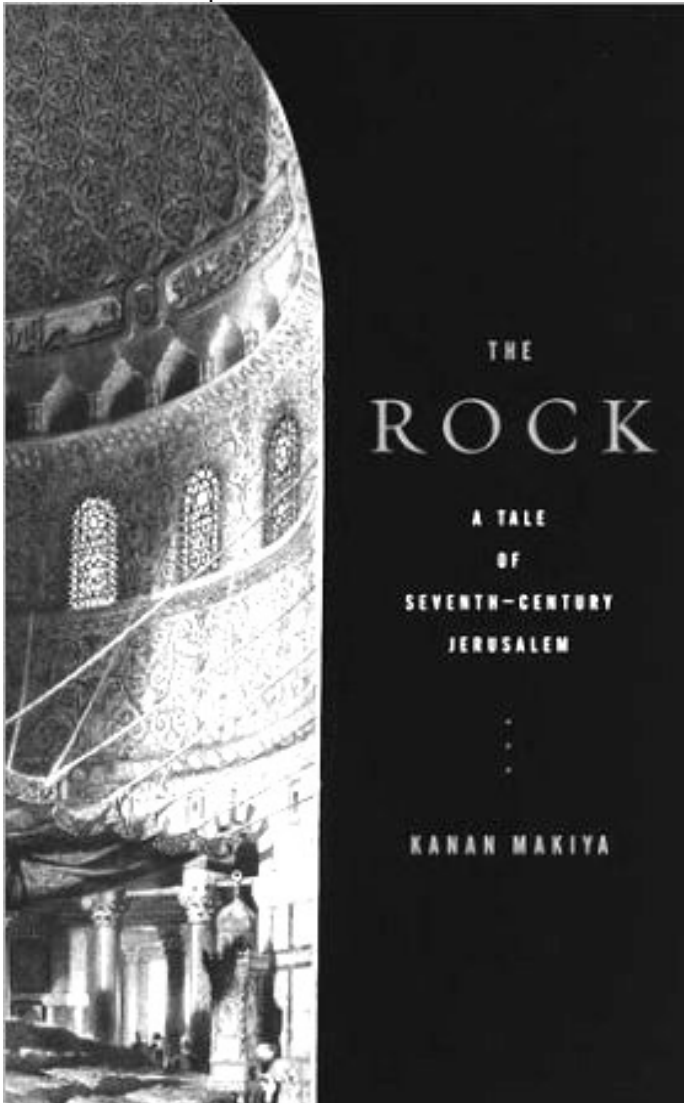

The Rock: Jerusalem's Sacred Space



Responses to Kanan Makiya's
*The Rock: A Tale of Seventh-Century
Jerusalem*

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Preface

On March 3, 2002, Brandeis University hosted a symposium to coincide with the publication of *The Rock: A Tale of Seventh-Century Jerusalem* (Pantheon Books, 2001), a novel by Brandeis professor and Iraqi-born writer, Kanan Makiya.

The Rock, a work of fiction based on meticulous research, depicts seventh-century Jerusalem, from the Muslim conquest to the building of the Dome of the Rock, through the eyes of the son of the most prominent early convert from Judaism to Islam. The novel asks us to re-think our ideas about this sacred space, tracing the origins of myths about the Rock to tangled roots in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic tradition. No plot of ground has inspired human passion for as long and as deeply as the raised platform in Jerusalem that Jews call the Temple Mount and Muslims call the Haram al-Sharif.

The symposium looked beyond the current political conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians to explore the ways in which men and women of three ancient faiths have invested meanings in the city's stones. Makiya led the event by reading a selection from his book and taking questions from the audience. His presentation was followed by a panel discussion, that examined questions raised in *The Rock* through the lenses of religion, history, architecture, and the literary imagination.

Introduction

Daniel Terris

There is a moment in Kanan Makiya's *The Rock* when Ka'ab, the figure at the heart of the book's narrative, faces a spiritual crisis. A historical personage, an early convert from Judaism to the upstart faith of the prophet Muhammad, Ka'ab has accompanied the Muslim troops under the Rightly-Guided Caliph Umar, on their successful conquest of Jerusalem. Now the men have an important decision to undertake: where to site the first, primitive mosque, on the sacred site adjacent to the rock.

Ka'ab advocates for placing the mosque north of the rock, so that believers prostrate in prayer can face both the Jerusalem rock—the rock of Abraham and David—and the Black Stone in the Q'aba in Mecca, the newly-minted Muslim holy city lying 800 miles to the southeast. But General Umar closes off that option, choosing deliberately to site the mosque to the south. Ka'ab is horrified. Believers in the new mosque would face Mecca, according to Muhammad's instructions, and in so doing they would turn their backs to the ancient rock just behind them.

Ka'ab had grown up with the Jewish veneration for the holy site in Jerusalem, and it was a matter of course to him that this ancient attachment would be incorporated into Islam. But it was not to be. The new orientation towards Mecca causes Ka'ab intense distress, a spiritual pain that is physical in its intensity. He refuses to pray in the new mosque, preferring to worship in the open air from the north, where he can face both rocks. His disappointment, his agony, is profound, as he comes to recognize that his vision of an embracing faith, in which the new and the old are welded inseparably, may be destined for failure.

The crisis of Ka'ab is an imaginative portrait of a moment in history, a tangible rendering of Islam's declaration of independence from the Jewish aspects of its roots. But it is also the tangible representation of a common human dilemma: our efforts to reconcile powerful, but conflicting beliefs. Ka'ab's pain resonates with us because it recreates a process that we go through as individuals, as we seek meaning. It also resonates because it suggests the enormous challenges of bringing together peoples whose world-view is, as in this case, literally different.

Spiritual direction is Ka'ab's problem, and there is, in fact, only one direction to go to escape his dilemma, and that is up: up to a high enough point that the problem of spiritual direction becomes moot. I'd like to think our symposium gives us a bird's eye view, the chance to consider the motives and the

meanings invested in the Rock, the centerpiece of those couple of acres that Jews call the Temple Mount and Muslims call Haram al-Sharif.

Recent history has made this, of course, a particularly delicate subject. The battle over the meaning of the Rock and the sacred space that surrounds it is very much with us today. It would appear that no peace will come to the embattled Middle East until (among other things) Jews and Muslims manage to convey some sense of mutual respect for each other's spiritual orientations. The very persistence of these contested ideals sends us back into history to search for clues, for hints, for ideas about how to re-orient ourselves to break old habits of conflict and to seek innovative approaches.

Kanan Makiya's book, *The Rock—A Tale of Seventh Century Jerusalem*, offers us an imaginative portrait of a key moment in the history of that sacred space: the Muslim conquest of Jerusalem and the erection of the magnificent Dome of the Rock, today the most prominent feature of any Jerusalem cityscape. Published in 2001 after more than five years of work, *The Rock* is a book that merits our attention not only because of its subject matter, but because of its daring and innovative form. It is an imaginative re-creation of the era, a work of fiction based on extensive research, a kind of bold guess at the contours of history, in the service not of establishing the facts but of stimulating our consideration of the possible. Kanan Makiya is not so much asking, "What was?" as he is asking "What could have been?" and also "What could be...?"

Makiya's book challenges us to respond, to ask ever-deeper questions about the meaning of sacred spaces and the contest between men to control them. The comments that we publish here are from three respondents who come from very different intellectual disciplines. Oleg Grabar brings the sensibility of a distinguished historian of Islamic architecture, a scholar whose work directly influenced Makiya's understanding of the building of the Dome of the Rock. Zvi Ben-Dor brings the background of the historian of comparative religion. Eugene Goodheart brings the insights of the literary critic.

For all three, the very form of *The Rock* poses a challenge. What are they to make of this work of fiction with its extensive footnotes, its mix of historical figures and fictional characters, and its frank speculations about a moment in the unreachable past? The blurry boundaries of the book's form create a certain obstacle to analysis, but in the end, the three respondents find that Makiya's narrative strategy mirrors the complexities of his subject. The book is itself, as Eugene Goodheart notes, very much about the process of "naming," about the ways that myth and fiction and historical data can all, in different ways, serve the cause of truth.

This collection of essays can be read in two ways. For those who have not read *The Rock*, Makiya's own comments and the responses can serve as an introduction to the subtle and complex issues of the book; I hope that it will

stimulate those readers to tackle the whole volume. For those who have already read the book, I trust that these comments shed new light and raise new questions.

The Rock will be a relevant book for years to come. It asks all of us—whatever we believe in—to test and examine the sacred myths that sustain us. It urges us not to leap to judgment about the motivations of those who do not share our beliefs. In its most optimistic moments, it asks us to believe that visions of holiness and beauty might, someday, have the power to reconcile peoples who have grown accustomed to conflict.

Kanan Makiya

No greater compliment can be paid to a writer than to have his work critically examined by such a distinguished group of people. For this very reason also, I must begin with a disclaimer.

I am not a historian, having neither the training nor the temperament of one. Nor are my intentions in this talk, or in the work of historical fiction upon which it is based, *The Rock: A Tale of Seventh Century Jerusalem* (Pantheon, 2001), ones to do with the writing of the actual history of Muslims and Jews in Jerusalem in the seventh century. It is a history that scholars agree reached an important climax in the making of Islam's first monument—the Dome of the Rock—a building whose continuous 14 centuries of existence until this present day is a testament to the universality of its appeal. On the other hand I do like to think that I have stuck closely to the principle that the human significance of a work of historical fiction is greatly enhanced by a close adherence to that history, as far as modern scholarship makes it available to us. In this I take my cue from something Marguerite Yourcenar wrote while reflecting on her own 20 year-old project of fictional reconstruction, *Memoirs of Hadrian*. “Whatever one does, one always rebuilds the monument in his own way. But it is already something gained to have used only the original stones.”

The problem that everyone faces in writing about the Dome of the Rock is that there are not that many stones that are indubitably of or about the formative first century of Islam in which it was built. We know so little. So many sources have been lost. Most of what we do know only began to be written down a century or more after the events they describe. So how can anyone, writer or scholar, go about building his or her monument, his or her own account of how or why this great universal marker of such a deeply contested city was imagined into existence? Fiction, it seemed to me, was a way of stepping into the breach that modern scholarship will perhaps never be able to fill. Not any kind of fiction, but a fiction of assembly. I saw myself in *The Rock* as piecing together a variety of stories culled from the literature of three religious traditions as though I were making a mosaic. You find the piece, smooth and perhaps trim the edges, and then try to fit it into a shape that in all likelihood originates in your own most private fears and desires. The outcome is new, unmistakably so, but new in a way that mimics the assembly of a building to a new plan using the detritus of greatly esteemed predecessors as its raw material. The predecessors, as it so happens in the case of the Dome of the Rock, were all designed to celebrate the same much-revered site.

This way of telling a tale happens, not coincidentally, to correspond to that of the chief protagonist of my book, a learned former Jew from the Yemen, Ka'b al-Ahbar. Ka'b, who may have been an ex-Rabbi, is said to have accompanied the

Muslim Caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab during his conquest of Jerusalem in 638 (give or take a year or two.)

To the best of my knowledge, Jewish and Christian sources tell us nothing about Ka'b. The little that we know comes from Islamic literature in which he occupies a rather shadowy place (highly respected in some and deeply compromised in others.) As far as anyone can judge, Ka'b is the oldest authority among Muslims on Jewish scripture and the source of many of the Muslim traditions on the merits of Jerusalem. It is reasonable to think that he, or someone like him, was the source of much of the "rock lore" around which Islam's first and oldest monument was built.

Ka'b arrived in Medina around the time of the Prophet's death. According to one version of events, he is said to have accepted the prophecy of Muhammad during the Caliphate of Abu Bakr (632-34). According to another it was during the Caliphate of Umar and on the very eve of Umar's conquest of Jerusalem. Mu'awiyya, the founder of the Umayyad Caliphate and a contemporary of Ka'b, is cited by the highly respected compiler of traditions Bukhari as saying "[Ka'b] possessed knowledge like fruit, but we were remiss in relating it from him." Mu'awiyya also said that Ka'b was "the most reliable of those transmitters [of traditions] who relate on the authority of the People of the Book, but in spite of this we used to test him for falsehood."

Notice the circumspection in the second half of the sentence. Was this a later addition to what Mu'awiyya actually said? Or was it present in how Ka'b was viewed by his contemporaries? The sources do not allow for certainty in such matters. The task I set myself was to make allowances for both possibilities while sticking to the "fact" that Mu'awiyya, and after him his protégé Abd al-Malik, the Caliph who actually commissioned the Dome of the Rock, held Ka'b in extremely high regard.

What exactly did this hero of my fictionalized reconstruction do? I imagine him as a *qassas*, or popular storyteller and preacher, a forerunner of the genre of storytelling that later produced such works as *One Thousand and One Nights*. The fortunes of Ka'b's vocation fluctuated over the centuries, combining interpretation of sacred texts, soaring flights of the imagination, and outright charlatanism. That is not to say that Ka'b would not have taken his storytelling as seriously as his listeners, for whom it was a way of dealing with the great metaphysical questions of existence. Ka'b, after all, had the reputation of being a very wise man. But so have many scoundrels in the past.

Ka'b dealt in a genre of stories known as *Isra'iliyat* (Judaica), which eventually fell into disrepute and as frowned upon by Muslim scholars. But Ka'b had been dead for at least a century by the time such distrust became widespread. The *Isra'iliyat* have got to be our first line of enquiry into the question of what the building celebrating the Rock meant to the people who built it. I say this because,

in following in the footsteps of Oleg Grabar's decades of scholarship, I have grounded my story in the "fact" that the Dome had to have been built to celebrate what was perceived at the time to be a Rock laden with Jewish associations. These associations included the belief that the Haram or Temple Mount area was the site of the Temple and the place of Abraham's would-be sacrifice and Adam's creation and death and many other Jewish traditions beside, all dating, I surmise, after the Roman destruction of the Second Temple in 135.

In that spirit I have in *The Rock* imagined my Ka'ab to be a kind of voice of the Rock, cobbling together the Bible, Quranic passages, rabbinical literature, southern Arabian folklore, his personal likes and dislikes, and perhaps, what he felt his audience wanted to hear. I think of the historical Ka'ab as an entertaining rogue, a man with an agenda but also one who liked playing to the gallery. His modus operandi, not his truthfulness, is what makes his contribution to the raucous world of early Islam so invaluable. In its early years, I surmise, Islam needed men like him to flesh out its appeal and ground the prophet's message in a larger cultural frame than that of Bedouin Arabia.

What kind of a Muslim was Ka'ab? We don't really know. He had after all converted on the eve of Umar's departure to Jerusalem and may even have been compelled into doing so by his puritanical and ascetic protector, Umar. He was a very old man when he converted, perhaps in his 70s or 80s, another un-encouraging sign of a genuine conversion.

However we also know that allegiance to Muhammad as God's Messenger was all that conversion to his religion entailed during those years in which Ka'ab became a kind of Muslim. Muslims had only ten years earlier stopped praying towards Jerusalem, which of course they used to do in the early Meccan years of Muhammad's mission. Muhammad's followers are even said to have fasted on the Jewish Day of Atonement in the early years. In fact, following in the argument of Montgomery Watt, you could probably be a Muslim and be a Jew at the same time as long as you accepted that the revelation that had descended upon Muhammad in fact came from God. Muslim sources tell us that in the Prophet's time Jews used to read the Torah in Hebrew and interpret it to his followers in Arabic. A very early Christian church historian, Sozomen, had already observed these deep affinities between the beliefs of the Arabs and the Jews. So the question arises—what was Ka'ab? Was he a Believer in Allah with all that later generations of Muslims read into that statement? Or was he a dissembling Jew, a fraud and an opportunist, as has also been claimed by some Western scholars and modern Islamists alike?

The larger point that I am trying to make is that being a Muslim or a Jew in the 7th century was worlds apart from being one today. Sibling rivalries, which took two hundred years to gel into completely distinct and antagonistic religious identities in the case of Christianity and Judaism, were in a state of flux at the

time of the Muslim conquest of Jerusalem. Furthermore, it is not clear they were really rivalries at all in relation to Jerusalem. We are in a world in which all the roles are reversed, almost perfectly so, from what we would expect them to be looking at the state of Arab-Israeli relations, or Muslim-Jewish relations, today. I said that Ka'ab went to Jerusalem in the company of Umar ibn al-Khattab. The circumstances of that extraordinary visit are worth looking at more closely. Umar went to Jerusalem at the invitation of the Patriarch of the city, a stubborn old Greek born in Damascus. Sophronius was a man who was about to do the hardest thing he had ever been called upon to do in his life—sign a treaty surrendering the seat of his patriarchate and the crown jewel of his entire belief system. And surrender it to whom? An upstart conqueror, a desert chieftain, and a barbarian as Sophronius must have viewed Umar. It is unlikely that Sophronius knew much of anything about Umar or his religion. The Quran had after all not yet even been put together into a book.

To make matters worse, Umar came with a counselor and advisor on the holy sites of Jerusalem who was, in the eyes of his host, Sophronius, a Jew. Regardless of how genuine Ka'ab's conversion to Islam was, or wasn't, in the eyes of Sophronius, he would always be simply a Jew. Let us not forget that Ka'ab's reason for being there, his role as Umar's counselor, and the enormous esteem he clearly commanded among the first generations of Muslims, all must have derived from his Jewish learning, irrespective of what his religion may or may not have been. I surmise such a statement. I do not claim to know it for a fact. That is something a writer of historical fiction can do, which his historian counterpart cannot. In fact, the sources tell us nothing about an encounter between Sophronius and Ka'ab. They talk about Umar and Sophronius's tour of the Holy City, and in a separate fragment from Tabari they tell us what happened when Ka'ab and Umar uncovered the Rock on the Temple Mount. The sources are silent on any meeting between Ka'ab and Sophronius. I made that up, on the grounds of its plausibility, assuming of course that you have accepted everything else I have said.

At the time of this historic encounter between the two leaders of Christendom and Islam, Jewish resonances being very much there in the person of Ka'ab, Palestinian Jewry was in full decline. It had experienced forced conversions and massive persecution in the previous two centuries. These culminated into a Jewish massacre of Christians and a Christian massacre of Jews during the 15-year interlude of Persian rule that started in 615. Persian rule ended under Emperor Heraclius with a pogrom of Jerusalem's Jews. It occurred on the very threshold of Heraclius's own defeat by Umar's Bedouin army. Therefore, it is fair to assume, as I do in my novel, that a man like Sophronius was steeped in the kind of hatred of Jews that was so typical of the time. Moreover, we happen to know, from his own words, that Sophronius blamed the Jews for the Persian sacking of

the city. Sophronius, in short, would not have taken kindly to the presence of Ka'ab al-Ahbar at the moment of his greatest humiliation and capitulation.

Why, one might legitimately ask, was he even there? Why was he presiding over a meeting in which a thoroughly Christianized Jerusalem was about to be handed over to a new Abrahamic faith, one that in those days ardently sought after Jewish lore and scriptural interpretations? After all, the sources tell us that the Byzantine army had been routed on the banks of the Yarmuk River a year or two earlier. The garrison of defenders left in Jerusalem had long since fled. Sophronius's cowardly commander was hiding out in Alexandria. Jerusalem, the crown jewel of seventh century Christendom, was an island in a sea of enemies, the last city in the Fertile Crescent to fall to the Muslim armies. So, what on earth was Sophronius doing there, dressed as the Muslim sources claim in long silken robes with golden chains trailing after him?

He was there, I surmise, because the places of Jesus' life, suffering, death, burial, and resurrection were more important to him than life itself. We can tell that much about the man from his writings. At the heart of the Christian story, since Constantine and until the end of the Crusades, there was a place, and that place was Jerusalem. On the strength of his feelings for that place, Sophronius had the gall to write to Umar in Medina and offer him a peaceful transfer of sovereignty in Jerusalem. But, it was only on condition that he come in person all the way from Medina to receive the keys of the city from himself. He did this knowing that the battle had already been lost from the strictly military point of view. Still, he hoped to use the force of his personality, and all the pomp and circumstance of Byzantine art and architecture, to wrest from his adversary some measure of protection for those churches and places that meant so much to him as a Christian. And, to an extent, the strategy worked. The Caliph Umar was of course not won over to Christianity, but he did end up granting the wily Sophronius pretty much everything he asked for.

Yet, there is a twist to the way this story ends, a twist arising from Sophronius's ignorance of a man like Umar, and a twist that is going to end up having the greatest implication for the later project of the Dome of the Rock.

Muslim and Christian sources, while differing greatly in matters of tone and attribution of intent to the other, were agreed on two things that came out of this historic encounter between Umar and Sophronius. First, they agreed that Sophronius took Umar—I surmise in the company of Ka'ab—on a tour of the Holy City. They also agreed that Umar, who visited many fine churches including the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, really was interested in only one site. That site was the Temple Mount.

At the time of the Muslim conquest the Temple Mount was, according to Muslim sources, quite literally the city dump. The Christian Holy City that the Empress Helena had forged into existence in the fourth century daily emptied its

bowels onto the holiest site of Judaism. Whether this was deliberate or not is a matter of some debate. However, there is no disputing the fact that Muslim historians in the Classical period believed that it was deliberate.

The account that I have stuck closely to in spirit, but by no means in every detail, is by Jamal al-Din Ahmad, fourteenth century author of *Muthir al-Gharam* (The Book of Inciting Desire to Visit the Holy City.)

The story of what happened on the Temple Mount is the stuff of myth and legend. Although I won't discuss it here, I would like to draw attention to the first Muslim act concerning the city they now ruled, and towards which they used to pray only 13 years earlier. It was the cleaning of the Temple Mount and the exposure of the Rock that today lies graced by the Dome of the Rock.

I return to the question of why was this first great Muslim work of art and architecture built, a building that looks today more or less what it looked like in the seventh century? The evidence suggests it was not built for the reason Muslims today believe it was built, namely to commemorate a story concerning the Prophet, one that has him ascending to heaven by way of the Rock. The evidence instead suggests it was built to celebrate and revere a Jewish rock, the last remaining vestige of the long gone Temple of the Jews, a relic that Jewish sages since the second century had vested with such importance they called it *Even Shetiyah*, the Rock of Foundation, the navel of the universe, the site of Abraham's sacrifice, and many other things besides. There is good reason to think that because of men like Ka'b, the voice of the Rock in my book, many or some of these associations had to have been on Muslim minds when the Dome of the Rock was constructed. But it is also true to say we don't have any way of knowing which of the many Jewish associations that the Rock had in the seventh century most appealed to the Muslims of the 7th century.

Whatever those Jewish associations were in the seventh century—and scholars have debated the likelihood of this one versus that—there is no doubt whatsoever that none of those associations are on Muslim minds today. Both Muslims and Jews have forgotten, or deliberately erased from their traditions, all memory of these early beginnings. You will not find Ka'b mentioned in a Jewish source. He was, after all, an apostate, a renegade from the faith.

On the Muslim side, the contributions of marginals like Ka'b and others have gone unappreciated especially in the twentieth century. In 1946 an article was published entitled, "Ka'b al-Ahbar, the First Zionist." The author, a disciple of the Islamo-Arabist leader Rashid Rida, set out to prove that Ka'b, the oldest authority among Muslims on Jewish scripture, had been involved in a conspiracy to murder his friend and patron the Caliph Umar. Muslim religious scholars in Egypt criticized the article. However, it is suggestive of the new wounded and defensive mindset that has surfaced with a vengeance on both sides since the creation of the state of Israel and the escalation of the Arab-Israeli conflict. A

historical character like Ka' b al-Ahbar goes unappreciated by Muslims today, in part out of a fear that acknowledging his contribution might undermine the authenticity of the Muslim claim to Jerusalem. I believe the precise opposite is the case, but that is another subject. The consequences of this most recently have been Palestinian denial that there ever was a Jewish Temple on the Haram platform. In the summer of 2000, during the latest phase of the Clinton-led negotiations, a senior Palestinian negotiator was led to ask his Israeli counterpart: "How do you know that your Holy Temple was located there [on the Haram]?" Not only are such fears belied by the whole pre-modern corpus of Muslim tradition; I submit they make total nonsense of it.

In order not to end on such a depressing note, I am going to "escape" with you into a different "ending" by way of citing an extract from *The Rock*. I do so not as a way of suggesting that history can be used to "imagine" or "foresee" a happy resolution of the abysmal state of Arab-Israeli relations today. That would be an exercise in futility when looking at the scale of the tragedy that is in the making in the Middle East today. Optimism is unimaginable in the context of what is going on today. But it is one of the ironies of Jerusalem, a city richly endowed with them, that the very lightning rod for complete and total disaster may well be the Dome of the Rock, a Muslim monument, built by Christian craftsmen, to celebrate a Jewish Rock.

The passages I have chosen to read are by the narrator of my story, Ishaq the son of Ka' b, whom I imagine to be the architect of the Dome. Ka' b may have been responsible for the lore surrounding the Rock, but he had been dead for 30 years when Abd al-Malik conceived the idea of his Dome. Fortunately for me, there is nothing in the sources about Ishaq—other than a reference to Ka' b as Abu Ishaq—and so I had a more or less free hand in creating this character. The passages I am about to read come from a chapter entitled, 'The Importance of Eight.' They describe Ishaq's moment of epiphany when he comes up with the right shape for the design of the building that Abd al-Malik wants built.

I consulted Nicholas, a Greek master builder responsible for many of the finest churches in Syria. Knowing that the secrets of his trade were handed down from father to son, and could only be imparted under the strictest of vows and never to a man of alien faith, he refused to talk to me about his craft at first, fearing both the admonition of his Church and the ire of his family. By appealing to our years of friendship ... and the pride he took in his considerable skills, I eventually won Nicholas over, and enticed him into a conversation on the setting out of domes.

"Give me a point, and a square," he said after crossing himself repeatedly to ward off the possibility that he might be committing a grave sin, "and I can erect any dome you want."

The point sat at the center of the square, where its two diagonals

intersected. From the same intersection, another square could be drawn at right angles to the first. Thus were created eight equidistant points.

“Now think of these as describing the circumference of a circle. That is the drum of your Dome, and that is how I would mark it out with pegs on the ground.”

I took to playing with this geometry, using a stick in the sand—as I often did when deciding upon a frame for chapters of the Holy Book ... [Ishaq is a bookbinder by profession].

In so tracing lines on a prepared patch of fine sand, I stumbled upon a remarkable consequence of Nicholas' rules. By taking the original superimposed set of squares, and extending all eight of their sides, a new set of intersections was harmoniously generated. I had made a new octagon, bigger than the first, but as perfectly derived from its archetype as the ripples made by a stone thrown into the stillness of a pond.

Extending the sides of the octagon ... generated yet another pair of superimposed squares, larger than their predecessors. One could go on and on I realized. The pattern emerging was like a living crystal, infinitely extendable around a point of origin and always with perfect symmetry in every direction. Connecting the outer eight points gave me ... closure, a boundary wall enveloping two interior ambulatories, which, in turn, enclosed a circle out of which was going to rise the highest and most splendid Dome imaginable. There before my eyes in the sand was what I had been looking for—a graded passage from this world to the next by way of the Rock.

Eight is the number of Paradise just as surely as Arabic is its language. God provided His creatures with eight paradises and only seven hells, Ka' b used to say.

“Why the difference,” I asked?

“Because His mercy is greater than His wrath. Is not the covenant between a newborn and his Maker made on the eighth day, the day his foreskin is cut? And did not the Prophet say that the Garden of Refuge for the Companions of the Right, virtue's ultimate reward, is the eighth level of Paradise?”

Four rivers--of water unstalling, of milk uncurdling, of honey purified, and of wine delightful--irrigate this highest level. The Garden is near the Lote-Tree of the Boundary under the Throne of God, itself carried by eight angels, all hovering in the heavens directly above the Rock. Fountains gush everywhere. Shade trees, date palms, pomegranate trees, and other fruit trees abound. The air is redolent of musk, camphor, and ginger. In such a place the God-fearing shall dwell in the presence of their King Omnipotent, and find out that all that their Lord had promised them was true.

Believers know these things because they are written. But not all of them know about the importance of eight. A bare handful realize that all the Peoples of

the Book are folded under that number's divine wings.

Christians say that Jesus rose to heaven on the eighth day of the Passion. The pool in which they circumcise the hearts of their children is shaped like an octagon. Baptism, as they call it, makes the newborn a companion of Jesus on the Day of Resurrection. My Dome was in the shape of this number of the afterlife. The thought of it brought tears to my eyes.

In the course of a lifetime, a man is lucky to be granted two, three at most, insights into what is unmistakably right. Normally, the brain contents itself with shuffling around the dead facts of experience, trying this and then that, invariably settling on a compromise of sorts. But in the rare event of such an insight, the veils are stripped of life's clutter to reveal the bright forehead of exactitude. The soul has grasped a living truth! The Beautiful, a deeply overpowering sensation that fills the soul with the warmth of Rightness, is revealed.

What is Rightness if not also Truth and Justice? My commission was one of immortalizing in stone the Truth and the Justice of my father's Rock. Nothing about it was contingent. Like a harmonious chord, the building had materialized in my mind as an emanation of cosmic laws. The architecture was rhythmical and sequenced as it should be; it rejected the confusion of the superficial. Even the circumference of the Dome fell into place by itself, as it were, according to a definite proportion and in perfect harmony with every other dimension, as did the locations of the piers and columns that fell naturally on the points of intersection of my lines. I did not choose those points; they made themselves known to me. Nor did they conceal one another in the plan, but rather permitted, from any point in the interior, a view all the way across to the other side. Transparency, as all men know, is the rule in Paradise.

Can rotating a square around a point accomplish all this? Can it determine the appropriate correlation between His ineffable nature and Architecture? To find forms properly grounded in scripture and the stories of the Prophets from so few rules is more reminiscent of Him than months, even years, of knowing Him through words alone. And all of it happened while I was playing like a child in the sand. When His Design was traced out with my stick, I was blessed with a glimpse into the dawn of what was to come. I knew then that finally I had awakened from the dream of this life to the reality of the next.

Oleg Grabar

The task that was given to me is very difficult. You don't read the *Three Musketeers* in order to learn French history in the seventeenth century. You don't try to understand Michelangelo by thinking of Charlton Heston or Van Gogh by thinking of Kirk Douglas. They played those roles. The genre of fiction, even when dealing with history, serves a different function than history. Then why should I, the historian, read Kanan Makiya's book to understand, or to feel, Jerusalem and what I now prefer to call western Asia?

There are two reasons why one should do that. One is that there is no alternative to fiction. Sources do not provide a coherent account that is organized in the way in which we ask questions today. Many of the so-called sources are much later than the events they describe. The main sources quoted by Makiya were from the fourteenth century, which is many centuries after anything was done that he dealt with. Almost all of these sources were affected by hagiography and religious and secular ideologies. In other words, when one deals with the past, we are colored by what we are today. And the novelist is much more colored than the historian, who has not always learned to separate today from the past. However, we can't all do that and so fiction is a useful thing to fill the gaps between the little bits that sources give us.

The other reason is that the main subject that the book deals with—the Dome of the Rock—on the Haram al-Sharif, occupying one-fifth of the Old City of Jerusalem—is an extraordinary work of architectural art, for which we have no explanation. It is a unique and extraordinary work (as pointed out by Palestinian stamps and Israeli postage). You cannot go to Jerusalem without seeing the Dome of the Rock. You don't have to visit it, but it is there and you can't do without it. Not only is it an extraordinary work of art in its own right, but there is no parallel to it anywhere. I'm talking about the purely visual, physical, aesthetic impression and not about any meaning attached to it. Therefore, to provide an explanation requires bringing to that space something else, something that the existing sources do not give. This something else is imagination. The question then becomes, does this book provide a reasonable explanation of the circumstances in which the Dome of the Rock was built?

I would like to pick on two events, which occupy much of the book and are certainly very important in the history of Jerusalem at that time, and in some ways, are important today. The first, is the taking of the city in roughly 637. I say roughly, because we don't know the exact year that the Muslims took over the city of Jerusalem. If we don't know when it happened, how do we know what happened? Since the sources don't tell you what happened, it is particularly tricky. There is no contemporary eyewitness. Even if there was we have learned sufficiently from reading newspapers that eyewitness accounts are often incorrect.

Therefore, another logic has to be applied. This is where the novel comes in. Kanan introduces a logic, and we just have to find out if it is reasonable.

Is the account given by Makiya a reasonable one, even if it is fictional? First, let me tell you the things that are not reasonable in this account. It is certainly inaccurate in describing the numbers of people involved in the so-called conquest. Can you call it a conquest, when there was no fight? It was a take-over, the take-over of Jerusalem. The image of masses of people touring the city of Jerusalem is a beautiful picture and would make a wonderful movie, but I am sure that it did not take place. There were only a small number of people and there was practically no military involved.

I am particularly skeptical that Umar was even there, though I am in the minority of scholars on this point. Sophronius led Umar through a visit of the city in a very different, private operation. We have these accounts from Muslim but not Christian sources. I have doubts as to whether this patriarch [Sophronius] would have led this barbarian [Umar] through the city. Although it is possible that he was trying to make a deal, it is still an exaggerated image of an event. Something took place, but it is exaggerated in the way it is put together.

The other, more significant error is the importance of Jews at that time. Unfortunately, this is one of those instances where Makiya's account reflects contemporary issues, rather than issues of the time. The importance of Jews was secondary at that time. It was a Christian city inhabited by mostly Christians; the Byzantine Empire was the main concern of the Muslims, not a group of Jews. The relationship to Christianity was the key to the Muslim involvement in Jerusalem. This is demonstrated by the fact that the Arabic inscription in the Dome of the Rock contains most of the Christology of the Quran. It relates practically every passage except the one dealing with Christ and Mary. The public for whom these inscriptions were created were either Christians themselves or Muslims needing to know how to talk to Christians. Jews and the Jewish past were used in order to mask the real conflict, the conflict between Christianity and the new Muslim world.

Changes in the twentieth century, unfortunately, have affected the scholarship dealing with the past. Therefore, Christian-Muslim problems, have become Jewish-Muslim problems. I think that the image proposed by the book is historically debatable. *The Rock* is much more creative in establishing a relationship between Umar and Ka'b. Although it does make some sense, I don't know whether the relationship was as close as is implied. Certainly, the conversion of Ka'b is an important part in his bringing the Jewish traditions into Islam. While politically it was the Christian world that counted, ideologically, Makiya's account does seem to fit with some aspect of what is known as "Hagarism"—to see Islam as a Jewish heresy. Most scholars have not accepted

the theory of Hagarism but I now think there is a bit more evidence supporting parts of it.

The image of Ka'ab torn between his past as a Jew and his present as a Muslim is twentieth century fiction. The easiest thing to compare it to is Saint Paul, who lived six hundred years earlier. Saint Paul was a Jew who used to prosecute all Christians. Then he converted to Christianity and started prosecuting Jews. He didn't turn back and say "I'm sorry" or "I was wrong." In other words, converts, unless their conversion was fake, are usually more catholic than the Pope and tend to be more on the side of the new world they have joined instead of on the previous one. I would prefer to see Ka'ab that way, but I may be wrong and Makiya may be right on that particular point.

Thus, my first point is that the very early period, the taking over of Jerusalem, was made more dramatic in the book than as it really occurred. Also I see the relationship between Ka'ab and Umar, where Christianity is missing, slightly differently.

The second reason for reading the book is the planning of the Dome of the Rock. Makiya provides a striking image—a combination of the political vision of a Caliph, the holy places of Ishaq's and Ka'ab's Jerusalem, and the talents of a designer—which he describes in a very beautiful passage on the octagon. The only problem is that there were about 25 octagonal churches that existed before the Dome. An octagonal plan is a very common Christian feature, part of the vocabulary of the architecture of Christianity in the Mediterranean. Therefore, the designer did not have to have visions to invent an octagonal plan. However, the Dome of the Rock does have one particularity, which fits with Makiya's interpretation. I will come back to that.

Regarding the committee meetings in which Abd al-Malik and his consultants create the Dome of the Rock, I could very well imagine Abd al-Malik as a big CEO who gathers a collection of consultants in technical fields. He brings them around him and says "I want to build this building for a variety of reasons—you help me do it." It is only through this unusual combination of consultants that one can explain the combinations in the Dome of the Rock, of the pure geometry in plan and decoration with a stunning color. The Dome of the Rock has the largest surface of mosaic work done before San Marco in Venice. In no place, until San Marco, was there such a large amount of mosaic work as there is on the walls of the Dome of the Rock. I think they may have a little bit or almost the same amount in Monreale in Sicily, but you had to wait until several centuries later. Also, there is writing of highly thought-out excerpts from the Quran and the locations, correctly identified at that time, connected with eschatology.

I'm much less sure about the identification of the remains of the Temple that existed earlier. I'm not sure it existed at that time. Descriptions of the

Temple, from Herodian time, do not mention the Rock, which is rather strange. At that time Jerusalem was essentially the place of the last judgment for Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The last judgment is where time will come to an end, God will reappear on earth and set peace in the world.

What is remarkable is how the building works and operates. While it's true that there were octagonal buildings in Christianity prior to the Dome of the Rock, the extraordinary thing about this one is the purity of its geometry. All Christian buildings had an entrance and an apse but in this one, you don't know which of the four doors is the entrance. It is an absolutely perfect octagon.

The cynical explanation for that was offered to me by one of my colleagues at Harvard. He said that when architects don't understand what a patron wants, they make it geometric. Then, at least, the building will stand up and they won't get their heads chopped off for having a building that falls down. Therefore, according to him, the Dome of the Rock is perfect because nobody understood what the patrons wanted. The Christian architect didn't know what was wanted. So, he made it in perfect geometric form, covered with color because somebody described Mecca and the Q'aba as covered with colorful cloths. Although his explanation is good in theory, I don't think it worked that way.

However, it does have one important consequence. The important consequence is that a willed decision in 691 was not a willed decision to make something beautiful. This is not the way seventh-century artists and artisans thought. They made practical things. The accident of the Dome of the Rock was that it was made so extraordinarily beautiful. That accident saved the building because of the impact it makes visually. Everybody has repaired it. The crusaders, who were great destroyers of things, saved it because they thought it was Solomon's.

Eugene Goodheart

I read Kanan Makiya's *The Rock* as a secular Jew with no investment in any of the great religions that are its subjects. As a professor of the humanities, I have taught selections in translation from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament as literature, not as sacred scripture. I have a fascination for certain stories in the Bible, in particular the story of Abraham's intended sacrifice of Isaac, which is here retold. I am fascinated by the challenge it offers to the religious imagination. How is it possible to justify a God who demands that his servant sacrifice his son, and how can one justify a man who is prepared to do so? The answer requires extraordinary spiritual ingenuity. Is it fortuitous that the narrator of *The Rock* is named Ishaq, the Arabic version of Isaac?

I am also a literary critic. And one of the concerns of literary criticism is the matter of genre. *The Rock* cannot be easily classified. The subtitle is "A Tale of Seventh-Century Jerusalem." It does not present itself as a novel, though the blurb speaks of it as "a narrative of novelistic depth." In an historical note at the end of the narrative, Makiya says that he has "not allowed [himself] the liberty of changing the original sources from which the pieces were taken" except for "changes in language, continuity and the modification of detail." He has remained faithful to his sources, which are meticulously provided for every chapter at the end of the book. Too faithful I would say for it to be called an historical novel in which the novelist usually takes liberties not allowed the historian. The reader may wonder (as I did for a while) why Makiya didn't simply present his narrative as history. He is faithful to his sources, but "the outcome is unmistakably fiction, mimicking the assembly of a building to a new plan, using the detritus of greatly esteemed predecessors as its raw material predecessors that were designed to celebrate the much revered site." (278)

The metaphor of the building is what one might expect from Makiya, an architect, who has an architectonic sense of the composition of the book. It also reminds us of the splendid passages, which describe the architecture of Jerusalem and in particular the Dome of the Rock. I don't see, however, that assembling a building to a new plan distinguishes the making of fiction from the making of history. Historians also assemble their sources to plans that differ from the plans of other historians.

What makes the difference is Makiya's choice of a character to narrate the story. Unlike the historian who aims for an objective narration of events (whether he can achieve it is another matter), Makiya entrusts his story to a participant in the events (Ishaq becomes the architect of the Dome of the Rock) who by virtue of his participation cannot claim objectivity. In the historical note at the end of the narrative, Makiya focuses on Ishaq's father, Ka'b, a convert to Islam and the

source of the stories his son recounts. It would have been interesting to learn more about the historical Ishaq himself, who survives his father and narrates events from his own experience. Makiya tells us, however, that there is no historical information about Ishaq. Could it be that Ishaq is Makiya in disguise? In any event what Makiya has to say about Ka'b is very much in the spirit of the writing of fiction. Ka'b does not have a reputation as a reliable truth-teller. What attracted him to Makiya is his *modus operandi*, his imaginative relationship to the truth. Makiya writes: "I think of the historical Ka'b as an entertaining rogue, a man with an agenda but also who liked playing to the gallery." (28) And he adds: "The most delightful thing about Ka'b from my point of view is that in telling stories about the summit of Mount Moriah he did not favor one source or religious tradition over another. Like Ka'b, I ardently hope my readers have a difficult time discerning whether a given tale in this book is Jewish, Muslim, or Christian in origin." No character, Christian, Jew or Muslim, not even the narrator, the son of a Jewish convert to Islam, can be said to possess the Truth. The quarrels that arise between Christian and Muslim, Muslim and Jew, Christian and Jew are never resolved, as they would be by the particular interpretation that the historian provides. Fiction is the medium that allows for a multiplicity of perspectives, a contestation of views, and a freedom that allows characters to speak their minds and act out their convictions without the intrusion of an objective narrator who presumes to tell us where the truth lies.

Fiction, I would argue, is antithetical to dogma. This opposition plays itself out in one of the major themes of the book: the theme of naming. Early in *The Rock*, Ishaq and his father engage in a dialogue about the relationship between a name and the thing it names. Ka'b insists that the name is the thing it names, its very essence. So he refuses to call the Rock by anything other than its oldest name, The Rock of Foundation. Ishaq, who is still a child and a student, notes that the Rock has been given other names: Precious Stone, Rock of Atonement, Adam's Sepulchre, Navel of the Universe, Stone of Stumbling, Rock of Fear and Trembling, and so on. (15) When Ka'b asks his son to say whether he believes that the Rock is one thing or many things at once, Ishaq says he is uncertain. He may be uncertain because he is too young to know, or perhaps because he is too wise to be dogmatic in his answer. Ka'b, who conflates name and thing, is here a dogmatist. Elsewhere, however, Ka'b takes the opposite line when he resists the idea that God can be reduced to his aspects and attribute. He is more than his 99 names; the view that all names are provisional or partial (reflecting perhaps aspects of things and not their totality) is the anti-dogmatic view. And the difference between the views is momentous. It can become the difference between tyranny and freedom and the difference between war and peace. In naming a thing (a rock or a building or a piece of land), the Jew or Christian or Muslim takes possession of it. If he believes that the name that he

gives the land is final and irrevocable, it remains forever his. No change or accommodation or compromise is possible. On the other hand, if names are provisional so is possession. In the middle ages the doctrine that the name was the essence of a thing was called realism (a doctrine quite different from modern realism), which in the religious sphere promotes dogmatism and in the political, imperialism. (A side reflection: in giving Adam the privilege of naming the rest of creation, God conferred upon Adam power over creation.)

There is a connection between naming and another theme in the book, idolatry. Idolatry is anathema to the monotheism of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Ka'b cautions his son against excessive enthusiasm for the Temple. "Idolatry run amok," he calls it, though Ishaq remarks to the reader (not to him) that his father forgets his own idolatrous passion for the Rock.(121) What is idolatry? The dictionary defines it as the worship of idols or images, the immoderate attachment to or veneration for any person or thing. An insufficient definition, for it doesn't say what makes for immoderation. Idolatry, from the point of view of the great religions, is a diversion from the true object of veneration, the invisible transcendent Deity. If we admire the lines of the Temple or the strength or power of the Rock or the beauty of the desert, our admiration must not be an end in itself, we must be led through the material object and beyond to a contemplation of the divine. To be arrested by the material is paganism. Idolatry may be self-worship when its object is what the idolater has created, for instance, a temple. Idolatry is a temptation because it is difficult for the human mind to attach itself to what is transcendent and invisible. Our minds and spirits are nourished by the objects and images of the natural and man-made world.

What then is the connection between idolatry and naming? The realist who declares that the name is the essence of a thing is in a sense an idolater, for he has conferred upon a material object (a rock or a temple, for example) an excessive significance of his own making. He has transformed a thing into a sign and reified it. Even the landscape is not allowed to have a life of its own that is independent of the human possession of it. Consider, for instance, this description of the desert in *The Rock*:

Those who know what a great seducer the desert is understand how the faith of its sons gets tested daily simply by their being condemned to live in it. Amid sands and dunes that shift and undulate like loose women, rocks stand out, omnipotent and steadfast, commanders of presence, demarcators of boundaries, bearers of witness visible presences in place of invisible ones, the known in place of the unknown and the unknowable. And when such signs of God's work cannot be found because the terrain is

too flat, too muddy, too monotonous and unresistant, they have to be made up. A building then takes the place of a mountain.

The nominalist for whom all names are provisional or partial descriptions makes no such presumption. Unlike the realist, he allows the object to have an unmastered life of its own. There is a moment in the book when Sophronius, a Christian, Umar, a Muslim, and Ka'ab, a Jew, albeit a convert to Islam, enter the ruins of the Old Temple, David's sanctuary. Makiya writes through his narrator:

[Ka'ab] removed his sandals, a custom of both the followers of Muhammad and Moses, signifying that they make no claim to the hallowed ground upon which they were about to walk. This occurs at a moment when by dint of sheer necessity a bond was achieved between [sic] the three men inside the tunnel that held the forces of competition, prejudice, and hatred in abeyance for a while.

The Rock treats a period of intense religious conflict in particular between an emergent Islam and a beleaguered Christianity. Judaism, in the form of Ka'ab, is both participant and witness. In reading a book about the seventh century that is at once history and fiction, the reader inevitably speculates about its contemporary relevance. It seems to me that the narrative tries to find within the turmoil of religious and national conflict moments when "the forces of competition, prejudice and hatred are in abeyance," when, that is, the sacred is conceived as a presence beyond the exclusive possession of any community or communion. The competition of religion is all about the making of rival claims to hallowed ground; the very act of naming and of signifying implies mastery and possession. Or the competition may be in rival claims about what constitutes hallowed ground. Ka'ab's rock has to contend with increasing passion of others for a different rock. Religion is at its best in its respect for the unknown, its resistance to the naming and the possession of it. Do I need to say more about *The Rock's* contemporary relevance to our time? And I have in mind not only events in the Middle East.

Fiction has the virtue of not presuming to be the exclusive truth about the reality it depicts. It is a medium that allows various stories to be told about the same events, and as I have already remarked, it encourages a diversity of points of view. It cannot, however, avoid the temptations of idolatry. What is idolatry in religion is symbolism and metaphor in fiction—significant, but always provisional in its truth claims. *The Rock* shares the idolater's passion for the Rock and the Temple. Without that passion we would not have the beauty of this work.

Zvi Ben-Dor

In his commentary to the first verse in the famous Mishnaic chapter Perek Helek, which discusses the categories of those Jews who shall not inherit the World to Come (*'Olam Haba*), Maimonides discusses the prohibition on reading “Pseudepigraphal or external books” (*sefarim hitsonim*). The original passage talks about three types of Jews, all of them, in effect, heretics: he who says that there is resurrection of the dead; he who says that Torah was not handed down from Heaven; and *Apikoros* (here meaning ‘heretic’). Rabbi ‘Akiva makes an addition to the list: “even he who reads the *sefarim hitsonim*.” Curiously, Maimonides, himself a very active reader of scientific and philosophical texts written by Jews and Gentiles, expands upon Rabbi ‘Akiva’s words and discusses at great length the definition of these books. This term, says Maimonides, specifically refers to “books found among the Arabs which tell the historical events and biographies of the kings or [the] books of songs, the genealogies of the Arabs and similar works.” Such books, Maimonides tells us, “neither have wisdom or yield profit for the body, but are merely a waste of time.”¹ Maimonides probably refers to the Arab tales of the pre-Muhammedan times known as *ayam al-‘Arab* (days of the Arabs), and also to the tales of Muslim history and triumphs after Muhammad.

Although Maimonides does not specifically direct his words to Jews living in Arab lands, we can assume that they were, indeed, his target audience. He wrote his commentary in Arabic and made specific references to Arab/Muslim history. And indeed, at that point in time—the 12th century—the Arabs with their conquests, kingdoms, and empires were definitely seen as the most active factor in history. In this regard, Maimonides’ warning to the Jews could be read this way: do not expose yourself to Arab history and do not let yourself be seduced by the books that tell the story of Arab and Muslim triumph and glory. Stay where you are—outside history, at least, outside the immediate history that surrounds you.

In this stance, Maimonides echoes a traditional Jewish position: with the exile and destruction of the Jewish polity and temple, the Jews had somehow been thrust outside of history, and would return to it only with the coming of the Messiah, which, as Maimonides repeatedly tells us, is not a miraculous event but rather a political event embedded in history.

Perhaps when Maimonides was sounding this admonition he had in mind the historical example of Ka‘b al-Ahbar, a Yemeni Jew who in the seventh-century joined Muhammad’s camp.

¹ Mishna with Perush Harambam (Sanhedrin, 10-1). Translation from the Arabic original is Rabbi Yosef Kafeh’s with my minor emendations.

Joining the prophet Muhammad's camp meant eventually also converting to Islam, becoming an Arab and a Muslim. Then, this was not a matter of simple conversion—Ka'b's move was one that brought him into a new and triumphant, social and cultural and, above all, historical sphere.

In his new Islamic context, Ka'b plays an interesting role. Kanan Makiya tells us that he was not only an important source of some stories and *Hadith* about the prophet but also that Ka'b recounts to the Arabs the glories of the Jewish kings—David and Solomon. In a way, Ka'b defies the Maimonidean interdiction in every possible regard. He not only reads the days of the Arabs (*ayam al-'Arab*), but also generates new stories. In addition to that, he takes Jewish tales and stories—*ayam al-Yahud*, if you will—and makes them part of Muslim history. Ka'b does so, explains Makiya, using beautiful Arab prose, like a true *qassas*—or Arab storyteller.

Ka'b, then, utterly rejects his status as a Jew outside history. In becoming a Muslim, he re-enters history—and in bringing Jewish tales of greatness to the Muslims, he brings the Jewish past into history, as well—albeit as a part of a history that is not exclusively Jewish.

Yemeni Jews, Ka'b's ancestors, exiled during the first temple period, had been given a special break by history. Unlike other Jews, they continued to be players in history and in Yemen, where there was a series of Jewish kings, they became over the course of time, as Makiya writes, “the most Jewish and the most Arab of all Jews.” But they themselves eventually were exiled from history with the defeat of the last Jewish king of Yemen, Yusef Dhunwas, in the late sixth century.

Ka'b's journey to Muhammad's camp begins with that moment of defeat—with the final Jewish exile. Makiya writes of Ka'b, who “despised the state of weakness that the Jews had fallen into after the vanishing of Dhunwas.” Most critically, this final exile from history was in Ka'b's memory made all the more bitter by the fact that shortly after it a “madman” promising miraculous redemption was exposed as a false messiah. It is at this point that Ka'b begins to be interested in Muhammad. Not a false Messiah promising redemption, but a real prophet promising historical victory and triumph.

Ka'b's “conversion,” then, is best understood not as being one of Jew to Arab, or even of Jew to Muslim—it is, most potently, a conversion into history. Makiya tells of Ka'b's Muslim contemporaries, who suspected that his commitment to Islam was not driven by sincere faith, but by opportunism – that Ka'b was using them to get to Jerusalem. I think that these accusers were both right and wrong. Did Ka'b really abandon his old faith, his old name? He was born Ya'akub (Ya'acov), and his new name, Ka'b, comes from the same root as the word *akev*—ankle. Ya'acov, for whom Ya'akub/Ka'b was named, came out of the womb holding his brother by the ankle. In addition, Ka'b/Y'akub's

nickname, al-Ahbar, is ambivalent. It means “*haver*”—in the yeshiva world the term used for “associate”—someone who was a full member of the *beit midrash*, the yeshiva. Does his appellation “associate” refer to his connection to the Muslims, or to his fellow scholars in the yeshiva? Both of his names, in both their Hebrew and their Arabic renditions, have specific and potent meanings.

Furthermore, Ka‘b trembles and shakes in Jerusalem when he sees the Rock and bows to it. So perhaps Ka‘b never did abandon his old faith. But those who suspect the sincerity of Ka‘b’s conversion are also wrong in several important ways. He is a true Muslim in the sense that he wants the Muslim Arabs to share fully his desires and feelings about the Rock, and make them a central feature of their own faith. His desire to share these sentiments with his Muslim friends is not a desire to Judaize his friends as much as it is a desire to Islamize the Rock itself. Or, more accurately if more clumsily—to “Rockify” the Muslims. So Ka‘b did convert, but to a special Islam. It was an Islam that in his eyes is nothing short of a triumphant Judaism—leading all the way to Jerusalem, all the way to its core, the Rock.

This brings us, Makiya’s readers, to *The Rock*. Ka‘b’s vision of the Rock is a unifying vision. It seeks to create a common ground between Jews and Arabs through a vision—which both are to share—of the Rock’s significance. And indeed, one of the more interesting midrashim about the Rock, says: “What is the Rock? It is the Rock of Foundation (*even hashtiya she mimena hishtat haolam*)—the Rock upon which the world was founded.” The midrash continues, “. . .this Rock of Foundation is the navel of the world.” Most interpretations take this stance—that the Rock is the navel of the world – to mean that it is the world’s center.² But a few other midrashim take the term navel in a more literal sense. The sages say that just as the baby begins to develop in the womb from the navel, so too does the world begin to develop from the Rock. One can feel here the truly peaceful image of the world as fetus, here developing in a cosmic womb. The Rock here, then, is the connection—the *umbilicus*, the umbilical cord—between the world and the divine cosmos that has given it life. By hanging onto the Rock, the world in its entirety is remembered in this peaceful stage of embryonic existence—a stage before human divisions were created, and even before history itself came to be. This is a moment that marks the prelude to history but is not itself a part of it. Paradoxically, when Ka‘b leads Arab and Jewish history back to the Rock, he seeks a return to a peaceful pre-prehistoric stage, one untrammelled by the disappointments of history which Ka‘b himself has experienced so acutely.

² See Pirkei Derabi Eliezer 9; see also Ramban’s commentary on Bereshit 1, 28. See also Midrash Shimon Ben-Yohai, 10, in *Otsar Hamidrashim*, which is in fact a Jewish chronicle of the building of the Dome of the Rock by the Caliph Marwan.

Another midrash tells us about Jonah, the Jewish prophet who was sent to warn the non-Jewish people of Nineveh about their coming destruction. While Jonah was in the belly of the big fish, the fish, according to this midrash, took him swimming to a space beneath the temple of God. There Jonah sees the Rock and the midrash tells us that it is “fixed in the voids” (*kevu‘a batehomot*).³ The term *tehomot* refers to the great void (*tehom*) which existed before the creation of time and space, our time and space, to be sure. And thus, fixed in the voids the Rock is at once part of our world and also part of the eternity, which was before the creation, before humanity, before Jews and Arabs. The Rock, then, is not only a place; it is mostly a condition.

The midrash on Jonah tells us that at this unique site—which is not a site at all—all prayers are always answered. So Jonah prays to God to be released from the big fish’s belly, and the prayer is granted and the big fish throws him up to dry land, onto the Rock. Here again we see a unifying message of peace. Jonah goes to Nineveh, makes his prophecies to the gentiles, warns of their impending destruction, and witnesses God’s motherly love for all his children when God refuses ultimately to destroy them. God in the book of Jonah cares about the Jews and the gentiles alike.

The sages of the midrash felt the need to link the biblical story of Jonah to the Rock. In its explicit message of God’s care for all the world’s people, they saw a link to the place in which all the world was most protected—the womb in which it first grew.

This is the message, too, of Ka‘b’s Rock, and of Makiya’s Ka‘b. The Rock of Foundation is a place that brings peace, and that gives us resonance of a quiet, peaceful moment in the world’s development. As Makiya concludes his book, the Rock, first and foremost, is God’s Rock, “to which he will return when all motives will have dissolved into nothingness and a new reality will have unfolded in which will be exposed the whole slew of intentions that have shaped our destiny from the moment Adam ate of the forbidden fruit.” And one might add, from the moment we, all of us, were thrust so rudely into history. And history itself is rude.

Somehow, this Rock of Foundation, as we know too well, has become instead, the Rock of disagreement—even *hashitya hayta lesela‘ hamahloket*. In the past two years, in particular, it emerged during negotiations as the one thing upon which neither Jew nor Muslim is willing to compromise in any way. We are told that even if all other issues are somehow resolved, the Rock—truly like a rock—will remain immutable and fixed. A fateful visit to the Rock—whatever the specifics of its motives or intentions, to borrow Makiya’s words—crystallized for the world a different aspect of the Rock’s implacability. It is oblivious to the

³ *Otsar HaMidradshim*, Yona, 3.

intentions and motives of the world, it is—truly—beyond dispute. Not because one or the other side is right, but rather because neither one has managed fully to grasp the vision that burned so brightly in Ka‘b’s heart—a vision in which the very thing that most made the rock the Rock was the fact that it stood before, above, and beyond disputes of any sort.

For those of us, who, like myself, grew up in Jerusalem, and understand it to be not both but rather at one and the same time a Jewish and a Muslim and also a Christian city, Makiya, himself a true *qassas*, a weaver of stories, has given us one with a powerful message.

Biographies

Kanan Makiya is the Sylvia K. Hassenfeld Professor of Islamic and Middle East Studies and a faculty associate of the International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life at Brandeis University. Born in Iraq, Professor Makiya was trained as an architect at MIT and the University of London, but he is best known as a writer on Iraq, global politics, and history. His books *Republic of Fear* (1989) and *Cruelty and Silence* (1993) were among the first works to expose to the world the brutalities of Saddam Hussein's regime. During the 1990s, Kanan Makiya headed the Iraq Research and Documentation Project; he served in 2002 as a member of the Coordinating Committee of the Democratic Principles Workshop, which developed a broad framework for a transition to democracy in Iraq. On leave from Brandeis University since the 2003 Iraq War, Professor Makiya has been working on the process of a new constitution for Iraq and on developing the Iraq Memory Foundation, which will create a living museum and archive documenting the atrocities of Saddam Hussein's regime.

Zvi Ben-Dor is assistant professor in the history department at New York University. He previously held a position in Chinese and world history at Boston University. He earned his doctorate in history from the University of California, Los Angeles. He is the author of *The Dao of Muhammad: A Cultural History of Muslims in Late Imperial China*. He is currently working on a comparative global history of the death penalty.

Eugene Goodheart recently retired as the Edytha Macy Gross Professor of Humanities after almost 18 years at Brandeis University. He is the author of over 250 articles and reviews. Goodheart has published numerous books including *The Reign of Ideology* and *Does Literary Studies Have a Future?* He recently published his memoirs, *Confessions of a Secular Jew*. His most recent book is *Novel Practices: Classic Modern Fiction*.

Oleg Grabar, a historian of Islamic art and culture, is professor emeritus at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, NJ. Grabar is the founding editor of the annual journal *Muqarna: An Annual on Islamic Art and Architecture*. His many publications include *The Formation of Islamic Art*, *The Shape of the Holy: Early Islamic Jerusalem* and *The Dome of the Rock*.

Daniel Terris, director of the International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life at Brandeis University, oversees all of the Center's programs. He also teaches in the American studies department on subjects including individualism, poverty, and American literature, and has written on twentieth century history, literature, and religion.

Centers

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The International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life exists to illuminate the ethical dilemmas and obligations inherent in global and professional leadership, with particular focus on the challenges of racial, ethnic, and religious pluralism. Examining responses to past conflicts, acts of intervention, and failures to intervene, the Center seeks to enable just and appropriate responses in the future. Engaging leaders and future leaders of government, business, and civil society, the Center crosses boundaries of geography and discipline to link scholarship and practice through programs, projects, and publications.

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The Jacob and Libby Goodman Institute for the Study of Zionism and Israel sponsors research, symposia, and publications, as well as teaching, in the historical and ideological development of the Zionist movement, and the history, society, and culture of the State of Israel. The Institute is organized on a multidisciplinary basis under the auspices of the Tauber Institute for the Study of European Jewry, and carries out activities in partnership with other universities and organizations in the United States and abroad.

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