



King David's Tomb, Mount Zion and the Vatican

AN IMPORTANT part of Pope Francis's visit to Israel back in May 2014 was the prayer Mass he held while visiting the Cenacle, the upper rooms above King David's Tomb on Mount Zion, widely considered to be the site of the Last Supper. The early history of the Cenacle site is uncertain; scholars have made attempts at establishing a chronology based on archaeological evidence and historical sources. Biblical archaeologist Bargil Pixner offers some significant dates and events in the building's history. He states:

"The original building was a synagogue later probably used by Jewish Christians and Disciples. According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, the building was spared during the destruction of Jerusalem under Titus (AD 70), though Pixner thinks it was likely rebuilt right after the war, and claims three walls of that structure are still extant: the North, East and South walls of the present King David's Tomb. Roman emperor Theodosius I built an octagonal church (the "Theodosian Church" or "Holy Zion Church") aside the synagogue (that was named "Church of the Apostles"). The Theodosian Church, probably started in AD 382, was consecrated by John II, Bishop of Jerusalem in AD 394... While the church was destroyed in 1219, the section containing the former synagogue including its upper-floor room (the Cenacle) were spared. In the 1330s, it passed into the custody of the Franciscan Order of Friars, who maintained the structure until 1552, when the Ottoman authorities took possession of it. After the Franciscan friars' eviction,

this room was transformed into a mosque, as evidenced by the mihrab in the direction of Mecca and an Arabic inscription prohibiting public prayer at the site. Christians were not officially allowed to return until the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948."

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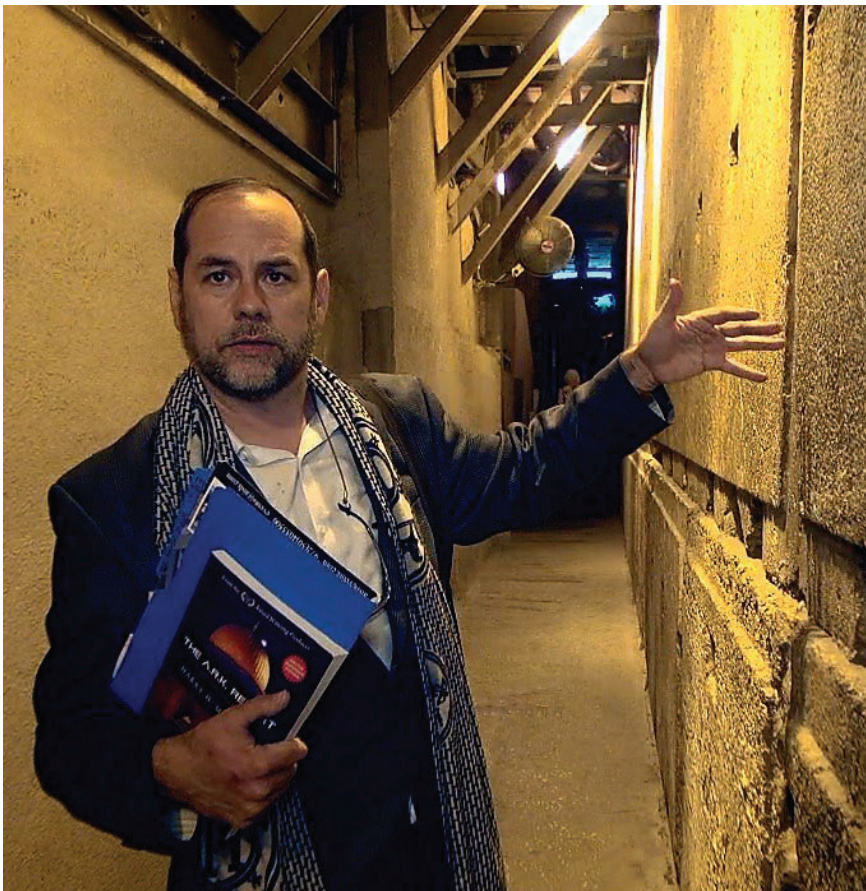
The historical building is currently owned by the State of Israel and the Diaspora Yeshiva, which also owns land right across the walkway on Mount Zion. The Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land, which had previously owned the building and sought its return, has sought to have administrative control over the Cenacle itself after the Vatican-Israeli accord.

VATICAN RADIO had anticipated Israel relinquishing control of the Cenacle Shrine on Mt. Zion. On April 7, 2013, Vatican Radio, which serves as "the voice of the Pope and the Church in dialogue with the world" made what seems to be rather antagonistic maneuvers for the Cenacle Shrine above the tomb of King David. On March 27, Vatican Radio News broadcast a show titled: "Our Christian roots: Cenacle, Room of the Last Supper."

The article accompanying the link for the

broadcast notes: "The Cenacle had once belonged to the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land, which still claims ownership of the property. It's been in the hands of the Israeli authorities since 1948." But it is what Father Peter Stravinskias said on the airwaves in the first 2 minutes plus of an interview with Vatican Radio's Tracey McClure, which is most surprising. He said as follows: "It is unfortunate that this site of the Last Supper is not accessible to Christians for worship. It is controlled by the Israeli civil authorities." However, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has claimed that this last Christmas season, and indeed the whole past year, has seen a record number of tourists visiting the site on Mount Zion.

JewishIsrael reported that there are conflicting reports over the future of the Upper Room (the Cenacle Shrine). Israel Hayom reported that a new agreement will grant the Pope "an official seat" in the Upper Room, as well as giving the Vatican "a special modicum of control over the site." Clerical Whispers stated that "the Cenacle is the key to reaching an agreement" and remained the sticking point in the negotiations. For the record, the Chief Rabbinate's office expressed a position on the matter already back in 2009: "According to Jewish Law (Halacha), it is prohibited for any person to assist in transferring property in the Land of Israel to the Vatican in the holy places that are the heart and essence of the people of Israel." The official position of the Jewish state, as reported in the Israeli press over the last few years, has been that "Israel will not give up sovereignty over any of the holy places," and



Harry Moskoff, holding his book, tours the Western Wall tunnels

that Israel “will remain firm in its stance to maintain ownership of the room in which the Last Supper is believed to be held, which is on Mount Zion next to King David’s Tomb.”

HOWEVER, THERE have been hints dropped here and there, which infer that “certain gestures might be made to provide the Holy See with leeway.” In terms of timing, it is telling that Shimon Peres met with the Pope on April 30, 2014. Again, back in May 2009, Ha’aretz ran headlines that Peres wants to hand over Christian sites in Israel to the Vatican. The article stated that Peres was pressing the government to agree to the Vatican’s request that Israel surrender control of six religious sites, among them the Cenacle on Mount Zion.

Apparently, Jerusalem’s Mount Zion is already “Gospel Central,” thanks to the State of Israel’s no-holds-barred definition of “religious freedom.” The competitive missionary networks Daystar Television and Trinity Broadcasting (TBN) had both purchased grand studios on Mount Zion for targeting Israeli, as well as international audiences. Missionary ministry Succat Hallel on Mt. Zion sponsors mega-Jesus concerts for Israeli youth. And messianic congregations are situated among several large church landmarks – all in a relatively small area.

“I’m holding in my hand a signed agreement that says that Daystar will be issued a television channel for the nation of Israel that will go into every home in the land

of Israel 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, preaching the gospel 100% of the time” – Marcus Lamb, President and CEO of Daystar Television network.

“The main thing we want to do is help sponsor what we call Messianic Jews, or Jews that have received Jesus Christ as their Messiah ... We want to do some Hebrew language programs to reach out to Jews and entice them to read the word of God and become what we call a completed Jew” – Paul Crouch, President and Chairman of Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN).

MK Nissim Ze’ev of Shas stated that Chief Sephardi Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef told him that the Prime Minister’s Office asked Rabbi Yosef for halachic permission for Israel to hand over the Tomb of King David to the Vatican. The rabbi, of course, said it’s strictly prohibited, as it would be turned into a place of idol worship (according to the rulings of Maimonides [the Rambam]).

In the current geopolitical scenario, it’s tough to say who will eventually become the owner of that whole sacred precinct at the top of Mount Zion. Elsewhere back in Rome though, there are apparently two enigmatic items of the Jews that remain in the Vatican vaults, the golden head-plate of the High Priest (*tzitz* in Hebrew), and the giant curtain (*parochet*), both taken from the Herodian Temple in Jerusalem almost 2000 years ago. The next section will look deeper into this phenomenon. ■

This is an adapted excerpt from the author’s book, ‘The A.R.K. Report – The Lost Ark of the Jews and the Modern State of Israel’