

Chapter VIII

Al-Masjid al-Aqsa*

Al-masjid al-Aqsa, literally, “the remotest sanctuary.” There are three meanings to these words.

1. The words occur in Qur’an, XVII, 1: “Praise Him who made His servant journey in the night (*asra*) from the sacred sanctuary (*al-masjid al-haram*) to the remotest sanctuary (*al-masjid al-aqsa*), which we have surrounded with blessings to show him of our signs.” This verse, usually considered to have been revealed during the Prophet’s last year in Mecca before the Hijra, is very difficult to explain within the context of the time. There is no doubt that *al-masjid al-haram* is the then pagan sanctuary of Mecca. But whether the event itself was a physical one and then connected with a small locality near Mecca which had two mosques, a nearer one and a farther one (A. Guillaume, “Where was al-Masjid al-Aqsa?,” in *Al-Andalus*, 18 [1953]), or a spiritual and mystical night-journey (*isra*) and ascension (*mi’raj*) to a celestial sanctuary, a consensus was established very early (perhaps as early as the year 15 AH, cf. J. Horowitz, *Koranische Untersuchungen*, Berlin, 1926, p. 140) that *al-masjid al-aqsa* meant Jerusalem. By the time of Ibn Hisham’s *Sira*, nearly all the elements of what was to grow into one of the richest mystical themes in Islam were in place. Their study and the diverse and at times contradictory interpretations found in early commentaries of the Qur’an derive from a complex body of religious sources (references in R. Blachère, *Le Coran*, Paris, 1949, ii, p. 374) which have not yet been completely unraveled.

2. The words were occasionally used in early Islamic times for Jerusalem, and, during many centuries, more specifically for the Haram al-Sharif, the former Herodian Temple area transformed by early Islam into a restricted Muslim space.

3. The most common use of the words is for the large building located on the south side of the Haram platform and, next to the Dome of the Rock (Qubbat al-Sakhra), the most celebrated Islamic building in Jerusalem. Its

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I The Aqsa
Mosque, façade



archaeological history has been superbly established by R. W. Hamilton, *The structural history of the Aqsa Mosque*, and his conclusions were entirely accepted by K. A. C. Creswell and incorporated in his *Early Islamic architecture* (Oxford, 1969), pp. 173–80. Such points of debate as do exist (H. Stern, “Recherches sur la Mosquée al-Aqsa et ses mosaïques,” in *Ars Orientalis*, 5 [1963]) deal only with the precise dating of the archaeologically determined sequences of building, not with their character. From the fourth/tenth century onward, precious descriptions by al-Maqdisi, Nasir-i Khosro and, much later, Mujir al-Din’s chronicle of Jerusalem, provide a unique written documentation which has been made accessible in several books, of which the more important ones are G. Le Strange, *Palestine under the Moslems* (London, 1899), and M. S. Marmardji, *Textes géographiques arabes sur la Palestine* (Paris, 1951), pp. 210–60. An easily accessible survey of drawings and plans is found in Eli Silad, *Mesgid el-Aksa* (Jerusalem, 1978). For inscriptions, one should consult M. van Berchem, *CIA, Jérusalem* (Cairo 1927), ii/2, and S. A. S. Hussein, “Inscription of the Khalif El-Mustansir,” in *QDAP*, ix, 1942; A. C. Walls and A. Abul-Hajj, *Arabic inscriptions in Jerusalem* (London 1980), pp. 24–5, for a checklist. Finally, it is possible that a unique picture of Zion in the celebrated ninth century AD Byzantine manuscript known as the Chludoff Psalter is a representation of the Aqsa Mosque *c.* AD 850; cf. O. Grabar, “A note on the Chludoff Psalter,” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, 7 (1983) (a volume in honor of Professor Ihor Ševčenko). The recent excavations carried out south of the Haram have brought a lot of contextual information pertinent to the uses of the Aqsa Mosque, but, at least to the writer’s knowledge, nothing immediately pertinent to its forms or history.

The latter can be summarised in the following manner:

(a) There was an Umayyad hypostyle mosque consisting of several aisles (their exact number cannot be ascertained) perpendicular to the *qibla*, with a central, wider aisle on the same axis as the Dome of the Rock. This mosque, like many Umayyad ones, reused a lot of materials of construction from earlier buildings and was either built from scratch or completed under the caliph al-Walid I. The only item of contention is whether it already contained a large dome in front of the *mihrab* which would have been decorated with mosaics (Hamilton and Creswell argue that it did not, Stern that it did; the argument of the latter has historical logic on his side, as al-Walid was lavish in his imperial buildings, but the archaeological arguments against it are weighty indeed). Many decorative remains of painted and carved woodwork (kept in various Jerusalem museums) which have been preserved probably date from the Umayyad period, but they, as well as numerous fragments of mosaics, marble, etc., whose records remain in the archives of the Palestine Archaeological Museum (the so-called Rockefeller Museum), still await a full investigation. This first Aqsa Mosque was the congregational mosque of the city of Jerusalem, but it was also seen as the covered part (*mughatta*) of the whole Haram conceived as the mosque of the city.

(b) A series of major reconstructions took place in early 'Abbasid times, possibly because of a destructive earthquake in 746. But the extent of the reconstructions carried out under al-Mansur, al-Mahdi and 'Abd Allah b. Tahir between 771 and 844 suggests more than a simple restoration. It was certainly a major attempt to assert 'Abbasid sponsorship of holy places. It is essentially this 'Abbasid building which is described by al-Maqdisi (c. 985). It consisted of fifteen naves perpendicular to the *qibla*, of a fancy porch with gates inscribed with the names of caliphs, and of a high and brilliantly decorated dome. Its greatest peculiarity is that it was open to the north, toward the Dome of the Rock and the rest of the Haram and to the east. The latter is unusual and is probably to be explained by the ways in which the Muslim population, mostly settled to the south of the Haram, ascended the holy place. We know that the main accesses to the Haram were through underground passages, and the eastern entrances of the Aqsa may indicate that the Triple Gate and the so-called Stables of Solomon in the southeastern corner of the Haram played a much greater role in the life of the city than has been believed.

(c) The earthquake of 1033 was a devastating one, leading, among other causes, to a major reorganization of the whole city. The Aqsa was rebuilt under al-Zahir between 1034 and 1036 and the work completed under al-Mustansir in 1065. Except for the latter, it is the mosque described by Nasir-i Khosro in 1047, and most of the central part of the present mosque dates from that time. Shrunken to seven aisles only, probably without side doors, it was a very classical mosque adapted to the peculiar circumstances of Jerusalem,

whose major characteristic was the brilliance of its mosaic decoration. The triumphal arch with its huge vegetal designs surmounted by a royal inscription in gold mosaics, the gold pendentives with their huge shield of “peacock’s eyes,” and the [708] drum with its brilliant panels of an idealized garden with Umayyad and possibly Antique reminiscences, transformed the mosque into a true masterpiece of imperial art and exemplified the political ambitions of the Fatimids in Jerusalem.

(d) The Crusaders used the mosque as a palace and as living areas for the Knights Templar, and much of the present eastern and western façades date from this occupation. In 1187, when the mosque was reconsecrated to Islam, Salah al-Din redid the decoration of the whole *qibla* wall, including the beautiful *mihrab* and the long inscription along the *qibla* wall. He also brought in the *minbar* made in 1169 by order of Nur al-Din for the reconquered Holy City, but this great masterpiece of Syrian woodwork was destroyed by an arsonist in 1969 before it had been possible to study it fully. The northern porch was restored in 1217 and the eastern and western vaults redone in 1345 and 1350. Under the later Ottomans, numerous repairs, often of dubious quality, and plasterings or repaintings altered considerably the expressiveness of what was essentially a Fatimid building with major Crusader, Ayyubid and Mamluk details. It was only in the 1920s and especially between 1937 and 1942 that a major and carefully supervised program of restoration took place.

In spite of scholarly debates which will continue to grow about this or that detail, and this or that date for some aspect of the building, the history of the monument is reasonably set. What is far more difficult to define and to explain is its function, and on that issue the debate has barely begun. As a work of art, should it be considered as a finite monument to be explained entirely in its own architectural terms? Or should it always be understood as physically and visually part of a broader vision, whether even completed or not, of the Haram as a unit? Socially and culturally, was it always, as it has become today, the city’s mosque, different from its other sanctuaries, or was it, at times, simply the covered part of a single sanctuary? In all likelihood, the answers to these questions will differ according to the periods of the city’s history. But beyond the fascinating vagaries of meaning of an extraordinary building in a unique setting, the problem is still unresolved of when it became known as the Masjid al-Aqsa. The Qur’anic quotation XCII, 1, appears for the first time in the fifth-/eleventh-century official Fatimid inscription on the mosque’s triumphal arch, and it is possibly at that time that it acquired its name. But in the early tenth/sixteenth century, Mujir al-Din still calls it a *jami*’, while acknowledging that it is popularly known as the Aqsa.

These confusions are all part of the complexities of Jerusalem’s meaning in the Muslim world. Yet it should be noted that the spiritual and onomastic impact of the mosque extended much beyond its location, since in the Javanese city of Kudus the main mosque is also called the Masjid al-Aqsa.