

A Synagogue on Har Habayit in the 7th Century: Dream or Historical Fact?

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Did the Muslim rulers of Jerusalem in the first centuries after the Arab conquest of the city permit Jews to pray in a synagogue on the Temple Mount? Or is this merely a legend that reflects the dreams of some contemporary Jews who are eager to establish a synagogue on the most sacred Jewish site?

Readers of this journal are well aware of the long-standing relation between Har Habayit/Temple Mount and the Jewish people. This was the site of both the First and the Second Temple. And this mountain has been the focus of the daily prayers of Jews during the past two millenniums. But some non-Jews, particularly Muslims, deny this connection. Only recently Sheikh Ekrima Sabri, a former Jerusalem mufti, declared that the Aqsa Mosque, as well as all of the area surrounding it [that is, the Temple Mount] and above and beneath it, was “purely and exclusively sacred to Muslims.”¹ This is not a new idea that the former mufti invented. King Feisal of Saudi Arabia said already in 1977 on Radio Riyadh, “The Jews have no connection whatsoever with Jerusalem and have no sacred places there. The Temple of Solomon does not exist in Jerusalem. Therefore, the Jews have no right to have any presence in Jerusalem.” Khamal Katif, vice-chairman of the Northern Branch of Israel’s Islamic Movement, said on another occasion that “Jews do not have any rights on the Temple Mount, not even one centimeter ...”²

¹ “Palestinian religious leaders challenge Jewish presence atop Temple Mount,” *Jerusalem Post*, 6/08/2015, archived at <<http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Palestinian-religious-leaders-challenge-Jewish-presence-atop-Temple-Mount-411281>>.

² *Yisrael Hayom* (daily newspaper) 24 June 2009.

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Earlier, in the past century, other Muslims expressed contrary views. For example, the *1925 Official Guide to the Temple Mount*, issued by the Arab Waqf that controlled the Temple Mount, stated unequivocally that the Jewish Temple (which they called “Solomon’s Temple”) was located on this site.³ It seems that the more recent Muslim spokesmen are rewriting history when they deny the Jewish connection to the Temple Mount. Historical and archeological facts show that the two Jewish Temples were located here, but also indicate that one or more synagogues were located on the Temple Mount many centuries after the Second Temple was destroyed.

Arab army defeats Byzantine forces

The Battle of Yarmouk in August 636 was a major battle between a vastly outnumbered Arab army and a significantly larger Byzantine force. The battle lasted six days and ended with the decisive victory of the Arab army. This battle is considered by many historians to be one of the most significant battles in history. It was fought near the Yarmouk River along what is today the border between Syria and Jordan, southeast of the Sea of Galilee. The Arab victory brought to an end Byzantine rule over all of Syria (including Jerusalem), Egypt and large portions of Mesopotamia.⁴ The Byzantine governor of Jerusalem fled the city as soon as he learned of the defeat at Yarmouk, but it would be another nine months before the Arab army conquered Jerusalem.

Conquest of Jerusalem by Arab army

When Jerusalem was conquered by the Muslims in May 637, their intention was not to liberate a holy city.⁵ They did not rush to Jerusalem after the victory at Yarmouk. As a matter of fact, Jerusalem was among the last cities in this region to be attacked and occupied because it was of low importance. The army that conquered it was commanded only by a low ranking officer. Caliph ‘Umar arrived on the scene because the city’s Christian population insisted that they would surrender only to him since he had a reputation of being honorable and just. The Byzantine city government had abandoned the city so that the negotiations for the city’s

³ *A Brief Guide to Al-Haram Al-Sharif*, Jerusalem, 1925, archived at <<http://www.templeinstitute.org/1925-wakf-temple-mount-guide.pdf>>.

⁴ David Nicolle, *Yarmuk 636 A.D.: The Muslim Conquest of Syria*, Oxford, Osprey Publishing, 1994, 8.

⁵ Various sources suggest different months and years for the Muslim conquest of Jerusalem; the dates range between February 636 and May 638.

surrender were conducted by Christian Patriarch Sophronius. The draft peace treaty was similar to that concluded with other cities in the region, but the local population demanded one extra condition—that the ban on Jews living in the city be continued.

When Caliph ‘Umar (577-644) entered Jerusalem he immediately wanted to locate the place where Solomon's Temple had once stood. Neither he nor any of his contemporaries had any idea that this site was the “furthest mosque,” the place from where Muhammad started his “Night Journey.”⁶ When ‘Umar ascended the Temple Mount he was aghast at the general neglect of the area. He ordered that the site be immediately cleared of all rubble and refuse. Apparently he employed Jewish workers for the clean-up operation. Despite his interest in locating and visiting the Temple Mount, he left Jerusalem ten days after his arrival and never returned.

Historian Steve Runciman described the Muslim conquest of Jerusalem in the following way:

On a February day in the year A.D. 638 the Caliph ‘Umar entered Jerusalem, riding upon a white camel. He was dressed in worn, filthy robes, and the army that followed him was rough and unkempt; but its discipline was perfect. At his side was the Patriarch Sophronius who acted as chief magistrate of the conquered city. ‘Umar rode straight to the site of the Temple of Solomon, whence his friend Mahomet had ascended into heaven. Watching him stand there, the Patriarch remembered the words of Christ and murmured through his tears: ‘Behold the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet.’⁷

A Muslim legend reports that ‘Umar was shocked by the filth and rubble on the Temple Mount which for centuries had been used as a garbage dump.⁸ The legend continues that he made the Christian Patriarch grovel in the muck because this holy site had been totally neglected during the many centuries that it was under Christian control. The use of the Temple Mount as a garbage dump during the Byzantine period is also mentioned in several Jewish legends. However, more recent archeological excavations suggest that one or more Byzantine churches

⁶ Quran 17:1 (Al-Isra).

⁷ Steve Runciman (1951), *A History of The Crusades*. Cambridge University Press, vol. 1, 3.

⁸ Moshe Gil, *A History of Palestine 634-1099*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, 65.

were built on the Temple Mount during some of the period that the mount was under Christian control.⁹

A different description of the capture of Jerusalem by the Arabs appears in a letter written by the Jerusalem Jewish community to their brethren in Egypt in the 11th century (or perhaps even earlier). This letter states that the Jews who accompanied the Arab invaders showed ‘Umar the exact spot where the Temple once had stood. In return for their help they received a number of concessions, including the right to reside in Jerusalem, the assignment to keep the Temple Mount clean and, perhaps most important, permission to pray on the Temple Mount without interference.¹⁰ The ease with which the Jews identified the location where the Temple had once stood suggests that they had first-hand knowledge that could be gained only by ascending the Temple Mount regularly, either during the fourteen years of the Persian occupation (614-628) or during the previous centuries when despite official prohibition Jews did ascend. Once ‘Umar had identified the location of “Solomon's Temple,” he ordered the erection of a simple structure and dome over it. In a later section we will discuss the purpose that this building served.

Despite the positive attitudes that the Arab conquerors had toward the Jews, their first task was to gain the cooperation of the city's Christian population, because at that time they were the majority of the city. ‘Umar had at first agreed to accept the demand of Patriarch Sophronius that no Jew be permitted to settle in the city. Some say that the Christians hated the Jews and everything connected with Judaism because a few years earlier the Jews had sided with the city's Persian conquerors. Or their hatred of Jews had been of much longer standing and originated in the centuries of Byzantine rule.

The Christians wanted to continue to keep Jews out of Jerusalem as had been the practice for centuries during most of the time that the Byzantines ruled the city—but they did not succeed. A fragment found in the Cambridge Geniza collection, written at an unknown date, describes the negotiations that allegedly were conducted by Jerusalem's Jews with Caliph ‘Umar and the Christian patriarch. Initially the Jews demanded that at least 200 families be permitted to live in Jerusalem. The Christians who had wanted no Jews in their midst finally agreed, in response to the

⁹ Etgar Lefkovits, “Was the Aksa Mosque built over the remains of a Byzantine church?”, *Jerusalem Post*, November 16, 2008, archived at <<http://www.jpost.com/LandedPages/PrintArticle.aspx?id=120768>>.

¹⁰ Abraham Ya'ari (1943). *Igarot Eretz Yisrael* (Eretz Yizrael Letters). Tel Aviv, 51 [Hebrew]; J. Mann (1920). *The Jews in Egypt and in Palestine under the Fatimid Caliphate*. Ithaca NY: Cornell University Library, vol. 2, 188-189.

Caliph's pressure, to admit fifty Jewish families. In the end the Caliph gave permission to seventy Jewish families to settle in Jerusalem. From this small beginning the Jewish population increased manifold during the centuries that the city was under Muslim rule.

Throughout the centuries that the city was under Byzantine rule, Jerusalem was an unimportant and neglected village. A major change occurred when the Muslims designated it a holy city, third in importance after Mecca and Medina. Originally they named the city *Bet ha-maqdis*, the Arab translation of the Hebrew *Bet Hamikdash* (the Temple). Later the name was abbreviated to *al-Quds* (The Holy), which is the Arabic name of the city to this day.¹¹

There are no contemporary Jewish records that describe what happened when the Muslims captured Jerusalem and how the Jews reacted to this event. We can surmise that they welcomed the arrival of the new rulers because they would initiate major changes in the status quo of the city and of the Temple Mount. For Jews it would result in a vast improvement in their living conditions. Unlike the earlier Byzantine Christian rulers who had prohibited any Jewish presence in the city, the Muslims permitted and perhaps even encouraged Jews to return to Jerusalem. Though subordination and degradation would now be part of the daily life of all non-Muslims, the physical survival of all of the minorities including the Jews was (with few exceptions) secure throughout the Medieval Muslim world.

Muslim attitude toward Jews

The Muslims generally gave the people whom they conquered a choice between death and conversion to Islam. But Jews and Christians were an exception; once they surrendered, they were considered *dhimmis* (protected persons) and were usually allowed to continue to practice their religion. An integral aspect of the *dhimma* status was that all such infidels were required to acknowledge the superiority of the Muslim faith by paying the annual poll tax or *jizya* as a symbol of the subordination. While humiliation of the non-Muslim minorities was constant, the degree of harshness depended on the whims of the current ruler, local as well as regional and national.¹²

¹¹ Other sources give the original name as *Medinat bet ha-maqdis* (The city of the Temple). See Salo Wittmayer Baron (1952-1983), *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, 2nd ed., revised and enlarged, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, vol. 3, 269 n. 18.

¹² Louis Gardet (1954). *La Cité Musulmane: Vie sociale et politique*, Paris, 1954, 348; Joan Peters (1985). *From Time Immemorial*. New York: Perennial Library, 176.

The first Muslim structures on the Temple Mount

Before leaving Jerusalem, ‘Umar ordered the erection of a simple wooden structure and dome on the site where the First and Second Temples had stood. The first reliable document of the presence of this wooden structure on the Temple Mount comes from Bishop Arkulf, a French bishop who undertook a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the 670s; he spoke of a temporary mosque that the Muslims had erected on the Temple Mount.¹³

The present-day magnificent dome structure known today as the Dome of the Rock was built by Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān (646-705) at the end of the 7th century or the beginning of the 8th century. This edifice marks the place that both Jews and Muslims believe to be the site of the Holy of Holies. The Caliph had many reasons for building this new shrine. One of these was the attempt to boost the importance of Jerusalem as a center for Islamic pilgrimage and worship. He planned this site as a counter attraction to Mecca and Medina, the two holy cities that were then under the control of a rival Caliph. This structure in later times became mistakenly known as “The Mosque of ‘Umar” even though it was built not by ‘Umar but by ‘Abd al-Malik and was not intended to serve as a mosque.

Another simple wooden structure was erected on the southern end of the Temple Mount, perhaps by Caliph ‘Umar. It was rebuilt and enlarged by Caliph ‘Abd al Malik and finished by his son al-Walid in 705. This building later became known as Al Aqsa Mosque. Over the centuries Al Aqsa Mosque was destroyed several times by earthquakes, but was rebuilt each time. The most important reconstruction occurred after the earthquake of 1034 when the mosque was expanded so that 5000 men could worship there simultaneously. The Muslims now named the entire area the “Haram esh-Sharif” or Noble Sanctuary because it contained both the Dome of the Rock and Al Aqsa Mosque, two holy structures that were built two or three generations after the Muslim conquest of Jerusalem. This is the same area that the Jews for the past two thousand years have called “Har Habayit” or the Temple Mount.

¹³ Heribert Busse and Georg Kretschmar, *Jerusalem Heiligstumstraditionen in altkirchlicher und frühislamischer Zeit*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1987, p. 1; see also Jeremy Johns, “Archaeology and the history of early Islam: the first seventy years,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 2003 (46, 4) p. 423, n. 20.

A Jewish synagogue on the Temple Mount

Did the Jews build a synagogue on the Temple Mount in the century immediately following the Muslim invasion? All historians agree that the Jews played a prominent role in identifying the holy areas on the Temple Mount; these same Jews subsequently worked as servants and cleaners of the mosques that were erected there. The medieval Arab historian Mujir al-Din al-Ulaymi (1456-1522), born in Ramle but a lifelong resident of Jerusalem where he was buried, described the role that the Jews played on the Temple Mount in the early Muslim period in his comprehensive history of Jerusalem and Hebron, as follows:

The Jews who served as servants [in the mosques] were exempt from paying poll tax, they and their descendants forever. At first these numbered ten, but later their number rose to twenty. Their job was to clean the mosques. Other Jews were engaged to manufacture and attach the glass and the candelabras and other things. They also supplied wicks.

Most interesting is Mujir al-Din's suspicion that the Jews consented to engage in these jobs in order to gain a foothold on the Temple Mount so that they could offer prayers in the place where their Temple once stood.¹⁴

At this time Muslims did not consider a Jewish presence on the Temple Mount problematic because they had not yet designated the mount as a sacred site. Several scholars wrote that Jews received permission to build a synagogue or prayer-and-study hall on the Temple Mount. Some have even suggested that the first wooden structure built on the site of the Temple was meant originally to be a synagogue, but that before it was completed the Muslims expropriated the building and gave the Jews another site on the Temple Mount as a substitute location for their synagogue.

Sebeos, a 7th-century Armenian bishop and historian, wrote about the existence of a Jewish prayer hall on the Temple Mount as follows:

After the Jews enjoyed the aid and protection of the Arabs for a long time, they conceived the idea of rebuilding the Temple of Solomon. They identified the location of what they called the "The Holy of Holies" and there they built a prayer hall, using the foundations and the remnants of the original building. Once they had started to build,

¹⁴ Donald P. Little, "Mujir al-Dīn al-Ulaymī's Vision of Jerusalem in the Ninth/Fifteenth Century," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 1995, vol. 115 (2), 237-247.

the Arabs became jealous and banished them from there. Instead, they gave the Jews another area on the Temple Mount for a synagogue.¹⁵

Solomon ben Jeroham, a Karaite exegete who lived in Jerusalem between 940 and 960, wrote in his commentary on the Book of Psalms that the Muslims had permitted the Jews to pray on the Temple Mount for many years.

When, with the mercy of the God of Israel, the Romans were thrown out [of Jerusalem] and the Islamic kingdom appeared, permission was given to Israel to enter [the city] and live there. Furthermore, the courtyards of the Temple were turned over to them and they prayed there [on the Temple Mount] for many years. Afterwards [slanderers] told the Muslim king that they did bad things there, that they drank intoxicating wine and desecrated the place. He therefore ordered them expelled to one of the many gates and there they prayed for many years. But they continued to do bad things and there came a new king and he expelled them from the Temple Mount completely.¹⁶

The 11th-century letter written by the Elder of the Jerusalem Jewish community that we cited earlier also stated unequivocally that from the time of the Arab conquest of Jerusalem until the present time (tenth or eleventh century) Jews were allowed to pray without interference on the Temple Mount or at its gates.¹⁷

Petachiah of Regensburg, a Bohemian rabbi who set out from Prague to Palestine in 1175 and arrived in Crusader Jerusalem no later than 1187, reported that in his days it was “common knowledge” that the Dome of the Rock (he called it the ‘Umar-mosque) was designed originally to serve as a synagogue.¹⁸

The midrash collection called “Nistarot de-Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai” [*The Esoteric Teachings of Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai*, believed to have been compiled at the time of the Crusaders] brings the following account:

¹⁵ Sebeos, *Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos*, trans. Robert Thomson, Liverpool University Press, 1999, ch. 31.

¹⁶ Comment on Psalms 30, cited by Goren, Shlomo, *Sefer Har Habayit [Book of the Temple Mount]*. Rev. ed., Jerusalem, 2004, 314 [Hebrew].

¹⁷ Ya'ari, Abraham (1943), *Igarot Eretz Yisrael* (Eretz Yizrael Letters), Tel Aviv, 51 [Hebrew].

¹⁸ Anonymous, “The riddle of the Dome of the Rock: Was it built as a Jewish place of prayer?” <<http://www.triumphpro.com/dome-of-rock-riddle.pdf>>. *The Voice of the Temple Mount Faithful*, (Summer 5761-2001).

... the second king who arose to Ishmael was friendly to Israel, and he mended their breaches and the breaches of the *Heikhal*, and dug up Mount Moriah... and he built there a place for prayer [lit., a place for bowing down] on the Foundation Stone [that is, on the site of the Temple].¹⁹

Many years ago Professor Dinur wrote a comprehensive article on “A Jewish synagogue and study hall on the Temple Mount during the Arab period” in which he summarized all the evidence available at that time concerning Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount during the Muslim period.²⁰ He suggested that the building that eventually became known as the mosque of ‘Umar was originally built by Caliph ‘Umar as a synagogue or prayer hall for the Jews. He cited evidence of the existence of a synagogue on the Temple Mount from the 9th century on. This synagogue, known as the Mahkema, was located on the southwestern side of the Shalsholet Gate. After the Fatimid rulers conquered Jerusalem in 969, this synagogue was rebuilt and used until the Jews were banished by Caliph al-Chakim in 1015. Jews returned to this synagogue on the Temple Mount after a subsequent ruler cancelled al-Chakim’s ban.²¹

While there is disagreement about where the synagogue was located on the Temple Mount, most scholars agree that there was a functioning synagogue on the Temple Mount during the first century after the Muslim conquest—and perhaps even later. Subsequently (the exact date is not known) the permission for Jews to have a synagogue on the Temple Mount was cancelled. Then it became popular for Jews to pray at one or the other gates of the Temple Mount. An 11th-century document found in the Cairo Geniza describes how Jewish pilgrims frequently circled the Temple Mount (from the outside) and stopped at each of the gates in order to recite specific prayers. This “pilgrim guide” noted that there is evidence that inside the Hulda Gate there was once a place of Jewish worship—the names of many Jewish pilgrims were chiseled on the walls and could be seen at the time that this guide was written.²² Moshe b. Yizhak (mid-11th century) is reported to have prayed daily at one of the

¹⁹ A. Jellinek, *Bet Hamidrash*. Jerusalem, Bamberger and Wahrman, 1938, 3, 79 [Hebrew].

²⁰ B.Z. [Dinaburg] Dinur, “A House of Prayer and Study’ for Jews on the Temple Mount in the Period of the Arabs,” *Ziyon*, 1929, 3 [Hebrew].


²¹ See Jacob Mann (1931/1970). *Texts and Studies in Jewish History and Literature*. Cincinnati, vol. 1, 313-315, for a different interpretation.

²² Dan Bahat, “Identification of the Gates of the Temple Mount and the ‘Cave’ in the Early Muslim Period,” *Catedra* 106, 2002, 61-86 at 70 [Hebrew].

Temple Mount gates. A document written in 1057 confirmed that the Jews paid special taxes for the privilege of praying at the Temple Mount gates and on the Mount of Olives.²³

Some archeologists suggest that there was a synagogue underneath the mountain as late as the 11th century. There are two chambers underneath the mount whose existence was documented by 19th-century archeologists. During the Second Temple period, one of these chambers served as a water cistern and the other was used as a pathway to the outside, perhaps for the priests who had become polluted (*tamey*) while serving in the Temple. Some suggest that in the 11th century this second chamber was used as a synagogue—before being turned into a mosque at a later date.²⁴

Summary

In summary, there is overwhelming evidence that there was an active synagogue on the Temple Mount during the Early Muslim period. At some point, perhaps during the eleventh century, the policy that permitted Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount was revoked. We have no specific information as to the exact date or the reason for this change. The Crusader invasion in 1099 put a definitive end to any Jewish house of worship on the Temple Mount. Since that time there has not been a synagogue on the Temple Mount.²⁵ 

²³ Bahat (2002), 72.

²⁴ Interview with Dr. Eilat Mazar, Jerusalem Post (Internet edition) 28/02/2010. Other archeologists disagree with her conclusion.

²⁵ Rabbi Goren described a temporary synagogue that the Army Rabbinate established on the Mount, under his direction, in 1967 in the days immediately after the recapture of the Temple Mount. This synagogue was dismantled on orders of the Chief of Staff and the government within a short time after its erection. (Goren, 2004, 26-28)