

The Dome of the Rock

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The purpose of this essay is to explore information about the extraordinary building now standing on one of the most sacred spots in the world. The building is called variously the Dome of the Rock (Arabic Qubbat al-Sakhra) or the House of the Holy Shrine/ Holy Place. The entire area is the Haram al-Sharif—the Noble Sanctuary. These are the Arabic terms given by those who governed and built up the complex of structures on the mount where the Dome stands. Before and since, the site has belonged to or has been controlled by other peoples, and many other buildings have occupied it. But this building and its sponsorship have been in place for a long time—a very long time when measured by the tumultuous circumstances of the Near East, ancient and modern. This temporal fortitude deserves serious attention, if only as an example 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 earthquakes of varying intensity—more than one of which has leveled buildings, both large and small, all over Jerusalem—but all without noticeably damaging the Dome.¹ For thirteen hundred years the Dome has stood on this spot, extending a welcoming hand to pilgrims and visitors to join the faithful in a common act of reverence.

The “rock” is itself a prominent feature of Jerusalem and is identified with Mount Moriah (more exactly, the mountain in the land of Moriah, mentioned in 2 Chronicles 3:1 as the place where Abraham bound his son in preparation for offering him as a sacrifice to God at the latter’s command, as related in Genesis 22:9).² While we have no means to confirm or corroborate this identification other than the Hebrew Bible, it is part of the tradition known to Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike.

This association with Abraham—the Father of the Faithful and the common ancestor, both spiritual and physical, of the three peoples—is of the highest importance. It established the primary feature of the present building—namely, that it is, or can be, called a *martyrium*³ (or *ciborium*, so named from the Greek *kiborion*, which refers to a drinking cup shaped like the flower of the Egyptian bean). A *martyrium* is a structure designed to enshrine or memorialize an individual, an event, or an act of faith of enduring value and importance for those who are heirs to that person.⁴ The rock 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.

The history of building sacred structures on the Holy Mount began with the work of David and Solomon—the first and last kings of a united Israel in the tenth century B.C.E.—and continued to the final and enduring effort of ‘Abd al-Malik, the fifth Umayyad caliph, who completed the Dome in 691 C.E. as an essential part of a larger project on the Haram.

The First Temple period, that of Solomon, lasted somewhat less than four hundred years (if we date its construction to about 967–960 B.C.E. and its destruction by the Babylonians to 587–586 B.C.E., the total is about 375 years). The Second Temple was longer lived, from its construction by Zerubbabel in about 521–515 B.C.E. until it was destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E.⁵ In fact, both temples were repaired, restored, and even more extensively renovated over time. The Second Temple was completely remodeled and replaced by the temple of Herod the Great, but it was and is customary not to consider such peaceful alterations alongside the violent destructions that typically mark the end of one temple period and the start of another.⁶

The fate of the first two temples is similar. It seems clear that the Babylonian destruction of the First Temple was deliberate and intended as retribution and reprisal for the rebellion of the last regent king, Zedekiah. At the time of the Babylonian invasion eleven years earlier, the city had surrendered peacefully, and the city and its temple were spared by the same monarch. But after the rebellion of Zedekiah—an act warned against and denounced vehemently and categorically by the great prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel⁷—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 although the circumstances were 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 eventual heir to the emperor Vespasian, had promised to spare the temple, but his vengeful army, increasingly frustrated by the length of the siege, could not be prevented from torching both city and temple.⁸ 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 actually have been.

In any case, in 587–586 B.C.E. and 70 C.E. the two temples were destroyed by enemy action in violent engagements. As it happens, a third temple, though less well known, existed temporarily on the site.⁹ Sixty-five years after the debacle of 70 C.E., the Roman emperor Hadrian erected a temple to Jupiter on the site in Jerusalem either before or after the revolt of Bar Kokhba. The latter doubtless had intended to build a new temple there, and work may have begun toward that end. With the defeat of Bar Kokhba and the banning of Jews from the city, Hadrian built an entirely new city (Aelia Capitolina, so called at his pleasure, perhaps to mark the complete romanization of Jerusalem, 135 C.E.)¹⁰ and constructed either a temple or statue¹¹ to each of the gods Jupiter, Minerva, and Juno. The sources vary as to exactly where this construction took place and whether this project was one temple to all three deities or whether separate temples were 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.”¹¹ Jerome uses the term *simulacrum* (“image”) when referring to the monument to Jupiter and *statua ex marmore* (“statue of marble”) when referring to Venus. It is worth noting that he does not use the term *templum*, which would refer to a structure rather than a likeness, and 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 is open to speculation. Jerome wrote this letter in about 395 C.E., 250 years after Hadrian’s reorganization of the city.

No clear traces of Hadrian’s building projects on the Holy Mount remain. Exactly where the temple or statue to Jupiter (and Minerva and Juno) was and what happened to it is unclear. Hadrian’s structures had vanished from the scene. Once the Roman Empire was converted to Christianity by the order of Constantine in 325 C.E., interest in restoring, repairing, or even preserving such pagan monuments would have waned, although in some cases they were or could be converted into churches (and later mosques). Once again the Holy Mount was bare of buildings, though travelers enjoyed seeing the remains of Solomon’s temple on the site. With a lively imagination, the Anonymous Pilgrim of Bordeaux relates in 333 C.E. 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. 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.”¹² The pilgrim goes on to describe two statues of Hadrian not far from the stone where the Jews came every year to mourn.

Around the same time, Eusebius (ca. 260–340 C.E.), bishop of Caesarea, reported that he could see the remains of the sanctuary;¹³ not much later, about 400 C.E., John Chrysostom, the bishop of Constantinople, said that he too could discern the foundations.¹⁴ He recounted how the Jews tore everything down during the reign of Emperor Julian the Apostate to begin work on their third temple (work on this structure began in 363, when Jews were allowed back into the city). Plans for a new Jewish temple on the site called for a building more splendid than the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, also, and perhaps more fittingly, called the Church of the Resurrection.¹⁵ With Julian’s death, the plans and the work came to naught, but the work had been frustrated even in the months preceding the emperor’s demise. Gregory Nazianzen, John Chrysostom, Ambrose, and the philosopher-soldier Ammianus Marcellinus all report that natural disasters attended the attempted construction of a third temple, including conflagrations perhaps fueled by gases trapped in blocked subterranean passages.¹⁶

Except for the brief 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 Patriarch Sophronius and Caliph Omar.¹⁷ Full control of the city was ceded to the Muslims with the stipulation that the Christian churches and other properties would be spared destruction and despoliation. No mention was made of Jews; officially, they had been banished from Jerusalem since the end of the Bar Kokhba rebellion, and no organized Jewish community existed in the city. The Holy Mount at this time was bare of buildings, although the ruins and remnants of earlier structures were doubtless 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 on particular sites associated with the presence of Jesus in Jerusalem, especially the place they identified as that of his crucifixion and resurrection; that site was dominated by the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. No group at that time exhibited a special interest in the Temple Mount, and nothing remained either of Hadrian’s works or of the Jews’ efforts to rebuild a third temple in 363 C.E.¹⁸ It is hardly surprising, then, that the Muslims took 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 Jerusalem with the heroes of the Old and New Testaments. For example, as well as being the Holy Mount where Abraham bound his son (the mountain in the land of Moriah in Genesis 22), the area was identified explicitly with the site of Solomon’s temple in 2 Chronicles 3:1 and was the place where Jesus had preached and cleansed the temple area during his mortal ministry.

Within a few years a mosque was erected on the Haram mount, the first of the al-’Aqsa structures to stand there. By the end of the seventh century several other buildings had been constructed, 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, including the followers of Moses on the one hand and Jesus on the other, both of whom were and are acknowledged by Muslims as prophets of the one true God.

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, built on the site of the temples of Solomon and Zerubbabel (and Herod the Great). As agreed by all who have studied this structure, it is unique in the Near East, having no counterparts in the religious structures of the ancient world and few imitators in its own culture.¹⁹

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 building's shape and appurtenances. The Dome is a double octagon with a rotunda or dome—not the typical shape for houses of worship, whether temples, churches, synagogues, or mosques.

Nevertheless, examples of similar structures exist, most notably in Byzantine architecture (compare structures in the cities of Basra, Kufa, and Wasit), and different views attempt to explain the numerical significance of the octagon. 'Abd al-Malik, the sponsor of the Dome of the Rock, apparently used the octagonal form in building it for two reasons. These 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 to assert the supremacy of his faith over the Christian faith as architecturally articulated in the domed Church of the Holy Sepulchre and to comment on the centrality of Jerusalem as a holy city, either in addition to or superior to Mecca. The historian Muqaddasi (tenth century C.E.) was among the first on record to suggest that the magnificent size and shape of the Dome of the Rock are a 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."²⁰ Muqaddasi is two hundred years removed from the construction of the Dome, but it is an understandable and generally accepted tradition that 'Abd al-Malik desired to surpass the Church of the Holy Sepulchre as a symbolic victory over Christianity.²¹

With respect to the spiritual significance of the octagon, in our view it symbolizes symmetry, totality, and perhaps perfection. The number eight figures importantly in the story of creation in the Bible and prominently in other distinctive and significant places and contexts. For instance, the sequence of the books of the Hebrew Bible shows the following pattern: Torah, 5; Prophets, 8 (former = 4, later = 4); Writings, 11. The sum of the books in the Torah and Writings thus equals 16, or twice 8. The total number of books in the Hebrew Bible (5+8+11) equals 24, or thrice 8.²² That the octagon symbolizes the totality of heaven and earth—in effect, the universe—may be reinforced by two other features or aspects: first, the four doors to the building are connected with the four rivers of paradise, and second, the exact location is identified with the *omphalos*, or umbilicus, of the world. Jerusalem has traditionally been viewed as the very center, as is known from biblical prophecy (cf. Ezekiel 47:1–12, describing the rivers that flow out of the temple of Jerusalem from the center of the earth).

The octagon is also the only shape that mediates between the geometric articulation of the terrestrial square and celestial circle—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."²³ This mathematical complexity and its symbology contribute to the unique character of the Dome, a character that draws upon the universal language of mathematics to express the divine.

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, colorfully described in the Qur'an 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 as promised to the faithful of Islam and open to the rest of humanity, but especially to the Peoples of the Book, who belong to the great monotheistic tradition.

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 or he walks around the drum, or circumference, in either direction. The legend is written in Arabic, thereby defining the primary target audience of the inscription: by Arabs for Arabs, by Muslims for Muslims. 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). This Islamic statement affirms the basic tenets of the faith and pronouncements of the Prophet Muhammad and quotes freely from the Qur’an; in fact, this inscription constitutes the earliest written documentation of the Qur’an and may precede any extant written manuscript of the prophet’s utterances. No doubt it was derived from oral tradition and the tenacious memory of those who heard and remembered. This declaration 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 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, the inscription makes explicit reference to Jesus, acknowledged as a true prophet standing in the line from Adam through Abraham and Moses and continuing to the latest and last of them, Muhammad 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 prophethood 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 practiced 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 an 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, at the time of the construction of the Dome, 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 Holy Mount, its shape and design, and its decorative style, along with the contemporary inscription indicating the time and the caliph who sponsored it and the team that planned and built it in the last decade of the seventh century C.E., we come up with a unique sacral structure, variously called a *ciborium* or a *martyrium*, as noted above. The Dome of the Rock, in terms of commemoration, holds significance for all three monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Concerning the construction of the Dome on this site, competing theories or resolutions exist, none of which may be entirely 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 world. The traditional view connects the site (and the structure) with the legendary night ride by the Prophet (the *isra*) or his journey to heaven (*mi’radj*). That connection, however, was not made in the earliest sources. Since the inscription fails to mention or allude to it, we may regard it as a later accretion. The second view, which derives from the earliest written sources, holds that ‘Abd al-Malik, the caliph who arranged and constructed the buildings on the Holy Mount, did so in order to rival the famous shrine at Mecca with its sacred stone, the Ka’ba, so as to divert pilgrims to Jerusalem. At the time, Mecca was under the control of a rival caliph, ‘Abd Allah ibn al-Zubayr, and the outcome of the struggle between the two for

preeminence of location was in doubt.²⁴ But shortly thereafter al-Zubayr was killed and Mecca reverted to the authority of 'Abd al-Malik. 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 (which was growing by leaps and bounds at this time) and more closely tied to the biblical traditions and the temples of the Bible than any other site.

A third view evokes the contemporary sociopolitical and religious situation in which the Arab caliphs found themselves—the necessity to establish themselves in the complex world of Syria-Palestine and their desire 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 Holy Mount and the particular details of the inscription on its walls. Together they affirm the central tenet not only of Islam but 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 (Muhammad) 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, articulated, 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.

In this way, the Dome of the Rock with its weighty, lengthy inscription affirms the superiority of Islam against its rivals but at the same time approves its predecessors as leading and guiding along the proper way. Above all, it invites comparison and welcomes 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, to examine architecture and art, to read its literature, and to 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 Qur'an nor Islamic theology can ever come close to rendering a true and faithful account of their religious convictions and commitments, the Dome of the Rock represents an honest and honorable 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 thirteen-hundred-year period of the Dome's survival, it is hard not to believe that Providence has played an important role in maintaining this building above all that have stood in its place on the Holy 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 any, even if it does not yet entirely fulfill the words of the prophet Isaiah:

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. (Isaiah 56:7)

Notes

1. Keppell Creswell writes that the Dome fell down in 1016 but was restored to its previous condition. See K. A. C. Creswell, *The Origin of the Plan of the Dome of the Rock* (London: Council of the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem, 1924), 13–16.

2. Genesis 22:3 and especially verse 14 connect the mountain to the land of Moriah.

3. Richard Ettinghausen and Oleg Grabar, *The Art and Architecture of Islam: 650–1250* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1987; 1994), 32.

4. That is, the descendants of Isaac on the one hand and of Ishmael on the other—the first two sons of the patriarch. Members of these faiths who are not descendants by blood are considered to be Abraham’s adoptive heirs by virtue of their adherence to the one faith or the other.
5. For information on both the First and Second Temples, see Carol Meyers, “Temple, Jerusalem,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:350–68.
6. Jerry M. Landay, *Dome of the Rock* (New York: Newsweek Book Division, 1982).
7. For instance, see Jeremiah 38 and Ezekiel 17 (the allegory of the eagles).
8. Josephus, *Jewish War* 5.10.3.
9. We do not include in the account the action of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who is reported to have erected an altar to Ba’al 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 this chief god in the temple precinct, but the temple itself remained standing and was restored to proper use by Judas Maccabeus and his successors.
10. Meyers, “Temple, Jerusalem,” 367.
11. Jerome, *Ad Paulinum Presbiterum* 58.3.13.
12. “The Itinerary of the Anonymous Pilgrim of Bordeaux,” in *Anonymous Pilgrims I-VIII (11th and 12th Centuries)*, vol. 6 of Palestine Pilgrims Text Society, trans. Aubrey Steward (1894; reprint, New York: AMS Press, 1971).
13. Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 3.26 and 3.33.
14. Chrysostom, *Homily* 6.
15. Julian, *Epistles* 29 and 30.
16. Cf. Gregory Nazianzen, *Orations* 4, and Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 16.7.1. These accounts are related by Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London: Dent and Sons, 1920), 2:386–87 (chap. 23). Gibbon discusses the sources for these disasters and the likelihood of such conflagrations.
17. Ettinghausen and Grabar, *Art and Architecture of Islam*, 18.
18. Tuvia Sagiv argues, in *The Temples of Mount Moriah* at www.templemount.org/mtmoriah.html, as does Giovanni Rivoira in *Moslem Architecture: Its Origins and Development*, trans. G. McN. Rushforth (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1975), 69 (followed up in Creswell, “The Dome of the Rock,” 17), that the octagonal structure takes its shape from the temple to Jupiter, Minerva, and Juno erected on the site by Hadrian. Evidence that Hadrian built a temple rather than a simulacrum, that it was octagonal in shape, and that any portion of that temple remained into the seventh century is open to speculation.
19. Myriam Rosen-Ayalon, *The Early Islamic Monuments of al-Haram al-Sharif: An Iconographic Study*, Qedem 28 (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1989), 12.

20. Alistair Duncan, *The Noble Sanctuary: Portrait of a Holy Place in Arab Jerusalem* (London: Longman, 1972), 28.

21. See also Julian Raby and Jeremy Johns, eds., *Bayt al-Maqdis: 'Abd al-Malik's Jerusalem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 1:101: "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."

22. See David Noel Freedman, *Psalms 119: The Exaltation of the Torah* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 2, 39; and David Noel Freedman, *The Unity of the Hebrew Bible* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 5.

23. Kim Williams, "The Sacred Cut Revisited: The Pavement of the Baptistery of San Giovanni, Florence," *Mathematical Intelligencer* 16/2 (1994): 24.

24. For a discussion of this rivalry, see Josef van Ess, "'Abd al-Malik and the Dome of the Rock," in Raby and Johns, *Bayt al-Maqdis*, 89–103.