How has the Destruction of the Second Temple affected Jewish Faith and Practice?

The Short Answer

Rabbinic Judaism did not treat the destruction of the Temple as leaving Israel without atonement. Its answer, built on themes already present in the Hebrew Bible, is that atonement comes through

teshuvah (repentance),

tefillah (prayer),

tzedakah (charity and righteous deeds),

Yom Kippur,

and God's covenant mercy.

Maimonides states it bluntly in *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 1:3:

“now that there is no Temple and no altar of atonement, nothing remains but repentance, and **repentance atones for all sins**.”

How Atonement Works Without the Temple

The story comes from *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* (A, ch. 4). Rabbi Joshua looks at the ruined Temple and laments that the place where Israel's sins were atoned is gone. Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai answers that they have another atonement just as effective, acts of lovingkindness, citing Hosea 6:6: “I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice.” Yohanan had escaped the siege and re-founded rabbinic leadership at Yavneh, so this exchange became something like a charter for post-70 Judaism.

From there the rabbis developed several substitutes, each with a biblical anchor.

- **Prayer as offering**. Hosea 14:2 reads literally “we will pay the bulls of our lips.” The Talmud (b. Berakhot 26b) records the view that the daily prayer services were instituted to correspond to the daily burnt offerings, which is why the morning and afternoon services track the Temple schedule.
- **Torah study as offering.** b. Menachot 110a teaches that whoever studies the laws of the sin offering is regarded as having offered one.
- **The table as altar.** b. Berakhot 55a says that while the Temple stood the altar atoned, but now a person's table atones for him, meaning hospitality to the poor.
- **Fasting as sacrifice.** In b. Berakhot 17a, Rav Sheshet prays that the fat and blood he has lost through fasting be accepted as if he had offered them on the altar.
- **Yom Kippur itself.** The Mishnah (m. Yoma 8:8–9) teaches that repentance atones for lighter sins and that Yom Kippur atones with repentance. It also says **Yom Kippur does *not* atone for sins against another person until you have made it right with them**. Rabbi Akiva closes the tractate: who purifies you? Your Father in heaven, citing Jeremiah 17:13, where God is the “hope” (*mikveh*, a play on the ritual bath) of Israel.

The High Holy Day liturgy sums it up in the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer: repentance, prayer, and charity avert the severity of the decree.

Jewish teachers also stress that when the Temple stood, the sin and guilt offerings of Leviticus 4–5 dealt mainly with ***unintentional* sins**. For deliberate, **“high-handed” sin** (Numbers 15:30–31) the law provided no individual sacrifice, so repentance was always the essential element. The prophets and Psalms repeatedly subordinate sacrifice to a contrite heart and obedience (1 Samuel 15:22; Psalms 40:6–8; 51:16–17; Proverbs 21:3; Micah 6:6–8). Solomon's dedication prayer (1 Kings 8:46–50) even anticipates Israel in exile, unable to reach the Temple, praying toward it and being forgiven.

When Christians cite Leviticus 17:11 (“it is the blood that makes atonement”), Jewish rabbis typically point to Leviticus 5:11–13. There a poor person could bring a flour offering for a sin offering, and it atoned without blood.

What About the Sacrificial Commandments Themselves?

They are not fulfilled. **They are considered suspended, not abolished.** Deuteronomy 12 restricts sacrifice to the place God chooses, so offering anywhere else would itself be a violation. A large share of the 613 commandments (Temple service, priestly purity, the red heifer, many agricultural laws) simply cannot be performed now.

What Judaism does is ***remember and rehearse*** them liturgically:

- **Musaf (additional temple offering).** The additional service on Sabbaths and festivals recites the biblical passages describing that day's offerings.
- **Retzeh (prayer asking God to accept their worship).** This blessing in the daily Amidah (series of daily standing prayers) asks God to restore the service (*avodah*) to His house.

Do Jews Expect the Temple to be Restored?

The movements differ here:

- **Orthodox Judaism** prays for the Third Temple and restored sacrifice.
- **Conservative Judaism** generally recasts the temple references in the past tense (“our ancestors offered”).
- **Reform Judaism** removed prayers for restoring sacrifice altogether.

How Do Jews Understand Being “Saved”?

Judaism does not generally center religion on individual salvation from sin and judgment. The basic categories are covenant and faithfulness. A person is part of Israel by birth or conversion. Election rests on God's

love (Deuteronomy 7:7–8), and keeping the commandments is the response to that covenant, not the means of earning it.

On the afterlife, m. Sanhedrin 10:1 teaches that "all Israel has a share in the world to come," then lists exceptions, such as those who deny the resurrection or the divine origin of Torah. Tosefta Sanhedrin 13:2 and later Maimonides affirm that the righteous of the nations also have a share. Gentiles are not expected to convert. They are judged by the Noahide laws (Seven Laws of Noah).

So for most traditional Jews, the question is less "How am I saved?" and more "How do I remain faithful within the covenant, and how do I return when I fail?" The answer to the second is teshuvah (repentance). Emphasis varies widely: Orthodoxy affirms resurrection and the world to come as core beliefs (Maimonides' thirteen principles), while much of liberal Judaism places little weight on the afterlife.

How the Destruction Reshaped Judaism

The changes were sweeping, though many had roots before 70:

- **Leadership shifted from priests to rabbis.** The Sadducees, whose power was tied to the Temple, disappeared. The Pharisaic-rabbinic movement became normative Judaism, and its sage became the central religious figure. Descendants of priests keep a few vestigial roles, such as the priestly blessing and the redemption of the firstborn.
- **The synagogue and the home became the sacred centers.** Synagogues already existed in the diaspora and in Judea, but they now carried the full weight of communal worship. The home table, Sabbath meals, and the Passover seder took on Temple symbolism. The seder is essentially a reconstruction of the Passover sacrifice without the lamb.
- **Torah study became central.** The oral tradition was compiled in the Mishnah (c. 200), then the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds. Text, interpretation, and debate became Judaism's portable "Temple".

- **Liturgy was standardized.** Tradition credits the form of the Amidah to Rabban Gamaliel II at Yavneh.
- **Mourning for the Temple was built into Jewish life.** The fast of Tisha B'Av commemorates both destructions. The glass broken at weddings, a section of wall traditionally left unfinished in a home, and the prayers facing Jerusalem all keep the loss present.
- **Purity law largely lapsed.** Without the red heifer (Numbers 19), corpse impurity cannot be removed, so most Temple purity laws became theoretical.

Historically, the failed Bar Kokhba revolt (AD 132–135) and Jerusalem's conversion into the pagan city Aelia Capitolina sealed these changes and pushed the center of Jewish life toward Galilee and Babylonia.