

SHRINES IN PALESTINE

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Palestine is home to many sacred sites and very special landmarks. This place has witnessed the birth of Judaism and Christianity and plays a very important role for Muslims as well, with Jerusalem being regarded as the spot visited by Prophet Mohammed. Billions of people see Palestine as the land of divine presence, with many sites linked to events of exceptionally high importance for both believers and historians. The following brief introductions offer just a glimpse of the holy sites of Palestine.



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THE CHURCH OF THE NATIVITY (BETHLEHEM)

The Church of the Nativity (*Kaneeset al-Milad*) is one of the most ancient churches in the world that are still in use. The first Christian building was built in the fourth century AD, over the grotto where Mary is believed to have given birth to Jesus. Emperor Constantine and his mother, Helena, built a magnificent and majestic church adorned with beautiful marble and mosaics. Later, during the sixth century, the Byzantine Emperor Justinian erected a new and even more intricate church on the same spot. By the eleventh century, the Crusaders raised their flag above the Basilica of the Nativity and renovated it.

Although the Church of the Nativity is famous as a Christian holy site, it also has a long tradition of importance to other religions. There are theories that the grottos beneath the church were used by the Canaanites (third millennium BC) for fertility rites. Another tradition recounts that when Persian forces swept through the area in 614 AD destroying churches as they went, they left the Church of the Nativity untouched because of a mosaic on the church's facade depicting the Magi wearing Persian attire. Muslims also consider the church as a sacred place since they regard Jesus as a prophet.



Photo from Palestine Image Bank.

AL-AQSA MOSQUE (JERUSALEM)

Al-Aqsa Mosque (the Farthest Mosque) is a rectangular (50m x 80m) edifice also constructed within the compound of the *Haram al-Sharif*. The mosque's elegant rectangular construction with its subdued colors, when compared with the eye-catching and colorful Dome of the Rock, blends in with the surroundings.

The establishment of the sanctuary is associated with the Caliph 'Umar bin al-Khattab (634 – 44 AD) who erected a *mihrab* (prayer niche) and a simple mosque on the site where the present mosque stands. The current shape of the sanctuary is the result of various modifications and re-buildings in different periods of time. The new mosque was initiated in 705 by the Umayyad Caliph Abd al-Malik and completed in 715 under the reign of his son and successor, Caliph Walid. It had 15 arcades, of which only the ones on the southern wall have survived a number of earthquakes and reconstructions.

After 1099, Crusaders turned al-Aqsa into a church. But in 1187, the Ayyubid Sultan Saladin restored al-Aqsa's Islamic identity and consecrated it as a major spiritual center. Saladin installed a beautiful *minbar* (pulpit from which Friday sermons are given) made of ivory and wood. Unfortunately, it was burnt in 1969 and its remains are now stored in the Islamic Museum.



Faithful gathering inside the church, around the chapel called the Aedicule that contains the Holy Sepulcher. Photo courtesy of VisitPalestine.

THE CHURCH OF THE HOLY SEPULCHER (JERUSALEM)

One of Christianity's holiest sites, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher – known in Arabic as *Kaneesat al-Qiyamah* (Church of the Resurrection) – is believed to be built upon the site of Jesus Christ's crucifixion, entombment, and resurrection. In the gospels, this site is called Golgotha (the Place of the Skull) and is located just outside the walls of Jerusalem. However, in 41–42 AD Herod Agrippa extended the city towards the northwest, and the Place of the Skull became part of Jerusalem proper.

It is said that before the first church was built on the site of Golgotha by Roman Emperor Constantine and his mother Helena, a Roman temple stood there until 326 AD. Since that time, the structure has often been partially destroyed and rebuilt. Nowadays, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher looks like a puzzle – it contains many small chapels and its space is shared by many different Christian denominations.

The facade of the Holy Sepulcher until now preserves the design characteristic of Crusader architecture. There are twin doors, one of which was closed during the time of Saladin (end of the twelfth century), whereas the other was entrusted to the custody of two Muslim families from Jerusalem in 1246. The Joudeh family is in charge of protecting and holding the key, and the Nusseibeh family takes care of opening and closing the door every day.



Photo courtesy of VisitPalestine.

AL-IBRAHIMI MOSQUE (HEBRON)

The Al-Ibrahimi Mosque or *Al-Haram al-Ibrahimi* (Sanctuary of Abraham) is also known as the Tomb of the Patriarchs or the Cave of Machpelah, meaning “double tombs,” as the cave is designed with several pairs of tombs, side by side. It is believed to be the burial place of Sarah, where, according to Biblical tradition, Abraham bought land from Ephron the Hittite for 400 shekels of silver to bury his wife (Gen. 23:15). The cave then became a family burial place, where Abraham, Isaac, Rebekah, Leah, Jacob, and (according to Islamic belief) Joseph were also buried.

In the first century, Herod the Great built a large wall to surround the cave. The wall consists of massive blocks, some of them seven meters long. Local legend even states that these huge blocks were brought there by a *djinn* (spirit).

Religious control of the site has changed throughout its history. The ruins of a Byzantine church, built inside the wall around the year 570 AD, were converted into an Umayyad mosque in the seventh century. After the Crusaders conquered the city it was rebuilt again as the Church of Saint Abraham in the twelfth century. Later, in the same century, the city was taken over by Sultan Saladin, and the church was reconverted into a mosque.