

The Temple in the Qur'ān

William J. Hamblin

Professor of History, Brigham Young University

Although the Qur'ān was composed over five centuries after the destruction of the temple, and nearly a thousand miles away from Jerusalem, in a different culture, language, and religion, the enduring spiritual significance of the temple nonetheless reverberates throughout the book in many ways. As one of the great religious texts of the world, the Qur'ān can be examined from many different perspectives. I will be approaching the text as the culmination of earlier pre-Islamic traditions and beliefs, rather than as the foundation and beginning of the new Islamic tradition. In this paper I will largely rely on the Qur'ānic text itself, rather than on later voluminous Muslim interpretations of the Qur'ān and temple found in the *tafsīr* (commentary), *ḥadīth* (reports of Muhammad's teachings), or the *Isrā'īliyyāt*, (Jewish traditions).

The Qur'ān is organized roughly from longest to shortest *sūrah*, or chapter, but I will review its temple-related passages following the broad chronological order of the events the passages purport to describe. The translation I used throughout are from A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*,¹ though occasionally modified as noted regarding technical terminology of special importance for this paper.

The sanctity of the Temple Mount for Muslims is based on biblical stories associated with the temple as recounted in the Qur'ān, as well as the unique understanding of Muhammad and

¹ A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1955).

the first Muslims. These include the following biblical narratives: 1- the building of the temple (Q 34:12b-13a),² 2- the story of the Queen of Sheba and Solomon's crystal palace (Q 27:44), 3- Mary and the Temple (Q 3:35-37), 4- Zachariah in the Temple (Q 3:38-41), and 5- the destruction of the Temple (Q 17:4-8). In addition, there are several uniquely Muslim references to the Jerusalem Temple: 6- the story of the ascent of Muḥammad (Q 17:1), 7- the question of the Qibla, or direction of prayer (Q 2:142-150), and finally, 8- the relationship of the Ka'ba and temple.

Solomon's Temple

Perhaps the most explicit reference in the Qurʾān to the Jerusalem temple can be found among the stories of the prophet-king Solomon.³ In the Qurʾān Solomon is included among the great prophets of antiquity, noted for his knowledge, wisdom, and the magnificence of his reign.⁴ His knowledge is described as being so vast that he even knew the languages of birds, animals,

² Citations from the Qurʾān are preceded by Q and cited by chapter (*sūrah*) and verse (*ʾāyah*).

³ J. McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, (Brill, 2001), 5:76-78 (hereafter cited as EQ); Solomon is discussed in most detail in the Qurʾān in 27:16-44 (describing the visit of the Queen of Sheba); many other allusions can be found in the following notes. P. Soucek, "The Temple of Solomon in Islamic Legend and Art" in J. Gutmann, (ed.), *The Temple of Solomon*. (1976), 73-111. For a general introduction to Solomon and his legends, see S. Weitzman, *Solomon: The Lure of Wisdom*, (Yale, 2011)

⁴ Q 4:164, 6:84, 21:78-9; P. Bearman, et. al., *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 12 vols. (Brill, 1960-2005) 9:822-4 (hereafter cited as EI); B. Wheeler, *Prophets in the Quran*, (London: Continuum, 2002) 273-8.

and ants.⁵ Furthermore, the Qurʾān says that God gave Solomon power over the winds, jinn and demons.⁶

In this regard the demons and jinn are said to have performed unspecified “tasks” for Solomon (Q 21:82), which are most likely associated with building the Temple.⁷ This is most explicit in *Sūrah* 34:12b-13a,

وَلِسُلَيْمَانَ الرِّيحَ غُدُوهاَ شَهْرٌ وَرَوَاحُهاَ شَهْرٌ وَأَسَلْنَا لَهُ عَيْنَ الْقِطْرِ وَمِنَ الْجِنِّ مَن يَعْمَلُ
 بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ بِإِذْنِ رَبِّهِ وَمَن يَزِغْ مِنْهُمْ عَنَ أَمْرِنَا نُنزِقْهُ مِن عَذَابِ السَّعِيرِ (١٢) يَعْمَلُونَ لَهُ
 مَا يَشَاءُ مِن مَّحْرِبٍ وَتَمَثِيلٍ وَجِفَانٍ كَالْجَوَابِ وَقُدُورٍ رَّاسِيَتٍ أَعْمَلُوا

And We [God] made the Spring of Molten Bronze (*ʿayn al-qītur*) to flow for him [Solomon]. And of the jinn, some worked before him by the leave of his Lord; ... fashioning for him whatsoever he would -- **places of worship** (*maḥārīb*), images (*tamāthīl*), basins (*jifān*) like water-troughs, and cauldrons (*quḍūr*). (Arberry, modified)

Each of the items mentioned in these verses can be correlated with elements of the traditional narratives of the building of Solomon’s temple.

- This Qurʾānic story, describing the employment of demons and jinn to build the temple, is not biblical. Rather, it is related to the similar legends from the first century CE Jewish

⁵ Q 27:16-29, 21:79, drawing on 1 Kg 4:33; Prov. 6:6-11; Wheeler (2002) 266-8.

⁶ Q 21:81-2, Q 27:17, Q 27:38-41.

⁷ Q 34:12-13, cf. Q 38:35-38; Wheeler (2002) 269-70, 272-6; EI 2:546, 3:1050; J. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, (New York: Doubleday, 1983-1985) 1:960-87 (hereafter OTP); P. Torijano, *Solomon the Esoteric King*, (Brill, 2002).

Testament of Solomon, which describes God giving Solomon the power to bind demons and force them to construct the temple.⁸

- The “Spring of Bronze” (*ʿayn al-qītur*), may refer specifically to the “sea” of bronze found in the courtyard of the temple (1 Kgs. 7:23-26; 2 Chr. 4:2-5). However, it may allude more broadly to the detailed description of the massive amount of fine bronze work and furnishings made by Hiram of Tyre for Solomon’s temple (1 Kings 7:13-47), which poetically could be described as bronze flowing like water from a spring.

- The mention of “images” or “statues” (*tamāthīl*) in the context of “places of worship” is rather odd given the Qurʾān’s abhorrence of idols.⁹ However, the Temple of Solomon contained a number of religious images, including the ark, the cherubim (1 Kgs. 6:24-27; 2 Chr. 3:11-12), bas reliefs on the walls (1 Kgs. 6:29) and doors (1 Kgs. 6:32-35), and images on the water carts (1 Kgs. 7:36). Thus, the Qurʾānic description of images/*tamāthīl* in Solomon’s temple is perfectly consistent with contemporary understandings of the temple.

- The Qurʾān further describes Solomon building bronze “basins (*jifān*) like water-troughs, and cauldrons (*quḍūr*)” Similar items can be found in the description of Solomon’s Temple, including the massive water basin, called the “sea” (1 Kgs. 7:23-26; 2 Chr. 4:2-5), a great bronze altar (2 Chr. 4:1), and various bronze basins (1 Kgs. 7:27-38; 2 Chr. 4:6) and vessels (1 Kgs. 8:40-47).

- Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Solomon is described in these verses as making “places of worship.” The Arabic plural here is *maḥārīb*; its singular is the more familiar *miḥrāb*.

⁸ J. Collins and D. Harlow, (eds.), *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 1240-1242; *The Testament of Solomon* (OTP 1:935-988).

⁹ For background on idols and images in the Qurʾān, see EQ 2:481-484.

It may be plural here in reference to the multiple rooms within Solomon’s temple complex. At this point I will only note the appearance of the word *mihrāb* in this verse. As I will argue below, the word *mihrāb* in the Qurʾān seems to be a technical term for the Jerusalem temple.

Taken together, all of the elements mentioned in this passage--Solomon as builder of a place of worship, the massive use of bronze, the jinn as workers, the images, and water basins--make it certain that this passage is describing the building of Solomon’s Temple, viewing its construction as having been ordered by God and facilitated by divine intervention.

The Queen of Sheba and the Crystal Palace

The jinn are also associated in the Qurʾān with the building of Solomon’s magical crystal palace, which may contain an oblique allusion to the Temple. As in the biblical narrative (1 Kgs. 10:1-13), the Queen of Sheba--who is called Bilqīs in later Muslim tradition¹⁰--visited Solomon at Jerusalem. But in Q 27:44 she was brought to Solomon’s crystal palace, where she mistakenly assumed its transparent crystal pavement was water.¹¹

قِيلَ لَهَا ادْخُلِي الصَّرْحَ فَلَمَّا رَأَتْهُ حَسِبَتْهُ لُجَّةً وَكَشَفَتْ عَنْ سَاقَيْهَا قَالَتْ إِنَّهُ صَرْحٌ مُمَرَّدٌ
مِّنْ قَوَارِيرَ قَالَتْ رَبِّ إِنِّي ظَلَمْتُ نَفْسِي وَأَسْلَمْتُ مَعَ سُلَيْمَانَ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ

It was said to her, ‘Enter the **pavilion** (*ṣarḥ*).’ But when she saw it, she supposed it was a spreading water, and she bared her legs [to cross the water]. He [Solomon] said, ‘It is a **pavilion** (*ṣarḥ*) smoothed of crystal. She said, ‘My Lord, indeed I have

¹⁰ EQ 1:288-289. For background on the Queen of Sheba, see: J. Pritchard (ed.), *Solomon and Sheba*, (London, Phaedon, 1974); J. Lassner, *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). For the historical context of ancient Sheba/Yemen, see J. Simpson, *Queen of Sheba: Treasures from Ancient Yemen*, (London: British Museum, 2002).

¹¹ Q 27:38-44; Wheeler (2002) 269-70; EI 1.1219; 1 Kg 10.1-13.

wronged myself, and I surrender with Solomon to God, the Lord of all
Being.' (Arberry)

The Arabic term *ṣarḥ* can mean a “palace, pavilion, or a large or lofty building.”¹² Although it has no specific religious connotation, its range of meaning certainly *could* include the temple. On the face of it, this story doesn't make a lot of sense. The crystal pavement of Solomon's *ṣarḥ*/palace is so splendid that the Queen of Sheba thinks it is actually water and lifts her skirts to walk across it so her dress doesn't get wet. She is so amazed when she finds out the pavement is not water but crystal, that she becomes a follower of Solomon's God, to whom the miraculous pavement is apparently, but not explicitly, attributed. Nothing in the biblical narratives of the Temple or the Queen of Sheba appears as a possible background to this story.

However, the biblical narratives of the Qur'ān potentially reflect nearly a millennium of post-biblical legends and traditions which form important parts of its cultural context and background. This story may be indirectly linked with Jewish traditions that the floor of the celestial Temple was likewise made of crystal.¹³ In this case Solomon's *ṣarḥ* would not be merely a palace or pavilion, but the temple itself, with its crystal pavement miraculously made in imitation of the pavement of the prototypical celestial temple. If this interpretation is correct, then the spontaneous conversion of the Queen of Sheba suddenly becomes a more reasonable conclusion to the story.

¹² E. Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (William and Norgate, 1863; reprinted by the Islamic Texts Society, 1984), 1:1675.

¹³ 1 Enoch 14:9; Ezek. 1:22, Ex 24:10, Rev. 21:18,21; Tha'labī, = W. Brinner (tr.), *'Arā'is al-Majālis fī Qiṣaṣ al-Aniyā'*, or *the Lives of the Prophets*, (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 51.

If we search further in the broader pre-Islamic context we discover an interesting parallel story of crystal/water pavement in the celestial temple, as described in Jewish mystical literature. Christopher Morray-Jones, in his book *A Transparent Illusion*, analyzes the mystical Jewish tale of the “Four who entered Paradise” who are warned not to say “water” when they see the marvelous marble/crystal paving stones of the celestial temple.¹⁴ Although the Qur'ānic narrative is likely to be more directly related to Jewish folktales such as found in the seventh century *Targum Sheni* to Esther,¹⁵ its ultimate indirect source is probably these types of celestial temple visions and stories of crystal pavement. This presents the possibility that the *ṣarḥ* of Solomon that the Queen of Sheba visited was conceptualized in the Qur'ān as the *temple* of Solomon rather than simply a magnificent palace.

Mary in the Temple

Mary, or Maryam, is “the most prominent female figure in the Qur'ān,”¹⁶ where she is described as “chosen above all women” (Q 3:42). Chapter 19, the Sūrah Maryam, is named after her. She most often appears as the mother of Jesus, who is most commonly called in the Qur'ān “‘Īsā bin Maryam,” or “Jesus the son of Mary.”¹⁷ The Qur'ān discusses the birth of Mary, her youth, the Annunciation, and the birth of Jesus, along with several other incidents in her life.

¹⁴ b. Hagigah 14b; C. Morray-Jones, *A Transparent Illusion: The Dangerous Vision of Water in Hekhalot Mysticism*, (Leiden: Brill, 2002)

¹⁵ Morray-Jones, *Transparent Illusion*, 231-233.

¹⁶ EQ 3:288; On Mary see EQ 3:288-296; B. Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an*, (New York, 1994); J. Smith and Y. Haddad, “The Virgin Mary in Islamic Tradition and Commentary,” *Muslim World*, 79 (1989): 161-187; G. Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'an*, (Oxford, 1977) 60-66.

¹⁷ Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'an*, 22-29.

In these Qurʾānic narratives about Mary, the temple appears in Qurʾān 3:35-37, describing the birth of Mary and her dedication as a youth to serve in the temple, where she is miraculously fed by God.

فَلَمَّا وَضَعَتْهَا قَالَتْ رَبِّ إِنِّي وَضَعْتُهَا أُنثَىٰ وَاللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا وَضَعْتَ وَلَئِنِ الذَّكَرُ كَأَلْثَمَ
وَإِنِّي سَمَّيْتُهَا مَرْيَمَ وَإِنِّي أُعِيذُهَا بِكَ وَذَرِّيَّتَهَا مِنَ الشَّيْطَانِ الرَّجِيمِ
فَتَقَبَّلَهَا رَبُّهَا بِقَبُولٍ حَسَنٍ وَأَنْبَتَهَا نَبَاتًا حَسَنًا وَكَفَّلَهَا زَكَرِيَّا كُلَّمَا دَخَلَ عَلَيْهَا زَكَرِيَّا
الْمِحْرَابَ وَجَدَ عِنْدَهَا رِزْقًا قَالَ يَا مَرْيَمُ أَنَّىٰ لَكِ هَذَا قَالَتْ هُوَ مِنْ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَرْزُقُ
مَنْ يَشَاءُ بِغَيْرِ حِسَابٍ

And when she [the wife of ‘Imrān, the mother of Mary] gave birth to her [Mary] she said, ‘Lord, I have given birth to her, a female. . . . And I have named her Mary, and commend her to Thee with her seed [Jesus], to protect them from the accursed Satan.’ Her Lord received the child with gracious favour, and by His goodness she grew up comely, [her uncle] Zachariah taking charge of her. Whenever Zachariah went in to her in the **Sanctuary** (*mihrāb*), he found her provisioned. ‘Mary,’ he said, ‘how comes this [food] to thee?’ ‘From God,’ she said. Truly God provisions whomsoever He will without reckoning. (Arberry)

These verses are undoubtedly related to the second century CE Christian *Protoevangelium of James*,¹⁸ which describes Mary being dedicated to the temple (*naos*) by her parents (7), where she was fed by the angels (8), and ultimately assigned to weave the veil for the temple (10)--presumably the veil that will be rent at Jesus’ death (Mt. 27:51, Mk. 15:38, Lk. 23:45). What is important for this study is that in the Qurʾān Mary lived under the guardianship

¹⁸ *Protoevangelium of James*, 7-10; see B. Ehrman and Z. Pleše, *The Apocryphal Gospels*, (Oxford, 2011), 46-54; J. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, (Oxford, 1993), 60-61.

of Zachariah in the *mihrāb*, which Zachariah enters (*dakhala*) to talk to her. The *mihrāb* here is something you can enter; obviously not the prayer niche of the classic Islamic mosque. The *mihrāb* here is also equated with what is described as the *naos*/temple in the *Protoevangelium*. I'll explore this idea in greater detail below.

Zachariah in the Temple

Zachariah's vision of the angel in the temple announcing the birth of John the Baptist as described in Luke 1:5-23, is retold in Q 3:38-41,¹⁹ immediately after the passage about Mary discussed above.

هُنَالِكَ دَعَا زَكَرِيَّا رَبَّهُ قَالَ رَبِّ هَبْ لِي مِنْ لَدُنْكَ ذُرِّيَّةً طَيِّبَةً إِنَّكَ سَمِيعُ الدُّعَاءِ
فَنَادَتْهُ الْمَلَائِكَةُ وَهُوَ قَائِمٌ يُصَلِّي فِي الْمِحْرَابِ أَنَّ اللَّهَ يُبَشِّرُكَ بِيحْيَى مُصَدِّقًا بِكَلِمَةٍ مِّنَ
اللَّهِ وَسَيِّدًا وَحَصُورًا وَنَبِيًّا مِّنَ الصَّالِحِينَ
قَالَ رَبِّ أَنَّى يَكُونُ لِي غُلَامٌ وَقَدْ بَلَغَنِيَ الْكِبَرُ وَامْرَأَتِي عَاقِرٌ قَالَ كَذَلِكَ اللَّهُ يَفْعَلُ مَا
يَشَاءُ
قَالَ رَبِّ اجْعَلْ لِّي آيَةً قَالَ آيَتُكَ أَلَّا تُكَلِّمَ النَّاسَ ثَلَاثَةَ أَيَّامٍ إِلَّا رَمَزًا^{٢٠} وَادْكُرْ رَبَّكَ كَثِيرًا
وَسَبِّحْ بِالْعَشِيِّ وَالْإِبْكَارِ

Then Zachariah prayed to his Lord saying, 'Lord, give me of Thy goodness a goodly offspring. Yea, Thou hearest prayer.' (38) And the angels called to him, [while] standing in the **Sanctuary** (*mihrāb*) at worship, 'Lo, God gives thee good tidings of John, who shall confirm a Word of God, a chief, and chaste, a Prophet,

¹⁹ Greater details are given in Q 19:2-15, but without specific allusion to the Temple; see EQ 5:574-576 and Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'an*, 55-59 for a broader analysis the Qurʾānic Zachariah narratives.

righteous.’ (39) ‘Lord,’ said Zachariah, ‘how shall I have a son, seeing I am an old man and my wife is barren?’ ‘Even so,’ God said, ‘God does what He will.’ (40) ‘Lord,’ said Zachariah, ‘appoint to me a sign.’ ‘Thy sign,’ God said, ‘is that thou shalt not speak, save by tokens, to men for three days. And mention thy Lord oft, and give glory at evening and dawn.’ (41)

Sūrah 19:2-15, contains a more detailed narrative of the same story, adding the following passage in verse 19:11:

فَخَرَجَ عَلَى قَوْمِهِ مِنَ الْمِحْرَابِ فَأَوْحَىٰ إِلَيْهِمْ أَن سَبِّحُوا بُكْرَةً وَعَشِيًّا

So he [Zachariah] came forth unto his people from the **Sanctuary** (*miḥrāb*), then he made signal to them, ‘Give you glory at dawn and evening.’ (Arberry)

Despite the differences in detail, this text is clearly related to the Zachariah narrative in Luke 1:5-23. In Luke Zachariah enters (Lk. 1:9) and leaves (Lk. 1:21-22) the *naos* or temple while performing his priestly duties. In the Qur'ān, Zachariah likewise enters (Q 3:39) and leaves (Q 19:11) the *miḥrāb*. As with the *Protoevangelium* narrative of Mary (Q 3:37) discussed above, the Greek concept of *naos*/temple in the prototype narratives is consistently rendered as *miḥrāb* in the Qur'ān. Now I am not here arguing any direct textual dependency, but simply that *miḥrāb* is the Qur'ānic conceptual equivalent of the *naos*/temple in the Greek originals of these narratives.

Destruction of the Jerusalem Temple

The Qurʾān also includes a rather detailed description of the destructions of the Jerusalem temple by the Babylonians and the Romans in 17:4-8.²⁰ Verses four and five describe the apostasy of Israel and the destruction of the first temple by the Babylonians, who, however, are not mentioned by name in the text.

وَقَضَيْنَا إِلَىٰ بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ فِي الْكِتَابِ لَتُفْسِدُنَّ فِي الْأَرْضِ مَرَّتَيْنِ وَلَتَعْلُنَّ عُلُوًّا كَبِيرًا
فَإِذَا جَاءَ وَعْدُ أُولَاهُمَا بَعَثْنَا عَلَيْكُمْ عِبَادًا لَنَا أُولِي بَأْسٍ شَدِيدٍ فَجَاسُوا خِلَالَ الدِّيَارِ
وَكَانَ وَعْدًا مَّفْعُولًا

And We decreed for the Children of Israel in the Book: ‘You shall do corruption in the earth twice, and you shall ascend exceeding high.’ (4) So, when the promise of the first of these came to pass, We sent against you servants of Ours [the Babylonians], men of great might, and they went through the habitations, and it was a promise performed. (5)

This is followed by the repentance of Israel and their restoration by the power of God in 17:6.

ثُمَّ رَدَدْنَا لَكُمُ الْكُرَّةَ عَلَيْهِمْ وَأَمْدَدْنَاكُمْ بِأَمْوَالٍ وَبَنِينَ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ أَكْثَرَ نَفِيرًا

Then We gave back to you the turn to prevail over them, and We succoured you with wealth and children, and We made you a greater host. (6)

Then the second prophesied apostasy occurs, culminating in the destruction of the temple by the Romans (17:7-8).

إِنْ أَحْسَنْتُمْ أَحْسَنْتُمْ لِأَنفُسِكُمْ ۖ وَإِنْ أَسَأْتُمْ فَلَهَا ۗ فَإِذَا جَاءَ وَعْدُ الْآخِرَةِ لِيَسُوءُوا وُجُوهَكُمْ
وَلِيَدْخُلُوا الْمَسْجِدَ كَمَا دَخَلُوهُ أَوَّلَ مَرَّةٍ وَلِيُتَبِّرُوا مَا عَلَوْا تَتْبِيرًا

²⁰ For general background on Jerusalem in the Qurʾān, see EQ 3:2-7

عَسَىٰ رَبُّكُمْ أَن يَرْحَمَكُمْ وَإِنْ عُدْتُمْ عُدْنَا وَجَعَلْنَا جَهَنَّمَ لِلْكَافِرِينَ حَصِيرًا

‘If you do good, it is your own souls you do good to, and if you do evil it is to them likewise.’ Then, when the promise of the second [apostasy] came to pass, We sent against you Our servants [the Romans] to discountenance you, and **to enter the Temple (*masjid*), as they entered it the first time, and to destroy utterly that which they ascended to.** (7) Perchance your Lord will have mercy upon you; but if you return, We shall return; and We have made Gehenna a prison for the unbelievers. (8)

The Qurʾān thus calls upon the Jews to return to God by accepting Muhammad, with the implicit promise that they will be restored to their former glory, and perhaps threatening that they may again be scourged for their transgression a third time if they do not accept the message of the Qurʾān.

The Qurʾān here speaks explicitly of two destructions of the Jerusalem Temple. When describing the second/Roman conquest, the Qurʾān states the Roman “servants” of God “enter the Temple (*masjid*), as they [the Babylonians] entered it the first time, to destroy utterly that which they ascended to” (17:7). Nonetheless, it is typically vague and allusive about the specific historical contexts of these destructions. Later Muslim commentators generally attributed the first destruction to Nebuchadnezzar (*Bukhtnasar*), and the second to the Romans after the time of John the Baptist and Jesus.²¹

From the perspective of this paper, the Qurʾān describes the destruction of the Jerusalem temple as having been prophesied by God (17:4), and the fulfillment of that prophecy is God’s

²¹ H. Busse, “The Destruction of the Temple and Its Reconstruction in the Light of Muslim Exegesis of Sūra 17:2-8,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 20 (1996) 1-17.

punishment for Israel's apostasy. This, of course, parallels standard Christian interpretations of the Roman destruction of the Temple as reflected in the prophecies of Jesus in Matthew 24:1-2, Mark 13:1-2, Luke 21:5-6, and later Christian exegetes.²² Another way to describe this Qur'ānic concept is that God would not have allowed the temple to be destroyed if the Jews had not been in apostasy. This is part of a much larger Qur'ānic theme of the destruction of past nations such as Thamūd and 'Ad in Arabia for their arrogance, sin and rebellion against God, as a warning to the Arabs of Muhammad's day.

Finally, it is worth noting here that the term for the Jerusalem temple in 17:7 is *masjid*. *Masjid*, of course, becomes the standard Muslim term for mosque. But in the Qur'ān *masjid* has a much broader meaning, literally "a place of prostration (*sajdah*) for worship," as compared to *muṣallā*, "a place of prayer (*ṣalāt*)." In the Qur'ān *masjid* can refer to any place of worship, Muslim or pre-Islamic.²³ Thus, from the Qur'ānic perspective, the Jerusalem temple was indeed a *masjid*--a place for prostration, prayer and worship.

The Concept of the *Mihrāb* in the Qur'ān

This survey of the explicit historical allusions to the biblical Jerusalem temple in the Qur'ān allows us to examine the concept of the Jerusalem temple as a *mihrāb*. In classical Islamic religious parlance the *mihrāb* is a niche in a mosque which indicates the *qibla*, the

²² On early Christian views of Jerusalem and its temple, see P. Walker, *Holy City, Holy Places? Christian Attitudes to Jerusalem and the Holy Land in the Fourth Century*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990) and R. Wilken, *The Land Called Holy: Palestine in Christian History and Thought*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

²³ EQ 3:426-438, especially 3:427.

direction of prayer towards the Kaʿba in Mecca.²⁴ However, the *mihrāb* as an architectural feature of a mosque did not begin in Islam until the early eighth century.²⁵ The Qurʾān never uses the term *mihrāb* to refer to the classical prayer niche of a mosque, which is not surprising since formal mosques as such did not exist at the time of Muhammad with the possible exception of the mosque of the Prophet in Medina. (The Kaʿba is described in the Qurʾān as a *masjid*, but it could have no *mihrāb* to point to itself.)

Mihrāb occurs only five times in the Qurʾān, nearly always in the retelling of biblical stories related to the temple of Jerusalem.²⁶ Four of these passages have already been discussed: the stories of Solomon (Q 34:13), Mary (Q3:37) and Zechariah (twice, Q 3:39, 19:11). In each of these stories the *mihrāb* clearly refers to the Jerusalem temple, a building which one can enter and leave, not an architectural feature of a mosque.

The one exception to this pattern may be the fifth use, the story of the *mihrāb* of David (Q 38:21). This passage (Q 38:15-25) is essentially a retelling of the story of the condemnation of David by the prophet Nathan, through the parable of the sheep (2 Sam. 12:1-15). The mention of the of the *mihrāb* here is incidental to the story; it simply describes two men climbing up to be judged by David in his *mihrāb* (Q 38:21).

²⁴ The Arabic root ḤRB generally relates to rage or warfare, and appears to have nothing to do with the religious *mihrāb*. Lane, *Lexicon*, 1:540-541; H. Wehr and M. Cowan, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, 3rd ed. (Harrassowitz, 1971) 166.

²⁵ R. Serjeant, "Mihrab," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 22 (1959): 439-452; O. Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art*, (Yale, 1973) 120-122; N. Khoury, "The Mihrab, from Text to Form," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 30/1 (1998): 1-27. For a broader view of Qurʾānic concepts of sacred space see EQ 4:513-516.

²⁶ EQ 4:516; Kassis, *A Concordance of the Qurʾān* (University of California Press, 1983) 543.

The story culminates in 38:24b, which says:

وَوَظَنَّ دَاوُدُ أَنَّمَا فَتَنَّاهُ فَاسْتَغْفَرَ رَبَّهُ وَخَرَّ رَاكِعًا وَأَنَابَ

David thought that We had only tried him; therefore he sought forgiveness of his Lord, and he fell down, bowing, and he repented.

Thus we see at the end of the story that both prostration and prayer occur in David's *mihrāb*, which would be consistent with a mosque or the biblical temple.²⁷

The earliest Muslims certainly understood this passage as referring to the Temple Mount. In a famous story, the Caliph ʿUmar came to Jerusalem in 638 CE--a mere six years after the death of Muhammad--to accept the surrender of the city. While there he asked the patriarch Sophronius if he could pray at the *mihrāb* of David, where David had repented--clearly alluding to this passage in Q 38:15-25. Sophronius didn't understand what ʿUmar wanted, so they visited several holy places of Jerusalem until they came to the Temple Mount, where ʿUmar prayed and a mosque was eventually built.²⁸ If this story about ʿUmar is authentic--and there is no real reason to doubt it--it shows that the earliest Muslims understood the Qurʾānic passage about David's *mihrāb* to be related to the Jerusalem temple.

²⁷ Now, of course, historically the temple did not exist at the time of David. But this would not necessarily be reflected in the temple mythos of the narratives of the Qurʾān.

²⁸ H. Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, 2nd ed. (Longman, 2004) 50-69; Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabari*, (SUNY), 12:189-99; Theophanes, *Theophanes Confessor*, tr. C. Mango and R. Scott (Oxford, 1997) 339; M. Gil, *A History of Palestine, 634-1099*, (Cambridge, 1992) 51-67; H. Busse, "Omar's Image as the Conqueror of Jerusalem," JSAI 8 (1986), 149-168; F. Peters, *Jerusalem*, (Princeton, 1995), 187-9; Thaʿlabī, *Lives of the Prophets*, 513-519; Soucek, "The Temple of Solomon in Islamic Legend and Art" (1976) 78-9; C. Mango, "The Temple Mount, AD 614-638," in J. Raby and J. Johns (eds.), *Bayt al-Maqdis: ʿAbd al-Malik's Jerusalem*, (1992), 1:1-16.

The Jerusalem Temple and the Qibla

The holiness of the Temple of Jerusalem was exemplified by earliest Muslim *qibla*--the direction of prayer--which was towards Jerusalem.²⁹ Jewish prayer in the direction of the temple of Jerusalem had become a standard practice long before the time of Muhammad,³⁰ and according to the earliest accounts, Muhammad and his small band of followers initially also prayed towards to the Temple at Jerusalem.³¹ On the other hand, there are reports that while in Mecca Muhammad went to the south of the Kaʿba to pray, so he could face towards both the Kaʿba and Jerusalem simultaneously.³² Seventeen months after Muhammad’s *hijra* (emigration) to Medina, however, a dispute arose over the direction of prayer, culminating in the revelation that the *qibla* should henceforth be towards the Kaʿba—the venerable and archetypal direction of prayer by Abraham.³³

The Qurʾān is typically vague about the precise context of the change of the *qibla*, as described in Q 2:142-150.

سَيَقُولُ السُّفَهَاءُ مِنَ النَّاسِ مَا وَلاَهُمْ عَن قِبَلَتِهِمُ الَّتِي كَانُوا عَلَيْهَا ؕ قُلِ لِلَّهِ الْمَشْرِقُ
وَالْمَغْرِبُ يَهْدِي مَنْ يَشَاءُ إِلَى صِرَاطٍ مُسْتَقِيمٍ...

²⁹ On the Qibla, see EQ 4:325-328.

³⁰ 1 Kgs 8:44-8; Dan. 6:11; m. Berakot 4.5-6; EI 5:81-8.

³¹ Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabari*, (SUNY), 7:24-25; Ibn Iṣḥāq, *The Life of Muhammad*, tr. A. Guillaume, (Oxford, 1955, rep. 2002), 202, 258-9; Peters, *Jerusalem*, 180-1.

³² Ibn Iṣḥāq, *Life of Muhammad*, 135.

³³ Q 2:142-5; Peters, *Jerusalem*, 181.

قَدْ نَرَى تَقَلُّبَ وَجْهِكَ فِي السَّمَاءِ فَلَنُوَلِّيَنَّكَ قِبْلَةً تَرْضَاهَا ۗ فَوَلِّ وَجْهَكَ شَطْرَ الْمَسْجِدِ
الْحَرَامِ ۗ وَحَيْثُ مَا كُنْتُمْ فَوَلُّوا وُجُوهَكُمْ شَطْرَهُ

The fools among the people will say, ‘What has turned them from the direction they were facing in their prayers aforetime?’ Say: “To God belong the East and the West; He guides whomsoever He will to a straight path.’ ... We have seen thee turning thy face about in the heaven; now We will surely turn thee to a direction that shall satisfy thee. Turn thy face towards the Holy Mosque (*al-masjid al-harām*); and wherever you are, turn your faces towards it. (Arberry)

The phrase “Holy Mosque” in Arabic in this verse is *al-masjid al-harām*, a technical term throughout the Qurʾān used solely in reference to the Kaʿba.³⁴ Thus these verses clearly establish the priority for Muslim prayer towards Mecca and the Kaʿba. However, as I shall note later, what this change represented was an affirmation of the priority of the sanctity of the Kaʿba, not a rejection of the sanctity of Jerusalem and its temple.

The Ascent of Muhammad

Although, as we have noted, Solomon’s Temple was venerated as a sacred site by early Muslims because of its intimate connection with biblical prophets, its sanctity was further enhanced by its association with Muhammad’s “Night Journey,” (*al-ʾisrā wa al-miʿrāj*), an ascent into heaven that has captured the religious imaginations of Muslims in subsequent centuries, and became a foundational motif in Muslim mysticism.

³⁴ EQ 2:458-462; O. Leaman, (ed.), *The Qurʾān: an Encyclopedia*, (Routledge, 2006), 336-338 (hereafter, QE).

Several passages have been universally understood by traditional Muslim exegetes as also referring to this incident,³⁵ but only 17:1 makes a possible reference to the temple. The verse is again frustratingly vague and allusive.

سُبْحَانَ الَّذِي أَسْرَىٰ بِعَبْدِهِ لَيْلًا مِّنَ الْمَسْجِدِ الْحَرَامِ إِلَى الْمَسْجِدِ الْأَقْصَى الَّذِي بَارَكْنَا
حَوْلَهُ لِنُرِيَهُ مِنْ آيَاتِنَا

Glory be to Him [God], who carried (ʿ*asrā*) His servant [Muhammad] by night from the Holy Mosque (*al-masjid al-ḥarām*) to the Further Mosque (*al-masjid al-aqṣā*), which We have blessed, that We might show him some of Our signs.
(Arberry, modified)

The “Holy Mosque” (*al-masjid al-ḥarām*) in this passage is clearly the Kaʿba; the two are explicitly equated elsewhere in the Qurʾān (Q 5:97). The question of the identification of the “Further/Farthest Mosque” (*al-masjid al-aqṣā*), however, is disputed. Two major theories have been proposed by modern scholars: first, that the “Further Mosque” is the celestial temple, and the second, that it is the Jerusalem Temple Mount.³⁶ We lack sufficient contemporary data to resolve this question. In my opinion, however, the overall context of Sūrah 17 points to the Jerusalem Temple. The Sūrah begins with God taking Muhammad to the “blessed” “Further Mosque,” where he is promised the revelation of a “sign” (plural ʿ*Āyāt*, which can mean any type of miraculous manifestation of God’s power, and is also the standard name for verses of the Qurʾān.) The Sūrah then proceeds to tell the story of how the apostasy of the the “Children of

³⁵ Q 17:1, 94:1-3, 53:14-16, 56:28; EQ 1:176-181.

³⁶ On the ʿ*Aqṣā* see EQ 1:125-127; H. Busse, “Jerusalem in the Story of Muhammad’s Night Journey,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 14 (1991):1-40.

Israel” led to the destruction of their *masjid*--the Jerusalem temple, the passage I discussed earlier. The most straightforward interpretation is that one of the signs/*āyāt* that Muhammad was shown was the destruction of the Jerusalem temple/*masjid*, that is, the Further Mosque itself.

This interpretation of this verse is bolstered by the fact that this passage was generally understood by later Muslim exegetes as describing a visionary journey of Muhammad from the Ka^cba in Mecca to the site of the temple in Jerusalem. The Muslim name for the mosque on the southern Temple Mount, “al-Aqṣā,” further points in this direction. From the sacred site of the Jerusalem temple, Muhammad ascended to celestial mosque in Heaven, where the promised “signs” from God were revealed to him. His vision thus contained two components; a miraculous night journey from the Ka^cba to Jerusalem (*isrāʿ*), and an ascent from the Temple of Jerusalem to the celestial temple and Throne of God in Heaven (*miʿrāj*). The site of Solomon’s temple—and the future Dome of the Rock—thus played a central role in Muhammad’s divine vision as the point of encounter between heaven and earth, just as it had in many biblical theophanies. The sanctity of the Temple of Solomon for Muslims was thus not only confirmed, but increased by the ascent of Muhammad, the “Seal of the Prophets” (Q 33:40). Later Muslim traditions greatly elaborated on the theme of Muhammad’s ascent.³⁷

³⁷ B. Vuckovic, *Heavenly Journeys, Earthly Concerns: The Legacy of the Miʿrāj in the Formation of Islam*, (London: Routledge, 2005), 5-6; Ibn Ishāq, *Life of Muhammad*, 181-7; M. Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism*, (New York: Paulist, 1996), 48-53; Wheeler, *Prophets in the Quran*, 325-32; Q 53:10-16, 94:1-3; Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, 1:207-17, 6:78; Ibn Ishāq, *Life of Muhammad*, 182; M. Seguy, *The Miraculous Journey of Mahomet: Mirāj-Nāmeḥ*, (New York: Braziller, 1977).

Kaʿba and Temple

The Kaʿba was the great pan-Arabian temple of Mecca, venerated by pre-Islamic pagan Arabs as well as Muslims. The most common term for the Kaʿba in the Qurʾān is “house” (*bayt*)--a standard trans-Semitic term for temple, such as the Hebrew *bēt YHWH*, the “House of the LORD.” It is used some eighteen times to designate the Kaʿba in phrases such as the “first house” (*ʿawwal bayt*) (Q 3:96-97), “the ancient house” (*al-bayt al-ʿatīq*) (Q 22:29, 33), “the sacred house” (*al-bayt al-ḥarām*) (Q 5:97, 14:37), “my [God’s] house” (Q 2:125, Q 22:26), the “Visited House” (Q 52:4), and “house of God” (Q 5:97).³⁸

In Qurʾānic thought the Kaʿba supersedes the Temple of Jerusalem both spiritually, in its greater sanctity, and chronologically, in its greater antiquity. It is the “ancient” (Q 22:29, 33) or “first house” of God (Q 3:96-97), founded by Adam³⁹ and restored by Abraham (2:125) centuries before the building of the temple of Solomon.⁴⁰ As such, its sanctity superseded that of the temple of Jerusalem. While, the sanctity of both the Kaʿba and Solomon’s temple are affirmed in the Qurʾān, the seventh century reality was that Solomon’s temple no longer existed, having been destroyed by a decree from God because of the apostasy of Israel, as discussed above (Q 17:4-8).

³⁸ EQ 2:458-462; QE 336-338.

³⁹ Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, 1:293-4, 301-2; Thaʿlabī, *Lives of the Prophets*, 60.

⁴⁰ G. Hawting, “The Origins of the Muslim Sanctuary at Mecca,” in G. Juynboll (ed.), *Studies on the First Century of Islamic Society*, (Southern Illinois University Press, 1982) 23-47; U. Rubi, “The Kaʿba: Aspects of its Ritual Functions in Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Times.” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 8 (1986): 91-131; F. Peters, *Mecca: A Literary History of the Muslim Holy Land*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 3-106; F. Peters, *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam*, (Albany: State University of New York, 1994), 1-29.

In practical terms, the sense of cosmic sanctity that had been attributed to the temple of Solomon in both Jewish and Christian traditions was in many ways transferred by later Muslims to their understanding of the Ka'ba, the supreme earthly manifestation of the Celestial Temple.⁴¹

Conclusion

The Qur'ān views the temple of Jerusalem through three different lenses. First, the Qur'ānic temple was an Israelite holy place intimately tied to the lives of the ancient prophets. Solomon built it by divine decree and with miraculous assistance. It was commemorated as a place of repentance and miracles. Second, it was a Christian holy place, where God fed Mary miraculous food, and angels spoke to Zachariah. Finally, it was a contemporary Muslim sacred place, directly linked to the spiritual life of the Muslims, where Muhammad ascended to heaven in vision. But, despite its holiness, it was destroyed because of the apostasy of the Jews. For the Qur'ān, the Jerusalem temple is thus a sign of God's miraculous power, and a warning, that sacredness does not derive from a place alone, but from submission (*'islām*) to the will of God.

⁴¹ H. Busse, "Jerusalem and Mecca, the Temple and the Kaaba: An Account of their Interrelation in Islamic Times," in Moshe Sharon (ed.), *The Holy Land in History and Thought*, (Leiden: Brill, 1988) 236-46; F. Peters, 1986. *Jerusalem and Mecca: The Typology of the Holy City in the Near East*, (New York: New York University Press, 1986).