

Doomsday Prophet?

Leaning on his cane, a kippah, or traditional head covering worn by Jews, perched atop his silver hair, the mustachioed 62-year-old man's dark eyes danced like a little boy's as he spoke about the dream of his life—a dream so big it would fit well as a major plot line for a Left Behind book: rebuilding the third temple at the holiest place in Israel, the Temple Mount.

At his small office in an upstairs apartment in Jerusalem, Gershon Salomon stood over a miniature scale model of the third temple, carefully pointing out the Court of the Gentiles, the Women's Court where women entered, and the inner court's most sacred place—the Holy of Holies where the high priest could perform only one sacrifice per year.

Salomon's face seems to sing with a sense of wonder when he speaks about the Temple Mount, the site of the first and second temples. Despite the near-impossible task of displacing the Muslim mosque now located at the Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount, Salomon is confident that in his lifetime the third temple will be built, ushering in a new era of peace as the Messiah defeats Israel's enemies.

Because of his mission, Salomon has become a popular speaker at many Christian churches in the United States. In talking with Salomon, it's clear he is sincere in his faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Nonetheless, as an Orthodox Jew he accepts Jesus only as a prophet, rejecting Him as deity or Messiah.

Salomon awaits the first coming of the Messiah, not God in the flesh but an anointed man, a powerful political figure, who will save Israel. But the rebuilding of the third temple must come first, he believes. Orthodox Jews such as Salomon cite

Ezekiel 43:4-7:

"The glory of the Lord entered the temple through the gate facing east. Then the Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court, and the glory of the Lord filled the temple. While the man was standing beside me, I heard someone speaking to me from inside the temple. He said: 'Son of man, this is the place of my throne and the place for the soles of my feet. This is where I will live among the Israelites forever.'"

"God is ready for this," Salomon told New Man. "We are living now in the end times and all the nations will flow to this place," he says of the third temple.

While Salomon believes rebuilding the temple will usher in the Messiah, some Christians feel this same act will ultimately bring the second coming of the true Messiah, Jesus. Some, however, argue that the third temple may not be needed for Jesus' return. If the third temple is rebuilt, they believe that the Antichrist, not the true Messiah, will inhabit it and deceive much of the world:

"He [the Antichrist] will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God" (see 2 Thess. 2:4).

Salomon sees the Temple Mount movement as a test for the leaders of Israel. He points to the story of Joshua and Caleb and the 10 spies as a suitable analogy to modern Israel. Instead of focusing on the "giants" in the form of Arab nations and criticism from other nations, Israeli leaders should have enough spiritual courage to reclaim the Temple Mount, he says.

"I am sure that God is testing us and challenging us on the Temple Mount. Will we behave like the 10 spies and fear the giants, or will we trust God and fear only God?" Salomon says. "I'm so sad to see that our leadership is not taking this

challenge.”

Salomon’s Temple Mount Faithful movement has already cut two 6-1/2 ton cornerstones for the temple according to biblical standards: lasers, not iron, were used to hew the stones. They are having an architect draw up reconstruction plans, and they intend to recreate temple vessels, some of which are ready now.

Beyond this, Salomon believes the ark of the covenant may lie not far away in a secret room inside the temple walls. In addition, there are news reports that a red heifer—one without blemish according to Numbers 19—was born in 1997 and is ready to be used as a sacrifice.

“There is an intensive work of preparation for the rebuilding of the third temple,” he says. “This is the will of God, the dream of God Himself for thousands of years.”

But even though these elaborate plans are in the making, Salomon says the physical aspect of the temple is not the most important.

“The meaning of it is not only to build a house for God, the meaning is much deeper: to put God and His values, His morals, His principles, His way of life in the midst of our life,” he says. “Do you think God needs a physical house to dwell in? He dwells all over the world.”

Increasingly, people in Israel support the Temple Mount Faithful movement, Salomon says, pointing to a recent poll showing an 85 percent approval rating. When current Israeli President, then-politician, Ariel Sharon visited the Temple Mount in September 2000, a violent clash between Palestinians and Jews erupted. But Salomon feels the visit was a rare outward sign of the private support many Israeli government officials feel.

Violence also breaks out when Salomon and his supporters

regularly march to the Temple Mount area, as they have for many years. In July of last year, they loaded a cornerstone on a truck and brought it to the area to lay it in a symbolic demonstration of support for the third temple. Israeli policemen and Palestinians were injured in the riot that ensued. In 1990, several people died in such a riot.

"One cornerstone shocked all the world," Salomon notes, pointing to worldwide press coverage of the incident. Palestinians managed to steal the cornerstone last year but in response to the theft, Salomon's group cut two more.

"You stole one, we shall bring two. You steal two, we shall bring three and four," he says.

After Israel's victory in the 1967 war, Israeli military leader Moshe Dayan gave formal control of the Temple Mount area to the Jordanian Muslim authority known as the Waqf. The Waqf remain in control today, although Israeli police serve as a security force. Christians and Jews are forbidden to pray at the site, but Jews gather to pray at the Western Wall, one of the last remaining segments of the ancient temple.

The struggle in Israel is a struggle over the land. Everyone agrees the most important city in Israel is Jerusalem. Zooming in even further, keen observers know the most important site in Jerusalem is the site of the first and second temples, where the Dome of the Rock sits on the Temple Mount. Salomon believes the temple must be built on the exact site of the Dome of the Rock, not to the side as some believe.

"We are not allowed to move it even one inch here or there," he says.

If the Israeli government attempted to reclaim control of the Temple Mount, as Salomon desires, many feel it would start war. Some feel it could lead to the final war. If that's the case, Salomon believes God will send "Messiah ben David" or Son of David.

"Messiah, when He comes, will be the commander and leader and the King of Israel which will lead the major end-time war against the enemies of Israel," he says.

In recent years, Salomon has enjoyed strong support from many Christians. Many other believers, however, support Israel and appreciate Salomon's sincere heart for the God of Abraham but question the wisdom of supporting his work. Salomon welcomes whatever support he gets from Christians and makes a distinction between Christians today who love Israel and those centuries ago who called themselves Christians but "converted" Jews by the sword.

"These are not the Christians you know the last 2,000 years. Their heart is with Israel," he says, calling Christian support for Israel "an exciting end-time event." He was impressed to see Christian churches flying the flag of Israel and singing Jewish praise and worship songs.

He frequently gets letters of support from around the world. One American woman told him if the United States ever fought Israel, "I will fight with you, not with America."

Salomon said he had a life-changing encounter with God in 1958 at age 18 when he was a commander over a unit of 150 Israeli soldiers. The unit was attacked in the Golan Heights by an overwhelming force of Syrians estimated at 12,000 soldiers. As Salomon's men hunkered down in a valley, he ran to the aid of one of two Israeli soldiers who died that day.

In the confusion of battle, an Israeli tank commander turned his tank the wrong way, running over Salomon in between the treads. Miraculously, Salomon survived the ordeal, perhaps because of the muddy ground softened by a steady rain.

Salomon said he never knew what hit him. As he lay paralyzed on the ground, he was an easy target for the Syrians who were taught to kill injured Israeli soldiers.

"I met God on the field of battle. I felt the presence of His angels. I felt white light surrounding me from all sides," Salomon says. Instead of killing him, the Syrian forces cowered and moved away.

During his recovery in the hospital, a U.N. observer told Salomon that Syrian officers told him "we were ready to shoot him but in the same moment we saw thousands of angels surrounding him from all sides. We knew God didn't want us to kill him."

When the Six-Day War broke out in 1967, Salomon had "the second big moment in my life when I met God," he says. He was in the paratrooper unit that rushed to the Dome of the Rock, losing 200 soldiers in the process as Jordanian military forces attacked them.

Despite the onslaught of enemy forces, Salomon and others ran to the Temple Mount. Salomon said it was the first and last time in his life he was able to run without the aid of a cane.

"We stood there, with tears in our eyes, and in the same moment I could feel again the presence of God and God saying to me 'for this moment, I saved your life—build My house,'" he says.

After finding 15 others who shared his vision, the Temple Mount Faithful movement began. "We called it faithful because we decided to be faithful to God and His Word," Salomon explains.

But should Christians be faithful to the Temple Mount Faithful movement? Salomon says many Christians know the rebuilding of the temple "is a condition for their redemption and the redemption of people all around the world." A number of Christian churches in the United States support him but others have reservations.

Salim Munayer, a born-again Arab in Jerusalem who leads a

ministry dedicated to reconciling Arabs and Jews in Christ, cautions American churches about their involvement. Munayer believes those who try to rebuild the temple “are trying to force prophecy to be fulfilled and thus are taking the role of God.”

A major function of the temple is to perform sacrifices for sin, but Munayer notes that the book of Hebrews says Jesus’ atonement on the cross is final and complete (see Hebrews 7:24-27). Christians who advocate rebuilding the temple “are communicating and declaring that Jesus’ act on the cross is not are distracting Jews from finding the Messiah of Israel,” he says.

Munayer also points out the likelihood of violence, should efforts to rebuild the temple come to fruition.

“We as believers in the Messiah should not be involved in an act that will bring death and destruction on people,” he says. “We should be calling both Jews and Muslims to believe in the Messiah and not to an act that will propagate war.”

But Munayer does see a redemptive aspect to Salomon’s journey.

“The positive aspect in the quest of Gershon Salomon is that according to the Bible, he understands that there is a need for atonement of sin,” Munayer says. Understanding that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin is foundational to accepting Jesus as Messiah, Munayer says.

“This awakening should be redirected to the true sacrifice and atonement that we have in Christ,” he says.

Munayer feels American Christians should focus less on end-time musings and more on preaching the gospel, loving their neighbors, and living out a Spirit-filled life.

Like Munayer, Messianic leader Baruch Maoz of Grace and Truth Christian Congregation in Rishon LeTzion, Israel, has no doubt

about Gershon Salomon's sincerity. And, like Munayer, he expresses concerns about Christians focusing on matters that are not central to the message of the cross.

"The temple without Christ is an empty shell," he says. "It can neither bring man closer to God nor God closer to man."

Maoz feels it's important to note that Orthodox Jews in Israel, the only segment of Israeli society that wants to restore temple worship, "are openly and firmly opposed to the gospel."

"Orthodox Judaism is an avowed enemy of the gospel, and Mr. Salomon's message promotes Judaism's interests," Maoz says.

"As an Israeli Christian, I would very much regret if Mr. Salomon continued to enjoy the wide support he presently enjoys among my evangelical brethren," Maoz comments.

As for Salomon and his Temple Mount Faithful movement followers, the slogan on their flag may sum up how they feel about their mission: "We shall go to the land and we shall take the land because God is with us."

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