



Transforming the Face of the Holy City: Political Messages in the Built Topography of Jerusalem (part 1 of 2)

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I

Jerusalem has been a symbol of both sacrality and secular power for more than four millennia. Over this time, those who have been the masters of the Holy City have shaped and reshaped its built face

repeatedly to convey significant messages about both the power of the divine and their own power. Each of these changes in the face of the city, in what I shall call its built topography,¹ was intended to serve several purposes, sometimes simultaneously. A building may have been meant to shelter pilgrims or soldiers; or to glorify God; or to house a king, or a Crusader, or a settler, magnificently. But simultaneously, these structures were meant both individually and collectively to convey explicit religious and political messages. They were meant to be "read" at one and the same time as individual buildings, and as an ensemble.

Many of us who have had the opportunity to visit Jerusalem in recent years are familiar with the some of the meanings of the structures which today dominate much of the face of the city. On the hilltops around the city, in concentric circles both close in to the Old City and at a distance, there march a series of buildings almost military in their appearance. They are uniform in aspect, closely packed in ranks, and exude both an aggressive and a defensive aura. These buildings, whether the housing built for the 175,000 or so Israelis who have been

settled in the eastern part of Jerusalem since 1967, or official and quasi-governmental buildings, have been erected both to serve these mundane purposes and to make a political statement. Their austerity and plainness against the existing landscape and in contrast to the rest of the city's built topography reflect the very political nature of their existence: they are meant to occupy space, to cover territory, and to stake a claim to land, plainly and simply. We can read them, and understand what they mean and what they are meant to do, just as we have learned to read other landscapes and other kinds of built texts.

As a historian who has spent some time looking at and thinking about Jerusalem, but has no training or experience in art history or other aspects of visual culture, I propose to do three modest things in this preliminary paper: to give some historical context to the current process of writing in stone on the built topography of Jerusalem, using buildings to convey a message; to offer a few reflections on the contrast between the traditional, primarily Islamic, façade of the city and that which Israel has gradually imposed over the past few years; and to underline some of the political implications of these serrated rows of stone sentries for the Israeli colonial project in Jerusalem.

II

Some of the most famous builders in history, among them Herod the Great, the Roman Emperor Constantine, the Umayyad Caliph 'Abd al-Malik, and the Ottoman Sultan Sulayman the Magnificent, have adorned Jerusalem with major structures. These were intended for

¹ I marginally prefer this term to an alternative like "toposcape" suggested to me by my colleague Arjun Appadurai, although his term more effectively brings in the aspect of perception, as well as what is "out there" to be perceived. I believe that the term "built topography" better conveys the sense of what is created on the ground to reshape its aspect somewhat better than does "toposcape." See Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 33 ff.

purposes of governance, or worship, or healing, and also to convey a variety of messages. A number of powerful movements, dynasties and empires—the Crusades, the Mamelukes, the British Empire and the Zionist movement for example—have also made their mark on the face of the city. Traces on the city's built topography of some of these "texts" that they commissioned or inspired, traces most often in the local pale golden Jerusalem stone, can still be read today on the city's skyline, in its streets, or beneath some of its many archaeological strata.

We know something, and sometimes only very little, of what Jerusalem may have looked like in earlier ages. Archaeology has given us a plethora of incomplete evidence, much of it in the form of jumbled fragments of stone and pot-shards. Ancient manuscripts and other documentary sources have given us more fragments, glimpses and contradictory accounts. All of this data has been elaborated by archaeologists, historians and others into a picture of the built topography of Jerusalem and its physical aspects in various periods. Sometimes these elaborations, driven by an overt or covert nationalist or religious agenda, have been fantastic, bordering on the absurd. An example of the latter is a huge model purporting to represent Herod's Temple, which emerges hourly before the dazzled eyes of foreign tourists from beneath models of the al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock—the monumental structures which for the past 1,300 years have adorned the Haram al-Sharif. This display takes place in a large room

(probably of Umayyad or Mameluke provenance, although that is never mentioned to the tourists) in the tunnel opened by the Israeli authorities only meters away from the site of the Western Wall of the Temple enclosure, immediately adjacent to the Haram itself.

At other times, these glimpses of what the face of Jerusalem might have looked like in the past have been reasonably sober, although we have no way of ensuring that even the more sober visions are indeed accurate. What check, after all, do we have on the accuracy of an ancient text like the Bible which can be utilized as a historical source only with the greatest of care?² How can we assess the accounts of eye-witnesses from many centuries ago like Josephus, or Bishop Arculfus, or Nasir Khosrau, or Mujir al-Din? And if these are a sampling of our documentary sources, how can we trust the archaeological sources, when only a tiny proportion of Jerusalem's surface has been seriously and scientifically excavated, and only a fragment of the results of these excavations has so far been published? Thus, for example, key data regarding the Israeli archaeological excavations south of the Haram, perhaps the most extensive ever in Jerusalem's history, remain unpublished. We are still lacking in particular a scientific

² The recension of the Hebrew Bible in the form in which it comes down to us took place centuries after the period of David and Solomon, for which period it is one of our very few sources. For a brief survey of the differing theories on when the different parts of the Bible were set down, see Karen Armstrong, *Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), pp. 24-25.

analysis of the six or more massive stone early Umayyad buildings uncovered there by Mazar and Ben Dov nearly two decades ago, and considerable traces of which are still visible today in the "Archaeological Garden" located immediately to the south of the Haram.³

Nevertheless, in the work of Oleg Grabar, Michael Hamilton Burgoyne, Meir Ben Dov, Danny Bahat⁴ and a few others, we can find some images of what Jerusalem might have looked like at different times in the past. The best of this work, notably that of Grabar and Burgoyne, tries to visualize, demonstrate and explain what different rulers and different regimes in Jerusalem intended to show via the interaction between the built topography of the city, which they could in large part control, and the physical topography of the city, which they either could not control, or could only control in some measure. We find in their work maps, drawings, and photographs of still existing buildings and of

archaeological remains, as well as striking and innovative computer models in Grabar's *The Shape of the Holy*, from which we can try to picture the aspect which the built topography of Jerusalem may have presented to the viewer in different eras. Much of the discussion in this section is based upon the scholarship of these four authors.

It is apparent from this body of work that the greatest rulers and most powerful regimes tried to master some of the elements of Jerusalem's physical topography with their building projects, and were attracted in particular to the many high points in this city of many hills. Thus, it is clear that Herod and probably other builders before him, although limited by the topography of Mount Moriah, nevertheless flattened it and extended it by creating the spacious level platform which was the basis for the Haram al-Sharif as we see it today. We can see the vast nature of the task that Herod set himself by examining the massive surviving retaining walls of this platform, part of which today constitutes the Western Wall. Herod did more than locate a place of worship on top of a mountain, which the Bible tells us had in any case been done by David, Solomon and others before him: he went beyond that, capping the mountain with his massive, flat rectangular enclosure, and topping that with a great box-like temple.

Similarly, in the fourth century the Holy Sepulcher (then called the Martyrium) was placed atop the site which the Emperor Constantine, inspired by the discoveries of his mother the Empress Helena while on pilgrimage to Jerusalem, believed to be the hill of Golgotha. That structure and its

³ Illustrations of these buildings, and an account of their discovery can be found in the popular work by Meir Ben Dov, *In the Shadow of the Temple: The Discovery of Ancient Jerusalem* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1982), pp. 272-321.

⁴ Grabar is the author of several important works on Jerusalem, most recently, with Said Nuseibeh, *The Dome of the Rock* (New York: Rizzoli, 1996) and *The Shape of the Holy: Early Islamic Jerusalem* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Burgoyne produced the massive *Mamluk Jerusalem: An Architectural Study* (London: British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem, 1987); intended for popular audiences and thus less scholarly, although not less valuable than these works, are Ben Dov's *In the Shadow of the Temple* (Jerusalem, 1982), and Danny Bahat, *The Illustrated Atlas of Jerusalem* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990).

successors for several centuries dominated the city from its western side, as Grabar's computer models show perhaps most clearly. Here too, a building encompassed and capped a hilltop, and from it dominated the surroundings. We can only surmise what Constantine's Martyrium and the later buildings which became the Holy Sepulcher looked like (although Wilkinson, Grabar and others have given us a reasonable indication⁵), but in some sense the rounded western end of the complex, and the dome over it, reflected the top of the hill which it had enveloped.

A few centuries later, in 692, Abd al-Malik and his son al-Walid, two of the greatest builders in Islamic history, picked up where Herod had left off in reshaping the physical topography of the city. They rebuilt and extended the great platform which he had constructed for the enclosure of his temple, erecting on it the Dome of the Rock and a much-expanded and more magnificent al-Aqsa Mosque: one considerably larger than the quite impressive structure we see today. To the south they built a series of great multi-story buildings whose existence was unsuspected until the recent excavations, and whose purpose can only be surmised at,⁶ but which added greatly to the bulk of

the hill on whose side they were built. Immediately to the west of this vast platform which has been known since then as al-Haram al-Sharif, they also began the process of filling in and ultimately erasing the northern end of the Tyropean Valley, which in ancient times lay between the city's western and eastern hills. This process was completed in subsequent centuries by their successors, the master builders of the Mamelukes.

Each of these three major changes in the built topography of Jerusalem of course had profound religious significance, linked to the central religious project of each of the three Abrahamic faiths. But they also had potent political implications, which brings us to the main subject of this paper. Thus Herod built his Temple, presumably where Solomon had built before him,⁷ in order not only to draw on and emphasize the sacrality of a site already ancient in his time, but also to emphasize his power and the glory of his reign. It is worth noting

largest of these building to the al-Aqsa mosque: *In the Shadow*, pp. 293-320. Grabar is more cautious, suggesting other possible purposes for these huge buildings (the largest was 96 by 84 m.): *Shape of the Holy*, pp. 128-130. Note his critique of Ben Dov's conclusions in nn. 33 and 34, p. 211.

⁷ I say "presumably" because there is no scientific evidence as to where the Temple of Solomon was located, or indeed that it definitely existed, although all believers in any of the Abrahamic faiths perforce must accept that it did. Few, if any, serious scholars have any doubt that it did exist, albeit perhaps in a different shape than is described in the Bible, which was transcribed in the form we have it several hundred years after its construction. It is most likely that it was located somewhere on Mount Moriah, later called the Temple Mount, and a thousand years later the site of Herod's Temple.

⁵ See John Wilkinson, "Jerusalem under Rome and Byzantium, 63 BC -637 AD," in K.J. Asali, ed., *Jerusalem in History*, rev. ed. (London: KPI, 1997), p. 94 for a diagram of Constantine's church, and Grabar, *Shape of the Holy*, p. 33 for a computer model of the building.

⁶ Ben Dov has argued that they were palaces for the caliph, members of his family and governors of Jerusalem, and points out the direct access from the

that while Herod's Temple must have been an imposing sight, if the truly impressive retaining walls of its enclosure which we can still see both above and below the ground today are any indication, that was not all Herod built in Jerusalem. He also built a massive fortress (the "Antonia") north of the temple, and a palace on the western side of the city crowned with three great towers. According to Josephus, one of our prime sources for what Jerusalem looked like in this period, these were in some respects more impressive than the Temple itself.⁸ We know that the Romans were deeply impressed by the fortifications of the palace: Titus, who destroyed the Temple and much else in Jerusalem, retained some of these great towers and reused them. The remains of one of them probably constitute the foundation of the citadel we see today, most of which dates to the era of the Crusaders, the Ayyubids and the Mamelukes. All of this building in Jerusalem (and elsewhere in Palestine) was meant to mark in a lasting fashion the power of one of the greatest rulers of the Roman world of his day: even what little remains of these buildings still does so today.

Similarly, the Holy Sepulcher was meant both to emphasize the sacrality of the site where Jesus was crucified, and the political

supremacy of a Christian power over the city of Jesus' passion and crucifixion, a city which had been the spiritual and political capital of the Jews. The sharp contrast between the magnificence of the Holy Sepulchre and the barren devastation at the former site of the Temple was meant to stress that Jerusalem was now the city of the followers of Jesus and no longer that of the Jews, whose holy site was purposely kept in ruins, and who were banned from entering the city. During the three Christian centuries from the time of Constantine to the Islamic conquest, the built topography of the city was dominated at four of its highest points by grand Christian monuments. These were the Holy Sepulcher; the great Nea Church built by the Emperor Justinian, which stood at the southern end of what is today the Jewish Quarter until destroyed by a massive earthquake; the Church of the Dormition on Mount Zion; and the Church of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives.

We can still see the Holy Sepulcher, albeit in a very different form than when it was completed in 335, as well as the Church of the Dormition and the Church of the Ascension, all of them now much modified and surrounded by later structures. Although the Nea church is gone with barely a trace, it is still just possible for us to imagine the political implications which were intended by the erection of these great Christian monuments dominating several high points in a city which at that point in history had only dual sacrality, to Christians and Jews. It is worth noting that all four of these Christian buildings overlooked and dominated the places most sacred to Jews

⁸ The same may have been true of Solomon's palace: Karen Armstrong, *Jerusalem*, p. 48, notes that according to the Bible, the palace, "significantly, took nearly twice as long to build as the Temple." Josephus reports that the buildings of Herod's palace were so "large and lovely" that they "made even the Sanctuary [of the Temple] seem insignificant": *The Jewish War* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), p. 75.

in Jerusalem, notably the Temple Mount and the ancient cemeteries and monuments on the slopes of the Mount of Olives and in the Valley of Kidron.

Beyond a triumphant proclamation of the victory of the new faith, the visual impact of these structures in contrast with the desolation of the temple precinct must have been meant to emphasize the supremacy of Christianity over Judaism. This powerful visual message—our high places are sumptuously built and glow with light,⁹ while yours are dark and desolate—was clearly meant to complement the harsh Roman-Byzantine restrictions on Jewish residence in Jerusalem, and on prayer on or near the Temple Mount. While Christian ritual in Jerusalem was often celebratory in nature, that of the Jews in the centuries after the destruction of Herod's Temple had the character of lamentation for past glories.

The new Muslim rulers of Jerusalem chose somewhat different means of achieving the same objectives of asserting their political dominance and stressing the supremacy of their faith than those who came before them. They did not lay waste or take over the sacred sites of their defeated Christian rivals—unlike the situation in Damascus, where the Church of St. John was initially shared between the two faiths, until the caliph al-Walid, builder of al-Aqsa, took over and destroyed it, building the Umayyad Mosque in its

place.¹⁰ Nor did they initially try to construct structures to rival the Christian ones on the high points in and around Jerusalem, although mosques were eventually built near some of these Christian sites. Instead, from very soon after their conquest of the city, probably immediately afterwards, the early Muslims began veneration of an entirely different site: the long-abandoned platform of Herod's temple. The accounts of precisely how and when this happened are contradictory,¹¹ but it appears that some time after the city fell to the Muslims in 637 or early 638, the second Caliph, 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, visited the city, identified the deserted former site of the Temple, and fixed it as a place of Muslim worship. A simple mosque was soon thereafter erected at the southern end of the Herodian platform. This came to be called al-Aqsa, in reference to the Prophet's night journey

¹⁰ The Muslims may have originally shared space in the Holy Sepulcher with the Christians before the mosque which Bishop Arculf saw in 670 was completed. It does seem clear, however, that both there and in Damascus they did not initially take over the church for Muslim worship. On the implications of this question, see Fred M. Donner, "From Believers to Muslims: Confessional Self-Identity in the Early Islamic Community," in L. Conrad, ed., *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East, 4: Patterns of Communal Identity* (Princeton: Darwin, 1998), p. 42.

¹¹ The sources are in disagreement as to the date of the conquest; whether the city surrendered to 'Umar or to local deputy Abu 'Ubaida; the details of 'Umar's visit; and the terms of surrender. A huge literature has grown up around the subject, but it is in any case secondary to our purposes in this paper. See Grabar, *Shape of the Holy*, pp. 45 ff. See also Abdul Aziz Duri, "Jerusalem in the Early Islamic Period, 7th-11th Centuries AD," in K.J. Asali, ed., *Jerusalem in History*, pp. 105-108.

⁹ Grabar, *Shape of the Holy*, p. 37, cites a seventh century source referring to bright lights shining at night from the windows of the Church of the Ascension and illuminating the city across the Valley of Jehosaphat.

reported in the Qur'an [17:1] from Mecca to "the farthest [al-aqsa] mosque."

Many of Umar's successors strengthened the Muslim connection with this site, including the first Umayyad caliph, Mu'awiyya.¹² One of the most astute political leaders of his time, Mu'awiyya ceremonially received the allegiance of the leaders of the Muslim community to him as caliph in Jerusalem in 661, probably in the Haram al-Sharif, thereby according to Grabar establishing "the precedent of identifying Jerusalem with the legitimization of authority, above and beyond whatever pious meanings were involved with the city."¹³ Most of these early caliphs engaged in what appears to have been an almost continuous process of reconstruction and new building. But it was only with the efforts of 'Abd al-Malik and al-Walid at the end of the seventh century that this location took on more or less the aspect which it has today. The result was perhaps the most striking building in the whole range of Muslim architecture, Qubbat al-Sakhra, the Dome of the Rock, and with it an entirely new visual, religious and political focus for the city as a whole.

What the Muslims did in the first six decades of their rule over Jerusalem was to take the city over politically and religiously by changing its built topography. It is important to understand that they were

doing so in the context of a city the great majority of whose population was and long remained Christian. Rebuilding and renovating the huge Herodian esplanade and its entryways and some of its stairways, they completed this ensemble with a building of unique, unmistakable beauty in the Dome of the Rock, and another series of imposing buildings to the south. These included a much larger dome than Bishop Arculf described in 670, and six or more large, close-together structures immediately abutting the southern and southwestern walls of the Haram al-Sharif.

The skilled builders who did the bidding of 'Abd al-Malik and al-Walid in effect topped off Mount Moriah as had their Herodian predecessors, but gave it a different appearance, to convey a different message. Complementing the octagonal body of the building with a huge dome, the whole on a raised platform above the rest of the Haram, it was as if they had built graduated steps up towards God, a sort of man-made mountain at the already sacred site of the peak of Mount Moriah. The golden dome reflected the bright light of the sun in such a way that it could be seen all over the city and from a great distance away. Looked at particularly from the Mount of Olives to the East or from the south, the ensemble spoke both of man's efforts to glorify God, and of the political power, the flawless sense of design, and the wealth of those who had commanded the erection of these wondrous buildings. Seen from there and from elsewhere, they can still produce the effect of wonder on the viewer.

¹² Before the time of Mu'awiyya, for whom Jerusalem was clearly extremely important, 'Umar's immediate successor, 'Uthman Ibn 'Affan, is reported to have endowed the Silwan spring below the Haram as a *waqf*: see Duri, "Jerusalem," in Asali, ed., *Jerusalem in History*, p. 108.

¹³ Grabar, *Shape of the Holy*, p. 50.

Beyond the Muslims themselves, and others who could be induced to join the new Islamic community, the primary intended recipients of this message were the Christians. This can be seen clearly from the original inscriptions, most of them Quranic in origin, which are still clearly visible in the midst of the beautiful floral mosaics within the Dome of the Rock. The over 240 meters of inscriptions have been carefully analyzed by a number of scholars, most recently Grabar, who shows that they were meant to convey a powerful monotheistic, anti-trinitarian message directed largely at those from whom the Muslims had wrested the city and who were still their main political and religious adversaries.¹⁴ Interestingly, there is evidence that at this time the Jews, whom the Muslim conquerors had allowed to return to Jerusalem whence they had been expelled by Titus 600 years before, did not look unfavorably on the Muslim reverence for their own holiest site.¹⁵ The Jews welcomed the Muslims, just as they had a few decades earlier hailed the temporary victories of the Persians over their Roman-Byzantine-Christian persecutors. Within a few years, the victory of the Muslims was memorialized in stone on a site purposely left barren by the Byzantines as a mark of their paramouncy

over the Jews. Now, these sumptuous and striking new buildings on the same site constituted a resounding affirmation both of the triumph of Islam and of the strength and stability of the Umayyad dynasty.

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¹⁴ The text is translated and analyzed in *ibid.*, pp. 56-71.

¹⁵ For early Jewish reactions to the coming of Islam to Jerusalem, see Moshe Gil, "The Jewish Community," in J. Praver and H. Ben Shamai, eds., *The History of Jerusalem: The Early Muslim Period, 638-1099* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), pp. 165-171.