

The Jerusalem Western Wall Tunnel

by Dan Bahat

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Reviewed by Leen Ritmeyer

In the 1970s, when I worked on the Temple Mount Excavations, one of our most precious possessions was Charles Warren's 1884 portfolio titled *Plans, Elevations, Sections, etc., Shewing the Results of the Excavations at Jerusalem, 1867–70*. These drawings of the Temple Mount walls and the accompanying text¹ record the daring investigations of Warren and his companions on behalf of the London-based Palestine Exploration Fund.* Their work remains valuable to this day, as many of the explored areas are no longer accessible. These reports often comprise our principal source of information on the walls of the Temple Mount.

We now need an entire bookshelf for the significant books (with drawings to rival Warren's) that have emerged of late from the study of the Temple Mount. In recent years, all of its facets—the underground Temple Mount,² the top of the Temple Mount or the Temple Mount proper,³ its surrounding walls⁴ and now a section of the Western Wall, one of the most notable of its retaining walls—have been rigorously documented.

This new publication describes the underground structures north of the famous Western Wall Plaza, formerly the Wailing Wall where Jews came to mourn the loss of their Temple.

Following the 1967 Six-Day War, two major excavation projects were initiated in Jerusalem: the Temple Mount Excavations under the direction of Benjamin Mazar and the Jewish Quarter Excavations led by Nahman Avigad. At the same time, Zerach Warhaftig of the Ministry of Religious Affairs decided to expose the full length of the Western Wall north of the plaza. However, whereas Mazar and Avigad conducted scientific archaeological excavations, the Western Wall Tunnel was merely cleared out (although apparently only Mamluk fills were removed). In 1985, the Western Wall Foundation began to administer the site with the aim of opening it up to the public. The subsequent clearance works were supervised by archaeologist Dan Bahat, who also conducted some excavations in the underground area. The result is this book.

The book begins with a series of elevation drawings of the Western Wall, expertly drawn by Sharon Ma'ayan. However, there is no explanation as to their purpose, and the lack of scales and markings make it virtually impossible to join them together. The only overall reference is to the square numbers located on the foldout plan in the pocket inside the book's back cover, but the numbers are printed so small that, even with the use of a magnifying glass, they are virtually impossible to read. If one wishes seriously to study the Herodian masonry in the Western Wall Tunnel, I would recommend Eilat Mazar's book, *The Walls of the Temple Mount***

Bahat's close acquaintance with Warren's excavations enables him to provide fascinating insights into Warren's prescience. It is tantalizing to read here that Warren had foreseen the possibility of creating a passage from the present entrance to the Western Wall tunnel as far as Wilson's Arch, the very idea picked up a century later by the Ministry of Religious Affairs! And Bahat's statement: "Today after nearly forty years of modern Israeli work at the site, there are still many rooms and installations examined by Warren during the brief time he had at his disposal that we have not reached," is humbling indeed for anyone who had a part in this work of exploring the Temple Mount and its environs!

In separate chapters Bahat deals with all the main features of the tunnel, for example, the Great Causeway, the "Masonic Hall," the Rock-hewn Aqueduct, etc. The chapter on the Cruciform Hall is particularly interesting. It records the excavation of the previously unknown underground hall that was broken through and emptied by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, apparently without any archaeological supervision. From the eastern part of this Cruciform Hall, a tunnel was excavated along the Western Wall with the aim of exposing as much of its original Herodian masonry as possible. Here the Western Wall was covered by plaster that apparently belonged to a large cistern dated by Bahat to the Roman period because of the proximity of Roman latrines. To make the plaster adhere to the Herodian stones, holes had been cut into the wall into which stone plugs were inserted in order to anchor the plaster.

This plaster obscured four massive stone blocks. These massive stone blocks were soon dubbed the Master Course. This course of stones is almost 11 feet high (3.30 m), equal to three courses of regular stone blocks in the wall. The longest stone measures 45.5 feet (13.55 m)! Initially, it was thought that these stones were almost 15 feet (4.50 m) thick. However, subsequent GPR5 data revealed they were only between 6 to 8 feet thick (1.80–2.50 m). The data also revealed that there was no void behind this Master Course. There is therefore no basis for Bahat's reconstruction drawing (Fig. 8.02, see left) of an internal vault behind the Western Wall.

Bahat's reconstruction [drawing](#) of an internal vault behind the Western Wall.

The abundance of photographs provided by Bahat are a boon to understanding the text. I found the picture of the interior of Warren's Gate, one of the underground passageways that led up to the Herodian Temple Mount, particularly helpful, offering, as it does, a rare glimpse into one of the recesses of the Temple Mount to which entry is now out of the question. Unfortunately, Bahat's presupposition that the Hasmonean Baris was located at the northwest corner of the present-day Temple Mount colors his interpretation of some of the finds. The historical sources indicate that this Hasmonean fortress was located at the northwest corner of the Temple Mount before it was enlarged by Herod. Bahat makes no reference to any other scholar's research on the Baris nor is any such work included in the book's bibliography.⁷ This, of course, limits the book's academic usefulness.

Despite the political controversy that has swirled around the Western Wall Tunnel and its clearance, walking through it is one of the most exciting archaeological experiences that Jerusalem has to offer. The Jerusalem Western Wall Tunnel, the publication that now defines it, is a formidable achievement, containing much valuable material, some of which has never been published before. It is a welcome, worthy (and weighty!) addition to the ever-expanding bookshelf dedicated to the study of Jerusalem's Temple Mount.

Notes

1. Charles Warren and C.R. Conder, *Survey of Western Palestine: Jerusalem* (London, 1884).
2. S. Gibson and D.M. Jacobson, *Below the Temple Mount in Jerusalem: A Sourcebook on the Cisterns, Subterranean Chambers and Conduits of the Haram al-Sharif* (Oxford, 1996).
3. L. Ritmeyer, *The Quest, Revealing the Temple Mount in Jerusalem* (Jerusalem, 2006).
4. E. Mazar, *The Walls of the Temple Mount* (Jerusalem, 2011).
5. See Appendix, p. 395.
6. According to Bahat's estimation, the largest stone would have weighed 570 tons, a figure earlier disputed by this reviewer; see Ritmeyer, *The Quest*, p. 32.
7. See, e.g., Ritmeyer, *The Quest*, pp. 216–21, and G.J. Wightman, "Temple Fortresses in Jerusalem, Part II: The Hasmonean Baris and Herodian Antonia," *Bulletin of the Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society* 10 (1990–1991), pp. 7–35.

* David Jacobson "Charles Warren vs. James Fergusson," *BAR*, September/October 2003;

Dan Bahat, Jerusalem 3000: “Jerusalem Down Under: Tunneling Along Herod’s Temple Mount Wall,” BAR, November/December 1995; Leen Ritmeyer, “Locating the Original Temple Mount,” BAR, March/April 1992.

** See “In the Footsteps of Wilson and Warren,” Shimon Gibson’s review of Eilat Mazar with Y. Shalev, P. Reuven, J. Steinberg and B. Balogh, *The Walls of the Temple Mount* (2 vols.) (Jerusalem: Shoham Academic Research), BAR, May/June 2013.

Archaeological architect Leen Ritmeyer has worked on Jerusalem’s major digs: the Temple Mount, the Jewish Quarter, the Citadel and the City of David. He directed the restoration of the Byzantine Cardo and the Herodian villas in the Jewish Quarter in the Old City of Jerusalem. Ritmeyer’s reconstruction drawings of numerous sites throughout Israel appear in many journals and books on Biblical archaeology.