

# Maqam En-Nabi Musa Al-Kalim: A Picturesque Holy Site in Al-Barriyah

By Dr. Hamdan Taha

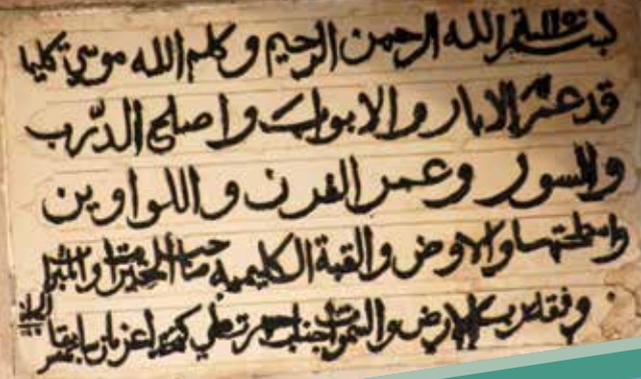


The spectacular dome-covered monument is located on top of a hill, around 28 km east of Jerusalem and 7 km southwest of Jericho. The Maqam En-Nabi Musa is an iconic monument in Palestine, which dominates the landscape of Al-Barriyah between Jerusalem and Jericho.

The site is known by its popular name, Maqam En-Nabi Musa, and in historical religious sources as the memorial for the Prophet Moses or Musa Al-Kalim (Moses the interlocutor of God). In terms of its religious significance, it is considered the tomb of Nabi Musa in the Muslim tradition. This is contrary to the biblical story, which locates the burial place of Prophet Moses east of the river. In Christian tradition, the grave of Moses is thought to be on Mount Nebo. Some Muslim historians like Mujir Ed-Din have raised doubts about the authenticity of the grave, but it has been established in the memory of the people as the memorial for Nabi Musa.

The site has exceptional historical and spiritual value due to its association with Prophet Moses, and stands as a testimony to the living traditions in monastic life. The site is also associated with social and cultural events, especially Nabi Musa Season, which was once one of the main festivals in Palestine

The historical monument of Maqam En-Nabi Musa has evolved over the past seven centuries as an organic architectural ensemble. It was built in the year 668 AH (1269 AD) by Al-Malik Ez-Zahir Baibars, and then the buildings were expanded by various donors up until recent times. The minarets date back to 880 AH. The history of the maqam has been learned from various historical sources, pilgrims' accounts, and the Islamic waqf records, as well as the five Arabic inscriptions found on the site, which date the main interventions in the history of the site.



Inscription on the Western Gate.  
Photo courtesy of Hamdan Taha.

The *maqam* was described by Mujir Ed-Din in 1494 in *Al-Uns Al-Jelil fi Tari'rikh Al-Quds wa'Al-Khalil* and by the historian and poet Abdul Ghani En-Nabulsi in *Al-Hadra Al-Ansiye fi-Rihle Al-Qudsiye* where he described the visit he undertook in the year 1101 AH (1690 AD).

In the nineteenth century, the site was described by Buckingham (1822 AD), Van der Velde (1861 AD), and Tristram (1866 AD). It was described in the *Survey of Western Palestine* as a deserted mosque on the downs. It was also described in modern archeological surveys, as Maqam En-Nabi Musa was a subject of a series of studies in the last century. The main sources that helped in the study of the site were the works of H. Spoer (1909 AD), Richard Hartman (1910 AD), P. Kahle (1901 AD), T. Cannan (1927 AD), K. Asali (1990 AD), and K. Murar (1997 AD). In the early 1980s, the Department of Islamic Waqf conducted an architectural survey for the first time.



General view of Maqam Nabi Musa. Photo courtesy of Hamdan Taha.



The mosque at En-Nabi Musa. Photo courtesy of Hamdan Taha.

Maqam En-Nabi Musa has great significance for Palestinians. Its festival (*mosam*) became the most popular of all the festivals and played an important role in the Palestinian struggle during the British Mandate of Palestine.

Maqam En-Nabi Musa is composed of an extensive complex of buildings built in an area of 5,000 square meters within a perimeter wall with three gates. It may be divided into two parts: the sanctuary, and the rooms surrounding it. The rooms are separated on three sides by an open space, also known as the courtyard. The sanctuary itself protects the shrine of the prophet, and has porches on the north and east sides. The *maqam* was built of local stones quarried from the nearby hills. The courtyard is paved with slabs of the same stone. Above the door of the mosque, an inscription

states that Abdallah Pasha rebuilt the place in 1235 AH (1819 AD).

The complex is composed of three stories with more than 150 rooms. The lower story is used for storerooms, two kitchens, and an oven, as well as a stable, in addition to many rooms for the pilgrims. The first story includes the shrine, the mosque, and the surrounding rooms around the courtyard. The rooms serve thousands of visitors who make the pilgrimage once a year and generally spend several days at the site. The upper story opens up on a terrace, which overlooks the courtyard and is used to accommodate visitors. During the festival days, tents are pitched in the open air all around the shrine to accommodate visitors. Large cisterns are used to gather rainwater for use on feast days.

The *maqam* is surrounded by two smaller buildings: Maqam Hasan Er-Ra'i to the southwest, and the more recent Maqam Sitt Aisha to the east. East of the *maqam* is a cemetery where people who die during festival days are buried. Notables who die in Jericho are very often brought there as well, and, in the past, Idwan's tribesmen of Jordan buried some of their dead in the same cemetery. It is viewed as a special blessing to be interred near a man of God.

### The Nabi Musa Season

The festival seems to have been introduced by Salah Ed-Din after the conquest of Jerusalem in 583 AH (1187 AD). After the long rule of the Franks, he apparently wanted to create a meeting point for Muslims in Palestine.

The Nabi Musa festival lasts for eight days and ends on Greek Orthodox Good Friday. The feast itself begins on the Friday preceding the Good Friday of the Greek Orthodox Church and ends on Maunday Thursday. The Friday preceding it is called *Djumet Al-Mnadat*, or the Friday of Calling, since it is on this day that it is officially made known that the *mosam* of the prophet begins on the next Friday. The night preceding the feast is named *Lelatu Al-Waqfeh* (Night of Standing). Everyone who intends to participate in the feast prepares for the coming days. Different friends or families come together and talk over their plans. The nights of the next Wednesday and Thursday are called *Lelat Es-Sheil* (Night of Departure) since most of the pilgrims arrange to leave on those days.

The traditional procession begins by bringing the Nabi Musa banner from Ed-Dar Al-Kbireh, which belongs to the Hussein family. The procession moves slowly to the Aqsa Mosque,

Currently the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), in cooperation with Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, the Ministry of Waqf, and the local community, and with financial support from the EU, is working on a plan for the conservation and management of Maqam En-Nabi Musa within the framework of the project Support for the Development of Cultural Tourism, which was launched in 2014.





*Sufi musical bands are the most prominent during the Nabi Musa season.*

entering by the gate of Bab Al-Habs. After the midday prayer is over, the procession leaves the mosque area by the same gate and passes through Via Dolorosa, leaving the city by Saint Stephan's Gate (Bab Sitti Maryam) to Ras Al-Amud. The spectators fill the streets, the balconies, the windows, the cemetery, and the gardens on both sides of the route. After the reception of the Mayor of Jerusalem, the procession advances slowly to Nabi Musa on the Jerusalem-Jericho road.

Visitors come from Jerusalem, Hebron, Jericho, Bethlehem, and Nablus. All classes of people come, including city dwellers, farmers, and Bedouin from the land east of the Jordan River. It is a family festival that includes women and children.



The *mosam* was banned by the British Mandate government as part of the repressive measures they took against the Palestinian national movement. After a long interruption, the season was revived again two decades ago.

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*Southern courtyard showing the minaret. Photo courtesy of Hamdan Taha.*