

---

# Building of Mystery

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

---

The Dome of the Rock is one of the most famous shrines of any religion in the world. It stands on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, which has long been a sacred place for Jews, Christians, and Muslims. On the Mount was located the Temple built by Solomon (1 Kings 6) and later destroyed by the Babylonian army (Psalm 79), as well as the Second Temple constructed after the Exile (Ezra 6) and refurbished during Jesus' day before it was destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70.

Before Muhammad received his revelation in 624 that the believers should direct their prayers toward the Ka'bah in Mecca, the first *qibla* (or, direction for prayer) for Muslims was toward Jerusalem. Muslim interest in the city is strengthened by the belief that the Temple Mount—or as Muslims call it, *Al-Haram As-Sharif*, “the Noble Sanctuary”—is the “farthest place of prayer” from which Muhammad made a miraculous night journey to heaven, as described in Surah 17 of the Qur'an.

The Muslim armies found the Temple Mount in ruins when they conquered Jerusalem in 638, for the city had been a battleground for years between the Byzantine and Persian empires. Arculf, a Christian pilgrim who visited the city several decades later, noted that only a small mosque had been built among the ruins. The rebuilding of the Temple Mount began in earnest during the peaceful reign of the caliph Abd al-Malik (A.D. 685-706). The Dome of the Rock was constructed over a rocky outcropping that had been variously identified as the place of Adam's burial, Abraham's sacrifice of his son, Jacob's dream of the ladder reaching to heaven, Muhammad's night journey, and the Holy of Holies of the Temple of Solomon. There is a small cave located in the rock.<sup>1</sup>

Some scholars claim that the Dome of the Rock is the first work of Islamic architecture. The purpose of the building remains a mystery, for it is not a mosque (though Muslims consider the entire precinct of the Noble Sanctuary a place of prayer) and the inscriptions in the building make no reference to Muhammad's night journey. Some scholars believe the Dome of the Rock was built to refute the tenets of Christianity and announce the Islamic presence in the city of Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup>

Its unknown architect must have been very familiar with the wonderful Byzantine mosaics found throughout Syria and Palestine. These mosaics

were created by placing tesserae, which are small pieces of cut glass or stone, closely together in mortar so as to unite in a pattern that can be seen as the light reflects from them. On the lower part of the building—an octagonal platform with four entrances—the exterior mosaics have been replaced several times, but its basic structure and the internal mosaics remain unchanged through thirteen centuries. The central space, sixty-five feet tall, is covered by a wooden dome sheathed with lead and then plated with gold.

Though much of the building's decoration is Byzantine in style, there are no representational scenes as were common in Byzantine art. It is often incorrectly stated that figures were banned from Islam, but the truth is more complex. The Qur'an contains very few narratives from which to devise painted scenes, and Muslims believe that God is unique and cannot be represented. Because they had little scriptural narrative for inspiration and were not able to make a visual representation of God, Islamic artists chose to move what had been decorative elements in secondary locations of Christian art to the main area of their compositions.

Much is unknown today about whether the shapes, patterns, and decorative motifs in Islamic buildings symbolized concepts from the faith or conveyed messages to the believers. Nevertheless, Muslim architects established characteristic building styles that were distinctive and recognizable, even though they were influenced by early works of Christian art.

#### NOTES

1 Jonathan Bloom and Sheila Blair, *Islamic Arts* (New York: Phaidon, 1997), 23-33.

2 *Ibid.*, 30.

This photo is available in  
the print version of *Christianity and Islam*.

**Built over a rocky outcropping variously identified as the place of Adam's burial, Abraham's sacrifice of his son, Jacob's dream of the ladder reaching to heaven, Muhammad's night journey, and the Holy of Holies of the Temple of Solomon, the Dome of the Rock is one of the most famous shrines in the world.**

*The Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, c. 685- 692. Photo Credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.*