altar, was in front of the shrine.

construction such as a shrine (Finkelstein 1993: 29–30), but nothing remains above on the surface of the *tel* to confirm such a suggestion. Charles Wilson and others have claimed that the small plateau north of the *tel* was the possible site of the tent but later excavations found no remains of Iron Age I date, and this proposal was, therefore, dismissed by Finkelstein (see Kaufman 1988).

The distinction of being the first Israelite temple to be found in an archaeological context belongs to Arad in Israel, where such a structure was excavated in 1963. Aharoni dated it, in its three phases, from the tenth to the seventh centuries BCE, and believed it to be a true Israelite sanctuary, with an altar for burnt offerings, an incense altar and offering tables, and without any sign of figurines or pagan votive offerings (1973: 3). In its main phase, it stood as a single chamber of three by ten meters oriented north to south, that is, with its entrance from the east and its holy of holies in a niche or adyton on the west wall. Its orientation was similar to that of the Tabernacle but it was built on a broadroom plan.

The Arad Temple had an outer courtyard with a central altar to the east of the shrine, except that the courtyard was only to one side and did not extend around the sides and rear of the shrine. Aharoni claimed that the three by ten meter plan of the temple, equivalent to six by twenty cubits, conformed to the dimensions of the cella of the Mishkan, although that is described as being ten by twenty cubits and extending a further ten cubits for the holy of holies, or *naos*. Similar to the shrine discovered at Elephantine, the Arad temple served as a military establishment (1967: 248).

Herzog (1983) has suggested that a temple with a similar plan and orientation was found at Beersheba—another site excavated by Aharoni. The large open-air altar here (recovered from Stratum II) together with earlier and later remains, point to a shrine and courtyard parallel to that of Arad, but here located in the center of the town of Stratum III. Herzog suggests that it stood from the tenth to the seventh centuries BCE as at Arad. Although disputed by Yadin (1976) and others, the proximity of time and place between the remains at Arad and Beersheba (twenty-five kilometers apart) make the similarity of their shrines plausible.

The small miner's temple at Timna, discovered by Rothenberg in 1966 at the foot of "Solomon's Pillars" also resembles the design of the Wilderness Tabernacle. It clearly started as an Egyptian shrine but in its latest phase (twelfth century BCE) it became a tented Midianite one with a square cella of about nine by nine meters around a small inner *naos* set against the rock face (Rothenberg 1972: 125–29). It is the only known ancient shrine with a tented covering (Rothenberg 1972: fig. 44).

The so-called Solar Shrine at Lachish, first uncovered by Starkey in the 1930s and reinvestigated by Aharoni in 1966, also bears comparison. Although the original excavators had assigned it to the Persian period, and Aharoni dates it to the Hellenistic period, he claimed that its similarity to the Arad shrine indicates that there was an earlier cult center at Lachish associated with Israelite worship. As he says, the similarities with Arad are striking. The shrine is somewhat larger but of the same proportions; the cella is a broadroom four by twelve meters and the eastern courtyard twelve by fifteen meters. The orientation is the same as Arad and the adyton is also in the center of the western wall and approached by three steps. However there is no sign of an altar in the courtyard (Aharoni 1968: 157–60 and fig. 1). If indeed it existed in an earlier phase, as Aharoni claims, the differences between the Lachish shrine and the Wilderness Tabernacle would be the same as those for Arad and Beersheba.

In connection with the Hellenistic shrine at Lachish, Aharoni mentions the contemporary Jewish Temple of Onias at Leontopolis (1968: 162). This is the only other known Jewish temple in Egypt besides Elephantine. The circumstances of its rise and fall are well-known from Josephus but its physical details are in great doubt, especially as the description of it in *Antiquities* varies from that in *The Jewish Wars*. In the first (13: 64–72) Josephus describes it as modeled on the Temple of Jerusalem, while in the second (7: 426–32) he says it is a fortress and temple unlike that of Jerusalem, with a tower sixty cubits high. It must be added that the siting and reconstruction proposed by W. M. Flinders Petrie (1906: 19–27), who located it at Tel el-Yehudiya, is suspect and has not received further corroboration. In a recent visit to the site, I remained unconvinced and, in any case, any

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similarity to a known Jewish temple or indeed the description of the Wilderness Tabernacle must remain tentative.

Cross raises the fascinating possibility that the "enormous platform of unhewn stones" on Mount Gerizim above Shechem, which "reveals no trace of a superstructure" might have "once held a tabernacle or similar impermanent structure, which would have left no trace after destruction" (1981: 117–18). He goes on to suggest a similar possibility at the earlier shrine of Dan (1981: 118 n. 34). I mention these two speculative ideas as they relate the persistence of the Wilderness Tabernacle model in the northern kingdom of Israel.

Possible Origins of the Jewish Colony at Elephantine

The style and layout of the Elephantine Jewish Temple suggests that the Jewish mercenaries originated in the former northern kingdom of Israel and not in Judah at the time of Manasseh, or later, during the conquests of Jerusalem. After the death of Josiah in battle with Pharaoh Necho II in 609 BCE, Judah, including former Israel, came under the domination of the Egyptians (2 Kgs 23:33) and Jewish soldiers were fighting under Egyptian orders in Babylon and elsewhere. It is very possible that these troops, originating in the north, would later be taken, forcibly or voluntarily, to serve in Egypt and perhaps reach that country in about 600 BCE, some eighty years before their temple at Elephantine was preserved by Cambyses II in 525 BCE (Cowley 1923: no. 30). If, as Cross has suggested, the memory of the Mishkan remained with the people of Israel (the northern kingdom) then their setting up of a shrine in its form would be much more likely than building one on the lines of the Solomonic Temple. It might also suit them to build a shrine in Egypt in defiance of the centralizing reforms of 622 BCE by Josiah, which obviously caused much dismay among the remaining peoples of the northern kingdom.

From what we have briefly summarized here of Jewish temples and shrines, one can now see that the remains at Elephantine come closer to the description of the Wilderness Tabernacle in Exodus 25–27 than any other known remains. The Wilderness Tabernacle, or Mishkan, is described as a two-room shrine, cella and *naos*, ten cubits wide and thirty cubits long overall, or about five by fifteen meters (Exod 26:16–22). It stood in a courtyard of fifty by one hundred cubits (Exod. 27: 11–13) or twenty-five by fifty meters, of which the major part, containing the sacrificial altar, was in front of the shrine. In the case of Elephantine, the shrine was six by sixteen meters and the courtyard twenty-three by forty meters. Both may have been longer, as explained above, and the courtyard undoubtedly held an altar to offer the sacrifices so resented by the priests of Khnum. Nevertheless, even the scant remains indicate that the proportions of the shrine and its courtyard were similar to those of the description of the Mishkan, whose shrine was of the proportion of three to one and the courtyard two to one. Where the Elephantine temple did not conform is in its orientation, having its presumed entrance (now missing) to the southwest and its *naos* to the northeast, but this can be taken to be the accident of its location between the "Aramaean Quarter" of the Jewish mercenary colony and the "street of the king."

On the few pieces of evidence known to us, we have attempted to reconstruct the temple of Yahweh at Elephantine. The building stands off-center within the courtyard, to allow the southern wall to avoid part of the "street of the king." There are five doorways shown, but only two of them to the temple itself, leaving three for the courtyard. The doors would have had stone framing (as described in the letter of 407 BCE) but the remainder of the walls are in mudbrick, to the thickness indicated in the foundations as found. The temple roof is of beams of solid cedar, as in the documents, and they would have been covered by a good layer of plastered mud, probably renewed annually. That there was an altar in the courtyard is to be assumed, but its form cannot be known. There will have been space to slaughter animals and drainage for the excess blood, though in its second phase the altar was only to be used for cereal sacrifices and incense. As in descriptions of the Wilderness Tabernacle and the Solomonic Temple, there were probably vessels for ritual washing (Exod 30:18) and space for tethering animals. Being so closely located within the residential area, it is possible that the laity participated in the ritual within the temple site, as they did in the shrine at Shiloh (1 Sam 1:12), and therefore there were several doorways to the courtyard. This, of course, had not been the case in the Temple of Jerusalem, whose inner precincts were reserved for the priests and the Levites alone.

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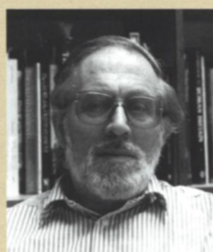
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephen Rosenberg has worked as architect and surveyor on numerous digs in Israel over the last thirty years, including Lachish, Shilo, Tel Hanaton and Tel Miqne-Ekron. He earned his Ph.D. in 2003 from University College, London and is currently a post-doctoral associate fellow at the Albright Institute in Jerusalem, and Honorary Secretary of the Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society in London.



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