

# History of Al Aqsa

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For more than fourteen hundred years, Al Aqsa has been venerated throughout the Muslim world as the third holiest site of Islam. It was to this place that the prophet Muhammad, may Allah's prayer and peace be upon him, made his night journey from the Masjid al-haram in Makkah. It was from this site that he, Muhammad, may Allah's prayer and peace be upon him, ascended on the Miraj, his journey through the heavens to his Lord.

In the name of Allah, the most gracious, the most kind

Glory be unto Him who carried his servant by night, from the Holy Mosque to the Furthest Mosque, the precinct of which We have blessed, that We might show him some of Our signs. He is the All-hearing, the All-seeing

For fourteen hundred years, Al Aqsa has dominated the skyline and the life of Jerusalem. For more than thirteen centuries, it was a centre of pilgrimage for Muslims from all over the world.

In 638 CE Jerusalem's thousand years of recurrent religious persecution, intolerance and oppression were brought to an abrupt halt; 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, the second Khalif of Islam, entered al-Quds. 'Umar entered Jerusalem on foot. There was no bloodshed. There were no massacres. Those who wanted to leave were allowed to, with all their goods. Those who wanted to stay were guaranteed protection for their property and places of worship.

It is related that 'Umar asked Sophronius, the city patriarch, to take him to the sanctuary of David, as soon as he was through writing the terms of the surrender. They were joined by four thousand of the Companions of the Prophet. When they reached the area of the Noble Sanctuary, they found it covered in rubbish. 'Umar proceeded to the west of the Sanctuary and unfurled his cloak, filling it with debris. His companions did likewise. They disposed of it and returned again and again, until the whole area where the Masjid Al Aqsa now stands, was cleared. The entire area of the Haram ash Sharif, the Noble Sanctuary, was over thirty-five acres. The great rock, the site of the Prophet Muhammad's, may Allah's prayer and peace be upon him, ascension to the heavens on the Miraj and the direction of the first qibla, lay in the centre. A huge timber mosque, which held three thousand worshippers, was erected on the site, the site of the present Al Aqsa mosque.

Fifty years later, near the end of the seventh century, it was given to the Umayyah Khalif, Abdul Malik ibn Marwan, to construct one of the worlds most beautiful and enduring shrines over the rock itself (and it is truly a tribute to the Muslims love and respect of this site). Thabit al-Bunani reported on the authority of Anas that the prophet Muhammad, may Allah's prayer and peace be upon him, said:

"I was brought by al-Buraq, an animal white and long, larger than a donkey but smaller than a mule, whose stride was a distance equal to the range of its vision. I mounted it and came to Jerusalem, and tied it to the ring used by the prophets. After entering the mosque and praying two rakat, I came out. Gabriel brought me a vessel of wine and a vessel of milk, I chose the milk, and Gabriel said, 'You have chosen the true religion.' We were then taken up to heaven&hellip;"  
(Translated by Muslim)

After the completion of the Dome of the Rock, construction began at the site of the original timber mosque at the south end of the sanctuary. A vast congregational mosque, accommodating over five thousand worshippers, was constructed. It became known as Masjid Al Aqsa, although in reality the entire Haram ash-Sharif is considered to be the Al Aqsa mosque with its entire precincts inviolable.

The next five centuries of Muslim rule were characterised by peace, justice and prosperity for all. The Noble sanctuary became a great centre for learning; scholars came from all over the world to worship al Al Aqsa, to study and to teach within its precincts. The people of the book (Jews and Christians) were respected throughout this period.

In 1078, bands of Seljud Turks took Jerusalem. They ruled for the next twenty years, during which time the right of Christian pilgrims to the city were regularly trampled, along with everyone else's, in the path of their fierce internal rivalries.

In 1096, Pope Urban called the first crusade. Christians were mobilised to defend their faith. After three years of marching mayhem, the remnants of the crusade reached the gates of Jerusalem. It was the morning of June 7th 1099. After a five-week siege the cities ramparts were stormed. The crusaders went berserk and for two days the forty thousand (40,000) men, women and children of Jerusalem were massacred in the streets, in the mosques and in their homes.

Muslim soldiers were slaughtered in Al Aqsa mosque, even after being guaranteed amnesty there. The cities Jews were burned alive in their main Synagogue, where they had huddled together for refuge. Al Aqsa and the Dome of the Rock were looted. A golden cross was placed on top of the Dome of the Rock. It was renamed Temple Domini. Al Aqsa mosque became Temlum Solomonis. In their enthusiasm to link the glory of the Noble Sanctuary with their own heritage, the new conquerors erased every trace possible of its Islamic origins.

In the Dome of the Rock Quaranic inscriptions were plastered over. Steps were carved into the Rock and an altar placed

on top of it. Chips of the Rock were sold for their weight in gold. The Al Aqsa mosque was sub-divided into a royal palace as well as headquarters and barracks of the Knights Templar. The east of Al Aqsa became a stable for four hundred horses.

In 1146, Nuradeen Zangi, ruler of Aleppo, commissioned master craftsmen to build an extraordinary cedar member. It was to be installed in Al Aqsa on the day the crusaders were expelled from al-Quds. It was his lieutenant and successor Salahudeen, who was to lead the Muslims into victory. Generous almost to a fault, shunning luxury and ostentation, Salahudeen, was merciful to those he conquered but ruthless to anyone who maligned the prophet Muhammad, may Allah's prayer and peace be upon him, and the path of Allah. On the second day of October 1187, the twenty-seventh day of Rajab, Salahudeen entered Jerusalem after a twelve-day siege. There were no massacres. Those who wanted to leave were permitted to do so, with all their goods. Those who wanted to stay were guaranteed protection for their lives, property and places of worship. The wisdom of the Khalif 'Umar, was observed. The laws of Islam were restored.

The cross on the Dome of the Rock was taken down. Al Aqsa was purified with rose water and reinstated as a mosque. The magnificent member, commissioned by Nuradeen forty years before, was installed. The jummah prayer was held once again in the Furthest Mosque. The right of Jews and Christians to worship at their holy sites was guaranteed and Salahudeen's authority in all but the coastal areas of Palestine was confirmed. The next centuries witnessed the final expulsion of the crusader's from Palestine.

By the early sixteenth century, Ottoman Turks displaced them and in the process established a vast empire, which encompassed Constantinople, Damascus, Cairo, Makkah, Medinah and Jerusalem. On entering Jerusalem, in 1517, the Ottoman sultan, Saleem, was interested with the keys to Al Aqsa and the Dome of the Rock. A delegation of Christian clerics presented him with scroll containing the original covenant of 'Umar, guaranteeing them right over the church of the Holy Sepulchre and other Christian holy places. Saleem pressed them to his face and kissed them, confirming his intention to honour 'Umar's word. Saleem's son, Suleiman al-Qanuni, known throughout Europe as Suleiman the Magnificent, consolidated his domain into the greatest world power of the sixteenth century. His most remembered gift to Jerusalem, however, was the breathtakingly beautiful tile work commissioned for the exterior of the Dome of the Rock. Forty thousand tiles were fired and put into place, crowned by the inscription of Suratul YaSeen at the top. This brilliant application of exquisite aesthetics to celebrate the message of Allah has made the Dome of the Rock a world landmark and a sacred piece of architecture. This was the peak of the Ottoman Empire and it soon began to deteriorate.

In the nineteenth century, Consular offices representing the European powers were set up in the old city to begin exerting influence from abroad, while a new political movement was being cultivated that could exercise power from within Palestine. Secular Zionism denied the prophetic message whilst at the same time used it for the basis of their claim for a Jewish state in the Holy Land. From this apparently irreconcilable platform, the political Zionists waged a successful campaign to gain international sympathy and support for their secular and at the same time Jewish State in Palestine. Ottoman sovereignty was now seriously threatened and with it the believers control of the sacred city of Al-Quds.

When British forces entered Jerusalem after its surrender by the Ottomans in 1917, it was only a question of time until Zionist plans began to be realised. On May 14th 1948, David Ben-Gurion proclaimed the state of Israel. By the time of the cessation of hostilities in 1949, more than seven hundred thousand (700,000) Palestinians had been driven out of their homes. The Al Aqsa mosque and the Dome of the Rock had both sustained damage from the cross-fire of mortars and bombs, but remained, together with the old walled city, in the hands of the Muslims. The Israelis commenced on their plans for the capture of Al Quds.

In 1967, they got their opportunity. On 7th June, the Israelis took Al Quds. Israeli tanks and soldiers entered the Noble Sanctuary. Jerusalem was annexed. Only the Haram ash-Sharif was returned to the Muslims, by the grace of Allah and the Jews recognition of its significance to the Muslims and their willingness to defend it at any cost. With the capture of East Jerusalem, all of the elements seemed to be in place for the realisation of the Zionist national dream, the rebuilding of the second temple. The only obstruction to the Zionists architectural dreams &ndash; international recognition of the Muslims right to, and ownership of, the Haram ash-Sharif, the existence of the Al Aqsa mosque, the existence of the Dome of the Rock and the vigilance of around a billion Muslims who call this site the third holiest site in Islam. Seeking to establish the principle of the Noble Sanctuary as a place of Jewish worship, extremist groups began performing Jewish prayer ceremonies in the area of the Sanctuary.

Fearing retribution from the Muslim world, the Attorney General banned such acts in the spring of 1969. Four months later the entire south wing of the Al Aqsa mosque was destroyed by fire. When the fire was finally extinguished, the Qibla wall, mihrab and dome were destroyed and with them the member commissioned by Nuradeen over seven hundred years earlier; installed by Salahudeen when the crusaders were driven out in the twelfth century. An Australian visitor was arrested that night for starting the blaze. An Israeli court ruled that the Australian could not be held responsible for his actions due to mental imbalance. After treatment in Israel, he returned to Australia.

Two decades later work on the restoration of the damage caused by this fire continued with the support of Muslims from around the world. And although the work has won numerous international awards for excellence, the restoration has,

nonetheless, disrupted worship in Al Aqsa since 1969. Attempts to establish Jewish prayer ceremonies within the sanctuary continued. In 1976, Israeli courts passed a law permitting them to do so. In September 1979, fifteen Jewish extremists blocked the way to one of the Sanctuaries gates on the day of the Friday congregational prayer.

In May of 1981, the Adhan was prohibited from the minaret of the west wall because of Jewish celebrations. The following month, the Hakam of the Wailing Wall petitioned the minister of religious affairs in Jerusalem for permission to pray in Al Aqsa. Harassment's and acts of sabotage escalated in 1981. In August an Israeli helicopter hovered, at low altitude, over the Masjid Al Aqsa preventing worshipers inside from hearing the jumma khutba. That same month a tunnel dug by workers from the ministry of religious affairs was uncovered in the Sanctuary leading to the Western Wall. The government immediately ordered the tunnel sealed because of the political sensitivity of the issue. Despite warnings by Israeli archaeologists against digging beneath the sanctuary, and UN resolutions against them, excavations continued, leading to dangerous cracks to buildings adjoining the Western Wall. A general strike was called by the Supreme Muslim Council to protest the excavations. The following spring armed Israeli students clashed with the Muslim security guards. This time the minister of defence was petitioned for permission to perform Jewish services at Al Aqsa.

Excavations beneath Al Aqsa continued with Israeli archaeologists claiming the discovery of Jewish ruins under the mosque. In 1982, a parcel with a fake bomb and threats signed by Jewish extremists was discovered at one of the gates leading to the Sanctuary. Two days later Muslims mobilised a demonstration in Al Aqsa to protest attacks on holy places. The following day an ex-Israeli army regular opened fire, killing two Muslims and filling the exterior interior of the Dome of the Rock with bullet holes.

Less than a month later shots were fired into the sanctuary by a sniper on the rooftop of the Madrassa Amriyya and a group of Israelis tried to enter the Sanctuary with leaflets inciting Jews to take over the mosque.

In March 1983, Muslim security guards discovered explosives in the entrance to the Sanctuary on the day of the Friday prayer. Four armed Israelis were discovered attempting to enter the Sanctuary through Solomon's Stables. The same month a group of Jewish fanatics armed with Uzi's and M-16's and carrying a cache of explosives were caught attempting to enter the Sanctuary.

In January of 1984, a group of Jewish terrorist carrying ladders and explosives were stopped in the Sanctuary by Muslim security guards in the middle of the night. Four days later time bombs were discovered at one of its gates. By the spring of 1984, armed Israeli guards were patrolling the Sanctuary twenty-four hours a day, their presence and behaviour inimical to the sanctity of the mosque. The Supreme Muslim Council petitioned the Israeli Prime Minister repeatedly to withdraw the soldiers but to no effect. With no response forthcoming from the Israelis, The Supreme Muslim Council petitioned the UN in May 1984 to pressurise Israel into withdrawing its troops from Al Aqsa. Israeli soldiers continued to patrol the Sanctuary on the pretence of protecting it from attack. In reality it is the Muslim run security force (underpaid, understaffed and unarmed) whose vigilance has provided the only protection for the Noble Sanctuary.

On June 15th 1988, Israeli troops stormed Al Aqsa mosque, firing tear gas into groups of worshippers. A month later, the discovery of new excavations adjacent to the Sanctuary led to more civil disorder. Harassment and acts of terrorism against Muslims living adjacent to the Sanctuary are part of an ongoing policy to drive them out of the area.

In another desperate attempt, a Jewish group attacked worshippers on 8th October 1991. Twenty-one young Muslims gave their lives in protecting the Noble Sanctuary, and lighting for us candles showing the way to Al Aqsa &ndash; the Furthest Mosque. Not to the idol that the temple became, where prophets were slaughtered and the pure religion of Ibrahim al-Islam were rejected &ndash; but to the site where from the messenger of Allah, Muhammad, may Allah's prayer and peace be upon him, ascended through the heavens to his Lord.