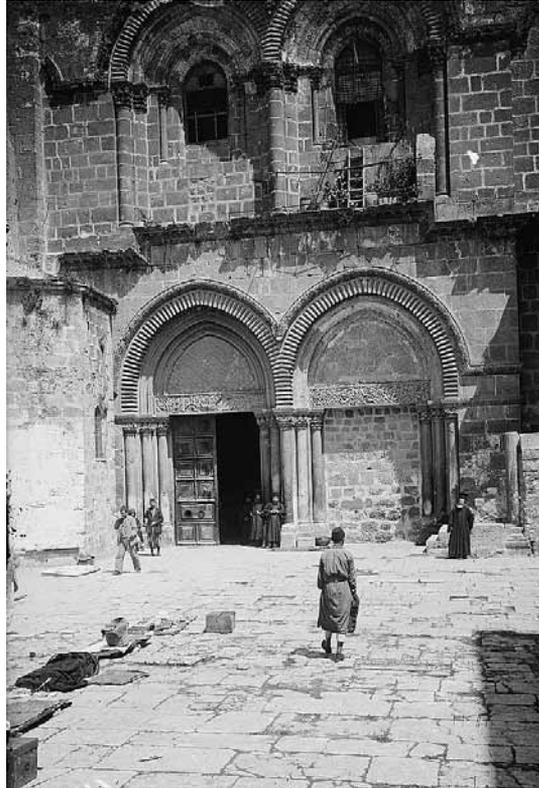


The Holy Sepulcher and the Garbage Dump: An Etymology

Zakaria Mohammad



The most common name for the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in classical Arabic sources is the Church of Refuse, or garbage (Kanisat al Qumamah). The geographer al-Idrisi (493-559 AH, 1099–1165 or 1166 CE) gives us the following description for the Jerusalem Haram:

At the northern end we find the gate known as the Crow's Pillar ('Amud al Ghurab). If one enters [the area] from the Mihrab Gate, which is the western entrance, one would head eastward down the alley leading to the Great Church, known as Church of the Resurrection (Kanisat al Qiyamah), and referred to by Muslims as the Church of Refuse (Qumamah).¹

Photo of the entrance to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. Photo from late 19th century. Photographer unknown. *Private collection.*

Clearly then Muslims referred to the Sepulcher as Kanisat Qumamah (with or without the definite article al). Yaqut al Hamawi (574-626 AH, 1179–1229 CE) adds the following: “*Qumamah*: the greatest church for Christians, endowed with unparalleled beauty, wealth and design. It is located at the center of the city, surrounded by a wall. Inside the church is a tomb, which is called ‘resurrection’ (Qiyamah), because it is believed that the Messiah rose up from there. But in fact its [actual] name is *qumamah* (‘garbage’).”² The further we go back in time the less frequently the term Church of the Resurrection (qiyamah) occurs until it disappears altogether while the term *qumamah* gains ascendancy. The great author and essayist al Jahiz who lived in the eighth century CE (159-255 AH), refers to the place exclusively as *Qumamah*.

The Conjuring Fire: Monks in the church perform all sorts of tricks – such as the appearance of the oil in the lamps burning during the night of their festivals without being lit.³

Elsewhere he also refers to how “many Christians are mesmerized by the oil lamps of the Qumamah Church [suddenly burning without being lit]. This is especially true of older Christian women”.⁴

There are two explanations for this naming anomaly: The first is that the term is an intentional Arabic distortion of the original name, meant as an expression of contempt and denigration towards Christians and their shrines. This explanation is widely diffused in popular culture, as we note in the following source from the Web – “It was a common manner of insulting Christians to refer to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher as the Qumamah church, instead of Qiyamah.”⁵ Despite its diffusion though, no recognized scholarly authority upholds this view. It is an explanation that emerged, most likely, in the context of religious conflict, and re-emerged in recent decades in the region with the rise of sectarianism. It carries little or no weight as an explanatory notion since we do not find it adopted even in polemical anti-Christian debates.

The second hypothesis, which is even more common, attributes the origin of this usage to Christian-Jewish, rather than to Christian-Muslim polemics. It is based on an older Christian narrative that claims that it was the Jews who buried the cross after Christ’s crucifixion, covering it with debris, until it was discovered by the Byzantine Empress Helena. Hence the name Church of Qumamah (or *qamamah*) derives from finding the cross under the garbage soil. Ibn Khaldun reiterates this traditional Christian claim concerning the cross:

Hilaneh [i.e. Empress Helena] came to the place of the cross and prayed. Then she asked about the wooden cross upon which the Christians claim Christ was crucified. She was told what the Jews had done, and how they made the place a dump for all kinds of vile refuse, carcasses and unclean matter. She was highly disturbed by this (ista’dhamat) and had the wooden cross extracted from the earth. She commissioned the construction of a great church on the site which [Christians] presume to be the site of his burial. That

place is known to this day as Qumamah [refuse dump]. Then she destroyed the temple of the Israelites, ordering that trash and refuse be dumped on top of the dome that is the Qibla of the Jews. This tradition continued until [the caliph] Omar Ibn al Khattab, may God have mercy on his soul, conquered Jerusalem and put a stop to this practice.⁶

Al Qalaqashandi cites a similar narrative: “His [Constantine’s] mother Hilaneh [Helena] went to Jerusalem and extracted the presumed wood of the cross from under the heap of refuse, and built the church of Qumamah in its place.”⁷ Ibn Kathir adds to this: “The Queen Mother Hilaneh ordered that the trash be removed, and built in its place a magnificently ornamented great church known today as al Qumamah in Jerusalem, after the refuse on which it was built. They call it al Qiyamah [‘resurrection’] in reference to the resurrection of Christ’s body. Hilaneh then ordered that all the town’s refuse and its garbage be placed on the rock which is the Qibla of the Jews. This continued until Omar Ibn al Khattab conquered Bayt al Maqdis, and he removed the garbage with his own mantle, and cleansed the place of all impurities and offensive matter. He refused to build a mosque in its place, but went across and built al Aqsa Mosque where the Prophet, God’s prayers on him, prayed on the night of Isra’.”⁸ In this interpretation there is a Judeo-Christian conflict (battle of shrines or symbols desecration), to which Muslims arrive belatedly, which accounts for the ‘qumamah’ usage.

Yaqut on the other hand does not mention the cross at all, but refers to the garbage dump. The church, in his version, was built on a dumping site and took its name, the Church of Qumamah. “In fact its name is Qumamah, because it was the garbage dump of the city. On the extremity of the city there was a site where the hands of corrupters [‘mufsideen’] were cut off, and where thieves were crucified. When Christ was crucified at the same site, he was glorified, as mentioned in the Christian Gospels [Injeel].”⁹ This variation of the incident cited by Yaqut suggests that successive embellishments were added to the Christian narrative until we got it in its present rendition.

Significantly the oldest Arabic sources make no mention of the garbage dump, or of refuse in this context. For example, Al Jahiz, who typically dwells in detail on religious narratives and mythologies, and who presents these narratives with a great deal of relish (even though he generally does not subscribe to them) – does not mention this incident of garbage origins. This leads us to conclude that the linking of the name of the church as Qumamah with garbage is a later development; introduced to explain the origin of the name of the church, which by then had become obscure. I further suggest that a misunderstanding has taken place, leading to the association of the Church of the Sepulcher with garbage and refuse, through the legend of the Buried Cross. It is precisely this narrative that has transformed the initial incomprehension to a misunderstanding. When the origin of the term became obscure in later centuries, it was associated with the “garbage narrative” leading to the popular assumption about the “church of refuse.”

For this reason al Jahiz, whose life bridged the second and third centuries (AH),

had no reason to provide an explanation for the origin of the sepulcher's name, *for in his days the name was not associated with garbage*. If it was indeed linked to notions of refuse, then he would have been compelled to explain the association of a holy place with a refuse dump, as had later interpreters. Such an explanation became imperative when the reference became obscure and problematic – as it was *not* in the era of Jahiz.

In fact linking the naming of the church with the legend of the buried cross is basically not credible. It assumes that Arab Muslims took the name “qumamah,” or some variation thereof, from Christian sources, when in fact this reference does not exist in any Christian tradition. We are therefore compelled to conclude that we are dealing with an essentially Arabic usage that has become archaic. It is unlikely that Christians would have referred to their own church, and the holiest one for that matter, as the Church of the Garbage Dump – an Arabic expression which came into currency a long time after the presumed burial of the original cross.

On the basis of all of this discussion I suggest that the term *qumamah* had no relationship originally with garbage or refuse. We need to look at the root word QMM, to search for an alternative meaning that makes sense in this context. The root, QMM generates two derivative meanings: elevation and union (gathering, accumulating or collecting) (al-‘uluw, and al-jami‘). Qumamah derives from the second sense, whence comes the word, signifying collecting garbage and remains. For garbage in Arabic is called such, because it is gathered (collected, accumulated), from the verb “tuqam” in the passive voice. As for the name of the church, we need to look at the two other variations of the word – “qumamat’,” and “al-qumamah.” If the usage has the definite article (“al”) attached to it, it most likely designates “the universal church,” or “the communal church,” or “great church,” or the “supreme church.” This usage is actually cited by al-Idrisi in the passage quoted earlier where he refers to “The supreme church known as the Church of the Resurrection, and called by Muslims ‘Qumamah.’” This supports the assumption that Qumamah refers to “the community,” as can be traced in the classical lexicon: *qumamah* = a group of people.¹⁰ Ar-Razi adds to this: “*Al-Qumamah*, and *al-Qumamah* also mean ‘a collectivity’ [*jama’at an-Nas*].”¹¹ More specifically I suggest the name Qumamah originally referred to “the central church” or to “the universal church,” meaning that it belongs to the Christian community as a whole, just as al Masjid al Jami‘ means the universal mosque for Muslims. For *al Jami’* is an attribute of the Mosque – and the main mosque in major cities used to be referred to as *al Masjid al Jami’* – i.e. that mosque which gathers and combines [*yaQum*].

If we consider the name without the definite article “al,” that is – Qumamah, which is more likely the original term, we note that it was incorporated in the names of a sizeable number of well-known figures, in both Aljahilliya [pre-Islamic period] and in Islam. Among those were Waqqas ibn Qumamah, the poet; Abu Qumamah, Jabalah ibn Muhammad, an orator; Qumamah ibn Amr the grandson of the well known poet Zaid ibn Tha‘ labah ibn Adi, who is believed to be a Christian and the son of a famous Christian family in Aljahiliyah. It is very unlikely that the names of these people referred to garbage; and less likely that they would have been given the name

“garbage” by their families. It is most probable that the name bore a positive meaning, derived from its second sense of “elevation and loftiness”—since the root of the word “Q-MM” conveys this meaning. This assumption is also supported by the fact that the twin root “q-m-q-m” conveys seniority and sovereignty [“siyada”]. *Qamqam* in Arabic is the “master,” according to *Lisan al Arab* [lexicon]: “*Al-Qamqam* or *Qamaqim* among men—is the master who is generous and munificent.”¹² Al Suyuti adds in *Muzhir*; ““al *qamqam*’ is the lord among men.”¹³ Hence the name *qumamah* can refer to “the master” or “the lord.”¹⁴ In this case, the reference to the Church of Qumamah most likely means “the church of the lord,” or the “church of the supreme master” among other possibilities.

If this is the case then the term *Kanizat al Qumamah* is very likely an Arabic Christian usage, possibly from the late Jahilliyah period. If so, then that would explain its obscurity in later Arabo-Islamic sources, for it would have been extracted from a less known derivative of the root.

I will end this discussion on a lighter note. In *Muhit al Muhit* lexicon, *Qumamah* is identified as “a Christian woman who built a convent in Jerusalem, which was named after her.”¹⁵ In this tradition Queen Helena becomes the inheritor of her own garbage (*qumamah*)! Despite the irrelevance of this last interpretation it does act as an indication of two issues: first, that the name of the Holy Sepulcher had itself become enigmatic in later periods; and second, that the story of the refuse origins of the church certainly was not the only narrative that is available to us for explaining the original Arabic designation for the greatest of all Christian churches.

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Translated from the Arabic by Salim Tamari.

Endnotes

- 1 Al-Idrisi, *Nuzh-at al Mushtaq fi Ikhtiraq al Afaq* at www.alwaraq.net
- 2 Yaqut al Hamawi, *Mu'jam al Buldan* at www.alwaraq.net
- 3 Al-Jahiz, *al Hayawan* at www.alwaraq.net
- 4 Al-Jahiz, *al Hayawan* at www.alwaraq.net
- 5 <http://www.ladeenyon.org/forum/viewtopic.php>
- 6 Abdul Rahman Ibn Khaldun, *Kitab al 'Ibar* at www.alwaraq.net
- 7 Al-Qalqashandi, *Subh al A'sha* at www.alwaraq.net
- 8 Ibn Kathir, *al Bidayah wa-al Nihaya* at www.alwaraq.net
- 9 Yaqut al Hamawi, *Mu'jam al Buldan* at www.alwaraq.net
- 10 *Lisan al Arab*: root of q-m-m
- 11 Al-Razi, *Mukhtar al Sihah*, root of Q-M-M
- 12 *Lisan al Arab*, root of Q-M-M
- 13 Al-Suyuti, *al Muzher*, at www.alwaraq.net
- 14 Al-Azhari, *Tahdhib al Lughah*, root of q-m-m
- 15 Fairuzabadi, *al Qamus al Muhit*, root of q-m-m