

### ***The Crescent on the Temple, by Pamela Berger, Boston College***

The Temple of Solomon as described in the Book of Kings was rectangular in plan, as were the subsequent temples of Zerubbabel and Herod. By 135 CE the Herodian structure was completely destroyed, yet over the centuries Jews gathered surreptitiously at the site and wept, especially at the place where bedrock was exposed at the top of the Temple Mount. In the Hebrew Bible, as well as in the Talmud and the Midrash, the Temple had been associated with a rock or a large stone. For example, Isaiah [28:16] writes of a Foundation Stone: “So has the Lord God said: ‘Behold, I have laid as a foundation a stone in Zion, a fortress stone, a costly cornerstone, a foundation well founded.’”

That Foundation Stone came to be regarded as having been in the most sacred part of the Temple, the Holy of Holies. According to tradition, the Ark of the Covenant rested upon the Foundation Stone. When the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem in 586 BCE they most likely took away the Ark of the Covenant, for it is no longer mentioned as being there. However, later texts speak about the stone upon which it stood, and that God’s glory reposed upon that stone. An anonymous visitor from Bordeaux reported in 333 CE that when he visited the Temple Mount he saw there a “stone to which the Jews come every year

and anoint. They mourn and rend their garments, and then depart.” In the early 400s the Biblical scholar Jerome saw the same kind of ritual on the Temple Mount: Jews groaning over the ruins of their Temple.

Jews created a series of stories about that Rock: that the Rock is close to heaven and represents the throne of God; that waters of the flood receded from the Rock, and that it was the pillow under Jacob’s head. Muslims and Jews shared the legend that Abraham bound his son at that Rock, though for Jews the son was Isaac and for Muslims it was Ishmael. And both peoples believed that the Rock was the navel of the world.

One apocryphal later account about the site speaks of an old Jew, Ka’b, who accompanied the Muslim caliph Umar when he marched peacefully into Jerusalem in 638. Umar asked to be taken to the place where David prayed and the Bishop of Jerusalem took him to the Temple Mount. Though the Christians had allowed the site to be desecrated by all kinds of dung and refuse, Umar saw it as the place where David had prayed. According to legend, the old Jew, Ka’b, helped the Muslim Caliph find the rock. A fragment from the Cairo Geniza recounts the story: “Taking part were all the Muslims in the city . . . and participating with them were a group of Jews. Afterwards they were

ordered to evacuate the rubbish from the sanctuary [site] and to clean it; and [the Caliph] Umar watched them all the time. Whenever a remnant was revealed, he would ask the elders of the Jews about the rock... and one of the sages would mark out the boundaries of the place, until it was uncovered.”<sup>1</sup> By 692 the Muslims had built the Dome of the Rock at that site.

From the eighth century on, the Dome of the Rock was referred to as the Temple of Solomon in a number of texts, and in numerous works of art the Dome of the Rock stood for the Temple. My book, “The Crescent on the Temple,” presents this argument, citing the textual references and visual imagery. In this short essay I’ll present a few examples.

A circular Temple is

**Fig. 1. “Q” Initial with the Annunciation to Zechariah. London, The British Library. Harley Gospels 2788, folio 109r. Late 8th century. Copyright: The British Library Board**



depicted as the venue for several Christological scenes. This Carolingian manuscript depicts the Annunciation to Zachariah of the impending birth of his son, John the Baptist. (fig. 1) Zachariah was a Temple priest and the scene is represented as taking place in the Temple. In medieval terms this domed masonry building stands for the Temple, for it has the salient elements characteristic of that building. The courses of masonry clearly indicate a circular building, and the ribs of the dome are easily visible. Curiously, medieval Christians had developed the belief that the Dome of the Rock was the very same structure standing during the time of Jesus. Thus a circular Temple is depicted as the venue for several other Christological scenes.



**Fig. 2. Sacrifice at the Temple/Tabernacle. Octateuch. Constantinople, 1070–1080. Rome, Vatican Library, Gr. 747 folio 125v. Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, with all rights reserved**

Byzantine art likewise provides examples of a domed structure serving as the Temple, as in the above miniature of a sacrifice made by the priest Aaron and his son. (fig. 2) Behind the sacrifice, in the upper register, a haloed Aaron points to the domed structure, which is meant to stand for the Temple, conflated with the Tabernacle in the desert. In the bottom part of the illustration the offering is being burned.



**Fig. 3. Presentation in the Temple. Psalter of Queen Melisende. 1131–1142. London, The British Library, Egerton 1139, folio 3r. " Copyright: The British Library Board**

When crusaders entered Jerusalem in 1099, they took over the Dome of the Rock and renamed it "Temple of the Lord." Consequently, some of the Christological events that were illustrated in crusader manuscripts depicted scenes of Jesus'

life as if they had taken place at a circular Temple, as in this representation of the Presentation in the Temple just above. (fig. 3)

The circular domed “Temple” could be given a negative meaning as well. Here on the twelfth-century tympanum at St. Gilles-du-Gard the



**Fig. 4. Synagogue with Crown like the Dome of the Rock. Detail of Crucifixion Tympanum. St. Gilles-du-Gard, France. South Portal Tympanum, West Facade. 1150–1180. Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY**

crucified Jesus is flanked by personifications of Church and Synagogue. Synagogue is being forced down by the spear of the angel. (fig. 4) One of her defining attributes is a crown in the shape of the Dome of the Rock, the structure which, at the time, was still called "Temple of the Lord" by the crusaders. The use of this building as Synagogue's crown is meant as a denigration. In addition to her being thrust down by the angel, her debasement is further highlighted by the voluptuous breasts that are visible through her garment. In a strange tangle of religious imagery, this Muslim building, which had been consecrated as a church, had, according to the prevailing crusader narrative, also been the Jewish Temple standing at the time of Jesus. It was thus associated with Gospel stories that, for instance, pointed to Jewish greed, like Jesus purging the Temple of the Jewish moneychangers, and Jewish Temple priests handing Jesus over to Pilate... stories that offered up a strong dose of negativity in association with the Temple. It was this negativity that was called upon by the inventor of this extraordinary iconography at St. Gilles-du-Gard, where the domed "Temple" becomes the crown of the defeated Synagogue. Since the Dome of the Rock had been captured by the crusaders from the Muslims, it could symbolize defeated Jewish infidels and defeated Muslims at the same time.

The circular Dome of the Rock standing for the Temple also appears in the “Moralized Bible” of the 1220s. (fig. 5)



Fig. 5. Solomon praying to the Lord. Upper roundel.  
“Moralized Bible”  
c. 1230. Vienna, Oesterreichische Nationalbibliothek,  
Codex Vindobonensis 2554 fol. 50v. Photo: copyright:  
Oesterreichische Nationalbibliothek



Here Solomon is giving thanks to the Lord after completing the construction of the Temple. Even though the biblical text clearly indicates that Solomon's Temple had a rectangular plan, in this illustration of the king praying to the Lord, the elements of the Dome of the Rock are visible: Beneath the fronds of the dome are the arched windows of the drum, and below that is what could be construed as an ambulatory roof.

In the fourteenth century the practice continues, as in this Broederlam painting of the Presentation scene. (Fig. 6 & 6a)

**Fig. 6 & 6a. Presentation in the Temple and Flight into Egypt. Melchior Broederlam. 1399. Musee des Beaux Arts, Dijon, France. Photo: Francois Tay. Copyright: Musee des Beaux-Arts de Dijon.**



The ritual takes place in a polygonal space, with the exterior of the building shown on the left. This exterior not only has the



dome and the drum windows, but here the “Temple” in which the Christological event takes place actually has a crescent on top.

A domed structure stands for the Temple of Solomon in Islamic art as well. (fig. 7) This early-fourteenth-century illustration attached to an eleventh-century text describes Nebuchadnezzar’s destruction of the Temple. Here we see the Dome of the Rock with fire lapping up around it. The finial

being pulled down is a crescent on top of an oval and a circle. The inscription going around the base of the dome



Fig. 7. Nebuchadnezzar’s Destruction of the Temple. From al-Biruni, *Athar al-Baqiya*, Chronology [or Surviving Traces] of Ancient Nations. Edinburgh University Library, Arab 161 folio 134v. Copyright: Edinburgh University Library.

reads “*Bayt al-Muqaddas*” or

“*Bayt al-Maqdis*,” the Arabic translation of the Hebrew name for the Temple, *Beit ha-Miqdash*, or, by extension, for the City of Jerusalem.

In Jewish art as well, the Dome of the Rock came to stand for the

ancient Temple of Solomon. During the last eighty years or so Jewish art has not depicted the Temple in the guise of the Dome of the Rock, but from at least the fifteenth century, right up until the late 1920s, the Dome of the Rock often *did* stand for the Temple in Jewish art, or, in

some instances, for the Tabernacle in the Desert.

One such example is a mid-to-late fifteenth century copy of the *Mishneh Torah* by Maimonides.

(fig. 8)

The events



depicted are of Aaron and his son slaying the calf and then burning it at the Tabernacle in the Desert.

Even though other writings by Maimonides contain references to the

**Fig. 8. *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides. Book 8, f. 1r. North Italy. Israel Museum, Jerusalem, L-B07.010. Extended loan from Michael and Judy Steinhardt, NY. Copyright: The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, for Michael and Judy Steinhardt. Photo: Ardon Bar-Hama.**

rectangular plan of the ancient sanctuary, and even though those writings were at various times illustrated with just such rectangular plans, here an octagonal domed structure appears as the Temple, a structure that looks like the Dome of the Rock.

The Temple in the guise of the Dome of the Rock also appears in this Hebrew printer's mark, where the dome and ambulatory bear the Hebrew words *Beit ha-Miqdash*, i.e. the Temple. (fig. 9) Above the



building floats a banner with a quote from Haggai (2:9) referring to the greatness of the glory of the Temple. In fact, the shape of the Dome of the Rock in Jewish art came to evoke a

Fig. 9. Dome of the Rock as Hebrew Printer's mark. Printed in the books of Giustiniani, Venice, 1545–52.

messianic vision of the Temple at the End of Time. A

woodcut at the bottom of the last page in the in the Venice Haggadah of 1609 embodies this new messianic meaning for the Dome of the Rock.

The artist concretizes this meaning by adding figures connected to the



Fig. 10. Messiah riding a Donkey toward the Gate of Jerusalem with the Prophet Elijah Leading the Way. Final page of the Venice Hagaddah. 1609. Woodcut.

End of Time in the Jewish tradition. (Fig. 10) On the left the Messiah makes his triumphant entry toward the central gate of Jerusalem. He comes on a donkey, a traditional motif found in earlier illustrated manuscripts of the Haggadah. This portrayal of the Messiah's arrival is inspired by the words of the prophet Zechariah (9:9): "Behold! Your king shall come to you...riding a donkey." In front of the Messiah strides Elijah, the prophet who, according to Malachi 3:23, will herald the Messiah at the End of Days. He is blowing the shofar, the ram's horn. From between the hills, groups from all the nations arrive. Close-fitting

round hats, hats with a knot above, hats with wide brims or short brims, and various length garments characterize the figures. Not only Jewish nations are depicted here, for it is unlikely that in seventeenth-century Italy a black-skinned group would have been depicted. So these are surely meant to be all humankind. As an indication that time stands still at this End Time, both the sun and the moon are present in the sky. Thus the image represents the moment when all the peoples of the earth will be gathered into Jerusalem. The number of houses that await them is not just the twelve that would symbolize the tribes of Israel. Rather, fifteen odd houses stand within the walls.



The Dome of the Rock designated as the *Beit ha-Miqdash* is also represented on Jewish pilgrimage scrolls. (Fig. 11) This view is from the East, so it is the

**Fig. 11. Pilgrimage Scroll. National Library of Israel. Ms. Heb. 8. 1187. 16th Copyright: National Library of Israel. Jerusalem**

dome on the right that represents the Temple, and the Foundation

Stone is labeled within it.

## On Jewish Marriage

Contracts the Dome of the Rock represents the “Jerusalem” that the newlyweds must not forget.

(Fig. 12) In this example, the Renaissance-style Dome of the Rock is clearly labeled, “*Beit ha-Miqdash,*” the



**Fig. 12. Marriage Contract. Detail. The British Library. Or. 12377 From Senigallia, 1780. Copyright: The British Library Board**

Temple.

Esther scrolls also include images of the Dome of the Rock to



**Fig. 13. Messiah approaching Jerusalem at the End of Days. The Washington Megillah. detail. Italy. c. 18th century. Credit: Library of Congress, Hebraic Section. Copyright.**

represent the Temple. (Fig. 13) In this context the image alludes to the hoped-for redemption of the Jewish people through the appearance of the Messiah who, following Elijah, moves toward Jerusalem from the left.

“Souvenir Posters” made in the Holy Land c. 1900 likewise show the Dome of the Rock labeled “*Beit ha-Miqdash*,” the Temple. (Fig. 14)

Fig. 14.  
Watercolor and Ink on Paper.  
Palestine. 19th century.  
Collection of The Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Photo Copyright: The Israel Museum Jerusalem





The Dome of the Rock was also used as an amulet, to be placed on the wall to guard the Jewish home from the Evil Eye, especially in matters relating to mothers and babies. (Fig. 15)



Fig. 15. Color Lithographic Amulet, by Moshe Ben Yitzhak Mizrachi. Jerusalem, early 20th century. Gross Family Collection, Tel Aviv. Courtesy of the Gross Family Collection.

Psalm 121:2 asking for help from God is at the very top, and the other inscriptions enlist the powers of angels to keep the home safe. In the surrounding circle, the tomb of Rachel, a figure particularly venerated by pregnant women, is placed at the top. The Dome of the Rock, featured as the main image on this lithograph intended to guard the Jewish home, demonstrates how powerful a protective image the Muslim shrine had become.

These representations of the Dome of the Rock as the Temple in Jewish art mirror a similar phenomenon in Jewish folklore and written accounts. The texts confirm what the visual evidence demonstrates: that until the late 1920s, Jews sometimes used an image of the Dome of the Rock as a protective amulet and as a positive representation of what they considered to be the holiest place on earth.

This attitude of tolerance suggested in the historical, cultural and literary sources points the way to an understanding of how these works of art done in the Holy Land, or based on Holy Land models, could incorporate so easily the image of the Dome of the Rock with a crescent on top as a representation of the Temple. By the early 1930s a shift began to occur in both the use and the meaning of the Dome of the Rock in Jewish arts and crafts. The appearance of the image declined. No

longer was it featured, as it had been earlier, in such religious and folkloric settings as New Year's greeting cards, Sabbath cloths, and challah covers for the Sabbath meal. Starting in the late 1920s, few of those objects display the image of the Dome of the Rock. This change coincided with mounting conflict with the indigenous population that grew out of increasing Jewish immigration and consequent encroachment on what had been Arab land.

By the end of the twentieth century, and into the twenty-first, one could detect a new iconography: the Temple Mount/*Haram al-Sharif* with trees and foliage, and no Dome of the Rock. Its absence in the iconography coincided, tragically, with the actions of extremist Israeli groups that wanted to destroy the ancient Muslim shrine, a structure that had been absorbed into Jewish art unopposed and that had taken its place beside other long-standing Jewish iconographic motifs.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Moshe Gil. *A History of Palestine, 634 – 1099*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. 71.