THE TEMPLE MOUNT/ \textit{AL-HARAM AL-QUDSĪ ASH-SHARĪF}:
THE POWER OF NARRATIVE AND THE INTERSECTION OF CIVIC AND
RELIGIOUS SPACE

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HY131

Professor Murphy

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Dear Reader,

This paper is a short reflection on a topic that consumes a small library of secular and religious interpretation: the Temple Mount. I am trying to argue that the evolution of the outside interpretations of this historic location is more important than the physical place itself. Its meaning derives from the conflict between groups that have vied to control it through narrative and the use of history to define their current position.

Nothing can be more telling of the beauty in this interpretation than its application to conflict over the Noble Sanctuary, both in the past and in the modern era. The conflict comes from multiple interpretations of the same space, multiple claims to have the correct cosmology that fits the Temple Mount into its narrative. Today, Palestinians and Jews fight over the Mount as both a religious and civic space, reflecting millennia of defining the area as both a place of worship and as one captured in the political sphere as a symbol of unity and nationhood.

My best work explaining this phenomenon is the explanation of how the Crusaders reinterpreted the religious sites of earlier periods in radically different ways than earlier Christians did. The Temple became not a symbol of Jewish decline but rather a symbol of Christendom and religious power in continuity with great Biblical leaders. I also find the more philosophical discussion in closing this argument especially significant, demonstrating that the nature of the conflict comes from a meaning derived from conflict itself, thus revealing the paradox of the Temple Mount. I think my final point, about how civic and religious values in the Noble Sanctuary are intertwined, is pertinent to those seeking a resolution to the conflict over its location. I argue that a shift in theology is required if a political solution is to be found. If each side sees the physical occupation of the area as necessary, there will be no mutually agreeable result.

I found my draft uninspired at best, so I really wanted to make sure my revision moved away from its broad conclusions and vagueness. My greatest revision is hard to pinpoint. I did a major reordering of some of my thoughts, trying to make the work easier to follow. I tied my points throughout history back to the thesis, and dated my information to contextualize its meaning. Finally, I redid my conclusion to remove the obscure and overarching generalizations I had thrown in before (saying the Temple Mount is a metaphor for the human condition is so cliché.)

Now that I have revised my work considerably, my concern is if what I have done can be seen by the reader. Was it necessary to provide illustrations, or superfluous? Is asking questions in a conclusion bad form? I have always sought to avoid them in essays if possible. Finally, did I avoid summary and provide an insightful look at a very complex place?

FYE Paper Conquered,
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Today there are some 3.8 billion adherents of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, who number well over half the world’s population, all of whom hold one particular crumbling mass of rocky soil as one of the most sacred spaces in the world. This relatively small area, known as the Temple Mount or al-haram al-qudsī ash-sharīf, the Noble Sanctuary, has for millennia been the theater of God’s manifestations on earth. Throughout history, competing religions were both united and sharply divided over the appropriation of this hill, and each sought to redefine its history through the lens of their own theology. To them, God’s mountain, where people from all over the known world came to see and fight for their holy place, was not sacred solely because of its physical existence, but rather because of the role it came to play in religious narratives. Two of its most defining periods came during the reign of Herod, who built the fabled Second Jewish Temple on the hill of Jerusalem, and during the Crusades, where Christians and Muslims fought to define the icon of the Mount into their own theologies. Finally, a third, modern period of reinterpretation can be seen, where debates continue over the Temple Mount through both sacred and civic interaction.

The story of the Temple on the Mount began millennia before the coming of Christ or even the settlement of the Jews. Evidence suggests that the Temple Mount was a burial site for ancient pagans as early as 2500 BCE.¹ It became important to the Abrahamic narrative around the time of David, who purchased the Mount as a site to build his alter to give sacrifices to God.² Two major Jewish temples were built at the site: one by Solomon in 968 B.C. and one by Zerubbabel in 515 BCE, which grew to be the grand temple complex of

Herod around 19 BCE. During this period of Jewish history the Temple Mount gained a unique cosmology, focused on Old Testament events linking the Jewish people to what became their homeland, and in its capital, the holy site of their God, Yahweh. From the earliest days of the Temple, it held multiple roles: as a religious site and a civic space, representing the capital of the Jewish homeland, and the city’s shrine.

The conception of the temple as sacred space is not new in human history, especially in the Middle East. David Seely argues that the temples in Jerusalem were embodiments of the “cosmic mountain” a place that bridged the gap between the celestial and the mortal. Just as Hinduism reveres some mountains as sacred, so too did early civilizations in the Fertile Crescent and along the Nile. Often, the mountain represented God or the divine as above the primordial waters, bringing dry land and rising above in creation myths of floods such as in the Babylonian and Egyptian religious traditions. It is no surprise then, that when pilgrims in the first century visited the Temple in Jerusalem, they described it as “ascending the mountain of the Lord.” Holum argues that holiness was related by sheer physical size of the space and its location, common during the period of the Temple’s construction in the Near East. Herod’s Temple was a symbol not only of the religious power of the Jewish state and their God Yahweh, but it represented in its grandeur the political power of Herod himself. It was modeled on the caesareum, a Roman style of religious architecture used for the worship of the emperor. It was the center of life in Jerusalem and the only great temple of the Jewish state of Israel. The Temple of David, built high on a mountaintop above, was to

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6 Holum, *Caesarea’s Temple Hill*, 189.
represent the Jewish people’s connection to the heavens, an acropolis for what would become Jerusalem.\(^7\)

Figure 1

Similarities between the Jewish temples and other cultures do not end with the chosen location of a hill. There is a heavy influence of Greco-Roman arches and styling in Herod’s Temple and in comparable other contemporary Jewish temples at Cassaera, a better preserved remnant of Jewish architecture during the Roman period.\(^8\) Herod’s temple


\(^8\) Holum, *Caesarea’s Temple Hill*, 189.
complex reflects Greek masonry techniques, and used imported marble in a Western style. The Temple itself and its design borrowed from concepts prominent in almost all religions. As one moved inward or upward in the Temple, sacredness grew. Ancient Mesopotamians and Egyptians both used walls and concentric patterns to cordon off different layers of holiness in their religious structures. Similarly, the temples of David and especially Herod were layered to restrict access at each level of entrance to the site. Clyde Weber used a 1904 survey to argue that the Temple Complex during the Second Temple Period was divided into sections, each growing more selective, first to all Jews, then restricted to men, then just priests. Finally, the “Holy Place” was a completely empty and black chamber where God on earth resided, only entered once a year by the high priest, to atone for humanity’s sins. This description adds another layer to the construction of the Temple Mount. Outside of its Abrahamic religious elements, it included many Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Hellenistic architectural features. It was a locus for the overlap of the various cultural values that influenced Jerusalem during Herod’s rein. This concept of an earthly physical residence of God is almost pagan, even in its Jewish form, and the construction of the temple complex shows the combination of cultures, art forms, and social concepts that came from throughout the Middle East and Southern Europe.

Herod’s Temple reflects the cosmopolitanism of the Roman Empire between 37 BCE and 70 CE. Made in a similar fashion to Roman garrison towns, the Second Temple was a grand undertaking, symbolizing the power of Herod, ruler of Israel. Herod resorted to brute

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9 Holum, Caesarea’s Temple Hill, 189.
10 Seely, Solomon's Temple: Myth and History, 10.
force to unite the Jewish tribes under his rule after their diaspora during Nebuchadnezzar. He was a patron of the pagan Romans, who at some points during their rule even used the temple complex as a worship site.  

Kenneth Holum describes the Biblical basis for the Temple Mount and its holiness as “socially constructed.” The sanctity of the Temple was not due to its physicality, but the conceptual idea of an object that unified the Jewish people, just as the once-mobile Ark of the Covenant did with the nomadic Jewish tribes. By giving a permanent residence to both the ark and providing a space that was religious also gave the Temple political significance, as the symbol of the Jewish nation. The Temple exploited common Greek themes of the time, including the concept of temenos, an enclosed meeting space in the form of a portico, used for pagan temples and civic meeting spaces in the Hellenistic period. The Temple evolved not only a religious aspect, but also significance as a civic concept, meant to unify the Jewish nation. Even in the Christian narrative, many of the early stories of Christ come from his interactions at the Temple and its position as a social center. He is presented there as an infant to the Jewish community, and later impressed the teachers with his questions of Jewish practice. An older Jesus even expressed his rage at the trading occurring inside the Temple and overturns the tables of the merchants working there. The Temple was the hub of everyday commerce and social interaction. What is notable in the New Testament narrative is the rejection of the commercial merchants in a sacred place. This foreshadows later Christian ideals firmly segregating social and religious spheres within their communities.

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13 Seely, Solomon’s Temple, 45-49.  
14 Holum, Caesarea’s Temple Hill, 184.  
15 Holum, Caesarea’s Temple Hill, 187-189.  
16 Grabar and Zedar, Where Heaven and Earth Meet, 68.
Benjamin Issac describes the complex funding mechanism that Herod’s Temple developed in imitation of the Roman model. As the Temple grew to symbolize all Jewish people, it developed a system of patronage from Jews living outside the bounds of the Israelite homeland. A recent investigation into a particular inscription from the Roman period may give new insights into the nature of the Temple during Herod’s reign. It is an inscription commemorating the donation of money from a Jew residing overseas, far from the Jewish homeland of Israel, to Herod’s Temple. It is inferred that this donation came from Rhodes, showing the widespread patronage of Jews in the Mediterranean to the Temple. Such a large donation towards the upkeep of the Temple may lead to different conclusions than the widely held belief that funding came from widespread taxing, rather than large private contributions.

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17 Fig. 2. Photograph, Plate 9, from Isaac, Benjamin ,“A Donation for Herod's Temple in Jerusalem,” Israel Exploration Journal 33 (1983): 92.
Pilgrimage to what was now a holy site also began during Roman rule. The philosopher Philo (25BCE - 45CE) stated: “countless multitudes from countless cities come, some over land, others over sea, from east and west and north and south at every feast. They take the Temple for their port as a general haven and safe refuge…” The Temple itself became a place of pilgrimage for Jews across the Middle East, symbolizing how its significance transcended that of a local place of worship into an icon for the Jewish people.

The Jewish revolt following the looting of the Temple by Emperor Nero in 66 CE destabilized Jerusalem. Troops of Titus set fire to the Temple in 70 CE, destroying what would later be seen as the pinnacle of the Jewish era. As the Temple burned, it brought about the end of the priestly period for Judaism. A new Jewish structure, based on the rabbinic order and the synagogue as the center of Jewish life, appeared. The destruction of the Temple marked an epoch for the religion; hopes of one day resurrecting the “Third Temple” would later drive fundamentalist concepts in the Zionist movement and a desire to recreate the “Jewish homeland” for centuries to come.

Christians in the second and third centuries CE came to view the destruction of the Temple as fulfilling Jesus’ prophesy foreshadowing its impending collapse. The decline of the Temple signified the end of the old order; a new era would fulfill the teachings of the Messiah in the Holy Land. Such anti-Jewish sentiments at the time led to statements like those of St. Jerome, who referred to the Temple Mount as “the dungheap of the new Christian Jerusalem.” Nevertheless, Christians did identify some important sites in the

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19 Grabar and Zedar, Where Heaven and Earth Meet, 67.
20 Grabar and Zedar, Where Heaven and Earth Meet, 70.
Temple complex, recognizing the tower where Jesus was tempted by the devil, and the sites of early martyrs, such as St. James, who gave their lives on the Mount. As the Byzantines, the surviving remnants of their Roman ancestors, exerted their new Christian influence along the Levant coast, the Temple was for the most part ignored as new Christian sites were built. Among the most prominent new sites was the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in 326CE, which gave Jerusalem its first major Christian shrine. The Christian-Jewish friction, although widely discussed, was not one of complete oppression by Constantinople. Even at their most oppressive, the Byzantines granted the Jews the rights to visit the Temple Mount on certain holidays, and their policies shifted over time as Byzantine grip over the city fluctuated. A letter between the priests of Israel mentioned the Empress Eudocia in 438 CE discussing the possibility of returning Jerusalem to the Jews: “The time of our exile has passed; the day has come for the ingathering of our tribes, because the kings of the Romans have decided to give us back Jerusalem.” This statement, although not in any real way a possibility, reflected both the Jewish belief that the Byzantines were willing to compromise on important matters of theology and politics and the ever-present hope that the holy city would once again return to the Jewish people.

The Byzantines were overcome by the rise of a new, third monotheistic religion grappling with creating its own history: Islam. The rise of the Umayyads brought a new permanent face to what was termed in Islamic tradition as the Noble Sanctuary. Although a small mosque existed at the site from 635 CE, the construction of the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa mosque that came to define the Mount were products of this later empire. In a


\[\text{\footnotesize 23 Grabar and Zedar, Where Heaven and Earth Meet, 97.}\]
continuation of earlier building practices, concentric building patterns delineated inner and outer sanctuaries into different levels of sacred space. The Umayyads followed their Christian predecessors in reclaiming the Noble Sanctuary as part of their own narrative, recognizing the location as the place where Muhammad landed before ascending to heaven, and the rock, the holy of holies, as the place of his ascension. This new addition of storyline adds another religious context to *al-haram al-qudsī ash-sharīf*. The social construction that Holum describes with the Jewish people applied now to both Christians and Muslims as well, as the Mount became an icon to adherents of those religions and unified their believers.

Around 1099 CE, the Abbasid Empire that controlled the region faced a new threat: the Crusades. Although they would reclaim the Noble Sanctuary and restore Muslim rule less than a century later, the Crusades were a defining moment in the Christian reinterpretation of the Mount. At the behest of Pope Urban II, the lesser royalty of a land-based society in Europe came for God, gold and glory to the “Holy Land,” hoping to establish new Christian kingdoms in Jerusalem and along the Levant Coast. As these new invaders entered Jerusalem and the Temple Mount, they too reinvented history to fit their current position. The Crusaders took the Temple image and reincorporated into the Christian narrative, using its motif to embellish coins and placing it prominently on maps of the Holy City at the time. Sylvia Schein contrasts this new perspective with that of the Byzantines: “this change in the veneration with which the Temple Mount was regarded is in strong contrast with the Christian attitudes towards it in the Byzantine period.” Jerusalem was made into the capital of a new Christian state, and its king presided from the Temple Mount, now a religious and

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civic center. Ousterhouse argues that the Temple imagery of the period influenced the Christian representations of the Tomb of Christ, and that the Tomb and ark portrayal may also have borrowed from contemporaneous Jewish art. Thus the Temple was made by the Crusaders not just into a piece of Old Testament history, but an icon of Christian architecture borrowed from Jewish scholars at the time. In the words of Sylvia Schein: “The Mount became almost overnight…one of the most conspicuous holy places on the path of pilgrims in the Crusader capitol.” Buildings and Holy sites in Jerusalem found significance in the epics of the Crusaders, whereby minor stories were used to reinforce the strongly Christian nature of the site. Mosques became churches, the Al-Aqsa mosque the palace of the king. According to Schein, “almost ever physical feature, structure, arch and gate – the greater part of them of Muslim origin- were assigned to Christian tradition.” The new rulers of Jerusalem traced their lineage back through that of David and Solomon, signifying the continuity of these Jewish historical figures with the new kingdom. Even ritual processions on great feast days “passed from the Church of the Holy Sepulcre to the Temple Mount.” The Temple Mount, like so many other pieces of Jerusalem, became part of a new history of the Crusaders.

Eventually, the Crusaders would lose the Christian narrative of the Temple to a resurgence of Muslim rule over Palestine, only for the Muslims to be challenged again in the early 20th century by the British promise for a new State of Israel. The Israeli state offered a new source of conflict for the region, and an important investigation of the balance of civic

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29 Ousterhout, The Temple, the Sepulchre, and the Martyrion of the Savior, 49.
and religious space. As Motti Inbari argues, the Temple Mount presents a dilemma to Israel, as an area traditionally off-limits to Jews but yet simultaneously a contested civic space that Israel is desperate to reinforce its sovereignty over. Inbari shows how in recent decades restrictions on visiting the Mount have been slowly lifted as Israel’s claims to it have grown. As the Zionist Rabbi Kook anticipates: “our faith is firm that days are coming when all the nations shall recognize this place, which the Lord has chosen for all eternity as the site of our Temple, must return to its true owners…”33 Today, the renewal of rites on the Temple Mount, and the use of it as a prayer space are almost a complete reversal of before. The Temple Mount has been taken by the Jews as a space of religion in order to reinforce their religious motive for keeping the area, sacred also to Muslim Palestinians. Unlike Christianity, Burgess argues, both Jews and Muslims have a strong traditionalist doctrine demanding connection of holy sites with religiosity. The connection of religion and state cannot be explained away as in Western Christian liberalism.34 The Temple Mount has civic meaning because it is religious, not in spite of it. Recently, Israeli and Palestinian politicians have exploited this in using the Mount for speeches and declarations of the preservation and reclamation of land both sides feel entitled to.

The Temple Mount may perhaps be one of the most contested and human-marked sites on the planet. But the great mystery of its existence lies not with the place itself or the people that controlled it, but how such a place could take on such meaning. How did a small hill in the dry lands of Israel become the site of so much value? Monk takes this analysis and

argues: “the conflict creates the holy site.”\textsuperscript{35} By having a physical space upon which to enact the defense of God, religion is reinforced, and the place is given meaning. Mica Eliade suggests that sacredness is similar – that “the essence of religious objects and religious experience is radically different from ‘ordinary’ objects…while at the same time coexisting with them.” Something becomes sacred simply by being picked out among the rest, “saturated with being.”\textsuperscript{36} Thus the creation of meaning around a site such as the Temple Mount lies more with the people and their singular interpretations of it in their own cosmology rather than the physicality of the place itself. Whether Christians, Jews, or Muslims controlled the site, the meaning and representation it held was adapted to fit their own narrative. Why then, not adopt another similar site nearby to reinforce one’s religion? The answer lies in the conflict itself – the reclamation of the site through the victory of one religion over another signifies its dominance over previous periods. Thus the adaptations of the site in these narratives – the renaming of small fortifications, the introduction of new narratives and pictorial depictions of the Mount – give the area such great interest to religious narratives. Physical space can be denoted meaning only through the human context.

The Temple Mount has shown itself to be a shrine of not simply religious tradition but human narrative. Its significance lies with the interpretations of the people who have come and gone and left their mark on the holy site. The most defining periods of the Mount’s history – the Second Temple Period and the Crusades – focused on adapting previous narrative into new political and religious spheres. Even today, the contest between political and religious significance of the Mount continues. The Temple Mount is such a source of conflict because it has meaning, meaning given agency from the conflict of narratives. Thus

\textsuperscript{35} Burgess, \textit{The Sacred Site}, 320.
\textsuperscript{36} Mica Eliade, quoted in Burgess, \textit{The Sacred Site}, 320.
the ultimate paradox of its existence continues. Its value simply does not lie in the physical remnants that remain in Jerusalem today. The significance of the Noble Sanctuary resides in the conceptual accounting of those who hold it as holy. It is this binary, of the area as either Muslim or non-Muslim, the Mount of the Temple of the Jews or *al-haram al-qudsī ash-sharīf*, a holy place of Islam, which creates conflict. This implication of ownership as religious doctrine keeps the area one of great dispute. The nature of the Noble Sanctuary as both religious and civic space has been exploited as tensions have risen; the Mount has now found, once again, its historical role as a tool of political iconography for both the relatively new Israeli nation and the Muslim world. This leaves open the question of a resolution of the dispute over the Temple Mount. Does a political resolution to the civic space of the Mount render its religious qualms void? Or is the prospect of a solution impossible without a change in thinking about the Mount itself? If possession is the end goal of these theologies, then only a doctrinal shift in the Islamic and Jewish faiths will guarantee the site as a holy space for multiple religions. Until physical occupation of the Mount ceases to be the end goal of religious narrative, as it arguably has in the Christian tradition, it is hard to see any resolution, religious or civic, to the question of *al-haram al-qudsī ash-sharīf*. 
Bibliography


