



# DOME OF THE ROCK

QUBBAT AS-SAKHRA

ISMAIL PATEL

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No visitor to Jerusalem can escape the enigmatic golden dome building poised majestically at the highest point of the city, 753 meters above sea level. Placed almost in the centre of a 35 acre trapezoidal platform it teases the observer closer, igniting an artistic and enquiring mind in the most casual spectator.

The Dome of the Rock, better known as the Qubbat as-Sakhrah, was completed in 691/2 and is probably the first masterpiece of Islamic art and architecture. The attention it commands due to its harmonious geometry and energetic colours easily captured within the visual field means it subsumes everything around it and mesmerizes an individual.

Not only has the Dome of the Rock been the centre of fascination for Sufis and devoted Muslims, but architects, archaeologists and artists have invested their lives in understanding its structure, origin and aesthetic meanings. While its beauty has transcended people of all walks of life there has been a divergence of views about the



reasons for the construction of such a fabulous and unparalleled building of its time.

Jerusalem unlike any other city in the world not only occupies a physical space on earth but carves an eternal niche in the hearts of millions of Jews, Christians and Muslims. Islam is the continuation of the Message from the Lord; the same message that had come to Prophet Daud, through the Psalms (Zaboor); that had come to Moses through the Torah and that had come to Jesus through the Gospel. Thus, the Islamic fascination with Jerusalem envelopes within it a variant of both the Judo-Christian liturgical and eschatological practices and beliefs. To Muslims, Jerusalem is further exalted by the references to it in the Qur'an and through the narrations of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW).

Although archaeological evidences suggest Jerusalem has been inhabited for over 10 millenniums, the monotheistic faiths' fascination with Jerusalem began with Prophet



Abraham around 4 millenniums ago. The Children of Israel, being the first of the monotheistic incumbents of Jerusalem, witnessed one of the most horrifying events in their tumult history in 70AD, as predicted by Jesus: 'There will not be left here one stone upon another that shall not be thrown down'. A Jewish revolt against the Romans between 66-70AD resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem, including the Temple and the majority of Jewish people were massacred; some enslaved and the rest expelled. Although this marked the end of Jewish rule and presence in Jerusalem, the attachment to the city, physical or visionary, was not undermined.

Like a phoenix, Jerusalem emerged from obscurity in 312AD when the Roman Emperor Constantine embraced Christianity. Jerusalem benefited from the resources of the state which went towards erecting churches on spots sanctified by Jesus. These included the Holy Sepulchre, the place of Crucifixion/Resurrection, the House of Caiaphas, where part of Jesus' trial took place and others. Although many churches were constructed within





the city, it is fascinating to note that the Temple area remained derelict and some say it was used as a dumping ground, perhaps in fulfilling Jesus' prophecy of the destruction of the Temple.

By the time Muslims arrived at the gates of Jerusalem in 637AD, the city had not only gained prominence in Christianity but became a centre of pilgrimage evoking celestial connotations. The arrival of Muslims was neither accidental nor opportunistic but a fulfilment of a vision, imbibed from the early years by the Prophet Muhammad (SAW), to link it with the two Islamic holy sites of Makkah and Medina. Ironically, it was the Jewish people who, according to the encyclopaedia Judaica, bore the fruits of Muslim rule as the new governors lifted over 5 centuries of sanction over Jerusalem and saw 70 Jewish families residing within the city.

The Dome of the Rock, a prism of colour was aesthetically very advanced for its era; with rich and vivid mosaic tiles adorning its exterior and the glistening golden dome cap some 20m in diameter.



Even Ibn Batutu, the 12th century intrepid traveller and writer succumbed to its elegance, professing: “Any viewer’s tongue will grow shorter trying to describe it.”

Rising to 30m in brilliance of colour and perfection in symmetry, the Dome of the Rock architecturally states its own unfaltering meaning and leaps out at the observer testifying to a monument beyond any logical reasoning. Many hypothesis-theological, political to social, have been propounded for its construction but all have to lay at the feet of the passion for Jerusalem in the early Muslims, whose love has been immortalised in living stones. A passion that has been accentuated by the belief that the Prophet Muhammed (SAW) made a stop here on his incredible night journey to and from the heavens.

One is drawn towards the harmonious geometrical patterns and beautiful contrast of the exterior wall which the Dome of the Rock beckons through any one of the eight short flight of stairs onto the



esplanade upon which the Dome sits. Once upon the esplanade the golden dome merely peeps above the larger 40m octagonal base with each side running at just over 20m. The exterior shimmers with exquisite tile works and beautifully carved inscriptions from the Holy Qur'an which was commissioned by Sulayman the Magnificent in the 16th century. The Qur'anic verses of Sura Ya Sin, referred to as the heart of the Qur'an, embraces the parapet while the verse relating to the night journey of the Prophet Muhammed, Sura al-Isra, hugs the topmost course of the tiled drum.

As one speculates over the choice of entry from one of the four intricately designed and identical doors, positioned at the apex of a diamond, you pass the exterior evoking the three natures in the universe; the lower white base being earth; the middle blue being the sky; and the gold dome the heaven.

Once inside a soft shower of light rays welcomes you in a variety of colours refracting the stained glass windows recessed high in the drum. The



impact is both dramatic and profound; and you are further enveloped in the richness of texture and vivid materials that draws the imagination. In contrast, the rugged dark rock sleeping serenely beneath the dome and rising up 1.5m above floor level instantly draws the attention of the visitor.

One instinctively understands the message conveyed by the floor design, as it compels the observer's feet to cherish the floor through the ambulatory all around the rock irrespective of which entrance was used. Like the exterior; the internal floor plan can be divided into three. The inner circle contains the rock. The inner ambulatory is created from 16 arches with contrasting plain outer and exquisite inner mosaics. Lastly, the outer ambulatory is demarcated from the inner ambulatory with 24 arches decorated exquisitely in gold and green colours and supported by 8 massive hexagonal outer piers gracefully dressed with polished marble and 16 smooth stone columns of stunning colours.





The drum and dome above is held up by 4 inner piers and 12 columns forming 16 arches. The arches are further highlighted with strips of contrasting black and white marble, with their inner side faced with grey-veined marble and the space between the shoulders of adjoining arches with alternating black and red panels.

The inner drum has an upper part containing 16 windows with three layers. The inner layer contains vibrant stained glass, the central layer has clear glass and outer perforated window is adorned with the classic blue tiles, to be observed on the exterior of the drum. A second, lower ring has a beautiful Qur'anic inscription intended to go beyond evoking religious sentiments as it is hard to read; which perhaps holds the connection between the material building and divine thoughts.

Perpendicularly above the rock arches the dome with its apex adorned in circular patterns and with the greatest verse of the Qur'an, 'Ayat al-Kursi', extolling the characters of the Lord. From here, like



a ripple in a pond, the rich geometrical patterns in red and gold increase in size until they stroke the 40 painted arches at the base of the dome. The motifs inside the dome include richly decorated images of vegetal and ornamental jewellery; interspersed with fruits, trees and leaves.

The ingeniously structured building means a visitor standing anywhere inside is surrounded by the rich splendour of colours, textures and designs, and is able to gaze out from one of the four entrances. In the absence of any advisory literature for the visitor, ones mind is free to wonder about heaven as compared with the efforts of man's creation.

The Dome of the Rock is not merely a shrine or a Mosque. While its use has been constant; its meaning grows in richness with time. It has the ability to become dear to every individual for personal and differing reasons. This building is not only aesthetically appealing but also mentally challenging as it unveils more and more as one



ponders over it. It has, above all, stamped an Islamic identity to Jerusalem.

Islamic architectural splendours are many, from the Taj Mahal in India to the Alhambra in Spain. However, the Dome of the Rock arguably sets the reference mark of excellence and sophistication. Its beauty is so enigmatic that even the marauding Crusaders with their earth scorching torch could not bring themselves to harm it.





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### **About Friends of Al-Aqsa**

Founded in 1997, the Friends of Al-Aqsa is a UK based non-profit making NGO concerned with defending the human rights of Palestinians and protecting the sacred al-Aqsa Sanctuary in Jerusalem. FoA has established links with the UN; governments in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Europe; and NGO's around the globe.

### **Aims & Objectives**

- Educating the public and policy makers on the issue of Palestine
- Bringing the Palestinian matter to the worlds attention
- Mobilising international action against occupation and apartheid policies
- Articulating the significance and the centrality of the al-Aqsa Mosque to the Islamic faith

### **Activities**

- Consultation and advisory services
- Dialogue and interaction
- Workshops
- Publications: Journal, Newspaper, Books, Booklets, Leaflets
- Resourceful Website



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