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## Sharing Holy Places

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# SHARING HOLY PLACES

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*Elizabeth Key Fowden*

The Lord said unto him . . . throw down the altar of Baal that thy father hath, and cut down the grove that is by it: And build an altar unto the Lord thy God upon the top of this rock, in the ordered place, and take the second bullock, and offer a burnt sacrifice with the wood of the grove which thou shalt cut down.

—*Judges 6:25–26*

Destruction and supplantation: the exclusivist God of Israel commanded Gideon to obliterate the holy place of another god, and to establish His cult on the ashes of the former—the trees hewn from the polytheists' sacred grove would fuel his offering to the One God. Gideon acts out what would become the classic, head-on confrontation of monotheism with holy places dedicated to strange gods. But the Hebrew Bible abounds in signs that this ideal was not often attained. Rather than total eradication, more often various forms of cohabitation and assimilation emerged from the introduction, or the reintroduction, of the cult of Israel's God into an established holy place.

Even after worship of the One God was focused at Jerusalem, Baalism was repeatedly encouraged by the wayward kings of Judah. During the reign of Manasseh from 687 to 642 B.C., an alien cult intruded even into the one sanctuary established as a holy place not to be shared with other deities—Solomon's

temple to the God of Israel where He dwelt among His people in the holy of holies. Manasseh constructed altars on the Temple Mount, raised altars to the celestial gods in the temple's two courtyards, and established an image of a goddess inside the temple itself. Incense was burnt to other gods within the temple.<sup>1</sup> In 622, Josiah retaliated with full-scale eradication. He banned worship at high places and polluted cultic sites and apparatus with the blood of Baalic priests. The One God was to be worshipped alone in His one shrine.

The purging activity of reformers such as Elijah, Hezekiah, and Josiah was dramatic, but more eloquent of ordinary religious life is the quiet repetition, after each biblical account of a righteous king's reign, of the phrase, "But the high places were not taken away: the people still sacrificed and burnt incense in the high places."<sup>2</sup> In Judea before the Babylonian captivity, the cultic customs of Baalism had taken root in the worship of the One God. Sacrifice and incense-burning on high places by followers of the Holy One represents both assimilation of the religious practices of neighboring worshippers and also cohabitation at—perhaps we should even say sharing of—a holy place.

We can assume that there were times when worshippers of Yahweh borrowed Canaanite style without incorporating Canaanite gods and images: "The people did sacrifice still in the high places, yet unto the Lord their God only."<sup>3</sup> Such assimilation and even cohabitation among worshippers of Yahweh and of the Baals is greeted with anxious reserve by prophets and sages aware of the strength of will required not to veer into the practices and beliefs of one's neighbors. Did worshippers of the Holy One simply turn a blind eye to those who burned incense to other gods at the same high place—or even at another, nearby, high place? To what extent does cohabitation actually compel those who experience it to consider the other, to be open to cross-fertilization? And might this inadvertent cross-fertilization in turn lead the two to resemble each other more closely? Or might greater acquaintance lead to greater hostility? These are questions that require closer attention, especially in the context of relations among the three monotheisms, the three branches of Abrahamic religion.

### Christianity and Restricted Sharing

The oak of Mamre stood next to a well on the stony Judean plateau.<sup>4</sup> Inland and peripheral to the great coastal trade routes, Judea nonetheless gave birth at

1. 2 Kings 21:4–7; 2 Chron. 33:4–7; Jer. 19:4 (all quotations are from the King James Version).

2. 2 Kings 12:3; cf. 14:4; 15:4; 15:35.

3. 2 Chron. 33:17.

4. Though the Septuagint *oak* has entered our vocabulary, the tree was actually a terebinth, considered in antiquity

(and also in modern times) to be conducive to numinous experiences: see Evaristus Mader, *Mambre, die Ergebnisse der Ausgrabungen im heiligen Bezirk Râmet el-Khalil in Südpalästina* (Freiburg im Breisgau: E. Wewel, 1957), 285–88, hereafter cited as *Mambre*; and F. Nigel Hepper and Shimon Gibson, "Abraham's Oak of Mamre: The Story of a Venerable Tree," *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 126 (1994): 94–105.

Mamre to a cult site important locally, and in late antiquity internationally. Mamre was a classic *ḥaram*, a sanctuary where pilgrims converged at a source of water and shade in an ungenerous landscape.<sup>5</sup> The existence of a pre-Abrahamic holy site centered on the sacred tree and well is quite possible but cannot be proved indisputably.<sup>6</sup> The well and tree had, according to the tradition, attracted the patriarch Abraham and his household. At Mamre, Abraham built an altar to the One God. It was in the tree's shade that, in the form of three men, Yahweh and two angels appeared to Abraham and his wife Sarah, who offered hospitality to the unexpected strangers.<sup>7</sup> On this occasion, Yahweh foretold Sarah's conception of a son, despite her advanced age. Sarah's surprised laughter was taken by Christians as an Old Testament foreshadowing of Mary's bemused reaction to the angel Gabriel's annunciation of her own maternity.

Thanks to this densely packed episode, the site acquired the holiness of Abraham's encounter with the angels—indeed, association with a holy man is another distinctive feature of the *ḥaram*. The holy man's presence is very often symbolized by his tomb, though at Mamre that was not the case; Abraham's tomb could be found in nearby Hebron. Mamre can be seen as a specialized satellite shrine to the tomb, a shrine commemorating not just the holy man, but one particular moment in his life, an event with power to inspire visitors across a wide cultural and religious spectrum. The appearance of angels at Mamre was commemorated as a moment when the divine penetrated the human sphere. In Christian tradition, the incident confirmed Trinitarian theology—Abraham speaks to the three in the singular—and foreshadowed the appearance of the incarnate Logos in the world. Angels are a characteristic manifestation of God's power and His disposition to communicate with mankind; and access to divine power seems to be the underlying motive for much sharing of holy places by different traditions.

It was not only Jews and Christians who gathered at Mamre. Christian sources, in whose interest it might well have been to tamper with the evidence, relate that worshippers reflected the diverse religious population of Palestine.<sup>8</sup> Our most informative source for the cult at Mamre is the fifth-century ecclesi-

5. On the characteristic functions of a *ḥaram*, see Robert B. Serjeant, "Ḥaram and ḥawṭah: The Sacred Enclosure in Arabia," in *Studies in Arabian History and Civilization* vol. 3 (London:Variorum Reprints, 1981).

6. Mader, *Mambre*, 35–36, 48–49, excavator of the site at Mamre in the late 1920s, speculates about a pre-Abrahamic stratum at the cult site. For a discussion of the accumulation of sacred associations and the formation of a "collective memory" at Mamre, see Arieh Kofsky, "Mamre: A Case of a Regional Cult?" in *Sharing the Sacred: Religious Contacts and Conflicts in the Holy Land, First–Fifteenth Centuries, CE*, ed. Arieh Kofsky and Guy G. Stroumsa (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben Zvi, 1998), 26.

7. Gen. 18:1–15, 19:1. For other examples of sacred trees associated with divine presence in the Old Testament, see Judg. 4:5, 11 (the prophetess Deborah sat under a palm tree); Judg. 6:11 (the angel of Yahweh appeared to Gideon under a terebinth); Judg. 9:37 (the "Diviner's Oak"); Josh. 24:26 (Joshua assembled the Israelites at the oak tree of the Yahweh sanctuary at Shechem).

8. The most important Christian sources for the cult at Mamre include: Eusebius, *Onomasticon* 6; Eusebius, *Demonstratio evangelica* 5.9.6–8, hereafter cited as *DE*; Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* 3.51–53, hereafter cited as *VC*; Socrates, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.18, hereafter cited as *Historia*; Sozomen, *Historia ecclesiastica* 2.4, hereafter cited as *HE*.

astical historian Sozomen, an exponent of a Christianized view of history who was a native of the Gaza area and very probably, to judge by his style, an eyewitness of the festivities he describes. The passage deserves quotation in full:

Here the inhabitants of the country and of the regions round Palestine, the Phoenicians and the Arabians, assemble annually during the summer season to keep a brilliant feast; and many others, both buyers and sellers, gather on account of the fair. Indeed, this feast is zealously attended by everyone: by the Jews, because they boast of the patriarch Abraham; by the polytheists, because of the visit of the angels; and by Christians too, because it was on that occasion that there appeared to the godly man He who at a later time manifested himself openly through the virgin for the salvation of mankind.<sup>9</sup>

Sozomen's account bears witness to the fact that where a cross section of peoples meets, a market commonly springs up—another characteristic feature of the *ḥaram*. That Mamre was already a frequented marketplace in the early Roman period is known, for example, from Hadrian's choice of the site for the sale of Jews taken prisoner after the Bar Kochba revolt.<sup>10</sup> This passage from Sozomen also reveals how the story of Abraham's encounter at Mamre gave rise to a variety of complementary interpretations of the cult: reverence for Yahweh; for His accompanying angels; for the Son of God; and by extension for the Trinity. The different religious groups interpret the same holy place according to their separate theological traditions. This maintenance of separateness within the same holy space applies also to ritual, as we see in the continuation of the passage:

They honored this place with religious veneration—some praying to the God of all; some calling upon the angels, pouring out wine, offering incense, or an ox, he-goat, a sheep, or a cock.

But Sozomen goes on to highlight how aspects of the celebration—notably picnicking, decent behavior in public processions, and sexual temperance—were agreed on by all who gathered for the religious festival. Nor did anyone drink from the well, which during the fair received libations and other offerings. Sozomen does not claim, as one might expect, that the well was thus tainted by pagan pollution. Rather, his commonsensical explanation is: “I suppose that the water was rendered useless by commixture with the things cast into it.” In fact, Sozomen goes out of his way to emphasize the easy and joyous intermingling of

9. Sozomen, *HE* 2.4.2–3; cf. Socrates, who also mentions altars and sacrifices (*Historia* 1.18.5–6). In the early fourth century Eusebius too had commented on the devotion of the local polytheists to the angels and the sacred tree at Mamre: Eusebius, *Onomasticon*, “Arbo”; cf. Eusebius, *DE* 5.9.6–8, for the holy tree in local piety, and an image at

the site showing Abraham's three angelic visitors, the central figure greater in size in order to identify it as the Logos.

10. *Chronicon Paschale*, Olympiad 224.

these diverse people during the feast. Clearly, if ever there was an opportunity for cross-fertilization among various groups, this was it. Sozomen draws a picture of a non-Abrahamic cult within the same holy site, and of occasions for joint activities with Jews and Christians. That the monotheists were inspired to imitate the polytheists, who were “calling upon the angels, pouring out wine, offering incense,” would hardly have been surprising.

Into this many-layered holy place, official Christianity intruded itself in the form of an imperial building project. When Constantine’s sober mother-in-law visited the site to pray, she was appalled by the accustomed mirth with which polytheists were celebrating nearby. Her report to Constantine provoked a severe rebuke of the local bishops and directions to ban all worship not sanctioned by Christianity: the altar was to be demolished, images burned, and in their place a splendid church erected.<sup>11</sup> This Christian transformation of holy places rested on the ideology of Old Testament destruction and supplantation, here with overt intentions to purify ancient monotheist tradition and convert to true worship those still devoted to the old gods. The interlinking of destruction, education, and conversion is explicit in the chapter that follows Sozomen’s account of Mamre.<sup>12</sup> But Sozomen, writing over one hundred years after the reign of Constantine, knew that Christian monopolization of the site had not yet succeeded in his day, and he even seemed to relish the scene. He certainly did not react as Constantine’s mother-in-law had done. Archaeological investigation has confirmed the written record, turning up what appear to be fourth- and fifth-century votive offerings around the well, and bones of cockerel feet near the altar.<sup>13</sup> Also, a unique stone mold—possibly a bread stamp—may illustrate the cohabitation at Mamre of Christians and worshippers of the old gods (fig. 1). According to the attractive interpretation of M. E. Frazer,<sup>14</sup> one side of the mold shows three angels, Abraham and Sarah, a heifer, and a well. On the reverse is depicted a goddess, probably Aphrodite Ourania, identifiable thanks to a Greek inscription around the edge. To her side is a pile of round cakes, perhaps the favored offering mentioned by Sozomen. In any case, what is clear enough from the architecture itself is that the intended exclusivity of the church literally gave way to the pre-existing cult. In order to accommodate the time-honored well, tree, and centrally placed altar, the builders ended up truncating the basilical plan and cramping the structure into the east end of the *temenos*.

A passing phrase in the *Demonstratio evangelica* of Eusebius, Constantine’s contemporary and his biographer, reveals an attitude that helps to explain how people accommodated into their thinking the presence of worshippers from such

11. Sozomen, *HE* 2.4.6–8.

12. Cf. Eusebius, *VC* 3.58, for a similar situation at Heliopolis/Baalbek.

13. Mader, *Mamre*, see 107 and 154 on the offerings; 137 on the bones.

14. Frazer, “A Syncretistic Pilgrim’s Mould from Mamre (?)” *Gesta* 18 (1979):137–45; republished by Sheila Campbell, ed., *The Malcove Collection: A Catalogue of the Objects in the Lillian Malcove Collection of the University of Toronto* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 66–67.



Figure 1. Stone mold showing on one side the three angels with Abraham and Sarah in the lower register, and the goddess Ourania on the reverse. Fifth century (?). Said to have been found near Jerusalem. Reproduced with permission of the University of Toronto Malcove Collection.

a wide range of traditions: “The people of the neighborhood revere the place because of those who appeared by the Terebinth, which is still there, including, *even if they are unaware of it*, the Lord.”<sup>15</sup> People were drawn to the place because of its reputation for holiness. That much was shared consciously. The more specific truth—that the Lord incarnate appeared in the company of angels to the first monotheist patriarch—simply resided there, regardless of whether people discerned it or not. The truth was present to be shared, and visitors did so according to their individual discernment.

Worshipping in their church, the Christians would have been able to assimilate the Abrahamic holy site to their own vision of God’s manifestations to humanity—that is, they could Christianize the holy place. But stepping outside, away from the Kingdom of God re-created within the basilical walls, and walking over to the ancient altar, well, and tree within the shared *temenos*, the Christian pilgrim—so the evidence suggests, at least with respect to the fourth and fifth centuries—would have been confronted with non-Christian worship and with a dilemma that was up to the individual to resolve. Sharing of religious experience at Mamre was part of a larger complex of social interaction that depended, to a large degree, on individual, rather than communal, interest.

### Damascus and Islamicization

The assimilation of practices and also beliefs from a historically prior tradition is well illustrated by the tomb of John the Baptist in Damascus and the *temenos* that

15. Eusebius, *DE* 5.9.7, emphasis added.

surrounds it. The sharing of this holy place passed through several phases of development, resulting in the complete Islamicization of the Christian site. As the ninth-century historian al-Balādhurī recounts in his *Futūḥ al-buldān*, when Islamic conquerors in the 630s accepted the surrender of a city in Palestine and Syria, their conditions were laid out in a treaty tailored to each situation. With regard to religious life, Jews and Christians were allowed to retain their places of worship—the only restriction being that these could not be expanded. In addition, construction of new synagogues or churches was not permitted. In some instances, it was stipulated that given churches were to be taken over for Muslim worship. In no case were churches to be demolished or converted for domestic use. The conditions established in each treaty were considered binding, and churches that remained in Christian hands according to these terms technically could not later be commandeered for Muslim use.

At the time of the conquest, the main holy place in Damascus was a monumental basilica dedicated to St. John the Baptist. The church incorporated materials from the temple of Roman Jupiter which had formerly stood on the site—including part of the *temenos* wall and an elaborately carved entrance to the temple (now, church) precinct. Christian takeover of the temple had represented abolition of the old religion, but important to the Christian victory over polytheism was the memory that the temple lay beneath the church. Enshrined in a crypt-chapel was the head of the forerunner of Christ, John the Baptist, who was also revered as a great prophet by the Muslims, who called him Yaḥyā b. Zakariyā.

When Damascus was taken in 635, the church remained by agreement in the Christians' possession. From this early period Muslims too worshipped within the *temenos* wall, so that Christians and Muslims shared the courtyard. No doubt Muslims visited the shrine of John the Baptist as well. It is up to one's imagination to envision how Muslims might have taken part in the processions and litanies in honor of St. John that would have overflowed into the courtyard. But their place of formal corporate worship was in the open-air mosque set up in the *temenos*. Some of our sources for this early period of cohabitation relate that Christians and Muslims used separate entrances to the courtyard.<sup>16</sup> For more than seventy years—from 635 to 706—Christians and Muslims worshipped within the same *temenos*, although the visual balance within the *temenos* would have been tipped toward the preexisting basilica, renowned for its size and luxurious decoration.

A shared commitment to the One God was the crucial ingredient that allowed this situation at Damascus to persist for almost three generations, until the political climate demanded that the church give way to a grand central mosque for the capital of the Umayyad caliphate. The situation was no doubt

16. K. A. C. Creswell, *Early Islamic Architecture*, 2d ed., vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 151–96.



helped by the fact that, in this early period of Islam's appearance in the Christianized East, the actual nature and status of Islam was not at all clear in the eyes of contemporary Christians.<sup>17</sup> Some viewed Islam as just another Christian heresy; others interpreted it as God's punishment for the Christians' quarrelsomeness over christological issues. Within Muslim circles, too, this was a formative period in which the debt to Judaism and Christianity was being weighed against the emerging identity of a separate religious community. As that community gradually accumulated what could be called "Islamic tradition," it began to separate itself from what were seen increasingly as distinct religions. Part of this process was the claiming of the entire holy place in Damascus for Islamic worship alone.

In 706, on the order of the Umayyad caliph al-Walīd I, the church was demolished. In its place rose a mosque that housed within its walls the shrine of John the Baptist (fig. 2). The *temenos* wall remained in place to mark the entire sanctuary's perimeter, though within that space the orientation of the new mosque with its expansive courtyard now reflected the Muslim practice of facing Mecca. Damascus was, after all, the capital of the Islamic empire at this time, and it would have seemed unsuitable for the city's chief holy site to be dominated by a Christian structure. By the time of al-Walīd's reign, the number of Muslims was growing and with it no doubt the confidence—which clearly was lacking at the start—to take over the whole *temenos*. For the construction and decoration of the new mosque at the heart of the Umayyad empire, artisans trained in Byzantine technique and style were hired, and they produced the fabulous mosaics that are still to be seen, glittering in green and gold, with primarily vegetal and architectural themes. It has been argued that these mosaics reveal the influence of Christian representations of paradise.<sup>18</sup> The twelfth-century Damascene historian Ibn 'Asākir states explicitly that the purpose of beauty in mosques is to make the viewer desire paradise, whose beauty must be immeasurably greater than any that is manifest on earth.<sup>19</sup> The Damascus mosque is considered in this passage to be the most beautiful of all, therefore the closest to paradise and the most potentially anagogic. But some considered the gold and mosaic decoration to be a distraction from prayer. The Umayyad caliph 'Umar II was reported to have left these adornments in place only because they were a source of awe and irritation to a Christian delegation that was allowed to visit the

17. On this important issue, see Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin, 1997), esp. 523–41.

18. Barbara Finster, "Die Mosaiken der Umayyadenmoschee von Damaskus," *Kunst des Orients* 7 (1970–71): 117–21.

19. Ibn 'Asākir, *Ta'rikh madīnat Dimashq* 14 = ed. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Munajjid, trans. Nikita Elisséeff, *La description de Damas d'Ibn 'Asākir* (Damascus: Institut français de Damas, 1959), 21. Cf. *Ibid.*, 38–39 = trans. 57–59.



Figure 2. Umayyad mosque in Damascus. Interior with the shrine of St. John the Baptist. Eighth century.

mosque.<sup>20</sup> That its beauty was not limited to what could be seen with the eyes is confirmed by a story about the aroma of musk emanating from its oil lamps. But another pious contemporary of ‘Umar begged to differ from those Muslims who found beauty in such smells, and one must wonder whether for him the association with Christian practice was too close for comfort.<sup>21</sup>

A necessary feature of taking over the Christian holy place was the Islamization of its history. From early on, the role of those known as traditionists, who assembled the Prophet’s sayings (the *ḥadīths*) was crucial in this gradual, associative enriching of the holy place. Islamic commentators on the Damascus mosque from the eighth to the twelfth centuries asserted Islam’s superiority to Christianity in order to deflate the abiding influence of the sanctuary’s earlier owners. This process involved both widening the interpretation of the holy place to accommodate a more general monotheist framework and narrowing it down to its exclusively Muslim meaning. For example, Yazīd b. Maysara, a traditionist active in the first part of the eighth century, related the tradition that in the eyes of God there are four holy mountains, namely Jerusalem, Sinai, the mosque of Damascus, and Mecca. Such assertions illustrate the intricate network of associations and legends by which holy places gradually come to be seen as interrelated.<sup>22</sup> The monotheist history of the

20. Ibid., 41–44 = trans. 63–66.

21. Ibid., 45 = trans. 67.

22. This tradition is recorded by Ibn ‘Asākir, *Ta’rīkh madīnat Dimashq* 5 = trans. 9; see also ibid., 6 = trans. 10.

For other traditions concerned with Damascus, see M. J. Kister, “Sanctity Joint and Divided: On Holy Places in the Islamic Tradition,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 20 (1996): 21–26.

Damascus site was emphasized by evocations, on the one hand, of David, Solomon, and Bilqīs, the Queen of Sheba, and on the other hand, of the pre-Islamic prophet Hūd, who is mentioned in the Qur’ān.<sup>23</sup> The discovery of John the Baptist’s head by the caliph al-Walīd in a subterranean chapel became part of the foundational myth of the mosque. The Christian origin of this cult and the period of shared reverence before al-Walīd’s reworking of the space are submerged in order to highlight instead the rebirth of the cult under al-Walīd’s supervision. According to Ibn ‘Asākir’s account, the caliph himself opened the hidden chapel and declared that it should be left as it was (complete with the identifying inscription, in which language we are not told, and undecayed hair and skin), and declared moreover that a column with an intricately decorated capital should mark the spot in the mosque above.<sup>24</sup> While it is the prophet John the Baptist who is held in greatest honor at the Damascus mosque, tradition also relates that Khidr, the much revered but somewhat amorphous Muslim saint, also prays there every night.<sup>25</sup> In many circles, especially among Sufis, Khidr was included among the pre-Islamic saints and was often identified with the popular Christian saints Sergius and George, who themselves are often confused (or fused).<sup>26</sup>

Despite a distinct Islamicization of the holy place, the use of lamps and incense—and the retention of St. John’s relic—indicate that elements of the earlier cult were thought worth assimilating.<sup>27</sup> One important factor contributing to the success with which Islam absorbed and synthesized elements from the religions in the lands that the Muslims took over is that the people who converted to Islam were themselves on the whole from those traditions (notably Christianity and Judaism) that were made part of the new faith. Rather than alienating potential converts by its novelty, Islam incorporated as much as possible from the traditions that the converts represented. Originality is anathema to traditional religion. Drawing from the deep wells of preexisting monotheist tradition did not expose a weakness in Islam, since the accusation of derivativeness is painful only to the modern ego. The rootedness in local tradition and the willingness to take nourishment from it helps to explain, for example, the Ka’ba in Mecca,

23. Ibn ‘Asākir, *Ta’rīkh madīnat Dimashq* 9 = trans. 14; 30 = trans. 45–46, for David and Solomon; 33–34 = trans. 51–52, for Bilqīs; 8–9 = trans. 12–14; 28 = trans. 43, for Hūd.

24. *Ibid.*, 9–12 = trans. 13–8.

25. *Ibid.*, 13 = trans. 19–20.

26. Still one of the most interesting discussions of Khidr is by F. W. Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam under the Sultans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1929), esp. 319–36. See also Rudolf Kriss and Hubert Kriss-Heinrich, *Völksglaube im Bereich des Islam I* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1960), 154–64.

27. The use of oil lamps was, naturally, not exclusive to Christians. But they were, nonetheless, objects of Muslim admiration at monasteries and churches. See, e.g., Abū ‘l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī (attributed), *Kitāb adab al-ghurabā’* 94, ed. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Munajjid = trans. Patricia Crone and Shmuel Moreh, *The Book of Strangers: Medieval Arab Graffiti on the Theme of Nostalgia* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener, 2000), 72, and 150–52 for a discussion of the Arabic literary genre, *al diyārāt*, concerned with Christian monasteries.

where Muḥammad wanted most of all to help bring the Meccans into his understanding of God. That willingness also helps to explain the openness at Damascus to the prophet and saint cult—and the openness to religious decoration: the mosaics that adorn the mosque belong indisputably to the Byzantine tradition, both in technique and subject matter.

But what the example of the Damascus *temenos* illustrates most of all is how what may begin as an openness to influence from preexisting religious tradition develops—via gradual accumulation of symbolic associations—into a much more self-sufficient system of belief and understanding. The process of Islamization begins from the common ground shared with Christianity and develops toward a more precise focus on Islamic truth. Another holy place with a history of Christian-Muslim cohabitation is al-Ruṣāfa in eastern Syria. The evidence from al-Ruṣāfa sheds additional light on the effects of Islamicization and on the role of conversion in shared holy places.

### **Al-Ruṣāfa and Saint Cult**

Like Mamre, but on a much grander scale, al-Ruṣāfa was a *ḥaram* operating as a point of convergence for social, economic, and even political as well as religious interests. The shrine of St. Sergius at al-Ruṣāfa was the most celebrated pilgrimage destination in the Christian Arab culture of late antique Syria and Mesopotamia. St. Sergius had been an officer in the imperial Roman horseguard. Martyred and buried in the early fourth century at a fort still known today as al-Ruṣāfa (located in the Syrian steppe near the Euphrates), his tomb became a site of miracles, and pilgrims began to pray beside it for healing. In the course of the fifth and sixth centuries, al-Ruṣāfa grew into one of the greatest pilgrimage sites in all the East and the settlement was adorned with lavishly decorated architecture of the highest quality. A monastic community was drawn to the site. Sergius's image—whether standing or mounted as horseman, wearing his official costume, a gold torc prominently displayed around his neck—traveled widely with pilgrims. Sergius was especially revered by the Arabs who populated the steppe around al-Ruṣāfa and would converge on the shrine for baptism. As a military saint and miracle worker with his shrine in the frontier zone, Sergius's aid was sought for defense and mediation not only by the region's Arab population, but also by the political leaders of Rome and Sasanian Iran.<sup>28</sup>

The tomb of St. Sergius was the focus of the largest church at al-Ruṣāfa. The airy grandeur of the nave contrasts with the carefully controlled space around the shrine located north of the apse. Today, traces of the luxurious mar-

28. On the cult of St. Sergius, see Elizabeth Key Fowden, *The Barbarian Plain: Saint Sergius between Rome and Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

bles that decorated the small shrine can only hint at the exquisite gifts dedicated to the saint, whose body was adored there in a silver sarcophagus. This was certainly one of the Syrian churches most famed for its beauty, its costly fabrics, colorful paintings, and myriad lamps.

The Umayyad caliph Hishām, who ruled from 724 to 743, built a country palace outside the walls of al-Ruṣāfa and resided there permanently, so that the city came to be known to Arabic writers as Ruṣāfat Hishām. Within the city walls, Hishām’s architectural contribution included the mosque built due north of the main church, which swallowed up over one-third of the church’s monumental courtyard (fig. 3). The Muslim worshipper could enter this courtyard directly from the mosque’s prayer hall, through a door in the south—or *qibla*—wall. The result of this architectural innovation was that the mosque shared the courtyard and its stoa with the city’s main church, which housed the martyrdom of St. Sergius. Unlike the basilica opposite, the mosque appears to have been simple and unadorned. Two *mibrābs*, as well as the stone *minbar* that later replaced the original wooden one, are still visible on the interior *qibla* wall. North of the prayer hall is another open-air courtyard, with the formal entrance to the whole complex in its north perimeter wall. Rather than attempting to destroy or rival the very popular cult of St. Sergius, Hishām attempted to tap into its power. By incorporating the three-aisled mosque into the preexisting north courtyard of the main church, Hishām’s architects linked their building to the shrine of St. Sergius, making the Islamic presence known but without supplanting the Christian cult and its material apparatus. The mosque’s proximity to the shrine suggests an effort to benefit from the saint’s miracle-working presence and to provide Muslims with a place nearby to worship—and even to participate in the cult of St. Sergius. The same desire for mediation and for healing by divine power as administered through the saints even now draws Christians and Muslims together to the famous shrines of St. Thekla at Ma‘lūla and of the Mother of God at Saydnaya, both in western Syria.<sup>29</sup> And the pursuit of healing kept the thermal baths of Hammat Gader, known once also as the Baths of Elijah, at the southeast end of Lake Tiberias, operating through the Umayyad period.<sup>30</sup> Literary evidence, combined with recent excavation, attests polytheist, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim experiences of divine healing in this place.<sup>31</sup>

The symbiosis of church and mosque at al-Ruṣāfa might also be interpreted as a Muslim attempt to ease Christians into Islam by not rejecting outright the

29. For the Crusader period only, see Bernard Hamilton, “Our Lady of Saidnaiya: An Orthodox Shrine Revered by Muslims and Knights Templar at the Time of the Crusades,” in *The Holy Land, Holy Lands, and Christian History: Papers Read at the 1998 Summer Meeting and the 1999 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, ed. Robert N. Swanson (Woodbridge, UK: 2000), 207–15.

30. The Disney-style revival of the baths can only dimly reflect the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the late antique spa, second in fame and glamour only to Baiae on the Bay of Naples; see Eunapius, *Vitae sophistarum* 459–60.

31. Yizhar Hirschfeld, *The Roman Baths of Hammat Gader: Final Report* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1997).

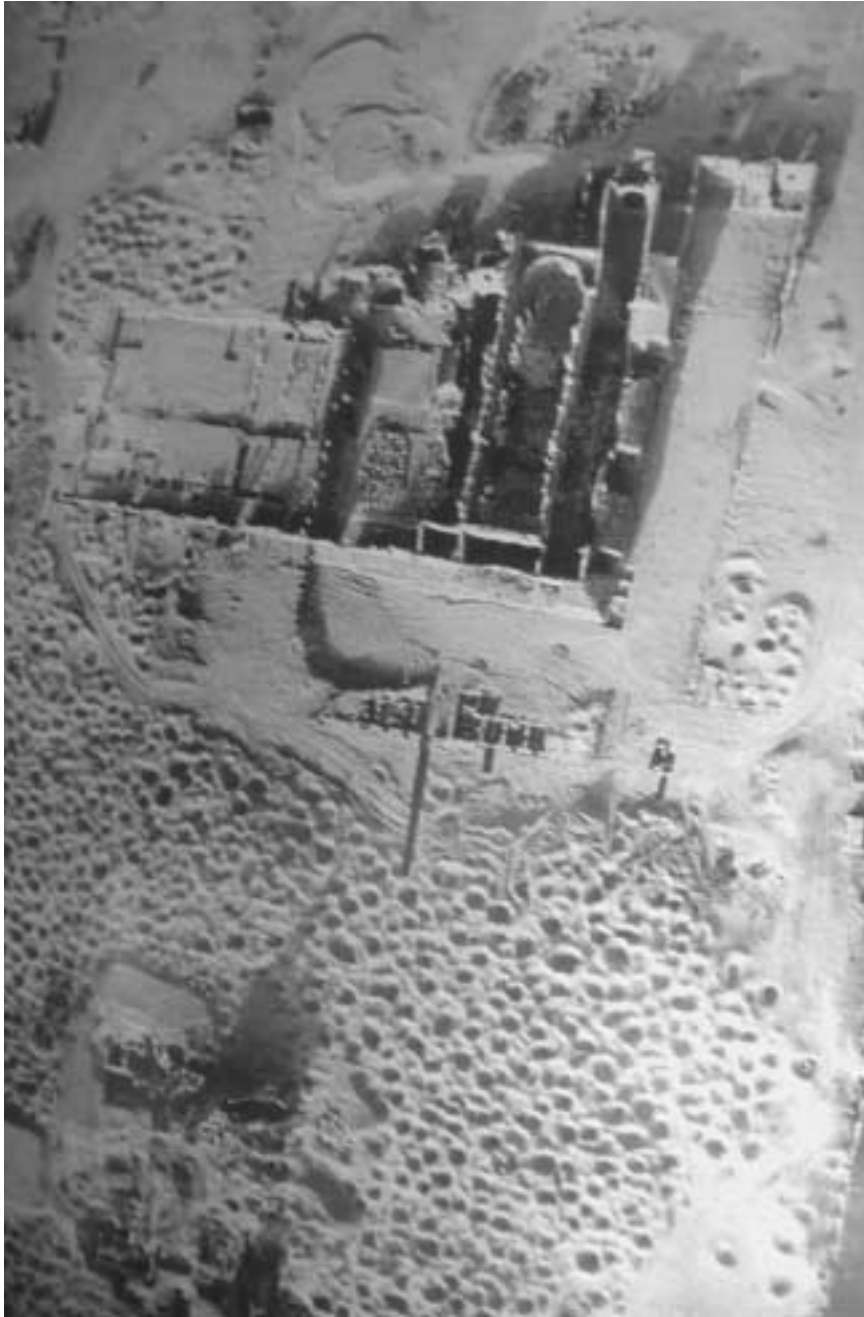


Figure 3. Aerial view of the Basilica A complex at al-Ruṣāfa, Syria. Shrine of St. Sergius at upper left of central nave, opening onto courtyard shared by the Umayyad mosque at far left. Eighth century. Reproduced with permission of the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Damascus.

patterns of Arab involvement in Christian piety. That involvement was especially clear in the Syro-Mesopotamian steppe, where churches and monasteries were important fixed points in pastoral and semi-pastoral life. The use of saints' tombs, monasteries, and other familiar religious architecture as bases for conversion has parallels in more recent times. For example, the popular Bektashi order of Sufis in the fifteenth- through early-nineteenth-century Balkans and Turkey consciously cultivated features common to Christianity and Shi'ite Islam—including icons and altars, incense and bells, even the trinity of Allāh, Muḥammad, and 'Alī—in order to create suitable conditions for conversions from Christianity to Islam.<sup>32</sup>

At a much later phase in al-Ruṣāfa's history, possibly in the twelfth century, a tomb was built in the courtyard north of the mosque, that is to say, on the side away from the courtyard shared with the still-active shrine of St. Sergius. Parallel evidence for modes of cultic continuity in northern Syria, together with a contemporary literary tradition about al-Ruṣāfa, suggest that the tomb may mark a period of more rigid Islamicization. Al-Harawī (d. 1215), an ascetic of Shi'ite leanings who composed a guide to pilgrimage sites, included in his entry for al-Ruṣāfa "tombs of the companions and the followers" of the Prophet. He added that he had not seen the names himself, and that God alone knows the truth.<sup>33</sup> Yāqūt, in the early thirteenth century, reported that a *mashhad* (saint's tomb) had been built in the place of an abandoned Christian monastery outside Aleppo, in honor of 'Alī, who had been seen there by several Shi'ites.<sup>34</sup> What these two examples may point toward is al-Ruṣāfa's place in the wider Islamicization of holy sites in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Syria. At al-Ruṣāfa, Muslim accommodation of St. Sergius represented the first phase, clearly reflected in the mosque's intimate proximity to the Sergius church. The second phase that we may postulate moves beyond the shared holy man Sergius to the installation at the holy site of purely Muslim holy men. The degree to which the Prophet's companions would have comfortably cohabited with St. Sergius must have varied over time, in accordance with historical circumstance and religious fashion.

Similar attempts to monopolize a holy man and to black out previous devotion can be observed still today. One particularly successful example is the tomb of Nabī Rūbīn (the prophet Reuben: Jacob's eldest son in the Hebrew Bible), near the Mediterranean coast south of Jaffa.<sup>35</sup> From not later than the fifteenth cen-

32. For a discussion of Bektashism that focuses on proselytizing among non-Muslims, see Speros Vryonis, *The Decline of Hellenism in Asia Minor and the Process of Islamization from the Eleventh through the Fifteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 368–81.

33. Al-Harawī, *Kitāb al-ishārāt ilā ma'rufat al-ziyārāt* 61 = ed. and trans. Janine Sourdel-Thomine, *Guide des lieux de pèlerinage* (Damascus: Institut français de Damas, 1957), 136.

34. Yāqūt, *Muḥjam al-buldān* 2.691 = ed. Ferdinand Wüstenfeld, trans. Guy Le Strange, *Palestine under the Moslems* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1890), 430–31.

35. Tewfik Canaan, *Mohammedan Saints and Sanctuaries in Palestine* (Jerusalem: Ariel, n.d., reprint of the original 1927 publication), 215–16; Meron Benvenisti, *Sacred Landscape: The Buried History of the Holy Land since 1948* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 274–75. I have not visited the site myself.

tury, when our first documentary evidence appears, until within living memory, the prophet's tomb was the site of a famous *mawsim*, a religious festival drawing pilgrims once a year from cities and villages of the central coastal plain. Pilgrims' tents spread out in the plain around the shrine. Impromptu stalls for buying and selling, eating and drinking, areas for preachers and poets, for magicians, and for whirling dervishes, all abutted each other during this month-long revelry in honor of Nabī Rūbīn. The tradition was ended abruptly in June 1948, when the nearby village was captured by Jews and its inhabitants expelled. The shrine then lay unattended, slowly falling into disrepair until 1991 when the minaret was demolished. The giant trees—so very often the saint's sign, as we have seen at Mamre—disappeared from the courtyard. New pilgrims began to frequent the shrine, now transformed by the removal of the traditional green tomb drapery, on which was embroidered, “There is no God but Allah, and Rūbīn is his prophet.” The new gold embroidery on the red replacement drapery reads: “Reuben, thou art my first born, my might, and the beginning of my strength” (Genesis 49:3). This change represents not so much a reorientation—for the Old Testament figure remains the focus of reverence—as an attempt to commandeer Reuben/Rūbīn as an exclusively Jewish patron.

The early history of the shrine is unknown, but there is no evidence of previous Jewish presence at the Muslim site. Jewish pilgrims, in the second half of the last century, assimilated the site as Reuben's tomb, but rejected the patently Muslim language once attached to it. The Old Testament model of supplantation has worked in this case, since the Muslim worshippers were eliminated and the Pentateuch supplanted the *shabāda*. At Nabī Rūbīn, any opportunity for restricted sharing has been excluded—unlike at Mamre, al-Ruṣāfa, Damascus, and (as we shall see) Jerusalem, where the process of monopolization was either never completed or was very incremental.

One striking feature shared by literary traditions about Mamre and Damascus is the assertion of a primordial pedigree that links both places with the time of creation, thereby underlining their special relationship with the Creator. The tree at Mamre, like the cosmic tree of ancient Eastern religions, stood there from the time of creation;<sup>36</sup> Adam's cave was located in the sacred Mount Qāsiyūn overshadowing Damascus and intimately identified with that city.<sup>37</sup> These sites are considered holy because they are places where the divine has erupted into the mortal sphere. But another reason is their association with holy figures of the past, men and women who, like the place itself, have come into direct contact with God. The holy man becomes the holy site, becomes the Temple—that is, the place where God is present in the world. In order to explore the relation-

36. Josephus, *Bellum Iudaicum* 4.533.

37. Ibn 'Asākir, *Ta'rikh madīnat Dimashq* 101–02 = trans. 184–86; 8 = trans. 11–12. See also Kister, *JSAI* 20 (1996): 26.



ship of the one Temple and the many holy places and holy men scattered elsewhere, we must turn finally to the holy city of Jerusalem.

### Jerusalem and the Temple

And as he went out of the temple, one of his disciples saith unto him, Master, see what manner of stones and what buildings are here! And Jesus answering said unto him, Seest thou these great buildings? there shall not be left one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down.

—*Mark 13:1–2*

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. . . . And I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it.

—*Revelation 21:1–3, 22*

Not much time was wasted before Jesus' prophecy about the destruction of the temple was fulfilled. The temple's sack and demolition in the year 70 catalyzed the religious imagination of the Jews and the early followers of Christ's teaching. Exile from a holy place and from a holy presence became a powerful spiritual goad. Another driving force was the need to understand the transfigured Temple not exclusively as a fixed place on earth, but also as a place to be internalized. With the idea of this New Temple—the New Jerusalem—the duality between esoteric and exoteric was for Christians abolished. Christ was the Temple and Christians were to take on Christ.

In 335, a solemn gathering witnessed the consecration of the magnificent Constantinian complex embracing the sites of Christ's crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. Eusebius, the bishop of Palestinian Caesarea, who delivered an address on that occasion, envisioned the relationship of the Old and New dispensations as follows:

New Jerusalem was built at the very Testimony to the Saviour, facing the famous Jerusalem of old, which after the bloody murder of the Lord has been overthrown in utter devastation and paid the penalty of its wicked inhabitants. Opposite this, then, the emperor erected the victory of the Saviour over death with rich and abundant munificence, this being perhaps that fresh New Jerusalem proclaimed in prophetic oracles.<sup>38</sup>

38. Eusebius, *VC* 3.33.1–2 = trans. Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall, *Eusebius: "Life of Constantine"* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), 135.

The quickening of Jerusalem's Christianization began at this time. The Christians preserved from their Judaic background the idea of the Temple as the place where God is present in the world, but that idea had now to be seen in the light of Jesus' prophecy concerning the temple's destruction and his own resurrection. His tomb becomes the Temple. While the Christians adopted and breathed new life into the idea of the Temple after the physical temple's destruction, they refused to rebuild the house of God on Mount Moriah. That ground was to stand desolate as a stark witness to Christ's prophecy—and instead, Christian restoration turned to the New Temple, to Christ and his resurrection as symbolized on earth in his tomb.

We must guard against seeing the Christian Temple and Christian Jerusalem as purely inward or celestial. It is fundamental to the Christian faith that material and spiritual realities are fused by the Incarnation. The shift to the New Temple assumes material form at the gradually developing holy places and symbols clustered around the tomb itself. A sixth-century pilgrim's handbook of Jerusalem serves to illustrate this magnetic accumulation of sites and objects sanctified by their association with the life of Christ.<sup>39</sup> The altar that Abraham had prepared for Isaac, the horn by which both Solomon and David were anointed, the stone stained with the blood of Zacharias before the temple entrance: these are vital symbols of monotheist history, distilled and transferred from the Temple Mount where they belonged in Jewish tradition to the New Temple within the walls of the Constantinian complex. At Golgotha, which was embraced within the complex, one could pray at the birth and burial places of Adam, and stand at the omphalos, where God "wrought salvation in the midst of the earth."<sup>40</sup> The site of creation, the world's center—these are perhaps the most powerful testimonies to the living idea of the Temple within Christian thought and practice.

At the world's center, God communicates with mankind: that is the essence of the Temple, both Old Testament and Christian. But through the process of being worked into a distinctly Christian understanding of divine epiphany, the many Old Testament symbols transferred to the Christian Temple become separate and can, in practice, no longer be called shared. Historically, the transferred symbols were absorbed into the new topography of Jerusalem, and what was left of the Jewish past was expunged as fruitless—even literally: in the sixth-century Madaba mosaic map, the Temple Mount, a prominent feature of Jerusalem, was simply absent.<sup>41</sup> A further sign of separation was the addition of uniquely Chris-

39. *Breviarius de Hierosolyma*, ll. 5–85.

40. Quoting Psalm 74:12, as Cyril of Jerusalem did in this context as early as the fourth century (*Catechesis illuminandorum* 13.27).

41. Yoram Tsafrir, "Byzantine Jerusalem: The Configuration of a Christian City," in *Jerusalem: Its Sanctity and Centrality to Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, ed. L. I. Levine (New York: Continuum, 1999), 143–44.

tian symbols, to be encountered above all at the Church of the Resurrection complex: the cup from the Last Supper, the sponge and reed of Christ's Passion, the basin used for washing the disciples' feet, and most of all, the Cross, or at least part of it. These holy symbols were not only exclusively Christian, but they pointed unblinkingly to the Jews' original and continuing rejection of Jesus.

In early Islamic Jerusalem, the Jewish and Christian past is rivaled and superseded by controlled imitation and elaboration.<sup>42</sup> But imitation is always mutation. In the case of Jerusalem's sanctity in the eyes of early Muslims, the power of old symbols was channeled in new directions but the same symbols remained the source of power. According to one tradition, the Umayyad caliph 'Umar (634–44), new ruler of the holy city, set the precedent of tolerating—but not explicitly imitating—Christian practice when he refused Patriarch Sophronius's invitation to pray at the Church of the Resurrection.<sup>43</sup> By leaving the foremost holy site of late antique Jerusalem to the Christians, 'Umar honored established forms of worship, at the same time avoiding involvement in them and thus evading too the charge of Christianizing behavior. Steering clear of this dilemma, he headed for another by choosing to pray on the Temple Mount.

To put the many 'Umar traditions into perspective, we must first return to the Jewish traditions regarding the Temple Mount. As we have said, the foundation stone is understood as the center of creation, the navel from which the world came into being and draws its nourishment. It is the altar, the point of entry to heaven, the burial site of Adam, whence—before the first man's creation—God collected the dust that would give Adam form.<sup>44</sup> The foundation stone, over which the Dome of the Rock was later built, marks the place where the ark had stood and on which, after the ark's forceful removal, Jewish prayer remained focused. Muslims referred to the stone as the Jews' *qibla*.<sup>45</sup> Like the Sabbath in time, the stone stood in space as a reminder of God's presence in the world.

Countless, often perplexing stories about the meaning of the Temple Mount for early Muslims have adhered to the pious figure of 'Umar.<sup>46</sup> Even

42. The rich and controversial subject of early Islamic Jerusalem is enjoying much scholarly attention; note in particular Julian Raby and Jeremy Johns, eds., *Bayt al-maqdis. 'Abd al-Malik's Jerusalem*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); and Johns, ed., *Bayt al-maqdis. Jerusalem and Early Islam*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

43. The accounts of 'Umar's acceptance of the surrender of Jerusalem and his tour of the city with Sophronius are very controversial. For a recent discussion that refers to past source criticism, see Oleg Grabar, *The Shape of the Holy: Early Islamic Jerusalem* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 44–51, esp. n. 63.

44. For a selective survey of Jewish traditions surrounding the stone, see appendix A in R. J. McKelvey, *The New Temple: The Church in the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 188–92. See also Josef van Ess, "'Abd al-Malik and the Dome of the Rock: An Analysis of Some Texts,'" in Raby and Johns, *Bayt al-maqdis*, 89–103.

45. Kister, "Sanctity Joint and Divided," 64.

46. In "'You Shall only Set Out for Three Mosques': A Study of an Early Tradition," (*Le muséon* 82 [1969]: 173–96), M. J. Kister assembles and evaluates many strands of this convoluted story.

whether he himself visited Jerusalem to accept the surrender—in 636 or 638, the sources vary—is open to debate. But his close companionship with the Jewish convert from South Arabia, Ka‘b al-Ahbar, is not disputed. Ka‘b is believed to have been an important source for knowledge of Jewish traditions in the early Muslim community. It is Ka‘b who (in versions of the tradition handed down by the tenth-century historian al-Ṭabarī and the fourteenth-century traditionist and polymath al-Suyūṭī) suggested that ‘Umar take up a position north of the stone in order to perform his ritual prayer.<sup>47</sup> In this way, by facing southward, he would pray in the direction of both the *qibla* of Moses and the *qibla* of Muḥammad. This ‘Umar adamantly refused, accusing Ka‘b of imitating the Jewish religion. Instead, ‘Umar prayed in the direction of Mecca from a position south of the rock, deliberately turning his back to the *qibla* of Moses. Standing beside the Jewish ophanos, ‘Umar overtly acknowledged Islam’s kinship with Judaism, but apparently the opportunity to merge the two *qiblas* was considered too great a risk. However neglected by the Christians, the ancient power residing on the Temple Mount might still threaten to overbalance that of the far-away Ka‘ba. And in addition, for those not praying at the same spot, it would pose a practical dilemma five times a day. Ultimately, the authority for Mecca’s preeminence as the Muslim *qibla* was the Qur‘ān. While Moses’ *qibla* was rejected in practice, the sanctity of the Temple Mount, and the foundation stone in particular, was not.

The fourth Umayyad caliph, ‘Abd al-Malik, was responsible in the early 690s for constructing on the site of the foundation stone what would become the foremost Muslim sanctuary in Jerusalem (fig. 4).<sup>48</sup> It was clearly designed to upstage the domed Church of the Resurrection, thereby expressing Muslim sovereignty over the holy city without direct, physical impingement on the Christian shrine. What is of interest here is not only Muslim use of Jewish sacred topography, but also the form that Muslim interaction with Christianity took. In terms of cult, the Church of the Resurrection complex presented little of interest to adherents of the Muslim faith, since they denied the crucifixion of Jesus. And there was, naturally enough, no relic of the ascended Jesus there to reverence. What was important in Jerusalem was to construct a symbol of Muslim hegemony in the ancient holy city of Judaism and Christianity, now adopted by Islam. The message is powerfully conveyed by the monument’s position, but also by the 240-meter-long monumental inscription inside the building. This elegant compilation of Qur’anic texts includes a rebuttal of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. But since Muslims rather than Christians would have frequented the

47. Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rikh al-rusul wa’l-mulūk* II. 2408–9 = ed. M. J. de Goeje et al., trans. Yohanan Friedmann, *The History of al-Ṭabarī* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 12.194–95; for a translation of the version in al-Suyūṭī, *Ithāf* I. 236–37, see ed. A. R. Aḥmad, and for further bibliography, see Friedmann, *History of al-Ṭabarī*, 195 n. 723.

48. For a recent interpretation of the date, 692, on the building’s inscription, see Sheila Blair, “What Is the Date of the Dome of the Rock?” in Raby and Johns, *Bayt al-maqdis*, 59–87.

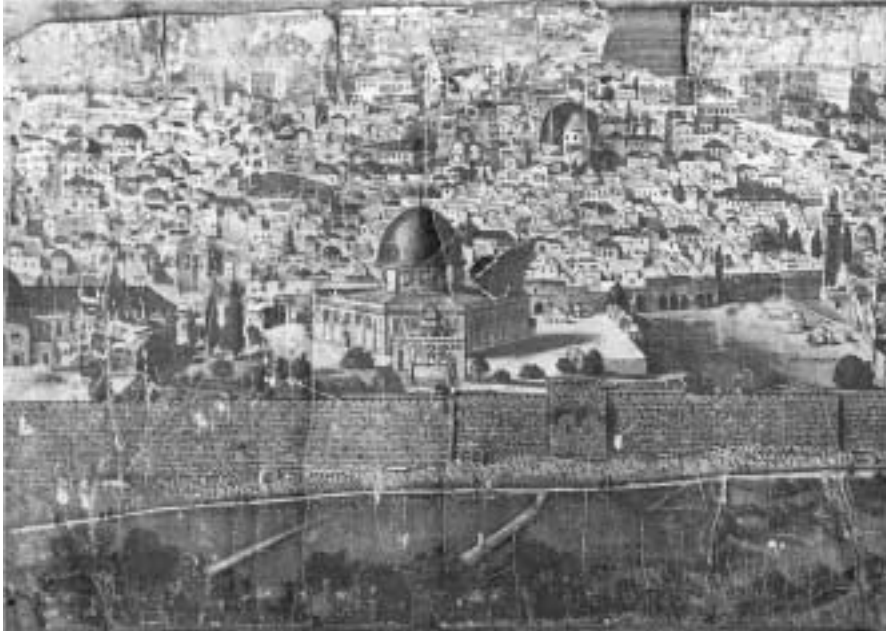


Figure 4. Nineteenth-century painting of Jerusalem showing the centrally placed Dome of the Rock on the Ḥaram al-Sharif and the dome of the Anastasis church to the upper right. Aleppo, Museum of Popular Traditions.

building, the inscription was aimed more at cementing Islamic faith, and at averting conversion from Islam to Christianity, than at proselytizing among Christians.

Early Muslim leaders were not unaware of the spell cast over the Arabs by Christianity, with the liturgical, charitable, and festal traditions enacted at its shrines and monasteries. In the competitive cultural climate of late antiquity, belief that architecture had the power to hold hearts and minds makes intelligible an interchange like the following—a passage from the tenth-century geographer al-Muqaddasī concerning al-Walīd’s decision to build the Great Mosque in Damascus:

Now one day I said, speaking to my uncle, “surely it was not well of the Caliph al-Walīd to expend so much of the wealth of the Muslims on the mosque at Damascus. Had he expended the same on making roads, or for caravanserais, or in the restoration of the frontier fortresses, it would have been more fitting and more excellent of him.” But my uncle said to me in answer, “O my little son, you have no understanding! Al-Walīd was right, and he was prompted to a worthy work. For he beheld Syria to be a country that had long been occupied by the Christians, and he noted there the beautiful churches still belonging to them, so enchantingly fair, and so renowned for their splendor, even as are the al-Qumāma [literally “rubbish heap,” an insulting reference to the al-Qiyāma, the Church of the Resurrection] and the churches of Lydda and

Edessa. So he sought to build for the Muslims a mosque that should prevent their regarding these, and that should be unique and a wonder to the world. And in like manner is it not evident how the Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik, noting the greatness of the dome of the al-Qumāma and its magnificence, was moved lest it should dazzle the minds of the Muslims, and hence erected above the Rock the Dome which now is seen there?<sup>49</sup>

The gradual process of Islamicization began with occupation of the Temple Mount and the establishment there of a structure that in its design and decoration—both deeply indebted to Christian artistic traditions—proclaims Islam’s status as successor to Judaism and Christianity.<sup>50</sup> The process, internal to the Islamic community, of linking up the network of Islamic holy places, holy symbols, and holy men seems to have lagged behind the Islamic response to Judaism and Christianity that forms a wider monotheist context. Only slowly did traditions evolve associating Muḥammad with the Temple Mount. The inscription inside the Dome of the Rock, for example, does not mention any specific relationship between the last prophet and Jerusalem.<sup>51</sup> In the course of the Umayyad period, the Temple Mount came to be seen as the place from which Muḥammad ascended to the throne of God during the *mi‘rāj*. His intimately related night journey, the *isrā’*, offers spiritual guidance to his followers by tracing out the connections between the most distinguished monotheist holy places. Mounted on the winged beast al-Burāq, on which Abraham had journeyed from Judea to the Ḥijāz to visit Hagar and Ishmael, Muḥammad travels from Mecca to Jerusalem, stopping to pray at Hebron and Bethlehem. Once in Jerusalem, he leads Adam and other prophets in prayer on the Temple Mount. Central to the Muslim unifying vision of these holy places is Muḥammad’s act of prayer at each stop.

In Islam, communal prayer has the power to bring the individual into the presence of God. “Prostrate yourself and draw near,” God commanded Muḥammad.<sup>52</sup> “It is when he is in prostration that the man is closest to his Lord.”<sup>53</sup> The Qur’ān leaves no room for doubt that prayer in the mosque as part of the community of believers is more efficacious than a single man’s prostrations. And prayer at particularly holy mosques could bring the worshipper into God’s presence more effectively than at other places less charged with sacred associations. A subgenre of writings sprang up in which the distinguishing affiliations with holy figures and divine epiphanies are weighed up by the competing advo-

49. Al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm*, 159 = trans. Le Strange, *Palestine under the Moslems*, 117–18, with alterations.

50. For a stimulating discussion of the building, accompanied by important photographs of the interior decoration, see Grabar, *Shape of the Holy*, 52–116.

51. Van Ess, in Raby and Johns, *Bayt al-maqdis*, 90–91, 99–100.

52. Qur’ān 94.19.

53. Abū Hurayra, companion of Muḥammad and transmitter of *ḥadīth*, cited in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2d ed., 8.933.

cates of these shrines.<sup>54</sup> For example, according to one tradition, God vowed to Hebron, which boasts the tombs of the patriarchs, that the man who prostrates himself there will “drink from the Presence of my Holiness.”<sup>55</sup> In the intensity of this attention to the sanctity of famous holy places we see the idea of the Temple continuing in Islamic practice and belief. The Temple is not just the one that Solomon built in Jerusalem, the place that Muslims still revere as sacred. The Temple is any place where a community gathers to pray, invoking the One God’s presence to dwell among them.

### Sharing and Interrelation

To share a holy place is a dynamic process, not a static condition. There emerges from this analysis of four holy places in late antiquity a gradual movement from sharing to separating as the different religions clarify the meaning of the holy place in the context of their own developing tradition. The holy place becomes encrusted with symbolism and meanings that connect it to other holy sites and holy men. All together they make up the intricate fabric of a vibrant religious tradition. Some of these rich associations—often modified and elaborated to fit particular circumstances—will be shared by the different traditions; but other features will belong only to one, marking it out as a different branch of Abrahamic religion.

Within each of the three monotheisms are two interlinked religious mentalities. First we have the yearning for the One God present in the One Temple. This is the ideal Temple localized in time and space—the Solomonic temple and the Church of the Resurrection at Jerusalem, the Ka’ba at Mecca—but it is also the Celestial Temple, the Temple understood through the active imagination as the link between divine and human spheres. Second, but closely related to this first mentality, is the understanding of the Temple as manifest in many places, an understanding that results in the proliferation of worship of the divine presence on earth. We witness this mentality in the persistence of the “high places,” and in the growth of shrines at the tombs of prophets and saints, in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim tradition. This proliferation is grounded in the belief that the Temple may be manifest in individuals who have prepared themselves to receive the divine presence. This way of conceiving of the Temple, of other shrines, and of their source of divine power is fundamental to any sharing of holy places among the three religions. Within each tradition, the coexistence of the one central holy place and the many holy places is not necessarily a source of

54. On these writings, see Kister, “Sanctity Joint and Divided.”

55. Nu’aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-ḥitan*, fol. 65a, ms. in the British Museum, cited in Kister, “Sanctity Joint and Divided,” 28 n. 60.

conflict. But for an equilibrium to be maintained, an awareness of their interrelatedness is required; and that awareness is often lacking.

The yearning for a unified vision of God and His relationship to creation—a yearning common to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—is what eventually drives the individual to absorb or dispose of other religious traditions. It is the hunger for wholeness, for a harmonious marriage of all parts, that leads the pilgrim to eliminate other possibilities, other roads to reality. This yearning for unity focuses the worshipper and excludes plurality as a distraction. It would be misleading to conclude that for this reason there cannot be sharing among distinct religions. The very act of yearning is in itself worship, and to the degree that those who visit holy places strive to know God and experience divine power, it is ultimately in that very striving that the sharing of holy places happens.