

# THE PILLARS OF THE TEMPLE

RAYMOND APPLE

Among the notable features of Solomon's Temple were the two monumental pillars or columns which formed a major artistic feature of the Sanctuary. Our first question is: What were these pillars made of? I Kings 7:15 states that they were made of *nehoshet*, a word that the biblical text employs in a rather indeterminate sense: it can mean pure copper or a copper alloy. *Nehoshet* is generally translated to mean copper, but the pillars are more likely to have been made of bronze, an alloy of copper with a small amount of tin. This material is more durable than copper or stone and was used for various building materials in the ancient world. The JPS translation thus reads *columns of bronze*. According to II Chronicles 4:16, all the Temple vessels were made of *nehoshet maruk*, "burnished bronze."

The pillars were heavy structures: *one column was 18 cubits high and measured 12 cubits in circumference* (I Kgs. 7:15) – about 8.2 m tall and 1.8 m thick. They were probably made in parts, cast in clay molds (II Chron. 4:17), taken to Jerusalem, and assembled there. Not only the pillars but the whole edifice required the making and moving of massive materials, which could be handled with relative ease today, but would then have created major technical difficulties. Recognizing the magnitude of the problem, *Song of Songs Rabbah* 1:1, 5 posits that the stones of the Temple carried themselves and placed themselves in position.

Superficially, it seems that the pillars stood outside the entrance of the Temple, although we cannot be sure how far outside the doors they were. In place of the ambiguous phrase *le-ulam ha-heikhal* (lit. "for the portico of the hall"; I Kgs. 7:21), II Chronicles 3:15 has *lifnei ha-bayit* – *before [in front of] the house*, while verse 17 of that chapter has *al-penei ha-heikhal* – *in front of the hall*. Keil comments, "This unquestionably implies that the two brazen pillars stood unconnected in front of the hall, on the right and left sides of it and not within the hall as supporters of the roof. Nevertheless many have decided in favor of the latter view."<sup>1</sup> An exterior location is generally adopted

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in depictions of the Temple, although a location *inside* the entrance is supported by David Kimḥi, who reads *le-ulam ha-heikhal* as if it were *ba-ulam*, *in the hall*. By adding the phrase *bi-khenisat ha-bayit* ("at the entrance of the building"), he seems to imply that the pillars were just inside the hall.

The Bible deals with the pillars in three main passages: I Kings 7:15-22, 41-42 (cf. II Kings 25:17); II Chronicles 3:17; and Jeremiah 52:20-23. The version in I Kings reads, *He [Hiram] set up the columns at the portico of the Great Hall; he set up one column on the right and named it Jachin, and he set up the other column on the left and named it Boaz. Upon the top of the columns there was a lily design. Thus the work of the columns was completed* (verses 21-22). The text in II Chronicles states: *He erected the columns in front of the Great Hall, one to its right and one to its left; the one to the right was called Jachin, and the one to the left, Boaz*. The measurements in I Kings 7:15-20 differ from those in Jeremiah, presumably reflecting renovations and alterations made over the years, or perhaps measuring standards had changed.

I Kings implies, but does not clearly state, that the pillars were solid. According to Jeremiah, they were hollow, *navuv* (verse 21), a term rendered by the Targum as *halil* and by Rashi as *halul*. *Navuv*, from a root meaning "to hollow out", can have a figurative sense (*ish navuv* in Job 11:12 is an empty-headed man), but here it is probably meant literally. Hollow casting was known in ancient Egypt and may have been used for ease of manufacture and handling.

The pillars did not survive the destruction of the First Temple; Jeremiah 52:17 reports: *The Chaldeans broke up the bronze columns of the House of the Lord*. II Kings 25:13 has a similar account. The pillars were carried away in pieces for ease of transportation. When the Second Temple was built, they were not returned and we have no record of new pillars being constructed to replace them. For this and other reasons, the Second Temple and Herod's reconstructed Sanctuary were not identical with the First Temple.<sup>2</sup>

Taken together, the texts of I Kings and Jeremiah raise three major questions:

- a. The Significance of the Names of the Pillars
- b. The Purpose of the Pillars
- c. The Orientation of the Pillars

## THE NAMES OF THE PILLARS

It is strange for parts of the Temple to have proper names, though elsewhere there are name-bearing cairns and pillars, e.g., Gal-ed, *mound* (or *stone-heap*) of *witness* (Gen. 31:47) and Mizpah, *watch-tower* (Gen. 31:49). The nearest to a biblical cultic example is when Moses *built an altar and named it Adonai-nissi, The Lord is my banner* (Ex. 17:15).

Boaz is vocalized differently in some versions. While that of the Masoretic text is *Bo'az*, the Septuagint in I Kings 7:21 has *Ba-az* and in II Chronicles 3:17 *Be-az*, although it must be pointed out that there are often variant texts within the Septuagint.<sup>3</sup> In the Vulgate the name is *Bo'oz*. However, all versions of the name contain the same key word *oz*, "strength." Jachin (*Yakhin*) derives from a root that means "to establish". The two words, when conjoined, could form the headlines of a nationalistic slogan connected with the royal dynasty. *Bo'az* might signify *In His [God's] strength shall the king rejoice* (cf. Ps. 44:9), and *Yakhin, God will establish the throne of David forever* (cf. I Kings 9:5). If the names refer to the Temple and not the monarchy, they may be part of an inscription such as *God will establish the Temple and make it firm* (or: *give it strength, in His strength, or: through it Israel will be strong*, a possible reference to Psalm 29:11, *May the Lord grant strength [oz] to His people*).

This is the view of Radak (Kimḥi) in his exegesis of I Kings. The *Da'at Mikra* edition of Kings notes a suggestion that the name *Yakhin* reflects a verse in the Song of the Sea, *The sanctuary [makhon?], O Lord, which Your hands established* (Ex. 15:17).<sup>4</sup> If this suggestion is valid, we might find a *Bo'az* reference earlier in verse 2 of the same chapter: *The Lord is my strength [ozzi] and might*.

*Midrash Tadshe*, a pseudepigraphic work traditionally ascribed to the second-century *tanna* Pinḥas ben Ya'ir, attaches a cosmic symbolism to the Sanctuary, connecting the pillars with the moon and the sun. According to this *midrash*, Jachin represents the moon, since the Psalmist affirms: *David's throne shall be established [yikkon] forever as the moon* (Ps. 89:38); while the moon determines the festivals for Israel, as it is written, *He appointed the moon to mark the seasons* (Ps. 104:19). Boaz represents the sun which comes forth in power and strength, as it is written, *He [the sun] rejoices like a strong man to run his course* (Ps. 19:6).<sup>5</sup>

The imaginative interpretation of the Freemasons, who were greatly enamored of Solomon's Temple and its architecture, makes Jachin and Boaz historical figures. Boaz would refer to the great-grandfather of King David and Jachin to the assistant high priest who, they believed, officiated at the dedication of the Temple. Jachin appears in the 21<sup>st</sup> of the 24 divisions of priests listed in I Chronicles (24:17). However, there is no obvious reason to link David's forebear (despite his piety and integrity) with the Temple; and even less logic in plucking out of obscurity a minor priest called Jachin and claiming that he held high office and officiated at the dedication of the Sanctuary. (In I Kings 8, where the dedication of the Temple is narrated, Solomon is the major officiant and no priest is mentioned by name.) Freemasonry may have confused Jachin with a person bearing a similar name, Hanina "the deputy High Priest," who figures in Mishna *Avot* 3:2.

Modern edifices sometimes record the names of their architect and builders (or donors) in or on a building, but it is unlikely that a similar wish led to the naming of the pillars of the Temple, especially in view of the solemnity with which the Bible commands the use of the two names and the fact that no record exists of architects, artisans or donors called Boaz or Jachin.

Whether the names were actually inscribed on the pillars is not certain, but this is not impossible in view of a precedent – the phrase *Kodesh la-Adonai, Holy to the Lord* (Ex. 28:36), being engraved on the High Priest's frontlet. There is therefore a possibility that words hinting at God or His attributes of strength and stability were inscribed on the pillars: Psalm 93:2 states that His throne is *nakhon* ("firmly established"), from the same root as *Yakhin*.

#### THE PURPOSE OF THE PILLARS

It is tempting to suppose that the pillars were originally designed, following precedents in Arad, Megiddo, etc., to hold up the roof of the portico. However, in view of contemporary precedents, they were more probably free-standing and merely ornamental, the main feature of a monumental entrance plaza. Pillars provided a ceremonial entrance to other ancient buildings, as indicated by archaeological discoveries in many parts of the region and confirmed by artistic representations on ancient coins from Cyprus, Sidon, etc. Herodotus (2:44) and other authors describe pillars of this kind. Cleopatra's Needle in London may be a surviving example of a free-standing obelisk.

Pursuant to this usage, some old churches in Europe and elsewhere have twin free-standing columns which, in time, became a popular artistic symbol. The cathedral of Würzburg has shafts bearing the names Jachin and Boaz, while a historic synagogue in Worms had columns near the Ark bearing Hebrew words derived from I Kings 7:15-16. Various medieval Hebrew manuscripts contained illustrations of the Temple, but these related to the Second Temple, which had no Jachin and Boaz.

It is possible that Hiram exerted an influence on the introduction and design of the original pillars, since in Tyre (his city of origin) two pillars stood outside the temple of Hercules.<sup>6</sup>

The pillars may have had a ceremonial purpose, the king receiving an official position next to Jachin. II Kings 11:14 speaks of him *omed al ha-ammud ka-mishpat*, which the JPS renders *standing by the pillar, as was the custom*, although *ammud* could mean "a platform." If the king had a recognized place to stand, the High Priest (at his consecration or regularly) may also have been accorded an official position next to Boaz. This would have indicated the (ideal or theoretical) symmetry of temporal and spiritual power.<sup>7</sup>

Things that come in twos, like earth and heaven or male and female, can easily be seen to provide dual explanations for the two pillars. Viewing the symmetry in this way invites interpretation, whichever way we regard the pillars, either as utilitarian in purpose or merely symbolic.

Robertson Smith believed that they had a utilitarian, cultic role as high fire-altars. Alternatively, the pillars could have served as the base for braziers or another form of external lighting that pointed the way into the Temple at night.<sup>8</sup> This may have been the reason for the bowls (*gullot*) on top of the capitals (I Kings 7:41). Zechariah 4:2-3 uses *gullah* for a bowl of oil on top of a golden candlestick. However, if the pillars were pedestals for exterior lighting, the biblical account would presumably have mentioned this. Much the same could be said about W. F. Albright's notion of incense stands.

Albright argued that the pillars could have represented the metaphorical columns (sometimes known as Pillars of the East or Pillars of the Dawn – see Zech. 6:1) through which the sun rose in the morning to pour its light into the Sanctuary. By contrast, rabbinic thinking averred that the Sanctuary needed no light from outside. Since the Temple was the House of God, the source of all light, the light appeared from inside and *came out of* the Temple. Thus,

according to *Exodus Rabbah* 36:1, "The Temple gave light to the whole world." Alternatively, Albright suggests, the pillars denoted the twin qualities of endurance and continuity (of the building or the Davidic dynasty), or they symbolized the columns of fire and cloud which led the Israelites through the wilderness.<sup>9</sup>

Jewish commentators tend to treat both the pillars themselves and their duality as symbols.<sup>10</sup> Suggestions include the notion that they represent two trees of life; the pillars of cloud and fire in the wilderness; the two *keruvim* (cherubs) in the Sanctuary;<sup>11</sup> the two eyes placed high above in the human body; or the two copper mountains (Zion and Scopus) from which Divine judgment goes forth (Zech. 6:1).

Homiletical interpretations of Jachin and Boaz are plentiful in more recent Jewish writing. The *Hida* (*Hayyim Yosef David Azulai*) states that one who prepares himself (*Yakhin*) spiritually can override the strong (*Bo'az*) temptation to sin. The *Malbim* (Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Mikhael) affirms that God works in two ways – by establishing the laws of nature through His strength (*Bo'az*) and by being prepared (*Yakhin*) to make exceptions to them.<sup>12</sup>

#### THE ORIENTATION OF THE PILLARS

A third major question concerns the orientation of the pillars. From which direction did one see Jachin on the right and Boaz on the left as related in the Book of Kings – from the outside looking in or from the inside looking out? The Jewish commentators on I Kings 7:21 maintain that it was when one stood inside the building and looked out toward the entrance in the east (Ezek. 11:23; cf. Zech. 14:4 and also the Gospel of Mark 13:3). This theory placed the right pillar, Jachin, in the south, and the left pillar, Boaz, in the north. This tradition, known to Josephus (*Antiquities* 8:3:4), is sustained by Whiston's explanatory note to the Josephus passage.<sup>13</sup> Josephus, however, never saw the actual pillars, since they disappeared before his time, and he must only have reported a tradition passed down from previous generations.

An example of a contrary approach may be found in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* entry on the Temple (q.v.), which reproduces a drawing based on the view of C. Watzinger, with Jachin on the right and Boaz on the left looking in from outside. If Jachin was in the south and Boaz in the north, the entrance to the building was in the east. The fact that the Temple had its door in the

east is borne out by the Mishnah (*Sukkah* 5:4), which states that the Jews were shocked to read in Ezekiel 8:16 how some members of the congregation turned away from the Holy of Holies, *their backs to the Temple of the Lord and their faces to the east...bowing low to the sun in the east.*

#### CONCLUSION

The Temple in all its incarnations had a central role in Israelite religion. Since its destruction, it has exerted continuous fascination and played a major part in religious and cultural history. Centuries of often loving study have, however, not solved the innumerable problems arising from biblical texts on the subject. While this paper has probably failed to provide answers, it has at least pinpointed some of the questions.

#### NOTES

1. C. F. Keil & F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 3: I & II Kings, etc., by C. F. Keil, trans. James Martin (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983 reprint) p.101.
2. On the Temples, see *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 15, s.v. "Temple" and "Temple Mount"; S. Schaffer & A. Joseph, *Israel's Temple Mount* (Jerusalem: Achva, 1975).
3. On the Septuagint, see M. J. Mulder, ed., *Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum: Mikra* (Assen/Maastricht: Van Gorcum/Phila.: Fortress, 1988), ch. 5, "The Septuagint", by E. Tov.
4. *Da'at Mikra – Sefer Melakhim*, ed. Y. Kiel (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1989) p. 140.
5. *Midrash Tadshe* (so named because it commences with an exposition of Genesis 1:11, of which the first word is *Tadshe*, "Let [the earth] sprout") is also known as *Baraita de-Rabbi Pinhas ben Ya'ir*. It is a small work; apart from its inclusion in Jellinek's *Beit ha-Midrash*, a fuller edition was published in Vienna by A. Epstein in 1887.
6. B. S. Isserlin, "Israelite Art During the Period of the Monarchy," in Cecil Roth, ed., *Jewish Art: An Illustrated History* (London: Allen, 1961) pp. 77-118.
7. Although they may have been no more than decorative obelisks, the pillars could have been used as archival repositories, with data recorded on or (if they were hollow) within them. Many cultures feared that hard-won scientific or ethical knowledge would disappear, especially in time of fire or flood, if not preserved in relatively indestructible form. The Torah commands (Deut. 27:2-3), *As soon as you have crossed the Jordan...you shall set up large stones. Coat them with plaster and inscribe upon them all the words of this Teaching.* The biblical text itself notes the problems caused by the disappearance of the Book of the Law, which was later found at the bottom of a money chest (II Kgs. 22:8-13). In his *Antiquities of the Jews*, (I.2), Josephus states that the descendants of Seth inscribed information about the heavenly bodies on two pillars, one of brick and one of stone.
8. William Robertson Smith, *The Religion of the Semites* (New York: Meridian reprint, 1956) pp. 487 ff.
9. William Foxwell Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (Baltimore, 1942) p. 148.

10. W. G. Braude and I. J. Kapstein, trans., *Pesikta deRab Kahana* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1975), ch. 21.
11. Apart from their primary role on the Ark of the Covenant, the cherubim were a common decorative feature of the Sanctuary, found on the walls, doors and panels (I Kgs. 6:29-35) and the bases of the "molten sea," which was a huge laver (I Kgs. 7:23).
12. A. Z. Friedman, ed., *Ma'yanah shel Torah*, vol. 2 (Tel Aviv: Pe'er, 1955) pp. 169-70.
13. William Whiston, *The New Complete Works of Josephus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1999) p. 275.



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