

HERE I SURRENDER:

May not be extra-ordinary for some – what you'll see inside about a divine city.

Jerusalem: The holy city, the city of gold, the city of peace - one of the oldest cities in the world; since centuries it has been conquered and re-conquered, destroyed and ruined, then built and re-built to its present shape. Every stone has a story, every olive tree a history, and every mountain keeps different name, depending on who you ask.

Jerusalem is the largest city in the region. Today it is a vibrant mosaic of both ancient and modern; the ethnic landscape reflects the diversity of its population, a growing melting pot of Arab-Israeli society. Despite its charm, Jerusalem carries bitter disputes. It is a divided city, part Arab, part Jewish, but jointly owned by all kinds of worshipers, as ever – however, not only surviving with honour - but continues to glow, gleam and glimmer on the horizon of multi-religious culture, as ever too.

The ultra-Orthodox community constitutes about a third of Jerusalem's Jewish population, and as such wields plenty of power over local life – in fact this commune is very closed and insulated against the outside world. The men dress in traditional 19th Century religious garb and devote their lives to [holy] Torah's study, while the women are required to dress very modestly and are mainly responsible for child-bearing and supporting the household.

AND the same is true for Muslims and Christians who prefer to live in the same primordial, primitive and pre-historic fashions and approach. However, the city's secular population is decreasing now; many complain that the city is becoming too religious, and resent the ultra-Orthodox families in their neighbourhoods; large numbers of secular Jews are leaving for more liberal places like Tel Aviv. Youngsters wish there were more entertainment spots, more places open on Fridays & Saturdays.

The BBC's Erica Chernofsky, in her report of **30th October 2014**, takes a closer look at **why this city is so important to Christianity, Islam and Judaism**, the three religions which trace their shared origins back to the biblical figure of Prophet Abraham AS – with centuries of shared though little disputed history. While it has often been the tales of division and conflict amongst people of different religions, they are united in their reverence for this holy ground.

Being one of the oldest multi-layer cities in the world, every layer of its surface reveals a different piece of the past. At its core is the Old City, a maze of narrow alleyways and historic architecture that characterises its four quarters - Christian, Muslim, Jewish and Armenian. It is surrounded by a fortress-like stone wall and home to some of the holiest sites in the world.

Each quarter of the Old City symbolize its population. The Christians have two, because **Armenians** are also Christians, and their quarter is one of the oldest Armenian Centres in the world. It is unique in that their community has preserved its own particular culture and civilisation inside the **St James Church** and monastery.

A QUESTION OFTEN ASKED that Who are the Israelites and what is Israel's TRUE history.

Nabi Abraham AS's grandson - Prophet Jacob [in *Arabic* Yaqoob AS]'s name was changed to Nabi **ISRAEL** AS under the God's command in his mid-life span. Nabi AS's twelve sons are fully named in holy Biblical book **Genesis**, along with his only daughter - Dinah. The twelve sons became the progenitors of the twelve **Tribes of Israel**. The generations of Prophet Jacob AS were so dear to God that He addressed them **exactly twelve times** in the **holy Qur'an** calling them as '**Bani-Israel**' [Israelites].

Nabi Jacob's one son LEVI had settled himself apart while Nabi Joseph AS had gone 'missing' and finally appeared in Egypt as its ruler. Prophet Jacob AS's twelve sons and one daughter

were from his two wives, **Leah and Rachel**, and from their maidens Bilhah and Zilpah.

Nabi Jacob AS, after a severe drought in Can'an, moved to Egypt with his family while his 'missing' son Nabi Joseph AS was viceroy there.

After 17 years in Egypt, Nabi Jacob died - he had lived for 147 years. Nabi Joseph carried back Prophet Jacob's remains to the land of Can'an, and gave him a stately burial in the same **Cave of Machpelah** in Hebron [now in Palestine] as were buried Prophet Abraham AS, Sarah, Nabi Isaac AS, Rebecca, and prophet Jacob's first wife, Leah there. The offspring of Nabi Jacob's sons became the tribes of Isra-el following **the Exodus** – thus settled in the lands of Cana'an and Judea making together as ISRAEL of today.

In ISLAM: Nabi Jacob AS is recognized in Islam as a prophet and acknowledged as a patriarch of Islam. Muslims believe that he preached the same monotheistic faith as his forefathers Prophets **Abraham AS, Issac AS, Ishmael AS** used to spread. Nabi **Jacob is mentioned 16 times in holy Qur'an.** As Nabi Jacob was on his deathbed, he asked his twelve sons to testify their faith before his soul departed [**Al-Qur'an** 2:132]. Each son testified that they would promise to remain Muslim (*in submission to ONE God*) until their last day.

Some western religious scholars have tried to target the humanity by adding new explanations in the name of secular researches and voluntarily opted to distract their readers and students of comparative religious studies by attempting to prove that ISLAM is [perhaps] the religion of extremism – totally baseless as

NO GODLY RELIGION PREACHES FANATICISM
OR HATRED.

They must know the basic fact that:

**'IN ISLAM ALL THE PROPHETS & RUSULS
ARE INNOCENT & BLAMELESS – NO
EXCEPTION.**

**MUSLIMS ARE BOUND TO EXTEND EQUAL
RESPECTS TO EACH OF THEM –
OTHERWISE ONE CEASES TO BE A TRUE
MUSLIM.**

- & this is the message for all my global friends who believe in INTER-FAITH broad-mindedness, tolerance and acceptance.

A TRIBUTE: At the end I want to offer heartiest gratitude, appreciation and thankfulness to three noble characters; without their help I could not have taken this project. First name is **SARWAR MUNIR RAO**, the former Director General of PTV, the prime media institution in Pakistan. Mr Rao instigated me to set off on this arduous task and guided me through the elapsed facts of sacred history as to the divine religions.

Secondly, I owe too much to my companion **SALIHA RAHIM** who escorted me in this sanctified journey to Jerusalem just to facilitate me despite her own abysmal health.

Thirdly; incessant sweet words and grateful wishes for bro **Saifullah Bukhari** who completed the gigantic task of typing my manuscript in Urdu language and made my journey epic-cum-pleasant.

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IMPORTANT:

In the whole script **pbuh** and **AS** are being used as abbreviations of **PEACE BE UPON HIM** and **ALAIH US SALAM** respectively.

These abbreviations are the signs & codes of reverence, respect, esteem, high opinion and gratitude due [ONLY] to **Prophets, Rusuls & holy Messengers; RA** is the abbreviation of **RAZIALLAH O ANHO / ANHA.**

BE READY FOR JERUSALEM

**In the name of
ALLAH THE ALMIGHTY,
the most Gracious,
the most Compassionate**

- Holy [& Exalted] is He Who carried His (pious) man by night **from the Holy Mosque (in Makkah) to the farther Mosque (in Jerusalem) - whose surroundings We have blessed - that We might show him some of Our signs.** Indeed He alone is All-Hearing, All-Seeing. [AL-Qur'an 17:1]

A reference to the event known as *Mi'raj* [Ascension] and *Isra'* [Night Journey]. According to the authentic traditions, this event took place about one year before HIJRAH; detailed reports about it are found abundantly in *Hadith* and *Sirah* books of Islam.

That FARTHER MOSQUE was the Al-Aqsa in Jerusalem, now the capital of Israel. Where is **Jerusalem** and why it was so dear to the God [ALLAH] and now to all the communities of the world - so old and so sacred that Allah has mentioned it in the latest holy book Qur'an. Why the Prophet Muhammad [pbuh] was taken to **Jerusalem** first and then to the heavens – a question in many inquisitive minds. The reply lies in the above verse itself – '**...that We might show him some of Our signs**'.

KNOW ABOUT JERUSALEM:

Jerusalem is known as the '**land of Prophets**'; its mention is available in all earlier religious books. Travel to Jerusalem is not the exhausting or arduous or demanding camel-back journey it used to be. You can just hop on a plane and come Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion Airport.

World's 79 countries are such that they don't require visa to travel to Israel. Simply get down the airport and follow the queue to get an Entry Pass valid for two months if you are holding

passport of any of those 79 countries - NO VISA REQUIRED; probably all you need to get into Israel is a passport valid for six months at least.

Another saying of the Prophet Muhammad pbuh is: "**Visit it [Al-Aqsa] for prayer - If you cannot go for prayer then send some oil to be used in its lamps; will be as if you've prayed in it**". And there are about forty [40] *ahadith* in which the holy prophet mentioned about Al-Aqsa mosque or Jerusalem.

Jerusalem can justifiably be taken as the oldest living place in continuity, the oldest living culture through developments with time. One can find graves of many prophets and Allah's messengers buried here around and also the ancient religious remains – in layers. A city where monotheist Rasuls were given divine revelations; where holy **Zabur** [the biblical book of **Psalms**] was consecrated to Nabi David [in *Arabic*: Dau'd] AS. He had laid foundations of the FIRST TEMPLE to worship ONE GOD which was later completed by Nabi Solomon [in *Arabic*: Suleiman] AS during his reigns.

The holy **TORA** [*Toraat*] was given to Nabi Moses AS at Mountain TUR in Sinai but Jerusalem is the city where the congregation of the '**TEN COMMANDMENTS**' of Nabi AS were put in practice. About 600 years later, the holy **Injil** [Bible] was blessed on Nabi Isa [Jesus] AS here.

READY TO GO: When packing for Jerusalem travel, one must keep in mind what to wear there – it is **NOT a normal Tourist site** to visit. So before you start packing, please read about **modest clothing** – and know its meaning realistically in detail. **Jerusalem** is NOT a place to **show off your body**; clothing matters here much; shorts and sleeveless may not work at most sites.

At most Christian, Muslim and Jewish holy sites, the modesty rules are prominently displayed at the entrances. At the **Western Wall**, the most sacred place for the Jewish, the ambience is bit relaxed - a scarf wrapped around bare shoulders

would go. If someone refuses to let you into a holy site because of dress-code, don't take it personally. Princess Margaret was once refused entrance to one of the churches on the **Mount of Olives** for showing up in a sleeveless dress.

Israeli currency is Shekel [NIS]. In early 2018, the exchange rates were 3.35 NIS per US Dollar and 4.70 NIS per Sterling Pound. Dollar is widely accepted currency everywhere in Jerusalem. Inside Airport there are Currency Counters and also bank Cash Tills for exchange – otherwise Dollars are accepted by the Taxi drivers outside. Money changers are abundantly available in markets of the town and nearly all tourist attractions; however, the rates may vary at places.

The **work week** in Jerusalem depends on your neighbourhood; officially, Israel has a six-day work-week that begins on Sunday and ends on Friday afternoon. Saturday - the **Jewish Sabbath** - is the official day of rest; it begins at Friday evening and ends an hour after nightfall on Saturday. When making out Jerusalem travel plans, the travellers have to take into account that most businesses, most Jewish restaurants and even public transport would be closed from Friday noon until Saturday night.

In Arab neighbourhoods, however, the Muslim day of rest is Friday and shops may or may not be open. And in Christian areas, Sunday is the day off. It is a city where you visit places you normally don't expect elsewhere. A simple rule and a fact too: **Expect the unexpected**. The official languages in Jerusalem are Hebrew and Arabic but almost anyone to whom a traveller runs into will speak some English or Russian [astounding?]; this is an incredibly international city. The Hebrew language has its own script, written from right to left like Urdu, Arabic and Persian.

TEL AVIV AIRPORT TO JERUSALEM: The distance between Ben Gurion Airport of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem city is 54km only. Catching a bus [*advised for single travellers only*] directly from the main terminal at Ben Gurion Airport to the

Central Bus Station in Jerusalem — and vice versa — is the most affordable option at just 16 NIS per person. The **Bus# 485** run by **Afikim** conveniently leaves every hour and for 24 hours a day from Sunday-Thursday, but less conveniently runs from 12.30pm afterwards on Fridays – NO SERVICE on Saturdays.

SHARED TAXI VAN: If you're arriving at the airport during odd hours or prefer to be dropped off or picked up at your hotel in Jerusalem, you can turn to the shared taxi that leaves from just outside the Arrivals Hall at Ben Gurion airport and will deliver you directly to your destination in Jerusalem. Leaving from the airport, drivers typically wait for the van to be full before setting off – but normally a few minutes to go.

On return, **if your flight is on Saturday night or Sunday, then be sure to book your van or taxi 48 hours in advance.**

In any way, after an hour or so after journey on smooth motorway [from Airport], one finds himself in his rest place or hotel where the welcome staff, mainly male, is usually smiling. You can go through the NOTES about Jerusalem – the city which is equally consecrated for all – the birthplace of many prophets where they started preaching about ONENESS OF GOD – and burial place of several ones.

Here, in this city where you feel the blessings of Allah continuously pouring down since thousands of years – one also hears the horrible haunting voices from the Dead Sea - 30kms away, where Nabi Loot AS's nation in village Sodom were dumped amidst the terrible rains, fire-balls and red pebbles / stones.

If you intend to travel in Jerusalem by bus or tram [in Jerusalem it is called LIGHT TRAIN], you'll need a **Rav-Kav** [a card with a computerised chip on it]. You can buy this on the first bus you get on, or in the Jerusalem Central Bus Station at the ticket windows. The card costs NIS 5; then put NIS 13.50 on the card from the first bus you ride or any TRAM Station plate-form for **all-day ticket**. When you get on

a bus or tram, you put your card on the reader machine and it will give a green signal for you.

Weather of Jerusalem in the winter is less predictable than in the summer. The wet season starts in November and goes through April. Israel's water supply is dependent on rainfall. Israelis hope, pray and beg the Heavens for winter rains - so the people don't grumble about a rainy day here – not even little children – they enjoy it like a school off holiday.

In Israel, it comes so windy when it rains that umbrellas go useless. **November & December** are usually fairly mild; **January and February** are the coldest months of the year. Average temperature in January:12-13C. Israel's famous citrus fruits come in that season – the desert blooms and the surroundings go green and lush. Surprisingly, **spring** in Jerusalem comes for **2-3 weeks only**, in late March or April.

In Jerusalem, spring is also the time of several major religious holidays, when pilgrims' Jewish and Christian flock to *Jerusalem holy sites* and so there's the added excitement of that tangible holiday feeling in the air. This means lots of traditional holiday meals and seasonal treats, school holidays, yearly parades and events - not too hot not cold.

The **hotels in Jerusalem** are always busy and go fully occupied the whole year because about 15K tourists land and fly every day; the Ben Gurion Airport goes extremely busy. In hotels here, seldom there is a concept of English breakfast; normally bread slices with Tehina, hummus and tea or coffee without milk. There is little concept of eggs, cheese, jam / honey, yogurt, butter, cereals, juices or similar luxuries.

Jerusalem is a costly city for the English or American tourists because meals are high priced than in UK or the States. For European tourists there is no much difference because the most European tourist cities are also much expensive. **Jerusalem food** is a unique fusion of Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, North African

and East-European cuisines. One of the exciting things about Jerusalem travel is the opportunity to experience a wide variety of delicious exotic meals.

In Israel, the green produce isn't refrigerated for months – so fruit and vegetables are always fresh and in season. In fact, Jewish green produce is a major export and finds its way into Europe's high-end food stores. Fresh, seasonal produce is a staple of Jerusalem's cuisine, both in veg-fruit salads. Freshly juiced green apples, carrots and almonds make a popular drink available at many refreshment kiosks in Jerusalem.

Jerusalem's food is influenced heavily by Middle Eastern flavour. The city shows up in popular Arabian or Palestinian foods like *shawarma* and *the gyros sandwich*. Seldom one finds **McDONALD** or **KFC** or **BURGERKING** or **CKICKEN-COTTAGE** or **SUBWAY** in Jerusalem – it was astonishing. The Jews claim that Jerusalem is gaining reputation as a **foodie's paradise**. Although this is a tiny country, almost anything grows here – cooked and served fresh.

The **Shwarma** Sandwich is a classic Arabian cum Jewish food and liked by all. It is normally served in **pita bread** or **Laffa** with vegetables and sauce. **Falafel** and **Shwarma sandwiches** have got **street food reputation** all over the city; most travellers go to the **Damascus Gate** to enjoy and to have the best taste.

Jerusalem cuisine has a sweet tooth, too. You can find every possible kind of **halva**, a sesame-seed based confection, and counters of perennial Jewish / Arabic food; sweet, sticky **Kunafa** or **rugelach**; rose-water infused **malabi** pudding is light or pomegranate juice on every corner.

BUT what about Jewish Community's main meat ingredient – **KOSHER**. **What is kosher food?** Travellers see that some Jerusalem restaurants advertise themselves as **KOSHER** restaurants. Keeping kosher is one of the basic doctrines of Judaism. The Jewish dietary laws

are derived from several Torah prohibitions; thus Kosher restaurants serve **ONLY Kosher meat and its dishes - but NOT DAIRY items.**

Travellers in Western Jerusalem have to decide if they feel like having dairy OR meat for dinner. It's also why restaurants in Western Jerusalem are placed in two categories [may also be licensed separately]. Here are some basic rules of what **kosher food** is and what isn't:

- Some animals, like pork, are forbidden for all.
- Animals that are permitted, such as **cows and chicken**, must be slaughtered according to Jewish law.
- Certain parts of permitted animals are forbidden.
- **Meat cannot be cooked or eaten with dairy products.**

In Jerusalem, some **holiday foods** are enjoyed every week, like chicken soup and *matza balls*, traditionally served at the Sabbath [Saturday] evening meal. Some foods are common in other religions too – like '*Sheer-Khurma*' of Muslims.

In short, Tourism is one of Israel's major sources of income, with a record 3.6 million tourist arrivals in 2017, yielding a 25 percent growth since 2016 and contributed \$7 billion to the Israeli economy making it an all-time record. Israel offers a plethora of historical and religious sites and beach resorts etc but the most visited city is Jerusalem – with 19% of tourists from the US, followed by Russia, France, Germany, Poland, China, UK & Italy in descending order.

BRIEF HISTORY OF JERUSALEM

Jerusalem, seat of government and the largest city of ISRAEL, the holy city for the Muslims and Jews, sacred also to the Christians, located in the Judean hills about 32 km from the Jordan River and about 30 km from the Dead Sea. Let us go back into its **history** for a while.

*During its long history, Jerusalem has been attacked **52 times**, captured and re-captured **44 times**, besieged **23 times**, and destroyed twice. The oldest part of the city was settled in the 4th millennium BC, making Jerusalem one of the oldest cities in the world.*

In ancient religious literature, the name **Shalem** [**Salem**] refers to Jerusalem [city's old name] is evidenced by **Psalm 76:2** holy **Zabur**; the same is held by **Josephus**, the known interpreter of the Bible. **Shalem** was the *Cana'anite* god of sunset and the ending day. The **Jewish** traditions hold that the city was founded by the ancestors of Nabi Abraham AS. As per the Hebrew Bible, **Jebusites** [Modern *Yevusi, Tiberian*] were inhabited in Jerusalem prior to its conquest by King David AS. Then this place was called the **City of David** after Jebusites were defeated. **Nabi** started here building the **First Temple** on the **Mount Moriah** where, as per Hebrew Bible, **Prophet Isaac's** sacrifice was offered.

As per Hebrew biblical literature: In c.**1005 BC** - Nabi David AS is appointed King; in c.**970 BC** - Nabi Solomon AS is appointed King; in **931 BC** - his son Rehoboam takes throne; could not keep the Kingdom united – even though the reign continued for 254 years. In **722 BC** - the

Assyrians captured the whole Israel; in **597 BC** - Jerusalem is captured by Babylonians and the Temple-I was destroyed. About 70 years after, Temple-II was again built at the same place. In **444 BC** - walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt by Nehemiah, another Israelite ruler.

In **398 BC** - the 39 books of the '**Old Testament**' completed. Then there is "**400 years of silence**" between Malachi's Old Testament and Matthew's New Testament.

In **64 AD** - Rome got burnt and its ruler Nero blamed the Jews and new Christians both. In **70 AD** - The Temple [II] and the city of Jerusalem were destroyed as prophesied by Jesus [**Matt 24**] – and severe persecution of Jews and Christians started which continued till year **81 AD**.

Holy Jesus preached and healed the people in Jerusalem, held the **Last Supper** in an '**upper room**' [called the **Cenacle**] there the night before he was arrested from **Gethsemane** nearby. The six parts to Jesus' trial – three stages in a religious court and three stages before a Roman court – were all held in Jerusalem. His crucifixion at **Golgotha**, his burial nearby [the **Church of the Holy Sepulchre**]; his resurrection and ascension and prophecy to return all are said to have occurred here in this city.

Thus, **Jerusalem** was an early centre of Christianity, too with a continuous Christian presence there since. From the mid-4th century AD to the Islamic conquest in year 638 AD, the Roman province of Palestine [then a part of Syria] was a Christian nation with Jerusalem its principal city.

Jerusalem ideologically became holy to Muslims, though unseen till then when **Al-Aqsa's** mention appeared in Chapter **Al-Isra** of the holy **Qur'an** [17:1] and its surroundings were addressed in the Qur'an as '**the holy land**'. In this sacred event, the Archangel Gabriel AS, took the prophet Muhammad pbuh from the **ROCK** [now] under the [**Golden**] **Dome of the Rock**.

Initially the Muslims used to pray towards Jerusalem - the city remained the **qibla for 17 months after Ascension**; the same was switched to Ka'aba later on; **Al-Qur'an 2:144–150** is referred.

Jerusalem was taken over by Muslims under command of the 2nd **Caliph Umar RA in 638 AD**; but Christians were allowed to continue living in the city and practicing their faith. Then the Byzantine Empire of Jerusalem surrendered the city along with Syria. **The city remained under Islamic control for the next 461 years.** During that time it was part of the Rashidun, Umayyad, Abbasid, and Fatimid Caliphates.

Jerusalem: A City of Great Spiritual Diversity; A City of Great Conflict — but still considered the most holy place in the world. In fact, all 3 monotheistic religions of the world have ties to it: Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. It's hard to separate the sacred and the mundane here.

'Jerusalem is an onion' *the Western travellers keep the opinion - there is no better way to describe this Holy City.* True; it is a product of layers – layers of history, culture, people and religion, each of them contributing to make it immaculately complex city that it is today. **Jerusalem is not ONE city but many;** has been so for thousands of years. There is a Jerusalem for everyone. From Christian pilgrims to Muslims and to Orthodox Jews from all over the world – **you'll find your Jerusalem, you just need to peel the layers, and find your own choice** - continuously inhabited like this millenniums. It is the place where spirituality comes alive – and fascinating too.

Jerusalem is as sacred for the Jews as Makkah for the Muslims. The **Amidah** [Jews' prayers] is always read facing Jerusalem, as the patriarch Prophet Jacob AS proclaimed, **"And this [place] is the gateway to Heaven, where prayers ascend"**. The **Talmud** records the **Baraita** on this topic:

"A blind [Jew] or one who cannot orient himself, directs his heart towards Heaven, as it is said: **They shall pray to the Lord.** One who stands in the Diaspora should face the Land of Israel; one who stands in the Land of Israel should face Jerusalem; one who stands in Jerusalem should face the Temple. ... One who stands in the Temple should face the **Holy of Holies.** ... One who stands in the Holy of Holies should face **the Ark.** ... It is therefore found that the entire nation of Israel directs their prayers toward a single location."

In nut shell, to the Jewish people it is the City of David and the Western Wall. So do the Muslims all over the world; in mosques, in their homes, in Makkah, in Madina – and so they do while in journeys, un-known places; direct all their prayers towards **Haram e Ka'aba** in Makkah [Saudi Arabia]. Even if the Muslims are in Jerusalem, they pray facing the Makkah – their eternal holy city.

In 1099 AD, the city was captured by the Western Christian army of the First Crusade claiming they wanted to keep Jerusalem in God's name. Many men fought and died for this spiritual cause; many were not as honest; kings and nobles actually hoped to acquire new fortunes through this aspiration & betrayal.

This Christian Kingdom of Crusaders lasted for 90 years only, during which time **Dome of the Rock** was converted to a Christian shrine, named **Temple of the Lord** and during the same era the **Church of the Holy Sepulchre** was rebuilt. In **1187 AD**, the land and the government were recaptured by the Arab Muslims, led by **Saladin**; he summoned the Jews back and permitted them to resettle in the city. In **1229 AD**, by treaty with Egypt, Jerusalem came into the hands of Frederick II of Germany.

The current walls of the Old City were built in **1535–42 AD by the Ottoman Turkish Sultan Suleiman-I the Magnificent** – the

details are given in next pages. **In 1947**, the UN created a partition plan which designated the city of Jerusalem as a partitioned and UN controlled settlement and it was put in practice in May 1948. Jordan retained the eastern half of the city including most of the important religious sites but the same was re-claimed by Israel in 1967 during the Six Day War; the **Haram** plaza was allowed to remain with Muslim Waqf though all political, security and financial controls vested in the hands of Israeli government.

Till mid 2009, on the event of Pope Benedict's visit to Israel, the number of Christians living in Jerusalem shrunk to nearly **14,600**, down from **31,000** at the end of the British Mandate of 1923, *also known as the **Palestine Mandate*** – only 2% of the city's population, and far fewer than the 20% it constituted in 1946.

OLD CITY – EAST JERUSALEM:

Jerusalem is plainly divided in two parts; East Jerusalem and the Western City; the areas and zones inhabited by the Palestinian and Israeli populations respectively. Within the East Jerusalem, there is a walled Old City. On this little piece of the earth, countless historical events took place within its small boundary ... religiously, politically, and emotionally.

The walled **Old City is the heart of Jerusalem**, the place where most religious sites are located. Despite its miniature size [c.1 sq km – 220 acres] in comparison with the whole Jerusalem [125.1 sq kms], it packs in a huge heritage of history and culture. Up until the 19th century, all of Jerusalem resided within the walls of the Old City. Thousands of souls, for thousands of years lived and died there.

Every stone of the Old Jerusalem has some thing to offer to its guests ...the beauty of this place is that it can make you happy, sad, angry or just leave you feeling confused or astonished with too many facts. It's a thrill to walk on some of the ancient and original streets from the Prophet Abraham's time then travelling through Roman and Muslim ruling eras; go pass the crowded markets, looking at ancient synagogues, chapels and mosques that commemorate different phases of Allah's holy messengers [*Nabi & Rusools*], Romans' passion for holy Jesus and glories added by noble Muslim rulers in sequence.

Jerusalem is national & religious symbol for both Palestinians and Israelis; the Palestinian neighbourhoods serve as the Palestinian capital and the Israeli region as the Israeli capital – but practically the whole Jerusalem in under political and administrative control of Israel since 1967.

After 1948's settlement of Israel, there was no Jew living in the Old City and even till 1967 there was not a single Jew in Eastern part. As of 2007 the total population in the Old City was 36,965; of which 27,500 were Muslims; 5,681 Christians; 790 Armenians; and 3,089 Jews. Now there is mixed population - the Jewish count was almost 4500 in 2013.

The Old City of Jerusalem is divided in four quarters. North of Jaffa Gate you'll find the **Christian Quarter**, including the **Church of the Holy Sepulchre**, then moving clockwise you'll encounter the **Muslim Quarter with Golden Dome** and **Aqsa Mosque**, full of shops, little restaurants and sights like the Ecce Homo Basilica [Church of Sisters of Zion], then the **Jewish Quarter** with the **Western Wall**, and finally the **Armenian Quarter**, south of Jaffa Gate, with the Citadel [location of **a stunning sound and light show**], Cathedral of St James etc.

The main points of entry to the Old City are **Jaffa Gate**, located nearest to the Western part of the City; **Dung Gate**, the closest place to access the Western Wall and the ONLY way to visit Haram Sharif by the NON-MUSLIMS; **Damascus Gate**, to visit Haram Sharif through busy bazaars and **Lions Gate** to see St Ann's Church and Haram Sharif. In 1980-81, the whole Old City was listed as a **UNESCO World Heritage Site** - due to its divinity and mystery.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam - similarities and differences are there but all the three religions believe in ONE GOD. Scripts of the **Talmud** [*oral and traditional commentary in Hebrew religions*], Bible - Old Testament and New one, holy Qur'an - direct revelation from God and Prophet Muhammad pbuh's deeds and sayings, all are

equally respected here. Holy City of Jerusalem is for all.

The new & young generation of Jewish planners has coined a term – HOLY BASIN - means **removal of the old city walls after unification of the city** – but the successive governments have been staying the proposal as Israel's whole tourism industry could be knocked down. Also there may start an endless conflict amongst various religious factions. According to the Research Institute of Jerusalem, in 2003, 35,400 residents lived in the Old City, and in the entire proposed Holy Basin around 40,000. 73% of the residents in the old city were Muslims, 18% Christians, and 9% were Jews. In 2013, out of 6,000 families who lived in the Old City, 68% were Muslim, 24% Christian & 8% Jewish.

East Jerusalem is also the location of the first campus of Hebrew University *near Mount Olives & Al-Toor of Muslim dominated areas*. The university area and the military base near it were always under Israeli control, even prior to 1967 - thus a high level of coexistence is seen here even there is un-rest in rest of the country.

In the **Haram Sharif** areas, Israel has given functional sovereignty to the **Muslim Waqf** but with no funds for its maintenance or up-keep on the pre-text that it has been surrendered to the Waqf. However, Israel is retaining sole sovereignty over the lower Western Wall where the up-keep is being done in a well deserved manner and nicely.

As per **BBC Documentary** dated **21st October 2013**, during 2013's local elections, the Religious Composition of **Jerusalem** was: Jews [502,830]; Muslims [288,170]; Christians [14,820]; others [9,390] and Druze [90]. Ref the **Jewish Virtual Library**: in May 2017, **Israel's population** stood at 8,680,000 - a 10-fold increase to the figures in 1948; AND out of 14.3m Jewish people in the world, 43% had migrated to Israel.

BAIT UL MAQDAS

TEMPLE MOUNT HARAM SHARIF **GOLDEN DOME:**

The people from around the world come to Jerusalem to see the **Temple Mount**; Muslims call it the **Haram Sharif**. Travellers' first day engagements surround this holy place for which they travel from their far flung hometowns. After dumping their travel-bags in their hotel rooms, if it is daytime, the explorers and holiday-makers both, rush towards the Old City to see the Golden Dome first.

Muslims can enter the **Haram Sharif** [Temple Mount] complex through any of the Old City gates; preferably they make choice of gate near their staying lodge. The people staying in East Jerusalem use **Herods Gate** or **Damascus Gate**; the travellers staying in the main city normally enter through **Dung Gate** or **Jaffa Gate**; the people staying in the northern Jerusalem prefer to use **Lions Gate** but feel equally convenient while passing through busy **Damascus Gate**.

If making entrance through Dung Gate, the travellers follow a queue for going to the Haram Sharif [Temple Mount] which will take them through a hanging wooden passage after security checks. The other queue leads towards

the Western Wall [*Deewar e Giryā*] where the Jewish visitors pray.

Muslims do pray on the **Haram Sharif**, but Christians and Jews may only **visit the site** as tourists. They are forbidden from singing, praying, or making any kind of '*religious displays*'. All tourists can enter regardless of their age or gender and for Non-Muslims, the **Visiting Hours** are from **Sunday to Thursday**: [in **Winter**] 0730 hours till 1030 hrs & 1230 hrs till 1330 hrs [In **Summer** it is +1 hour]. The **Haram Sharif [Temple Mount]** is closed to Non-Muslim visitors on Fridays because Palestinian Muslims along with their families from all the cities around come there for prayer – leaving no space for tourists to walk around. Similarly on Saturdays, the visit to Western Wall is normally discouraged to all except Jews.

In order to enter **Haram Sharif**, both men and women need to be dressed modestly. No religious articles like prayer book or tablet are allowed – and visitors are frequently asked to show their passports at so many places. On the Haram Sharif plaza, the most significant attraction is the **Golden Dome**; in historical literature called **Dome of the Rock [Qubbat El-Sakhrah** in Arabic]. **Ibn e Batuta**, the famous travel writer, narrated in 14th century that:

"Dome of the Rock is a building of extraordinary beauty, solidity, elegance, and singularity of shape."

DOME OF THE ROCK

Also known and seen as **GOLDEN DOME**; the magnificent, splendid and glorious, is the landmark of this ancient city. In all literary descriptions - it is called the DOME OF THE ROCK. Referring to SACREDSITES.COM; "..... following a brief period of Persian rule, Jerusalem was taken over by the Muslim Caliph Umar [RA]; he cleansed the Temple Mount, built a small mosque and dedicated the site to Muslim worship.....The site chosen was the same very rock where previously had stood the Jupiter

temple of the Romans and before that, the two temples of the Jews."

At this blessed site, the 9th [Ummayyad] Caliph, Abd al-Malik, built the great Dome of the Rock between 691-92 AD. The dome is 20 meters high, 10 meters in diameter, and its supporting structure, made of lead, was covered in pure gold. The sacred foundation stone is encircled by sixteen arches that formerly came from different churches in Jerusalem, which were destroyed during the Persian occupation of the city in 614 AD. Writing of the sublimely beautiful structure with its heavenly dome, its columns of rare marble and its brilliant mosaics, the British authority on Muslim architecture, KAC Creswell, once exclaimed:

"Under a scheme whereby the size of every part is related to every other part in some definite proportion, the building instead of being a collection of odd notes becomes a harmonious chord in stones, a sort of living crystal.....Some of the ratios involved are fundamental in time and space, they go right down to the very basis of our nature, and of the physical universe in which we live and move."

Till year 969 AD, the Jews and Christians were allowed to freely visit the Holy City and the Golden Temple. This era of peaceful coexistence ended in that year when control of the city passed to the Fatimid caliphs of Egypt. In 1071 AD the Seljuk Turks defeated the Byzantines, displaced the Egyptians and closed the ages-old pilgrimage routes. The prohibition of Christian pilgrimage angered Western Europe and became a contributing cause of the Crusades, a series of invasions that culminated in the capture of Jerusalem in 1099 AD and the Christian Kingdom lasted almost 90 years till Saladin's take over in 1187 AD. The Jews, who were exiled by the Crusaders, were called back by Saladin and allowed them to settle in Jerusalem.

Jerusalem, in fact the whole Old City, remained charged since thirty centuries with holiness, devotion and spiritual love; the control of the

city shifted frequently between the religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The Moriah ROCK was first a Jebusite place of worship, then the site of the Jewish Temples, next the sanctuary of the Roman god Jupiter, later capped by the Muslim's Dome of the Rock, taken over by the Christians again [for 90 years], and still later a Muslim shrine again. Some are fortunate enough to be inside the Golden Dome, it's awfully moving, regardless of one's faith.

The holy **Golden Dome** is situated on a hill [Mount Moriah], the highest elevation in Jerusalem's proximity. History tells that Jews had also participated in the construction of the **Haram**, laying the groundwork for both the Al-Aqsa and El-Sakhrah mosques – making Jerusalem the third-holiest city, after Makkah and Medina.

The Rock, as you see it today [in 2018] is enclosed by two aisles that circle the holy rock itself and an octagonal wall surrounding it. The central row of sixteen pillars [*four piers and twelve columns*] supporting a rounded drum that transitions into the two-layered dome. The columns are clad in marble and are adorned with exceptional mosaics. The ethereal interior atmosphere is a result of light that pours in from grilled marble windows in exterior walls.

The **Golden Dome** also contains 240 meters long inscription comprising of verses from the holy Qur'an – in an architectural context; the *Bismillah* and the *Kalma e shahada* are repeatedly included in it. Many of the 45,000 blue and gold exterior tiles were installed under Turk Caliph Suleiman the Magnificent.

Four doors, clad with copper by Qaitbay, 18th Mamluk Sultan of Egypt [1468-96 AD], lead into the interior and in the centre lies the **Holy Rock**. Just less than 18m long by 13.25m across, it is surrounded by a grille installed by the Crusaders in the 12th century to prevent relic collectors from breaking off pieces of the ROCK. Underneath is a cave, called as **Bir el-Arwah [Well of Souls]**, where it is believed that the

souls of the nobles and spirits often come, gather and pray.

Till today, it's a holy place in Islam for being the spot from which Nabi Muhammad pbuh ascended to heaven with the angel Gabriel on his Holy Night Journey, in which he met past prophets including Nabi Moses AS and Nabi Jesus AS. The holy Qur'an also speaks reverently of the prophets of Judaism and Christianity, so it is equally sacred for all.

The **Golden Dome** was built originally in **692 AD; collapsed in 1015 AD and rebuilt in 1022-23 AD**. The most recent restoration of the site was carried out in 1998 by Jordan's King Hussein II, who helped the shrine with funding of 80 kilograms of gold required to coat the dome.

One of the reasons why the sanctuary remained intact through the centuries, withstanding earthquakes that destroyed many nearby structures, is its octagonal shape. In short, the Golden Dome is the magnificent structure standing as a symbol of God's glory for 1300 years. It is the place where **THE FOUNDATION STONE** – [Biblical name of the **ROCK**] is located under the octagonal Dome. As per Jewish belief, it was the location of the **Holy of Holies** [explained in later pages] in the Jewish Temple.

The **Golden Dome** and the **ROCK** remained the holiest site in Judaism throughout its history. Jews also identify this **ROCK** as place of the **Binding of Isaac** with an **Altar** [a table-like structure on which religious sacrifices used to be done]. As per Judaism & Christianity, Nabi Abraham AS fulfilled God's test to see if he would be willing to sacrifice his son. Nabi Issac AS was thirty seven years old then. Hebrew Bible's **Genesis** 22:2 states that the event of sacrifice occurred at **Mount Moriah**.

Muslim History has diverse narration for this holy **ROCK** because the Qur'an has given a very explicit version about its account - that Nabi Abraham AS was commanded to sacrifice his

elder son – and Nabi Ishmael AS was about 17 years older than Nabi Isaac AS. Moreover, the place of sacrifice was **ARAFAAT** near Makkah – and not Jerusalem. The Jews, Christians and Muslims keep the same faith; holy Bible's **Genesis** 16:7-16 & 25:17 and the **holy Qur'an** 37:101-106 are referred. In researchers' view, **holy Qur'an's** 11:71–74 and the **Genesis** 17:17 & 18:11 [of the Hebrew Bible] tells the same reality in more detail.

Out of four entrances of the **Baitul Maqdas**, only one is opened daily but on Fridays or Eid like special days all the four doors are made open. The shoe racks are just inside the doors. No prohibition of photography or videos but one cannot focus on women inside except of your own family. There is no *adhan* [call for prayers] in *Baitul Maqdas*; Aqsa's *adhan* is directly heard here and taken sufficient – but all the five prayers are held here separately with its own '*IMAM*' in place except for Fridays' '*Juma Prayer*' ; this prayer is offered in the lead of Aqsa's *IMAM*. At *Juma* prayer times, the Haram is for the women only; no male allowed.

Inside **Haram Sharif**, the security and administrative functions are handled by the volunteer Muslim ladies. Well educated, speaking Arabic, Hebrew and English with equal proficiency - they guide the tourists skilfully and smilingly. Mostly they are teachers of girls' school situated in the Haram complex.

For visitors normally *Bab el Gharab* [Door-1] or *Bab el Jannah* [Door-2] remains open till after *Isha* prayer. Waqf closes and lock the doors of **Haram Sharif** about 15 minutes after the night prayer. On Fridays, the *Bab el Qibla* [Door-4] remains open whole day because non-Muslims are not allowed that day and mostly Muslim women from all around Palestine come there for prayers. **The niche [Mehraab]** can be seen near this door and also the stairs leading down to the cave called '**Fountain [well] of Souls**' or *Bir el Arwah* as referred earlier. Here in the cave, the visitors can touch the holy **ROCK** and feel spiritually elevated.

Just inside front of the Door-1, there are **fingerprints of the Archangel Gabriel AS** who is said to have held back the Rock when Prophet Muhammad pbuh ascended into the heaven on the '*Miraj Night*' [cannot be seen directly due to high wooden shield in between].

Nearby in one corner of the holy rock inside Haram, there is a **small minaret in red & gold**. The people go there and put one hand inside a hole beneath it. When one takes his / her hand out, a gesture of perfumed **WAVE** accompanies for a while – it is a heavenly perfumed breeze and being so since about 15 centuries – inside there happens to be that part of rock over which the Prophet Muhammad pbuh had placed his foot to ride '*burraq*' when going on ascension – a popular Muslim belief it is.

Just inside the *Bab es Silsilah* [Door-3], Jews call it David's Gate of Judgment; there lies a big marble slab. It is said that this slab covers **Prophet Solomon AS's Tomb**; by authentic historical notes Prophet Solomon had breathed his last in a nearby place which is in north-eastern corner at the Haram Plaza.

WHAT ELSE AT HARAM PLAZA....

In the old city of Jerusalem, the tourists are not only attracted by the Dome of the Rock and the Aqsa Mosque only but there are other footprints of the blessings, divine love & human values too which have left immortal impressions over the pages of history. Some of those monuments are mentioned below.

DOME OF THE CHAIN:

It is a free-standing dome located adjacently east of the **Golden Dome** in the Old City of Jerusalem; was constructed during Umayyad Caliph Abd al-Malik [685 AD] **as model for [later] building of Sakhras Golden Dome** in 691-92 AD. One of the oldest structure on the Haram Plaza; and surely was used as a proper mosque till the completion of construction of the Golden Dome and Al-Aqsa Mosque. The Dome of the Chain has no walls; the walls were not originally erected nor ever built later.

When the Crusaders got hold of the city in 1099 AD, they identified this dome as the spot where **St James was martyred**, and

transformed the structure into a chapel dedicated to him within the Templum Domini [**the Golden Dome**]. In 1187 AD, the building was returned to Muslims after Saladin captured Jerusalem from the Crusaders. In 1199 AD, its ceiling and paving were renewed by the then ruling Ayyubids. The Christians had re-used the place once more during 1240–44 when they captured Jerusalem again for a short period. It was renovated by Mamluk Sultan Baybars in 1260–77; which mainly involved re-facing of the *mihrab* with marble. In 1561, under Ottoman Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, the tiles of the *mihrab* were glazed. The last major restoration of this Dome was done in 1975-76.

In ancient religious histories, there is a mention of Nabi **Solomon AS's Chain** - said to be suspended between Heaven and Earth - where Dome of the Chain now stands. The chain had one characteristic. If two men approached it to solve a point of litigation, only the honest and upright man could take hold of it; the unjust man could only see it moving out of his reach. The Jews and Christians rightly say it as **Dome of the Chain** because of Nabi Solomon's Chain but Arabs translated the word CHAIN as '**Silsilah**' without assigning any reason or event that what type of '*Silsilah*' is attached with it.

During construction of the **Golden Dome** in 691-92 AD and the **Al-Aqsa** in 715 AD, the place was used as mosque for the Muslim builders and others. But when the building work completed, the practice of regular prayers discontinued here because the two major places had their separate prayers arrangements regularly till today [except the intervals mentioned for Crusader's 90 years period]. Today there is no prayer held in the said Dome – thus the travelers often see the small children playing football there.

The building consists of a domed structure with two concentric open arcades but without walls. The dome, resting on a hexagonal drum, is made of timber but then covered by lead sheets to save it from bad weathers. The *qibla* wall contains the prayer niche and is flanked by two

smaller columns. The Dome of the Chain has a diameter of 14 meters [46 ft], making it the third largest building on Haram Plaza after the al-Aqsa and the Golden Dome.

It appears as fact that Dome of the Chain was used as a model for the Dome of the Rock – the **Golden Dome** – both contain two concentric polygons – but the Golden Dome is three times the size of the Dome of the Chain. The only difference is that the Golden Dome is octagonal whereas the Dome of the Chain is hexagonal – but the philosophy and proportionate dimensions are mathematically the same. The alternate purpose of the Dome of the Chain is unknown otherwise.

DOME OF ASCENSION:

Dome of Ascension [Arabic: *Qubbat al-Miraj*] is a small, free-standing dome built by Crusaders in north of the **Golden Dome** [Dome of the Rock] at the Haram plaza. Though sign plate posted there in Arabic describes that Prophet Muhammad pbuh ascended to Heaven during his 'Night Journey' from this place but the doubts prevail because the Prophet pbuh was surely taken up from the holy rock now lying under the Golden Dome.

The scholars hold that this **Dome** was built by the Crusaders as part of the Christian *Templum Domini* [Crusaders' given name to the **Golden Dome**], probably as a baptistry [*the ancient Christians used to build a small dome / place like this along side a big church to administer the baptismal rituals*].

The structure and the column capitals are of Frankish style and construction, but some repair or renovation was done in or after the Ayyubid dynasty period. An Arabic inscription on the sign plate dated 1201 AD describes it as rededicated to waqf.

DOME OF THE SPIRITS [or TABLETS]:

If you walk from the Golden Dome towards Dome of Ascension, you'll see another Dome further down in the same direction – standing alone and much lower in height. In Arab tradition this is known as the Dome of Tablets - to commemorate the Tablets of the spiritual Law like that of Ten Commandments for the Jewish people or the Ark of the Covenant **so there is also a theory that this is the Foundation Stone where the Holy of Holies was actually placed – NOT inside the Golden Dome.**

Some modern Jews researchers believe that the **Dome of the Tablets** is a place where their two Temples were built – though only few scholars agree with the theory. Below is an interesting account of this **Dome of the Tablets** as researched by an Israeli scholar who worked on the '**mystery of Golden Dome**' and the holy ROCK in it; see an essay from www.upi.com:

Israeli scholar's major discovery:

By DAVID E. ANDERSON, UPI Religion Writer
Feb. 26, 1983 - key points in **verbatim**:

*"WASHINGTON -- Scholars have generally maintained that no trace of the Jewish temple is to be found on Temple Mount..... It has generally been assumed that both the Temple of Solomon and the Second Temple, reconstructed by Herod, stood where the Dome of the Rock now stands. **Dr Asher Kaufman** [a professor of physics & Archaeology at Hebrew University 15 years] **disputes that.***

*Kaufman, using ancient literary sources and measurements of hewn rock remains on Temple Mount, **concluded that the Jewish Temple originally was located on the northern end of the Dome of the Rock platform, about 330 feet north of the Dome of the Rock.....It is known in Arabic as the **Dome of the Spirits** or the **Dome of the Tablets.** Kaufman maintains***

that this flat rock is the Foundation Stone in the Holy of Holies on which the Ark of the Covenant rested.

Kaufman also contends that the Golden Gate, the primary ancient entrance to the Temple Mount area.....will run directly through the cupola known as the Dome of the Tablets."

UPI.com is the official site of **UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL** based in USA with a history of **reliable reporting since 1907**. The rest is being left for my readers.

AL-MARWANI PRAYER HALL:

In western literature it is known as **SOLOMON'S STABLES** but during years 1996-99 it was made a part of the Aqsa Mosque after converting it into a Muslim prayer hall. It is an underground vaulted space, some 500 sq m in area; at the bottom of stairs which lead down from the al-Aqsa Mosque to the base of the southern wall of the **Haram Sharif** [Temple Mount] in the Old City of Jerusalem. It lies 12½m below the courtyard and feature twelve rows of pillars and arches; later added lights and floor tiles and renamed it the **Al-Marwani Prayer Hall**.

The structure was mostly built by King Herod as part of his extension of the platform of the Temple Mount southward to the Ophel. The Herodian engineers constructed the enormous platform with a series of **vaulted arches supported by eighty-eight pillars** resting on massive Herodian blocks and divided into **twelve rows of galleries**. Originally it was a storage space of the **Second Temple** – but visitors are rarely permitted to enter the areas.

The underground space for the most part remained empty except for the Crusaders period who had converted it into a stable for the cavalry. The rings for tethering horses can still be seen on some of the pillars. The structure has been called **Solomon's Stables** since Crusader times of Baldwin II [King of Jerusalem

in 1118-31 AD]. In the winter of 1996 the **Islamic Waqf** acquired permit to use Solomon's Stables as an alternative place of worship for 10,000 worshippers in occasional rainy days or the holy month of Ramadan. Later the Waqf created a mosque - the largest mosque there now.

DOME OF THE PROPHET:

It is an octagonal dome structure located northwest of the Golden Dome in the Haram Sharif compound. Several Muslim writers, most notably **al-Suyuti**, claimed that the site of the dome is where Nabi Muhammad pbuh led the prophets and angels in prayer on the night of **Me'raj** before ascending to the Heaven. Endowment documents from the Ottoman period indicate that a portion of King's charity fund of the al-Aqsa Mosque was dedicated to maintain the lighting of an **oil-lamp in the Dome of the Prophet** each night. Till now it is the common belief of Muslims.

In 1538 AD, Mohammad Bek, the Governor of Jerusalem had a prayer niche built in this location. The Ottoman Sultan Abdul Al-Majid later ordered the building of an octagonal dome that is based on eight marble columns over the niche. The dome is much smaller than the other free-standing domes in the vicinity. During 1620s AD it was re-constructed to present day's dome.

The **Dome of the Prophet** is also known as the **Dome of Gabriel** that serves as a symbolic monument rather than a religious building. Beyond this structure, there are no authentic sources which point to the accurate location of where the Prophet pbuh led the *salah* of all the earlier prophets during that blessed night. And Allah (Glorified and Exalted is He) knows best.

DOME OF PROPHET'S LOVERS:

It is a square building situated towards the northern side of **al-Aqsa**; was a place where sufi sheikhs used to gather for the *zikr* of Allah. This dome structure was built by the Ottoman

Sultan Mahmud II in 1808 AD. This open structure is based on four stone pillars built over a platform that is half a meter higher than the rest of al-Aqsa's grounds.

NABI SOLOMAN'S DEATH PLACE:

A building, located at the rear end of the Haram Plaza is believed to be the place where the Prophet Suleiman AS passed away while leaning on his staff. It presently functions as a Girls School. Nabi AS ruled over Judea and Jerusalem for 30 years, and his public work was largely carried out by the *jinn*s [God's another creature about whom the people mostly believe that they are all-powerful] which were made [like the birds etc] subservient to Nabi Suleiman AS.

And then the time destined by God came for the death of Nabi Suleiman AS while sitting holding his staff, overseeing the *jinn*s at work - the *jinn*s could not know about his death for a long time because the Nabi AS had died sitting in this position. Days passed, and the king's death became known only when his supporting stick, eaten by termites, gave way and the body fell to the ground; **Al-Qur'an** 34:13-14 is referred for more details.

SABEEL QASIM PASHA:

It is an Ottoman era fountain located on south-western side of **Al-Aqsa** close to the Chain Gate; built by a prince of Jerusalem Qasim Pasha in year 1526-27 AD. The fountain is octagonal shaped with 16 faucets topped with a wooden sunshade; has been mostly used by worshipers for ablution & for drinking until the 1940s. Today, it stands as a colossal structure only.

YOUSAF [Ayyubi] DOME:

Built in 1191 AD by the conqueror Yusuf bin Ayyub, more famous as **SalaDin Ayyubi**. It was renovated in 1681 AD by the Ottoman Sultan Mehmet IV. The dome's structure is open from all sides, except for the south which is sealed by a wall. It is built on two stone columns and

contains two inscriptions. On the northern face of the southern wall, there are stone carvings and a marble-faced blind-niche. The exterior of the dome is covered in lead sheeting.

DOMES OF AL-KHIDR:

It is a small hexagonal dome built in the 16th Century AD on the far north-western corner of the Haram Plaza. This structure marks the spot where some Muslims believe a righteous man, **Al-Khidr** [see **Al-Qur'an** 18: 65-82]; a figure ascribed in the holy Qur'an possessing great wisdom and mystic knowledge used to sit. In various non-Islamic traditions, Khidr is described as a messenger, *wali*, slave of God or angel.

In the religious literatures from the world, the figure of **al-Khidr** has been syncretized or amalgamated over time with various other figures including but not limited to Vishnu in India, Sorush in Iran, Saint Sarkis the Warrior, Saint George in Asia Minor and the Levant, and John the Baptist in Armenia. However, there are no authentic sources to back the above claim. And Allah [Glorified and Exalted] knows best. The dome is based on six marble columns and includes a niche built **with red stone inside**.

DOMES OF THE SCALE:

[aka **Burhan ad-Din pulpit**]; is a Mamluk era pulpit located in the southern part of the Haram Sharif plateau. The Supreme Judge Burhan ad-Din bin Jamaa' ordered the building of a marble pulpit in 1309 AD to replace the portable one made of wood. The pulpit has an entrance and steps leading to a stone seat reserved for the speaker. It is topped with an attractive **Dome of the Scale** because of its adjacent location to one of the arched gates which were earlier known as scales. Later, only the Eid sermons used to be performed here but even that practice was stopped sometime in the 17th century.

MOROCCAN GATE MINARET:

[1st Minaret] It was built in 1278 AD on south-western corner of the Al-Aqsa Mosque by the Mamluk judge Sharif Ad-Din Al-Khalili. The 23-meters high minaret is the shortest minaret inside Al-Aqsa and stands without any foundations. The top of the minaret was damaged in the earthquake that hit Jerusalem on 11th July 1927 and was repaired by the Islamic Council which then complemented it with a dome; later covered with lead sheets.

It was built in the traditional Syrian style, with a square-shaped base and shaft. The niche is surrounded by a square chamber that ends in lead covered stone dome.

GHAWANIMA MINARET:

[2nd Minaret] It was built at north-western corner of the Haram Plaza in 1298 AD by architect Sharaf al-Din al-Khalili. It is considered the most decorated tower and is almost entirely made of stone, apart from a timber canopy over the *muezzin's* balcony. It is squared shaped minaret located near Bani Ghanim's Gate in the Islamic Quarter. Six storeys high with a height of 38.5 meters it is the tallest minaret on the **Haram Sharif plateau** with a staircase of 120 steps.

The western tunnel dug by archaeologists in 1980s had weakened the minaret's foundations – thus was renovated in 2001 AD. Due to its firm structure, this minaret has nearly been untouched by the earthquakes. The stairway is externally located on the first two floors, but becomes an internal spiral structure from the third floor until it reaches the *muezzin's* balcony.

BAB AL SISILA MINARET:

[3rd Minaret] It is a Mamluk era minaret built by Prince Saif Ad-Din Tankz in 1329 AD. It rises near Chain Gate along Al-Aqsa's western border with its square-shaped minaret and having 80 step stairs. The minaret was restored in 1927 AD after being damaged in an earthquake. Muslims are **NOT ALLOWED** to enter it or use this

minaret because it lies just over the Western Wall.

This minaret is built in the traditional Syrian square tower type and is made entirely out of stone. Since the 16th-century, it has been the tradition that the best *muezzin* [saying the *adhan* - the call to prayer], is assigned to this minaret because the first call to each of the five daily prayers is raised from it, giving the signal for the *muezzins* of mosques throughout Jerusalem to follow the timings of *Salat* & prayer.

TRIBES GATE MINARET:

[aka **Salaya minaret**] is located on northern edge of al-Aqsa Mosque; first built by the Governor of Jerusalem Saif Ad-Din Qatlo Pasha. It used to be a square-shaped minaret until the Ottoman rulers ordered its reconstruction in 1599 AD making it **the only cylindrical-shaped minaret** inside the Haram Sharif. Later, the minaret was renovated twice, first in 1927 AD after being damaged in an earthquake, and then in 1967 AD after being damaged during Israeli war; its dome is covered with lead sheets.

MINARET AL-ASBAT:

It was the last but most notable minaret which was built in 1367 AD. It is composed of a cylindrical stone shaft [built later by the Ottomans]. The shaft narrows above the *muezzin's* balcony, and is dotted with circular windows, ending with a bulbous dome. The dome was reconstructed after the earthquake [of 11th July 1927].

There are no minarets in the **east of the Al-Aqsa Mosque**. However, in 2006, King Abdullah II of Jordan announced his intention to build a fifth minaret overlooking the Mount of Olives but not YET on ground.

UMAR MOSQUE AT HARAM:

This small room, in the far left corner of the **Qibly Hall** in Al-Aqsa is known as Masjid Umar, in honour of the 2nd Caliph Umar bin Khattab RA who visited Jerusalem in 638 AD. After taking over the city, Caliph Umar RA asked Sophronius to take him to the Foundation Rock in al-Aqsa sanctuary because Prophet Muhammad pbuh had ascended to heavens from there. When they reached there, Caliph Umar RA was shocked to find it covered with rubbish as the Romans were using the area as a rubbish tip. Caliph Umar RA instantly knelt down and with his own hands started clearing the area. When the companions saw this, they followed the suit and soon the whole area was cleared.

It was in Caliph Umar's honour that this small room was built by the later Muslim rulers and named it Umar Mosque. Today, that room is being used as an emergency clinic.

THE ISLAMIC MUSEUM:

It is in **Al-Aqsa Mosque** compound in its south-western corner; was established in 1923 AD; considered to be the first Islamic museum founded in Palestine. Initially, it was housed at Ar-Ribat Al-Mansour, which is located opposite the Islamic Waqf headquarters. In 1929 AD, the museum was moved from there to its current location - next to the **Moroccan Gate**.

The museum has two halls that form a right angle. This western hall was formerly a mosque known as the **Mosque of Moors** while the southern hall was the portion earmarked for the Women only. This Moroccan Mosque was built during the 12th century AD – in the Ayyubi era, however the accurate year for its construction and the name of its founder remains unknown. In the past the mosque was dedicated to the followers of the Maliki School of jurisprudence.

The Islamic Museum includes rare archaeological and artistic collections which pertain to the various Islamic historical eras. In addition, the museum has about 750 manuscripts of the Qur'an with the oldest copy dating back to the 8th Century AD. There is also a copy of the holy

Qur'an from the Mamluk Sultan Barsbay which was written between the years 1422-37 AD. With its dimensions of 110cm x 170cm it is considered the largest copy of holy Qur'an in Palestine.

restaurants in the Eastern Jerusalem particularly the Old City and near Damascus Gate are closed and business hours go changed. In Muslim areas, eating or drinking in public during the fasting hours should be avoided.

Seeing the **Old City** usually involves a lot of **walking** around holy places and ancient sites each day. The terrain is often stony and irregular; however, charming also. To enjoy the trip to Jerusalem, you should do some walking during few weeks before departure. Get used to walking a km or so at odd times daily. Buy new trainers or soft shoes for the trip but wear them for a few days before departure so their stiffness should go lost. If in doubt about your fitness, must discuss with your doctor or clinic.

Walking or travelling in this holy city is quite safe. Even during days of Israel-Palestine fighting in the streets; the scene rarely involves bombs and bullets; terrorist incidents are extremely rare in whole of Israel and Palestinian areas. For tourists it is often said that: "**Daily life in Jerusalem involves buns rather than guns.**"

The **OLD CITY** of Jerusalem, a magic and majestic landscape of magnificence and splendour – since ever one of the world's holiest and most visited locations. Its ruins are significant to the three monotheistic religions: **Judaism, Christianity and Islam**; a walk through its hallowed passages is an exciting and life-changing source of historic, cultural and spiritual uplift. Visiting the Old City of Jerusalem is like travelling to a mystical, miraculous and amazing new world.

The **Old City and its Walls** are a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1981. The Old City stands surrounded by walls for its defence since ancient times; see the **Amarna letters** dating back to years 1330s BC. In year 1010 BC, Nabi David AS conquered **Jebus**, renamed it **City of David** and started expanding it. Prophet Solomon AS, while building the First Temple which he had inherited in year 970 BC, also extended the city walls in order to protect

OLD-CITY WALL & GATES

Ready For The Holy Journey? Jerusalem is best visited in **autumn** [September to November] or **spring** [March to May]; summers can get hot [normally 28-35 C] and winters go just cold [ranging from 11-15 C] but sometimes very cold - and rainy, too. Summer in Jerusalem is hot and dry but often mild at night. However, the **religious holidays** - Easter, Passover, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Sukkot [*the dates vary each year*] attract large number of pilgrims to Israel; thus accommodation prices go double, shops and restaurants go closed and public transport seldom open.

During **Ramadan**, the month when Muslims fast from dawn to sunset, many cafes and

the Temple. However, the entire city was destroyed, including the Temple and its outer walls in c.586 BC by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon.

After about half a century, the Persians conquered Babylonia; Cyrus II of Persia allowed the Jews to return to Judea and rebuild the Temple. In year 445 BC, governor **Nehemiah** got re-built the broken walls of Jerusalem. The full description of rebuilding is described in Chapter 3 of the **Hebrew Bible**.

Details are: **The Sheep Gate** [leading to market where lambs & sheep were sold for sacrifices in Temple]; **Fish Gate** [also called Ephraim Gate]; **Inspectors' Gate** [Also known as **Council Gate**; where the elders of the city used to decide local disputes]; **Valley Gate** [leading towards nearby Hinnom Valley]; **Dung Gate** [through which the garbage was removed from the city]; **Fountain Gate** [the primary access point to the Gihon Spring, the city's main water source]; **Water Gate** [the main way leading to the Temple-I]; **Horse Gate** [for Prophet David AS [King]'s chariot to pass through].

FOUND & LOST: During 140-116 BC, the city walls were expanded more and renovated; Herod the Great in year 44 AD, made additions near today's Jaffa Gate; but the Roman attack of **70 AD** had completely destroyed it along with **Second Temple** – thereafter Jerusalem remained without protective walls for over two centuries. For nearly a thousand years, there was, of course, protective wall around Jerusalem, good or bad, but there is no authentic history about it till 1033 AD when the city was destroyed by a gigantic earthquake. It was once more reconstructed after taken over by Saladin Ayyubi in 1187 AD.

In the 16th century, during reign of the Ottoman Empire in the region, Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent rebuilt the city walls completely afresh - **in 1535-42 AD**, that is the wall which exists now. Today's traveller finds the same **Wall of Jerusalem**, about 4kms around, their average height is 12 meters and the average thickness is 2.5 meters at base. The wall

contains 34 watchtowers and seven main gates open for traffic, with two minor gates reopened by archaeologists of 20th century.

THE OLD-CITY GATES:

During different periods, the Old City walls got varying number of gates. During the Crusaders' Kingdom for instance, there were four gates, one on each side. The current walls by Ottomans provided **six gates**; several older gates were filled and walled up with time. The number increased to seven after addition of a **New Gate in 1887**.

The walls around the Muslim shrines, the **Golden Dome & Al-Aqsa Mosque**, lead the travellers into an arena of another set of [inner] gates; one finds massive blocks of dressed stone of the Herodian times and the overlying courses of smaller stones of later restorations - some **NOT** important. However, there are Five Gates now in use being **Bab al-Magharib, Chain Gate** [Bab es-Silsileh], the **Cotton-Merchants' Gate** [Bab el-Qattanin], the **Iron Gate** [Bab el-Hadid], and **Watchman's Gate**.

COTTON MERCHANT'S GATE is the most beautiful gate leading to al-Aqsa Mosque from western side. It was first built by Mamluk Sultan Muhammad in 737 AD in typical style; it is a combination of alternating red and yellow stripes, black and white stones, topped by *muqarnas*. The gate was re-built in the 14th century. During the 19th century, the outside of this gate was a popular place of prayers for Jews.

HERODS GATE: [also the **Flowers Gate**] Historical accounts indicate that **in 1099 AD** the Crusader army entered the Old City through a breach located near this Herod's Gate - was also believed to have led to King Herod's **Palace**. It was constructed by **Sultan Suleiman I** in 1537-38 AD - that original entrance does not exist nowadays; the current entrance was re-built later in 1875. Right outside the gate was an old cemetery. In 1998 and during several subsequent excavations [the latest in 2004],

archaeologists dug in the eastern area of Herod's Gate and found **nine archaeological layers** of the Old City – covering from the Iron Age up through the Ottoman period.

MOROCCAN GATE: This gate lies along the western wall of al-Aqsa Mosque - also known as the '**Maghrabi**' Gate. Its residents had originally come from North Africa after **Saladin Ayyubi** conquered Jerusalem. The Moroccan Gate is actually built on top of another gate from the Herodian period known as **Barclay's Gate**; which was once identified as one of the **Second Temple** period gates. It was blocked with stones in ending 10th century.

During 12th century [or perhaps later], it was rebuilt at new ground level. This area was cleared, houses demolished and made a big open courtyard in 1967 and the inhabitants were shifted elsewhere. There is currently a wooden ramp that gives direct access from the Western Wall area to the Moroccan Gate. **This is the only place from where non-Muslims can get access into al-Aqsa and Haram Plaza.**

GOLDEN GATE: Now closed – on the east side of the Haram Sharif's retaining wall, one can see this gate, an elaborate gatehouse and portal; it could be a **Byzantine Christian structure**. However, gigantic stones in the walls nearby date back to the time of Nehemiah. In 1969, a massive arch was found underneath the Golden Gate and adjoining walls – considered that the ruins were of the **Nehemiah's East Gate** [then also called **Shushan Gate**] mentioned in **Nehemiah** 3:29 – an era of 5th century BC. But the gate stands here in the present form since 630 AD at least. The Golden Gate actually has two doorways; one of this is called as the **Gate of Repentance**.

Church claimed that in 614 AD, when the Persian Empire conquered and briefly ruled Jerusalem, they took back to Persia parts of the True Cross [believed to be the cross of the Crucifixion] from **Church of the Holy Sepulchre**. Fifteen years later, after defeating the Persians, Heracles the Byzantine emperor, brought the True Cross back

– via the Mount of Olives to the Temple Mount, and then to the Church of Holy Sepulchre – entering through this gate. On another account, the Christian's Gospel of Matthew holds that **Jesus entered through** the then Sheep gate – **today's Lions Gate**. In 1540-41 AD Ottoman Turks walled up this gate – and since then it is closed by all means.

Outside this Golden Gate, now there is vast graveyard but interestingly, the adherents to Islam, Judaism and Christianity all desire to be buried here. As a result, cemeteries dominate the immediate vicinity surrounding the Golden Gate where Jews and Christians are buried side by side with the Muslims.

LIONS GATE [Bab al Asbat]: Re-built in 1535-40 with four lions at its forehead; the Turkish Sultan dreamed about the lions spiritually guarding the thrones of Prophets David & Solomon AS. This entrance leads to **Via Dolorosa** [*Holy Christ's path to crucifixion at Golgotha*]. Through history it has also been known as **St Mary's Gate** - as Virgin Mary's birthplace is 30 yards inside this gate.

DAMASCUS GATE: Also known as **Bab al-Amood** built in year 1537 AD, in the north wall. It is the busiest gate on all weekdays with travellers & tourists visiting Jerusalem. It performs a visible division between the Old City and modern Jerusalem. The most architecturally impressive of the Ottoman Old City gates, Damascus Gate is the heart of Arab Jerusalem. It is also called **Bab al-Amood** because Roman columns of Byzantine era [324-638 AD] were found here.

Excavations done under this gate discovered the foundations and a triple-arched gateway dating back to the times of Roman Emperor Hadrian [135 AD]; Turk ruler built this gate upon the ruins of Hadrian's same 2nd century gate. Outside the gate steps lead to a wide plaza where the tourists take rest & chat.

NEW GATE: Also known as **Bab Al-Jadid**; built in the northwest corner of the Old City in 1887-

89 AD when Christians demanded the Turkish ruler to give them direct access to their residential quarter and monasteries. In the 1920-30s, the **New Gate** had an iron gate operated by the Police being the border between Jordan and Israel, called No Man's Land. The Jordanians kept the gate normally closed until the 1967's war – now open.

JAFFA GATE: [aka **Bab el-Khalil**] – a structure just inside this Gate has been identified dating back to 1st century BC's Jerusalem; believed to be foundations of a defensive tower King Herod built for his palace. He had built **three towers** here in 37-34 BC; one of these now known as the **Tower of David** - still stands today. Near Herod's Palace there is also a raised platform from which the Roman procurator held court [located outside the Citadel]. Above the Gate is a stone plate which commemorates the date of construction and its Ottoman builders.

As you enter Jaffa Gate, to the left is the **Christian Quarter**, to right the **Armenian Quarter**, and straight ahead lies the **Muslim Quarter**. During the Crusader conquest of Jerusalem in 1099 AD, Muslim defenders and their wives and children sought refuge and protection inside the Tower of David. Much later, beheadings also took place here during 1860's; Jerusalem's holy past cannot hide its bloody footprints, too.

In 1898 AD an opening was built into the wall near Jaffa Gate to allow the German Kaiser Wilhelm II enter Jerusalem without dismounting his horse. Later, the mayor of Jerusalem also welcomed the British army here and surrendered the city **on 9th December 1917**; Brig Gen Watson and Lt Col Bailey were the first to enter. Two days later, the British General Allenby entered, on foot, through this Gate and formally accepted the beg for surrender. Accompanying him was Major Lawrence - better known in history as the **Lawrence of Arabia**. During the years 1914-17, the population of Jerusalem shrank from 85,000 to 55,000 residents.

On **17th October 1938**, the Hitler's army attacked Jerusalem but just two days later, the British army stormed all gates of the Old City including Jaffa Gate and reclaimed their rule again. **On 17th May 1948**, Jewish forces did not gain control of this gate so it remained with the Jordanians till 1967.

ZION GATE: [aka **Bab Al-Nabi Dawud**] built near the west corner of the southern wall; connects King David's tomb and the Last Supper Room to the Jewish Quarter of the Old City – named so because the gate faces and provides access to **Mount Zion**. The gate was built by Suleiman the Magnificent in 1540 AD but the walls near the Zion Gate date from the Hasmonean periods. Since then, a Jewish family living in the Jewish Quarter held the key to this Gate.

On **17th May 1948**, the Jewish forces launched a siege on the Zion Gate and broke through two days later. However, **on 28th May**, two rabbis exited the Zion Gate holding white flags and surrendered the Jewish Quarter to Arabs – so this Gate remained with Jordanian guards till 1967 when the Israeli troops intercepted while dashing their way to victory. Later, the Gate was renovated by Israel government in 2008.

DUNG GATE; aka **Gate of Silwan** after the nearby Silwani village, was re-built in 1538-40 by Suleiman the Magnificent along with the main wall. It derives its name from the fact that refuse and ashes were escorted out of the city through this gate and dumped in the nearby Hinnom Valley since centuries. It was a gate for trash from not only the Old City but the Haram Sharif as well - today it stands as the main entrance to the **Western [Wailing] Wall**. The original Dung Gate also existed nearby which was in use since the **First Temple Period** - the 10th century BC. This makes it the **oldest of the gates of Jerusalem in continuous use**, though in slightly modified locations; see Hebrew Bible's Book of **Nehemiah** 2:13.

Inside **Dung Gate**, is a covered wooden ramp which takes the non-Muslim visitors direct to the

Haram Sharif [Temple Mount]. In fact there was a solid built ramp which was in use since decades. In February 2004, a wall which supported the 800-year-old ramp jutting out from the **Western [Wailing] Wall** partially collapsed. In 2007, the Israel Authority built a temporary wooden pedestrian bridge to the Moroccan Gate - no permanent structure has been constructed yet. The damaged ramp, situated beneath the bridge, is preserved for further archaeological research.

HULDAH GATE: Also called **15 STEPS OF ASCENSION**; consist of two separate gates, both located in the southern wall of the Haram Plaza - both are now sealed shut - one called the **Triple Gate** while the other as **Double Gate**. The exact date of their construction is unknown but believed to have been raised during the Herodian period. The etymology of the name **Huldah** is a mystery; mostly believed that the name derives from the First Temple period Hebrew prophetess Huldah; **II Kings 22:14-20** is referred. One Jewish sect links it to the Second Temple periods after **Southern Steps** excavations at the Archaeological Park. Further excavation near the **Haram Sharif [Temple Mount]** itself is prohibited by the Israeli government.

At top of the **Southern Steps**, there stands the **Triple Gate** in east — since closed with stones but had once served as entrance into the Temple Courts. At the far west of the staircase stands a **Double Gate** — today only a portion of this gate and its lintel can be seen. The gates represent entrance & exit of the temple with alternating wide and narrow steps with ample biblical references. Here a popular activity for tourists often includes reading one psalm on each wide step, moving up two steps to the next wide step for next reading – as revival of Nabi David AS's rhymes for singing.

[The holy Qur'an tells that when Nabi David AS used to sing [in praise of Allah], the birds around in the air used to join the Prophet AS to make it as singing in chorus.]

The Jewish religious literature holds that the **fifteen psalms** were sung by the priests who used to stand on these 15 Southern Steps. Most tourists prefer standing at the remnants of these centuries old **Stairs of Ascent**, knowing that the stairs are not taking them anywhere as the huge wall is just ahead – some go to the last stair. While sitting there **the Jews** keep the concept that the Temple is behind the wall – AND the **Muslim tourists** imagine they are at the door steps of their **Golden Dome of Haram Sharif** [behind the wall] and the angles are coming down and going up in front of them.

The Last Word: Wars, sieges, destruction and rebuilding have changed the face and landscape around Jerusalem many times. Trash and debris collected over the millennia have filled in many of the valleys that remind the tourists of divided and re-defined city. However, since the Ottomans of the 16th century in saddles, these primary gates of Jerusalem mostly remained unchanged. It is likely these gates were built on prior gates, perhaps even dating back to the times of Nabi Solomon AS, and later Nehemiah - mysteries are yet to be discovered.

indication to Jerusalem - though the Holy Qur'an does not mention the city by name.

A common misconception: most Muslims consider the **Golden Dome** of Jerusalem as **Al-Aqsa** Mosque; these are two different buildings. Golden Dome is a shrine whose significance is derived from the Foundation Stone [holy ROCK], which lies at its heart. As opposed to the Dome of Rock's Byzantine style, Aqsa Mosque is the feature of early Islamic architecture. It is about 100 yards away from the **Golden Dome** and is one of the **oldest & holiest** in the world. During Nabi Muhammad pbuh's lifetime - the term used for Aqsa as mosque didn't mean a physical structure but **location**.

Before the Muslims' take over, Jerusalem was held by the Byzantine Empire, and Emperor Justinian had a 6th century Christian church here dedicated to the holy Mary, which was burnt down by the Persians. When **Caliph Umar RA**, in 638 AD, visited the Temple Mount in the company of Archbishop Sophronius - he said prayer on the Foundation ROCK, the site from where Nabi Muhammad pbuh ascended to heaven.

Then Caliph Umar established a small mosque there for Muslims – most probably over the remains of that demolished church. That structure was later expanded by the Umayyad caliph Abd al-Malik and finished by his son al-Walid I in [705 or] 715 AD. The building was repeatedly destroyed by earthquakes and rebuilt, until the reconstruction in 1033 AD by the Fatimid caliph 'Ali az-Zahir and that version of the structure is what can be seen in the present day.

Since then the Muslims are in control of Jerusalem city. The period of Muslim worship on the Temple Mount was only interrupted by the Crusaders, who held Jerusalem during 1099-1187 AD and plundered the **Golden Dome** and **Al-Aqsa** Mosque (*far less generous than Muslim Caliph Umar, who had spared the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and remains of other religions when he took over Jerusalem*).

AL-AQSA MOSQUE

Before Islam, there were definitely holy and blessed places on **Mount Moriah** in Jerusalem; including a Byzantine church destroyed by Persians in year 614 AD - at place where **Al-Aqsa** stands now.

The *Salat* [prayer or *Nimaz*] was made mandatory for Muslims when Prophet Muhammad pbuh came back from **Mir'aj**; see the holy **Qur'an 17:1**. Al-Aqsa, literally means 'the farthest' - '**farthest from Makkah**', an

The place of Caliph Umar's first mosque is still available to see by tourists; which is a room near the niche of the present Aqsa mosque – called **Masjid e Umar**.

The Haram comprises nearly **one-sixth** of the walled Old City and can accommodate thousands of worshippers on festival prayers like Eid. **Al-Aqsa** itself is 35,000 sq ft in size and including its outer precincts it can accommodate up to 50,000 worshippers. The mosque itself, divided by columns into seven aisles, allows room for about 5000 Muslims to bow down their heads before Allah on the carpeted floor.

It has four minarets and a beautiful, tile-covered facade with 14 Romanesque arches. The Mosque's main ablution fountain, known as **El-Kas** [the cup], which is used by worshippers, is located between **Al-Aqsa** and the **Golden Dome**. It originally dates back to 709 AD [before completion of Al-Aqsa] AND re-erected by *Sultan Qaitbay* in 1455 AD.

AL-AQSA Mosque is on the southern end of the Golden Dome, which non-Muslim visitors can access from the Western Wall plaza through **Moroccan [Maghrabi] Gate**. Muslim visitors can enter from any side – but after showing their passports to the Security Guards proving they are Muslim tourists. Tourists must dress modestly, and women should cover their hair, arms and legs. Shoes are not allowed inside the mosque but are left outside on shelves on entrances.

Archaeologists believe that when the Crusaders captured Jerusalem in 1099 AD, they concluded that the mosque was the true site for Solomon's First Temple – **and NOT the [Golden] Dome of the Rock** as claimed by Jewish literature.

Across the centuries, **Al-Aqsa Mosque** has been extensively restored and renovated; most recently during 1938-43, when columns of white *Carrara* marble, supplied by Mussolini, were installed and a new ceiling was built at the expense of King Farouk of Egypt. In 1967, it was little damaged by gunfire and in 1969 fire

damage was deliberately done which destroyed some of the priceless 12th century interior detail. Despite this, the 7-aisled interior is impressive and is home to a striking and carved **mihrab**.

The early Muslim caliphs of Jerusalem used to reside in Al-Aqsa compound, but Crusaders converted it to the **Order of the Temple** in 1149 AD; they used the mosque first as their **Royal Palace**, then as the headquarters of the new Knights Templar AND finally made it church. One of the mosque's many rooms still has the medieval rose window it had when it was Crusader rulers' high residence.

After Makkah and Madina, the Jerusalem city is the third most revered holy site in Islam. The magnificent **Golden Dome** and the nearby **Al-Aqsa** are the principal remaining shrines on the Temple Mount. The structure has undergone many repairs and decorative additions through the centuries, but its basic design remained substantially unchanged and it stands as the greatest achievements of Islamic architecture related with the ancient time zone.

The AL-AQSA witnessed a turbulent 20th century. On **20th July 1951**, while on visit to Al-Aqsa Mosque, King Abdullah of Jordan was shot dead here by a Palestinian while attending Friday prayers in the company of his grandson, Prince Hussein. The Palestinian gunman fired three fatal bullets into the King's head and chest; Prince Hussein was hit too but a medal that had been pinned to Hussein's chest deflected the bullet and saved his life. The assassin named Mustafa Ashu, 21 then, was shot dead by the king's bodyguards at the spot.

Inside AL-AQSA, once there was a **Mimber of Nur Ad Din Zinki** [1146-74 AD]. Even prior to the liberation of Jerusalem from the Crusaders, Zinki had got this pulpit built in Aleppo in 1168 AD, with the intention of installing it here when AQSA be freed. Zinki; however, passed away before his dream could be realised. It was at the hands of Saladin Ayyubi that the pulpit made its way to the Al-Aqsa Mosque. The pulpit was made from cedar wood, decorated with ivory

and sea shells. A crown, an emblem of the Tankaziyah state, also features but was probably added later.

The original *mimbar* was burnt to ashes in a terrorist attack on Al-Aqsa Mosque on **21st August 1969** by a mental-case Australian Christian named Rohan. A new *mimbar* was then made in Jordan; its shape, size & decoration made identical to the old one and was installed in the mosque in 2007.

Behind the *mimbar* or pulpit is a rock, originally from the Dome of the Ascension, which bears the left footprint of holy **Jesus** it is believed. Near the *mihrab* is a small mosque, known as the **Mosque of Umar** [RA]. Under the mosque is a large hall. It leads to one of the original entrance passages to the Temple Mount during the period of the Second Temple. In the courtyard on the extreme south-west is a large building, formerly known as the **Mosque of the Moors**, which now contains the **Islamic Museum**.

There are 15 green coloured gates leading to the **Masjid al Aqsa** of which 10 are open and five are closed; most gates are located on the western boundary wall. The keys to all the gates, with the exception of the Moroccan gate are held by the Islamic Waqf. However, they can only open or close gates with the consultation of the Israeli police on duty, which control access to the site.

The steps that lead up to the central plaza, where the **Golden Dome** sits, are spanned by handsome arched columns dating from the *Mameluke* period. Some sects of Muslims call these the '**Scales**' as they believe that the scales used to weigh the souls of human beings will be hung here on the Judgement Day. See a letter, a tribute, a gratitude on media pages from an American tourist [thesacredplaces.com is referred]:

*"I loved it! It was a life goal for me to visit **Al-Aqsa Mosque**; it was full of peace, harmony and lovely people – they all were*

*very kind and helpful. To try and explain this place in words is difficult but here goes. Built on rock that includes **bait ul maqdis**, the first qibla of Muslims, as well as various different monuments of many prophets. Every tourist, Muslim or not, should go and see the 3rd holiest site in Islam.*

You have to keep your passport with you safe at all times to prove to the guards at the masjid doors that you are a tourist. There is plenty of walking and not much can be done my wheel chair."

EL-KA'AS: It is Al-Aqsa Mosque's main ablution fountain, known as **el-Ka'as [the Cup]**, and is located in north in between the mosque and the Golden Dome in the Haram compound. It is used by worshipers to perform *wudu*, a ritual washing of the hands, arms, feet, and face before saying prayers. It was first built in 709 AD by the Umayyads, re-built by the Ayoubi Sultan Al-Adel Abu Bakr in 1193 AD but in 1327–28 Governor Tankiz expanded it to house more worshipers. Lastly, in year 1455, Sultan Ashraf Qaitbey brought it in better shape which the tourists see now a days.

Water in it was originally supplied from Solomon's Pools near Bethlehem but now it gets water from pipes connected to Jerusalem City's main water supply.

AQSA-in Arab Israel Conflict:

The site has been the most contested piece of the Holy Land since Israel occupied East Jerusalem, including the Old City, in 1967. However, the conflict dates even further back - before the creation of Israel.

In May 1947, the UN drew up a partition plan to separate historical Palestine, then under British control, into two states: one for Jews, and one for Palestinians. In that plan to be implemented within a year, the Jewish state was given 55% of the land, and 45% was for the Palestinians.

The Jerusalem belonged to the international community then under the UN control. It was granted this special status for its importance to the three Abrahamic religions. In May 1948, Israel declared statehood. The Palestinians alleged that Israel had captured some 78% of the land without any mandate, while the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza were taken over by Egyptian and Jordanian governments and thus 1st Arab-Israel War broke out.

After the 2nd Arab-Israeli war in June 1967, Israel occupied the Old City and al-Aqsa compound – later extending to the East Jerusalem as a whole. In 1980, Israeli parliament passed a law that declared Jerusalem the '*complete and united capital*' of Israel. Israel also built 12 fortified Jewish-only settlements in East Jerusalem, housing some 200K Israelis. Since 1967, the Islamic Waqf has control over matters inside the Aqsa Plaza, while Israel controls external security and other anti-social activities.

Palestine also alleged that Jewish Temple movements, such as the *Temple Mount Faithful* and *the Temple Institute*, have gone violent while aiming at rebuilding the Third Jewish Temple in the Haram compound – and that such groups are being indirectly funded by the Israeli government. In 1990, the Jews declared to lay a cornerstone for the 3rd Temple in Haram compound, leading to riots and massacre in which 20 Palestinians were killed. In 2000, Israeli politician Ariel Sharon entered the holy site accompanied by 100s Israeli police, clashes broke out, in which more than 3,000 Palestinians and some 1,000 Israelis were killed.

Palestine also alleged that in 2015 again, 100s of Jewish youth tried entered the Aqsa mosque complex to commemorate a Jewish holiday. A year later, protests also erupted after when the Jewish settlers teased Muslims during the holy month of Ramadan, in breach of tradition.

It is also on record that Aqsa Mosque was shut down for the first time since 1969, after a deadly gun battle between Palestinians and Israeli forces. This **attack of 14th July 2017**, two

Israeli police officers died and also three Arabs – so the mosque was subsequently closed for two days. Then thousands of Palestinians came out to pray in the streets outside of Lion's Gate. To suppress the demonstration, Israel used force and four more Arabs were shot dead. Then the Christians had also joined Muslims voicing against injustices and oppression that Palestinians face in Jerusalem.

Al-Aqsa is a small area, but symbolically it is a large part of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. **AL-JAZIRA of 6th December 2017** held:

"With more restrictions placed on Palestinian access to the compound and ongoing calls by Israeli religious groups to allow Jews to pray at the site, many Palestinians fear a possible division of the compound."

history of Jerusalem as it passed through time - each era was quite different from the last and what is left is a mix of cultures you won't find anywhere else in the world – unbelievable & fantastic.

It appears that Nabi David AS makes comeback to his own city. The show is projected on the walls of the citadel after sunset and promises a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Using cutting-edge technology, the show creates an unprecedented artistic attraction suitable for all ages. The show features powerful laser projectors, a computerized system operating 20 projectors, 10 audio players, 14 computers, 14 speakers and amplifiers, and 10 kms of advanced cable infrastructure. It becomes a multi-sensory celebration that ties the past, the present, and the future, using state-of-the-art technology. The show tells the full life story of King & Nabi David AS.

The experience begins with a virtual tour of famous works by the greatest artists of all times: Chagall, Matisse, Michelangelo, and more - the citadel walls display beautiful images of them. As the night goes on, you are exposed to more and more imagery and events related to the exciting and thrilling life story of King [Nabi] David AS – all based on biblical, historical and archaeological sources – BUT coupled with psalm songs attributed to Nabi David AS.

Once the show is over, the Jewish tourists prefer to dine in nearby **Agada Restaurant** located on Mamilla Avenue. Interesting about **Agada** is that here **Theodor Herzl** - the great-grandfather of Zionism - stayed during his visit to Israel thus it is known as the **Herzl House**. If one is lucky enough to find place in the main event hall to dine – he literally feels being served a feast articulate for kings and princes.

David's Tower lies just inside **Jaffa Gate**; and the **Tower Museum** takes the tourists through 4000 years of ancient Jerusalem and Old City's history. There's a great view of city from the tower; it is also known as the **David Citadel**. The foundations of this structure are about

THE CITY OF DAVID:

As per written biblical literature, the **City of David** is the place where Jerusalem appeared first, the urban core of the continuous living civilization that existed at the time of the Prophets, over four millennia ago; the travellers feel and touch the **Old City's history** live through **audio-visual night show** held every night in the **Tower of David**. Once the mind-blowing light show starts, one travels with the

2,000 years old – built by the priests and kings of 167-37 BC.

After the **Fall of Jerusalem** in 70 CE, this is where the Roman Army's 10th platoon was stationed. In the 4th century, it was a monastery. The Crusaders built the moat around it and used to protect pilgrims. For 400 years it remained a Turkish garrison. **It was here in December 1917, the Ottoman Empire formally surrendered Jerusalem to the British General** – and the Muslim rule of 1200 years was over.

General Allenby stood on the steps that take you up to the [now] museum door when he formally declared Jerusalem to be under British rule. The British were the first to use the premises as a cultural centre – but then a quiet period – in 1967 the cultural centre revived again – and now a museum dedicated to the **past of Jerusalem**.

KING DAVID'S TOMB:

Mount Zion [Jabel Sahyoun in *Arabic*] is a hill in Jerusalem just outside the walls of the Old City – the name originally used in the Hebrew Bible's four books. In ending Roman period, a synagogue was built near the **David's Tomb**; the place went more sacred till the beginning of 12th century – and continued to be so even today. It is located in an old period building on Mount Zion on or near remains of the former **Hagia Zion**, a Byzantine church.

David's Tomb also remained a mosque for c.400 years during Ottoman Empire and was converted into a synagogue in 1948. From then onwards it is country's primary religious site - Jewish prayer was established authentically. Once a phrase "**David King of Israel Lives and Endures**" was written over the niche above the tomb-stone – BUT with the passage of time it disappeared. Now the niche is all white painted. During years 1948-67, **Nabi David's Tomb** remained the holiest Jewish site in Israel but later the **Western [Wailing] Wall** got priority in the Jewish community – **now more Muslims visit Nabi David's Tomb than the**

Jews. Then it was a designated no-man's land between Israel and Jordan. The Jews used to climb on roof of the tomb and keeping their direction towards the Golden Dome; they offered their prayers. It was the closest accessible site to the Jewish Temple place.

In December 2012, unknown persons completely destroyed a large number of 17th century Islamic-era tiles in **Nabi David's Tomb**; still those tiles are seen missing. Today the area is pitted with archaeological digs. The excavations attracted controversy but also got massive **stepped stone structures** - dating from the 10th century BC and being claimed as the retaining wall of Nabi David's Palace or the Canaanite fortress of even more earlier times.

THE LAST SUPPER-ROOM:

The **Last Supper** is the final meal that, in the Gospel accounts, Jesus shared with his Apostles in Jerusalem before his crucifixion –it is commemorated by Christians especially on Holy Thursday before the Easter day. The Last Supper-room, also called **Cenacle**, is said to be the upper floor of the building where Nabi David's Tomb lies. Recent years have seen rising tensions between Jewish activists and Christian worshippers at the site – but no worry because both sides respect Nabi David AS evenly and equally. Above this **Cenacle**, the tourists also see the minaret of a Muslim mosque.

Surprisingly, this **Cenacle** is not universally accepted as the site of the "Supper room" mentioned in the bibles of **Mark** [14:15] and **Luke** [22:12]. The only competing site is the Syrian Orthodox **Church of St Mark** in Jewish Quarter of the old city which also claims to possess the 'Supper-Room'.

This Mount Zion's Gothic-arched Cenacle is a restoration of a **Crusader** chapel built in the 12th century. Among the architectural details of the Crusader period is a slender marble column supporting a stone canopy in the south-west corner. Carved into the capital at top of the column are **two young pelicans feeding on**

the blood their mother has drawn from her breast — symbolising Christ giving his blood for the salvation of humankind.

In the 16th century, after the Turks took over Jerusalem, the room was transformed into a mosque in memory of the prophet David AS. Its *mihrab* [a niche indicating the direction of Makkah] and stained-glass windows with Arabic inscriptions remained in tact and are still visible.

GIHON SPRING & POOL:

The **King [Nabi] David AS** had captured the fortress of a Canaanite tribe, the *Jebusites*, 1050 years BC AND established his capital - that pitched tent later developed as the **City of David** - the oldest settlement on around the Jerusalem Hills.

Gihon Spring, the only source of water for that city, is mentioned many times in the Bible with its location in the valley. The travellers can also walk from Spring through the 530 metre [King] **Hezekiah's Tunnel** which was dug in 7th century BC to bring water to the **Pool of Siloam** inside the city to avoid siege by the Assyrians. Much later, it was also named **Fountain of the Virgin** because of the legend that here the holy **Mary** used to wash the swaddling clothes of holy Jesus.

Gihon Spring is one of the world's major intermittent springs — and a reliable water source that made human settlement possible in ancient Jerusalem. The spring rises in a cave 7x20 ft; irregularly flowing from 3-5 times daily in winter, twice daily in summer, and only once daily in autumn in the form of a siphon. The system worked successfully in years 1050 BC, the **1st Temple** periods at least. Now the visitors see the same water system as **Warren's Shaft**; a British engineer named it so in 1867 AD who had re-framed the scheme for Ottomans.

Amongst the tourists, the youngsters choose its '**wet tour**' - the tunnels where spring water still flows – in total darkness, with nothing but a flashlight to guide their path. Water level depends on the season - can be up to waist deep. The tunnel route from the **Gihon Spring** to the **Pool of Siloam** is still a work of art which winds its way underground for 513m. The tunnel was built with the **technology available 2700 years ago** - realizing just what an accomplishment it was when there was no civilization – walking through it is a life time event.

Pool of Siloam mentioned above is a rock-cut pool on southern slope was first built by King Hezekiah [715–687 BC], to provide water supply inside the City. During Nehemiah [445 BC]'s reign it was named as the King's Pool [Nehemiah 2:14]. Around the Second Temple era [103-76 BC], the pool was reconstructed – later also visited by Nabi Jesus AS; 'a man blind since birth' was made normal by him here – a miracle all religions believe. Pool the tourists see today was rebuilt again during Byzantine Period.

During excavation in 2009, the workers uncovered some stone steps on three sides of a 225 feet wide pool – but then had to quit the site because the land above was owned by the nearby **Greek Orthodox Church**. This pool was probably destroyed by the Romans during Roman-Jewish War of 70 AD, later filled with silt layers and sedimentations.

The Christians and certain sects of Jewish pilgrims and tourists assign much priority to visit this pool and tunnels to refresh their biblical history – as the stories of various prophets are linked with this particular place. During an **archaeological dig in 2009**, a fragment of stone inscription securely dated to the 8th century BC was discovered - proving that the city had monumental public building(s) in the 8th century BC around Jerusalem [then City of David].

ABBAY OF DORMITION:

It is an abbey on Mt. Zion just outside the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem. Originally there was a Byzantine basilica **Hagia Sion** - built in 415 AD but was destroyed during 614 AD's siege of Jerusalem by Sasanian King Khosrau II. Its foundations were recovered in 1899 AD by the Turkish architects. Later, a church was built here on the ruins of those earlier Byzantine foundations – now called Abbey of Dormition.

According to [another] local tradition, it was on this spot where the Virgin Mary died – religiously called **falling asleep**, and this gave the original monastery its name. However, two cities, Jerusalem and Ephesus [in Turkey], claim as to be the place where the Virgin Mary died; the **Ephesus** claim is based on Gospel account, too BUT the earliest traditions all locate the end of holy Mary's life in Jerusalem, where the **Tomb of Mary** is venerated at the foot of the Mount of Olives.

The fact remains that during his visit to Jerusalem in 1898 AD, the German Kaiser Wilhelm II bought this land on Mount Zion from Turkish Sultan [Abdul Hamid II] and presented it to a Protestant Charity called the **German Union**. Thereafter, foundation stone of the church was laid on 7th October 1900; construction was completed in ten years and its doors were opened on 10th April 1910. Presently, there are two spiral staircases leading to the crypt - the site ascribed to the **Dormition of Virgin Mary**.

After Arab-Israel war of 1948, the abbey came under the Israeli control - though was badly **damaged** by military bombardment too. In 1951, the abbey's supervision was taken over by religious authorities of Rome. The Abbey has been the target of occasional vandalism and **Price Tag Attacks** by extremist youths. More cases were reported during years 2011-14 and the last case was reported in January 2016 but then no odd news heard.

The **fortress-like** building, with a conical roof and four corner towers, stands south of the Old City's Zion Gate. Like the Crusader church that

preceded it, the basilica is built on **two levels** with the high altar and the crypt with its Marian shrine. In lower chambers, there rests a life-size statue of holy Mary, fallen asleep in death. The statue is made of cherry wood and ivory.

RAMPARTS WALK:

When youngster tourists enter the Old City through **Jaffa Gate**, they normally prefer for a self-guided walk on the ramparts [parapets of the wall] of this fortified old city. There are informational plaques in English every several hundred feet to give you an idea of what you are seeing. The views of both the Old City and the city outside the walls are magnificent. One path goes from **Jaffa Gate to Dung Gate** and the other from **Jaffa Gate to Lions Gate**. In fact, the **Ramparts walk** is a fun way to get an overview of this part of Jerusalem.

One has to be strong as the walk requires a lot of stair climbing and descending; and that a tourist must have enough water with him – **once you're on the ramparts, there's no getting off until the end and no refreshment kiosk or bathroom along the way**. It's not a suitable activity for small children, mid-aged ladies and older people whatsoever.

HOLOCAUST CHAMBER:

In the nearby building is a small **Chamber** of the **Holocaust Museum** located on the Mt Zion - Israel's first Holocaust museum founded in 1948. Same year, Israeli government oversaw the on-site burial of ashes of victims from the **Oranienburg Camp** [*one of the first detention facilities established by the Nazis in the state of Prussia when they gained power in 1933*] together with desecrated **Torah scrolls** recovered from Nazi Europe.

Another place; the Catholic cemetery where **Oskar Schindler**, who saved the lives of 1,200 Jews in the Holocaust, is buried along with 91

persons who were killed in bombing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem on **22nd July 1946**; explosion done by the militant **right-wing Zionist organization 'the Irgun'** on the British HQ for Palestine, which was housed in the said hotel then.

destruction of their Temples. It is the holiest Jewish site in the world and a renowned symbol of Jerusalem's Old City. It is a huge wall built in golden [lime] stone, with Jews praying in front of it, stuffing their written prayers in the cracks between stones. It is believed to be the last remnant wall of the Second Temple of Jerusalem, destroyed by the Romans at the time of city's conquer in year 70 AD – **First Jewish-Roman War** is referred for more details.

The 50m long & 19m high Western Wall makes the southern side elevation of the **Haram Sharif** [Temple Mount] - the holiest site in Islam, Judaism and Christianity. It is one of the few surviving sections of the enclosure built by King Herod in year 19 BC.

Interestingly, the term **Western Wall** is mostly used for the section traditionally used by Jews for prayer. During the period of Christian Roman rule over Jerusalem (c324–638 AD), Jews were completely barred from Jerusalem except to attend *Tisha be-Av*, the day of national mourning for the Temples, and on this day the Jews weep at their holy places. The term '**Wailing Wall**' was thus exclusively used by Christians, and was revived in the period of non-Jewish control between the establishment of British Rule in 1920 and the Six-Day War in 1967. The term '**Wailing Wall**' is not used by Jews - considering it derogatory – thus, of course, hate calling it so.

The wall was considered Muslim property as an integral part of the Haram Sharif and WAQF property of the Moroccan Quarter. The earliest source mentioning this specific site as a place of worship is from the 16th century. From mid-19th century onwards, attempts to purchase rights to the wall and its immediate area were made by various Jews, but none was successful. With the rise of the **Zionist movement** in the early 20th century, the wall became a source of friction between the Jewish and Muslim communities. During those outbreaks of violence at the foot of the wall became commonplace, with a particularly deadly **riot in 1929** in which 133 Jews were killed and 339 injured.

WESTERN [WAILING] WALL:

The Jews' sacred place of worship; aka the **Wailing Wall** [in *Urdu* **DEEWAR E GIRYA**] referring to the service and the way of worship of Jews being mournful at the site over the

After the 1948 Arab–Israeli War the Eastern portion of Jerusalem was occupied by Jordan and Jews were discouraged to live even in their Jewish quarter – so most of them left Jerusalem. The position changed on 10th June 1967, when Israel gained control of the site following the Six-Day War. Three days after establishing control over the Western Wall site the Moroccan Quarter was bulldozed by Israeli authorities to create space for what is now the Western Wall plaza and Jewish prime place of worship.

Since centuries Jews from throughout the world made the difficult pilgrimage to Jerusalem and immediately headed for the Western Wall to thank God. For c.2000 plus years, Jerusalem remained under the Christian and Muslim rule and the Jews were fewer in numbers – but its dignity was kept intact by all rulers. This surviving section of the **Wall** which, in ancient times formed a part of the Herod's Temple Mount [not Temple itself] has always been a source of comfort and consolation in misfortune. Now the tourists and visitors also avail privilege of wedging their prayer & wish slips of paper, into the cracks between the stones.

A giant wooden bridge at the right side of the Western Wall – allows pilgrims to ascend to the **Haram Plaza**. One can still see a **wooden walkway** that leads above the Wall to the Haram plateau - the only entry point for non-Muslim tourists. As discussed earlier, the wooden structure was erected after an earthen ramp collapsed in 2004, following an earthquake and heavy snowfall.

WESTERN WALL TUNNELS:

To the left of the Western Wall, one should take tour of the tunnels along the foundations of the **Temples**. While entering northern side of the Wall, visitors walk through a series of rooms moving eastward until they hit the Western Wall – then continue straight northward. During the walk in the Tunnels, visitors will pass by the Second Temple era homes, ancient cisterns, constructions from the Muslim period, a channel from the Hasmonean period and more - *the*

guided tour normally lasts around 75 minutes. The Tunnels run along about 488 meters of the Western Wall, giving visitors a taste for the challenge that stood before King Herod during the expansion of the Temple Mount. **One such example is a stone which is 14m long and weighs almost 570 tons.**

These complex underground Tunnels tell much about the **Hasmonean period** [140 - 116 BC] - the structures are supported by many arches and contain stairways that connected the ancient city with the Temple Mount. The Tunnels were first discovered during digs done by British archaeologists in the 19th century, but the intense digging was done after 1967 by the Israel government. Inside, one also finds the most special place for Jews - **the part of the Western Wall considered closest to spot where the Holy of the Holies** used to be in the Temples; there is a small synagogue where Jews come to pray as a special occasion.

OPHEL ARCH. PARK:

At the foot of the **Haram Sharif** [Temple Mount], one can find the **Hulda Gates**, a series of gates through which people used to ascend to the plaza through rising tunnels. Nearby, the Jew tourists also see archaeological remains of water cisterns, market stalls and structures from the First Temple period. In the vicinity of Dung Gate, amidst more excavations, there lies **The Ophel** [or **Ophlas**] – the biblical name given to a certain part of settlement or city that is elevated from its surroundings. In the **Hebrew Bible** this Ophel refers to a specific part in two cities: the extended **City of David**; and **Samaria** [2 Kings 5:24].

A unique activity - at various spots on the wide and thriving plaza, the Muslim males gather in study groups, reading the Qur'an and the Jews reciting their Torah contentedly before the West Wall and its attached synagogues. Everything is fine for the travellers and the tourists at least – if one is having non-Israeli passport with him.

BURNT HOUSE & WHOL MUSEUM:

In the Jewish Quarter of city, the tourists see the remains of a priestly home that was set on fire when Jerusalem fell in the **year 70 AD**; the sound and light show here makes the fall of Jerusalem chillingly real.

The **Burnt House** is a little museum now presenting an excavated site from the **Second Temple** period situated six metres below current street level. Ancient Jerusalem's Upper City was known for its wealth; was located close to the Temple and inhabited by priestly families who used to serve in the temple. When the Romans stormed the Upper City, they found little resistance: Much of the population was near death from disease and starvation due to hard siege. After 1967's reunification, the **Jewish Quarter** was rebuilt, and extensive archaeological excavations were conducted in the area during years 1969 to 1982 - **The Burnt House** was then found under a layer of ashes.

The Burnt House is only one part of a large complex buried under the Jewish Quarter. The ground floor of this House has courtyard, four rooms, a kitchen and a bath; walls built of stones and covered with thick white plaster; and round sunken bases of brown clay. The excavated house is open to the public and a 12-minute audio-visual presentation, set up inside the house, plays back the nearly 2000-year-old events too.

Across the street there is WHOL MUSEUM which was once a priestly home during the 2nd Temple days. Behind the modern facade, one can see ritual baths, frescoes and get an idea of what daily life was like then. Located underground, it preserves remains of six houses from the **Herodian** period that were excavated after 1967. In Temple times, high gentry' homes were built on this hill overlooking the Temple Mount - but were also got destroyed in 70 AD. Carefully excavated, the site includes water cisterns, elaborate bathrooms with beautiful floors, reception halls with colourful stucco paintings and mosaic – reflecting living **of 2000 years ago**. The homes here are about seven meters below the present-day street level.

In the nearby **Temple Institute**, the tourists see reproductions of apparatus used in the service of the holy Temple; sacred vessels created by the Institute, garments of High Priests, religious oil-paintings and model of the Holy Temple attract all.

THE CARDO:

The cities of the Ancient Roman Empire had a special tradition of decorating main roads with spectacular stone columns. These streets were called **CARDO** and Jerusalem, just like any other Roman city, had a Cardo of its own. This ancient street originates at Damascus Gate in the north, running southwards through the Old City, terminating at Zion Gate. It was city's main street some 1800 years ago; was originally paved in the 2nd century when Hadrian rebuilt Jerusalem as a Roman polis called **Aelia Capitolina**. The Cardo was extended south to the area of today's Jewish Quarter in the 6th century by the Byzantine Emperor Justinian as a high commercial centre. Prehistoric columns and shops are still visible. The roofed part, reconstructed in Crusader times, now houses boutiques and archaeological sites both.

In its day, **The Cardo** was an exceptionally wide colonnaded street running through the heart of the city, connecting many of Byzantine Jerusalem's major institutions. Parallel rows of columns supported a red ceramic tile roof and an arcade ran along, at least part of its eastern side. A section of Cardo has been reactivated as a shopping street, full of arts and various goods of tourists' interest. In part of the preserved Cardo, the French School of Art Creation installed a large painting of the Byzantine replica **of The Cardo**.

In another [open] section of **The Cardo** there are some of the pillars. Part of the Cardo has been restored to show how the stalls and shops were in Roman times. Occasionally, there are theme days with actors dressed in period costume running various hands on activities for the tourists and travellers.

HURVA SYNAGOGUE:

During 16th century, a Jewish group acquired land for building a synagogue and named it as **The Ashkenazi Courtyard**. They built it but with great financial difficulties; was repeatedly constructed and destroyed over and over again until finally completed in 1864 – then named as HURVA [the ruins].

Then the Hurva Synagogue was designed and constructed under the supervision of Assad Effendi, the Ottoman Sultan's official architect. Built in Byzantine Revival style, it was supported by four massive pilasters at each corner over which soared a large dome. However, the then Jewish organisers could construct only one of these towers due to paucity of funds. The height of the synagogue to the bottom of its dome was designed around 16 m and to the top of the dome it was 24 m but the Jews could construct 12m high. Twelve windows were placed around the base of the dome, which was surrounded by a veranda. Being one of the tallest structures in the Old City, it was visible for miles.

From 1864 onwards, the Hurva Synagogue was considered the most beautiful and most important synagogue in the Land of Israel. It was described as **the glory of the Old City**. However, during 1948's war [exactly on 27th May], someone placed a 200-litre barrel filled with explosives against the synagogue wall. The results were evident as the huge explosion reduced the 84-year-old synagogue to rubble and debris. The Jordanian Army was blamed for it and they had accepted the responsibility.

After Israel's take over in June 1967, plans for **HURVA's** reconstruction were developed in which the ruins were incorporated in a memorial garden, a new structure of synagogue and a Walking Route of the Prophets, leading to the Western Wall. Following the Beaux-Arts tradition, the elements of architecture were conceived as hollow; the outer structure composed of 16 piers covered in golden Jerusalem stone cut in blocks like of the

Western Wall. BUT the whole structure was coming up at a scale **comparable to the Golden Dome of the Baitul Maqdas**.

When Teddy Kollek, the then mayor of Jerusalem, learned of plans to design the **HURVA** at a scale comparable to the Dome of the Rock, he went unsupportive and discarded the proposal altogether. In 1977, one of the four stone arches that had originally supported the synagogue's monumental dome was re-designed. The height of the original building, including the dome, was made 50% greater. Its old glory and splendour was also brought back in wholesome.

[The **First Temple** lasted 373 years (960 – 586 BC); the **Second Temple** lasted 585 years (516 BC–70 AD). The **Golden Dome** has been on the **Haram Compound** for 1326 years. The **Al-Aqsa Mosque** is there since 1303 years.]

Jewish religious traditions hold that TEMPLE MOUNT is the site where King [Nabi] Solomon AS built the **First Temple** for Jews in c.1000 BC. According to the Hebrew Bible the Temple was plundered by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II in c.598 BC (**2 Kings** 24:13). A decade later, Nebuchadnezzar again besieged Jerusalem and after 30 months finally breached the city walls in 587 BC, subsequently burning the Temple, along with most of the city. According to Jewish tradition, the Temple was destroyed on *Tisha B'Av*, the 9th day of Av (Hebrew calendar).

The **2nd Temple** was built on a smaller scale in c.536-516 BC during Persian period when Nehemiah led the returning Jews from the Babylonian Exile. C.500 years later, around year 19 BC, Jerusalem's Ruler or Governor or Roma's Commander Herod the Great further expanded and renovated the **Second Temple**. The ambitious project, which involved the employment of 10,000 workers then, doubled the area of the plaza - to nearly **34 acres**. During King Herod's expansion and renewal of the said 2nd Temple, an additional Wall was also built.

King Herod died in year 4 BC and about 36 years later, Jesus Christ was crucified at a nearby place. Both these events [destruction of TWO Jewish temples] are referred in the **holy Qur'an** explicitly.

After mention about Al-Aqsa in holy Qur'an [17:1], there comes a set of six verses [Al-Qur'an 17:2-8] which tells that how the Bani-Israel people crossed the Allah's prescribed limits TWICE and how they were taught sad lessons through 'more powerful people' [referring to Babylonians & Romans], they were miserably beaten and their place of worship was 'totally

WHY JEWISH TEMPLES LOST

demolished' both times - referring to 1st & 2nd Temples – AND that was the purpose of taking Prophet Muhammad pbuh to Jerusalem to see and feel by his own that what happens when God goes angry with nations.

In the Jewish Biblical books, above verses of holy Qur'an were mentioned with other words – but pointing out the same reality. The holy **Talmud**, a central text of **Rabbinic Judaism**, in its verse [*Yoma 9b*] provides traditional theological reasons for their Temples' loss:

"Why was the first Temple destroyed?"
"Because the three cardinal sins were rampant in society: idol worship, licentiousness, and murder"...

And why then was the second Temple destroyed? *"Because gratuitous hatred was rampant in society; this teaches you that gratuitous hatred is equal in severity to the three cardinal sins: idol worship, licentiousness, and murder."*

Islamic traditions say that a temple was first built at this place by Prophet Jacob AS and later it was founded and re-built by Prophets David & Solomon AS. Due to sacred Night Journey of Prophet Muhammad pbuh, this city is very dear to Muslims, too. The **Haram Sharif [Temple Mount]** is a flash point in the Middle East conflict. Israel took control of East Jerusalem, the Old City, from Jordan in 1967; but the Palestinians still claim it as occupied Arab land – the stance also held by the United Nations. Israel exercises political sovereignty over the whole Old City but custodianship of the **Haram** compound remains with the Islamic Waqf.

For the Israelis, their history begins 3,000 years ago, when the Temple Mount [believed to be Mount Moriah] was mentioned in their **Book of Genesis**. The Old Testament describes how an army led by Nabi David AS conquered the area [Jerusalem], made it capital in around 1000 BC and built a palace nearby. Then Nabi David AS started building [1st] temple there and Nabi

Solomon completed it. However, Benjamin Kedar, a history professor at Hebrew University, holds that: **'Still we know nothing about the First Temple, because there are no traces of its physical remains - we've pieced together its tentative portrait from descriptions in the Bible.'**

King Herod brought a massive reshaping of the Temple Mount. He filled up the slopes surrounding the mount's summit and expanded it to its present size. He enclosed the holy site with a 100-ft-high retaining wall at certain places; constructed it with limestone blocks and shaped a far more expansive version of the original **2nd Temple**.

In the year 66 AD the Jews of Judea rebelled against their Roman masters. In response, the Emperor Nero dispatched an army under command of Vespasian to restore order. By the year 68, resistance was mostly subdued but the Romans were after the subjugation of Jerusalem. That same year, the Emperor Nero died by his own hand, creating a power vacuum in Rome. In the resultant chaos, Vespasian was declared Emperor and returned to Rome - then his son, Titus, took charge to launch assault on Jerusalem. By the year 70, the attackers breached city's outer wall [piece by piece] and ransacked it. But the stones from the top tumbled down and formed a protective barrier in itself that preserved the wall's lower portions – thus saving the existing portion of the **Western Wall** as the remnant of that original Temple's wall.

The assault ended in total burning of the Temple. In victory, the Romans slaughtered thousands of Jews; thousands more were enslaved and sent to toil in the mines of Egypt - some were also butchered for amusement of the public. The rebellion continued till 73 AD when various pockets of resistance were conquered including the stronghold at Masada in the Dead Sea region.

The Christians don't claim for the **Haram compound** with their presence during only the

Byzantine and Crusader periods [c. 300 years] — but Muslims' claim extends for 1,326 years from today backwards. During the Ottoman and then British rules, this area was a jumble of Arab houses, and Jews also used to pray here in a wide corridor in front of the Herodian stones but the whole area was cleansed to make a vast compound which the tourists see now.

Christianity, of course, has its roots in Judaism and the **Golden Dome** itself may not be significant to Christianity, other than that it's a shrine of the same ONE God. The orthodox Christians hold that: **"...the site itself is important but the Golden Dome may not,"** but not well received by most Christians — practically they keep and show all the regards and reverence to it.

Ever since the 2nd Temple's damage, prayer for the construction of a Third Temple has been a formal part of the Jewish prayers. However, the question of **when to construct the Third Temple** is disputed within the Jewish community itself. In year 363 AD, the **Roman King Julian** had ordered to re-build the Third Temple but couldn't.

Fact remains that ultra-Orthodox Jews traditionally oppose archaeological excavations in the Holy Land while saying that **"...all the evidence is in the [scriptural] sources, you don't need physical proof."** In the backdrop of Arab-Israel conflict since 1948, it is commonly understood that:

"Even sneezing in Jerusalem is an intensely political activity. You can do it to the right, to the left, on the face of an Arab or a Jew. Whatever you do, or don't do, is political."

The Islamic Council [Waqf] and the Israel government both have long forbidden archaeological excavations, which both view as desecration — thus the layers of history in this Mt Moriah site mostly remained hidden, veiled and out of sight.

ARK OF THE COVENANT

In Jewish literature there are some mentions of the ROCK as **Pierced Stone** because it has a small hole on the south-eastern corner that enters a cave [grotto] beneath the rock, known as the **WELL OF SOULS** — [*the cave in Baitul Maqdas*] sometimes thought by the Jewish community as the traditional sacred place of the **Ark of the Covenant - Ten Commandments** given to the Prophet Moses AS on Sinai; most likely in the year 1440 BC. Mythical legends attribute supernatural powers to the Tables. The truth remains that after the destruction of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem, nobody knows for sure where the **Ark of the Covenant** ended up — thus still the archaeology's greatest mystery.

***Ten Commandments** are a set of biblical principles relating to ethics and worship, which play a fundamental role in Judaism and Christianity. The commandments include instructions to worship the only God, to honour one's parents, and to keep the Sabbath day holy, as well as prohibitions against idolatry, blasphemy, murder, adultery, theft, dishonesty, and coveting. Different religious groups follow different traditions for interpreting them. The Ten Commandments appear twice in the Hebrew Bible, in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy.*

There is a difference of opinion in classical Jewish sources as to whether this was the location of the **HOLY OF HOLIES** making the place as the holiest site in Judaism

as per their religious indication referring to **Torah's Tanhuma** chapter 10.

Jewish holy book is called **Tanakh** [including **Torah** - the first **Five Books** of Nabi Moses] is comprised of 24 books. The **belief** that Jesus is **God**, the Son of **God**, or a person of the Trinity, is incompatible with **Jewish** theology. The basic beliefs of Judaism about God are that there is a **God** and there is only one **God**. Judaism also teaches that **God** is

spiritual and not physical; also that He is one whole, complete being.

Synagogues are consecrated spaces used for the purpose of prayer [– as mosques for Muslims and Churches for Christians], reading Tanakh, study and assembly; however, a synagogue is not necessary for **worship**; communal Jewish **worship** can be carried out wherever ten **Jews** assemble. Like for Muslims, Judaism doesn't permit Jews to eat pork and on their 8th birthday Jews get circumcised and they celebrate the occasion within the family.

[TORAH: The holy **Torah**, also known as Hebrew Bible of 600 BC, the central reference of Judaism, mostly mean the first five of 24 books of the Jewish community. Torah is the basis of **Jewish law** and tradition [*halakha*] – containing 613 commandments.

Specifically the **Torah** means a way of life; meaning thereby the totality of Jewish teaching, culture and practice. Common to all, Torah consists of the origin of Jewish living: **their call into being by ONE God**, the God of Nabi Abraham AS, Nabi Isaac AS, and Nabi Jacob AS, and their covenant with Allah to follow a way of life embodied in a set of moral and religious obligations and civil laws.

Traditionally, the words of the holy **Torah** are written on a scroll in Hebrew. A **Torah** portion is read publicly at least once every three days in the presence of a congregation - one of the basis for Jewish communal life like **Sunday Sermon** in Christianity and **Juma & Eid Prayers** of Muslim community.

The Muslims also keep similar faith in the **Ark of the Covenant** as it has mention in the holy Qur'an - containing artefacts from the household of the prophets Moses AS and Harun [Aaron] AS; **Al-Qur'an** 2:248 is hereby referred:

- And their prophet said to them,
"Indeed, a sign of his kingship is that the chest will come to you in

which is assurance from your Lord and a remnant of what the family of Nabi Moses and the family of Nabi Aaron had left, carried by the angels. Indeed in that is a sign for you, if you are believers."

However, contrary to all claims noted above, a researched article in UK's leading newspaper **'The Daily Mail'** dated **5th December 2011** redirected the channels of religious history altogether towards the forgotten lands of ETHIOPIA in the African continent. It may appeal many because the Ethiopian lands were nearer to Jerusalem – though across the pacific. The article held that a leaky church roof could give the world a chance to glimpse the legendary **Ark of the Covenant**. That's because the claimed home of the iconic relic - a small chapel in Ethiopia - has sprung a leak. The Ark is said to have been kept in **Aksum**, in the **Chapel of the Tablet**, adjacent to **St Mary of Zion Church**, since 1960s. Further details can be re-searched on media pages.

However, the Coptics [the Orthodox Church of Alexandria based in Egypt & Northeast Africa] hold that the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon AS had a child named Menelik I, the founder of a dynasty of Solomonic Empire that ruled Ethiopia. He would have been brought the precious chest, made out of gold and acacia wood to their lands.

On 7th day of each month, before the sun rises, the monks of Saint Mary of Zion take a copy of the Ark out in procession. Each and every one of the Orthodox churches in Ethiopia has a copy of the Ark. Routinely; almost a thousand faithful attend the processions every month.

However, the old Chapel of Our Lady of Zion seems to have fulfilled its duty: several leaks in its roofs have forced the monks to start the construction of a new temple, right next to the actual one into which, in the utmost secret, the monks will take the Ark. No one will know that the Ark has been moved once again, into the newly built temple, until the day after the deed is done.

HOLY MARY'S BIRTHPLACE:

Exhaustively and largely the sacred part of the Christianity religion, Virgin Mary is one of the most esteemed and respected women in Islam too. There is a **full Chapter in the holy Qur'an titled 'Al-Maryam'** which describes Allah's liking for holy Mary who fulfilled her covenant with God Whom she worshiped with full submission. She was pious, chaste, and devout; the woman chosen to be the mother of Jesus. Another **Chapter 3** titled as '**Aal-e Imran**' in the Qur'an specially describes about the noble history of Mary's father Imran – conveying a message to all human generations that how God loved this family.

The family of Imran are from the descendents of Nabi Abraham AS – in turn descendants of Noah and then of Adam. The family of Imran also includes many people known and respected in the Christian traditions – **Prophets Zachariah** [Zakarya in Arabic] AS and **John** [Yahya in Arabic] AS, also known as **the Baptist**, Prophet and holy Jesus's mother, Mary. In Arabic the name **Mary / Maryam** means the maidservant of God.

To see the birthplace of holy Mary, the travellers enter the Old City through the Herods Gate or Damascus Gate and walk through the cobbled streets and stone-steps towards the Haram Sharif. At one place they hit the Via Dolorosa. Here, instead of going into the Haram premises, they follow the Via Dolorosa towards the Lions Gate. Just short of the Gate, they'll see on their left an old building's door where on its face it is written as 'holy Mary's Birthplace' – St Anne's Church. There one finds a separate entrance to holy Mary's birthplace at the main street though the premises are internally linked to the Church.

St Anne's Church is the best preserved Crusader-age church in the Old City of Jerusalem. It marks the traditional site of the home of Jesus' maternal grandparents, Anne and Joachim, and the birthplace of the Virgin Mary. Located just 50m from the Haram Plaza, the church stands with a courtyard having large excavation area of the **Pools of Bethesda**, where Christ healed sick persons [Ref: **John** 5:2-9].

The New Testament says nothing about the birthplace of Mary. However, an ancient tradition, recorded in the legendary Gospel of James [dates from 150 AD] places the house of Her parents, Anne and Joachim, here around. A church built around 450 AD on this site and was dedicated to '**Mary - here She was born**'.

Thick walls give **St Anne's Church** a fortress-like appearance; and unusually asymmetrical in its design: Opposite columns do not match, windows are all different sizes, and walls differ in thickness and height. It is renowned for its remarkable acoustics and loud echoes; the voices of even a small choral group can sound like a large assembly.

The present basilica was built by the Crusaders just before 1140 AD. Its **cellar** was the cave where the Crusaders believed Mary had been born. Shortly after its construction, the Church of St Anne was enlarged by moving the facade forward. Like other churches in Jerusalem, St

Anne's was also not destroyed after the Muslim conquest by Saladin Ayubi in 1189 AD though it was turned into an Islamic law school by him – the Christians claim. However, Saladin's name still appears in the Arabic inscription above the main entrance.

After two or three centuries, the building was abandoned; however, the Sultan of Istanbul in 1856 offered the site to the **French** government in gratitude for its help during those days' battles. By then the building was in ruins but now it is described as '**certainly the loveliest church in the city**' because France undertook its extensive restoration, returning St Anne's as closely as possible to the original basilica.

A flight of stone steps descends from the south aisle to the **crypt**. This cave is believed to be the remains of the house of Anne and Joachim, and the Virgin Mary's birthplace. Here, in a tiny chapel with domed ceiling, an altar is dedicated to the **birth** of holy Mary.

In Islam, Holy Mary is known as *Maryam*, mother of *Isa* [Jesus]. She is often referred to with title *sayyidatuna* [meaning our honourable lady]. A related term of endearment is *Siddiqah* [meaning she who confirms the truth]. Another title for Mary is *Qānitah*, which signifies both constant submission to God and absorption in prayer and invocation. She is also called *Tahira* [meaning one who has been purified – [and the only woman] not touched by Satan at any point.

The Christianity has no explicitly written literature about the birth of holy Mary but the holy Qur'an informs the whole humanity unambiguously. Thus Muslims know about holy Mary more than any other religion in fact. Through the Islamic literature and the Qur'an, all Muslims [at least] know that who was holy Mary's mother Anne [*Hanna* in Islam], father Joachim [*Imran* in Islam], on what promise with God Anne conceived her child, how Mary was born, how Prophet Zachariah AS was chosen to be the guardian of holy Mary – and got arranged

a separate room for holy Mary so that she was able to worship the God at her will.

Nabi Zechariah AS used to see fresh fruit in holy Mary's room – how the Qur'anic verses replied that; - *It is from God. Verily, God provides sustenance to whom He wills without limit;* [**Al-Qur'an** 3:37]. Holy Mary's devotion to God was unparalleled – Muslims know from the Qur'an that how an angel in human robe appeared before Mary and conveyed a delighted message of Allah about **the gift of a righteous son**; [for more details see **Al-Qur'an** 19:17-19]. How holy Mary got amazed and puzzled as she was not married – then the divine revelation to keep Mary calm (**Al-Qur'an** 3:47); and God's assurance that: *"...We breathed into it through Our Spirit, and she testified to the truth of the Words of her Lord ..."* (**Al-Qur'an** 66:12)

The story of holy Mary in the Qur'an and in the Bible has many aspects in common. Then, as the time came for her to give birth; how Mary travelled to **Bethlehem**; how the process of delivery came up amidst distress and fear – then again God's assurance; for details see **Al-Qur'an** 19:24. Appearance of sudden stream of water, dates and the divine direction [**not to speak**] – accusations from around - then how a newborn baby, Jesus, the Prophet of God performed his first miracle – spoke and confirmed that: *"Verily! I am a slave of God. He has given me the Scripture and made me a Prophet; and ..."* see **Al-Qur'an** 19:30-34 for full details.

Astonishing for the tourists is that just next door to St Anne's Church, there is another door of another building over which it is inscribed '**Mary's Birthplace**'. When tourists go inside they are guided towards a set of dark, squeezed and spiral stairs ending at a set of rocky natural caves. In one of those caves, amidst very dim light, one can see a photodrama of Holy Mary's parents. The indications are there that it is the actual birthplace of Holy Mary.

However, nothing to worry or dispute because from inside this cave comes very close to that chapel or bigger cave which the tourists visit from inside the St Anne's Church – might there be only a stony wall between the two caves.

POOLS OF BETHESDA:

[means *house of mercy*] in Old City of Jerusalem and within the premises of St Anne's Church are identified as the scene of one of the Jesus' miracles; the **healing** of the paralysed man who had waited for 38 years for someone to help him into the pool in which water was believed to have curative powers. The Gospel account says holy Jesus told the man, "Stand up, take your mat and walk", and immediately he was made **well** [John 5:2-18]. John describes the pool as having five **porticoes** [*a series of reservoirs and medicinal pools*] in which lay many invalids – blind, lame and paralysed.

The history of the pool goes back to the 8th century BC, when a dam was built across the short Beth Zeta valley, turning it into a reservoir for rain water; a gate in the dam allowed the height to be controlled, and a rock-cut channel brought a steady stream of water from the reservoir into the city – called as the *Upper Pool*. Around 200 BC a second pool was added on the south side of the dam; its depth was 13m. In the 1st century BC, natural caves to the east of the two pools were turned into small baths one of which was named after the goddess of fortune. In mid 1st century AD, Herod Agrippa expanded the city walls, bringing the whole premises into the city.

Truth lies in the narrative that the pools and baths at Bethesda were believed to have healing powers - evidence of a pagan healing **sanctuary** has been found east of the pools, including marble representations of healed organs, such as feet and ears. That was why, the Byzantine empress Eudocia had an enormous **basilica** constructed over here in the 5th century. Its central **aisle** covered the central rock wall, the side aisles extended above the two

basins and the front part covered the site of the ancient healing sanctuary. However, this basilica was also destroyed by the Persians in 614 AD and its masonry ended up in the pool.

Crusaders built a small chapel, the **Church of the Paralytic**, over a part of the same ruined basilica; its façade, main entrance and apse of the Crusader chapel can be seen standing high over the pools, giving a clear example of the practice of building one church over another; building new temple over the old temple's ruins.

In the 1900s, however, archaeologists at Bethesda unearthed two large **water** reservoirs separated by a broad rock embankment. They were rectangular in shape, with four colonnaded porticos around the sides and one across the central barrier. The purpose of the reservoirs was to collect rainwater, principally for Temple use.

So nice job has been done by the archaeologists and in such details that this part of St Anne's Church has become a treasure trove for the tourists. The downstairs with reeling prompt the tourists to go down and touch the stones of walls, pools, columns and they can go even further down into the pools which still have water there – but no clue of entrance and exit of water course – no one is there to guide.

TOMB OF VIRGIN MARY:

In Jerusalem City; the Tomb of the Virgin Mary is situated near the **Church of All Nations** and the **Garden of Gethsemane**; she had died in year 41AD. The New Testament says nothing about the **death or burial of holy Mary** – but deep underground, accessible only by 47 steps carved from the rock in 12th century; this is a multi-faith place of worship for Muslims and Christians who believe holy Mary is buried there.

The burial chamber is sheltered within a barrier, so that a visitor must bend forward in order to enter – could be to demonstrate their respect for the sanctity of the site. **The tomb is dated as of the 1st century.** A church was built above the tomb during the same period that Constantine built the Church of the Holy

Sepulchre. Most Christians believe that Holy Mary was resurrected after her death.

While partway down, on the right, is a niche dedicated to holy Mary's **parents**, Anne and Joachim. This small chapel was originally the burial place of a Crusader Queen Melisande who died in 1161 AD. Almost opposite is a niche dedicated to **St Joseph**; women connected to Crusader kings are buried here.

The crypt, much of it cut into solid rock, is dark and gloomy. The smell of **incense** fills the air, the ceiling is blackened by centuries of candle smoke, and gold and silver lamps hang in profusion. To the right, a small **aedicule** houses a stone bench on which Mary's body is believed to have lain. The aedicule is richly decorated with Eastern Orthodox icons, candlesticks and flowers, but the interior is bare. Narrow openings on two sides allow **access**, and three holes in wall of the tomb enable pilgrims to touch it.

The church belonged to the Catholic **Franciscans** from 1363 AD until 1757 AD; later it passed to the Eastern Orthodox churches. Muslims also worship here. In the wall to the right of the Tomb of Mary is a **mihrab** niche giving the direction of Makkah. It was installed after Saladin's conquest in 12th century. The place is holy to the Muslims because they believe Prophet **Muhammad** pbuh saw a light over the tomb of his "sister Mary" during his Night Journey to Jerusalem.

A section of the cave has been set aside for Muslims to pray, because the Virgin Mary is revered more in Islam.

The Sacred Christianity also holds that the Virgin Mary died a natural death [the **falling asleep**] but her body was resurrected on the third day after her repose; she was taken up, soul and body, into heaven as **Her tomb was found empty**. Roman Catholics hold that Mary was "**assumed into heaven**" in bodily form.

While coming out of Holy Mary's tomb, the tourists definitely visit **Gethsemane** Church which is seen at immediate left of the Tomb's entrance. It is a small church but very aesthetically carved out of another cave; walls and ceiling all are of stone in natural and original texture. Every time the prayer sessions are on for the tourists. In the area at the foot of Mount of Olives, called the **Kidron Valley**, one can visit **Gethsemane** gardens and its two spectacular churches.

The **Kidron Valley** has vast burial grounds over the centuries. This is where the Messiah would come to raise up the dead; the Jews believed [**Zechariah 14:4**].

MOUNT OF OLIVES:

Gets its name because the area used to be covered in olive trees in ancient times. This is a very significant site and has been used as a Jewish cemetery for over 3,000 years and contains an estimated 150,000 graves. From the top it offers spectacular views of Jerusalem and is just a sight in itself. Most people tend to spend their time at the foot of Mount of Olives. Here is where you can find the picturesque **St Mary Magdalene Church**, with its golden domes, common in Russian Orthodox churches.

Mount of Olives is a place the **Christians are told about since their childhood**. The area is mentioned several times in the Old Testament and appears several times in the New Testament, since Jesus was 'a regular visitor' of this place. In a city where it is sometimes difficult to separate history and religion, these credentials make Mount of Olives one of the most interesting sites around Jerusalem. One of the most interesting places is the **Church Pater Noster**, built next to the place it is believed **Jesus taught the Lord's Prayer**. There, you can find many tiled panels with the prayer in more than 140 languages.

GETHSEMANE:

Gethsemane, in Hebrew called an 'oil press', is a garden most famous as the place where holy **Jesus prayed** and his disciples slept the night before Jesus' crucifixion - the site recorded as where the **agony in the garden** took place; it appears in the **Gospel of Matthew** [26:36] and of **Mark** [14:31-32]. It was a place that holy Jesus and his disciples customarily visited, which allowed Judas to find him on the night of his arrest. In Christianity, there are four locations claimed to be the place where Jesus prayed on the [last] night he was betrayed – all the four lie here within the radius of 100 yards.

Modern scholarships acknowledge that the location of Gethsemane is unknown – which is also NOT true; **Luke** [22:43–44] may be taken as guidance. In fact, the Garden of Gethsemane became a focal site for early Christian pilgrims; the faithful were accustomed to go there to pray at the place of **eight ancient olive trees**.

A study conducted by the National Research Council of Italy in 2012 found that several olive trees in the garden are amongst the oldest known to science. Dates of 1092, 1166 and 1198 AD were obtained by carbon dating from older parts of the trunks of three trees. The question is still not settled because olive trees can grow back from roots even after cut down in depth. However the researcher writes: *"All the tree trunks are hollow inside so that the central, older wood is missing [but] only three from a total of eight olive trees could be successfully dated."* Some historian priests held that roots of the oldest trees are possibly much older – could be dating as 3000 years back.

CHURCH OF ALL NATIONS:

It stands outside eastern wall of the Haram Sharif [Temple Mount] nearby Gethsemane - built over the rock on which holy Jesus prayed in agony the night earlier he was arrested before crucifixion. The church is also known as the **Basilica of the Agony**; Christians book **Mark** 14:32-42 is referred.

The current church rests on the foundations of two earlier ones, that of a small 12th century Crusader chapel abandoned in 1345 AD, and a 4th-century Byzantine basilica, destroyed by an earthquake in year 746 AD. In 1920, during work on the foundations, a column of the crusader chapel was found two meters beneath the floor. Following this discovery the architects immediately removed the new foundations and began excavations of the earlier church. After the remains of the Byzantine era church were fully excavated plans for the new church were altered and work continued on the current basilica in April 1922; till June 1924 it was completed.

The basilica is called the **Church of All Nations** because many countries contributed to the cost of construction; national **symbols** of 12 donor countries are inside the ceiling domes. The mosaics in the apses were donated by Hungary, Ireland and Poland. The wrought-iron **wreath** around the Rock of Agony was given by Australia. The church and the whole site provide an evocative place for meditation during night. Outside: with a roof of 12 small domes, the rich coloured triangular mosaic at the top of the façade makes it a Jerusalem landmark.

Two types of stone were used in the construction of this church: the Lifta stone of Jerusalem and rose-stone from Bethlehem. The building is divided by six columns into three aisles; violet colours were used for the windows to evoke a mood of depression analogous to holy Christ's agony. The facade of the church is supported by a row of Corinthian columns; atop each column sits statues of the Four Christian Evangelists - set below a modern mosaic depicting Jesus Christ as mediator between God and man; the whole set gives the said church a neo-classical look.

During construction, parts of the mosaic floor of the original **Byzantine** church were discovered. These were preserved under glass and may be seen in the floor of the south aisle. The architect then copied this 4th-century mosaic design in the floor of the modern church, to suggest a

spiritual **continuity** throughout the ages of faith.

HOLY CHRIST'S BIRTHPLACE:

Bethlehem [in Hebrew, the town is **House of Bread** and in Arabic, it is **House of Meat**] is a holy site for Christians of all sects around the world BUT the city is also significant to Jews because it is the **burial place of Rachel** [Prophet Joseph (Yousaf) AS's mother] and the **birthplace of King David** [prophet Daud AS]. Nabi Samuel anointed David king in Bethlehem; **I Sam. 16:1-13** is referred. Here the **Church of Nativity**, one of the oldest churches in the

world in continuous use, is the focus of Christian veneration in this city.

A long snake of town, the main thoroughfare of Bethlehem is **Manger St** which stretches from Rachel's Tomb to the **Church of Nativity** and the **Mosque of Omar**. The city is also known for what was **originally the House of Lachma**, the Mesopotamian **god of fertility**; the area stands settled since 3,000 BC. The city itself has a long pre-Roman history documented first in the 14th century BC in the *Amarna* letters. The **Old Testament Book of Ruth** [1150 BC] has also got reference to Bethlehem.

In year 326 AD, when the Christian church was constructed by Helen, the city had about 1000 inhabitants; but in year 2000 AD its population was estimated as 184,000. The city, just 10 kms south of Jerusalem, was turned over to the Palestinian Authority on 21st December 1995 as a result of the Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement. In the city itself, 40% of the population is Christians while 59% is Muslim. Although Arabic is the language of Bethlehem's inhabitants, **English, is widely spoken and understood**.

Manger Square in Bethlehem is the focus of activity; **Christmas** is celebrated here not once, but three times a year. The traditional Western celebration begins on **24th December**, the Greek Orthodox mark their Christmas on **6th January** and the Armenian observance is on **19th January** each year. However, Bethlehem is more than just a religious town - it is now a tourist hotspot; cafes and sweet shops all around, *Knafa* [warm cheese topped with sugar] and *Baklava* are special treats. And at night the streets become full of hungry tourists with some of the best falafel and hummus they will ever taste.

Like Jerusalem, **Bethlehem is also a safe place for tourists**; it is a hidden gem of the Holy Land. Nearly all travellers arrive via Jerusalem so an Israeli military checkpoint stands on the road connecting the two locations. Tourists are free to enter Bethlehem and back to

Jerusalem multiple times without any restrictions BUT making sure your passport with visa-slip is with you to be shown while you exit the Palestinian areas.

By bus: There is Arab / Palestinian bus station nearby the Damascus Gate [Bab el-Amoud] that host buses going to various Palestinian cities including Bethlehem. These buses continue to operate in normal way even during Shabbat and other Jewish holidays when Israeli public transport does not run. Before embarking it is better to ask the driver about his destination; the average trip length is 30 minutes.

In Bethlehem the bus drops you on main Manger Street from there you can either cab to the Church or just walk 15 minutes up the hill. To return Jerusalem use the same route back and wait for the bus at the same point where you were dropped off. Shared taxis also leave from the Arab Bus Station and manage the trip in 20 minutes. **Make sure to agree on a price before going into a taxi** any where around. Israeli soldiers often check your passport on the bus, particularly when heading back into Jerusalem, but it's quite painless.

THE CHURCH OF NATIVITY:

The birthplace Church is undoubtedly the top attraction in Bethlehem, an authentic citadel built fortress-like on top of the cave **where Jesus was born**. It remained sacred place for all but first time got wrecked by Romans during the **Bar-Kochba Revolt [132-35 AD]**; they set up their shrine to Adonis [*lover of the goddess Aphrodite*] here.

This CHURCH was first erected by **St Helen**, mother of the Byzantine Emperor Constantine-I [**Helena** was the same lady who also caused construction of **Church of the Holy Sepulchre** in Jerusalem] in year 339 AD BUT got destroyed in the riots of 536 AD though parts of which survived below ground and four years later, Emperor Justinian got it rebuilt. Then the Persians invaded this area in 614

AD but they left the church intact. King Edward IV of England donated wood from English oak trees for the ceiling - also the lead to cover the roof. An earthquake in 1834 and a fire in 1869 damaged it again; however, the continuous repairs kept it good.

The entrance, **The Door of Humility**, into the Church is a low doorway that has its own legends; the most approved one is that the height of the door was designed to prevent non-believers from entering the church on horsebacks. The Church is divided into five naves by four rows of Corinthian pillars with pictures of the apostles on them. The names are written in Greek and Latin and many visitors have carved their own signatures over the centuries. The floor of the nave has a hole that allows you to see what remains of the Byzantine mosaics that covered the original church floor.

The church's interior walls feature medieval golden mosaics once covering the side walls, which are now in large parts lost. There are 44 columns separating the aisles from each other and from the nave, some of which are painted with images of respected saints. The east end of the church consists of a raised chancel stage, closed by an apse containing the main altar and separated by a large gilded iconostasis. A complex range of sanctuary lamps is placed throughout the entire church. The open ceiling exposes the wooden rafters, recently restored. The previous 15th-century restoration used beams donated by King Edward IV of England.

Grotto of the Nativity, the place where Jesus is said to have been born, is a cave or the crypt of the Church of the Nativity - situated underneath its main altar and accessed by two staircases on either side. The Grotto is part of a network of caves, which are accessed from the adjacent Church St Catherine's. The tunnel-like corridor connecting the Grotto to the other caves is kept locked.

The exact spot where Jesus was born is marked beneath this altar by a 14-pointed silver star with the Latin inscription on it meaning thereby **'Here Jesus Christ was born to the Virgin**

Mary-1717'. It was installed by the Catholics in 1717, removed - allegedly by the Greek Orthodox Sect in 1847 but got re-installed by the Turkish rulers in 1853. The star is set into the marble floor and surrounded by 15 silver lamps representing the three Christian communities: six belong to the Greek Orthodox, four to the Catholics, and five to the Armenian Apostolics.

Roman Catholics are in charge of the **Grotto's Chapel** [Manger Grotto], marking the traditional site where Holy Mary laid the newborn Baby. Like the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, various Christian sects share control over different parts of the church.

The traditional midnight mass celebrated on Christmas Eve is held in **St Catherine's, the Roman Catholic Church** next door to the Church of the Nativity. This is also the site of several chapels with their own historic and religious significance. **The Chapel of St Jerome** is where the Bishop of Bethlehem translated the Old Testament into Latin. **The Chapel of the Innocents** is devoted to the deaths of the babies killed by Herod. **The Chapel of St Joseph** is where an angel appeared to Joseph and commanded him to flee to Egypt.

Not far from Manger Square is the **Milk Grotto**. According to Christian tradition, this is where **Mary spilled some milk** while nursing Jesus when she was hiding from Herod's soldiers. **The milk turned rocks of the cave a chalk white colour**. The rock is believed by some to have healing power and to make nursing easier for women. The white powder scrapped from the cave is also sold as a fertility medicine.

Mosque of Omar: A mosque in active use; quite plain if you see the inside but pretty on the outside. Other pilgrimage sites include the **Shepherds' Fields**, where an angel appeared to the shepherds to announce the birth of Jesus [**Luke 2:8-20**].

King [Nabi] David's Wells: (*Biyar Daoud*) in King David street, off Manger Square, are three

Great Cisterns excavated in the rock in Ras Eftais, an eastern sector of Bethlehem, marking the site where David's army knocked at a Philistine garrison to bring him water; **2 Sam.** 23:15 is referred. The cisterns were discovered in 1895. Here **The David's Church** is composed of 18 arches with two to six tombs in each. The cemetery was Christian as proved by the inscription found nearby.

The **graffiti** by famed yet mysterious artist **Banksy**, drawn on the **barrier wall dividing Bethlehem from Jerusalem**, has drawn worldwide media attention and is definitely worth a look. There are many other artists' work as well, including a Palestinian version of *Guernica*. To see this, it is probably best to **hire a taxi**.

RACHEL'S TOMB:

The burial place of the matriarch Rachel, **wife of Nabi Jacob [Yaqoob] AS and mother of Nabi Joseph [Yousaf] AS and Benjamin** is the second most important historical site for Christians in Bethlehem as per **Genesis** 35:19-20. It is a holy site in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. As a result of the security situation, the Tomb's original structure has been surrounded by an Israeli fortress, barricading it off from Bethlehem. While the original tomb can still be seen in its entirety from within the fortress, **access to the tomb is now restricted to those travelling by Egged bus from Jerusalem.**

Herodium: (*Ask a taxi driver at Bethlehem's bus station to take you there*) A must see! The site of King Herod's man made mountain and his recently discovered tomb. It is located near Bethlehem. Once at Bethlehem's bus station [called mujamma], negotiate a price with a taxi driver who will take you to the site, wait for you there, and drop you back off at the Bethlehem bus station. ₪150-200 may be reasonable; better to go with friends and split the cab cost.

CRUCIFIXION OF HOLY JESUS:

Holy Jesus was born in Bethlehem near Jerusalem in year c.4BC, spent whole of his life in stony cobbled streets of Jerusalem and the mounts around. Just in the age of 33 years [some historians claim it as 33-36], the prophet was crucified in the same city as per Christianity's main belief. The place where Holy Jesus was tried, nailed on the Cross, [died and] taken down, anointed and buried was later covered and commemorated as CHURCH OF THE

HOLY SEPULCHRE which is the main attraction for the pilgrims and tourists since sixteen centuries.

Crucifixion of Holy Jesus is the main part of Christianity's faith but the Muslims do not agree with this happening, his death and resurrection. However, similar to Christians, all Muslims believe that Holy Jesus will return before the end of time. All Muslims believe that Holy Jesus was not crucified, but was raised bodily to heaven by God. A similar belief is found in the Christianity's **Gospel of Basilides** [*reportedly stands lost since the second century*]; however, this view is disregarded by mainstream Christianity which only accepts the four gospels of the **New Testament** as genuine.

Muslims believe that God gave some one Jesus's appearance or someone else replaced Jesus causing everyone to believe that Jesus was crucified. One Muslim sect believes that He was nailed to a cross, but as his body is immortal **he did not die**; therefore, they contend that crucifixion just did not occur. See holy Quran's words:

....That they said, "**We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah**";- but they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them, and those who differ therein are full of doubts, with no knowledge, but only conjecture to follow, for of a surety they killed him not:-

Nay, Allah raised him up unto Himself; and Allah is Exalted in Power, [and] Wise;- [**—Al-Qur'an 4: 157–158**]

CHURCH OF THE HOLY SEPULCHRE:

For Christians of the whole world, this **Church** [*pronounced in British English as SEPUKA*] is the holiest site in the Old City and thus Jerusalem. After destroying the 2nd temple in year 70AD, the Romans built their own for both Venus & Jupiter on the ruins of the Jewish Temple. When Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, this later Temple was also smashed and the said Church was built in its

place; it was built by Constantine-I during 306-337 AD.

The Church of the Sepulchre is on this site since c.1700 years - though over the centuries it has been destroyed and rebuilt several times; some parts are very old indeed. See its brief in '**Washington Post**' dated **1st November 2016**;

"..... it's believed that the rock-cut tomb at the heart of the church was where the body of Jesus Christ was once laid.

*Today, the site thrums with piety, but history knows it is soaked in blood. There have been at least four Christian chapels erected over the site....Emperor Constantine had swept aside a pagan temple Hadrian built to the goddess Aphrodite. **The Holy Sepulchre was saved by the Muslim conqueror Omar in 638 AD**; destroyed by the Egyptian Caliph al-Hakim in 1009; rebuilt by the Crusaders who themselves slaughtered half the city; **protected again by the Muslim conqueror Saladin** and laid waste again by the fearsome Khwarezmian Turks, whose horsemen rode into the church and chopped off the heads of praying monks."*

At this place of **Church** the Jesus was crucified and buried; located on the Hill of Calvary as given in the New Testament. Just inside the entrance to the church is the **Stone of Anointing** which Christian traditions believe to be the spot where holy Jesus' body was prepared for burial; **it is the 13th Station of the Cross**. Thus it is one of the main pilgrimage destinations for millions of Christians from world over.

Like Jewish Temples, the **Church of the Holy Sepulchre** has also got a history of '**destruction**'. In September-October 1009, the Fatmid Caliph Al-Hakim bi-AmrAllah [*known in Western history as the 'mad Caliph' & 'Nero of Islam'*] ordered his army to destroy the whole sacred site. A Western historian Rudolphus Glaber wrote numerous events blaming French

Jews from Orleans for sending message to the Caliph via a pilgrim; hiding it in a hollow staff urging the Caliph to scrap the Church on threat Christians would take over his empire otherwise.

However, the Byzantine Empire in 1027–28, after an agreement with new Caliph Ali az-Zahir (Al-Hakim's son), was allowed the rebuilding and redecoration of the Church.

It is said that when the news of destruction reached Europe, Christians were horrified and Pope Sergius IV sent a circular letter to all churches calling for a holy fight in the Middle East and expulsion of Muslims from the Holy land. Although the crusades happened almost a century after the desecration and caused by various other complex political intrigues, it was still very much in the public mind as a cause.

The **Church of Sepulchre** lies inside the Christian Quarter of the Old City; divided among several denominations and managed jointly by representatives of different Christian sects, mainly the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, Franciscan friars from the Roman Catholic Church and the Armenian Patriarchate, but also by the Ethiopians, Egyptian Coptics and Syrian Orthodox Church. The **STATUS QUO** strictly determines times of prayer for each group, the lighting of candles, even on which floor-tiles members of which community may step.

It is on record that disputes among these sects have sparked street riots often. Since 1846 at least, clerics from the various orders have battled over the rituals like sweeping of steps, the placing of carpets at altars, and even the right of walking in procession to the Edicule. Sometimes, the fighting held with knives and pistols smuggled into the Holy Sepulchre by worshipers of either side. The *Status Quo*, a 260-year-old understanding between religious communities, applies to the site.

However, regardless of whether or not you are religious, this place will leave you speechless - feelings of mysticism intertwined with the weight of two millennia of history, wars and suffering

that took place here and so intense, it is awesome.

Traditionally, the Roman & Greek armies claimed they wanted to keep Jerusalem in God's name. Although many men fought and died for this spiritual cause; many were not as honest – only lust of power played and prevailed. During the Crusader's rule, in year 1149 AD, the **Church was rebuilt**; but smaller than of Constantine's.

The Franciscan friars renovated it further in 1555 AD; they rebuilt the Aedicule and extended it but control of the church oscillated between the Franciscans and the Orthodox - depending on which community could obtain a favourable *FARMAN* often through outright bribery and toe-licking. In 1767 AD, weary of the squabbling, a *FARMAN* was issued that divided the church among the claimants.

A fire severely damaged the church structure in 1808 AD, causing dome of the Rotunda to collapse and smashing the Aedicule's exterior decoration – but only to be rebuilt a year after. The current dome, made of iron, was restored by Catholics, Greeks and Turks in 1868; renovated again during 1994–97 as part of extensive modern overhaul to the church which has been ongoing since 1959 AD. The church's bell tower is located to the left of the façade; currently almost half its original size.

Historically, two large, arched doors allowed access to the church. However, only the left-hand entrance is currently accessible, as the right door has long since been bricked up.

Being within the old walled city, the church is a part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site.

CALVARY [GOLGOTHA]:

Entering the main door of the Church, one finds a stairway climbing to Calvary [Golgotha], traditionally regarded as the site of Jesus' crucifixion and the most lavishly decorated part of the church.

The raised Golgotha Chapel contains the peak-piece of the Rock of Calvary [**12th Station of**

the Cross]. It is split into two halves, one Greek Orthodox and one Catholic, each one with its own altar - but the main altar belongs to the Greek Orthodox. The rock can be seen under glass on both sides of the altar, and beneath the altar there is a hole in the rock, said to be the place where the cross was raised – and it is the most visited site in the Church after the Tomb of Jesus. The Catholic Chapel of the Nailing of the Cross [**11th Station**] lies south of it. Between Catholic and the Orthodox altar, there is a statue of Mary, believed by some to be miraculous.

Beneath the Calvary and the two chapels there, on the main floor, there is the Chapel of Adam. According to tradition, Jesus was crucified over the place where Adam's skull was buried. According to some, at the crucifixion, the blood of Christ ran down the cross and through the rocks to fill the skull of Adam. Here the Rock appears cracked too through a window on the altar wall, traditionally claimed to be caused by the earthquake that occurred when Jesus died. The tourists touch the actual rock proudly.

STONE OF ANOINTING:

While entering the church door, the first thing the tourists see is the Stone of Anointing which tradition believes to be the spot where Jesus' body was prepared for burial by one disciple named Joseph; however, the present stone was only added during major repair in 1810 AD.

The wall behind the stone is defined by its striking blue balconies and red banners depicting the insignia of the Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre. This wall was a temporary addition to support the arch above it, which had been weakened after the damage in the 1808 fire; it blocks the view of the Aedicule & rotunda. Immediately to the left of the entrance is a bench that has traditionally been used by the church's Muslim doorkeepers, along with some Christian clergy.

THE AEDICULE:

The Aedicule, the actual burial place of Holy Jesus is located in **rotunda** [any building with a circular ground plan mostly covered by a dome] of the main church. In the centre of the rotunda

is a small chapel called the Aedicula in Latin which encloses the Holy Sepulchre. The Aedicule has two rooms, the first holding the **Angel's Stone**, which is believed to be a fragment of the large stone that sealed the tomb; the second is the tomb [the cave] itself. Possibly due to the fact that eager pilgrims try to take bits of the original rock as souvenirs, a marble plaque was placed in the 14th century on the tomb to prevent further damage to it.

Besides, other ceremonies on special occasions are also held here, such as the Holy Saturday ceremony of the Holy Fire etc. All the Christian sects at the church have access to the Aedicule but historically, the Georgians also retained the key to the Aedicule. In 2016, restoration works were performed in the Aedicule. For the first time since at least 1555 AD, marble cladding which protected the estimated burial bed of Holy Jesus from souvenir takers was removed – the original limestone burial bed was revealed intact. This suggested that the tomb location has not changed through time and that the original limestone cave walls were there as such.

To the right of the Sepulchre is the Chapel of the Apparition, which is reserved for Roman Catholic use.

STATIONS of the CROSS:

In Christian literature, the 13 [later concept 14 & 15 too] stations of cross occupies very sacred ritual; STATIONS means the happenings on the path to his crucifixion point when the holy Jesus was asked to carry his own cross all the way - called **Via Dolorosa**.

Since the old-age, standard stations remained in vogue were; for instance, 2nd Station is place where Jesus accepts his cross; next Station is where Jesus falls for the first time [on his way]; next Station is where Jesus meets his mother, Mary Then nailing to the Cross; then death; then taken down from the Cross; And the last Station one is placing His body in the TOMB.

Although, not traditionally part of the Stations, the **Resurrection of Jesus** is, in very rare

instances, included as a fifteenth station. Pope John Paul II introduced a new form of devotion, called the **Scriptural Way of the Cross** in 1991. In 2007, Pope Benedict XVI approved another station for meditation and public celebration. Pope John Paul II till a year before his death in 2005 used to carry the Cross himself through all stations on Good Fridays.

The CHAPEL OF ADAM was a favourite burial place of Catholic Crusader kings. Most sects believe that beneath the Calvary and the two chapels there, on the main floor, there is **the Chapel** where Nabi **Adam's** skull was buried. Some also argue that at the crucifixion, the blood of Christ ran down the cross and through the rocks to fill the skull of Nabi **Adam**. One can see a crack in the rock caused by the earthquake which occurred at the moment of Jesus' death. This was also the origin of the name **Golgotha: the place of the skull**.

PRISON OF HOLY JESUS:

In the north-east side of the complex there is the Prison of Christ, alleged by the Franciscans to be where Jesus was held. The Greek Orthodox allege that the real place that Jesus was held was in their Monastery of the **Praetorium**, located near the Church of Ecce Homo between the Second and Third Stations at Via Dolorosa. The Armenians hold that the said prison is in the Monastery of the Flagellation at Via Dolorosa. Some declare that Jesus was held in the Mount Zion cell in connection with his trial by the Jewish High Priest. Most historians go for the Praetorium for his trial by the Roman governor Pilate, and near the Golgotha before crucifixion.

Monastery of SULTAN: It is a village of huts on roof of Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Ethiopian monks live here, although the site is hotly contested by the Egyptian Copts. A **Status Quo** [a 1852 decree] - an old understanding between them applies to the site, too. Later an Israeli court ruled in favour of the Ethiopian community in a dispute of 1970.

As per **BBC Documentary** dated **19th October 2008**; disputes are not uncommon, particularly over who has the authority to carry out repairs. This **Deir al-Sultan** monastery was built on the main church roof since ages and the modest small rooms were first occupied by monks from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in 1808.

PHILIP'S TOMB: Near the entrance to the church one will notice a **wooden panel** on the right. This is the **tomb of Philip d'Aubigne** [1166-1236 AD], the tutor of Henry III of England, whose signature appears on the **Magna Carta**. He had requested to be buried here so that pilgrims would tread over his grave.

CHAPEL OF ST HELENA: It is 12th century Armenian Church at the lower level of the whole premises. In the south east of the chapel there is a chair which is reputed to be a seat that was used by Helena, the mother of the Emperor Constantine-I when she was looking for the True Cross.

During 1973-78's excavations here, the scientists discovered a void containing remains of Hadrian's 2nd-century temple and a higher 4th century wall to support Constantine's basilica. In 2017, the chapel underwent renovations which included new white marble altar railing and new tile flooring.

SMALL WOODEN LADDER: It is there at the entrance to the church pointing towards two big windows of upper rooms. Till 1831 AD, the Christian monks lived inside who managed to get their food ONLY up this ladder and through the window. Because the ladder is part of the ancient status quo between the six sects, no one is permitted to move it, though it isn't in use any more.

An old agreement between the monks holds that nothing can be done in the church except by consensus, and that includes, amazingly enough, the movement of the ladder. And since 1757, the monks haven't agreed to move the

ladder. Even a papal request from the late Pope Paul VI could not bring consensus here.

WHO OPENS the CHURCH DOOR: Interestingly; two Muslim families are entrusted with care of this holy Christian site for centuries: One Adeeb Joudeh, A MUSLIM FAMILY MEMBER, keeps a cast-iron key some 500 years old as he walks through the streets of Jerusalem's Old City. His job, as it has been for generations of his forebears, is to carry the key that opens the doors to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. It is more than just tradition; this is the very essence of Jerusalem - its religious history so special.

See an eye-opening account dated **31st July 2012**, available on Catholic Christians' official website - **Catholic Online**:

*"In the holiest place of all Christendom, a single Muslim holds the key, Christians fight with one another, and Jewish police intervene - to keep the peace.Fights over seemingly trivial issues are part of the reason **why this ladder hasn't moved in 255 years [262 yrs in 2019]; it is here since 1757 AD.**"*

Muslims have been entrusted with the keys since 1187 AD, by Sultan Saladin – because of the constant feuding between the Christians; mainly the Orthodox and Roman Catholics; **Protestants have no presence there.** Oren Liebermann of **CNN** describes his visit [**of 26th March 2016**] to the ancient Jerusalem:

"We meet Adeeb Joudeh at the Jaffa Gate to the Old City. It is 3:30 am....he carries with him an ancient cast-iron key, some 500 years old. The key is 12 inches long, with a triangular metal handle and a square end. Adeeb Joudeh stands at entrance to Church of the Holy Sepulchre."

Few are aware of Joudeh's significance. In his house, Joudeh keeps a binder full of ancient comments.....**in golden ink; the oldest dates back to 1517 AD.** Of course, *this is an honour for all Muslims in the world.* This task fell to

Joudeh's ancestors as a way to keep **neutral guardian of the Church** of the Holy Sepulchre. He learned the obligations of guarding the key from his father, just as he will pass it on to his son. **Thus the holiest site must be unlocked by a Muslim and policed by Jews.** He added:

*"What we pass to the next generations is not only the key, but also the way you respect other religionswhen Caliph **Umar ibn Khattab [RA]** took the keys of Jerusalem from Patriarch Sophronius - he gave security and safety to Christians in the region. We co-exist and pass peace and love, which is the real Islamic religion."*

Another FACT: Joudeh [family] does not carry this obligation alone. Although he is in charge of protecting and holding the key, **another Muslim family opens the door** and allow the faithful to enter the church; the liability falls to **Wajeeh Nuseibeh.**

When Nuseibeh arrives at the church early in the morning, he takes the key from Joudeh, and climbs a small wooden ladder to unlock the top lock. He swings the church doors ajar, and the church is open to visitors. The entire process is repeated each evening, when the church is locked. **The two Muslim families are doing it since centuries leading the way to interfaith belief.**

VIA DOLOROSA:

Aka **way of Sorrow**; the path taken by Jesus Christ on his way to crucifixion. It starts at **Lions Gate** and travels through the two main roads since the Roman times, until it reaches the Church of the **Holy Sepulchre.** It is only 600 meters long, but it's possibly the most popular pilgrimage location for Christian groups following the **14 Stations of the Cross** – the first nine stations are located along this street and are marked by plaques and inscriptions, while the final 5 stations are inside the church itself.

Via Dolorosa route goes through crowded and winding small aisles, mostly through busy markets and neighbourhoods. At places, it becomes hard to push through these narrow streets, some of which had stairs without any ramps. But it is definitely worth walking this route.

CALIPH UMAR MOSQUE:

In the time of 2nd Muslim Caliph Umar RA, the Muslim armies had liberated most of [today's] Syria, Jordan and Palestine till they reached the gates of Jerusalem. Governor in Syria conveyed a message to the Patriarch of Jerusalem named Sophronius [560-638 AD] to surrender before the Muslim Caliphate of Madina. The Muslim governor also launched a siege around Jerusalem. Meanwhile, Sophronius who was the Patriarch of Jerusalem since 634 AD, sent a request to the Muslim Commander that he is ready to surrender the city before Muslim Caliphate – but if Caliph Umar himself comes to Jerusalem. The request was acceded. A well documented fact that:

*"Caliph Umar paid a visit [in year 638 AD] to the **Church of the Holy Sepulchre**; Sophronius welcomed him in the courtyard and handed over the keys of city.*

Soon there was Muslim prayer time and Caliph Umar RA held the 'Imamat' along with his Muslim companions in a corner place of the Church Courtyard instead of setting his prayers inside the church though the priest had specially asked the Caliph to do so. It was the far-sightedness of the Muslim Caliph while teaching [newly] Muslims to respect churches and worship places of other religions."

Caliph Umar's refusal made a precedent not to endanger the Christian sites; opting instead to pray in the courtyard. After that day, the Muslims ruled over Jerusalem for 1300 years but the sacredness of the Church was never disturbed. Contrarily, the Crusaders' ruled the city for only 90 years [1099-1187 AD] but they

had promptly converted the Golden Dome of the Haram Sharif into the **Church of the Lord**.

In later periods of the Crusaders' rule, the corner of the Church's courtyard, where Caliph Umar had offered prayers, was separated and walled making that place a mosque named as **Umar ben Khattab Mosque** which is still there sharing walls of the said **Church** – and in active use with **NEVER any unpleasant event reported since centuries**. The Umar's mosque has a distinctively square, 15-meter high minaret that was built in the 15th century and renovated some 300 years later.

GARDEN TOMB:

While some people believe that holy Jesus was crucified, died, and Resurrected at the site of Church of the Holy Sepulchre, another group of Christian believers strongly think that Garden Tomb is the actual site where Jesus died and resurrected. Some Christian sects believe that Jesus was crucified somewhere away but his body was brought back to this garden - owned by Joseph of Arimathea during that time. In the garden, a rock-cut tomb is said to be the burial place of Jesus and the spot of his Resurrection. Presently, the garden is maintained by an independent British charitable trust and admission is FREE.

The **Garden Tomb** was unearthed in 1867 AD and history of the place goes back to the 8th century at least. The trench in front of the tomb and the nearby cistern and surrounding garden's source of water, respectively, have both been dated to the Crusader period [12th century]. However, the pilgrims visit the Church of Holy Sepulchre since the fourth century with more confidence and didn't by this later theory.

Since 1894, the Garden Tomb provides tranquil environment for prayer and reflection but any claim that this is where Christ was buried and rose from the dead lacks authenticity. The site is particularly favoured by **Protestant** pilgrims, in preference to the cluttered **Church of the Holy Sepulchre** in the Old City because

this faction of Christians is not 'so welcomed' in the above said Church. Moreover, all the **tombs** in the Garden Tomb area date from 7 to 9 centuries BC — the time of Jeremiah or Isaiah, rather than Jesus.

ST JAMES CATHEDRAL

Armenian Quarter is the smallest quarter of the four in Old City. Armenian Quarter is also a Christian community but with distinct feel and looks; Tower of David and St James Cathedral

are something grand and worth visiting. Comprising just one sixth of the Jerusalem old city area, the heart of the Armenian community lies between Jaffa and Zion gates and this is where the world famous Armenian ceramics of Jerusalem are created.

This quarter is home to one of the **oldest Christian communities in the world**. The Armenians were the first nation to formally accept Christianity here in Jerusalem in 301 AD but they had their presence here long before that – by record dating back to 96 BC at least. After Titus razed Jerusalem in year 70 AD and expelled most of the Jews, the Romans imported more Armenian merchants and administrators.

There are about 500 Armenians living in the Armenian quarter today and most of the neighbourhood is owned by the Armenian Patriarchate. The self-contained community revolves around St James Church and Monastery. The nearby **Gulbenkian Library**, founded in 1879, houses one of the world's largest collections of Armenian manuscripts. The Armenian community is much closed and the only places tourists can visit on their own are the **church and small museum**. Armenians believe **James, brother of Jesus, is buried**. Among city's holy sites, this one is often overlooked - the church dates from the 12th century.

St James cathedral is dedicated to two Christian saints: James, son of Zebedee and James the brother of Jesus; the Cathedral itself is **only open between 3:00 and 3:30 daily**. At other times, you can still get into the courtyard of the complex and see the beautiful Armenian ceramics above and around the church doors. On either side of the doors one will see wooden and metal objects called **nakos**. These date to the 19th century when the Muslim rulers forbade Christians to ring church bells. The monks beat on the **nakos** like gongs, calling the faithful to prayer and worship.

Like Muslim shrines, the tourists are to make sure they are dressed modestly for this visit; a long list of rules is pasted at the entrance. In

addition to the said guidelines, the fathers won't let in men wearing shorts, frown on people putting their hands in their pockets and won't let you sit with your legs crossed. Besides the church and library, the complex also includes a museum, a printing press, an elementary school, a high school, and residential apartments.

The Armenian quarter is also the source of the world famous Armenian ceramics of Jerusalem. Armenian tile-making took off in Jerusalem in the 19th century, when the Ottomans brought in several families of Armenian tile makers from Turkey to renovate the tile decorations on the Golden Dome in Haram Sharif [Dome of the Rock]. The families settled in this Jerusalem old city area and established workshops that continue to produce ceramic goods to this day. In several shops and studios you can even watch the artists at work. Some of the studios specialize in kitchen, bathroom and swimming pool tiles which are just beautiful; orders come in from around the world.

BASILICA OF ECCE HOMO:

Also known as **Monastery of the sisters of Zion** stands on the Via Dolorosa with an over the street arch and one end of which is part of the temple. It is located at the **Second Station of the Cross** where Christians remember the laying of the cross on Jesus. The entrance from the Via Dolorosa leads to the Basilica itself and to the glass wall, through which to view the interior of the Church. Side street is named after nuns of the sisters of Zion. The monastery was built in 1857 AD comprised of monastic buildings, the Church and the orphanage for girls, and later the nuns bought neighbouring houses.

The Latin words *Ecce Homo* (i.e. *Behold the Man*) are attributed to Pontius Pilate [*adjudicator on the trial and crucifixion of Jesus*] in the Gospel of John 19:5, when he presented an afflicted Jesus Christ, bound and crowned with thorns, to a hostile crowd. The New Testament also says that Jesus was dressed in fake royal

attire, to mock the claim that he was '**King of the Jews.**'

In the process of excavation there were discovered the Roman stone slabs. For some time, they were considered by the Pavement which testified Jesus, but then declared as a later paving dating from the 2nd century, as the arch of ECCE Homo. Also, there is **Pool of Strothion** - an ancient reservoir for rainwater, built by Herod the Great in 1st century BC; Stration was discovered directly beneath the monastery. The water's there, but the pool is covered with stones. It was built by the nuns when the tunnels of the Western Wall were opened; part of the pool is opened to visitors. Now, Strothion can be seen from two sides - from the tunnels and the monastery of the sisters of Zion.

In the monastery there is a modest but comfortable guest house. Staying there tourists can climb to the terrace on roof with coffee and unforgettable views of the Old City.

TOMBS OF IBRAHIM AS & FAMILY:

In Palestinian city of **HEBRON**, about 25 km away from Jerusalem, the most attractive place for the tourists is the **Cave of Machphelah or the Ibrahimi Mosque**, Prophet Abraham AS's burial place and the main holy site in the city. It is on the border between the Palestinian and Jewish sectors. Military checkpoints staffed by the army separate the two areas and while the tourists usually pass with an ID check and after intense queries, **Palestinians are banned from crossing these checkpoints.**

A little History please: Islam, as sermonized by Prophet Muhammad pbuh, is the same religion preached by Nabi Abraham AS, as well as of all other prophets mentioned in the Torah and the Bible. Muslims honour all the prophets of the Jews and Christianity - Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, Solomon, Jesus and others [peace be upon them all] - as equally blessed and revered souls. Allah guided Prophet Muhammad pbuh to follow the religion of the Nabi Abraham AS [**Al-Qur'an** 16:123].

It remains a fact that Muslims know about and respect Nabi Abraham AS more than any of the fellow religions – Christianity and Judaism. From holy Qur'an the Muslims know that how his people disputed with him; **Al-Qur'an** 6:75-83 & 21:51-56 carry full details. How Prophet AS's father Terach [1883-1678 BC], himself used to carve and mould idols. Once Nabi Abraham AS chopped heads of all the idols with a sharp axe, the people got furious; they arrested, tried, kept him in chains and finally decided to throw the Nabi AS into the biggest fire they could build.

Every Muslim knows that how Nabi Abraham AS was thrown in rising blaze and that the flames did not harm Nabi AS because Allah the Almighty had issued His command for fire to cool down; see **Al-Qur'an** 3:173-174 & 21:69-70. How King Namrud held dialogue with Prophet AS [details are there in **Al-Qur'an** 2:258] and went speechless. In the meantime, Nabi AS continued calling people to believe in Allah – the one GOD.

NABI ABRAHAM AS IN 3 RELIGIONS: Prophet Abraham [in **Arabic:** Nabi Ibrahim] AS;

is revered not just in Islam, but in Christianity and Judaism as well – better known as a friend of God – **Khalil-Ullah** in Arabic. The history sees him as the father of the **Arab** people as well as the **Jewish** people through his two sons, Nabi Ishmael and Nabi Ishaq respectively and the grandfather of Prophet Yaqub AS or Jacob. During each prayer, Muslims ask God to send His blessings upon Prophet Ibrahim - every day, five times a day, in virtually every time zone on this planet. More importantly, the direction in which every Muslim must face when praying is towards a structure Prophet Ibrahim AS had built with his son Nabi Ishmael: the Ka'aba in Makkah; see holy **Qur'an 3:95-97 & 4:125.**

Hajj, the pilgrimage to Makkah, is the ritual wherein Prophet Ibrahim's willingness to sacrifice his eldest son Ishmael AS for God is commemorated – also called **Eid-ul-Adha**. Both father and son willingly submitted to God's command and the GOD was pleased with their commitment and performance thus rewarded Nabi Abraham with another [prophet] son Isaac AS; holy **Qur'an 37:100-107** is referred.

IN JUDAISM: Jews regard Nabi Abraham AS as the first Patriarch [*father*] of the Jewish people. The event of sacrifice is different in Judaism; Jews believe that God tested Abraham's faith by asking him to sacrifice his son Isaac [not Ishmael as given in holy Qur'an]; **Genesis 11:26-27 & 22:2-13** are referred. Secondly, Judaism believes that the place of sacrifice was Mt Moriah in Jerusalem [not Arafat near Makkah as per Muslim faith]. The rest of the facts go same in the two religions.

IN CHRISTIANITY: Christians used to call God as the **God of Nabi Abraham AS**. According to Concise Encyclopaedia of Christianity [Oneworld–1998], [Nabi] Abraham is a great Hebrew patriarch and is considered common spiritual father of the Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Christianity also believes that God asked Nabi Abraham to **sacrifice his son Isaac** [not Ishmael as per the Qur'anic version]. The Jews and Christians trace themselves back to Nabi Abraham AS and his

wife Sarah; Muslims, to Nabi Abraham AS and his other wife Hagar.

Coming back to **Cave of Machpelah [the Ibrahimi Mosque]**, Jews and Muslims both agree on who is buried there: Nabi Abraham AS & his wife Sarah, Nabi Isaac AS & his wife Rebecca, Nabi Jacob AS & his wife Leah; all spiritual patriarchs and matriarchs whom both Jews and Muslims revere.

The burial of Sarah was the first account of a burial in the Bible, and Nabi Abraham AS's purchase of Machpelah was the first commercial transaction mentioned in this holy book. The next burial in the cave was that of Nabi Abraham AS himself, who at the age of 175 years was buried by his sons Prophets Isaac and Ishmael AS. The third burial was that of Nabi Isaac AS, by his two sons Esau and Nabi Jacob, who died when he was 180 years old. There is no mention in Bible of how or when Isaac's wife Rebecca died and buried but she is included in the list of Nabi Jacob AS's final words; Nabi AS himself died at the age of 147 years.

The site was revered in Judaism since at least 2000 BC as a burial site for the patriarchs. In 31-04 BC, the Jewish king Herod built a large, rectangular enclosure over the cave which still survives with 6-foot-thick stone walls made from stones that were at least 3 to 24 feet in width – but did not have a roof. Under Byzantine rule, in 4th century AD, on one part a church was constructed and the enclosure was roofed everywhere except at the centre. During this period, the site became key Christian pilgrimage destination. The first accounts are from the 4th century. Till 570 AD at least Jews and Christians shared possession of the site.

In 614 AD, the Persians conquered the area and destroyed the whole structure, leaving only ruins; but in 637-38 AD, the area was taken over by the Arab Muslims and the building was reconstructed as a roofed mosque. The Muslims were fair enough to also permit erection of two small synagogues for Jews at the site; Wikipedia is referred.

In 1099 AD, the area was captured by the Crusaders and the enclosure once again became a church; Jews and Muslims both were banned to enter the mosque or synagogue. However, during this period, the area was given new gabled roof, clerestory windows and vaulting.

In the year 1119 AD, *"In this year was opened the tomb of Abraham, and those of his two sons Isaac and Jacob ...Many people saw the Patriarch. Their limbs had nowise been disturbed, and beside them were placed lamps of gold and of silver"* - a discovery that excited eager curiosity among all three communities in the southern Levant [Hebron] Muslim, Jewish, and Christian.

In 1188 AD Saladin Ayyubi conquered the area, reconverting it to a mosque but allowing Christians to continue worshipping there. Saladin also added a minaret at each corner—two of which still survive - and the *Mimbar*. In the late 14th century, under the Mamluks, two additional entrances were pierced into the western end and also the north-western staircase and all the six cenotaphs the tourists see today. During the Ottoman period, the dilapidated state of the patriarchs' tombs was often restored to sumptuous dignity – and all the sepulchres were covered with rich carpets of green silk, magnificently embroidered with gold; those of the wives were red, embroidered in like manner. The sultans of Constantinople used to furnish these carpets, which were renewed from time to time.

After Jordan occupied the West Bank in year 1948, no Jews were allowed in the territory; however, following the Israeli occupation of the West Bank in the Six-Day War of 1967, Hebron came under Jewish control.

The tomb itself is in a cave about 40 feet under the floor. The entrance is on the Muslim side, but the tomb is on the Jewish side. The entrance is sealed – it is [light] point of contention. Almost daily, the Muslim manager unlocks the cover to a small manhole, about the size of a dinner plate, and silver candelabra that just

barely fits inside, and lowers it down a shaft on a long chain, down to the underground cave. It's a symbolic gesture of sacred religious connection from Muslims to their holy prophets.

Today, the shrine is divided — one side is for Muslims; the other is for Jews — one side is mosque and the other side synagogue. On the Jewish side of the shrine, a senior Rabbi, who had grown up in Miami [USA] but now lives in Hebron, guides visitors and the Jewish settlers of Hebron. According to details given in the Bible, the shrine stands on the spot where Abraham bought a plot of land as a burial place for his family about 4,000 years ago. In fact, it was the first documented acquisition of property by someone in the Holy Land — it was the start of it all — the Jews claim Nabi Abraham AS is their ancestor; Muslims claim he was their elder — in fact both are correct.

Inside a large carpeted hall on Muslim side of the shrine stand two structures housing enormous cenotaphs, or grave markers, for Nabi Isaac AS and Rebecca. Tourists, both Muslims and non-Muslims, are welcome to visit both the Muslim and Jewish sides of the cave when there are no prayer schedules.

On 25th February 1994; Baruch Goldstein, an American Jewish settler, walked into the main hall and shot dead 29 Muslim worshippers at the spot and 125 persons injured; since then the shrine is being governed by strict regime of segregation. Bullet-proof walls divide the areas where Muslims and Jews could pray separately.

The Muslim side of the Cave contains the only known entrance to the Cave below [it is locked by a marble door]. The tomb-markers [KATBAS] of Prophet Issac AS and Rebecca; and of Prophet Abraham AS and Sarah lying on the border of both the Muslim and Jewish sides of the cave. The Jewish section contains the tomb-markers of Nabi Jacob AS and Leah. Most of the time, the building is used by Muslims and Jews for prayers — but in mutual consultation and convenience.

On a few pre-determined days each year, each religion gets to use the entire building. **For the Jews**, in addition to the normal holidays, one of these days is "*Shabbat Chayei Sarah*" each fall, on which thousands of people from all over Israel visit Hebron to commemorate moments of Nabi Abraham [AS]'s Buying of the Cave from its previous Hittite owners. **For the Muslims** it is on Fridays during Ramadan and as well during the *Eid al Fitr* and *Eid al Adha* holiday which Islam commemorates as the day Nabi Abraham AS went to sacrifice his son Ishmael AS.

The muezzin recites the *Adhan* [Muslim call] to prayer, but the microphone is on the Jewish side of the site, so soldiers escort him to the microphone. When he's done, they quickly usher him back through the bullet-proof divider to the Muslim side — he goes through the same exercise five times a day. On the other side, the Jewish Rabbi recites morning prayers in front of a large wooden Torah ark, which is attached to wheels so Jews can cart it out for the 10 days when Muslims take over their part of shrine.

Neither side trusts the other to respect its property and nor they are very happy with how this place is shared. Two religious factions are claiming the same one place — in nutshell this is the Israel - Palestine conflict.

HEBRON City - AL-KHALIL:

It is an ancient city in the southern West Bank - is mentioned in the Bible as the **home of Prophet [Nabi] Abraham AS**; burial place of him and several generations of his family. The Jewish population of Hebron was evacuated after killing of nearly 70 of them in 1929. Then, after the 1967 war, a few Jewish settlers went back and decided to renew their old life. Today, about 500 Israeli settlers live in old city of Hebron under continual security; the remaining 166,000 residents are Palestinians. The Old Town of Hebron was declared as **World Heritage Site** by UNESCO on 7th July 2017.

The Oak of Abraham Monastery in Hebron town is a Christian holy site which observes

Prophet Abraham [AS]'s visitation by three angels. In addition, in or nearby Hebron there are **Tombs of Biblical figures Jesse, Ruth, Abner** and **Tomb of Nabi Lut AS**; 8 km from Hebron city in the town of **Bani Na'im**. Their are tombs of his two daughters, also there is another Muslim monument associated with Nabi Lut's settlement and prayers in the town [called **al Maqam an Nabi Yateen** in Arabic].

GETTING IN HEBRON:

If you want to go to the Palestinian side of Hebron: grab bus 21 from **Arab bus station** just outside the Damascus gate in Jerusalem; tell them Hebron or *Al-Khalil* they will take you to a mid way **drop off point at the Bethlehem bus station** and from there you need to go to the very bottom floor of the Bethlehem bus station where a collective taxi or minibus will take you to Muslim side of Hebron. The minibus drops you in busy city centre from where no vehicular access to the Ibrahimi mosque; the tourists go on foot for about a km distance. Today, the shrine is divided — one side is for Muslims; the other is for Jews — one side is mosque and the other side synagogue. Everyone must pass through an Israeli military security checkpoint either way.

Direct Route: If you want to go to the Israeli controlled side, which includes the Cave of the Patriarchs, take **Bus 160 from the Jerusalem Central Bus station**. This is the easiest route to get to Hebron within 30 minutes because it is a direct bus ride that is quite fast and requires no transfers. There are **buses 380, 381 / 382 too, going every 15-30 minutes**, from here; no hassle but you may miss to see the tombs of Nabi Isaac AS & Rebecca because of security checks. However, the plus point is that you'll see tombs of Nabi Jacob AS & Leah which are not accessible from Muslim side.

The keen and serious tourists opt for both routs separately though it takes away their full one day's business. **Palestinian taxi drivers are not allowed into the Jewish settler's section**, so you will need to travel there from an

Israeli town or a Jewish settlement. For seeing sights out-of-town, it's best to take a **service-taxi**, the Palestinian equivalent of *sherut*, at the bus station.

Though it is not a meal but the travellers do try **tabun** [large soft & round] bread in **Bab el Zaweya** with container of hummus from nearby. **Falafel** is one of the most famous '**snacks**' in Palestine in general. Hebron has many famous falafel restaurants that are always crowded because of their world-known taste. From the beginning of **Ein Sarah Street** to its end, you will find many falafel stalls or restaurants.

Hebron is famous of its traditional dish called **Al-Qidrah Al-Khaliliyah**; a meal that contains mainly rice and meat [chicken or lamb]; eaten usually on Fridays and other festivals. Since it needs time to prepare and it should be cooked in an oven or in bakery, it is not easy to find it in casual restaurants. However, it is available in restaurants like **Abu Mazen** and **Al-Quds in Ras al-Jora**. It is expensive for most local citizens; often costing \$10 plus. In sweets, do not miss *Kinafa, Baqlawa, Harisah, Kolaj* and the list can go long.

Situated on the edge of Hebron's Old City, **ABU SALAH**, this busy restaurant is one of the best for shawarma. It has a handful of chairs where locals rest on to chomp down on their pitas, either chicken or lamb.

Alcoholic drinks are not available in Hebron, at least in the Arab areas. Nevertheless, natural juices can be found in many coffee shops with nice atmosphere. **Ein Sarah Street** is the main street for night life between 7PM to 11PM. Many coffee shops are available there where you can smoke **shisha** and have soft drinks.

FOOT-PRINTS OF HOLY JESUS:

Chapel of the Ascension in Jerusalem is a Christian holy site that is believed to mark the place from where Nabi Jesus AS ascended into heaven. The small round church contains a stone imprinted with the holy **footprints of Jesus**; scripts from the holy Bible [**Luke & Acts** referred]. The *Status Quo*, 260s year old understanding between religious communities of Church of the Holy Sepulchre, applies to this site, too.

Before the conversion of Ruler Constantine [312 AD], early Christians honoured the Ascension of Christ in a **cave** on the Mount of Olives. By the year 384 AD, the place of the Ascension was venerated on the present open site, uphill from the cave. The first church was built here around 390 AD by a pious Roman lady; it was once destroyed in the Persian attack of 614 AD but restored later. In year 680 AD the church was reconstructed as similar round building but **open to the sky**, where eight lamps used to shine brightly at night through windows facing Jerusalem. Inside was a central aedicule [small shrine] containing the footprints of holy Christ **clearly impressed**.

The **Crusaders**, in c.1150, rebuilt **Church of the Ascension** as a roofed octagon and fortified the exterior but since long remained deserted. In year 1198 AD, ten years after the fall of the Crusader kingdom, **Salah Din** got added a stone dome and *mihrab* in it; then brought it in use as a **mosque**. It continued so for over 300 years but fell into ruin again in ending 15th century, and the east section of the octagonal surround-wall got damaged. A mosque and minaret were added afresh to the building in year 1620 AD and the entire site was entrusted to Muslims for effective maintenance.

Want to See the Chapel? Ring the bell for admission if the door is not open. To the right of the entrance is a small 1620's mosque, *Zawiyat al-Adawiyya*; the entrance leads into a courtyard with a paved path. The exterior walls are decorated with arches and slim marble columns.

On the floor, inside an asymmetrically placed frame, is a slab of stone imprinted with the right **footprint of Christ** before he ascended to heaven; **left foot-print** is housed in Aqsa by the name: the **Ascension Rock**.

Hooks in the wall around the courtyard are used to stretch tents for the celebration of the **Feast of the Ascension**, which attracts many pilgrims; AND is annually celebrated. The Day that commemorates the bodily Ascension of Jesus into heaven is observed on Thursday, near 40th day of Easter.

Going there: The Chapel of Ascension and the *Zawiyat al-Adawiyya Mosque* are located in village AL-TUR on the **Mount of Olives** - easy to reach it on foot from the Old City. It is also possible to take **bus #75** from the Bus Station next to the Damascus Gate, which will take you there. Christians recall how the Lord lived for only 33 years on earth – well, actually only three years with his Ministry; Nabi Jesus AS in fact showed the people to live as truthful though short.

CHURCH OF ASCENSION:

Nearby on the Mount Olives, one sect of the Christians declare another premises as Church of the Ascension. The 64m high **tower** that dominates Mount of Olives skyline belongs to the **Russian Orthodox Church**. It was built to this height in 1870s so that pilgrims unable to walk to the Jordan River could climb its 214 steps and at least see the river. Atop the tower, there is an eight-ton **bell**, cast in Russia and was **pulled and pushed by women pilgrims** — on circular wagon from the port of Jaffa. **It was the first Christian bell to ring in the Ottoman city of Jerusalem**. Since 1907, the church is in the custody of Russian Orthodox nuns **from various nations - renowned for their singing and icon-making**. The church, including a pilgrims' hostel, is set among **gardens** with a large olive grove.

Access is from **Rabi'a al-Adawwiyya** Street [which begins directly opposite the entrance to

the **Church of Pater Noster**] and along a lane called Alley 7. To the left of a big **green gate** at the end of the lane is a door with a keypad to request entry.

The cross-shaped church is surmounted by a dome; stains on flagstones from an earlier Byzantine church are believed to be the **blood of nuns** slain during the Persian invasion of 614 AD. Attached to an outside wall, protected by a grate, is **rock** on which the Orthodox believe Mary, the mother of Jesus, was standing when her son ascended to heaven.

In this church, there is a **void in floor where John the Baptist's head is** believed to have been **found**; one sect of Christians claims so but no other biblical literature supports it. Later, a **chapel** was built at that particular spot.

RABIA'S TOMB:

A small burial vault next to the chapel is revered by all three monotheistic religions, but based on different beliefs about its occupant. Jews believe it contains the **7th century BC prophet Huldah**, one of seven female prophets mentioned in the Bible [**2 Kings** 22:14-20]; Christians hold it to be the tomb of the 5th century saint **Pelagia**; while Muslims maintain that 8th century holy woman **Rabi'a al-Adawiya**, also a Sufi saint but migrated from Syria then, for whom the mosque is named, is buried here.

Most people take this **Rabi'a al-Adawiya** as **Rabia Basri** of Iraq who is said to have been born between 714 and 718 AD in Basra. Much of Rābī'a Basri's early life has been recounted by **Farid ud-Din Attar**; a later Sufi saint and poet. **Rabi'ah al-Basri** of Iraq was a Sufi saint and is considered to be the first female Sufi Saint of Islam. She also lived during the 8th Century BUT she spent all of her life in Basra.

CHURCH OF PATER NOSTER:

It is a Roman Catholic Church located on Mount of Olives in Jerusalem - standing right next to the ruins of 4th century Byzantine **Church of Eleona** – which were re-discovered in the 20th century and its walls were partially rebuilt. Here, Christians recall Christ's teaching of the **Lord's Prayer** to his disciples. On its walls and its vaulted cloister, translations of the Lord's Prayer in **140 languages** are inscribed on colourful ceramic and marble plaques. When the Crusaders built a church here in 12th century, they called it **Pater Noster** [in *Latin*: Our beloved Father].

The Gospels suggest that Jesus taught the Lord's Prayer at least twice; **Matthew** 6:5-15 & **Luke** 11:1-4 are referred. The cave under the Pater Noster Church certainly existed in Jesus' time. When the Emperor Constantine built a three-level church on the site in 330 AD, it commemorated the **Ascension** of holy Christ here; then this historic church was known as **the Eleona** [in *Greek*: of olives]. The cave is also believed to be associated with Jesus' prophecies about the **destruction** of Jerusalem [later happened in year 70 AD] and his Second Coming.

The Crusades built a small oratory amid the ruins in 1106 AD while a full church was constructed in 1152 AD - but was heavily damaged during Sultan Saladin's siege of Jerusalem in 1187 AD; eventually being abandoned and falling into ruin since 1345 AD. The present church was completed in 1874 AD by a French Princess Bossi. She got erected translations of the prayer in 39 different languages; while the buildings were being constructed, she lived nearby in a wooden cabin. She died in Florence in 1889 AD, but her last wish was for her remains to rest in this Church, in a **tomb** which she had got prepared in her life. Her wish was fulfilled in year 1957; on top of her stone-coffin now lays her life-size statue.

Inside Church; steps below the altar platform lead down to the **crypt** of the 4th century basilica, partially built in the cave but only a little of the stonework could un-earth that original

church. A 1st-century **tomb**, which Constantine's engineers had blocked up with masonry, can now be seen – hats off to the new archaeological efforts.

CHURCH OF DOMINUS FLEVIT:

Halfway down the western slope of Mount of Olives, recalls the Gospel incident in which holy Jesus **wept** over the future fate of Jerusalem; now there lays the **Dominus Flevit** – Roman Catholic Church. Its unique design and construction was done in 1953-55 by the Italian architect Antonio Barluzzi but it occupies an ancient site. It stands on the ruins of a Byzantine church from the 5th century, dedicated to the Christian **prophetess** St Anna, and in an area of tombs dating back as far as 1600 BC.

Dominus Flevit [in *Latin: The Lord Wept*], was fashioned in the shape of a tear-drop [on the four corners of its dome] to symbolize the tears of holy Christ. Here, according to the **Gospel of Luke** [19:37-42], holy Jesus predicted Second Temple's destruction. Within 40 years, in AD 70, holy Jesus' prophesy came as true. Roman armies **besieged** Jerusalem and, after six months of fighting, burnt the Temple and levelled the city to ground.

During the Crusaders' era, a small chapel was built here. After the fall of Jerusalem in 1187 AD, the church fell into ruin. In early 16th century a **mosque named El-Mans ouriyeh** existed at the site, presumably built by the Turks on the remains of the earlier church - although disputed amongst historians. In 1891, the Franciscans purchased a small plot of land nearby and built a small chapel there. In 1913 homes were built here for '**the Sisters of St Joseph**' – the nuns.

In 1940, the old boundary wall was moved and in 1953 the Franciscans began construction of another wall. While digging the foundations, workers unearthed ancient tombs; excavations were led by Fr B Bagatti, a well-known archaeologist of Israel.

A late Bronze Age tomb from the Canaanite period and an ancient cemetery of periods from 136 BC to 300 AD were discovered but characterized by differing tomb styles. The earlier Second Temple era tombs were of the Kokhim style, while the Byzantine era section was composed of tombs with half-arches from the 3rd and 4th centuries AD. A Byzantine monastery from the 5th century was also discovered here. Nearby, also unearthed were the remains of an elaborate mosaic **floor** from the ruined Byzantine church; it has been preserved, to the left of the entrance. An inscription in Greek referring to **Simon - a friend of holy Christ**, can also be seen at the place.

CHURCH OF MARY MAGDALENE:

It is a Russian Orthodox Church located on the Mount of Olives, near the Garden of Gethsemane near Old City – dedicated to St Mary Magdalene. According to the **Gospel of Mark** [16:9], Mary Magdalene was the first to see Christ after his resurrection. She is considered a crucial disciple of holy Jesus, and seemingly his primary female associate — and being present at holy Christ's crucifixion - and who was the first recorded witness of his re-appearance.

This church was built in 1886 AD by Tsar Alexander III to honour his mother as per traditional design popular in 16-17th century Russia, and has seven distinctive gilded onion domes. The convent is located directly across the Kidron Valley from the Temple Mount. The relics of two martyred saints are also exhibited in the church.

It makes a specially striking scene at night, when its floodlit domes seem to be floating above the dark trees that surround it. Although the intricately decorated **façade** appears to be made of marble, it is actually of sculpted white sandstone. Above the entrance a circular blue **mosaic** medallion depicts Mary Magdalene robed in white. In its convent, there live about 30 Russian Orthodox nuns from different

countries AND particularly known for the quality of their **singing in public worship**.

Inside church, a 16th century **icon of the Virgin Mary** in a hand-carved wooden case keeps a place of honour - said to have miraculous powers. On one side of the nave is a marble stone coffin, each containing the body of a German **princess** and of grand-daughter of Queen Victoria.

In a chamber below the church is buried Princess Alice of Greece, the mother in Law of England's Queen Elizabeth. She had expressed a wish to be buried near Grand Duchess Elizabeth, who was her aunt.

[In 1930s, Princess Alice, mother of the Duke of Edinburgh, visited the church and asked to be buried near her aunt, the Grand - Duchess Elizabeth. In 1969, she died at Buckingham Palace in England AND in 1988, her remains were transferred to a burial chamber below this church.]

....."Convent of St Mary Magdalene" – A write up of **Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem** is referred.

QAUM-E-LUT PUNISHED HERE - THE DEAD SEA:

The **Dead Sea** is the lowest surface on Earth, at 430m [1412 ft] below normal geographical sea level - located in the border-region of Jordan, Palestine and Israel; about 25km east of Jerusalem. Its climate offers year-round sunny skies and dry air; less than 50mm annual rainfall and a summer average temperature between 32 and 39°C - winter average 20 to 23°C. Its therapeutic qualities attracted Herod the Great in ancient times. It is more of a lake than a sea, fed by the Jordan River. The Crusaders, when ruled Jerusalem during 1099-1187 AD, called it the Sea of Satan; Muslims also view it as a sign of God's wrath and anger.

The salts and minerals of the **Dead Sea** have long been believed to have healing properties - often used in soaps and cosmetics; several high-class spas have sprung up along its shores to cater the tourists and travellers from the whole world. Its minerals and sticky black mud provided balms for Egyptian mummies and cosmetics for Cleopatra. Its health resorts treat psoriasis and arthritis, its skin-care products are marketed worldwide, and its industrial evaporation pans harvest potash like minerals weighing in tons daily.

The **Dead Sea** is about 50km long, 15km across at its widest point; the water area is constantly shrinking and the water level is dropping by more than a metre every year. Because it has no exit, water is lost only through evaporation, which leaves behind the minerals; thus causing extremely bitter taste. This sea is nearly 10 times as salty as the other open oceans. The high concentration of minerals [*mostly chlorides of Magnesium and Potassium*] provides the buoyancy that keeps bathers floating.

According to Islamic traditions, the Dead Sea is actually the site of an **ancient city of Sodom**, home of the **Prophet Lut [Lot or Luut] AS**. The holy Qur'an describes the people of Sodom as deviant, wicked, evil-doers who rejected God's call to righteousness. Nabi Lut AS kept trying convey God's message to them - but found that even his own wife was one of the disbelievers.

When Prophet Abraham AS left Egypt, his nephew Nabi Lut AS was commanded by God to go towards the city of Sodom which was on the western shore of the Dead Sea. Then the city was a landmark of evil and its residents used to rob and kill travellers. Another common evil among them was that men used to have sex with men, the unnatural act later named as sodomy [*after the city of Sodom in literature*] AND the evil was practiced openly, shamelessly and defiantly. They refused to even listen God's messenger; instead, they threatened to drive Nabi AS out of the town - **Al-Qur'an 26:160-174** is referred for details.

Every Muslim knows that Qura'nic narration of the event when Allah had sent His three angles to Nabi Lut AS that night....and [at last] how an earthquake rocked the whole town; a mighty power had lifted the entire city and flung it back with top down in one jolt. A storm of red-clay stones rained on the city; everyone perished [including Nabi Lut's wife] – see the whole recitation in **Al-Qur'an 11:82-83 & 15:57-75**.

God severely punished the people of this region for their impiety and iniquity. The site of that punishment is **now the Dead Sea**, standing as a symbol of destruction for all generations to come. All religious references of ancient times carry this unfolding. As per holy **Bible; in 1890 BC**, the wicked cities of **Sodom & Gomorrah** were destroyed by God with red-brick pieces, sulphur and fire; and Nabi Lut's wife was turned into a 20 meters high pillar of salt for looking back at the destruction of her town and inhabitants; Book of **Genesis 19:21-26** is referred. In the northwest there is a town named **Jericho** mentioned also in the **Genesis**;

got destroyed in Nabi Abraham AS times – but still living and a key-attraction for the travellers.

On the eastern side of the Dead Sea, the highest peak visible is **Mount Nebo**, where Nabi Moses AS glimpsed the Promised Land. Before destruction, the Dead Sea was a valley full of natural tar-pits. Firstly the **Arabs** discovered the value of the globs of natural asphalt that constantly floated on surface where they could be harvested with nets. The Egyptians were steady customers, as they used asphalt in the embalming process in creating mummies.

The Ancient Romans knew the Dead Sea as **Asphalt Lake**. King Herod the Great built or re-built several fortresses and palaces on the western bank of the Dead Sea - the most famous was **Masada** where in 70 AD, the Jewish zealots fled and got refuge after fall of the Second Temple. During **Byzantine period**, the Dead Sea remained a place of escape and refuge.

Dead Sea Scrolls: Jews respect this sea equally. During 1945-55, religious documents dated between 150 BC and 70 AD were found in caves near the ancient settlement of **Qumran** - about 1.6kms inland from the north West Bank – now worldly known as the DEAD SEA SCROLLS. Qumran's ancient caves and settlements are worth for Jewish travellers. Being a place where the oldest biblical documents ever found, the daily life of mystical **Essenes**, a Jewish sect that fled Jerusalem 2000 years ago – are the real attractions for Jews.

That earlier mentioned [in holy Qur'an & Biblical books] areas, towns and their tribes were erased from the earth for ever - a chapter of moral corruption was closed for all times to come. Nabi Lut AS then visited Nabi Abraham AS and when he started recounting the story of his people, he was surprised to learn that Nabi Abraham AS already knew it. **Sodom & other two towns are still under this Dead Sea – where no water creature can live or survive – and cannot ever;** it is God's decree.

The **Dead Sea** is the most unusual water reservoir in the world; so loaded with minerals that no fish or plant can live in it; so dense that bathers can lie back on its surface and read a newspaper – no breathing body can sink in it. The Dead Sea itself is 304 m [997 ft] deep, the deepest hyper saline lake in the world - with a salinity of 342 g/kg, or at 34.4%; thus no plants or animals can flourish. The southern part is devoted to evaporation pools for mineral extraction.

Since the late 1980s the landscape around the sea has been reshaped by thousands of **sinkholes** – caused by fresh water from the mountains dissolving underground levels of salt. In December 2013, representatives of Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority agreed on a long-term **desalination project** - started in 2018 and to be completed till 2021. The **world's lowest roads, Highway 90**, run along the Israeli and West Bank shores of the Dead Sea and with **Highway 65** on the Jordanian side, both at 393m [1,289 ft] below sea level.

Tourist Attractions: The most **stunning archaeological site** on top of a hill is **Masada** - about 300m up; of course strenuous if you're not fit. If on private or group-hire vehicle, you may continue your tour to **Ein Gedi**, a nature reserve and oasis in the desert – but now considered deserted.

Public **Bus 486 / 487** travels from the Jerusalem **Central Bus Station** direct to the **Dead Sea**, Ein Gedi and Masada via Highway 90 all the way downhill [no buses on Shabbat from Friday afternoon till Saturday evening]. There is a public beach at the **Dead Sea** accessible to all. **Masada and the Dead Sea Day Trip** from Jerusalem is also available from various companies: Duration: 9 hours and fare is about £75.00.

The main access points are the oases of **Ein Gedi** and **Ein Bokek**. One has to remember that **Ein Bokek** has a public access beach with free showers; **the beach in Ein Gedi has been completely abandoned** and currently has no

facilities whatsoever. Population services are **infrequent**, so check schedules before planning your journey for the Dead Sea.

The Dead Sea is very sunny; the low altitude makes the sunlight weaker; thus sunbathing here carries a lower risk of sunburn. This quality of the Dead Sea sunlight is the real secret behind its mythological curing ability for several diseases, especially skin diseases. This is, in fact, natural photo-therapy. The hyper-saline water of the Dead Sea itself carries its own magnetism.

Masada - Mountaintop Fortress, Masada National Park is 18 km south of Ein Gedi, or 12 km from Ein Bokek to the cable train on the east of Dead Sea: Open 7 Days a Week; Cable Cars timings 8am - 4pm. Masada is a mountaintop fortress which King Herod, in year 35 BC, transformed into a 3 tiered winter home - the site is a UNESCO World Heritage. **Masada Sound and Light Show** is also worth enjoying but is reachable only via Arad - 20km away.

Ein Gedi Oasis and Kibbutz. Ein Gedi was a real oasis with lush vegetation, nestled between two streams, amidst the arid landscape. Today, it stands abandoned due to sink holes. The palm trees are dead and there are abandoned buildings everywhere. There is no longer a public beach here.

Mount Sodom is a mountain near the Dead Sea that has significant caves including the largest in Israel [5.5km] the caves has a salt stalagmites and stalactites.

Beware! Several people drown every year in the Dead Sea because they do not obey the rule: **Only float on your back**; accidents happen when someone tries to swim normally [stomach first] in the water. Short of actual drowning, inhalation of the water can cause specific and life-threatening medical problems. Also; wash the salt off in the beach showers before you use your towel.

The restaurant options near the Dead Sea are almost NIL; so better to take your own food with you. **Ein Bokek** town has two small shopping malls with a McDonald's, a number of Falafal Bars, a liquor store, and a few other stores selling everyday items and souvenirs. The shopping centre [visible against the majestic background of Desert Mountains] has a large McDonald's sign on the roof – the only sign of hope for the European travellers.

.....MORE PLACES TO VISIT

TOMB OF PROPHET SAMUEL AS: Prophet Samuel [also called *an-Nabi Samu'il* or *Nebi Samwil*] was one of the more striking personalities of the Bible, guiding the Jewish people as a messenger of the God and serving as the kingmaker of both King Saul and Saul's successor, **King [Nabi] David AS**. As per biblical notes, Samuel's mother, Hannah, was without children for many years, and gave birth to her only son after she pledged to enlist him in the service of God at the Tabernacle in Shiloh.

The tomb of the Prophet Samuel lies on the heights, atop a steep hill at an elevation of 908 meters above sea level. It is situated in the Palestinian village of **Nabi Samwil** in the West Bank, 1.3 km **north** of the Jerusalem neighbourhood of Ramot. It is visible from miles around. As such, over the centuries, Nabi Samuel's tomb has seen armies clash at its feet, conquerors come and go, and pilgrims of many faiths assembled in worship. The site offers breathtaking views of Jerusalem, especially from the roof of the structure. The site contains an **18th century mosque**, built on the remains of Crusader-era fortress; the tomb and a small synagogue are located in an underground chamber underneath the mosque.

Public Transportation: From the Central Bus Station, take the 31, 32 or 67 bus to Ramot Junction and switch to the 36 Aleph line. The trip takes about 30 minutes, depending on traffic. Admission is free but modest clothing required.

Today, the tomb of Nabi Samuel and the nearby archaeological area form a National Park and the city of Jerusalem stretches at its feet.

The **Bible's Book Samuel** states that the prophet was buried in his hometown of Ramah – to the east of the hill. It is also said that in 1173 AD, the Crusaders had found the bones of Nabi Samuel in a Jewish cemetery in Ramla and reburied here, overlooking the Holy City.

The strategic location of Nabi Samuel's tomb made it the site of battles during the British conquest of Ottoman Palestine in 1917, and the village was badly damaged from artillery fire and abandoned. It was resettled in 1921, but various difficulties lead it to again disband after a number of years. The mosque was also damaged in the battle between the British soldiers and the Ottomans; but was restored soon thereafter.

The location was again significant in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, and the 1967 Six-Day War, and was used by artillery of the Jordanians. Though the area lies in the Palestine territory but due to expanding archaeological excavations in the region, it is now now part of Israel's national park scheme. The original village located on the hilltop is still inhabited by about 20 Palestinian families or more.

On the site is a building containing a mosque built in 1730s that was formerly a church. The tomb itself is located in an underground chamber where a small synagogue is located. **Both Jewish and Muslim prayers are held at the site** – Jewish prayers regularly but Muslim prayers occasionally, with more religious Jews visiting on the anniversary of Nabi Samuel's death, the 28th of Iyar in the springtime.

TOMB of NABI ZECHARIAH:

It is an ancient stone monument amongst others in **Kidron Valley** - completely carved out of the solid rock and does not contain a burial cavity. The base of the monument is made of three steps; above it there is a decoration of two ionic columns and the upper part is like a pyramid.

Interestingly the fine masonry and decoration is visible on the facade only; while the other sides of the tomb are extremely rough and unfinished.

The tourists see a huge dark cave adjacent to Nabi Zechariah's tomb but sealed and closed. As Jewish traditions also adopted by Christians, this cave is believed to be the burial place of **Haggai, Nabi Zechariah AS and Malachi**, the last three Hebrew Bible prophets who are believed to have lived during the 1st century BC.

The site has been venerated by the Jews since medieval times, and they often visit the site and worship at the cave. In 1882, the Christian leadership acquired the location for the Russian Orthodox Church, planned to build it which aroused strong protests. The Ottoman courts ruled in 1890 that the transaction was binding but the Russians agreed to keep the site open for people of all faiths.

Nabi Zechariah AS is mentioned in holy Qur'an as prophet and father of John the Baptist; he was a righteous priest in the 2nd Temple in Jerusalem AND used to manage the services there. As he reached his old age, Nabi Zechariah AS got worried over who would continue the legacy of preaching the message of God after his death; then he prayed to God for a son. As a gift from God, Nabi Zechariah was given a son named **Yahyā** [John the Baptist], a name specially chosen for this child alone; Nabi Zechariah was 92 years old then; **Al-Qur'an** 19:4–10.

Nabi Zechariah AS was [also made] the guardian of Jesus's mother [holy] Mary because she had already dedicated herself for Special Service to the God Almighty. Holy Mary grew up with excellence while in the care of Nabi Zachariah AS – which showed his status as a pious man. He was frequently praised in the Qur'an: "*....And Zachariah and John, and Jesus and Elias: all were [in the ranks] of the righteous.*" — **Al-Qur'an** 6:85. In the Bible's book **2 Chronicles [24:20-21]**, Nabi Zechariah AS has also been mentioned in a very respectable way.

Coming back; **Nabi Zechariah's** rest place, and principles of the construction are similar to that of the **Tomb of Benei Hezir** - which is the oldest of four monumental rock-cut tombs standing together and dates to the period of 1st century BC. The tomb's inscription reveals that the cave was used by several generations of wealthy Benei Hezir family. In the Hebrew Bible there are two mentions of men with the name of Hezir. One was the founder of the 17th priestly division [**1 Chron.** 24:15]; the other one was among the leaders who set their seal to the covenant with Nehemiah [**Neh.** 10:20].

It is a complex of 38 burial caves. The tombs were originally accessed from a single rock-cut stairwell which descends from the north. At a later period an additional entrance was created by quarrying a tunnel from the courtyard of the Tomb of Zechariah. The stairs lead into a large circular central vault measuring 24 ft in diameter. From it, two parallel tunnels, 5 ft wide & 10 ft high, go 20 yards deep into the rock. A third tunnel runs in another direction - all connected by cross galleries and runs for about 40 yards.

Outside, the first stone pillar is the **burial chamber of Absalom**, Nabi David's third son, by Maacah, was born in Hebron. He moved at an early age along with the transfer of the capital to Jerusalem, where he spent most of his life. He was a great favourite of his father, and of the people. His charming manners and personal beauty were exemplary. He lived in great style and used to drive in a magnificent chariot. Absalom eventually rebelled against his father and was killed during the Battle of Ephraim's Wood; **2 Samuel 18:1-17** is referred.

The fact remains that the tombs do not contain bodies as these are solid objects carved from the rock. Fact remains that in ancient times there was custom that the body used to be buried in the backyard family-cave and the rock in front was carved to make it a pointed mark that here that body or coffin was laid down. Here also, the caves are there on the back side of the rock-

mark with two openings; now seen closed with iron doors and bars. Nothing can be seen inside while the whole history is buried there.

The fact also remains that no-where else **Nabi Zechariah's** burial place is approved by historians. The history of holy Mary's birth, staying around in the temple at Jerusalem and Jesus's birth 9km away and childhood nearby do point out that it is the right burial place of Nabi AS.

TOMBS OF SANHEDRIN:

Also called **Tombs of the Judges**, is an underground complex of **63 to 71 rock-cut tombs** located in a public park in northern Jerusalem called **Sanhedria**. They are part of a giant **necropolis** situated to the north-east of the Old City and dating to the **Second Temple period**; there are about 1,000 burial caves within 4.8 km of the Old City constructed during 1st century AD; the tombs are noted for their elaborate design and symmetry. The tombs were made open to the public in 1930s.

The **Sanhedrin** [in *Greek*: sitting together] was an assembly of rabbis appointed to sit as a tribunal - classed as **rabbinical courts** then; lesser Sanhedrin used to be of 23 judges and only ONE Great Sanhedrin of 71 judges, which among other roles acted as the Supreme Court. In Jerusalem, the Great Sanhedrin used to sit in the **Second Temple** and used to convene every working day. After destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, the Great Sanhedrin moved to Galilee, nearby Roman province. The last universally binding decision of the Great Sanhedrin appeared in 358 AD, when the Hebrew Calendar was abandoned by the Christian rulers.

The Tombs of the Sanhedrin are known by different names in history. In 1235 AD, Jews called them the **Tombs of the Righteous**; the

Christian literature of year 1611 AD said as **Tombs of the Prophets**; some called it by their original name - **Tombs of the Judges** because the tombs contain 71 burial niches as the number of members of the Sanhedrin. However, the **Tombs of the Sanhedrin** have been a site for Jewish pilgrimage and prayer since 13th century. The facade of the tomb used to appear differently - as '**caves within caves**'.

Inside are four burial chambers on two levels. The largest chamber, just inside the entrance, contains 13 arched burial niches arranged on two tiers, one atop the other, with some dividing the niches into pairs. Each niche measures 50 x 60cms. Other chambers contain further 10 to 12 more niches - but each chamber is designed with symmetry. Stone coffins were also found in rock-cut vaults within the complex. There are 63 burial niches in the tomb, along with several cubicles for bone collection.

Opinions differ as to how the dead bodies were placed in so small niches but it might not be the situation. Most historians understand that only bones of the dead body were kept in stone coffins - not the whole body. In 1867, a French archeologist of the tombs discovered a sarcophagus [stone coffin] inscribed with the name *Yitzhak* [Isaac] in Hebrew. Over protests of the local Jewish residents, the archeologist stopped further exploration but took that coffin with him to France, where it was dis-played in the **Louvre Museum in Paris**.

Mahane Yehuda Market

[*Shuk Mahane Yehuda*], often referred as '**The Shuk**', is a marketplace in Jerusalem, originally open-air but now partially covered. Popular with locals and tourists alike, the market's more than 250 vendors sell fresh fruits and vegetables; baked goods; fish, meat and cheeses; nuts, seeds, and spices; wines and liquors; clothing and shoes; and house-wares, textiles, and what not.

In and around the market are stands, juice bars, cafes, and restaurants. The colour and bustle of

the marketplace is accentuated by vendors who call out their prices to passers-by through shouting & hand waving.

It's definitely a must visit, and again it's up there in every tourist's **favourite** things to do in Jerusalem. **The Shuk**, as it's usually called, is Jerusalem's biggest market; a busy place, with delicious food everywhere you look – rows of glistening *baklava*, *halva* topped with roasted nuts, fruit and vegetables, street food... Visitors always feel bewildered in these kind of place - where to go and what to eat first. Every tourist spends some time there in the **Mahane Yehuda** - quite busy with *falafel*, *shawarma*, *Kobbedah*, *sesame seeds Halva* and juice stands lining the alleys and everything else you'd expect from a market.

Here is where **Bitemojo** comes in. Bitemojo is a phone-app specially designed for European and American visitors which claims: *"Forget about everything you've heard about Jerusalem and join us for a food tour to explore all the places and people who are responsible for the creative revolution in the city. Professor Richard Florida came up with the term CREATIVE CLASS to describe the new generation which has been turning the big cities into....."*; it costs around 25\$ per person only.

The concept is quite simple – a **self guided food tour**. The Shuk is so busy, that following a guide is very hard. On a Bitemojo tour you simply follow a map that takes you to various places of interest – most of them food related, but not exclusively. Once you get to a food stop, you simply show your phone to the seller who will hand you a 'bite' – most tourists try *khachapuri* [Georgian bread topped with cheese], *kubeba* [fried croquettes stuffed with meat] and a cookie with ice cream to end with sweet note.

....and at night! Most markets are kind of dead during the night – not the Shuk, which seems to be living a parallel life after sunset. Gone are the fruit & veg stalls, it's time for the bars to open their doors. With cool music, outdoor seating and lots of delicious food and drinks, the Shuk

becomes definitely one of the coolest Jerusalem hangouts after dark – with an atmosphere that is light years away from the sacred Old City and goes similar to what you'll find in Tel Aviv, Israel's capital.

There's also another reason to visit the Shuk at night – checking out Solomon Souza [a British born painter & street artist's art, 150 portraits of historical and contemporary figures painted on the shutters of the stalls, making the atmosphere of **Mahane Yehuda** at night fantastic and unforgettable.

URBAN ART: the tourists don't see much street art around Jerusalem besides the Shuk, but there are a couple of places where one can see some **urban art projects** – like the rooftop of **Clal Center**, an indoor shopping mall built in the Seventies which is worth a visit for its cool architecture alone. Another piece of urban art are **giant poppies** that inflate when you walk by, found in **Valiero Square**, near the ultra-orthodox district near the Mahane Yehuda market. Some visitors have special craze for young artists, both local and from around the world, they can head to **Beitar Jerusalem** at 155 Jaffa Road - a contemporary art centre. There are also many cool contemporary art galleries in Jerusalem but most tourists give more attention to visit the millennia old real art-remains of the Old City.

Ein Karem

Another place away from Old Jerusalem, **Ein Karem** used to be a separate village that now forms part of the city. **Ein Karem is worth a visit** – because the **Church of St John the Baptist** exists here. It is a Catholic church built in the location where St John [Prophet Yahya AS] the Baptist was born. It's a completely different experience compared to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre [*always flooded with devotees*] but here around the atmosphere is meditative, calm and quiet.

The Church of St. John carries its mention in the written history since at least 1113 AD. In 1480

AD, one writer Felix Fabri, a Swiss Dominican theologian (1441-1502 AD), reported it as tall and vaulted building but turned into a stable for animals. During Ottoman era, in the 1670s, the village Ein Karen was given to the Franciscans. In 1697, it was rebuilt from the ground as a large square building, uniform, beautiful and neat all over. In early 1800s, the convent appeared to be superior in comfort and equal to that of Nazareth. In 1883, the Palestine Exploration Fund noted that the Church of the Baptist was of Crusading origin but later the dome was raised from four heavy piers; the grotto was reached by seven marble steps and the monks were chiefly Spaniards.

The Israel Museum

The Israel Museum is the **largest in Middle East**, showcasing a number of collections that include archaeological artefacts, paintings, sculptures and even a huge model of ancient Jerusalem on the rooftop. The highlight of the museum is definitely the **Shrine of the Book**, where you can see the Dead Sea Scrolls, believed to be the most ancient manuscripts in the world. The latest addition to the shrine is – **Nano, the smallest Bible in the world**, a chip the size of a grain of rice where the whole Bible is inscribed.

The visitors like to see the **Holyland Model of Jerusalem** of the city of Jerusalem in the late 2nd Temple Period. The model was moved from its original location at the Holyland Hotel in Bayit VeGan to a new site at the southern edge of Billy Rose Sculpture Garden at the said Museum in June 2006.

The model, as of 2,000 sq m [22,000 sq ft] was commissioned in 1966 by Hans Kroch, the owner of the Holyland Hotel, in memory of his son, Yaakov, an IDF soldier who was killed in the Israeli War of 1948. The model was designed by Israeli historian Michael Avi -Yonah based on the writings of Flavius Josephus. The model includes a replica of the Herodian Temple. For the move, the model was sawn into 1,000 pieces and later

reassembled - the Holyland Hotel then spent \$3.5 million on the move.

The Holocaust Memorial

Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum, is not only a memorial for the 6 million Jews who lost their lives in the holocaust; it also works as a research and education centre. It is dedicated to preserving the memory of the dead; honouring Jews who fought against the Nazi army and Gentiles who selflessly aided Jews in need. One room after another, it gives us goose-bumps that stay till we step out of the museum. Artefacts, books, clothes, footwear and other belongings bring waves of sorrow for the visitors.

Established in 1953, **Yad Vashem** is on the western slope of Mount Herzl, also known as the Mount of Remembrance, at a height of, 804 meters [2,638 ft] above sea level and adjacent to the Jerusalem Forest. The memorial consists of a 44.5 acre complex containing the Holocaust History Museum, memorial sites such as the Children's Memorial and the Hall of Remembrance, the Museum of Holocaust Art, sculptures, outdoor commemorative sites such as the Valley of the Communities, a synagogue, a research institute with archives, a library, a publishing house, and an educational centre.

A core goal of Yad Vashem's founders was to recognize non-Jews who, at personal risk and without a financial or evangelistic motive, chose to save Jews from the ongoing genocide during the Holocaust. Yad Vashem is the second-most-visited Israeli tourist site, after the Western Wall, with approximately one million visitors each year – no admission fee is applicable.

About 1.5 million children were also killed; the photos of young boys and girls are projected on the glass and in the background one can hear their names, age and country of origin. Millions of reflections of twinkling lights, which actually originate from just 5 candles kept at various angles using mirrors, intensify the grief. There is also a memorial named Righteous, for all those non-Jews who risked their lives and helped Jews

at their time of plight. The last room, the Hall of Names, has heaps of files containing the names of the people who had lost their lives.