

THE UNSPECIFIED ARCHITECTURAL HARMONY BETWEEN JEWISH TEMPLES AND DRAVIDIAN HINDU TEMPLES



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ABSTRACT

As a city, Jerusalem has been at war continually and has faced conflicts, invasions and the highest number of attacks throughout its history. Being one of the oldest and most congested cities in the world, Jerusalem is revered as a sacred city to three major Abrahamic religions: Jews, Muslims and Christians. The Solomon Temple, popularly called the 'Temple of Jerusalem', is one of the oldest temples and a crown jewel of the city has been the centre of Judaism both physically and spiritually. Generally, nations seek others that share a similar history, cherished values, common religious bonds or similar interests. One question that arises is whether Israel and India share history or similarities in any field? Is there a noticeable architectural harmony that exists between Solomon's temple in Jerusalem and Hindu temples in south India? This paper uses literature and comparative analysis method, to identify the similarities and differences between the above two temples with respect to the syncretism in architecture and their respective spatial understandings. Historians generally agree that great stimulus can be found in studying historical evidence that links disparate cultures together over time and space. Though the timeline of the origin varies, the architectural similarities and resemblance of the spiritual purpose of spaces and elements are difficult to be ignored. There are a number of plausible and interesting conjectures like the basic plan, height differences for each space in these temples and the exterior spaces within the temple compound that offer useful starting points for investigating the connection that exists between architectural forms. Is it a coincidence or is it an influence? Plan of the divine? This paper might not give the right answer as to how this was possible but it does spark a theory or a question followed by research in that direction.

Keywords: Solomon's temple, Hindu temples, Syncretism, History, Literature, Spatial study

INTRODUCTION

Israel is a country which houses one of the oldest temples in the world called the Dome of the Rock. According to the Archaeological Survey, the mosque which exists now was originally the site of the Jewish temple in circa 832 BCE which was constructed by King Solomon. This site is greatly revered for its significance for the Abrahamic religions - Jews, Muslims and Christians. This recognition for this temple was also a cause for constant fighting to capture and ownership. In addition, Israel has seen a constant shift in power

since the beginning of time and only a few decades ago the country went back to its original ethnic inhabitants. In spite of being 4500 km apart, the two nations have witnessed the rise and fall of a number of dynasties and empires before independence. Though both the nations have a unique cultural heritage and history, they share a special closeness in terms of observing the lunar calendars and all the festivals they celebrate fall on the same dates (Narayan, S., 2016). In addition, Hindu and Jewish ritual objects are very similar, like lamps and incense, and several others.

RESEARCH QUESTION

To compare the two temples - Solomon Temple in Jerusalem, Israel and Brihadeeswarar Temple in Thanjavur, India- to see whether there are notable parallels with respect to architectural planning concepts and their architectural styles.

SCOPE OF THIS STUDY

This study will especially be of interest to historians and professionals involved in heritage and religious fields. It can be used by researchers to support their existing hypotheses around similar topics which try to link Israel and India in any cultural or religious way. Moreover, studying history allows us to observe and understand how people and societies behaved and deepen the appreciation of design and serve as a basis to foster creative energies. Since the authors hail from Tamil Nadu, they wanted to limit their comparative study to this temple.

METHODOLOGY

The comparative analysis makes up the majority of the exploratory research in this study. Most of these similarities are applicable to these two main temples. The Jewish temple would be King Solomon's temple and the Hindu Dravidian temple is the Brihadeeswarar temple.

HISTORY OF JUDAISM AND THE BIRTH OF JEWISH TEMPLES

Judaism is commonly considered the father of the three Abrahamic religions. It is a monotheistic religion where the followers believe in the existence of only one god whose name is Jehovah. This religion originated in

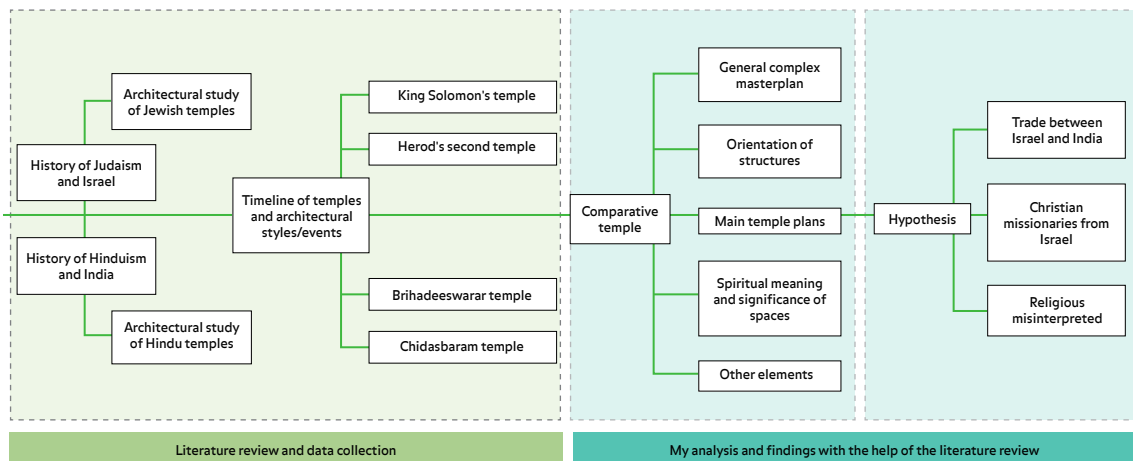


Figure 1: Methodology chart (Source : Authors)



Figure 4: Brihadeeswarar temple (Source: <https://unsplash.com/s/photos/tanjore-big-temple>)

THE GENERAL COMPLEX MASTERPLANS

Apart from the orientation, these temple structures are similar in a number of other aspects also. The analysis starts with comparing the two temples and their general masterplans with their structural elements:

- **The Compound :** Both portray a rectangular external plan. The later iterations of Solomon’s temple – Herod’s temple and the ones in between, had extra courtyards and rooms being added but nevertheless, the final masterplan remained rectangular in shape. The orientation of this rectangular compound (Fig.6) is also identical with the shorter sides being perpendicular to the east-west directional axis and the longer sides being perpendicular to the north-south axis.

- **The Temple Location :** The location of the main temple inside these compounds and temple grounds are also similar (Fig.7). They are located closer to the rear end wall, near the west side, and there is a small gap left between the rear end wall or the west wall and the temple wall for circulation. These distances are also comparatively similar in proportion to the length of the compound wall. The Brihadeeswarar temple is bigger in scale compared to Solomon’s temple, however, the distance between the temple and the west wall is similar in proportion for both of these structures.

- **Mandaps and Altars :** The temple complexes also have other smaller structures apart from the main temple in the middle. One such notable structure in both these temples is the square podium exactly in front of the entrance of the temple. This podium is called the Nandi mandap in Brihadeeswarar temple and in Solomon’s temple and its later designs it was the sacrificial altar (Fig.8). Just as the distance between the west rear end wall and temple wall was proportionally similar, this structure (mandap and altar) is also dimensionally proportionate to each other. Apart from its own dimensions, the location of this structure is also alike in both temples.

- **Location of Columns :** In most Hindu temples’ columns are seen in a mandap or placed in a long narrow colonnade (UNESCO, 2004). In king Solomon’s temple, we can see columns placed along the compound walls (Fig.9). In most Hindu temples today, a similar colonnade can be observed along the peripheral compound walls.

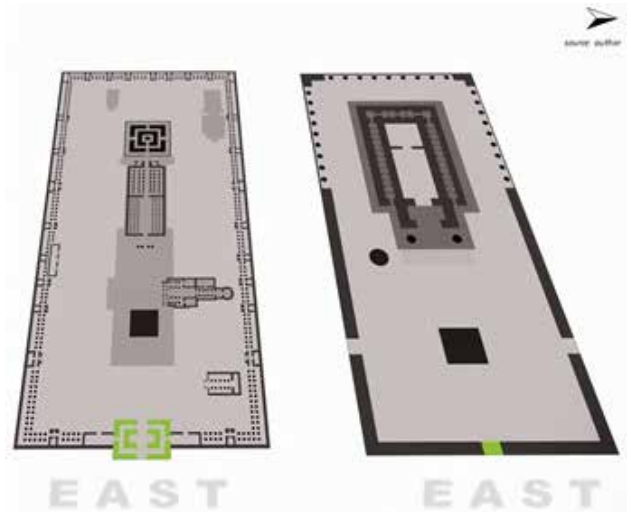


Figure 5: Orientation of temples (gates in green) (Source: Authors)

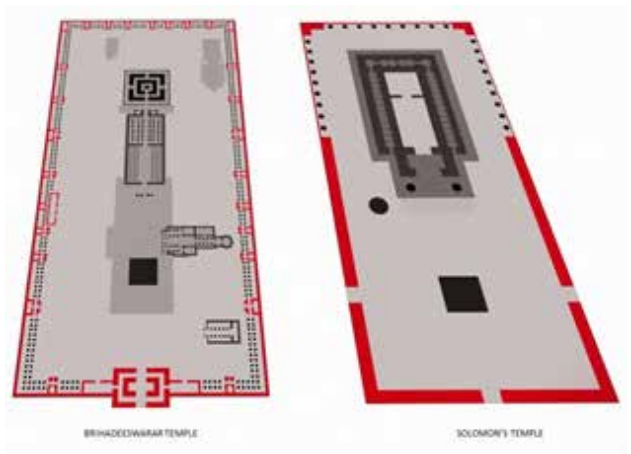


Figure 6: Compound walls (shown in red) (Source: Authors)

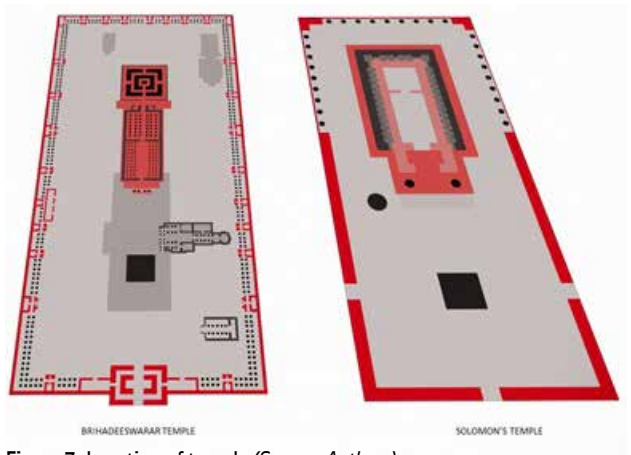


Figure 7: Location of temple (Source: Authors)

- **Circulation Pattern :** With the support of the aforementioned similarities, it becomes much evident that with these structures and their locations being very alike, the circulation pattern for users in both these religious temples is mostly the same. Apart from just the physical location of the structure on the ground (XY plane), most of these structures are similar in heights and massing also (XYZ plane). In conclusion, even the feel and visual of circulation (Fig.10) are similar for both these temple styles.

• **The Steps :** Both Solomon’s temple and the Brihadeeswarar temple are at a certain height above the rest of the structures in the temple complex. Therefore, there is a flight of steps between the temple grounds and the temple porch in both these structures (Fig.11). The stairs, in both these cases are always rectangular in shape, going along with the style of the temple planning.

• **The Artha Mandapa and the Porch/ Vestibule :** After the staircase, one enters the artha mandapa in Hindu temples (Fig.12). In the case of a Jewish temple, the space entered after the stairs is called the vestibule or the porch in general terms. This space is the official entrance of the temple where the user gets mentally prepared to enter the holy place of worship. These spaces in both religious contexts do not have any extra elements or ornamentations in them. These are simply plain open spaces.

• **The Mandapa and the Holy Place:** Following the porch or the artha mandapa is the main mandapa, also called the pillared mandapa in many temples like the Brihadeeswarar temple, and the holy place in Jewish temples (Fig. 13). This is the longest space in the temple in comparison to the other named sectional spaces. This main mandap or the holy place is where people can stand and worship the deity. This is also where the priests stand to perform the rituals before God who is said to reside in the garbhagriha or the oracle. This space also contains some other elements unlike the other spaces and these elements and their purposes are also very alike.

There are lamps or menorahs which burn with oil and wicks in various places to light up the temple. There is use of agarbati and censers or incense burners to purify the air. In Jewish temples and some Hindu temples there are also special tables to offer sacrificial food offering to the deity. In Hindu temples, this mandap mostly has a lot of ornated pillars which depict Hindu stories and mythologies. The initial Jewish temple built by King Solomon did not have pillars in it, however, the later design iteration by king Herod has a few non-structural columns inside the holy place.

• **The Garbhagriha and the Oracle/ Holy of Holies:** This space is the most important space in the entire temple complex. This is smaller in size compared to the mandap and the holy place and it is called the ‘garbhagriha’ in Hindu temples and the ‘oracle’ or the ‘holy of holies’ in Jewish temples (Fig.14). This holy space is very compact and cubical in design. It is also designed in such a way that no natural light enters the garbhagriha or the oracle. This is one of the reasons why lamps are used to illuminate these spaces (Sivaramamurti., 2006). Another thing that is common here is that no common man or woman is allowed to enter the oracle or garbhagriha. Only the priest is allowed access to these spaces. Even the priest has certain rules and restrictions when it comes to this space, like being allowed to enter only while offering prayers or performing rituals. There is also a striking cultural similarity here where the priest in most of these

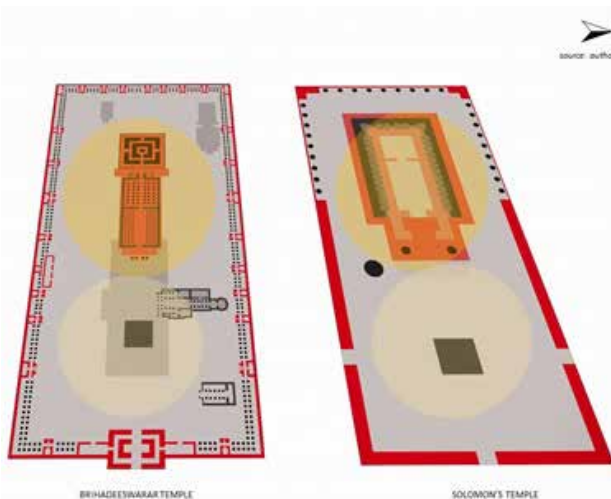


Figure 8: Location of Mandaps and altars (shown in red) (Source: Authors)

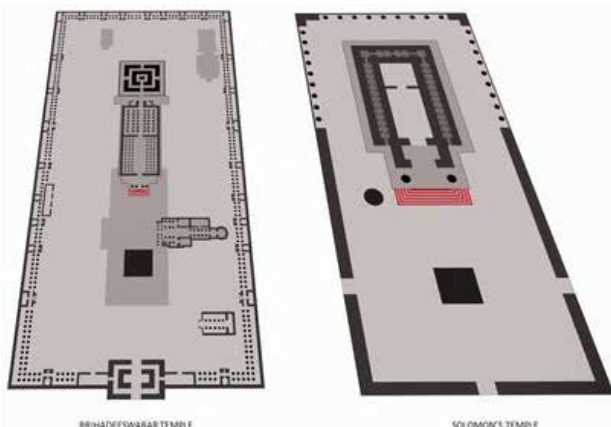


Figure 9: Location of columns (shown in red) (Source: Authors)

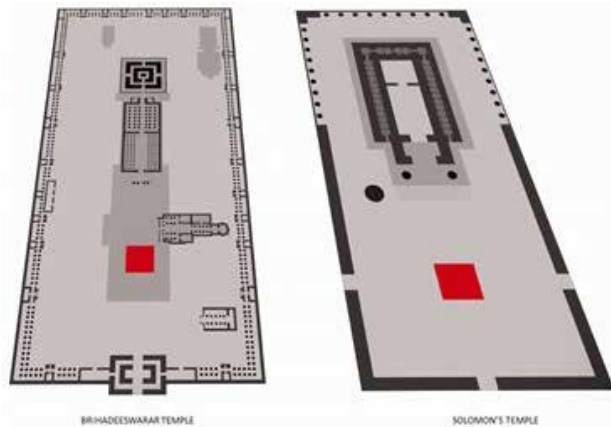


Figure 10: Circulation patterns (circles) (Source: Authors)

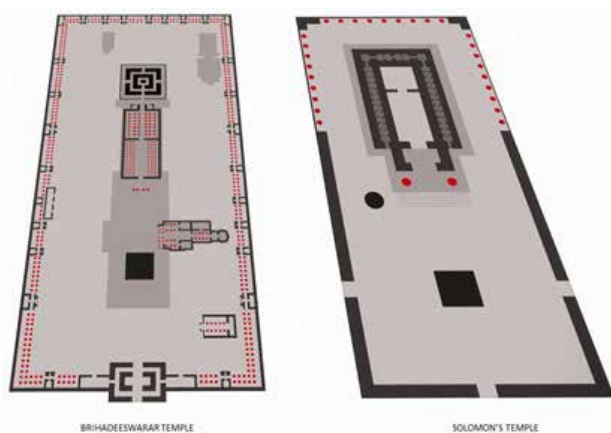


Figure 11: Steps (shown in red) (Source: Authors)

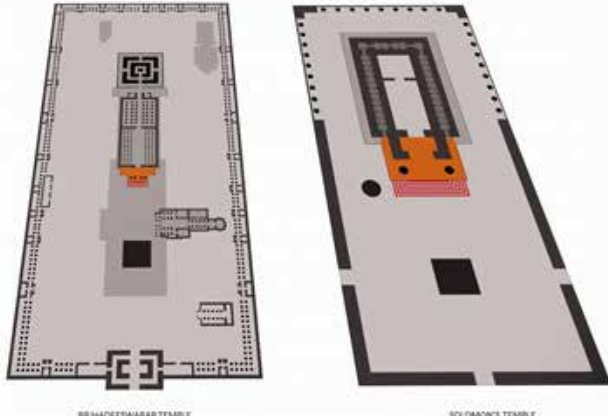


Figure 12: Arthamandapa and the porch or vestibule (shown in orange)
(Source: Authors)

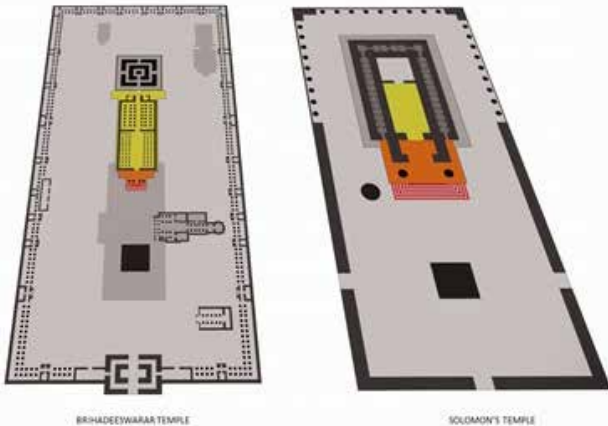


Figure 13: The Mandapa and the holy place (shown in yellow)
(Source: Authors)

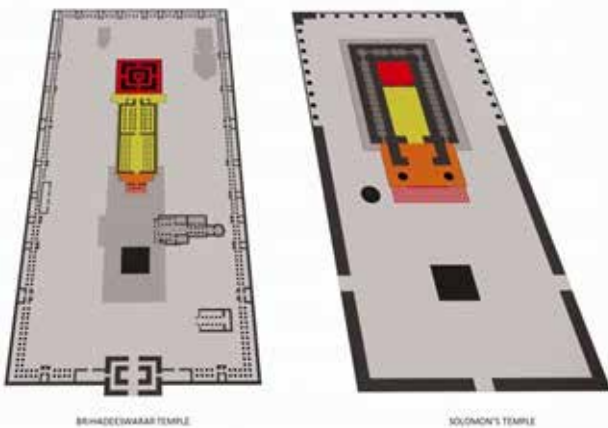


Figure 14: The Garbhagriha and the oracle or Holy of Holies (shown in red)
(Source: Authors)

temples (according to historical traditions) must come from a certain social class or background by birth. This class is named Brahmins in Hindu culture in India and they are called Levites or people from the tribe of Levi (Levi's descendants) in Israel and Judaism.

Hindu temples have an idol as a deity inside the garbhagriha. This space is similar to what one can see inside the oracle in any general Jewish temple. Only the main Jewish temple (Solomon's temples and its later design models) contains the ark of the covenant inside

it with cherubs flanking it on either side. The other Jewish temples only have a veil separating the oracle from the holy place or the threshold. This is similar to the Hindu temple of Nataraja temple in Chidambaram. There is no idol in the garbhagriha and it is an empty dark space, separated from the mandap with a veil. This is called 'Chidambara Rahasyam' in Tamil, which translates to 'the secret of Chidambaram temple' (Holy Dham, n.d.). However today there is an idol of the dance God Nataraja that rests in the garbhagriha.

- **Other Elements:** With so many striking and subtle similarities between the two different religious temples, and in general other temples belonging to that religion too and more miscellaneous similarities that were observed and analyzed during the exploratory study (Reddy, 2013), like understanding the senses of the user in both these spaces and how architecture and certain elements impact the users' sensory experience in the temples. Some of these have been listed in the following paragraphs.

- **Role of Light and the Use of Fire :** Since the garbhagriha and the holy of holies are enclosed spaces, they have also been deliberately designed in such a way to make sure no natural light or air enters these spaces (Vanmikanathan, 1971). Therefore, the only source of light here is the use of lamps. Hindus use pooja lamps, which are commonly called the panchadiyas or 'five wicks' (Fig.15). They use regular smaller lamps also. In Jewish temples, the menorah is used, which is a lampstand with seven light stands or wicks. There are also separate torch stands that are used to light up the holy place since even that is enclosed in Jewish temples. With the study of the use of fire, one can also conclude that these spaces once entered will have a certain high level of illumination or brightness. It also has the possibility to make the user feel warmer once they enter the temple and the temperature keeps rising as one keeps moving towards the end passing through each increasing level or section of importance, to where the oracle is, which would technically be the warmest due to the high use of lamps there.

- **Smell and Olfactory Senses :** Apart from visual senses and thermo-reception, another similar sensory experiment that is common for both these religious temples is the olfactory one. In Hindu temples, before the garbhagriha or an altar, there is the use of incense sticks or commonly called agarbati made of fragrant spices and flowers. Similarly, in Jewish temples, there was a separate altar called the altar of incense where different types of fragrant spices were burnt for a pleasant smell at the threshold which would be pleasing to the god residing in the holy of holies or the oracle (William & Peterson, 2016). Apart from the altar of incense, Jewish priests also use censers with the different fragrant elements inside burnt and the smoke it releases around the threshold, is carried and swung around in the censer by the priests. This ritual is to those performed by the Hindu priests where they hold a bowl-like vessel with a handle, and similar elements are burnt inside, causing the smoke to rise before the garbhagriha. Another interesting thing to note is

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS
THE SENSES: **OLFACTORY**



Menorah in Jewish temples and pooja lamps in Hindu temples

Figure 15: Role of light in temples (Source: <https://unsplash.com/s/photos/altar-of-incense-tabernacle>)



Dhoop or agarbati in temples

Censer or incense burner in Jewish temples

Figure 16: Smell and Olfactory sense (Source: <https://unsplash.com/photos/jowBIJC165U>)

that, in both these religious temples, the resin named benzoin (sambrani) is used for its fragrance and smoke (Fig.16). The olfactory sense plays an important role in one's experience of the space as the intensity of the smell increases as one proceeds from the outer realm to the inner realm of the garbhagriha. It is believed that odour-evoked memories tend to have high-intensity stimuli than visual imagery.

• **Sounds in the Temple** : Performing rituals before the garbhagriha or the oracle, as mentioned previously, used lamps, incense burners and another important element related to the sound aspect– bells (Fig.17). In Hindu temples bells are used as a ritual object. They are rung while offering prayers. In Jewish temples, bells are also present but not as separate entities- rather they are hung in the garments of the priest (Bharne & Krusche., 2014). Thus, the priest going in to offer prayers, moving around the sanctuary, would make the bells in his garment ring, which would indicate to the common people in the surroundings that the priest was offering prayers inside the oracle. However, the main reason to place bells in their garments was not to please God, rather it served a safety purpose. The priests in the Jewish temples, generally tie themselves to a rope connected to the holy place outside the oracle, as a safety measure, in case they face Jehovah's wrath inside

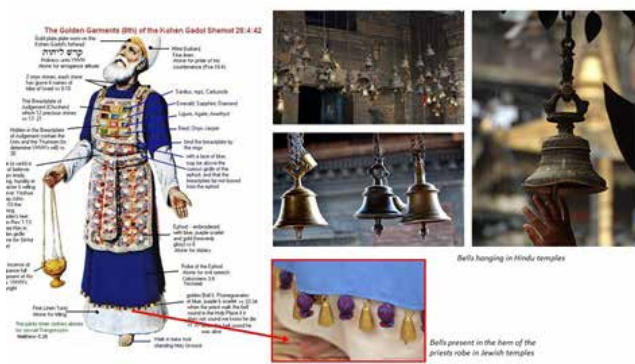


Figure 17: Bells used in differently in the two temples (Source: Emmock, 2017)

his dwelling. However, in the case of Hindu temples, it is a ritual which merely indicated that prayers are being offered and after that people or priests ring the bell, which in a way psychologically brings a feeling of inner peace to the people who indulge themselves in prayers.

• **The Threshold** : All the aforementioned rituals, of lighting lamps, offering sacrifices, offering fragrant incense and other such rituals are done by the priests alone and there is a specific place in the temple where these rituals take place. This is exactly in-between the garbhagriha and the mandap in Hindu temples and it is in between the oracle and the holy place in Jewish temples. In general terms, one can call this space the 'threshold' (Fig.18) and these rituals are not done in any other space in the temple apart from this one, which is again a similarity to note.

• **Water Bodies inside the Complex** : A few bigger-scale temples in south India have stepped pools inside them. These are present for purification baths before any important pooja or rituals. Similarly in Jewish temples, there were certain pools present around the compound walls. The first temple built by King Solomon did not have any pools in it, but it did have a huge water basin, called the 'sea of bronze' which contained water. And the purpose of this water was the same, for cleansing before entering the temple of prayers. Apart from the sea of bronze, there were also smaller basins with water on wheels for people to use before and after entering the temple. In King Herod's design, there were bigger pools of water designed around the temple compound. Some of the well-known pools were Bethesda and Siloam, for people to fully immerse themselves in for healing and cleansing, just as Hindu temple pools are used today (Pratico G. D., 1985).

• **The Bull** : This was a decorative element in the Jewish side of the analysis, where the temple had bulls made of cast bronze. The sea of bronze that carried water was supported by 12 bronze bulls (Fig. 19a & b) carrying the large basin. In Hindu temples and cultures, the bull is worshipped as a deity named Nandi. Looking at the temple of Brihadeeswarar, we can see a separate mandap dedicated to Nandi, which, as mentioned earlier, is located proportionally in the same location as the altar in Jewish temples. The altar in Jewish temples was used to make sacrifices to Jehovah, which in most cases had to be bulls (bigger the ritual, bigger the sacrifice, and

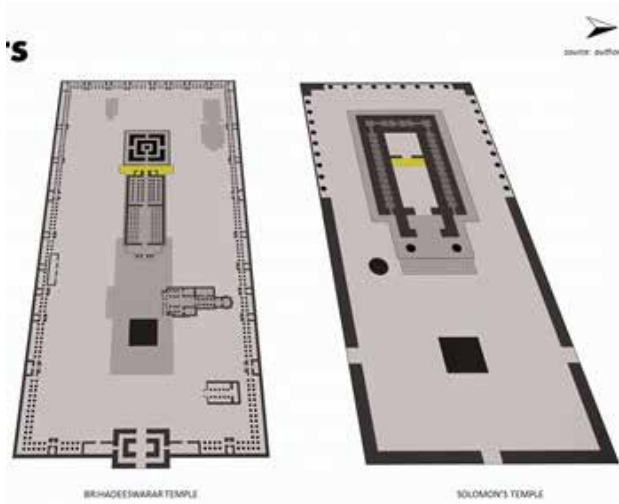


Figure 18: Location of the threshold space (shown in yellow)
(Source: Authors)



a) Nandi in Brihadeshwara Temple
(Source: <https://www.google.com/search?q=un-splash+pictures+nandi+at+brihadeshwara&tbm=isch&source=iu&ictx=1&vet=1&fir=KBiXaGd-MOD7hAM%252C-jFQ2bbN5ZhZ>)



b) Sea of Bronze in Solomon's Temple
(Source: <https://hermeneutics.stackexchange.com/questions/34023/in-1-kings-725-do-the-oxen-represent-the-foundations-of-the-earth>)

Figure 19: Bull used in the temples

bulls were prioritized) though the concept is not the same, the use of the same animal in the same location though for different purposes in both the temples is a notable parallel.

POSSIBLE THEORIES OF WHY THIS SIMILARITY COULD BE POSSIBLE

The similarities studied and observed between the temples of these two religions are very difficult to be ignored just as a coincidence. With further studies and research on how the respective countries India and Israel could have been possibly related in any way in history, a few notable points brought about the question of could these similarities have some logic behind them. These few facts can be delivered as a hypothesis to prove the similarities between Dravidian Hindu temples and Jewish temples.

- **Trade between Israel and India :** King Solomon who built the first Jewish temple, is said to have brought a lot of precious stones and gold from a place called Ophir, which is a port region mentioned in the Bible, famous for its wealth. King Solomon received a cargo from Ophir every three years which consisted of gold, silver, sandalwood, pearls, ivory, apes and peacocks. Some of Ophir's theorized locations according to historians and scholars are India (present-day Kerala and Tamil Nadu or Gujarat), Sri Lanka, Africa (Zimbabwe or Tunisia), Solomon Islands, Philippines. Since Ophir has the highest possibility of being south India (Fernando, n.d.), there could have been a possible exchange of goods along with ideas, both religious and architectural to bring about such detailed similarities that we see today in these two temples.

- **Religious Misinterpretation :** This hypothesis is a very farfetched one, but this is something many historians and religious scholars are working on currently. The

similarities in the religion and the cultural practices of Hindus and Jews are being studied and analysed in many places today. Some of the notable similarities in said culture and traditions are that both the Jewish and the Hindu calendars are lunar. Most of the festivals celebrated on both sides fall on the same dates. Both Jews and Hindus perform marriage under a canopy. Before entering temples, one has to remove all footwear in both these religions, as it becomes holy ground. In both these cultures, before entering the temple people can have ritual baths before special or auspicious occasions. In both Hinduism and Judaism women during the days of the menstrual period and after childbirth are not allowed to enter temples, they are preferred to be at home or in isolation, away from performing religious activities. This is something that is followed even today in the 21st century in both these religions. Hindus and Jews follow similar death rites. The first Jewish commandment says, "I am the Lord." One of the basic tenets of Hinduism is "Aham Brahma Asmi," or "I am the Creator" and both these are pretty much similar in context. Hindu and Jewish ritual objects are very similar as mentioned previously like the lamps being used, type of materials and incense too (Praver, 1963). The use of semi-precious and precious stones. Hindus use nine of these stones and they are collectively called 'navaratnam'. Jews use twelve of these stones which represent the twelve tribes of Israel. The six-pointed star of David, which is also visible in the flag of Israel is a sacred Hindu symbol also. The original name of Abraham was Av ram which loosely translates to father of Ram in Hebrew. There will be even more similarities in other aspects which need to be explored in further research.

- **Early Missionaries from Israel :** Saint Thomas was one of Jesus Christ's twelve disciples who lived in Israel during the construction of Herod's temple. He travelled

to India to preach the Christian gospel. Saint Thomas is said to have arrived at the shore of the Arabian sea in present-day Kerala and travelled all around south India which is today's Kerala and Tamil Nadu, where we see predominant Dravidian architecture. History archives tell us that St. Thomas arrived in India circa 52 CE (Bhatti, W., n.d.). People worshipped anthropomorphic deities and natural elements (Seeniraj & Paranthaman. 2020). There is a possibility that Thomas could have been an influence in one way to spark the similar ideology in Hinduism today, since Christianity is also literally a half of Judaism and also a major Abrahamic religion.

CONCLUSION

From the above descriptive analysis it is very evident that these two religious building principles have common traits. More than a solid conclusion, this research also ends in a hypothesis questioning that what could be an influence for the similarities which existed in terms of syncretism in architecture and their respective spatial understandings. Is it because of Christian missionaries, or the trade routes in early days, or is it just plain coincidence? Only further studies and research will give us answers for this question.

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