

About the Shared Sacred Sites Project

Despite theological differences, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share many beliefs, rites, and symbols. These elements have formed a fertile ground for the sharing of sacred sites across the Mediterranean and Middle East. Instances of cooperation and coexistence among the three monotheistic faiths, and the study of such sharing, provide key insights into the ways in which tolerance and understanding are cultivated. We hope this project will demonstrate the potential for peaceful coexistence, tolerance, and understanding.

Based on historical and anthropological research carried out over several years, this project provides an alternative narrative to one-dimensional accounts of cultural, ethnic, and spiritual conflict. A primary illustration of effective coexistence is the extensive history of religious sites shared by members of different belief systems. Our contemporary world contains numerous cases of such varied devotional interactions that defy the inflexibility often attributed to religious groups.

Shared Sacred Sites is a collaborative project that seeks to bring together scholars and curious individuals to promote and inform the study of shared sacred spaces and symbols. Contributors form a network of researchers and help make knowledge accessible through multimedia platforms, including scholarly essays, newspaper articles, photographs, audio, and videos.

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About the Exhibition

This exhibition project started at the Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilizations (Mucem) in Marseille in 2015. It has since traveled to the Bardo Museum in Tunis (2016), Thessaloniki (2017), Paris (2017), and Marrakesh (2018). This year, the exhibition is being hosted at three of New York City's renowned cultural institutions—The New York Public Library, the James Gallery at the CUNY Graduate Center, and the Morgan Library & Museum—drawing from their collections and beyond to illustrate the coexistence of the three monotheistic faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Each location offers a unique perspective on the intersections between these three religions. The New York Public Library provides a historical view of several major shared holy figures and the interpretations they inspire across faiths, while items on display at CUNY's James Gallery depict contemporary instances of believers practicing their faiths in shared spaces. At the Morgan Library & Museum, a single but significant work is on view—the 13th-century Morgan Picture Bible—which demonstrates how members of the different faiths interacted through shared biblical stories.

By examining these works together, we hope to raise awareness of the potential for cooperation among religious groups.

CURATORS:

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COVER:

Erhard Reuwich
Detail of view of Jerusalem from
Peregrinatio in Terram Sanctam
(Pilgrimage to the Holy Land) by
Bernhard von Breydenbach, 1486
The New York Public Library,
Rare Book Division



Léon de Laborde
“View of the Convent of
St. Catherine” from *Voyage
de l’Arabie Pétrée (Travels
in Arabia Petrea)*
Paris: Girard, 1830
General Research Division

This engraving depicts the Byzantine Orthodox Monastery of St. Catherine of Alexandria. Built in the 6th century, the monastery stands at the foot of Mount Sinai, or the Jebel Mûsa (“Mountain of Moses” in Arabic) in the South Sinai Peninsula. The monastery was an important place of sojourn for Muslim pilgrims on their way to and from Mecca, as illustrated in this engraving by the caravan of North African pilgrims arriving at the monastery.

The New York Public Library

For more than 100 years, The New York Public Library has collected thousands of religious books and manuscripts in order to preserve and make accessible the rich history of world religions, including the three Abrahamic faiths. Drawn from divisions across the Library’s research collections, the objects on display represent centuries of creativity that tell the story of these religions and the varied interactions among followers of different belief systems.

Several major figures central to the Torah, the Bible, and the Qur’an have inspired interfaith encounters. While chronicles of the three monotheistic faiths are full of examples of intolerance and conflict, they also tell of coexistence and mutual understanding. Such acts are modeled on the hospitality of Abraham, the motherhood of Mary, and the heroic deeds of other holy figures, including Moses, Elijah, St. George, and Khidr.

Shared Sacred Sites highlights the importance of these figures—and the shared worship they have inspired—by tracing them through texts and images drawn from the rich collections of the Library.



Scene of Abraham and Sarah hosting angels from a manuscript of *The Gospel According to Luke*
Muscovy, 15th century
Spencer Collection

This illuminated manuscript illustrates the hospitality that Abraham (left) and Sarah (right) showed three heavenly visitors at Mamre (Genesis 18:2–15). After the couple offered their guests a meal under an oak tree, one of the angels announced to Sarah that she will have a son, Isaac, despite her advanced age. The hospitality in the episode is a model for behavior at many holy places of Abrahamic faiths: visitors, even from another religion, are often welcome and hosted without discrimination or hostility.



Erhard Reuwich
View of Jerusalem from
Peregrinatio in Terram Sanctam
(Pilgrimage to the Holy Land) by
Bernhard von Breydenbach, 1486
The New York Public Library,
Rare Book Division

This panoramic view of the Holy Land comes from a 15th-century text regarded as the first illustrated travel journal to be printed. The woodcut shows the region from Damascus to Alexandria, the pyramids along the Nile and even Mecca, with a central focus on Jerusalem. This is one of the most beautiful maps of Jerusalem, stunning in its details and delightful in its prodigious reach beyond the city itself.



The Annunciation (detail) from a manuscript Book of Hours
Bourges, France, ca. 1505–10
Spencer Collection

Mary, Mother of Jesus, is a crucial figure for both Christians and Muslims. Mary is mentioned more often in the Qur'an than in the entire New Testament. The Annunciation, in which the angel Gabriel reveals to the Virgin Mary that she will have a child through divine intervention, is also present in the Islamic tradition.



Ketubbah with Abraham and Jacob

Nizza Monferrato, Aug. 16, 1782
Dorot Jewish Division

A *ketubbah* (Jewish marriage contract) includes references and iconography related to the names of the bride or groom. In this 18th-century *ketubbah* from Piedmont, Italy, the groom's name is represented by two pictures depicting his namesakes, Abraham and Jacob. On the left, the vignette features the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22:1–14), in which God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son. Shown on the right is the dream of Jacob.



Zamakhshari

Al-Kashshaf an Haqa'iq an al-Tanzil (The Discoverer of the Truth about the Revelation), vol. 3

Syria or Egypt, 15th century
Manuscripts and Archives Division

Shown is commentary on the 19th sura (chapter) of the Qur'an, dedicated to Maryam (Mary in Arabic). The portion of the Qur'an under discussion is written on the margins of the pages in red. These verses (19:19–21) tell of the Annunciation by the angel to Mary.



Firdausi Tūsī, Abū al-Qasim Hasan, author; Sharif Amīdī, translator; Darvish 'Abdī, scribe
Image of Iskandar and the Prophet Khidr from Tarjumah-i Shāhnāmāh (Book of Kings)

10th century, copied in Istanbul 1616–20
Spencer Collection

The *Shāhnāmāh*, the Persian Book of Kings, is a long epic poem written by the poet Ferdowsi between ca. 977 and 1010. In the Islamic tradition, Iskandar (identified as Alexander the Great) is a saintly leader whose armies conquered both East and West. It is said that Iskandar set out with Khidr to find the Water of Life. The story is told that while Khidr reached the Water of Life, Iskandar got lost, since he was interested in self-glorification while Khidr served his God and therefore gained eternal life.



Ishaq ibn Ibrahim al-Nishāpūrī Qazwin
Jesus with food from heaven from Qisas al-Anbiyā (Tales of the Prophets)

Iran, 11th century, copied ca. 1580
Spencer Collection

Jesus is the Son of God for Christians and revered as a major prophet ('Isa) by Muslims. This Muslim miniature shows Jesus in its center passing out food, representing the Miracle of the Table recounted in the Qur'an, which echoes the Feeding of the 5,000, or the Miracle of Loaves and Fishes, in the Gospels. The Qur'an explains that in answering his apostles' demand, Jesus caused a table set with food to descend from heaven (5:111–114). This was one of the proofs of his being a true prophet.

The Morgan Library & Museum

The Morgan Library & Museum's celebrated 13th-century Morgan Picture Bible is one of the masterpieces of Gothic art. Its 84 miniatures depict some 300 scenes from the Christian Old Testament, beginning with Creation and ending with the story of King David. It is one of the greatest visualizations of Old Testament events.

While many of the stories of the Hebrew Scriptures were well known, they were further popularized and became part of the shared cultural narrative of the Abrahamic religions as they were embraced by the Christian Bible and the Qur'an. The Morgan Picture Bible was originally designed without text. But as the book was circulated across civilizations, explanatory captions in Latin, Persian, and Judeo-Persian were added, creating a manuscript that is not only beautiful but a testament to exchanges between cultures.



Leaves from the Morgan Picture Bible, with later inscriptions in Latin, Persian, and Judeo-Persian. Illuminated for King Louis IX of France

France, Paris, ca. 1250
MS M.638, fol. 3r
Purchased by J.P. Morgan, Jr., 1916

The manuscript was originally conceived in Paris around 1250 as a series of selected Old Testament scenes. After the death of Louis IX of France, the book travelled to Italy where Latin inscriptions were added at some point in the 14th century. Bernard Maciejowski (1548–1608), bishop of Krakow (Poland), subsequently acquired the manuscript and presented it as a gift in 1604 to Shah Abbas the Great (1571–1629), in Isfahan (Iran), who in turn

ordered the addition of Persian captions. In the 18th century, the manuscript belonged to a Jewish owner, who added the Judeo-Persian inscriptions. The leaf shown to the left depicts the Drunkenness of Noah, the Building of the Tower of Babel, Abraham and the Sacrifice of Isaac, and the Capture of Lot and his Family. The leaf shown to the right depicts scenes from the life of Moses.

The James Gallery CUNY

The James Gallery at the CUNY Graduate Center focuses on contemporary cases of shared holy places in the Mediterranean. Often people of different religions converge in the same sanctuary because they are animated by a common quest for supernatural help, and seek the protection of a particular saint with a reputation for efficacy. Mutual influences and superimpositions form a fertile ground for the sharing of sacred sites, even if they may also generate the partition of such places between denominations.

Based on anthropological research, the exhibition presents photography, video, contemporary art, and ethnographic material coming from fieldwork. The show is organized as a Mediterranean tour of shrines such as the Cave of Elijah in Haifa, the House of Mary in Ephesus, the Synagogue of the Ghriba in Djerba, and the Greek Orthodox Monastery of St. George in Büyükada, Istanbul. In the last section, the exhibition focuses on particular individuals who, in their lifetimes, were able to build bridges and allow for rich exchanges between religions.



A mosque and a synagogue share the sacred space above the cave of Machpelah, where the Patriarchs rest with their wives, Hebron, West Bank © Andrea Merli, 2012



Both men and women pray inside Elijah's Cave, Haifa © Guy Raivitz, 2017



Ayşe Özalp
Annunciation
 Isfahan, Turkey, 2014
 Ink on parchment
 Private collection

Following the painting tradition of the school of Isfahan (Iran), the Turkish artist Ayşe Özalp reproduced an ancient Persian miniature on an old Ottoman sheet of parchment.



Lino Mannocci
Monotype from Annunciation Series
 2017
 Private collection

"I find the story of the Annunciation, the mystery of the incarnation, the possibility of embedding matter with aesthetic or spiritual value, an irresistible metaphor for the activity of painting. Working on parchment with monotypes, it seems to me, helps to evoke the complex relationship between body and soul, matter and spirit, that exists in all monotheistic religions."
 —Lino Mannocci



Icon of Our Lady Who Brings Down the Walls on the Wall of Separation, Bethlehem
 © Manoël Pénicaud, 2014

In 2010, the Catholic sisters of the Convent of the Emmanuel asked British artist Ian Knowles to paint this icon on the Wall of Separation between Israel and the West Bank. The figure of Mary is, therefore, mobilized in a political sense.



Jewish and Muslim women praying side by side in the Ghriba Synagogue, Tunisia
© Manoël Pénicaud, 2014

These two women pray barefoot in front of the eastern wall of the synagogue toward the direction of Jerusalem. The scrolls of the Torah are preserved behind the wooden panels, which are adorned with votive offerings.



Star of David and Mihrab in the Yeni Cami Mosque, Thessaloniki, Greece
© Manoël Pénicaud, 2016

In many areas of the Ottoman empire, as well as in northern Greece, a number of Jews publicly converted to Islam in the 17th century, following the messianic figure of Sabbatai Zevi (1626–1676). Some of these converts, called *dönme*, secretly kept their beliefs. In Thessaloniki, a famous mosque was expressly built for them in the 19th century. The interior of the mosque includes many Stars of David, as an implicit reminder of their Jewish ancestry.



Bas-relief of the church of the Aiguebelle abbey, France
© Manoël Pénicaud, 2016

This singular bas-relief was carved by a Catholic Cistercian friar on the facade of the abbey of Aiguebelle's church. This message of interreligious coexistence is also a tribute to the seven monks of Tibhirine (Algeria) who tragically disappeared in May 1996. These friars had nevertheless lived in harmony with their Muslim neighbors and hosts. They were beatified in January 2018.

Suggested Reading

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