

The Ladder at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre



By Simon Azazian

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he Church of the Holy Sepulchre is among the most magnificent religious monuments in Jerusalem. Christian pilgrims – both locals and foreigners – come here in search of a spiritual experience because the church is believed to be the site of Jesus' crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. The size, splendor, and architecture all contribute to the church's historical significance. Within the compound are also the Church of St. Helena and the Chapel of the Finding of the Cross. The separate sections of the compound were built in different periods and in different styles, but together they form "a large, sprawling, and rather confusing complex" known as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.¹

The Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Armenian churches all have the right to worship in this church, yet under an agreement known as the Status Quo, nothing can be moved or changed without the agreement and permission of all three denominations. As a result of the Status Quo, a wooden ladder has been standing in the same location above the entrance of the church for around 200 years, an inexplicable outcome of religious stubbornness. The exact date on which the ladder was placed in its present position is unknown, but its first evidence comes from the mid-1800s.

To shed some light on the mystery of how it was placed there, let me recount some of the events that took place over the last two millennia in the history of this holy site. While today the church is located at the center of the Christian Quarter of the Old City, Golgotha hill was originally located outside Jerusalem's city walls. In 135 AD, Jerusalem became a Roman colony (Aelia Capitolina), and emperor Hadrian built a temple for Aphrodite in this location, which made it easier for Christian tradition to mark the place as the credible location of Golgotha. Not until Helena, the mother of emperor Constantine, came to Jerusalem in 326 AD was the first church built on the site. In 614 AD, Constantine's basilica

was destroyed by the Persians under Khosrau II, but in 630 AD, the Byzantine emperor Heraclius marched triumphantly into Jerusalem and rebuilt the church. Under Muslim rule (starting in 637), it remained a Christian church until in 1009 the Fatimid Caliph Al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah ordered its complete destruction.

Almost a century later, the church was restored to a lower standard by the Crusaders, and it has suffered severe damage since then, caused by fires, earthquakes, and general neglect. In an attempt to repair it, the Franciscans conducted significant renovations in 1555, yet in more recent times, a fire (1808) and an earthquake (1927) have done extensive damage. Today, the church is a result of programmed restorations carried out in 1957 and again in 2017 – only after long-awaited agreements had been reached among the six different Christian denominations. The Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Coptic, Syrian Jacobite, and Ethiopian Orthodox faiths all have the right to worship in this Church, yet according to the Status Quo nothing can be moved or changed unless all of these agree and give their permission.

"The Status Quo has referred to the customary set of arrangements regulating possession, usage, and liturgy at the holy places. It allows rivals to live and worship alongside each other in a confined space. Without it there would be a free-for-all. Because the major communities realize this, they insist on its strict observance, though it includes many inconvenient provisions. The Status Quo is a seamless web: if you pick and choose, it will fall apart. Change is not completely ruled out, however, provided the parties can amicably agree."ⁱⁱ

Over the centuries, the Catholic and Orthodox churches – known in Jerusalem as Latins and Greeks – drifted apart for cultural, political, and theological reasons. Their rivalry for control of the Holy Sepulchre has reflected the wider conflict. When the Crusaders captured Jerusalem in 1099, they appointed a Latin Bishop to the vacant Jerusalem patriarchate, traditionally occupied by an Orthodox archbishop. The consecration of a new Holy Sepulchre in 1149 marked the high point of Latin primacy. When Saladin retook Jerusalem in 1187, he restored the patriarchal throne to the Greek Orthodox. During the Ottoman era (1516–1917), the Greeks and Latins contested control of the edifice. *"They fought on three fronts: in the church with stones and staves; through the local Moslem religious courts with ancient deeds, sometimes*





The famous ladder at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

forged; and in the corridors of power in Istanbul, where bribes and diplomatic pressure were used to obtain imperial “firmans” bestowing rights of possession and usage.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This rivalry required the establishment of the Status Quo, and the rule was imposed by the Ottoman Turks in 1757 and reaffirmed in 1852.

The holy places affected by the Status Quo and its general principles are: 1. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre with all its dependencies; 2. The Deir al Sultan Ethiopian monastery located on the roof of the church; 3. The Sanctuary of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives; 4. The Tomb of the Virgin (near Gethsemane); and 5.

The Church of the Nativity. The Milk Grotto and Shepherd’s Field near Bethlehem are also generally subject to the Status Quo.

In all matters of principle relating to the Status Quo in the Christian holy places, only the Orthodox, Latin, and Armenian Orthodox rites are considered. This follows the arrangement established under the Turkish Government and corresponds to the administrative organization of *rayahs*, the non-Muslim Ottoman nations, into *millet*s that correspond to these denominations – the other Orthodox Eastern rites being grouped with the Armenians.^{iv}

Pictorial proof of the presence of the immovable ladder reaches back to the nineteenth century. The ladder cannot be removed, yet it seems to have been replaced a few times (due to deterioration), existed in different versions, and moved from one window to the other. It even disappeared for a few hours at one point.

in this particular location. Yet there are many interesting narratives that have been circulated over the internet. Only a few people have gathered as much information as James E. Lancaster (PhD) who, since 1998, has been engaged in revealing various stories related to the ladder. But in the following pages, I will present new information not mentioned previously or by Lancaster.

The first and earliest known documentation of the ladder’s existence comes from the painter Clarkson Frederick Stanfield (December 3, 1793–May 18, 1867), who was a prominent English marine painter. His painting, dated 1834, shows the exterior of the church with a ladder placed on the right window ledge, exactly the same location where it appears today.

The second earliest documentation comes from the famous painter A. David Roberts (Fig. 1). The cover page of his lithograph album titled *The Holy Land Vol. 3*, published between 1842 and 1849, clearly shows the ladder standing on the window ledge, the same way it is seen today.

Given that the immovable ladder is a result of the Status Quo and its affirmation that nothing can be moved or changed unless the three denominations involved in the agreement reach a consensus, its presence and the surrounding discussions reflect the seriousness and obscurity of this matter.

A five-stepped wooden ladder rests on the ledge of the right window above the main entrance and can be seen by anyone coming into the plaza of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. No reliable source of information regarding who placed the ladder seems to exist. We do not know for sure when it was placed or why it sits



Fig. 1 The portal of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in an illustration by David Roberts, 1830s.

Another picture I was fortunate to stumble upon in the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem dates the ladder back to 1857. During my search for information, in the section displaying the original marble lintels of the church doors, I found a picture that displays the church's façade with the lintels above the doors prior to their removal. The ladder can be clearly noted, positioned in the same location as today (Fig. 1). Other nineteenth-century images of the ladder have been included in Dr. Lancaster's paper and are dated 1840–1870s.^v

Thus, as the earliest documentation seems to date the ladder back to 1834, the ladder is at least 178 years old, and it appears that it has not been moved since. However, comparing the different pictures of the ladder, I would like to suggest that the ladder has been renewed about every fifty years because it wears out. Pictures

have shown ladders with five and six steps. Fig. 2 shows the six-stepped-ladder picture to the right dated 1840.

So let us take a look at the various narratives. During the data collection for this research, I noted many different explanations for the existence of the ladder. However, none could be verified as accurate.

Simon Montefiore in his bestseller *Jerusalem: The Biography* describes it as:

“... a little ladder belonging to the Armenians on the balcony outside the right hand window in the façade of the church which tour guides claim can never be moved without other sects seizing it. In fact, the ladder leads to the balcony where the Armenian superior used to drink coffee with his friends and tend his flower garden; it is there so that the balcony can be cleaned.”^{vi}

The author refers to the ladder in a footnote while writing about disputes that took place during the Holy Fire ceremony in 2005. But he does not give any citation or reference for his information on how he concludes that the ladder's function is to allow the Armenian superior to tend to his flowers!

Yet what seems to be agreed upon in most narratives I researched is that the windows belong to the Armenians, while the base or porch belongs to the Greek Orthodox. According to an article published in the *Biblical Archaeological Review* in January/February 2010:

“...the ladder must not be removed because it sits on property of the Greek Orthodox ... but leans on property of the Armenians...; neither group therefore controls the ladder, nor may either remove it.”^{vii}

Older narratives claim that the windows belong to the Armenians and that the ladder is used to access the porch during the “washing of feet” and other ceremonies. In the article “The Status Quo in the Holy Places,” we read:

“Above the doorway runs a classical cornice, a relic of the Byzantine buildings. This is reached from the windows of the Armenian Chapel of St. John, and this Community has the use thereof on the occasion of the festival ceremonies that take place in the Courtyard. The upper cornice is used in the same manner by the Orthodox.”^{viii}

While searching for additional information, I made a number of visits to the church in an effort to interview clergy and priests on what they know about the ladder. These attempts have not been very fruitful! Fr. Alkimos, a Greek Orthodox priest who was guiding a pilgrimage group from Greece, said that he had no knowledge of why the ladder was

Various narratives exist regarding the immovable ladder's origin.

there or what its origins were; his only response was: “*Status Quo.*”

A Coptic priest was surprised to know that this ladder had significance, he said, “*I never paid attention to it!*”

Inside the Armenian section of the church, a young Armenian priest with broken English seemed relaxed and willing to share his limited views after identifying me as a fellow Armenian: “*This ladder is very old; it is very historical and very important...lots of history...*”

My final hope was to get an accurate answer in the Orthodox section, St. James Church. I had received guidance from the patriarchate's spokesperson, Father Issa Misleh, who insisted that the best people to give answers would be the Arab Christian wardens ministering there. Yet this inquiry was also without success as no one was able to comment or give information. I was then advised to interview Fr. Aristarchus, the patriarch's secretary — who was out of the country.

I returned to written sources in my attempts to collect information on the function of the ladder and seemed to have better luck. According to Aviva Bar-Am in *Beyond the Walls: Churches of Jerusalem*: “*the ladder... was used over a century ago for hauling food up to Armenian monks locked in the church by Turks.*”^{ix}



Fig. 2 - 5 Various photographs of the ladder at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

In order to verify that the function of the ladder was to haul up food for locked-up monks, I had to find out why monks were locked up inside the church. Lancaster's document notes: "The ladder was first introduced at a time when the Ottomans taxed Christian clergy every time they left and entered the Holy Sepulchre. The clergy who served the church reacted by leaving the church as rarely as possible. They set up living quarters within the church."^{vi} The ladder was placed on the balcony to allow the clergy to get fresh air and sunshine, and to grow vegetables!

In an interview, the late Kevork Kahvedjian, owner of the Elia Photo Service and son of the famous photographer Elia Kahvedjian, told me that the detailed story of the ladder was passed down from one generation to another, and this is how he narrated it to me:

"During the Ottoman period, constant clashes between the Armenians, Orthodox, and Catholics became very irritating to the sultan who ordered that the church doors should be closed and all the priests remain locked up inside until they agreed to settle their differences... This resulted in a three-month-long closure of the church because it seemed impossible to reach an agreement ... During those three months, the ladder was placed by the Armenian priests and a rope

was brought down to haul food and supplies up into the Church... The Orthodox had their own ladder in the back side of the Church... When the agreement was reached, everything had to remain in its exact place, and so remained the ladder."

It seems, therefore, that ladder's origin is related to a kind of "lock-up" that was directly or indirectly imposed by the Ottomans on the church, and thus its function begins to make sense.

In some of the stories around the Status Quo, I seemed to detect disappointment regarding the general dispute among various Christian denominations. Many, if not all, describe a desire to see the Christians more united and to witness a change towards mending the currently broken relations. Yet even if relations seem to be frozen, the ladder has almost certainly been moved!

On February 4, 2009, a student in an Israeli tour guide licensing course noticed that the ladder had been moved from its location under the right window to the left window. His camera captured the ladder in its current location (Figs. 3, 4).^{xii} The ladder was moved back to its standard location later on and sits there today untouched and unmoved. There has been no source of information as to what happened and who moved the ladder.

The ladder even disappeared for a few hours. Lancaster, in his article "The Church and the Ladder: Frozen in Time," mentions a unique and bizarre event: in 1997, someone named Andy took the opportunity to sneak into the church and pull the ladder inside. The picture in Fig. 5 shows an unnamed accomplice hauling the ladder through the window. After this act, a new solid frame with a lock was placed at the window to make sure that this doesn't happen again.

In conclusion, we apparently can be sure of three points:

The ladder is there because of the Status Quo agreement. It reflects the seriousness and significance of this treaty.

The windows belong to the Armenians; but because the ladder stands on a cornice that belongs

to the Greek Orthodox, no one has the exclusive ownership. Thus, a decision regarding its fate needs the consensus of all denominations.

The function of the ladder is most probably related to a "lock-up" that was imposed by the Ottomans during their rule in Jerusalem; it facilitated access to the outer section of the church in order to haul up food for the priests.

Finally, despite the many years of disagreement and quarrel, the Status Quo provides a reasonable solution for the complex issue of sharing a sacred space. In my opinion, such a system could work between Palestinians and Israelis when it comes to the sovereignty of political territory. Using the Holy Sepulchre as a model, I believe that conflicting ideas could be settled peacefully if an agreement such as the Status Quo were applied in the final negotiations on Jerusalem.

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ⁱ Rivka Gonen, *Biblical Holy Places: An Illustrated Guide*, Jerusalem: Palphot Publications, 1999.

ⁱⁱ Raymond Cohen, *Saving the Holy Sepulchre: How Rival Christians Came Together to Rescue Their Holiest Shrine*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cohen.

^{iv} Lionel G.A. Cust and Abdullah Effendi Kardus, *The Status Quo in the Holy Places*, London, H.M.S.O., 1929.

^v James E. Lancaster, "The Church and the Ladder: Frozen in Time," 1998, available at <http://coastdaylight.com/ladder.html>.

^{vi} Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Jerusalem: The Biography*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2012.

^{vii} Danny Herman, "Strata: Who Moved the Ladder?" *Biblical Archaeology Review*, 36:1.

^{viii} Cust and Kardus, *The Status Quo*.

^{ix} Aviva Bar-Am, *Beyond the Walls: Churches of Jerusalem*, Jerusalem: Ahava Press, 1998.

^x Lancaster.

^{xi} Herman, "Strata."