

The Significance of the Rock (*Sakhrah*) inside the al-Aqsa Mosque

The Dome of the Rock (*Qubbah al-Sakhrah*) in Jerusalem built, as commonly perceived,¹ between 65 H/684 CA and 72 H/691 CA within the precincts of the original al-Aqsa Mosque (*al-Haram al-Sharif* or Noble Sanctuary)² is one of the earliest existing monuments of Islamic art and architecture. Its significance lies in its religious, civilizational, geographical and historical contexts.

The Dome of the Rock is located on an artificial platform, approximately in the center of the *al-Haram al-Sharif* or the original al-Aqsa Mosque.

According to Creswell, it is "an annular building and consists in its ultimate analysis of a wooden dome 20.44 m. in diameter, set on a high drum, pierced with sixteen windows and resting on four piers and twelve columns, placed in a circle just large enough to surround the Rock, and so arranged that three columns alternate with each pier.

A central cylinder is thus formed, of height about equal to its diameter. This circle of supports is placed in the centre of a large octagon averaging about 20.59 m. a side, formed by eight

(1) A number of controversies surround the date of building the Dome of the Rock. The commonly articulated view is that in 65 H/684 CA the work commenced and in 72 H/691 CA it was completed. However, there are views asserting that the Umayyad caliph Abd al-Malik b. Marwan could not embark on building such an extraordinary and pricey edifice before crushing the insurgence of Abdullah b. al-Zubayr in Hijaz. In this case, building the Dome of the Rock could only start either in 72 H/691 CA or 73 H/692 CA. (See: Blair Sheila S., "What is the Date of the Dome of the Rock?", in: *Bayt al-Maqdis, Abd al-Malik's Jerusalem*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 59-85)

(2) By the al-Aqsa Mosque we here mean the whole area of the Noble Sanctuary or *al-Haram al-Sharif*, accounting for the second mosque on earth instituted 40 years after the Ka'bah. The present-day al-Aqsa Mosque covers only a section of the Sanctuary.

walls 9.50 in height (excluding the parapet, which measures 2.60 m.). Externally there are seven bays in each side, but those next the corners - that is to say the bay at each end of each side, or sixteen in all - are treated as blind panels. The remainder are each pierced in their upper part by a window."³

The Rock (*Sakhrāh*), which the domed edifice (the Dome of the Rock) shelters, is the highest point in the *al-Haram* or the *al-Aqsa Noble Sanctuary*. It is a bluish rock.⁴ It stands about one and a half meters above the floor - or about the height of an average man⁵ - at its highest part and is approximately eighteen by thirteen meters in area. Beneath it is a cave about four and a half meters square, in the roof of which there is a hole about a meter in diameter.⁶

Much extraordinary reverence is attached to the Rock, which, nevertheless, is rooted in little or no truth. In the main, such reverence is based on copious groundless legends and myths that are either work of some Muslims who have been contriving and propagating them in different ages, under different circumstances and for different purposes, or are no more than the re-creation or even re-telling of the same as found in the Jewish tradition.

Indeed, the Rock bears no special importance in Islam. It is significant inasmuch as it constitutes a part of the original *al-Aqsa Mosque* or *Noble Sanctuary*, the second mosque on earth

(3) Creswell K.A.C., *A Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture*, (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1989), p. 20.

(4) Khosraw Naser, *Book of Travels*, translated from Persian by W. M. Thackston, Jr., (Albany: Bibliotheca Persica, 1986), p. 32.

(5) *Ibid.*, 32.

(6) Duncan Alistair, *The Noble Sanctuary*, (London: Longman Group Limited, 1972), p. 28.

established forty years after the construction of the Ka'bah or Al-Masjid al-Haram.⁷

In no way can the Rock be more important and as such more revered than the other parts of Al-Aqsa Mosque.

By the same token, everything that the Holy Qur'an and the Prophet (peace be upon him) have said about Al-Aqsa Mosque applied as much to the Rock as to the rest of the sections of the Mosque. Al-Aqsa Mosque, with all its elements including the Rock, was the first *qiblah* (the direction to which the Muslims turned in prayer for about one year and a few months following the migration (*Hijrah*) to Madinah). It was a place where the Prophet (pbuh) was taken **{for a Journey by night from the Sacred Mosque (al-Masjid al-Haram) to the Farthest (al-Aqsa) Mosque whose precincts We did bless, - in order that We might show him some of Our signs...}** (Al-Isra' 1), and thence, the Prophet (pbuh) ascended to the sky for his *al-Mi'raj* Journey.

Al-Aqsa Mosque is one of the only three mosques to which journey ought to be undertaken, the other two being the *al-Masjid al-Haram* and the Prophet's Mosque in Madinah.⁸ And finally, Al-Aqsa Mosque is a mosque where a prayer is worth five hundred prayers performed in ordinary mosques, as narrated by al-Bazzar (in the *al-Masjid al-Haram* a prayer is worth one hundred thousand prayers, while a prayer in the Prophet's Mosque is worth one thousand prayers performed in ordinary mosques⁹).

The only thing in the Islamic authentic tradition that could be loosely linked with the Rock is the moment when the Prophet (pbuh) arrived at the al-Aqsa Mosque during his Night Journey

(7) Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Kitab Ahadith al-Anbiya', Hadith No. 3172

(8) Ibid., Kitab al-Jumu'ah, Hadith No. 1115.

(9) Ibid., Kitab al-Jumu'ah, Hadith No. 1116.

(*al-Isra'*) from the *al-Masjid al-Haram*. The Prophet (pbuh) was riding a beast called *al-Buraq*. When the Prophet (pbuh) arrived and disembarked in the *al-Aqsa Mosque*, the angel *Jibril* (Gabriel), who accompanied the Prophet (pbuh) all the way through, tied *al-Buraq* to the stone, having punctured it beforehand with one of his fingers.¹⁰

However, two concerns could be raised as to the content of this account.

Firstly, the Prophet (pbuh) used the word *al-hajar* (stone or rock) therein, rather than *al-sakhr*, and the latter was always the matter of the regular reference to the Rock. Thus, it stands to reason that *al-Buraq* could have been tied to any of many existing rocks and stones in and around the *al-Aqsa Mosque*. Moreover, some undisputed authorities in the field of the Prophet's tradition (*sunnah*)¹¹, while omitting the referred to *hadith*, recorded that *al-Buraq* was actually tied to the loop (*halqah*) - maybe somewhere at or near the gate - to which all the earlier prophets used to tie the same animal (because they rode it too). The loop has never been identified. On account of its insignificance as to the matters relating to one's spirituality, the exact position of the loop in the Mosque has not been even alluded to anywhere and by any trustworthy authority. Some accept as true, albeit with no sound evidence, that *al-Buraq* was tied somewhere near the Mosque's western wall, hence the appellation of a part of the wall as the "*al-Buraq Wall*", the place which the Jews refer to as the "*Wailing Wall*". And as a final point, a companion of the Prophet (pbuh) Hudhayfah b. al-Yamam

(10) Al-Tirmidhi, *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*, Kitab Tafsir al-Qur'an 'an Rasulillah, Hadith No. 3057.

(11) Muslim, *Sahih Muslim*, Kitab al-Iman, Hadith No. 234. Al-'Asqalani Ibn Hajar, *Fath al-Bari bi Sharh Sahih al-Bukhari*, (Cairo: Maktabah al-Kulliyah al-Azhariyyah, 1978), vol. 15 p. 56. Al-'Ayni Badruddin Abu Muhammad, *Umdah al-Qari Sharh Sahih al-Bukhari*, (Cairo: Sharikah Mustafa al-Babi al-Halabi, 1972), vol. 14 p. 10.

strongly opposed the idea of fastening al-Buraq anywhere in the al-Aqsa Mosque. He contended that there was neither reason nor need for such an act since the Prophet (pbuh) knew that *al-Buraq* had been subjected to him by Allah Almighty, the Guardian.¹²

Secondly, if the Prophet (pbuh) really tied *al-Buraq* to the Rock - the thing suggested explicitly only by al-Bazzar¹³ and implicitly only by al-Tirmidhi¹⁴ - or has made any other contact with it, either when arriving from the *al-Masjid al-Haram* or when ascending to the Heaven, even then no significant impact would have been made on the position of the Rock because the Prophet (pbuh) remained completely silent on the subject matter. While he was very eloquent about the advantages of the al-Aqsa Mosque as a splendid religious and historical phenomenon and marvel, never did the Prophet (pbuh) recognize any single unit thereof, including the Rock, attributing more importance to it than to the other units.

To be sure, excessively venerating the Rock on the grounds of its alleged association with the Prophet's Night Journey (*al-Isra'*) and Ascension to the Heaven (*al-Mi'raj*) does not seem sensible at all. If the Rock is to be thus venerated, then every other component of the Mosque ought to be venerated in the same way too. By the same token, *al-Hijr*, semicircular area attached to the northwest side of the Ka'bah whence the Prophet's miraculous Journey had commenced,¹⁵ would have also been the target of the people's undue respect and admiration. This would be especially so for the reason that more than a few scholars opine on the strength of some authentic Prophet's accounts that the Night Journey (*al-Isra'*) and Ascension to the Heaven (*al-Mi'raj*), as a

(12) Al-'Asqalani Ibn Hajar, *Fath al-Bari bi Sharh Sahih al-Bukhari*, vol. 15 p. 56.

(13) *Ibid.*, vol. 15 p. 56.

(14) Al-Tirmidhi, *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*, Kitab Tafsir al-Qur'an 'an Rasulillah, Hadith No. 3057.

(15) Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Kitab al-Manaqib, Hadith No. 3598.

matter of fact, occurred on two different occasions,¹⁶ each time starting in the *al-Masjid al-Haram* from either *al-Hijr* or the Mosque's gateway. Not only this, if the Rock were to be treated differently owing to its association with the Prophet (pbuh), then every place the Prophet (pbuh) visited, as well as everything he possessed, touched or stepped onto, would rightly become liable to be made an object of the people's disproportionate veneration, given that the whole of the Prophet's life as Allah's final messenger to mankind was, in a way, miraculous, sometimes more and sometimes less.

The truth is that there existed various reasons for making the Rock appear more hallowed than the other parts of the *al-Aqsa* Mosque. Different people with different backgrounds must have had taken parts in creating and sustaining the trend. While some might have done so deliberately and with their own vested interests, the others, surely, did the same inadvertently and out of ignorance and vulnerable faith often rooted in deadening formalism. Consequently, a number of legends, myths, fibs and apocryphal Prophet's traditions about the Rock, and about the *al-Aqsa* Mosque in general, kept cropping up through different ages, outnumbering, and so diminishing, the scope of influence of the truths about the same. Nonetheless, even though caliph Abd al-Malik b. Marwan, on deciding to build the Dome of the Rock, might have been influenced by the articulated tales and legends, yet the overriding reasons for doing so were totally different.

By and large, caliph Abd al-Malik built the Dome of the Rock for three reasons.

The first reason was religious. The caliph intended to project himself as a humble servant of the holy Mosque built sequentially

(16) Al-'Asqalani Ibn Hajar, *Fath al-Bari bi Sharh Sahih al-Bukhari*, vol. 15 p. 55.

second to the Ka'bah, and which is third in importance and sacredness on earth. He thus intended to promote, encourage and facilitate pilgrimage to it. The idea was in accordance with the Prophet's tradition referred to earlier, as well as with the practices of some of the Prophet's earliest companions who occasionally took the trouble to journey to Jerusalem and in some instances even settle and die there.¹⁷ The Dome was intended to serve as a dome (symbol) of caliph Umar's existing Mosque - albeit somewhat at a distant location - and also as a dome (symbol) of the entire al-Aqsa Mosque (Noble Sanctuary) in a wider sense of the word.¹⁸

Secondly, the Dome of the Rock was erected for some political purposes as well. Having successfully defeated Abdullah b. al-Zubayr - a claimant to the caliphate who challenged the Umayyad political establishment so long (about nine years) and so seriously that he almost succeeded in stripping them of power - Abd al-Malik was confronted with the arduous task of reasserting the legitimacy of the Umayyad claim to the caliphate. By embarking on building the Dome of the Rock - irrespective of whether it occurred during the civil war or in its aftermath - caliph Abd al-Malik definitely aimed to portray his self and the ruling Umayyad family as the real champions of Islam and its cause.

Thirdly, building the Dome of the Rock was very much related to the conditions surrounding the rise and maturation of the identity of Islamic art and architecture. The edifice was among the first works that showed that Islamic art by as early as the end of the first Hijrah century was steadily evolving its own conspicuous spirit, language and identity. Having been a man set to leave a mark on many a facet of Islamic history and civilization,

(17) Shurrab Muhammad, *Bayt al-Maqdis wa al-Masjid al-Aqsa*, (Damascus: Dar al-Qalam, 1994), p. 355.

(18) *Ibid.*, p. 372.

caliph Abd al-Malik could not fail to apprehend the implications of the global ambitions and determinations of the Muslim society for the evolution of a unique language of Islamic art and architecture. Abd al-Malik used the Dome of the Rock as an avenue to letting his counterpart in Byzantine know that as the Muslims were already standing on an equal footing with their neighboring enemy in many civilizational aspects - in some even superseding them - so could they comfortably claim that they neither lagged far behind in terms of architecture and arts. Likewise, the caliph's actions were impelling the non-Muslim minorities within the boundaries of the state, as well as the bordering foes of diverse kinds - who were mostly Christians - to hold both the religion of Islam and the Muslims in awe and utmost respect. By means of building and decorating the Dome of the Rock, an appeal has been made to non-Muslims to join the new religion, which, so to say, incorporated their own - as stated by Goitein.¹⁹ In this way, the crafts of art and architecture were gradually subjected to becoming an excellent novel means and channel of *da'wah islamiyah* (inviting people to Islam).

The most widely articulated fable about the Rock is that the Prophet (pbuh) after his Night Journey (*al-Isra'*) prayed there alone and then along with the prophets of the past. Then, he was taken to the sacred Rock from which he ascended to the Heaven (*al-Mi'raj*) by a stairway of light placing his foot on the Rock and leaving his footprint embedded in it.²⁰ As the Prophet (pbuh) did the latter, the Rock tried to follow him, but he put his hand on it and the Rock froze in its place, half of it being still suspended in the air. As indicated by other accounts, however, it was *Jibril* (Gabriel) and not the Prophet (pbuh) who restrained the eager Rock and kept it earthbound, leaving the imprint of his hand on

(19) Goitein S. D., *Studies in Islamic History and Institutions*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968), p. 147.

(20) Al-Ya'qubi Ahmad b. Ya'qub, *Tarikh al-Ya'qubi*, (Dar Beirut, 1980), vol. 2 p. 261.

it.²¹ The cave, which is beneath the Rock, is said to have come into being when the Rock moved to rise up. Having done so, the space was left, and, when the Rock froze the cave remained.²²

There are many other untruths and legends surrounding the existence of the Rock, such as the one alleging in serious anthropomorphic terms that God - be He glorified and exalted - ascended to the sky from there;²³ that a prayer on the Rock's right and left sides, followed by certain supplications, blots out one's sins, in addition to scores of other benefits that one is able to procure thereby;²⁴ that from underneath the Rock all the terrestrial drinking water, as well as the pollination winds, originate;²⁵ that under the Rock are Asiyah, the wife of Pharaoh, and Maryam (Mary) the mother of 'Isa (Jesus) preparing the necklaces of the inhabitants of Paradise until the Day of Judgment, etc. Many a scholar²⁶ have dwelled on these issues, vehemently rejecting them one by one while applying the highest standards devised for the purpose of distinguishing the truth from the falsehood in the field of *Hadith sciences* (*'ulum al-hadith*).

Certainly, the actions of caliph Umar b. al-Khattab on visiting Jerusalem epitomized the Islamic viewpoint on the Rock. Umar wanted to establish the place of prayer where the al-Aqsa Mosque once stood. So huge was the area of the Mosque (*al-Haram al-Sharif*) with the Rock standing approximately in the

(21) Duncan Alistair, *The Noble Sanctuary*, p. 34.

(22) Ibid., p. 10, 34. Khosraw Naser, *Book of Travels*, p. 33.

(23) Ibn al-Jawzi Abu al-Faraj, *Fada'il al-Quds*, (Beirut: Dar al-Afaq al-Jadidah, 1980), p. 145.

(24) Ibid., p. 142.

(25) Al-Suyuti Jalaluddin, *Al-Lali al-Masnu'ah fi al-Ahadith al-Mawdu'ah*, (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifah, 1981), vol. 1 p. 459.

(26) See: Ibn al-Jawzi Abu al-Faraj, *Kitab al-Mawdu'at*, (Karachi: n.pp, n.d.), p. 92. Al-Albani Muhammad Nasiruddin, *Silsilah al-Ahadith al-Da'ifah wa al-Mawdu'ah*, (Riyadh: Maktabah al-Ma'arif, 1988), vol. 3 p. 406. Shurrab Muhammad, *Bayt al-Maqdis wa al-Masjid al-Aqsa*, p. 374-383. Al-Suyuti Jalaluddin, *Al-Lali al-Masnu'ah fi al-Ahadith al-Mawdu'ah*, vol. 1 p. 459. Al-Shawkani Muhammad b. 'Ali, *Al-Fawa'id al-Majmu'ah fi al-Ahadith al-Mawdu'ah*, (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, n.d.), p. 428.

center, that the simple crude mosque, which Umar had in mind, had to be positioned on a specific location and of course southward towards the Ka'bah in Makkah. Umar consulted some people as to the site of the mosque and Ka'b al-Ahbar, a Yemenite Jew who converted to Islam during the reign of Abu Bakr or even Umar, proposed that the mosque be placed behind the Rock so that the old and new directions of prayer (*qiblah*) merge, as it were, with one another. However, Umar replied in the negative stating that such a course of action would imply imitating the Jewish religion.²⁷ Hence, the mosque was erected in the front of the Rock, that is, the southern part of the original al-Aqsa Mosque, thus making those who pray turn their faces towards the *qiblah* and their backs towards the Rock. "We were not commanded to venerate the Rock, but we were commanded to venerate the Ka'bah", was Umar's final remark.²⁸

Ibn Khaldun suggested that Umar, while paying a visit to the al-Aqsa Mosque, asked to be shown the Rock.²⁹ Regardless of what some people may infer from this report, the same in no way appears far-fetched or inconsistent with the existing authentic accounts. The report, furthermore, has nothing to do with the culture of favoring some parts of the Mosque more than the others. If caliph Umar really did as narrated, then he must have done it either out of curiosity - having been acquainted with what the Rock means to the Jews, who the Muslims had been making close contacts with since the migration (*Hijrah*) from Makkah to Madinah - or because, while exploring the Mosque proper and its primary components, he was set to identify the Rock as just one of such components. Although he has never witnessed the Mosque

(27) Ibn Kathir Abu al-Fida', *Al-Bidayah wa al-Nihayah*, (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1985), vol. 7 p. 57.

(28) Al-Tabari Ibn Jarir, *The History*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), vol. 12 p. 195.

(29) Ibn Khaldun Abd al-Rahman b. Muhammad, *The Muqaddimah*, (London: Rotledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), vol. 2 p. 262.

in the past, yet Umar possessed an approximate idea concerning its morphology, because the Prophet (pbuh) had described in detail the Mosque following his two miraculous journeys (*al-Isra'* and *al-Mi'raj*).