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## Chapter 6

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# THE ROCK AND THE FORTRESS OF ANTONIA

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**T**HE AREA OF THE DOME OF THE ROCK was actually that of the *Praetorium*, formerly Fort Antonia. The most prominent geographical feature associated with Fort Antonia was the rock around which the Fort was built. That rock monopolized any other description connected with Fort Antonia. Josephus mentioned it as dominating all other geographical facets of the area. The “Rock” and “Fort Antonia” went together like “birds of a feather” in first century Jerusalem.

Josephus says Antonia was situated north of the Temple with an entrance to the Fortress at the northwest corner of the outer colonnades encompassing the Temple Square. There was an outstanding feature of Fort Antonia that characterized its location. He said the Fortress had a prominent rock formation associated with it.

The way some translations render Josephus it might be imagined the whole fortress was situated on the top of a single rock (not simply over and around a rock). The fact is, though, Josephus did

not mean the fortress was built strictly on top of a singular rock. The Greek preposition Josephus used in giving the location of Fort Antonia was *huper*. This means the fortress was built over and around a rock, not on top (Greek: *epi*) of the rock itself.

Another point must be borne in mind. Josephus said the rock associated with Antonia was 50 cubits high (75 feet high). He gave no other dimensions to show the full measurements of the rock in other directions except to say that all areas around the rock were precipitous.<sup>111</sup>

Josephus meant something else. The text shows Fort Antonia was built over and around a rock (Greek: *huper*). This indication solves a problem about which scholars have been perplexed. Josephus was talking about a type of rocky ridge oriented north to south. From the base of this ridge of rock, Herod placed smooth flagstones in a slanted angle that surmounted the slope of the rocky surface to a height of 50 cubits (75 feet). Then a wall of 3 cubits was built as a balustrade to surround the fortress to protect an inward roadway that encompassed the fortress. On the inside of the roadway, four walls of 40 cubits height (60 feet) were built that circumnavigated the fortress. There was a level platform occupying the whole inner space within those four walls. The buildings and grounds of the fortress were constructed on that platform. At the four corners of the walls were towers of 50 cubits in height (75 feet) with the exception of the southeast tower which was 70 cubits high (105 feet). This southeast tower had the advantage of such singular height that one could view from its top (as did Titus, the Roman General) the whole of the Temple courts located to the south.

This description of Josephus concerning Fort Antonia must allow the height of the rock formation (the visible portion being the "Rock" itself) to protrude slightly above the platform as we see

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<sup>111</sup> He did not state, as some have commented, that the rock was also 50 cubits wide in its horizontal directions. If so, this would answer to a small rock (relatively) with a square area of 75 by 75 feet. If Fort Antonia were built strictly on top of such a rock, the fortress would have been very small in size in a relative sense. Why, there are many private homes in posh areas of American cities today that are larger than this 5625 square feet in area.

the rock now located underneath the Dome of the Rock. This is because Josephus shows the whole of Fort Antonia was positioned over and around this rock protrusion positioned at the summit of the ridge. There was nothing small about these dimensions associated with Fort Antonia. Indeed, the rocky ridge was a prominent geographical feature or else Josephus would not have referred to it. It means that the rock ridge was quite long and covered a large area which could house over 10,000 military personnel.

Josephus' use of the "Rock" as a cardinal feature of the geography of Fort Antonia agrees with his other descriptions of important topographical sites in the region of Palestine and surrounding areas. Note that Josephus used the same word for *rock* (Greek: *petra*) to describe the fortress of Masada. That fortress, also built by Herod, was not a small facility. Masada was a large encampment that Josephus said was on a rock near the Dead Sea. Modern measurements show the top of that rock was 18 acres in size.<sup>112</sup>

There is even more. Josephus also used the same word *rock* (Greek: *petra*) to describe the large city of Petra that occupied an area that was over a mile across. This particular "rock" was a city of carved temples and other magnificent buildings located southeast of the Dead Sea. Even today, this extensive area is called Petra [the Rock].<sup>113</sup> Using the word "*Petra*" to denote a large geographical area (such as a whole city) was common to Josephus as it was to other people in the first century.<sup>114</sup>

When one looks at the geographical evidence for this area of Jerusalem, Josephus could only be describing the rock now under the Dome of the Rock in the Haram. He was not talking about some unidentifiable "rock" in the northwest corner region of the

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<sup>112</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (15th Ed.), vol. 7, p.905.

<sup>113</sup> *Antiquities* XII.6,11.

<sup>114</sup> Just like Masada near the Dead Sea, and Petra in the Kingdom of Jordan, Antonia being built over and around "a Rock" was intended to show it as being large and highly fortified. A similar designation was afforded to Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay. This was a large prison area called locally "the Rock." Indeed, a recent Hollywood movie concerning Alcatraz was titled *The Rock*. As Masada, Petra and Alcatraz were designated "the Rock," the same nomenclature applied to Antonia which was also a large military camp that could garrison a full Roman legion and built over and around the rock (Greek: *huper*).

Haram that to this day no one has been able to find. In fact, this “*oblong rock*” was known later in Christian circles to the time of the Crusades as the *Praetorium*, the place of Jesus’ footprints where Pilate judged Jesus. I will show the evidence for this fact shortly.

The only outstanding geographical feature involving a “rock” on the eastern ridge in that area of Jerusalem is the “rock” under the Dome of the Rock. Anyone with common sense would admit this to be true. This is another clue is the description of Josephus that the Haram represents the remains of Fort Antonia and NOT the site of the Temple of Herod.<sup>115</sup>

From the time of Abn al-Malik in 692 C.E. who built the Dome of the Rock over that “*oblong rock*,” the central outstanding feature of the whole shrine has been the *rock* itself. Often in later literature, we find that the site was holy to the Muslims simply because the *rock* was there, that it was so important to God that the foundation of the world was dependent upon the existence of this *rock*, and that it was the navel of the earth in all geographical senses. The only thing we ever hear about after it was built was the sanctity and the importance of this *rock* (not only for Muslims and Jews, but for all people). The central component of the whole of the Haram esh-Sharif was (and is) the existence of that *rock*.

But in regard to the Temples built by Solomon, Zerubbabel and that of Herod, there is NOT one mention of an outcropping of natural rock (or a protruding stone at the top of a ridge) that figures into the geographical setting of the Temple. In fact, the absence of such an indication is conspicuous and tell-tale. In all biblical references, we find that the Temples had NO natural outcropping of rock associated with either the Holy of Holies or the Altar of Burnt Offering. All the stones important in the various Temples were either loose stones or those cut to fit certain parts of buildings or the walls of the compartments of the Temple.

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<sup>115</sup> The Israeli architect Tuvia Sagiv wisely suggests that the rock underneath the Dome of the Rock is associated with Fort Antonia. He is right.

## No Rock Outcropping Associated with the Temples

There is NOT a single reference either in the Holy Scriptures or any secular source that a natural outcropping of rock located on the highest point of a ridge (or hill) was ever associated with the positioning of the Temples. This also applies to the sites of both the Holy of Holies and the Altar of Burnt Offering. This is a most important fact that we must now consider, and be cognizant of its importance.<sup>116</sup>

First of all, we are informed in the Holy Scriptures that the place selected for the Altar of Burnt Offering was a threshing floor.<sup>117</sup> If there is one thing certain about this “threshing floor,” it is the fact that the area was a level region and not on the top of a

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<sup>116</sup> Such a “Rock” (that is, a gigantic outcropping of natural rock) was never depicted in the Bible or in secular history as associated with the architecture of the Temples. Where David prayed and raised up an altar that became the site of Solomon’s Temple was once a threshing-floor. The word in Hebrew denotes a type of a floor (that is, a level area where grain could be threshed). All threshing-floors are level areas, just like a floor, usually on a terrace between the strata of rocks on the upper slopes of hills. No farmer would think of make a threshing-floor on the peaked top of a natural outcropping of rock with rough indentations where grain would fall and have to be scooped out by hand. One can search the Bible throughout and never find that the Temples were built over a natural rock outcropping like the “Rock” under the Dome of the Rock.

The “foundation stone” called the *Even Shethiyah* that Jewish authorities said Solomon placed in the Holy of Holies as a base for the Ark of the Covenant was a man-made slab of stone that could fit within the twenty cubits’ dimensional square of the Holy of Holies. The top of that particular stone, made in the days of the Early Prophets, that is, Samuel, David and Solomon, was smooth and was elevated three fingers above the floor of the Holy of Holies. Note Sanhedrin 26b: “For we learnt: A stone lay there [beneath the Ark] ever since the time of the Early Prophets and it was called ‘shethiyah’.” This reference shows the stone was portable. See also the Mishna portion of Yoma 53b:

“After the Ark had been taken away, there was a stone from the days of the earlier prophets [Samuel and David], called the *Shethiyah*, three fingers above the ground, on which he would place [the pan of burning coals]. He would take the blood from him who was stirring it, and enter [again] into the place [the Holy of Holies].”

In no way, is the *Even Shetinyah* the natural “Rock” underneath the Dome of the Rock. The fact is, the *Even Shetinyah* (the “foundation stone” in Solomon’s Temple) was a manufactured slab of pavement.

<sup>117</sup> Second Samuel 24:16.

protruding rock on the top of a ridge. Every threshing floor I have ever seen in the Middle East (also Africa, Europe and even America) is on a level area. After all, even the term means *floor* and not a jagged outcropping like the protruding rock with indentions under the Dome of the Rock. That rock, even in its pristine state, would have been most unsuitable for the site of a threshing *floor*. One must look for a *level* area, NOT a jagged or steep one.

True, there was a stone featured in the Temple of Solomon the Jews called the *Even Shetiyyah*,<sup>118</sup> a term that normally denoted “the foundation rock.” But, as I have shown, and many Jewish scholars agree, *that* particular stone was moveable and it was NOT a natural outcropping like the “Rock” now under the Dome of the Rock. There was such a “Rock,” however, that was later called the “oblong rock” reckoned to be within the interior of the *Praetorium* in the days of Pilate and Jesus. Cyril, the archbishop of Jerusalem said about 350 C.E. that the *Praetorium* in his day had not been maintained for human occupation and the site was then in ruins.<sup>119</sup> But shortly afterwards, Jerome said the site had been rebuilt.<sup>120</sup> A

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<sup>118</sup> *Even Shetiyyah*, a term that was understood in two ways in talmudic times: “the rock from which the world was woven.” and “the foundation rock.” Both meanings presuppose the belief that the world was created from the rock which, placed at the center of the world in the Holy of Holies of the Temple in Jerusalem, constitutes the focal point of the world. The Holy Ark was placed upon this rock, and during the Second Temple period the high priest rested the fire-pan on it when he entered the Holy of Holes on the day of Atonement.

The Mishnah (Yoma 5:2) states that the rock had been at the site of the Holy of Holies “since the time of the early prophets” (i.e. David and Solomon); that it was three finger breadths higher than the ground: and that it was called *shetiyyah*.... The Mishnah clearly dates the placing of the stone to the time of the Temple’s construction (Yoma 54b). The relationship of the *Even Shetiyyah* to the rock presently housed under the Dome of the Rock (the “Mosque [Shrine] of Omar”) built on the Temple Mount is in no way identical in the Bible or early Jewish records. Muslim tradition identifies the two, and this view is most widely held today. The major difficulty here is the size of the rock housed in the Dome if the Rock measures approximately 58 by 51 feet, an area much larger than the Holy of Holies in which the *Even Shetiyyah* was placed.

<sup>119</sup> Cyril, *Cat. Lectures* 13:39.

<sup>120</sup> See Letter 108. In the time of Jerome, the area was again the residence of the imperial governor. This area was reserved for dignitaries and other political persons to lodge within the four walled area of former Fort Antonia. A small Church of St. Cyrus and St. John was then located over the “Rock” and it was

Christian church was soon built in the area, and in the middle of the fifth century an even bigger one (called the "Church of the Holy Wisdom") was built to house and to venerate the "Rock."

### **The Arrival of the "Footprints" of Jesus**

The reference by Jerome is very important to the story of what was built over the "Rock" as time went on. In fact, when Helena was in Jerusalem we have historical references that she selected the site for a church to be called "Saint Cyrus and Saint John." This church pointed out the spot of the "Pavement" (that is, the "Rock") where Jesus was judged before Pilate. There was no documentation at this early period that the *footprints* of Jesus were then to be seen in that "Rock." But, as Jerome tells us, the area had again become the residence of the imperial governor. This became the aristocratic region reserved for dignitaries and other political persons while they staying in Jerusalem. Such noble people could reside in comfort and safety within the four walled area of former Fort Antonia. After all, for military purposes the Haram esh-Sharif, with its gigantic walls, was the perfect spot for any military camp in Jerusalem. It was designed for that very purpose.

So, by the time of Jerome (about 385 C.E.) the Haram esh-Sharif was again the site of the *Praetorium* and the place where the military governor lived. He even invited Paula the nun, his friend of noble birth, to reside within the *Praetorium*. Paula did not feel this palatial residence was fit for her purposes in being in the Holy City. She had come as a pilgrim, not as an official dignitary.

Within the *Praetorium* by the time of Jerome and Paula, there was the small Church of St. Cyrus and St. John located over the "Rock." It must have been reserved at the time as a chapel for dignitaries and was not of sufficient importance for great crowds of residents or pilgrims to visit it. But something happened that made the spot quite important to all Christians. Somewhere in the 5th

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often a chapel reserved for dignitaries and not frequented by normal residents or pilgrims. But something happened with the Church. It was discovered that two indentations in the "Rock" were those of Jesus when he stood before Pilate. This is when a new "Church of the Holy Wisdom" was erected at the site and the area was opened to the general Christian public. I will show this in a moment.

century, a discovery was made. In looking closely at the “Rock,” it was recognized by Christian authorities that two indentations in the “Rock” looked like *footprints* and they were identified as the *footprints* of Jesus when he stood before Pilate. People became impressed with this feature and they wished to visit the “Rock” to obtain what early Christians called “measures” (facsimiles in wax or other substances) to take away as relics, mostly to aid in miraculously healing people. The Christian authorities then enlarged the area and built a new Byzantine style Church at the site. They called it the “Church of the Holy Wisdom.” It was erected in the middle of the 5th century, probably in the time of Empress Eudocia. The area was then opened to the general Christian public to view. Its centerpiece was an “oblong rock.”

This church is described very well (and accurately) in a sixth century work written by the Piacenza Pilgrim. He said (words in brackets mine):

“We also prayed at the *Praetorium*, where the Lord’s case was heard: what is there now is the basilica of Saint Sophia [the Holy Wisdom Church], which is in front [north] of the Temple of Solomon [located] below the street [east and downslope] which runs down to the spring of Siloam outside of Solomon’s porch [the eastern wall of Solomon’s Temple]. In this basilica is the seat where Pilate sat to hear the Lord’s case, and there is also *the oblong stone* [I emphasize this to identify the spot] which used to be in the center of the *Praetorium* [the *Praetorium* tent was moveable]. The accused person whose case was being heard was made to mount *this stone* so that everyone could hear and see him. The Lord mounted it when he was heard by Pilate, and *his footprints* [italicized for emphasis] are still on it. He had a well-shaped foot, small and delicate.”<sup>121</sup>

Note “*the oblong stone*” which the people thought had the footprints of Jesus embedded in it. Just as Josephus stated, the “Rock” was the most prominent part of Fort Antonia [the *Praetorium* area], so this “oblong stone” was the central feature of the “Church of the Holy Wisdom” (destroyed by the Persians and Jewish soldiers in 614 C.E). This “Rock” is now under the Dome

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<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p.60, or p.84.

of the Rock on the Haram esh-Sharif. And there are further references to it as late as the time of Saladin in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. I will have more on this later.

How was it determined the two indentations found in the "Rock" were the *footprints* of Jesus? The discovery was made in the same way the Piacenza Pilgrim said some markings and scratches found (at another site) on a column at Mount Sion where Jesus was supposed to have been tied and scourged were identified. The Pilgrim spoke of this and relates:

"When he [Jesus] clasped it, his chest clove to the stone [an indentation was made by his chest], and you can see the marks of both his hands and feet, his fingers and his palms. They are so clear that you can use them to take 'measures' [to make wax models of them] for any kind of disease, and people can wear them around their necks and be cured."<sup>122</sup>

A short time before, an account of Jerusalem called *Breviarius* spoke of the same column he called "the column at which the Lord was struck, where this is a mark where he held onto it, like an impression on wax."<sup>123</sup>

There are other such instances of similar discoveries. A Christian named Abdomnan mentioned a Gallic bishop by the name of Arculf who visited Jerusalem about 680 C.E. Arculf saw a great round church near the top of the Mount of Olives (octagonal in shape, like the soon to be built Dome of the Rock) where there was a stone in which "the Lord's feet" could be seen indented. And even though people took away soil where Jesus once stood, "to this day there are *footprints* on the earth."<sup>124</sup> Arculf also spoke about what he saw in the Church of Saint Mary in the Kedron Valley.

"Entering the lower round Church of Saint Mary one sees on the right, let into the wall, a rock. On it the Lord knelt to pray in the field of Gethsemane just before he was betrayed, on the night when

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<sup>122</sup> Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims Before the Crusades*, p.84.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p.60. There is also the similar comment of Theosius who lived near the same time: "The column ... where my Lord Christ was scourged ... you can still see the way he clung to it ... as if the marks were in wax ... the impression [was] of his whole face, chin, nose, and eyes as if it had been wax" (*Ibid.*, p.66).

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p.101.

he was ‘given up into the hands of wicked men’ and to Judas. The *marks of his knees* are visible, printed deeply in this rock, as if it had been soft wax.”<sup>125</sup>

The Muslims had their own rocks and columns on which various body parts of their righteous were believed to be molded into the hard substance (when the substance became “wax-like”) and these indentions could still be seen and venerated. Indeed, at a place east of the Al Aqsa Mosque on the lower slopes of the Haram esh-Sharif, the Muslims found the place where Jesus was supposedly born.<sup>126</sup> The Muslims came to revere the spot and called it “The Cradle of Jesus.” They did this because the Muslims could point out scratches in the rocks from Mary’s fingers supposedly made when she struggled in birth pangs to bring forth Jesus.<sup>127</sup> All of these “cradles” [indentions] were believed by early

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<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p.99.

<sup>126</sup> According to Muslim belief, the nativity of Jesus was near the Temple in Jerusalem, and not at Bethlehem as the New Testament teaches.

<sup>127</sup> The word “cradle” is explained by the Muslim historian Ibn Taymiyya (the great critic of relics and marvelous stories) who died in 1328 C.E. Speaking about an “indention” on the Dome of the Rock that some Muslims believed to be the footprint of Muhammad, Ibn Taymiyya said:

“What some of the ignorant ones have mentioned is that there is a footprint of the Prophet — God bless him and grant him salvation — or a trace of his turban or the like on it [the Rock]. All of this, however, is a lie. The greatest lie is from those who think that is the place of the footprint of the Lord [of Allah himself] and likewise that it is the place mentioned as the cradle [or, footprint] of Jesus [in the “Rock” under the Dome of the Rock] — Peace be upon him. It is nothing more than the baptismal font of the Christians.”

Translation in F.E. Peters, *Jerusalem: The Holy City in the Eyes of Chroniclers, Visitors, Pilgrims, and Prophets from the Days of Abraham to the Beginnings of Modern Times* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), p.377. A “cradle” in the context used by Ibn Taymiyya meant a depression in a rock (or a hole or a framework in which moldable things could be placed to be formed into a more solid shape). We even have a similar meaning in modern English. It means a “framework” usually made of timber or concrete in which a moldable substance can harden into the form of the framework into which it was poured. In early times, it was common for pilgrims to Jerusalem to place wax in such indentions [or “cradles,” that is, “frameworks”] in order to take away the shape of the “cradle” as a relic or as a souvenir. Any such “holy indentation” in a rock or on a column was ordinarily called a “cradle.” It did not mean in such contexts simply a cot for a young child. Even the supposed *footprint* of Jesus on the “oblong rock” was called in Arabic times a “cradle.”

Christians and Muslims to be miraculous signatures of the people associated with them. More examples in various areas of the world could be given.<sup>128</sup>

### **The Conclusion that Haram esh-Sharif Was Fort Antonia**

The present Herodian and pre-Herodian stones standing on one another in the rectangular area known as the Haram esh-Sharif are NOT the stones that made up the walls of either the Temple or the City of Jerusalem in the time of Jesus. They belong to the former Fort Antonia, reckoned by Josephus and Titus to be Roman imperial property (the *Praetorium*) and not part of the municipality of Jerusalem from 6 C.E. onward. It is also clear that the “Rock” around which Fort Antonia was built was the same “Rock” (called the “Oblong Stone” that was the main feature of the Church of the Holy Wisdom (destroyed by the Persians and Jews in 614 C.E.). That is the same “Rock” now under the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.

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<sup>128</sup> See *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, edited by Mercia Eliade, under the article “Relics.”