The most contested real estate on Earth?

Muslims call it the Noble Sanctuary. Jews and Christians call it the Temple Mount. Built atop Mount Moriah in Jerusalem, this 36-acre site is the place where seminal events in Islam, Judaism and Christianity are said to have taken place, and it has been a flash point for conflict for millennia. Many aspects of its meaning and history are still disputed by religious and political leaders, scholars, and even archaeologists. Several cycles of building and destruction have shaped what is on this hilltop today.

Dome of the Rock is a Muslim shrine to commemorate the prophet Muhammad’s ascension into heaven accompanied by the angel Gabriel. It was built in the late 600s A.D. on the site of the Second Temple, restored by King Herod and destroyed by the Roman siege of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

Sources: Ritmeyer Archaeological Design, Encyclopaedia Britannica, noblesanctuary.com, BibleWalks.com, thekotel.org, Temple Mount Archaeology, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Smithsonian Magazine

Five stages in the development of the Noble Sanctuary: A Muslim shrine supplants a Jewish temple

Before any temple or mosque was built on Mount Moriah, there was only an outcropping of bedrock. Among the significant associations attached to the rock by various traditions are that it originated in the Garden of Eden (or that dirt from it went to the Garden of Eden), that the prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven from it, that Abraham prepared to sacrifice his son on it, and that it is the source of all Earth’s water.

168 B.C.
After Seleucid King Antiochus IV Epiphanes ransacked the city, he built a fortress called Akra adjacent to the grounds and erected an altar to Zeus in the temple. Oppressive anti-Judaism laws sparked the Maccabean revolt that Hanukkah commemorates, and the fortress was demolished.

142 to 63 B.C.
Under the Hasmonean Dynasty, founded by the Maccabees, the temple was “purified” and restored and its platform extended to the south.

20 B.C.
King Herod ordered a major renovation and expansion of the Second Temple and greatly enlarged the square. All four New Testament gospels tell the story of Jesus chasing money changers out of this temple. It was destroyed during a Roman invasion under Emperor Titus in A.D. 70.

A.D. 691
During the Umayyad period, the Dome of the Rock was built over what was thought to be the innermost portion of the original temple, including the Holy of Holies, which only the high priest could enter. Al-Aqsa mosque was erected over part of Herod’s temple extension. Much of the building as it stands dates to its rebuilding after an earthquake in 1033.

There is a small but growing movement among Jewish activists who want time and space to pray on the Temple Mount, or, as it is called by Muslims, the Noble Sanctuary, home to the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa mosque. Jews are allowed to enter the compound through the Mughrabi Gate, but non-Muslim prayer is forbidden. Now some Jews surreptitiously pray as they wander the grounds. Muslims warn that changing the delicate status quo could be an explosive issue.

There are several gates on the western side of the Temple Mount, including the Mughrabi Gate and the Double Gate.

According to the Bible, King Solomon built the first temple there about 1000 B.C. After King Hezekiah expanded the Temple Mount after his predecessor, Ahaz, plundered the temple. He built the walls and platform that form the courtyard. The first temple stood until Babylon’s Nebuchadnezzar destroyed it in 586 B.C., and Jews built a second temple a generation later.

700 B.C.
Israel’s King Hezekiah expanded the Temple Mount after his predecessor, Ahaz, plundered the temple. He built the walls and platform that form the courtyard. The first temple stood until Babylon’s Nebuchadnezzar destroyed it in 586 B.C., and Jews built a second temple a generation later.

Photos reference sources: Hanan Isachar Photography

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