Sharing Sacred Space: Holy Places in Jerusalem Between Christianity, Judaism, and Islam

Ora Limor

One of the most intriguing phenomena in the study of sacred space and pilgrimage to holy places is how believers of different faiths may share sanctity. Scholars and historians of religion have not infrequently noticed that the nature of a holy place retains its sanctity when it changes hands. Once a site has been recognized as holy, the sanctity adheres to it, irrespective of political and religious vicissitudes.[1] Nowhere else, perhaps, is this rule more applicable than in the Holy Land. Over the past two thousand years, the country has changed hands repeatedly, generally in major wars of conquest that brought new rulers into power. These wars have also changed the official religion of the country. During the first millennium CE, it passed from Jewish to pagan rule, then becoming Christian and Muslim; in the second millennium it was successively Muslim, Christian, again Muslim, and finally Jewish. The changing religion of the rulers did not necessarily affect the inhabitants' faith; in fact, members of different religions were always living side by side, practicing different degrees of coexistence. While some of their holy places and the sacred traditions associated with them are exclusive to one religion, many others are shared by two of the three faiths or even by all three. Unfortunately, only rarely has the sharing of traditions become a foundation for dialogue and amity. For the most part, it has become a bone of contention; dialectically, in fact, the greater the similarity and the reciprocity, the greater the argument, rivalry, and competition, each group of believers straining to confirm its own exclusivity and prove its absolute right to the tradition and the holy place. Such tensions are particularly prominent in Jerusalem. The city as a whole is sacred to the three religions, and certain areas in it are venerated by all three, sometimes for very similar ideological reasons. The Temple Mount – the site of the Temple – and the Mount of Olives – the site of the resurrection and the Last Judgment – are obvious examples. In addition, several holy places in and around Jerusalem are venerated by members of more than one religion. Prominent examples are David's Tomb on Mount Zion, Samuel's Tomb north of Jerusalem, Rachel's Tomb between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, and the Tomb of the Prophetess Huldah on the Mount of Olives.[2] The

[1] On sacred space, see Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York 1959); idem, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York 1958), pp. 367–387; Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago and London, 1987); David Frankfurter, "Introduction: Approaches to Coptic Pilgrimage," in *Pilgrimage and Holy Space in Late Antique Egypt*, ed. David Frankfurter (Leiden, 1998).

[2] To the best of my knowledge, a comprehensive survey of holy places in medieval Palestine that are shared by several religions has yet to be carried out. Josef Meri cites many examples of shared rituals in local saints' tombs toward the end of the Middle Ages, mainly in Syria: Josef W. Meri, *The Cult of Saints among Muslims and Jews in Medieval Syria* (Oxford, 2002). Meri writes that Jews, Muslims,

phenomenon of sharing also exists outside Jerusalem, for example in Galilee, and outside Palestine in general, as in Syria, Iraq, Egypt, and Morocco.[3] Apart from sites hallowed by members of all three religions, Jews, Christians, and Muslims, there were also some sacred to members of only two. The Tomb of the Virgin Mary in the Vale of Jehoshaphat and the Church of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives are examples of Christian holy places also venerated by Muslims.[4] These different sites exemplify sharing to different degrees and in different ways. Furthermore, the more one examines the phenomenon, the more one realizes that the category of "sharing" obscures a considerable variety of interfaith relations. Sometimes the sharing is ideological, believers of different faiths agreeing on the content of the traditions associated with a certain place; sometimes it is the ritual that is shared. This article will be concerned with the different meanings of "sharing" and their significance in the history of religions.

Benjamin Z. Kedar, in an article about Saydnaya, north of Damascus, the site of a shared medieval ritual venerating a miraculous icon of Mary, has proposed a typology of cults shared by different worshippers, comprising three types: (i) A convergence of space only – members of different religions assemble in a place sacred to them all, but they share no cult, each group worshiping on its own; (ii) an in-egalitarian convergence – members of one religion perform the service, the others merely attending; and (iii) an egalitarian convergence – members of different faiths share a religious ceremony.[5] The third type is rare, and Kedar mentions one single example: In 1317, Jerusalem experienced a serious famine, in the course of which all the city's wells dried up and the inhabitants were left with no source of water other than the spring of Silwan. All the inhabitants – Muslims, Christians, and Jews –assembled in the open and prayed for rain; their prayers were answered on the third day.[6] Joseph Meri cites another case: in 1311, when a plague broke

---

and Christians were in contact with one another; they criticized one another's devotion, shared rituals, and entertained similar perceptions and similar expectations from the encounter. There was a kind of *communitas* among believers of different faiths, as they formed friendships or business associations while worshiping their God, venerating saints, and participating in celebrations. See especially Meri, *The Cult of Saints*, 123, 286–287.

[3] For Syria see Meri, *The Cult of Saints.*

[4] The phenomenon of Muslims praying in Christian churches is relevant to our subject, but space considerations preclude any discussion here. See Suliman Bashear, "Qibla Musharriqa and Early Muslim Prayer in Churches," *The Muslim World* 81 (1991), 267–282; Amikam Elad, *Medieval Jerusalem and Islamic Worship: Holy Places, Ceremonies, Pilgrimage* (Leiden, 1995), pp. 138–141; A. Arce, "Culte islamique au tombeau de la Vierge," *Atti del Congresso Assunzionistico Orientale* (Jerusalem, 1951), pp. 177–93.

[5] Benjamin Z. Kedar, "Convergences of Oriental Christian, Muslim, and Frankish Worshippers: The Case of Saydnaya," *De Sion exibit lex et verbum domini de Hierusalem: Essays on Medieval Law, Liturgy and Literature in Honour of Amnon Linder*, ed. Yitzhak Hen (Turnhout, 2001), pp. 59–69.

[6] Joseph Drori, "Jerusalem in the Mameluk Period," in *Jerusalem in the Middle Ages. Selected Papers* (Jerusalem, 1979), 177 (Hebrew). In this connection, it is worth recalling the Christian polemicist Inghetto Contardo, who proposed to his Jewish disputants that they pray together, using a text acceptable to Jews, Christians, and Muslims. His proposal, including a suggested text, was rejected by the Jews. See *Die Disputationen zu Ceuta (1179) und Mallorca (1286): Zwei antijüdische*

out in Damascus, Jews, Christians, and Muslims, young and old, marched together in procession, holding their sacred scriptures, reciting prayers and supplications.[7] Both cases concern crisis situations, possibly explaining the believers' willingness to pray together. It is clear from the descriptions that such common prayer is possible only in neutral territory – out in the open – not in a space sacred to one of the religions. An ancient example of such a shared ritual, also held out in the open but not necessarily in a time of emergency, comes from the sacred cite of Mamre, in Hebron.[8] Both Eusebius and Sozomen describe a local cult, of a regional nature, that took place at Mamre, revolving around the patriarch Abraham and the angels who came to visit him. The centre of the site was the oak tree growing there, under which, by tradition, Abraham had entertained the angels (Genesis 18). As told by Sozomen:

> Here the inhabitants of the country and of the regions round Palestine, the Phoenicians and the Arabs, assemble annually during the summer season to keep a brilliant feast; and many others, both buyers and sellers, resort there on account of the fair (*pançgyris*). Indeed this feast is diligently frequented by all nations: by the Jews, because they boast of their descent from the patriarch Abraham; by the pagans, because angels there appeared to men; and by Christians because He who has lately revealed himself through the Virgin for the salvation of mankind once appeared there to the pious man. The place is moreover honoured fittingly with religious exercises. Here some pray to the God of all; some call upon the angels, pour out wine, or burn incense, or offer an ox, or he-goat, a sheep or a cock … The place is open country and arable and without houses, with the exception of the buildings around Abraham's oak and the well he prepared …[9]

Sozomen is describing an "international" fair, during which multi-faith festivities were held in the open with the participation of Jews, Christians, and pagans. All of them venerated the sacred tree and the nearby well, together with the hallowed figures associated with them, namely, Abraham and the angels. This was probably a regional egalitarian ritual, a festival for inhabitants of the region of all faiths, which at this time began to attract people from afar as well.[10] The common veneration of Abraham, the local saint, the open-air ceremony, and the distance from Jerusalem, the centre of the establishment, created the proper conditions for the syncretistic cult performed at the site.

Schriften aus dem mittelalterlichen Genua, ed. Ora Limor, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Quellen zur Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters* 15 (München, 1994), pp. 232–33, 277.

[7] See Meri, *The Cult of Saints*, 36 (Source: Ibn Kathir, *al-Bidaya wa-al-Nihaya fi-al-Tarikh*, ed. A.M. Mu'awwad et al., 14 vols. (Beirut, 1994), 14.50 [711H]). Meri writes: "Any Jew or Muslim could pray for rain. Yet, collective supplication, particularly at the tombs of saints as at synagogues and mosques, was generally believed to be more efficacious than individual supplication" (Meri, 121).

[8] Aryeh Kofsky, "Mamre: A Case of a Regional Cult?," *Sharing the Sacred: Religious Contacts and Conflicts in the Holy Land*, eds. Arieh Kofsky and Guy G. Stroumsa (Jerusalem, 1998), pp. 19–30. On regional cults, see R.P. Werbner (ed.), *Regional Cults* (London, 1977).

[9] Sozomenus, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 2, (Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller), 504. English translation: Kofsky, "Mamre," pp. 24–25.

[10] Kofsky, "Mamre," p. 27.

The shared ritual at Mamre in late antiquity was apparently not so exceptional. The anonymous traveller of Piacenza known as "Antoninus", who toured the Holy Land before 570, describes a ritual shared by Jews and Christians at the Patriarchs' Tomb in Hebron, not far from Mamre. Here, too, the ceremony was held outdoors, in an unroofed court. The partition between believers of the two faiths could hardly veil the cooperative nature of the ritual. They were sharing both an idea – veneration of the Patriarchs, a space – the sacred tombs, and a custom – praying and burning incense. As the traveller tells the story:

> The basilica has four porticoes and no roof over the central court. Down the middle runs a screen. Christians come in on one side and Jews on the other, and they use much incense. [11]

The traveller goes on to describe the local Christian festival of David and Saint James, noting that Jews from the whole region flock to the ceremonies, burning incense and bringing gifts to the ministering priests.[12]

Antoninus was an inquisitive and fervent pilgrim, and his colourful account tells us much of regional cults and local customs that other sources ignore. Among other things, he cites interesting evidence of veneration of the Virgin Mary among Jewish women in Galilee. These Jewesses, "good looking and full of kindness," boasted to the traveller that they were related to Mary and had inherited their sterling qualities from her.[13] Perhaps this is an allusion to a local cult of Mary celebrated in Galilee around sites and objects associated with her, in which both Jewish and Christian women took part.[14] Religious barriers were in fact crossed in various places in the East – most often Christian holy places that were frequented by Muslims as well,

---

[11] Antoninus Placentinus, *Itinerarium*, 30, ed. P. Geyer, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina (Corpus Christianorum Series Latina) 175, (Turnhout, 1965), p. 144; English translation: John Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades* (Warminster, 2002)^2, p. 143.

[12] Antoninus, *Itinerarium*; see Ora Limor, "King David's Tomb on Mt. Zion: The Origins of a Tradition," in: *Jews, Samaritans and Christians in Byzantine Palestine*, eds. D. Jacoby and Y. Tsafrir (Jerusalem, 1988), pp. 11–23 (Hebrew); Eadem, "The Origins of a Tradition: King David's Tomb on Mt. Zion," *Traditio* 44 (1988), 453–62. For the memorial ceremonies for David and James, see below.

[13] Antoninus, *Itinerarium* 5: "The Jewesses of that city are better-looking than any other Jewesses in the whole country. They declare that this is Saint Mary's gift to them, for they also say that she was a relation of theirs" (English translation: Wikinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims*, p. 132). According to John Rufus, the biographer of Peter the Iberian, Peter was venerated not only by Christians but also by Jews and Samaritans: "God wrought by his hands [Peter's] many wonders and signs and casting out demons, not only on believers and Christians, but also on Jews and Samaritans, and especially on those inhabitants of the village and of the city of Jamnia [in Palestine] and its surroundings." *The Life of Peter the Iberian*, ed. and German trans., R. Raabe (Leipzig, 1895), pp.126–27. See also: D. Frankfurter, "Syncretism and the Holy Man in Late Antique Egypt," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 11 (2003), 339–385. In this article, the holy man is examined as a type of a regional prophet.

[14] On regional cults in Galilee, see Elchanan Reiner, "From Joshua to Jesus: The Transformation of a Biblical Story to a Local Myth. A Chapter in the Religious Life of the Galilean Jew," *Zion* 61 (1996), 281–318 (Hebrew); English version in *Sharing the Sacred: Religious Contacts and Conflicts in the Holy Land*, eds. Arieh Kofsky and Guy G. Stroumsa (Jerusalem, 1998), pp. 223–71.

such as Saydnaya near Damascus[15] or al-Matariyya near Old Cairo,[16] but we also have evidence in rare cases of Jewish participation. Arnold von Harff, at the end of the fifteenth century, describes a cave sacred to Mary near Bethlehem, which used to be visited by people of all faiths.[17] In all these places, miracles were said to take place – all places of local cults, remote from the established centre, and non-institutionalized.

However, as also follows from Kedar's proposed typology, sharing of various kinds took place not only on the periphery, but even at more central sites, closer to the religious centre. In what follows, an attempt will be made to examine two such sites, both sacred tombs in Jerusalem: The Tomb of King David on Mount Zion, and the Tomb of Huldah the Prophetess, Saint Pelagia, or Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya on the Mount of Olives. Though both sites are tombs, as is the case in many shared holy places, they were "shared" in very different ways. After briefly describing the two places in question and their main characteristics, I shall try to compare them, in an attempt to understand the reasons for the considerable, even extreme, difference in the mode and nature of the "sharing" that they represent. I hope that in so doing I shall contribute to a continuation of the discussion initiated by Kedar with his typology, and to throw light on some of the resultant religious phenomena.

The Tomb of David on Mount Zion

Christians, Jews, and Muslims believe that King David is buried in an ancient tomb on Mount Zion, which is even today a site of ritual and prayer. The tomb is in a small chamber on the ground floor of a building on Mount Zion, southeast of the Church of Dormition. In the building are several rooms side by side and upon one another, with visible remains of a Franciscan friary and church erected there in the fourteenth century on the ruins of the crusader church of Mount Zion (twelfth century), which itself was built on the remains of the Byzantine church of Zion. On the second floor is a room known as the Cenacle, the medieval chamber of the Last Supper, preserved in almost its original – late twelfth-century – form. The chamber of David's Tomb, directly beneath the Cenacle, is an elongated chamber, aligned north-south, with a narrow apse in its northern wall, in the direction of the Temple Mount. Standing before the apse is a large stone sarcophagus covered by a green velvet drape on which the name of David, King of Israel, is embroidered.

---

[15] For Saydnaya, see Kedar, "Convergences"; Bernard Hamilton, "Our Lady of Saidnaya: An Orthodox Shrine revered by Muslims and Knights Templars at the Time of the Crusades," *The Holy Land, Holy Lands and Christian History*, ed. R.N. Swanson (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 2000) (Studies in Church History 36), pp. 207–215; Daniel Baraz, "The Incarnated Icon of Saidnaya Goes West: A Re-examination of the motif in the light of new manuscript evidence," *Le Muséon* 108 (1995), 181–91.

[16] Kedar, "Convergences," pp. 59–60.

[17] *The Pilgrimage of Arnold von Harff*, trans. and ed. Malcolm Letts (London, 1946), p. 189.

Where was David's tomb shown during the Second Temple period? There is no knowing. Josephus reports traditions that the tomb was in Jerusalem but does not specify any site.[18] In the Acts of the Apostles, in the account of the assembly that is considered in Christian theology to mark the foundation of the Church, which was held according to tradition on Mount Zion, Peter says to the people of Jerusalem that "the patriarch David ... both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day" (Acts 2:29), and some authorities have suggested that the statement was actually made at the site of the ancient tomb of King David – a conjecture that can hardly be confirmed. If there was indeed an ancient tomb on Mount Zion associated with David, sources from late antiquity and the early Middle Ages do not refer to it. Perhaps the destruction of Jewish Jerusalem and expulsion of its Jews, together with the building of Aelia Capitolina on the ruins, caused the tradition to disappear, together with other Jewish traditions. At any rate, beginning in the fourth century, when the curtain rises on the map of Christian holy places, all sources place David's tomb in the outskirts of Bethlehem. As Eusebius writes in the *Onomasticon*: "Bethlehem in the territory of Judah is distant from Aelia six miles to the south, on the road leading to Hebron. There one is shown the tombs of Jesse and of David," and Jerome adds in his Latin translation: "Bethlehem, the city of David."[19] The location of the tomb in Bethlehem is surely due to the identification of Bethlehem as the city of David, based on the statement in the Bible that David and the kings of the House of Judah were buried in the city of David (1Kings 2:10). This tradition, reported by many pilgrims, survived at least till the end of the seventh century.[20] Around the year 680, Adomnàn, the scholarly abbot of the Isle of Iona wrote, on the basis of an account by the Gallic pilgrim Arculf:

> [The tomb of David] is in the centre of the pavement of the church without any ornament superimposed. There is a low stone coping around it, and it has a brightly shining lamp always placed above it. This church is erected outside the walls of the city in a valley nearby which adjoins the hill of Bethlehem on the northern side.[21]

The Venerable Bede, in his work on the holy places, which relies on Adomnàn's work, also repeats the tradition, though he is critical of it: "I have said this following the account of Arculf, Bishop of the Gauls, but Esdras clearly writes that David was buried in Jerusalem."[22] Arculf is indeed the last traveller to report the tomb near Bethlehem. Some time later the tradition of David's tomb returned to Jerusalem and became established on Mount Zion. This was presumably the result of the memorial

---

[18] Josephus, *The Jewish War*, VII, pp. 392–393.

[19] Eusebius, *Onomasticon*, ed. E. Klostermann, Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller, XI, I, pp. 42–43.

[20] For a summary of the traditions, see Limor, "The Origins of a Tradition."

[21] Adamnan's *De Locis Sanctis*, 2, 4, ed. Denis Meehan (Dublin, 1958) (Scriptores Latini Hiberniae 3), pp. 76–77.

[22] Beda Venerabilis, *De Locis Sanctis*, 7, ed. I. Fraipont, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 175, p. 265; English translation: Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims*, p. 223.

ceremonies that the Christians held for David at the church of Zion.[23] Evidence of such ceremonies comes from ancient liturgical works of the Jerusalem church, from which we learn that from a very early date, perhaps as early as the second half of the fourth century, the Jerusalem church held a ceremony on Mount Zion on December 25 to commemorate King David and Saint James "the Less," known as "brother of the Lord," the first bishop of the Jerusalem church (and of the Christian church in general). Later, when the Jerusalem church accepted December 25 as the date of Jesus' birth, the memorial ceremonies for David and James were delayed for one day, to December 26.[24]

During the Byzantine period, memorial services were held in the church of Zion for various Christian figures, though it was known that they were not buried there. Saint James's tomb, for example, was identified in the Vale of Jehoshaphat, not far from where he was traditionally put to death by the Jews.[25] Hence the memorial ceremony for King David in the church of Zion does not necessarily contradict the tradition of his tomb near Bethlehem. Nevertheless, all the figures for whom such services were held in that church were associated with it in some way. The connection of David and James to the church of Zion may have been due to the senior status of the church, which matched their own importance. The Church of Zion was considered the first Christian church, erected by the Apostles immediately after Jesus' ascension. It was called *Mater Ecclesiarum*, "mother of churches," and the Christians associated it with the scriptural verse, "For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem." Among the precious objects shown to pilgrims was the cornerstone "that the builders had rejected," symbolizing Jesus himself.[26] David and James were the founding fathers of that church, and the verses recited during the ceremonies held in their honour confirm this assumption.[27] Just as David had conquered the city and established the first Zion, so James was the founder of the new Zion, namely the Church. They complemented one another as the New Testament complemented the Old.

But David's position in Christianity was even stronger: He was the founder of the royal dynasty from which, as Christians believed, Jesus himself was descended, a scion of the House of David. It seems plausible that the identification of David with Zion and the memorial ceremonies held there in his honour were also responsible for the tradition that ultimately located his burial there too. The first evidence to that effect comes from Muslim sources. In the tenth century, Al-Mas'udi (d. 956) refers to "the Church of Zion that was mentioned by David, may he rest in peace ... They [= the Christians] believe that the Tomb of David was there." Other tenth- and

[23] I discussed this at length in my "The Origins of a Tradition."

[24] Athanase Renoux (ed.), *Le Codex Arménien Jérusalem 121*, Patrologia Orientalis 168 (Turnhout, 1971), pp. 366–369; Michel Tarchnischvili (ed.), *Le grand lectionnaire de l'église de Jérusalem*, 1, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 189 (Louvain, 1959), pp. 14–15.

[25] Theodosius, *De situ Terrae Sanctae*, 9, ed. P. Geyer, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina pp. 175, 119.

[26] Antoninus, *Itinerarium*, 22.

[27] See above, note 24.

eleventh-century Muslim authors also mention the tradition.[28] The Provençal historian of the First Crusade, Raymond of Aguilers, lists several traditions in the Church of Zion, the first of which mentions the tombs of David, Solomon, and St. Stephen.[29]

The last believers to begin to venerate the tomb were, of all people, the Jews. The first source to mention the site – Benjamin of Tudela, at the end of the 1160s – does so in a critical, polemical vein: "On Mount Zion are the sepulchres of the House of David, and the sepulchres of the kings that ruled after him. The exact place cannot be identified."[30] This was surely an attempt to challenge the validity of the local tradition. Benjamin indeed places the real tomb of David and the other kings of the House of David on Mount Zion, but elsewhere, at a closed, sealed, inaccessible site. "The exact place cannot be identified" implies that the place currently known as the tomb, in the Church of Zion, is not the real one.

Ultimately, however, the visible tomb prevailed. After the crusader period, when the Muslims returned to Jerusalem as victorious rulers, the church of Mount Zion was partly destroyed and the tomb was no longer part of it; then the Jews, too, accepted the tradition.[31] For some time, the site was not explicitly referred to as "David"s Tomb," but as "David's Shrine" or "David's Tower"; only in the fifteenth century did the Jews, too, begin to call it simply "David's Tomb." As Meshullam of Volterra writes in 1481:

> On top, near the burial of David, is the church of Saint Francis. And the site of the burial of David is a building with a large iron gate. The Ishmaelites [= Muslims] hold the key, and they venerate the place and worship there.[32]

The situation described by Meshullam, the tomb being in Muslim hands, is one stage in the very chequered history of the tomb in the Late Middle Ages. During the fifteenth century, there were diplomatic negotiations and violent clashes between the Franciscans, who had been appointed by the pope in the fourteenth century as custodians of the holy places and established themselves on Mount Zion, and the Jews, who tried to get control of the Tomb of David. The shared tradition thus became a bone of contention between Jews and Christians (minority versus minority). In the end, it was the tomb that in fact led to the eviction of both groups from Mount Zion. In 1452, the tomb was converted into a mosque, though it was

---

[28] A. Elad, "Sihyawn," *Enc. of Islam*, new edition, 9, pp. 571–73; H.Z. Hirschberg, "The Tombs of David and Solomon in Moslem Tradition," (Hebrew), *Eretz-Israel* 3 (1954), 213–220.

[29] *Le 'Liber' de Raymond d'Aguilers*, eds. J.H. and L.L. Hill (Paris, 1969), pp. 138–139.

[30] *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela*, ed. Marcus N. Adler (New York, 1907), p. 24.

[31] Elchanan Reiner, "Overt Falsehood and Covert Truth: Christians, Jews and Holy Places in Twelfth-Century Palestine," (Hebrew), *Zion* 63 (1998), pp. 157–188; idem, "A Jewish Response to the Crusades: The Dispute over Sacred Places in the Holy Land," in *Juden und Christen zur Zeit der Kreuzzüge*, ed. Alfred Haverkamp (Simaringen, 1999), pp. 209–31.

[32] *Masa Meshullam meVolterra beEretz Israel bishnat* 1481, ed. A. Yaari (Jerusalem, 1949), pp. 71–74.

later restored briefly to Christian hands; finally, in 1524, the Franciscans were driven from the mount. The chapel on Mount Zion became the "Ibn Daoud" mosque and both Christians and Jews were forbidden entry.[33]

Thus, since the late middle ages David's Tomb has been a "shared" holy place – but it does not fit any of Kedar's categories. From the very point in time at which the tomb came to be hallowed by believers of all three religions, it has become a disputed site, a bone of contention, where no compromise is possible.

Three in One Tomb

High up on the Mount of Olives, very near the enclosure of the church of the Ascension, is an ancient burial chamber, reached by a steep flight of stairs.[34] In the chamber stands a large, ancient sarcophagus with velvet drapes. A Christian tradition, dating to the sixth century, identifies it as the tomb of Saint Pelagia, a beautiful courtesan of Antioch, who repented her sins and became a hermit. A Muslim tradition, documented since the twelfth century, names the person buried in the tomb as Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya, the most famous saint of early Islam and an important figure in Sufi tradition. Finally, in the fourteenth century, we first hear of a Jewish tradition that the chamber was the last resting place of the prophetess Huldah, who was active during the reign of King Josiah of Judah. Who were these three women, and how – if at all – were they connected?[35]

As we learn from her *Vita*, Pelagia, whose beauty, wealth and dissolute life style were notorious among the Christians of Antioch, converted to Christianity after hearing a sermon by a bishop named Nonus. He persuaded her to repent her sins, and she freed all her slaves, distributed her money among the poor, and devoted herself to studying the tenets of the Christian faith. After being baptized she donned male garb – clothing supplied by Bishop Nonus – and travelled to the Holy Land. There she secluded herself in a cave on the Mount of Olives, which she did not leave till her dying day. The people of Jerusalem, convinced that a male hermit named Pelagius was living in the cave and astonished at his piety and self-denial, kept him supplied with bread and water through a small window. Pelagia soon died, and

[33] On the Christian-Jewish struggle for control of Mount Zion and David's Tomb, and the ensuing anti-Jewish measures taken by the Venetians, see among others Joshua Prawer, "The Friars of Mount Zion and the Jews of Jerusalem in the Fifteenth Century" (Hebrew), *Bulletin of the Jewish Palestine Exploration Society* 14 (1948/49), 15–24; David Jacoby, "The Franciscans, the Jews and the Problem of Mount Zion during the Fifteenth Century: A Reappraisal" (Hebrew), *Cathedra* 39 (1986), 51–70.

[34] For the structure of the tomb, see Jon Seligman and Rafa Abu Raya, "A Shrine of Three Religions on the Mount of Olives: Tomb of Hulda the Prophetess; Grotto of Saint Pelagia; Tomb of Rabi'a Al-'Adawiyya," *Atiqot* 42 (2001), 221–36. See also Rafa Abu Raya, "Muslim Sites on the Mount of Olives: A Historical and Archeological Study" (Arabic), M.A. thesis (Al-Quds University, Jerusalem, 1999).

[35] See at length Ora Limor, "Sin, Repentance, Salvation: Pelagia's Tomb on the Mount of Olives" (forthcoming).

only when her body was being prepared for burial was it discovered that she was a woman – Pelagia of Antioch, of whose beauty nothing further remained. Pelagia was buried in the cave where she had chosen to live, and the first report of the site as a holy place comes from the anonymous traveller of Piacenza, mentioned above.[36] In the middle ages, the site became a favourite among pilgrims, who in their reports highlight the special link between it and the concepts of sin and expiation; they also refer to a popular custom, according to which visitors to the tomb would squeeze through the narrow gap between the tomb and the wall, as a symbol of atonement for their sins.[37]

In 638, Jerusalem fell to the Muslims and various sites in the city became holy to them as well. The fame of Pelagia's Tomb as a site associated with sincere repentance, as well as the Muslims' goal, as the new masters of the city, to appropriate its sanctity as well, may explain the location of the burial of Rabiʾa al-ʾAdawiyya in the cave, despite the well-established tradition that she had been buried in the city of Baṣra, where she had lived and died. The tradition of Rabiʾa al-ʾAdawiyya held fast to the tomb on the Mount of Olives, despite scholarly censure and competing traditions – that it was the tomb of another Muslim saint, also named Rabiʾa. To this day, the site is known among Muslims as the tomb of Rabiʾa al-ʾAdawiyya.[38]

In the fourteenth century, we first hear of a Jewish tradition associated with the tomb, as being the burial place of the prophetess Huldah.[39] Like the tradition of Rabiʾa, this tradition too emerged "from grass roots," originating among the believers who came to frequent the tomb and pray there; it too earned scholarly disapproval, as it clashed with an ancient Jewish tradition according to which Huldah was buried within the walls of Jerusalem. Yehosef Schwartz (1804–65), an early geographer of the Land of Israel in the nineteenth century, bewailed the fact that the Jews had dragged Huldah to this place and were frequenting "impure" places. While he understood how ignorant worshipers could have been misled, he nevertheless held that Jews praying at the tomb were guilty of idolatry.[40]

In both Judaism and Islam, therefore, we have a similar process. The tomb of a woman, venerated by Christians and particularly popular as a place for the expiation

[36] Antoninus, *Itinerarium*, 16.

[37] On this custom and its meaning, see Limor, "Pelagia's Tomb." See also L.H. Vincent and F.M. Abel, *Jérusalem Nouvelle* (Paris, 1914), pp. 401, 406.

[38] On Rabiʾa, see Margaret Smith, *Râbiʾa the Mystic and her Fellow-Saints in Islâm* (Cambridge, 1928), pp. 140–43; "Rabiʾa: Her Words and Life in ʿAttar's Memorial of the Friends of God," in *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qurʾan, Miʾraj, Poetic and Theological Writings*, ed. Michael A. Sells (New York, 1996), pp. 151–169; *Women of Sufism: A Hidden Treasure*, ed. Camille Adams Helminski (Boston and London, 2003), pp. 25–34; Julian Baldick, "The Legend of Râbiʾa of Basra: Christian Antecedents, Muslim Counterparts," *Religion* 20 (1990), 233–247.

[39] The first source to mention the tradition is Estori ha-Parḥi in his *Kaftor va-Feraḥ* (Jerusalem, 1897), Ch. 6, p. 101 (see also p. 76).

[40] Yehosef Schwartz, *Sefer Tevuʾot ha-Aretz* (Jerusalem, 1900) [repr. 1979], pp. 348–352. On the tradition of Huldah's tomb, see *Entziklopedia Talmudit* 25, s.v. "Yerushalayim," col. 334 and note 420, and Appendix to "Yerushalayim," col. 717 and note 169. See also Y.Z. Horowitz, *Yerushalayim be-Sifrutenu* (Jerusalem, 1964), pp. 140–141.

of sins, is embraced by believers of other faiths as well. The Muslims and the Jews reburied there, as it were, an important woman of their own faith – it was after all a woman's tomb. Moreover, both Muslims and Jews found a woman who was somehow associated with the idea of repentance. Rabiʾa was known for her ascetic way of life, and she taught that sincere repentance was the foundation of the simple believer's way of life. Huldah, for her part, had been the prophet whom King Josiah requested to intercede with God for him and his people; and she replied that the people would indeed be punished, but not in Josiah's reign, as he had repented (2Kings 22:14–20; 2Chron. 34:22–29).

The link between the three saints may in fact be strengthened on a deeper, perhaps even subversive, plane. Some versions of Rabiʾa's biography in the poet Farid al-Din ʾAttar's *Memorial of the Saints* report that after she had been released from slavery, before becoming an ascetic, she had joined a troupe of musicians – an action that may be interpreted as becoming a courtesan.[41] Only later did she regret this step and become a penitent. In this version, Rabiʾa is almost the twin of Pelagia. While Huldah was never associated with such a risqué biography, Talmudic tradition does associate her with the sin of prostitution and atonement for that sin. The Sages of the Talmud cite her genealogy:

> Huldah was a descendant of Joshua ... R. ʾEna Saba cited the following in objection to R. Nahman: "Eight prophets who were also priests were descended from Rahab the harlot, namely, Neriah, Baruch, Serayah, Mahseyah, Jeremiah, Hilkiah, Hanamel and Shallum." R. Judah says: Huldah the prophetess was also one of the descendants of Rahab the harlot (BT, Megillah 14b).

Thus Huldah, albeit indirectly, preserves the idea of penitence as the basis for the tomb's sanctity and its association with sincere repentance from a life of sin.

Talmudic tradition has it that Huldah was buried within the walls of Jerusalem. Muslim tradition locates Rabiʾa's tomb in her city, Baṣra. Traditions of holy places, however, are immune to scholarly criticism, and the motives that originally reburied both women on the Mount of Olives kept those traditions in place. To this day, the tomb is still known by its three names. The alternating names, however, should not mislead us: Behind them lie three similarly structured traditions.

Two Tombs – Two Types

The two tombs described here represent different aspects of the phenomenon of shared holy places. Both are sacred to the three faiths that share Jerusalem. The

[41] Baldick, quoting the tradition, questions the connection between the repentance tradition and the tomb, writing that "it is not clear whether the legend of her being a musician was invented before her veneration at Pelagia's tomb, and led to the belief that she was buried there, or whether it arises out of that belief and Pelagia's own story." Baldick prefers the former alternative, p. 237 and note 41.

brief survey of their history presented above indicates the significant differences in believers' attitudes to their sanctity and to the very possibility of sharing that sanctity. The root of the difference, I believe, lies in the entirely different ideas underlying the two tombs and the entirely different needs that they satisfy.

David's Tomb is associated with a key figure in Jewish and Christian religion, a figure richer in theological, historical, and eschatological meanings than any other biblical hero. As with many other places in Jerusalem, David's Tomb is a textual holy place, that is, a place whose sanctity derives from the sacred text, which therefore occupies a special place as a cornerstone of sacred geography.[42] Just as Jews and Christians shared the belief in King David's significance as founder of the messianic dynasty, they shared the veneration of his tomb. This sharing, however, did not result in interfaith brotherhood, any more than the two religions' sharing of the Old Testament had done: quite the contrary. Just as each religion claimed to have the one and only key to understanding the Scriptures, each claimed absolute possession of the Tomb of David, and hence of David himself. David's Tomb, an earthly representative of David himself, demanded the exclusive loyalty of the believers, Jews and Christians. Furthermore, because of David's symbolic position in the faith system of the two religions, all the tensions and hostility between them were channelled into that one site. As a result, the shared tradition only gave rise to fierce competition, with the clashing interpretations sometimes assuming violent proportions. David's Tomb functions, therefore, as a central juncture, one might say even a nerve centre, in the age-old struggle of Jews and Christians for the Holy Scriptures, for the Holy Land, for the right to be considered God's chosen people, and for the truth. The dispute around it, ostensibly a dispute over a geographical site, embodies a titanic theological struggle that has never been settled.

Pelagia's Tomb is a holy place of a completely different nature. The theological status of the figures associated with the tomb is nowhere near the critical status of King David.[43] Moreover, while David's Tomb represents a strong, firm, tradition, which has held fast to the site despite changing times and rulers, Pelagia's Tomb has replaced the name of the woman buried there in accordance with the needs of visiting believers. Dialectically speaking, the shared belief in the figure of David at his tomb has been a basis for contest, whereas in Pelagia's Tomb, the divergence of views as to the identity of the person buried there have mitigated the competition and made sharing possible.

In the Late Middle Ages, Pelagia's Tomb functioned like any other saint's tomb; it was a site for expiating rituals and even for miracles. For example, a Russian monk from Novgorod, who visited Jerusalem in 1456, wrote:

---

[42] See Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (New York, 1978), pp. 17–18. The authors define pilgrimages to sacred sites associated with the founders of religions as "prototypical pilgrimages."

[43] This is the case, at least, with respect to Pelagia and Huldah. Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya occupies a more central place in Islamic tradition.

> Annexed to the holy Church of the Ascension of Christ, on the south, is the chamber of our mother, the sainted nun Pelagia. The chamber has two compartments; to the first lead eight steps, and to the second, eleven. They all descend, for they have been cut deeply into the mountain. Her tomb is on the right, to the south. Above the tomb, at its end, on the wall, is her footstep. The head of the tomb is very close to the southern and western walls of the chamber. Pilgrims enter and first confess by her tomb, confessing all their sins to God. Afterwards each alone walks around the tomb of Saint Pelagia three times. Sometimes the sainted nun, working wonders, will capture some person because of grave sins, holding fast for one or two hours, and then release [him or her]. There is a small chamber in the wall, facing the east. There Saint Pelagia used to sit and pray. There is a strong odour of incense here.[44]

The saint interred in the tomb is presented here as interceding with God for the sinner, as done by other saints in the Byzantine region since late antiquity.[45] In light of her qualities, her ascetic practices, and mainly the importance of atonement in her life, she was assumed to possess special powers to work wonders and subdue forces of evil. Her prayers would open the gates of heaven.

The two tombs thus represent two very different types of holy place, answering to the needs of different kinds of visitors: veneration and awe in the face of the distant, kingly, glory of the father of the messiah, as against the intimate embrace of the beloved, supportive figure of the saint atop the Mount of Olives. A principled theological position open only to controversy, as against a religious practice that answers to the immediate needs of believers and permits sharing.

When does sharing build a bridge, and when does it create barriers? Given the stories of the two sites described above, we may assume that to the extent that the holy site in question is more institutionalized and closer to the centre of religion, and to the extent that the tradition represented there is more central to the structure of the faith, exclusivity will be emphasized and border-lines more sharply marked. A syncretistic ritual is feasible at sites more remote from the geographical, institutional, and ideological centre, and it may be viewed as a "grass-roots" religious phenomenon, rooted in the needs of the believers. Yehosef Schwartz, deploring the phenomenon, writes about Pelagia's tomb: "In our time [= mid nineteenth century], however, the Ishmaelites permit entry to anyone who gives them a silver coin (a few pennies), and sometimes there are three kinds of people there: Jews, Ishmaelites, and Christians, coming to pray in that place."[46]

---

[44] Joel Raba, *Russian Travel Accounts on Palestine* (Jerusalem, 1986) (Hebrew), pp. 114–15. Descriptions of the tomb in Jewish and Muslim literature are more general and less picturesque than those of Christian travellers. Nevertheless, members of other religions clearly also considered their saints as intermediaries who would intercede for those praying to them. For the tomb in more recent times, see Zeev Vilnay, *Holy Tombstones in the Land of Israel* (Jerusalem, 1951) (Hebrew), pp. 195–98; Vilnay, *Jerusalem: The Old City*, Jerusalem 1962 (Hebrew), p. 156.

[45] Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Roman Studies* 41 (1971), 80–101.

[46] Schwartz, *Tevu'ot ha-Aretz*, p. 352.