

Brazil's massive replica of the Temple of Solomon

The Pentecostals of the Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus have a mighty vision.

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [July 1, 2020](#) issue



Biblical scale: The massive Temple of Solomon in São Paulo is both a congregation and the denominational headquarters of the Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus. (Photo by Ana Clara Giovani via Creative Commons license)

The modern growth of Christianity outside the West has not thus far left many great architectural showcases of the kind we find in other boom periods of the faith's history. A few megachurch facilities defy superlatives—witness Nigeria's Faith Tabernacle, designed to accommodate 50,000 worshipers. (The same church is now constructing a facility intended for twice that number.) But for sheer ambition, it would be hard to beat the Temple of Solomon in São Paulo, Brazil.

The Temple of Solomon was opened in 2014, to huge fanfare and with the nation's then president in attendance. While plenty of churches around the world take their titles from biblical sites, this one goes far beyond simply borrowing a name. It is a literal reconstruction of the ancient temple, as described so precisely in the Bible.

The main difference is that it is substantially scaled up from that holy original, which stood a mere 40 feet high. The new Brazilian exemplar is 180 feet, about the height of an 18-story building. That figure is no accident: the Temple of Solomon was specifically designed to be twice the size of the country's famous Catholic symbol, the statue *Christ the Redeemer* overlooking Rio de Janeiro.

To justify the size difference from the original temple, the planner of the Brazilian venture has quoted Haggai 2:9: "The glory of this latter house shall be greater than the one of the former." Among many other details, the temple building includes a precise replica of the Ark of the Covenant, along with massive menorahs. Materials were imported from Israel. The whole project cost some \$300 million.

The Temple of Solomon is the work of the Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus—the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God—a Pentecostal body for which it serves as a denominational headquarters. It is very much a living worship facility, designed to serve a congregation of 10,000. That is actually quite a restrained goal given the numbers of IURD adherents—anywhere from 1 to 7 million in Brazil, and another million or more worldwide. The temple symbolism is intended to give an aura of antiquity and continuity to a historically recent body—the IURD was founded in 1977.

The temple in São Paulo has been subject to many kinds of criticism. Generally, the country's sizable Jewish population has taken the development in stride, seeing few signs of aggressive supersessionism. The IURD tries to disarm any possible charges on this front; currently there are plans to create a Holocaust museum within the Temple.

More serious have been attacks on the IURD itself. The denomination has long been subject to charges of financial abuse and manipulation, both in Brazil and in other nations. Its founder, Edir Macedo Bezerra, has been accused of operating a cynical money-making scheme rooted in the prosperity gospel. Faithful members are told, in effect, that prayer and financial giving operate on the same crass principle as secular investments: the more one gives to the church, the more material benefit can be expected in this life.

The church profits directly from the sale of promised miracles and blessings and from material products such as holy oils. Macedo has risen from humble origins to become a billionaire, with an appropriately lavish lifestyle; his holdings include

Brazil's second-largest television network.

Those criticisms of the IURD naturally spill over to the Temple of Solomon, which can readily be denounced as vulgar and artificial, a Disneyfied and hucksterish approach to religion. Yet anyone who reads the Bible can recognize the central role of the original temple in the scheme of revelation and redemption and how centrally it features in mystical visions and prophecies. It is natural to imagine how that temple might be incorporated into a Christian framework—and Christians have repeatedly tried to give physical form to such theological contemplations.

In medieval Ethiopia, Christian kings used Jerusalem's sacred cityscape as a blueprint for constructing their own great complex of churches at Lalibela, which today is recognized as one of the glories of Christian architecture worldwide. If Christians found it hard to visit a city under Muslim rule, then they could find their own faithful facsimile at home. In Europe in the same era, other Christians reproduced other sites from Jerusalem on their home soil. In England, Cambridge acquired its own facsimile of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Such edifices served a profound teaching function, encouraging worshipers to frame their own devotion according to ancient precedent, to place themselves in that long historical continuity.

We need not try to compare Brazil's modern Temple of Solomon with such bygone triumphs. But without defending any particular aspect of the IURD itself, we can acknowledge and even applaud the vision represented by the building of this temple.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "The temple in Brazil."