

Julian sent out word that the temple was to be rebuilt and put the project in the hands of his trusted assistant, Alypius. Wealthy Jews from all over the empire provided great sums of money. Silver spades and pickaxes were brought for the start of the excavation. Edward Gibbon, one of the most famous of historians, and yet one who had a strong anti-Christian bias, says of the event: "The commands of a great monarch were executed by the enthusiasm of a whole people. Yet, on this occasion, the joint efforts of power and enthusiasm were unsuccessful; and the ground of the Jewish temple, which is now covered by a Mahometan mosque, still continued to exhibit the same edifying spectacle of ruin and desolation."

Regarding the failure of the attempted rebuilding, Gibbon says: "An earthquake, a whirlwind, and a fiery eruption, which overturned and scattered the new foundations of the temple, are attested, with some variations, by contemporary and respectable evidence." Gibbon quotes what he calls "the unexceptionable testimony" of a highly respected contemporary pagan historian, Ammianus Marcellinus, as follows: "Whilst Alypius, assisted by the governor of the province, urged with vigour and diligence the execution of the work, horrible balls of fire, breaking out near the foundations, with frequent and reiterated attacks, rendered the place, from time to time, inaccessible to the scorched and blasted workmen; and the victorious element continuing in this manner obstinately and resolutely bent, as it were, to drive them to a distance, the undertaking was abandoned!"

Gibbon tries to dismiss the event by saying: "At this important crisis any singular accident of nature would assume the appearance, and produce the effects, of a real prodigy." In line with this remark, some have tried to explain away the event by saying that it was not a supernatural intervention, but was instead caused by the explosion of gas which, they say, would have accumulated in the chambers under the old temple. Thus Gibbon calls it a merely "singular accident of nature."