

Glimpses of Ancient Rome

The Arch of Titus

Intro: In the couple of days that I spent in Rome I was able to photograph a number of things that would be interesting to Bible students—things that would give us greater understanding of the Roman world in which the NT Christians live and help confirm our faith in the reliability of the Scriptures. I hope occasionally to show you some examples of some of those things and their significance to our study of the Scriptures. Let's consider one together.

The Arch of Titus

The Roman forum was the seat of Rome's government in the first century. On the east end near the Coliseum and at the highest point of the forum stands the Arch of Titus.

It spans the Via Sacra and is 15.4m in height, 13.5m in width and 4.75m in depth. It is one of the best preserved and impressive of the monuments of the Roman Forum; though not everything seen is original (it was restored by Pope Pius VII in the early 19th century.)

The Arch of Titus is a triumphal arch and commemorates what the Romans considered to be an important victory. Around 66 AD a Jewish revolt against Rome broke out and Nero, the Roman Caesar at the time, sent his general Vespasian to prosecute the war against the Jews. After Nero's death, Vespasian returned to Rome to serve as emperor and his son Titus was made general of the Roman legions to finish the battle. In AD 70 Jerusalem was conquered and the temple was destroyed. After Titus' death his brother Domitian who began rule around 81 AD seems to be the one who ordered the construction of this arch to commemorate Titus' (and perhaps his father's) victory.

The inscriptions on the attic

The text: "Senatus Populusque Romanus Divo Tito Divi Vespasiani Filio Vespasiano Augusto" Originally it was in bronze letters.

The translation: "The Roman Senate and People to Deified Titus, son of Deified Vespasian, Vespasian Augustus"

On the Colisseum side another interesting inscription:

INSIGNE · RELIGIONIS · ATQVE · ARTIS · MONVMENTVM
VETUSTATE · FATISCENS

PIVS · SEPTIMVS · PONTIFEX · MAX IMVS

NOVIS · OPERIBVS · PRISCVM · EXEMPLAR · MITANTIBVS

FVLCIRI · SERVARIQVE · IVSSIT

ANNO · SACRI · PRINCIPATVS · EIVS · XXIII

The translation: (This) monument, remarkable in terms of both religion and art, had weakened from age: Pius the Seventh, Supreme Pontiff, by new works on the model of the ancient exemplar ordered it reinforced and preserved. • In the year of his sacred rulership the 24th •

Pius VII Chiaramonti has taken the Arch of Titus and claimed it as his own triumphal arch; "yet not I, but Christ liveth in me" (Galatians 2.20).

What is especially interesting and original are the relief panels inside the arch (about 7'10")

These panels could be considered one of the most important sculptures of the Flavian period.

On one side is the relief of the spoils of Jerusalem

The scene depicts the triumphal procession with the booty from the temple at Jerusalem--the sacred Menorah, the Table of the Shewbread shown at an angle, and the silver trumpets which called the Jews to Rosh Hashanah. The bearers of the booty wear laurel crowns and those carrying the candlestick have pillows on their shoulders. Placards in the background explain the victories Titus won. These few figures, standing for hundreds in the actual procession, move toward the carved arch at the right, complete with quadriga at the top.

On the other side is the relief of Titus

This scene depicts the actual triumphal procession with the toga-clad Titus riding a quadriga (a four-horse drawn chariot). The winged Victory riding in the chariot with Titus places a wreath on his head. Also you can see a goddess leading the horses (identified by some scholars as Roma, others as Valor [Virtus]. Lictors are walking in front of the chariot with their long ceremonial axes (fasces). After the emperor follow a young man, who represents the Roman people, and an older man in toga, representing the senate. Because the reliefs were deeply carved, some of the forward heads have broken off. In the middle, under the vault a small relief shows the apotheosis of Titus, flying to the heavens on the back of an eagle.

Significance for Biblical Studies

Confirmation of the Tabernacle (Temple) furnishings

In the OT God had commanded the Jews to build the tabernacle with its various furnishings. Later the temple was built as the permanent symbol of God's dwelling among the Jews and the same furnishings were placed in it.

The Arch of Titus gives us a clear picture of some of the furnishings that were important.

The table of showbread

Then he made the table of acacia wood, two cubits long and a cubit wide and one and a half cubits high. And he overlaid it with pure gold, and made a gold molding for it all around. (Exodus 37:10-11)

The candelabra or Menorah is clearly seen as being carried out by the Roman soldiers.

Then he made the lampstand of pure gold. He made the lampstand of hammered work, its base and its shaft; its cups, its bulbs and its flowers were of one piece with it. And there were six branches going out of its sides; three branches of the lampstand from the one side of it, and three branches of the lampstand from the other side of it; (Exodus 37:17-18)

The trumpets that were used to call the Israelites to assembly and announce the begin of feast days.

Also in the day of your gladness and in your appointed feasts, and on the first days of your months, you shall blow the trumpets over your burnt offerings, and over the sacrifices of your peace offerings; and they shall be as a reminder of you before your God. I am the Lord your God. (Numbers 10:10)

Confirmation of Jesus' prophecy concerning the Jews

In three gospel texts Jesus' prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem is recorded (Mt. 24, Mk. 13, Lk. 21).

As for these things which you are looking at, the days will come in which there will not be left one stone upon another which will not be torn down. (Luke 21:6)

He followed this declaration by giving the apostles the "signs" that "the end" was near (Lk. 21:7-19). People common confuse these passages with the end of the world. Actually Jesus was predicting the end of the Jewish age.

The specific sign that Jerusalem was about to be destroyed would be when they saw Jerusalem surrounded by the Roman legions.

But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then recognize that her desolation is at hand. (Luke 21:20)

Jesus reveals the reason why—it would be because of the Jewish rejection of Himself and His apostles. It would be an act of God's judgment in keeping with OT prophecy for the purification of Israel and in anticipation of the coming of a "new Jerusalem".

Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are in the midst of the city depart, and let not those who are in the country enter the city; because these are days of vengeance, in order that all things which are written may be fulfilled. Woe to those who are with child and to those who nurse babes in those days; for there will be great distress upon the land, and wrath to this people, and they will fall by the edge of the sword, and will be led captive into all the nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled under foot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled. (Luke 21:21-24)

The Arch of Titus is a permanent monument to the fulfillment of Jesus' words! They may have believed that their victory was the result of the blessing of the Roman gods; but in reality God was using them as an agent of His wrath upon the unbelieving Jewish nation who crucified the Christ and persecuted His apostles.

Josephus provides an account of Titus's triumphal procession, which the Arch of Titus depicts and celebrates:

The spoils in general were borne in promiscuous heaps; but conspicuous above all stood out those captured in the Temple at Jerusalem. These consisted of a golden table, many talents in weight, and a lampstand, likewise made of gold, but constructed on a different pattern from those we use in ordinary life. Affixed to a pedestal was a central shaft, from which there extended slender branches, arranged trident-fashion, a wrought lamp being attached to the extremity of each branch; of these there were seven, indicating the honor paid to the number among the Jews. After these, and last of all the spoils, was carried a copy of the Jewish Law (War 7.148-50).

Conclusion: Standing today in Rome the Arch of Titus confirms the truthfulness of God's words in numerous ways. The testimony of Scripture has come to us in a valid way to not doubt its accuracy; but the external evidence clearly supports the truth.

Ironically, the Jews who visit the monument do not yet perceive the reason why their temple was destroyed. The arch adds its testimony to the truth that Jesus was indeed the Son of God!