

The Dome of the Rock

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62614/xesse826>

Abstract: The history and uniqueness of the Dome of the Rock and its location are discussed. The current building has occupied the site for more time than any other earlier building and has a spiritual significance beyond any one religion. It is argued that the three religions that recognize Abraham should generally accept the building and by so doing find it a unifying feature.

The purpose of this article is to ask some questions and provide some answers, if possible, about the rather strange building now standing on one of the most sacred sites in the world. The building is called variously the Dome of the Rock (Figure 1) or the House of the Holy Shrine/Holy Place, and the place is the al-Haram al-Sharif – The Noble Area. These are the Arabic terms given by those who have

long time measured by the tumultuous circumstances of the Near East, ancient and modern, and this temporal fortitude deserves serious attention, if only as examples of endurance and stability in a notoriously unstable environment.

Not only have nations come and gone, and armies trampled this sacred space, but nature itself seems determined to rearrange its own landscape repeatedly if not regularly by



Figure 1: A general view of the Dome of the Rock. Image: CJ Davey 1974

governed and built up the complex of structures on which the Dome stands. Before and since, the place has belonged to or been controlled by other peoples and many other buildings have occupied that site. But this building and its sponsorship have been in place for a long time – a very

earthquakes of varying intensity – more than one of which have levelled buildings large and small all over Jerusalem – but without noticeably damaging the Dome. The most recent such event occurred on 11 February 2004. However the Dome has not escaped entirely and K. Creswell writes



Figure 2: The interior of the Dome of the Rock showing part of the rock and the inner octagon. Image: CJ Davey 1974

that the Dome fell down in 1016 but was restored to its previous condition (1924:13).

The Early Tradition

To begin at the beginning, or even before; the “rock” is itself a prominent feature of Jerusalem and is identified with Mt. Moriah or more exactly, the mountain in the land of Moriah, mentioned in 2 Chronicles 3: 1, and the place where Abraham bound his son Isaac before offering him as a sacrifice to God at his command. While we have no means to confirm or corroborate this identification, it is already made in the Hebrew Bible, and therefore is part of the tradition known to or coopted by Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike.

This association with the Father of the Faithful and the common ancestor, spiritual and physical, is of the highest importance and established the feature of the present building – namely that it is the *martyrium* (or *ciborium*, so named from the Greek *kiborion*, which refers to a drinking cup shaped like the flower of the Egyptian bean) – a building or permanent structure designed to enshrine or memorialise an individual or an event or act of faith of enduring value and importance for those who are heirs to that person, in this case Abraham (= Ibrahim) the ancestor of all Jews and Arabs (= the descendants of Isaac on the one hand and Ishmael on the other – the first two sons of the patriarch) (cf Genesis 22:3, and especially 14 – which connect the mountain to the land of Moriah). The rock – this massive crag – is thus sanctified by an extraordinary and memorable act of piety on the part of the founding father and common ancestor of the two peoples most involved with that site.

Our history of the Temple Mount begins with the work of David and Solomon, the first and last kings of a united

Israel in the 10th century B.C.E, and continues to the final and enduring effort of ‘Abd-al-Malik, the fifth Caliph who built the Dome of the Rock as an essential part of a larger project on the Haram in the last years of the 7th century C.E..

The First Temple lasted somewhat less than 400 years, if we take its construction from about 967-960 B.C.E and its destruction in 587/6 B.C.E by the Babylonians, the total is about 375 years. The Second Temple lasted somewhat longer, from about 521-515 B.C.E for its construction by Zerubbabel until C.E. 70, when it was destroyed by the Romans. In fact, both Temples were repaired, restored, and even more extensively renovated over time and in the case of the Second Temple, completely remodelled and replaced by the Temple of Herod the

Great, but it was and is customary not to consider such peaceful alterations in contrast with the violent destructions that typically mark the end of one temple era and the break before the start of another.

The histories of the first two Temples are similar yet different and not only in detail. It seems clear that the Babylonian destruction was deliberate and intended as retribution and reprisal for the rebellion of the last regent King Zedekiah. Eleven years earlier the city had surrendered peacefully and it and its temple were spared by the same Babylonian monarch. But after the rebellion of Zedekiah – an act warned against and then denounced vehemently and categorically by the great prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel – the Babylonians exacted their revenge in full and ended the kingdom and its monarchy, destroying both the city and its Temple.

In the case of the Second Temple, the outcome was the same, but the circumstances may have been different. After a prolonged siege, the city wall was breached, the city itself captured, and the Temple burned. According to Josephus, Titus the Roman general and heir to the emperor Vespasian, had promised to spare the Temple but his vengeful army, increasingly frustrated by the years of the siege, simply torched both city and Temple and could not be restrained or controlled. Either way, Titus bears responsibility for the Roman action, although Josephus, as a defender and apologist for the Flavian dynasty, may have adjusted the facts or changed the tone and nuances to modify the picture and make the Roman leader seem more benign than he may have actually been.

In any case, in 587/6 B.C.E and C.E. 70 the two temples were destroyed by enemy action in violent engagements. As it happens, there was a third temple on the site that we do not include in the account the action of Antiochus IV

Epiphanes who is reported to have erected an altar to Baal Shamayim, Lord of the Heavens, in the forecourt of the Second Temple around 170 B.C.E, or even to have erected a statue of his chief god, Zeus, in the Temple precinct; but the Temple itself remained standing and was restored to proper use by Judas Maccabeus and his successors.

Sixty-five years after the debacle of C.E. 70 the Roman Emperor Hadrian erected a Temple to Jupiter on the site in Jerusalem after the revolt of Bar Kochba. The latter doubtless intended to build a new temple there and work may have begun toward that end. With the defeat of Bar Kochba, Jews were banned from rebuilt city, Aelia Capitolina so called, at the pleasure of Hadrian. Perhaps to mark the complete romanization of Jerusalem C.E. 135 came the construction of a temple or statues to Jupiter, Minerva and Juno.

Our sources vary as to whether this project was one temple to all three deities or whether a separate temple was built for each. Jerome refers to a "statue" to Jupiter, not mentioning either Minerva or Juno: "From the time of Hadrian to the reign of Constantine – a period of about 180 years – the spot which had witnessed the resurrection was occupied by a figure of Jupiter; while on the rock where the cross had stood, a marble statue of Venus was set up by the

heathen and became an object of worship. The original persecutors, indeed, supposed that by polluting our holy places they would deprive us of our faith in the passion and in the resurrection."¹ Jerome uses the term "simulacrum" when referring to the monument to Jupiter and "statua ex marmore" when referring to Venus. It is worth noting first of all that he does not use the term "templum," which would refer to a space rather than a likeness and second, that both Minerva and Juno are absent from his account of Hadrian's structures on the mount. Whether temples for these goddesses were built elsewhere, or whether Jerome merely omitted their presence along with Jupiter is open to speculation. Jerome wrote this letter in about C.E.395, 250 years after Hadrian's reorganization of the city.

There are no clear traces of the building projects on the mount commenced by Hadrian in C.E. 135. Exactly where the temple/statue to Jupiter (and Minerva and Juno) was and what happened to it is unclear, but the Third Temple also vanished from the scene. Once the Empire was converted to Christianity under Constantine in 325 there would have been no interest in restoring, repairing, or even preserving such pagan monuments, although in some cases they were or could be converted into churches and later mosques.

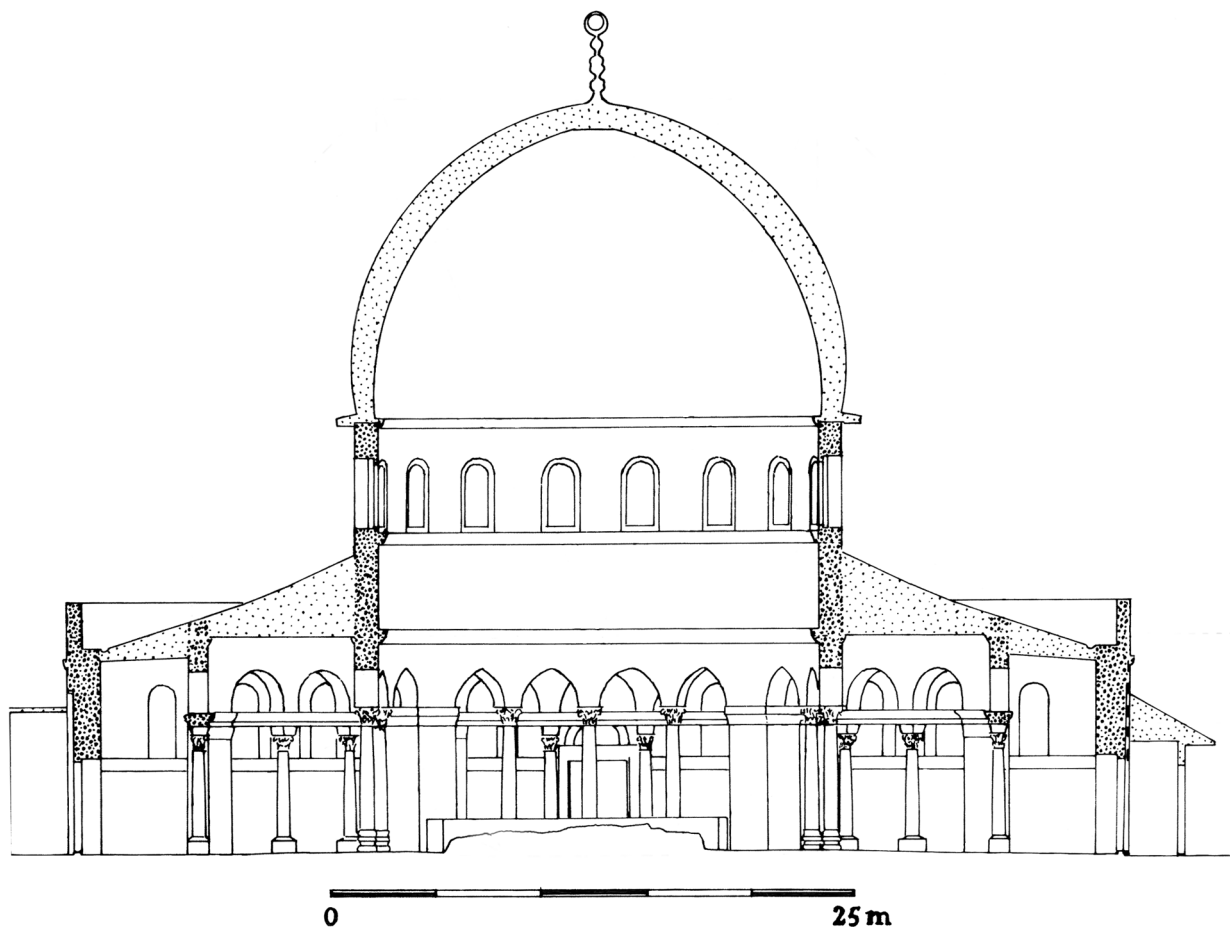


Figure 3: A section of the Dome of the Rock on its east-west axis(after Richmond)



Figure 4: A lithograph of the Haram al-Sharif by David Roberts R.A. in April 1839.

Once again the Temple Mount was bare of buildings, though travellers enjoyed seeing the remains of "Solomon's Temple" on the site. The Anonymous pilgrim of Bordeaux (333) relates, with a lively imagination, that he could see "two large pools at the side of the temple, that is, one upon the right hand, and one upon the left, which were made by Solomon; and further in the city are twin pools, with five porticoes, which are called Bethsaida (Beth-zatha/Bethesda). There persons who have been sick for many years are cured; the pools contain water, which is red when it is disturbed. There is also here a crypt, in which Solomon used to torture devils"²² The pilgrim goes on to describe two statues of Hadrian not far from the stone where the Jews come every year to mourn.

About the same time, Eusebius (ca. 260-340), Bishop of Caesarea, reported that he could see the remains of the sanctuary, and not much later, about C.E. 400, John Chrysostom, the Bishop of Constantinople, said that he, too, could see the foundations of the sanctuary. He refers to the Jews tearing everything down to begin work on the third temple during the reign of Julian the Apostate in C.E. 363 when Jews were allowed back into the city, and plans were made and work begun on building a Jewish Temple on the site. With Julian's death the plans and the work came to nothing; the work had been frustrated even in the months prior to Julian's death. Gregory Nazianzen, John Chrysostom, Ambrose and the philosopher-soldier Ammianus Marcellinus all report that natural disasters attended the attempted construction of the Third Temple, including conflagrations perhaps fuelled by gases trapped in blocked subterranean passages. Gibbon discusses these reports (1920:386-7).

The Muslim Arrival

Except for the brief period during the reign of Julian the Apostate, from the fourth century on the city and land were in the hands of Christians. Then in 638 the Muslims

came, and Jerusalem surrendered to the Caliph Othman. The terms of the capitulation were worked out between the Patriarch Sophronius and the Caliph. Full control of the city was ceded to the Muslims while in turn the Christian churches and other properties were spared destruction and despoliation. Nothing was said or determined about Jews, because officially there were none in Jerusalem, having been banished at the end of the Bar Kochba rebellion.

The Temple Mount was bare of buildings, although the ruins and remnants of earlier structures doubtless were on the site. During the intervening centuries since the violent destruction of the Second Temple and the expulsion of the Jews, the Christian community had concentrated attention on particular sites associated with the presence of Jesus in Jerusalem, especially at the place of his crucifixion and resurrection that was dominated by the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, also and perhaps more fittingly called the Church of the Resurrection. There was no special interest in the Temple Mount on their part, although as mentioned above, the Roman Emperor Hadrian, who rebuilt the city from the ground up after the Bar Kochba rebellion, is credited with the erection of a Temple/statue to honour Jupiter and perhaps the goddesses Minerva and Juno. Of the latter nothing remained. Nor did anything remain of the attempted rebuilding of the Third Temple in C.E. 363, although Tuvia Sagiv argues, as does Rivoira followed up in Creswell, that the octagonal structure takes its shape from the Temple to Jupiter, Minerva and Juno erected on the Rock by Hadrian (Sagiv; Rivoira 1918:69; Creswell 1924:17). Evidence that Hadrian built a temple rather than a simulacrum, that it was an octagon in shape, and that any portion of that temple remained into the 7th century is open to speculation.

It is hardly surprising then that the Muslims would take over and make over this hallowed ground for their own religious purposes. It is important to observe that they were steeped in biblical tradition and that they identified the landmarks of

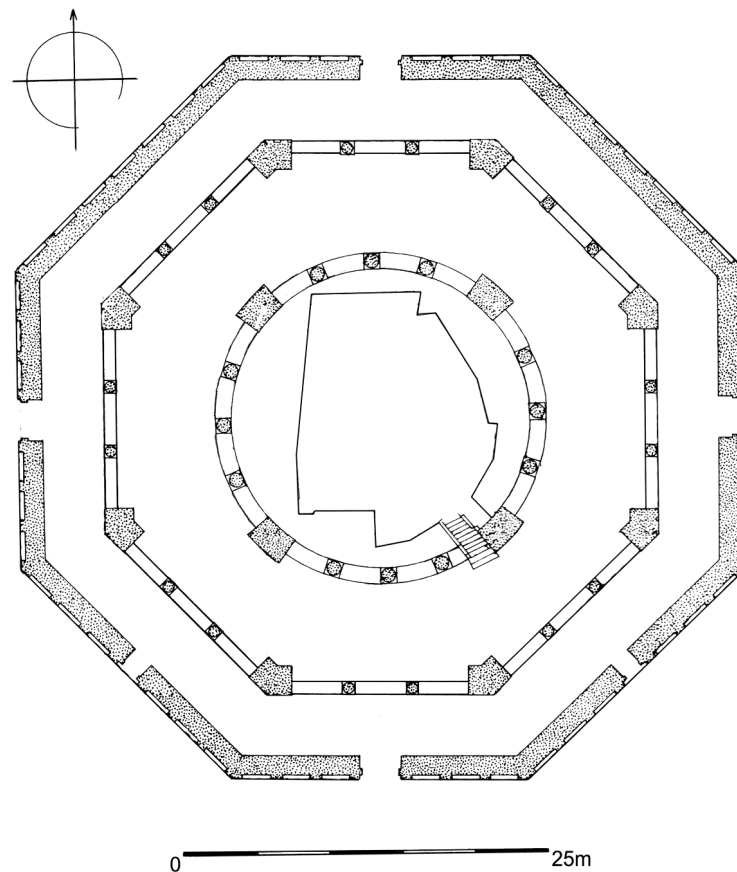


Figure 5: A plan of the Dome of the Rock showing its octagonal design (after Creswell 1969)

Jerusalem with the heroes of the Testaments. For example, it was at the Temple Mount that Abraham bound Isaac (the mountain in the land of Moriah was explicitly identified with the site of the Solomonic Temple in 2 Chronicles 3: 1), and Jesus had preached in and cleansed the Temple area before his crucifixion and resurrection.

Within a few years a mosque was erected on the Haram, the first of the al-‘Aqsa structures to stand there. By the end of the 7th century several other buildings had been erected, all part of a comprehensive program to reclaim one of the most sacred sites in the ancient world for the true religion stemming from Abraham, and including the followers of Moses on the one hand and those of Jesus on the other, both of whom were and are acknowledged as prophets of the one true God by Muslims.

The Dome of the Rock

The principal building, designed to dominate the Haram and to represent and symbolize the new factor in the return of the age-old religion, was the Dome of the Rock – Qubbat al-Sakhra – built on the site of the Temples of Solomon and Zerubbabel (and Herod the Great). It is now a unique structure, having few strict counterparts in the religious buildings of the ancient world, and few imitators in its own culture. Exactly what it is and what its principal purpose or

function are, remain in some doubt and dispute, although a moderate consensus along broad lines may be secured.

First, we should consider the shape and appurtenances. The dimensions on which modern analysis has been conducted were taken by Sir Archibald Creswell (1969:658-70). The Dome of the Rock has a double octagon plan (Figure 5) with a rotunda or dome and is not generally considered the normal shape for typical houses of worship, whether temples or churches or synagogues or mosques. Nevertheless, there are examples of such structures, in Byzantine architecture most notably, and there are different views about the numerical significance of the octagon. Wilkinson discusses the use of the octagonal design in Byzantine architecture and compares the proportions of the Dome to the earlier churches at Mt Gerizim and Capernaum that also have octagonal plans. He derives a single set of working figures used by the architects on all three buildings (1981:171).

‘Abd al-Malik, the sponsor of the Dome, apparently had two main motives or objectives in adopting the octagon shape. These two reasons are not mutually exclusive – one addresses practicality and the other spirituality. First, the octagon is the logical base structure for a huge dome, and ‘Abd al-Malik needed a huge dome in order to affirm the central importance of his faith as opposed to the Christian



Figure 6: Jerusalem showing how Caliph 'Abd al-Malik succeeded in eclipsing the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.
Image: CJ Davey 1974

statement architecturally articulated in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and to assert the primacy of Jerusalem as the holy city, hence in contrast with or as superior to, Mecca. The historian Muqaddasi, (10th century C.E.) suggests that the magnificent size and shape of the Dome of the Rock are a reaction and response to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre: "And in like manner the Caliph 'Abd al-Malik, noting the greatness of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and its magnificence, was moved lest it should dazzle the minds of the Muslims, and hence erected above the Rock a dome which is now to be seen there." (Duncan 1972:28) Muqaddasi is two hundred years removed from the construction of the Dome, but it is understandable and a generally accepted tradition that 'Abd al-Malik desired to surpass the Church of the Holy Sepulchre as either a symbolic victory over, or symbolic potential absorption of, Christianity (Figure 6). Architectural rivalry was prevalent at the time as demonstrated by the comment of *Bayt Al-Maqdis*: "The Syrian Muslims wanted to surpass the dome which covered the spot from which Christ had ascended to Heaven, by constructing a new one which covered the rock from which God had ascended to Heaven" (Raby 1992:101).

With respect to the spiritual significance of the octagon, in our view it symbolizes symmetry, totality, perhaps perfection. The number figures importantly in the story of creation in the Bible and figures prominently in other distinctive and significant places and contexts. The sequence of the books of the Canon of the Hebrew Bible shows the following pattern: Torah – 5, Prophets – 8 (former = 4, later = 4), Writings, 11; $5+11=16$ (twice 8) + 8 (prophets) = 24 total). cf Psalms. 119 – the 8 books of the Prophetic Canon – $5+8+11$ (Freedman 1999). That the octagon (8) symbolizes the totality of heaven and earth,

i.e. the universe, may be reinforced by two other features: the four doors to the building are connected with the four rivers of paradise and the exact location is identified with the omphalos, or umbilicus, of the world. Jerusalem as the very centre is known from biblical prophecy (cf Ezekiel 47: 1-12) and the rivers that flow out of Jerusalem from the centre of the earth.

The octagon is also the only shape that mediates between the geometric articulation of the terrestrial and celestial – it is the only shape that nearly squares a circle. Kim Williams, describing the sacred quality of the octagon, discusses the mathematical significance of this shape: "The use of irrational values, or incommensurables, is linked philosophically to the symbolism of the circle and the square. A circle was indefinite, its circumference and area based on the irrational π whereas the circumference and area of a square were rational values. Philosophically the use of irrational numbers such as π shows an attempt to rationalize that which is irrational, or in other words, to make sensible that which is divine or only achievable through the intellect? (Williams 1982:19).

The Decoration of the Dome of the Rock

If the shape is symbolic, the same may be said of the decorations and motifs of the friezes that cover the whole extent of the outer walls. The combination of geometric designs and floral motifs is intended to evoke and depict images of Paradise, colourfully described in the Koran and early Islamic literature. The happy destiny of the faithful is amply depicted on the walls of the Dome and fits in with the traditional view that Jerusalem would be the scene of the general resurrection of the dead, the appearance of God at the Last judgment, and the settlement of all outstanding accounts. Islam shares this view with

traditional Judaism and Christianity, so the symbolism of the Dome representing the gates to Paradise is fitting for its particular location. It is notable that exclusive emphasis is placed on the joys and bliss of Paradise, promised to the faithful of Islam, and open to the rest of humanity, but especially to those Peoples of the Book, who belong to the great monotheistic tradition.³

More important even than the shape and the decoration is the lengthy inscription that runs twice around the structure, once in each direction so that the pilgrim or inquiring visitor may read it all as she/he walks twice around the drum (in opposite directions). The legend is written in Arabic, thereby defining the primary audience and target of the inscription: by Arabs for Arabs, by Muslims for Muslims, but also for others. It is a public statement meant for everyone who can read the “sacred” language, large and clear even for those in a hurry (cf Habakkuk 2:3). It is an Islamic statement affirming the basic tenets of the faith and pronouncements of the Prophet Mohammed. It quotes freely from the Koran; in fact this inscription constitutes the earliest written documentation of the Koran and may precede any written manuscript of the prophet’s utterances. No doubt the written text is derived from oral tradition, and the tenacious memory of those who heard and remembered. It affirms the unity and uniqueness of Allah, the God of Islam (and of the Bible) using language that if not identical with or derived from the Bible, echoes the monotheistic affirmations found in Second Isaiah especially, and also Deuteronomy 32: 39: “See, now, that I, I am He and there is no god with me; I cause death and I cause life, I have wounded and I will heal, and there is no deliverer from my hand.”

At the same time, it makes explicit reference to Jesus, acknowledged as a true prophet and standing in the line from Adam through Abraham and Moses, and continuing to the latest and last of them, Mohammed himself. This reference to Christianity is at once irenic and polemical. It affirms the unity of the Godhead against any Trinitarian notions, and while acknowledging (or at least implying) the resurrection of Jesus, nevertheless affirms his humanity against claims of his divinity. At one and the same time, it attacks normative Orthodox Christianity, especially as believed and practised in Jerusalem at the time, but invites Christians as People of the Book to consider the (superior) merits of Islam with its positive view of Jesus and his tradition.

No doubt a similar treatment of Judaism and approach to this other and earlier People of the Book would have been made had there been any significant Jewish population in the vicinity. But as noted, the city and environs of Jerusalem were populated mainly by Arabic-speaking Christians.

If we take all the features of the Dome together, including its placement on the Temple Mount, its shape and design, as well as its decorative style, along with the contemporary inscription which with its names and dates ties it directly to the building, the time and the Caliph who sponsored it

as well as the team that planned and executed that plan, all in the last decade of the 7th century C.E., we come up with a unique sacral structure, variously called a *ciborium* or a *martyrium* – a structure dedicated to the memory of an individual saint and a particular experience. The Dome of the Rock, in terms of commemoration, holds significance for all three monotheistic religions Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Discussion

In this case, there are competing theories or resolutions, none of which may be entirely or factually accurate, but all of which contribute to the understanding and appreciation of the site’s role in the religious history of Jerusalem and its (or the) world. The traditional view connects the site (and the structure) with the legendary night ride by the prophet (the *isra*) and/or his journey to heaven (*mi’radj*). That connection was not made in the earliest sources and there is no mention of it or allusion to it in the inscription, so we may regard it as a later accretion. The second view, which derives from the earliest written sources, holds that the Caliph who ordered and arranged the buildings on the Temple Mount, ‘Abd al-Malik, did so in order to create a rival for the famous shrine at Mecca with its sacred stone, the Kaaba, and divert pilgrims from going there and instead have them come to Jerusalem for the same purpose. At the time, Mecca was under the control of a rival, ‘Abd Allah ibn al-Zubayr, and the outcome of the struggle between the two for pre-eminence of location was in doubt. Van Ess discusses this rivalry in detail (1992). But shortly thereafter the rival was killed and Mecca reverted to the authority of the Caliph.

So while the conflict may have been a factor in the story of the Jerusalem buildings, the outcome was quite different. In the end, Mecca remained the primary goal of all Muslim pilgrimages, while Jerusalem was built up and presented not as a substitute or alternative to Mecca, but as an added attraction, closer to the actual center of power and authority in the Muslim empire growing by leaps and bounds at that time, and more closely tied to the biblical traditions and the temples of the Bible than any others.

A third view evokes the contemporary socio-political and religious situation in which the Arab Caliphs found themselves, and both the necessity and desire to establish themselves in the complex world of Syria-Palestine and to make a firm statement about the place of Islam, especially in relation to the Byzantine empire. Here we would emphasize the special character of the Dome among other sacred buildings on the Temple Mount, and the particular details of the inscription on its walls. Together they affirm the central tenet not only of Islam but also of the religions of the Book – intrinsic, inherent, and explicit monotheism, in an Islamic formulation that nevertheless echoes the Hebrew Bible. Next to laudatory statements about the latest and last of the true prophets (Mohammed) is a positive affirmation about Jesus, the preceding true prophet in the story of

authentic religion, one whose presence in Jerusalem is not only recorded there but affirmed and elaborated on by the imposing sacred building standing on its own hill (or mount) across from the Dome – the Church of the Holy Sepulchre/the Church of the Resurrection.

In this way, the Dome of the Rock and its weighty and lengthy inscription affirms the centrality of Islam against its rivals, but at the same time affirms and approves its predecessors as leading and guiding along the proper way. Above all, it invites comparison and also extends a welcoming hand to all those pilgrims and visitors to come and see for themselves – to stand where Abraham stood with his knife raised before God and to walk around that sacred stone, to consider the roots of this religion as seen through the eyes of the first ancestor in the faith for all of them, and then to examine its architecture and art and to read its literature and join the faithful in a common act of reverence and obeisance to the one God of all.

While for Jews and Christians, neither the legend on the wall, nor the Koran, nor Islamic theology can ever come close to rendering a true and faithful account of their religious convictions and commitments, there is an honest and honourable attempt to make Jerusalem a dwelling place for all of them, a common ground for believers in the one true God. Has anyone since been able to do better than that? Given the long period of the Dome's survival (1300 years), it is hard not to believe that Providence has played an important role in maintaining this building above all in its place on the Temple Mount. If it is not the Third Temple of messianic tradition and hope, then it is a surrogate and substitute that deserves to hold its place until the day of the Messiah. It comes as close as anything could even if it does not yet entirely fulfil the words of the prophet (Isaiah 56: 7):

“And I shall bring them to my holy mountain, And I will make them rejoice in my house of prayer... For my house will be called ‘House of Prayer’ for all the peoples.”

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Endnotes

¹ Jerome, *Ad Paulinum Presbuterum* 58.3.13.

² The Anonymous Pilgrim of Bordeaux, 7a, Jerusalem. (333 A.D.), A.D. 2000 *Franciscan Cyberspot*, at <http://198.62.75.1/www.l/ofm/pilg/bord/10Bord07aJerus.html#SolomonTemple>

³ See *Qedem*, 46-62.