

## **MUSLIM SHRINES IN PALESTINE: THE CASE OF JOSEPH'S SHRINE THROUGH THE EYES OF PRE-TWENTIETH CENTURY VOYAGERS, GEOGRAPHERS AND PILGRIMS**

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### ABSTRACT

This article presents a comprehensive and critical historical, architectural and cultural review of a Muslim Shrine in Palestine, known as Joseph's Shrine, located near the ancient Palestinian city of Shikmu (Shechem, Tell Balata), northeast of Nablus, Palestine. A key heritage site in Palestine, the current structure is constructed within the tradition of Islamic shrines in Palestine. The shrine consists of a cenotaph tomb, housed in a domed building, with an adjoining courtyard. The shrine has also been subject to architectural changes and restoration projects over the centuries, as evidenced in the writings of pilgrims, travellers and geographers visiting the region from the fourth to nineteenth centuries. The article argues that, while the remains of Joseph are not found at the site, the shrine itself is important within the religious and cultural heritage of Palestine, representing Ottoman-Islamic architectural aspects of this heritage.

**KEYWORDS:** Muslim Shrines in Palestine; Sacred Sites; Palestine; Joseph's Shrine; Joseph's Tomb; Nablus; Voyagers; Ottoman Architecture; Palestinian Islamic Heritage

## 1. Introduction: Historical Background

Every community has its own religious beliefs and rituals, through which the faithful try to draw closer to their God. The sacred places of the prophets and saints are greatly venerated well-known sites with profound religious significance that includes a belief that miracles are performed by the prophets as intermediaries between the faithful and their God. Therefore, the presence of the prophets in the lives of believers and their need for a strong relationship with them is deeply experienced. This has led to the creation of several hundred sacred places in most cities and villages in Palestine. They appear in a variety of forms: shrines that may also include a tomb, tombs standing alone, caves that may contain a tomb, stone vases, springs or wells, single trees, mounds of stones, or a single rock (Kan'an 1998: 66–122). Those with the most religious significance are the shrines where a tomb is also present: they are small stone buildings with plastered walls, roofed with a dome and housing the tomb of an illustrious religious figure. A building of this kind is called a *maqam*, meaning a station (Wilson 1881–1884: II, 4).

Most of the shrines in Palestine are situated on raised terrain, such as mountain or hill slopes, so that they can overlook the surrounding areas and be seen from the distance from several directions (Kan'an 1998: 27). Among the shrines, that of Joseph holds a place of great religious and historical importance for different religious communities in Palestine and although other gravesites have been proposed for Joseph's remains through the centuries, there is a commonly held view that Joseph was buried at Shechem<sup>1</sup> (Tell Balata) after his bones were brought from Egypt (Joshua 24: 32).

Joseph's Shrine is located less than 2km north-east of the Palestinian city of Nablus,<sup>2</sup> in central Palestine, and 300m north-west of Jacob's Well (Figures 1<sup>3</sup> and 2<sup>4</sup>), where the south-east slope of Mount Ebal rises from the nearby plain of Moreh (Crosby 1851: 289; Tristram 1865: 147). Commissioned by the authors of this article, most of the maps and drawings cited in the footnotes were created by two Palestinian scholars

1 Shechem has the meaning: back or shoulder in relation to its geographic location. It has been inhabited since the Chalcolithic Age (4300–3200 BC) and the Old Testament indicates that it was a Canaanite city in patriarchal times, when Abraham visited it in about 1900 BC (Kean 1906: 198; Duncan 1931: I, 98–99).

2 Nablus was built between Mounts Gerizim and Ebal in 72 AD by the Roman Emperor Vespasian (69–79 AD), who named it Neapolis ('new city'). The name was transformed into Nablus about six hundred years later (Schwartz 1850: 150; Wright 1965: 5; Lily 2015).

3 Figure 1. Nablus and the location of Joseph's Shrine (mapped by M. Burqan).

4 Figure 2. Joseph's Shrine on site map of Shechem (Tell Balata) (mapped by I. Iqtait).

Muhammad Burqan<sup>5</sup> and Ibrahim Iqtait<sup>6</sup> and are not included in the list of published References. However, other cited figures appear in References as listed. It lies approximately 66km north of Jerusalem and in former times it was considered an eight hour ride on horseback from Jerusalem to the Palestinian city of Nablus (John of Wurzburg 1890: 8; Dunning 1907: 88).

In the biblical stories the relationship between the biblical ‘sons of Jacob’ and the land of Canaan dates back to their grandfather Abraham and his wife Sara who passed through on their journey from Haran in Iraq, when Abraham built an altar of worship under an oak tree near Shechem. It was told that ‘The Lord appeared to him’ there. He then continued his journey southward to Hebron, where he bought the land from Ephron the Hittite where the Cave of the Machpela was situated. When Jacob, Abraham’s grandson arrived from the east he bought a plot of land for a hundred coins, from Hamor, the ruler of Shechem, and set up an altar there (Genesis 12: 5–9; 33: 19–20; 49: 28–33). Jacob then dug a well of approximately 20–30m in depth (Robinson and Smith 1856: 132). Jacob and his sons remained in the Canaan region. However, Joseph was betrayed by his brothers who threw him in a well between the village of Sinjel and Nablus. Ismaili traders, passing through Palestine on their way to Egypt, captured Joseph and sold him to the Egyptian minister, Potiphar. Joseph became the chief adviser of the Pharaoh of Egypt during the Hyksos period (1675–1550 BC). When Canaan suffered a famine, Jacob and his family emigrated to Egypt where they settled in the Goshen region, on the eastern side of the Nile delta (For more details: Genesis 37: 12–36; 39: 1; 41–47; Acts, 7: 10–14; Quran: Yusuf, 8–20; Al-Hamawi n. y.: II, 101). Jacob remained in Egypt, and when he was near death, he asked his sons to promise to transport his body to Hebron, to be buried in the cave of Machpelah, where Abraham and Isaac and their wives were buried. On Jacob’s death, Joseph followed his father’s instructions, and eventually when he himself was dying he asked his brothers and sons to promise to transport his body to Canaan and bury him with his father and grandfathers (Genesis 49: 29–33; 50: 1–13, 24–25; Josephus n. y.: I, 113). It is clear that he meant the city of Hebron, where they had all been buried (Mills 1864: 67).

According to the narratives of the Old Testament, Joseph died at the age of 110. His body was embalmed and placed in a marble coffin (Gen. 50: 26). Arab historian Ali Al-Mas’udi (2005: I, 39) tells us that ‘They laid his body into a coffin of stone, closed it with lead, and covered

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it with varnish, which keeps out air and water, and threw it into the Nile, at the town of Memphis', as a sign to maintain the flow of the river and prevent further famines (Mills 1864: 67). The Samaritans were the only early inhabitants of Palestine who placed their dead in stone coffins and it is suggested that they did this in imitation of Joseph's burial in a stone coffin (Thomson 1919: 140). For several hundred years, from the time of Joseph to Moses, the Hebrew people flourished and increased in population in the Goshen region in Egypt. After the adversities that Moses and his followers suffered under the Pharaohs, 'the Lord' commanded Moses to leave. Moses told his followers to leave on foot, but before going, he removed Joseph's coffin from the Nile, where it had been for 320 years, to transport it to Canaan (Exodus 12:31–41; 13: 19). Although Moses was pursued by the Pharaoh and his soldiers, he was able to cross the Gulf of Suez. As well as historical accounts, the Bible and the Quran mention the details of the hardships Moses and his people suffered, including their wanderings in the wilderness for forty years and the revelations at Sinai, before their arrival in Canaan with Joshua Ben Nun, successor of Moses. Throughout these events, there was no reference to Joseph's coffin in Islamic, Jewish or Christian sources.

According to the Old Testament narrative, Joshua entered Palestine through Jericho and gathered all the 'tribes of Israel' at the entrance to the Shechem valley, where he addressed the crowd at length giving an account of the events of their journey and the key events of the history of the Israelites. The Bible provided a description of the speech in which there was no reference to Joseph. As Joseph is an important figure, Joshua should have mentioned him in his speech if had he already had his bones with him, and it is strange that the Bible has no reference to the details of his burial process. However, the Bible refers to 'the bones of Joseph, which the children of Israel brought up out of Egypt, [and] buried in Shechem, in a parcel of ground which Jacob bought' (Josh. 24: 1–24, 32). A number of sources regarded this verse from the Bible as evidence that not only was Joseph buried in Shechem, but his eleven brothers as well (Acts, 7: 15–16; St Jerome 1887: 13; Smith 1863: III, 1237–1238; Vetromile 1871: II, 253; Pringle 1998: II, 94). This is contrary to the historical truth, because travellers who visited the site did not witness their graves, nor did the archaeological excavations nearby indicate their existence.

After the spread of Christianity in the east in the fourth century, Shechem became an important holy place for Christians. When Jesus had come there and sat under the tree which Jacob had planted, a Samaritan woman had come to draw water from the nearby well and after Jesus asked her for a drink, he imparted prophetic teachings to her; this incident gave the Samaritans of the time a belief in Jesus (Gospel of John, 4: 1–42; Fisk 1845: 342). Due to the religious significance Christians gave to the well,

Saint Helena built a monastery over it in the fourth century, which was converted into a church at the time of Saint Jerome in approximately 400 AD (Bruce 1994: 102). Another reason Christians were drawn to Nablus was the fact that the first Christian philosopher, Justin Martyr, was born there (Schaff 1878: 315; Munk 1881: 40). The Nablus region became a conflict ground between Christians and Samaritans, with each group claiming the right to impose control over the holy sites. In the reign of the Byzantine emperor Theodosius I (379–395 AD) the Christians made a failed attempt to gather the presumed bones of Joseph to distribute to different cities, so the Samaritans covered over the tomb to make access to difficult (Montgomery 1907: 107; Kohen 2007: 24). In 415 AD, Theodosius II (402–450 AD) sent an imperial Byzantine committee to Shechem to recover the bones. They found no tombstone for Joseph, but after digging in the area they found an empty marble Sarcophagus and sent it to be placed in the church of Hagia Sophia (Crown 1989: 67–68). No source confirmed that this Church contained such a Sarcophagus. No other historical source has substantiated this story.

Determining the exact location of Joseph's burial in Shechem seems to have been difficult and this is understandable when considering the events of the intervening years between Biblical times and the late Medieval and Modern Ages. Rothman Lily (2015) found it noteworthy that Joshua Ben-Nun could locate the exact plot of land in Shechem that Jacob had purchased and Joseph had inherited, as though the ancient text had given map coordinates. Neither were there any references to the exact location in ancient religious and historical sources (Freund 2009: 28). Josephus (n. y: I, 114), the Romano-Jewish historian, recounted that Joshua had transferred Joseph's remains to the Canaan region but had not specified the burial location. Therefore, it cannot be established that the present day site of Joseph's Tomb, where his cenotaph lies, is the location referred to in ancient texts (Pummer 1987: 11).

In trying to pinpoint the burial location of Joseph's bones, a number of travellers have mentioned numerous tombs associated with Joseph. In addition to the tomb near Jacob's Well, they described another one at a small Muslim shrine called *Jami'a al-'Amud* ('Mosque of the Pillar') in the same area, about 400m away on the slope of Gerizim. The Samaritans do not accept any other tomb as Joseph's except the widely accepted one and attribute the *Jami'a al-'Amud* tomb to a renowned Rabbi, also called Joseph (Tristram 1865: 147; Hackett 1863: III, 1239; Mills 1864: 33, 66; Wilson 1881–1884: II, 8).

Numerous historians, pilgrims and travellers, some of them Jewish, related from the fifth century onward that Joseph's body was buried in Hebron where his father and grandparents were buried and most of them reported seeing his tomb there. Breen retells from the writings of

St Augustine (fifth century) that the three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and their wives, were buried at Hebron.<sup>7</sup> However some sources suggested Joseph was originally buried at Shechem and his bones later transferred to Hebron for burial with his father and brothers (Wilson 1881–1884: III, 186; C. Conder 1879, II, 82). In 1210, the Jewish traveller, Samuel Ben Samson, reported sighting Joseph's tomb in Shiloh, south-east of Nablus (Adler 1930: 105). Another opinion suggested Joseph's bones were buried near the Palestinian village of Beit Ijza, north-east of Jerusalem (Goldman 1995: 130), while another suggested he was buried with his sons, Ephraim and Menashe, in Safed in Galilee, northern Palestine (Freund 2009: 28). Yet others suggested the place of burial as Fayoum, where there was a mosque and shrine (Al-Harawi 2002: 44), or on Jabal al-Moqattam (Mount Moqattam) (Al-Himyari 1984: 588) or in one of the Giza Pyramids (Michaud 1834: V, 310). It was put forward that Joseph may be Yuya, with his mummy kept in the Egyptian Museum (see Osman 1989); some scholars discussed this theory (McCall 1999). It is clear that multiple locations have been perceived to be Joseph's burial place over the years. In an attempt to justify this, Shalom Goldman (1995: 130) proposed: 'It is a known phenomenon in popular Middle Eastern religion that a holy man or woman can have more than one tomb'.

As there is no archaeological evidence for Joseph's burial location, John Wilson (1847, II, 61) in the mid-nineteenth century suggested carrying out archaeological excavations at the site of Joseph's Tomb in Shechem. In the twentieth century, excavations in the Shechem area excluded Joseph's Tomb (Wright 1965: *passim*). Owing to this, the tomb at Shechem has been considered a religious site rather than a historical one (Freund 2009: 29). Many later scholars believed that the biblical account of Joseph is a literary work written during the sixth or seventh centuries BC, and that the historicity of the Egyptian episode, the exodus and the time wandering in the wilderness, as related in the Bible, cannot be historically substantiated (Moore and Kelle 1972: 91; Redford 1992: 429; de Hoop 1999: 412).

## **2. Description and Architecture of Joseph's Tomb/Shrine**

### **2.1. References by Travellers and Pilgrims**

Beginning in the fourth century, numerous travellers visited Shechem and Nablus for different reasons, either out of general interest, or for cultural, religious or political purposes. Their writings include descriptions of the geographical and natural features of the region and the social, economic,

<sup>7</sup> Breen 1906: 55. See also: Antoninus of Piacenza (1887: 24); Khusraw (1993: 86); Saewulf (1892: 12, 24); The Monk (2003: 77); Adler (1930: 98); Michaud (1834: V, 255); Burton (1876: II, 18, 182); Le Strange (1890: 314).

political and religious aspects of the society they found there. They can be divided into different groups. Firstly, there were those who viewed Joseph's Tomb and referred to it as the place where Joseph's bones were buried in the plot of land that Jacob had purchased not far from Jacob's Well. Their reference to the burial site of Joseph's bones was based on a preconceived idea from the Bible.<sup>8</sup>

Secondly, there were those who visited Shechem and Nablus, but did not refer to Joseph's Tomb at all, although they were in the vicinity and wrote extensively on the area. They include Saewulf (1892: 24–25), who was there in 1102–1103, and numerous travellers who visited the area in the late nineteenth century (Smith 1901: 119–123, 323–375; Dunning 1907: 103; Flaubert 1910: 322–323). Thirdly, there were those who referred to Joseph's Tomb, but did not visit it, such as John Mandeville who visited Samaria and Sebastia in 1332 and 1356 (Wright 1848: 182–183). Lastly, there were the travellers who not only visited the tomb, but described the building, either briefly or in detail. In this study, we are mostly concerned with the last group.

The most important early reference to Joseph's Tomb is from The Bordeaux Pilgrim (333 A.D.) in which it was reported that the tomb was near the tree that Jacob had planted (The Bordeaux Pilgrim 1887: 18). Eusebius of Nicomedia (d.341 AD) also saw the tomb when he was in Palestine. Their accounts suggest the tomb was not housed by a wall at that time (Guerin 1874: 374). This was the information, following the Bible, on which historians and travellers based their assumption of the existence of Joseph's tomb in that place, and this assumption was passed on to later generations. Although the Byzantine committee previously mentioned had failed to find the remains of Joseph, his tomb was included on the Madaba mosaic map (Figure 3<sup>9</sup>) in the sixth century AD, during the reign of the Byzantine emperor Justinian (527–565 AD); this showed that the tomb was regarded as a sacred Christian site. The map was considered an important reference for Joseph's Tomb at the time (Wright 1965: 5–6).

8 Archidiaconus Theodosius in 530 (Theodosius 1893: 7). Arculfus in 670 (Arculfus 1889: 41–43). Numerous anonymous pilgrims in the 11th century (Anonymous Pilgrims 1894: 4, 5, 17, 26, 59). Rogers Fetellus in 1130 (Fetellus 1896: 7–9). John of Wurzburg in 1160–1170 (J. of Wurzburg 1890: 8). Theoderich in 1172 (Theoderich 1891: 61–62). Buchar of Mount Sion in 1280 (B. of Mount Sion 1896: 19–20). Isaac Ben Joseph Ben Chelo in 1334 (Adler 1930: 141). Accounts of the Holy Land in about 1350 (Bernard 1894: 3). John Poloner in 1421, and Richard Guilforde in 1506 (Poloner 1894: 30, 38; Guilforde 1851: 52). Jean De Thevenot and Henry Maundrell in the 17th century (de Thevenot 1687: 215; Maundrell 1703: 61). Felix Bovet in the mid-nineteenth century (Bovet 1882: 318). Van de Velde in 1851 and 1852 (Van de Velde 1854: I, 401).

9 Figure 3. Madaba Map showing Joseph's Tomb and Neapolis/modern Nablus (see Avi-Yonah 1954: 195).

During the intervening centuries until the twelfth century, travellers seem to have had little interest in Joseph's Tomb, but after that, the tomb became an important place of pilgrimage for different religions and nationalities (Pringle 1998: II, 94). Persian Muslim traveller Ali Al-Harawi (2002: 30) reported seeing the historic tree beside which Joseph was buried. In the same period, Rabbi Jacob Ben R. Nathaniel Ha-Cohen wrote a fable about his visit to Joseph's Tomb, saying that the grave was in a cave where there were two coffins and one night when he entered the cave accompanied by a non-circumcised person, that person smashed the grave with an axe and was killed miraculously at that moment (Adler 1930: 96–97). In addition to being fictional, it is clear that Rabbi Jacob Ha-Cohen appears to have entered one of the rock tombs assuming that it was Joseph's Tomb. The story seems unbelievable without being supported by historical evidence. In 1137, Peter the Deacon related that Joseph's Tomb was in a 'church' about 50m from Jacob's Well. Denys Pringle (1998: II, 94) comments, 'There is no indication, however, that the tomb was any longer a Christian place of worship at this date'. Furthermore, the tomb was on open ground without a wall or building at the time. However, the first descriptions of the tomb began to appear in accounts of travellers in the twelfth century, when the English historian, William of Malmesbury, related that it was covered with white marble. In the thirteenth century, Joseph Menachem ben Peretz of Hebron and Rabbi Jacob, the messenger of Rabi Jechiel of Paris, visited the tomb between 1215 and 1244 and saw two small marble pillars at either end of it (Elitzur 2019; Mills 1864: 65; Adler 1930: 116).

By about the middle of the thirteenth century Joseph's Tomb was enclosed by an Islamic style stone wall, and by the end of the seventeenth century there were indications that a small building housed the tomb. Both Henry Maundrell and Tomas Wright (1703: 61; 1848: 435) wrote that they had viewed a small mosque built over the tomb. It seems that this was due to the sighting of a niche in the direction of the Islamic Qibla in the southern wall. Moreover, the tomb may have been covered with a dome at the time. This can be inferred from the drawing by David Roberts in 1839, which shows the dome was in ruin and the walls partially in ruins (Figure 4<sup>10</sup>). John Wilson (1847, II, 61), reported that the structure had been rebuilt by the head of the Jewish community of Jerusalem in 1749. Sources for his study did not provide details on whether the rebuilding referred to just the tomb or the tomb and building combined.

The bishop of Jerusalem, Michael Alexander (1844: 280), visited the tomb just before the mid-nineteenth century and reported that it was an elegant building in a well-preserved state, due to the care of the Jewish

10 Figure 4. Joseph's Shrine in 1839 (see Roberts 1842–1845: I, 9).



visitors. However, it would have been more accurate to say that it was the Samaritans who were looking after the tomb, taking it upon themselves to keep it in order (Wilson, 1847, II, 60–61). The small Samaritan population was approximately 160 people in the second half of the nineteenth century (Conder 1891: 64). Nevertheless, responsibility for preserving the tomb was not limited to the Samaritans, as the faithful from other religions took an interest in the preservation — evidence for this is that the tomb itself was not subjected to destruction or vandalism, but only the external walls and building.

At this stage in the history of the site, when the building resembled Islamic shrines and small mosques that were now in many villages and on the outskirts of cities, travellers noticed this and wrote about it in their journals and various accounts. It was noted in particular that the architectural design was unlike the usual design for Jewish sepulchres (McClintock 1880: IX, 555). Toward the mid-nineteenth century, the traveller Thomas Jolliffe (1820: 44–48) relates that he was shown a small chapel erected over Joseph's Tomb, and adds that there was no aspect of it that would either support or refute claims that it was Joseph's Tomb. Similarly, during the same period, James Birmingham (1821: 543–544) also saw a small ruined mosque built over the tomb, and not far from the tomb, he saw the church at Jacob's Well as a pile of ruins. When George Fisk (1845: 341) visited the tomb, he did not observe that it was necessarily Joseph's because it resembled Arab tombs. However, he did not rule out the possibility that Joseph was buried there, saying 'the grave evidently marks the final resting place of someone'. John Wilson (1847: II, 60) showed the same open mind, writing that the small mosque was 'over what is supposed to be the patriarch's grave'.

Travellers and pilgrims visiting the shrine several years later, in particular from 1850 to 1860, also observed that shrines to Muslim saints were widespread.<sup>11</sup> One of them, John Browne (1853: 354), added that the local authorities denied there was evidence that the biblical Joseph was buried there. Arthur Stanley (1856: 237) seems not to have been sure either that the tomb belonged to Joseph, speaking of the 'alleged tomb of Joseph'. David Randall (1868: 286) before 1862 added: 'We entered a little square area, enclosed by a high stone wall, neatly whitewashed. Across one end of this little enclosure is a Muslim tomb, surmounted by a [ruined] dome'.

The site remained without any substantial changes until 1868 (Palestine Exploration Fund (PEF), 1873: 71; Burton 1876: II, 207–208). This was confirmed by other writers, who added that the structural monument

11 Crosby (1851: 291); Saulcy and de Warren (1854: I, 99); Robinson and Smith (1856: 13); Stanley (1856: 237); The Religious Tract Society (RTS) (1863: 181); Hackett (1863: III, 1239); Tristram (1865: 147–148); Rogers (1865: 289).

housing Joseph's tomb was completely rebuilt by Mr Rogers, the English Consul at Damascus in 1868 (Conder and Kitchener 1882: II, 194–195; Schaff 1878: 309; Pringle 1998: II, 94). When Victor Guerin (1874: 373) visited the site in 1870 he pointed out that the shrine had been rebuilt several times and that the latest restoration seemed to have been not long before. His writings clearly cast doubt on whether the tomb actually belonged to Joseph. At the same time, he did not exclude the possibility.

Among the architectural additions to the site was a narrow, uneven paved path leading from the entrance on the northern wall to a Muslim prayer niche in the southern wall. On the eastern side of the path there was a raised platform, about 18cm high, for the use of believers who came to rest, read, or pray (Wilson 1881–1884: II, 2). One of the most important developments in the construction of the shrine was mentioned by Claude Conder and Horatio Kitchener (1882: II, 194–195) who surveyed the area in July 1872, June 1875 and May 1881. They described the site as follows:

The building is quite modern. An open courtyard surrounds the tomb with plastered walls [...]. A passage in the floor, 4ft wide, has a level 6in. lower than the side Diwans or raised platforms. The entrance to the courtyard is from the north, through the ruin of a little square building, with a dome measuring about 22ft either way or equal to the new courtyard. (Figures 8<sup>12</sup> and 9<sup>13</sup>)

It appears that, according to the writings of travellers, the shrine had become a small, whitewashed Muslim prayer mosque, with a low dome and an adjoining courtyard with stone walls (Geikie 1887: II, 212; Conder 1891: 63; Thomas 1900: 246; Kean 1906: 195; Macdonald 1880: 64; Munk 1881: 40). Some accounts indicate that, in the late nineteenth century, the tomb itself had been removed from the mosque, and placed alongside it, for reasons unknown. One of them, John Geikie (1887: II, 212) described it: 'The traditional tomb of Joseph lies beside a little mosque with a low dome. The tomb stands in a little yard close to the mosque, and the tomb is enclosed by a low stone wall'. In the same period, Claude Conder (1891: 63) also wrote that the monument he saw was a typical Syrian tomb in an open-air enclosure adjoining a small ruined mosque, confirming that the building had been once again destroyed, again for reasons unknown. Later, after the restoration works, the tomb was placed inside the prayer room building again. A change must have taken place during that period, when the Ottoman Empire was weakened by internal conflicts and no longer able to offer protection for holy sites.

12 Figure 8. Reconstructed plan of Joseph's Shrine based on information from Conder and Kitchener 1882 (mapped by I. Iqtait).

13 Figure 9. Reconstructed section of Joseph's Shrine based on information from Conder and Kitchener 1882 (mapped by I. Iqtait).

**Table 1. Courtyard dimensions**

<i>Courtyard dimensions</i>
Wall: 1.82m high × 0.96m thick. Walled space: 2.87m north-south × 3.07m east to west (cited in Mills 1864: 65), (Figure 5)
Low wall: approximately 3.65m × 3.65m (cited in Tristram 1865: 147)
Courtyard: 6.1m × 9.14m (cited in Andrews 1872: 261).
Courtyard area: 5.66×5.66m. Walls: 3.04m high × 53.34cm thick (cited in Conder and Kitchener 1882: II, 194), (Figures 8 and 9)

Therefore, when James Montgomery (1907: 44) visited Joseph's Tomb in the late nineteenth century, he wrote that the Samaritans of the time appeared to make a point of forgetting their dead and that the religious rituals practised in the tomb were almost non-existent, indicating that the tomb was deserted. In spite of all this, the shrine was again rebuilt, as shown in the photograph taken in 1900 (Figure 11<sup>14</sup>). Andrew Breen (1906: 628), the American Catholic priest, who was in Palestine in 1904–1905, visited the shrine and wrote that at the time of his visit the tomb itself was a simple Muslim cenotaph that was venerated by all local religious communities.

## **2.2. Courtyard Walls and Position of the Tomb**

From early in the thirteenth century onward, Joseph's Tomb was enclosed by a stone wall, with an entrance in the north (Fisk 1845: 341; Adler 1930: 116). The wall was built of local stones, with the internal side plastered and whitewashed (Robinson and Smith 1856: 133; Mills 1864: 65; Rogers 1865: 289). It is evident from the dimensions of the enclosed space that Mills and Tristram's figures (Table 1) refer to the walls of the open space and not the chamber. The drawing by David Roberts in 1839 gives us a clear idea of the shape of the shrine and the tomb during the period before the construction works in 1868 (Figure 4), but Andrews, and Conder and Kitchener's figures (Table 1), reflect the dimensions of both the chamber and the adjacent courtyard, with an entrance on the northern side. The variation in the figures given by the writers would be due to repeated repairs and constant changes to the building and possibly mistakes made.

The tomb was seen to be not in the middle of the courtyard, but on the western side of the courtyard path near the western wall, lying northwest

14 Figure 11. Photo of Joseph's Shrine in 1900 from: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Joseph%27s\\_Tomb.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Joseph%27s_Tomb.jpg) (accessed on 17 March 2019).

to southeast at an acute angle to the wall, rather than parallel with it (Hackett 1863: III, 1239; Tristram 1865: 147; Wilson 1881–1884: II, 2). The head of the tomb is toward the northern entrance of the courtyard and the foot toward the south (Mills 1864: 65) (Figures 5<sup>15</sup> and 6<sup>16</sup>). Victor Guerin (1874: 373) visited Joseph's shrine in 1870 and wrote that the tomb was in the form of a rectangular coffin. The Conder and Kitchener (1882: II, 194) survey (1872–1881) confirmed that the tomb, with a bearing of 202°, was not in line with the wall, nor was it in the middle of the enclosed area, being closest to the western wall (Figure 8).

The main niche (*Mihrab*) was in the southern wall of the tomb chamber opposite the entrance. It was 0.7m wide and 1.9m high (Conder and Kitchener 1882: II, 194) (Figure 10<sup>17</sup>). Charles Wilson (1881–1884: II, 2) wrote that the niche was about 1.5m high. There were two other wide niches in the south-western and north-western corners (Rogers 1865: 289) (Figure 5). They seem to have been alcoves where the pilgrims could rest.

### **2.3. Description of the Tomb and the Two Pillars**

The tomb was described as made of white marble in the fourth century and by the beginning of the thirteenth century travellers began to observe it between two small marble pillars. This was after it had been rebuilt and was enclosed by a wall, but at this stage there was no building. The tomb was resting on a plastered and whitewashed stone platform (Bonar and M'Cheyne 1845: 213; Mills 1864: 65; Conder and Kitchener 1882: II, 194). The upper part was arched (Wilson 1847: II, 60) (Figures 6 and 7<sup>18</sup>), resembling traditional Muslim tombs that can be seen in Muslim countries (Fisk 1845: 341; Crosby 1851: 291; Guerin 1874: 373).

In relation to the tomb measurements, the figures of Conder and Kitchener (1882) (Table 2) are the most accurate and complete, not only in regard to the tomb itself, but also the other spaces of the complex. On the other hand, surprisingly, the only measurement Tristram noted was the height of the tomb. Rogers also ignored the width. The length and height of the tomb did not change with the restoration of 1868, indicating that the tomb itself was not rebuilt, but only underwent minor changes as a result of the restoration. Mills seems to have clearly made mistakes in his

15 Figure 5. Reconstructed plan of Joseph's Shrine based on information from Mills (1864) (mapped by I. Iqtait).

16 Figure 6. Reconstructed isometric view of Joseph's Shrine based on information from Mills (1864) (mapped by I. Iqtait).

17 Figure 10. Reconstructed isometric view of Joseph's Shrine based on information from Conder and Kitchener (1882) (mapped by I. Iqtait).

18 Figure 7. Reconstructed section of Joseph's Shrine based on information from Mills (1864) (mapped by I. Iqtait).

**Table 2. Tomb dimensions**

<i>Height</i>	<i>Length</i>	<i>Width</i>
106cm	218cm	17cm (Mills 1864: 65)
91.4cm (Tristram 1865: 147)	–	–
91.4cm	182m (Rogers 1865: 289)	–
91.4cm	182cm	21cm (Conder and Kitchener 1882: II, 194)

**Table 3. Pillar dimensions**

<i>Northern pillar height</i>	<i>Southern pillar height</i>	<i>Diameter</i>
1.22m	–	29.12cm (Mills 1864: 65)
1.14m	78.74cm	53.34cm (Conder and Kitchener 1882: II, 194)
–	–	43.18 or 45.72cm (Wilson 1881–1884: II, 3).

measurements for the tomb, especially in regard to the length and height (Fig. 6 and 7).

The two pillars sighted at each end of the tomb were reported to be very low (Guerin 1874: 373; Geikie 1887: II, 212), and Charles Wilson (1881–1884: II, 2) wrote that they were the same height as the tomb; however, Conder and Kitchener's figures (Table 3, Fig. 10) were the most accurate. The pillars were built roughly of stone and covered with white plaster in the same style as the tomb. The upper surface of each pillar was in the shape of a concave bowl providing a place for worshippers to light oil-lamps and burn incense (Conder and Kitchener 1882: II, 194). The two pillars were said to represent the sepulchres of Joseph's sons Ephraim and Manasseh (Wilson 1847: II, 60). Perhaps they were part of disused pillars from a church, because some travellers spoke of broken columns from an abandoned church on the ground not far from Joseph's Tomb (Robinson and Smith 1856: 132; Burton 1876: II, 207).

### 3. Wall Inscriptions and Religious Rituals

The inscriptions on the walls of the shrine can be divided into two different kinds. The first kind relates to the official inscriptions that were subject to change with the restorations that took place. One of these was reported by John Wilson (1847: II, 61): The inscription in Hebrew reported that the tomb was rebuilt in 1749 AD. In translation, it reads:

'Blessed be the Lord who hath put it into the heart of Elijah, the son of Meir, our rabbi, let the Lord bless him, to build again the house of Joseph in the month of Sivan, in the year 5509'.

Ze'ev Erlich (2010: XVIII) explained that the inscription was originally engraved on the southern wall of the tomb, facing the entrance. Over the course of time it became eroded, and in recent years had been defaced with sharp and blunt instruments. Erlich added that the name of the donor appearing in the inscription was Rabbi Reb Eliyahu Ben Meir, who was known as 'Rabbenu', one of the leaders of the Jewish community in Jerusalem during that period. A number of sources in the first half of the nineteenth century stated that there were two stone slabs placed over the main niche in the southern wall (Fig. 6, 7 and 9) that exhibited inscriptions from that period that were defaced. The inscriptions were in Hebrew on one slab and in the Samaritan language on the other (Mills 1864: 65; McClintock 1880: IX, 636).

These Hebrew and Samaritan inscriptions seem to have disappeared after the shrine was completely rebuilt in 1868. When Conder and Kitchener (1882: II, 194–195) surveyed the area (1872–1881), the wording they saw inscribed on the southern wall of the shrine was: 'This building surrounding and covering the tomb of Joseph was entirely rebuilt at the expense of Mr. E. T. Rogers, H.B.M.'s Consul at Damascus, January, 1868'.

The second type of inscriptions were those written by pilgrims on the walls and they included names or remarks. Accounts of the travellers from 1839 to 1859 reported that the walls, the southern one in particular, were jotted with names and inscriptions in Arabic, Hebrew and Samaritan. European travellers also wrote or engraved their names on the walls at that time (Alexander 1844: 280; Fisk 1845: 341; Wilson 1847: II, 60–61; Tristram 1865: 148; Hackett 1863: III, 1239; Mills 1864: 65), but after the shrine took on its final Islamic form as a mosque, mainly after 1868, they seem to have ceased to do so.

According to the accounts of travellers, religious rituals at Joseph's Shrine began in the mid-thirteenth century. This is mentioned in the memoirs of Rabbi Jacob, the envoy of Rabi Yechiel in Paris between 1238 and 1244 AD; he wrote that the candles were lit each night (Adler 1930: 96). No-one before this period had referred to this practice, but it seems to have continued in subsequent periods because 'Travellers and Pilgrims from all climes did not stop coming to meditate in the shadow of Joseph's monument' (Randall 1868: 286).

It was reported that two vases for burning offerings were seen on the pillars by the tomb (Fig. 7 and 9), similar to those seen at the tomb of Simeon Bar Jochai of Meirun in northern Galilee. They contained the ashes of burnt garments (PEF, 1873: 71; Conder 1891: 64). Small

garments or pieces of linen, such as gold lace, embroidered muslin or silk shawls, were burnt as offerings at the tomb. Burnt offerings were said to have been a Jewish custom, in remembrance of the Patriarch 'who sleeps beneath' (Wilson 1881–1884: II, 3; Geikie 1887: II, 212). The Samaritans also practised this custom at Joseph's Tomb (Conder and Kitchener 1882: II, 195; Montgomery 1907: 44). It seems that the purpose of this comparison was to give Joseph's Tomb a Jewish character by linking it to the Jewish historical and religious heritage, but there is no evidence for this in historical fact.

The pilgrims regarded everything connected with Joseph's tomb as holy; an example of that was when a thriving vine in the north-eastern corner of the courtyard grew over the wall, its waving branches formed a pleasant bower (Fig. 8). It was converted into a symbol representing the blessing which Joseph received from his dying father: 'Joseph is a fruitful bough, even a fruitful bough by a well, whose branches run over the wall' (Bonar and M'Cheyne 1845: 213; Hackett 1863: III, 1239; Guerin 1874: 373).

As the shrine was built in the Muslim style, the main niche was meant as a *Mihrab* and was built on the southern wall towards Mecca in the south (Wilson 1881–1884: II, 2). Furthermore, Muslim families came to the shrine to pray and sing religious songs to seek Joseph's blessings (Goldman 1995: 131). However, it is surprising to note that the travellers did not mention in their accounts of the tomb that they saw any visitors or worshippers during their visits there, but have only referred to the remainders of their religious rites; this is with the exception of Isabel Burton (1876: II, 207) who commented that she found some Samaritans praying there. Overall, the various accounts show that the shrine received visitors from all the religious communities in the region, each contributing to its preservation (Alexander 1844: 280; Wilson 1847: II, 61).

### Conclusion

The religious sanctity of Joseph's Tomb area dates back to the time of Abraham and his grandson Jacob when the whole country was under Canaanite rule. We assume that Joseph's Tomb is a hollow one (cenotaph) and does not contain his remains. In addition, there were five other tombs attributed to Joseph in Palestine as well as our tomb; they were those at Gerizim, Hebron, Shiloh, Safad and Beit Ijza. Nevertheless, the Muslim tomb near Nablus (Shechem) remains one of the important cultural heritage sites in Palestine.

Joseph's Tomb was mentioned for the first time in the fourth century. The accounts of the architectural development of the site indicates that it was enclosed by a stone wall in the thirteenth century. During this era

descriptions of the architecture and religious rituals practised there began to appear in the writings of travellers.

From the end of the seventeenth century onward, there are indications that there was a small building over the tomb. It may also have been roofed with a dome at that time and became a shrine that later was converted into a Muslim chapel or small mosque. The shrine was rebuilt by Mr Rogers, the British Consul in Damascus in 1868. By tracing the architectural history of Joseph's Shrine, we are able to conclude that it is representative of Ottoman-Islamic architecture. Our research demonstrates the need for preservation of Joseph's Shrine through provision of the necessary resources and protection, far from political conflicts, so that all religious communities can visit the sanctuary and perform their rites and rituals in an atmosphere of justice and freedom.

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