



A Meeting About the Mount

There really is an ivory tower. Academic scholarship can sometimes rise completely above the political fray and bring scholars together in order to seek truth. It was a group of such scholars that gathered just a few weeks ago at Providence College, a Dominican Catholic institution with strong long-term ties to the Jewish community, in Providence, Rhode Island. Under the leadership of Joan Branham of Providence College, an art history professor who is an associate dean, and Beatrice St. Laurent of Bridgewater State University, 29 international scholars—Jewish, Christian and Muslim—gathered to talk about the history and archaeology of the Har Habayis. The conference was entitled “Marking the Sacred: The Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem.” The conference was also attended by a larger audience of Providence faculty, colleagues from other universities, and the local community. Along with the conference, the college’s museum presented a beautiful exhibition of rare photographs of the Har Habayis since the 19th century.



The ivory tower meant that we did not have to listen to any politically motivated false claims that there never was a Jewish Temple on the site of the Har Habayis. There was no fake news and no alternate facts. In fact, it was completely the opposite! The first speaker, archaeologist Jodi Magness of the University of North Carolina, had already forced *The New York Times* to apologize for and correct the false and irresponsible statement that there was no proof that any Jewish Temple had stood at that place. Her job at our conference was to bring together all the literary evidence from the *Tanach* and *Bayis Sheini* (Second Temple) literature to prove the actual location of the *Beis Hamikdash* and to relate it to the archaeological evidence for the *Bayis Sheini* period.

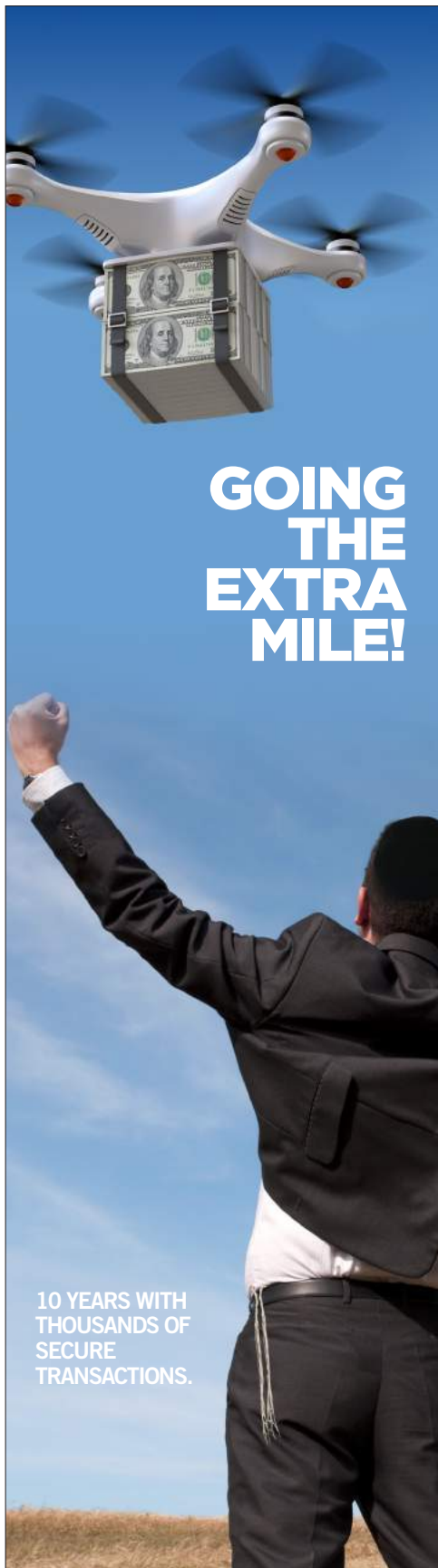
But what was most reassuring of all was to hear in that very same session the presentation of Sari Nusseibeh of Al-Quds University in East Jerusalem, where he was formerly the university president. For a while he represented the Palestinian Authority in Yerushalayim. He was phenomenal, showing in detail that Islam completely accepts the location of the Jewish Temple on the Har Habayis, known by Muslims as the Haram al-Sharif, “the

Noble Sanctuary,” and explaining the sacred status of this site and its meaning in Islam. He showed that the identification of this site as the location of the Jewish Temple is the basis for the Muslim tradition that Muhammad had a vision in which he ascended to heaven from the site of Solomon’s Temple. Indeed, the al-Aksa Mosque is called *Bayt al-Muqaddas*, the Arabic equivalent of *Beis Hamikdash*. Prof. Nusseibeh reported on numerous Islamic commentators

for whom this was clearly the location of the *Beis Hamikdash*, the present day Har Habayis. He argued strongly against the denial for political reasons of the Jewish connection to the Har Habayis. How refreshing to hear a genuine and committed Muslim scholar stand up for the truth in the face of what we might term “Temple Mount denial”—a political strategy that actually undermines the beliefs of Islam. I had the chance to talk privately with Prof. Nusseibeh and discovered quickly that we shared much in our quest for genuine research and discovery, although we no doubt do not agree on some other things.

I myself presented a study on *Maseches Middos*. This *maseches* (tractate) presents a detailed plan for the *Bayis Sheini*, which I argued applied to the second stage of its development. After the Jews returned from exile in Babylon, they commenced rebuilding the *Beis Hamikdash* and created a small structure. We learn from Ezra 3:12-13 that the elders who remembered the *Bayis Rishon*, which had been destroyed by the Babylonians, cried because the initial *Bayis Sheini* paled in size and grandeur in comparison to that of Shlomo. We know that much later, King Herod (Hordos) rebuilt the *Beis Hamikdash* and turned it into one of the wonders of the ancient world. Today’s Har Habayis represents the entire precinct in which the *Beis Hamikdash* and its courtyards were located. Yet the Mishnaic description is of a smaller enclosure. I maintain that *Middos* describes the *Beis Hamikdash* that stood from shortly before the time of the *Chashmonaim* until it was again rebuilt and expanded by Herod.

I argued that there were actually three stages in the history of the *Bayis Sheini* complex: what I call 2A, built soon after the return of Jews from Babylon to Eretz Yisrael in the Persian Pe-



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Perspective

By Prof. Lawrence H Schiffman

riod; 2B, referring to the *Beis Hamikdash* described by the Mishnah, enlarged from the Persian period *Beis Hamikdash* and refurbished sometime in the second century BCE; and finally, 2C, the *Beis Hamikdash* built by Herod of which the Kotel is a remnant of the outside wall of the platform—the Har Habayis. In this way, one can resolve the contradiction between the size of the *Beis Hamikdash's* precincts specified in the Mishnah and the much larger one that we see before us today that is in consonance with Josephus' description of the Herodian *Beis Hamikdash*.

Various presentations, especially those of Israeli archaeologists, dealt with the archaeological evidence for the gates of the Herodian *Beis Hamikdash*, as well as certain structures found to the south of it. New archaeological evidence was presented for the integration of the Har Habayis into the Roman city after the failed Bar Kochba Revolt when the Roman Emperor Hadrian (Hadrianos Caesar) erected an idolatrous shrine there. Extremely interesting was the realization, on the basis of a number of presentations, that we know very little about the Har Habayis during the Byzantine period—specifically, the years after Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in 325 CE. However, this is the period when, under Emperor Julian the Apostate (ruled 361-363 CE), Jews were hopeful that they would be able to rebuild the *Beis Hamikdash* because of his rejection of Christianity. However, these hopes were quickly dashed when he was killed.

Our lack of information lasts only up until the Muslim conquest of Eretz Yisrael in 635-640. In 691, out of respect for the site of the *Beis Hamikdash*, the Muslims built the Dome of the Rock on the Har Habayis. The construction of both of the main Muslim sanctuaries on the Har Habayis, as well as many of the smaller structures, was documented in a number

of presentations, but over and over we heard about texts that specifically describe the earlier presence of the *Beis Hamikdash*. Finally, we learned about the attempts of the Crusaders to assert control over that same “Solomonic Temple” on behalf of Christendom.

Put simply, the scholars at our conference never doubted nor disputed that there had been a Jewish Temple on today's Har Habayis in antiquity, up until 70 CE. Rather, they argued consistently, with no exception, that the religious traditions and texts of Judaism, Christianity and Islam solidly recognize this reality.

I will not deny that there are many people who believe the absurd claim that there is no evidence for a Jewish Temple on the Har Habayis despite the Jewish, Christian and Muslim sources regarding the First and Second Temples and the archaeological evidence for the *Bayis Sheini* that place the *Beis Hamikdash* squarely where Jewish tradition says it was. Before 70 CE, had someone scaled the *Kotel Hamaaravi* and climbed over the top, he would have found himself standing right behind the *Kodesh Hakodashim* (the Holy of Holies). Anyone who came to the conference thinking otherwise would certainly have left with the truth (and *veritas*, Latin for “truth,” is the motto of Providence College), delivered by Jewish, Christian and Muslim scholars. If the ivory tower is a place where dispassionate scholarship examines and analyzes evidence, whether preserved in texts, artifacts or traditions, then when it comes to the history of Yerushalayim and the Har Habayis it is a tower in which I remain happy to toil. ●

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