

JERUSALEM, GATEWAY TO PARADISE

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Standing on Mount of Olives and the Getsemani Garden and looking westwards, towards Jerusalem, one immediately notices that the skyline of the city is dominated by the Dome of the Rock, the Qubbat aṣ-Ṣaḥra. The Temple Mount, or the Ḥaram aš-Šarīf and the building itself is so well-known that I can leave the description here, but what is not quite clear, although it was frequently discussed by several scholars, what was its purpose, its original function?

This beautiful building, the earliest surviving monument of Islam was the subject of numerous publications and controversial opinions. Out of the numerous publications, I shall deal with only three more recent ones. The last of the three was that of Oleg Grabar and Saïd Nuseibeh (1996). However, I shall pay more attention to the other two, namely Rosen-Ayalon's (1989) monograph and the essays which were collected and edited by Julian Raby and Jeremy Johns (1992). In the introduction to this volume Julian Raby wrote that "scholars differ over whether ʿAbdalmalik was creating a rival to Mecca, a victory monument over the Byzantines and Sasanians, an earthly reflection of paradise, or a memorial to the Throne of God?" (Raby & Johns 1992:VII).

Indeed, what was ʿAbdalmalik's intention when he decided to erect this beautiful building on the site of Solomon's temple? It was definitely not intended to be a mosque. Its plan contradicts that possibility. Furthermore, his plan went far beyond the creation of a beautiful building. He altered almost everything on the platform and below. He paid such a great attention not only to the Ḥaram, but to the entire city and even the surrounding area, that the suggestion which emerges from Rosen-Ayalon's study, that perhaps it was his intention to move his capital from Damascus to Jerusalem, seems to be justified.

Rosen-Ayalon based her observations and conclusions on the excavations which began below the platform by the Israeli Department of Antiquities in 1970. The excavations uncovered the remains of three palaces. All three were

built during the reign of °Abdalmalik. Although they were built below the platform, but were attached to its southern wall, where the Mosque of al-Aqṣā is situated. It was also discovered that one of them was connected to the Aqṣā Mosque by a bridge.

These new discoveries in Jerusalem and °Abdalmalik's other building activities around Jerusalem, (cf. his milestones), gave the impetus to a new theory, strongly supported by Rosen-Ayalon, namely that the Caliph wanted to move his capital to Jerusalem. This theory was also raised by Sheila Canby and Josef van Ess in their essays in the Raby and Johns volume (1992). However, they refuted this suggestion and their argument is based partly on historical and partly on architectural evidence.

That it was built by °Abdalmalik has been recorded by several Arab historians and it is also confirmed in an inscription. This inscription was executed in gold mosaic and was placed at the summit of the inner and outer faces of the intermediate octagon. It is partly a quotation from the Qur'ān, but it also contains the date: 72/691–692. There is also the name of the °Abbāsid Caliph al-Ma'mūn (198/813 – 218/833), but originally it had the name of the Umayyad Caliph °Abdalmalik, who was the builder, but his name was substituted by that of al-Ma'mūn, probably in 831 AD. But what does this date mean? Is it a *terminus ad quem* or *terminus a quo*? Blair in her article (1992) has convincingly proven that the date is rather a *terminus a quo*, i.e. a date when the building programme commenced, rather than when it was completed. There are also historical reasons which would underline her arguments, but I shall return to that later.

Almost as important as the building itself, under the Rock there is a cave. In fact this building was erected around the rock and the cave. The rock is the place whence, according to the Holy Qur'ān and Muslim traditions, Prophet Muḥammad went during his celebrated journey (*isrā'*) and entered heaven. Here I would like to refer to the actual text of the Holy Qur'ān, in Q 17/1, where it says:

*“Glory be to [God] Who did take His servant for
a journey by night from the Sacred Mosque
to the Furthest Mosque whose precincts
We have blessed that We might show
Him some of Our signs: For He is the
All-Hearing, the All-Seeing”.*

Hence the rock played an important role in Islam and indeed, after the Ka'ba in Mecca, it became the second holy place for Islam and Muslims. So, what were °Abdalmalik's actual reasons the build the Dome of the Rock and particularly, why in this form?

Several scholars of Islamic religion and history, including Ignaz Goldziher, who was one of the most outstanding Islamic scholars, relied on the accounts of two historians, the Šī'ite al-Ya'qūbī and the Greek Eutychius. They both claimed that because ʿAbdalmalik at that time had a rival Caliph, Ibn Zubayr in Mecca, who spread hostile propaganda against him and the Umayyads, he wanted to prevent the Syrian Muslims to visit Mecca and to substitute Jerusalem as a new place of pilgrimage. Furthermore, he also intended to change the direction of prayer, i.e. the *qibla* from Mecca to Jerusalem, as it was during the first two years of the Hijra. Creswell and other art historians have also relied on these accounts and accepted this explanation. To support this argument some art historians, including Creswell, referred to the Mosque of al-Wāsiṭ. The Mosque of al-Wāsiṭ was excavated over several seasons and the excavators discovered three mosques, one above the other. The earliest one, was built by the Umayyad Governor of Iraq al-Ḥaḡḡāḡ, and to it was attached his famous palace the Qubbat al-Ḥaḡḡāḡ. It is interesting that the early mosque had a *mihṛāb*, but its orientation was wrong, the deviation was 34 degrees towards the west, i.e. towards Jerusalem (Safar 1945). This deviation, according to Ibn Taḡrībirdī, a 15th century Mamlūk historian, was due to the political circumstances which were mentioned by al-Ya'qūbī (Ibn Taḡrībirdī, *Nuḡūm* I, 71).

Some fifty years ago another one of al-Ḥaḡḡāḡ's mosques, the Mosque of Banī Ğunayd was excavated south of Baghdad. The excavators again found that the orientation of its *mihṛāb* was likewise wrong and its deviation was 30 degrees towards the west (Ibn Taḡrībirdī, *Nuḡūm* I, 71)¹.

The question of course immediately arises: could we conclude from this two examples that ʿAbdalmalik had really intended to change the *qibla* direction towards Jerusalem and to establish Jerusalem and the Dome of the Rock as the new centre of Islam? Highly unlikely! Recent research and archaeological work in several parts of the Islamic world has shown that calculating the proper *qibla* direction was not easy and they frequently made mistakes. From my own experience I would like to refer to the pre-Fāṭimid mosque of Madīnat as-Sultān (Surt al-Qadīma, ancient Surt), where we discovered that the deviation was similarly wrong. It was 54 degrees towards the south, i.e. towards Johannesburg.

Here I would like to refer as-Subkī's treatise on "*The question of turning to the right or to the left of the qibla*". According to as-Subkī, it was the duty of every Muslim community that once they realised that the direction of the *qibla* was wrong, they had to correct the deviation, except in those places where the

¹ This information was provided to me by my good friend and colleague, Abd al-Aziz Hamid, who was one of the excavators. Unfortunately I have never seen the report of this excavation.

Prophet or any of his companions prayed. In those places they were not allowed to touch it (as-Subkī, *Fatāwā*, I, 149–155).

Thus, it was very unlikely that the above mentioned two wrongly oriented *mihrābs* give sufficient support to the theory that ʿAbdalmalik wanted to change the *qibla* direction or to make Jerusalem the new centre of Islam. As far as it is known he was a pious man and well before he intended to build the Dome of the Rock he contacted theologians and asked for their advice and opinion. In spite of this uncertain archaeological ground, but rather relying more on the historical references, Elad (1992) was willing to accept al-Yaʿqūbī’s theory.

However, when we examine the actual historical events, as those have been well pointed out by Sheila Canby, by the end of 72/692 ʿAbdallāh ibn Zubayr was not only defeated, but killed. Hence there was no need to create a new religious centre in Jerusalem or to substitute the Kaʿba with the Rock.

We may dismiss al-Yaʿqūbī’s allegation that ʿAbdalmalik intended to create a new pilgrim centre for Islam, nevertheless we are still faced with the major question: why did he build the Dome of the Rock in the centre of the Temple Mount and around the rock and in an annular form?

Josef van Ess, in one of his recent articles presents an interesting theory, which is not entirely new, but it puts the problem in a new and different light. He writes that “the *miʿrāğ* connected with this spot was primarily not that of Muḥammad but of God himself” (van Ess 1992:93).

In the cave below the building there are the remains of footsteps, what people now generally believe are those of Prophet Muḥammad. Van Ess, however, quotes two studies which state that those are not of the Prophet, but God himself, since the creation, according to Jewish theology, took place on Mount Zion, “from the foundation rock (*ebhen shetiyya*) which was in front of the Holy of Holies”.² Then – quoting another study – he continues that “God sat there after the creation, and from there He returned to Heaven ... and will be present again for the Last Judgement”³.

This statement has been refuted by Islamic theologians on the ground that it introduced anthropomorphism, which contradicts the basic teachings of Islam. Van Ess (1992:98) also finds it significant that ʿAbdalmalik did not include Q 17/1, the one quoted above. He then continues and claims that ʿAbdalmalik’s ideas concerning the Rock were connected to God, rather than the Prophet and

² Josef van Ess (1992:95) quoting P. Schäfer, “Tempel und Schöpfung. Zur interpretation einiger Heiligtumstradition in der rabbinischen Literatur”, in: P. Schäfer, *Studien zur Geschichte und Theologie des Rabbinischen Judentums*, Leiden: Brill, 1978, 122–123.

³ Van Ess (1992:96) quoting M. J. Kister, “‘You shall Only Set Out For Three Mosques’: a Study of an Early Tradition”, *Le Muséon* 1969, 82.195. Reprinted in M.J. Kister, *Studies in Jahiliyya and Early Islam*, London, 1980.

the footsteps, he suggests that they were to be the answer to Christ's steps in the Church of Anastasis. Finally, that the Dome of Rock is a "tent over God's throne" (1992:103).

Van Ess's theory relies very much on Jewish and Old Testament traditions and I do not think that was in ʿAbdalmalik's mind when he decided to erect the Dome of the Rock in that holy place. Of course the other possibility is, and that has also been suggested before, that the Caliph intended to develop Jerusalem as the future capital of the Umayyad Empire.

These new discoveries in Jerusalem and ʿAbdalmalik's other building activities around Jerusalem, gave the impetus to a new theory: The Caliph wanted to move his capital to Jerusalem. One of the scholars who dealt with this new theory in great details is Miryam Rosen-Ayalon, who discussed all this in her monograph (1989). This question was also raised by Sheila Canby (1992) and Josef van Ess (1992). They refuted this suggestion and their argument is based partly on historical and partly on architectural evidence.

Yes, indeed, ʿAbdalmalik played great attention to the development of Jerusalem, but if he really intended to move his capital, he had both the resources and also the time. If we accept Sheila Canby's thesis, that the date of 72/692 is a *terminus a quo*, the Caliph, who died in 86/705, had plenty of time to do so. He did not, nor did his son, al-Walīd I, who succeeded him and who instead, rather converted the major church into a great mosque in Damascus which became known as the Great or Umayyad Mosque.

So, if the Dome of the Rock and the Ḥaram aš-Šarīf were not intended to be the centres, or the first and most important pilgrim place of Islam, nor the capital of the Umayyad Empire, then why did ʿAbdalmalik build it? What did it symbolise in his eyes? To find a satisfactory answer to our questions, we have look at once more at the mosaic decorations, but also at the cave beneath this holy rock.

Let's examine first the cave. Unfortunately early Muslim authors, while they gave detailed accounts of the building, either they did not mention, or only briefly the cave. When one descends by the stairs into the cave, one finds that there are two *miḥrābs* flanking it. One to the right, and one to the left. The one to the right is known as Miḥrāb Sulaymān, while the other one on the left is known as Miḥrāb Dāwūd. The earliest known reference to these two *miḥrābs* is by Aḥmad ibn Faḍlallāh al-ʿUmarī, who simply stated that "in the cave there are two prayer-niches, one to the right and one to the left, each flanked by two fine marble columns" (*Masālik* I, 154). The first modern writer not only to mention them, but also illustrating them was Gustaf Dalman⁴.

⁴ For his collection of 3195 historic photographs see the website of the Gustaf-Dalman-Insti-

Creswell (1932: I, 70) was the next one to illustrate Miḥrāb Sulaymān and also suggested that it was contemporary with the building, thus that it was installed by °Abdalmalik. In my thesis I fully agreed with Creswell and added further evidence for its early date (Fehérvári 1961: I, 90–105). Here it is irrelevant whether this *miḥrāb* is contemporary with the building or not, but what is important that both prayer-niches keep the proper *qibla* direction, i.e. they are oriented towards the Kaʿba.

In the southwest corner of the cave are the footsteps, what people consider as the footsteps of the Prophet from his famous *isrāʾ* or night journey and there is also what is called the ‘head-mark of Prophet Muḥammad’. Thus, the cave has a number of connections and reflections to Qurʾān 17/1.

As to the gold mosaics, we should now quote again what seem to be relevant passages from the Holy Qurʾān. The first one which should be considered here is Q 43/70–73, which says:

70. *“Enter ye the Garden,
Ye and your wives,
In (beauty and) rejoicing.*
71. *To them will be passed
Round, dishes and goblets
Of Gold: there will be
There all that the souls
Could desire, all that
The eyes could delight in
And ye shall abide
Therein (for aye).*
72. *Such will be the Garden
Of which ye are made
Heirs for your (good) deeds
(In life).*
73. *Ye shall have therein
Abundance of fruit, from which
Ye shall have satisfaction.”*

The second *sūra* which seems to be relevant here is Q 54/54–55 which talks about the garden of paradise.

54. *“As to the Righteous,
They will be in the midst
Of Gardens and Rivers.*
55. *In an Assembly of Truth,
In the Presence of
A Sovereign Omnipotent.”*

When, in the light of these two *sūras*, we examine the mosaics of the Dome of the Rock, we realise that the Caliph intended to present the views of Paradise – as it is promised to the believers by the Holy Qur’ān – in a place that was equally important for Jews, Christians and Muslims. He tried to press its basic teachings: The inscription refutes the Holy Trinity, when it says “*lā ilāha illā Allāh*”, “There is no God, but Allāh”. The mosaics illustrate the Islamic Paradise and the Prophet’s footsteps are the remains of his *miʿrāğ*, as it is illustrated in a rather rare representation of the event. It is a miniature painting from Nizāmī’s *Hamsa*, copied and illustrated in Tebriz, c. 1505.⁵

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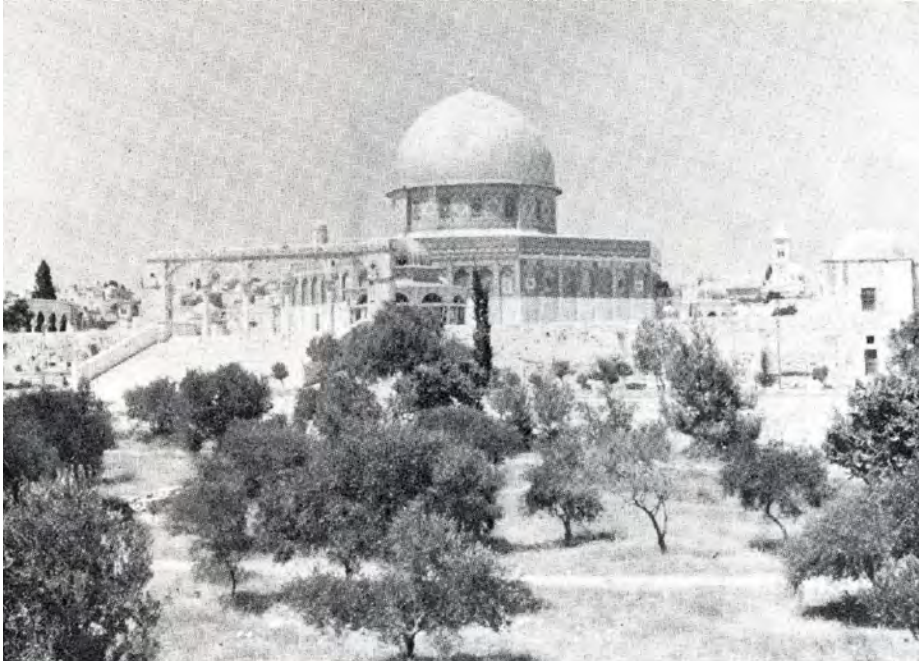
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⁵ Robinson et al. 1976:189, no. III. 207. The Miniature belongs to the Keir collection. See the colour plates, Plate No. I.

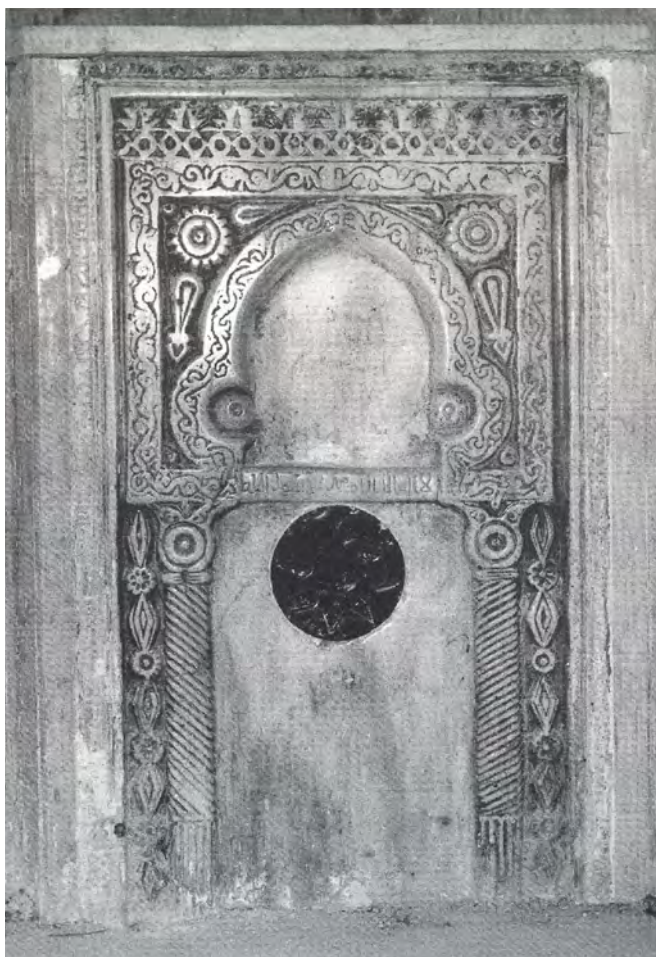
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Qubbat aş-Şahra



Mihrāb Sulaymān



Plate I

The *Mi'rāğ* from Nizāmī's *Ḥamsa*, Tebriz, c. 1505.