

The Temples of Jerusalem in Islam

by [Martin Kramer](#)

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Brief Analysis

The political status of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem is the subject of final status negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. According to press reports, at one moment in the Camp David negotiations last July, senior Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat asked his Israeli counterpart: "How do you know that your Holy Temple was located there?" A *Jerusalem Report* cover story (September 11) placed this in the context of a growing Palestinian denial of the existence of the First and Second Temples. "It's self-evident that the First Temple is a fiction," one Palestinian archaeologist at Bir Zeit University is quoted as saying. "The Second also remains in the realm of fantasy."

Archaeologists will have their debates, and their place is in the academy. (There, the biblical account of the First Temple is contested, while the existence of the Second Temple, and its general location on the Temple Mount, are regarded as well-attested facts.) But at the negotiating table, the subjective sanctity of any site is a concrete reality which must be respected in its own terms. This is all the more so in the case of the existence and location of the First and Second Temples: both are attested by precisely the same Islamic sources which render the Haram al-Sharif (including the Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock) holy to Islam.

(The Qur'anic passages below are quoted from what is widely considered to be the most orthodox Sunni translation and commentary, prepared by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, vetted and corrected by four committees commissioned by King Fahd of Saudi Arabia, and published at the King Fahd Holy Qur'an Printing Complex in Medina, Saudi Arabia, by royal decree.)

Did the Temples Exist? The Qur'an refers to the existence of both temples in verse 17:7. In this passage, the Qur'an deals with God's punishment of the Children of Israel for their transgressions:

(We permitted your enemies)

To disfigure your faces,

And to enter your Temple
As they had entered it before,
And to visit with destruction
All that fell into their power.

The word translated as "Temple" by Abdullah Yusuf Ali (and by the influential translator Marmaduke Pickthall before him) is *masjid*. This word, which is usually translated as mosque, has the meaning of a sanctuary wherever it appears in a pre-Islamic context. The usual Muslim exegesis of this verse (including that of Abdullah Yusuf Ali) holds that it refers to the destruction of the First and Second Temples.

Muslim tradition is especially adamant about the existence of the First Temple, built by Solomon, who appears in the Qur'an as a prophet and a paragon of wisdom. Verse 34:13 is an account of how Solomon summoned *jinn* (spirits) to build the Temple:

They worked for him
As he desired, (making) Arches,
Images, Basons
As large as wells,
And (cooking) Cauldrons fixed
(In their places)

Early Muslims regarded the building and destruction of the Temple of Solomon as a major historical and religious event, and accounts of the Temple are offered by many of the early Muslim historians and geographers (including Ibn Qutayba, Ibn al-Faqih, Mas'udi, Muhallabi, and Biruni). Fantastic tales of Solomon's construction of the Temple also appear in the *Qisas al-anbiya'*, the medieval compendia of Muslim legends about the pre-Islamic prophets. As the historian Rashid Khalidi wrote in 1998 (albeit in a footnote), while there is no "scientific evidence" that Solomon's Temple existed, "all believers in any of the Abrahamic faiths perforce must accept that it did."¹ This is so for Muslims, no less than for Christians and Jews.

The Location of the Temples So much for the existence of the Temples. But what of their location? The Islamic sanctity of the Haram al-Sharif is based upon verse 17:1:

Glory to (Allah)
Who did take His Servant
For a Journey by night
From the Sacred Mosque
To the Farthest Mosque

This is the textual proof of the *isra'*, the earthly segment of the Night Journey of the Prophet Muhammad: overnight, Muhammad was miraculously transported, round-trip, from "the Sacred Mosque" (al-Masjid al-Haram)-that is, the Ka'ba (or its vicinity) in Mecca-to "the Farthest Mosque" (al-Masjid al-Aqsa). Later Muslim tradition came to identify "the Farthest Mosque" with Jerusalem. But during Muhammad's lifetime, no mosque stood in Jerusalem; the Muslims conquered the city only several years after his death. Abdullah Yusuf Ali's commentary on this verse summarizes the traditional explanation: "The Farthest Mosque," he writes, "must refer to the site of the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem on the hill of Moriah."

When Muslims did build a mosque on this hill, Muslim tradition holds that it was built deliberately on the verified site of earlier sanctuaries. According to Muslim tradition, when the Caliph Umar visited Jerusalem after its conquest, he searched for David's sanctuary or prayer niche (*mihrab Dawud*), which is mentioned in the Qur'an (38:21). (David was believed to have chosen the site on which Solomon built.) When Umar was satisfied he had located it, he ordered

a place of prayer (*musalla*) to be established there. This evolved into a mosque-precursor of the later Aqsa Mosque. Thus began the Islamization of the complex that later came to be known as the Haram al-Sharif. It became the tradition of Islam that Muslims restored the site to its earlier function as a place of supplication venerated by all the prophets, including Abraham, David and Solomon.

Sari Nuseibeh, president of Al-Quds University, has emphasized this original meaning of the site for Muslims: the mosque is the last and final in a series of sanctuaries erected there. "The mosque was itself a revivication of the old Jewish temple," writes Nuseibeh, "an instantiation of the unity with the Abrahamic message, an embodiment of the new temple yearned for and forecasted. And why should this seem strange when Muhammad himself, according to the Qur'an, was the very prophet expected and described in the 'true' Jewish literature?"²

Whether it is called the Temple Mount or al-Haram al-Sharif, this corner of Jerusalem is the physical overlap between Judaism and Islam. Verse 17 of the Qur'an, quoted above, is entitled *Bani Isra'il*, the Children of Israel. The present-day State of Israel has acknowledged the sanctity of the site for present-day Muslims, in the interest of peace. For Muslims to question or even deny the existence of the Temples, in disregard of the Qur'an and Muslim tradition, is to cast doubt upon the very sources which underpin their own claim.

1. Rashid Khalidi, "Transforming the Face of the Holy City: Political Messages in the Built Topography of Jerusalem," paper presented to the conference on "Landscape Perspectives on Palestine," Bir Zeit University, November 12–15, 1998, <http://www.jqf-jerusalem.org/journal/1999/jqf3/khalidi.html>

2. Sari Nuseibeh, "Islam's Jerusalem," September 1995, <http://www.passia.org/jerusalem/publications/religiousaspectstext.htm#Islam'sJerusalem>

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