The vanished synagogues of Mosul

Mosul's recent violent sectarian history belies a past in which Jews, Muslims and Christians lived, worked and even prayed together, says **Ethel Sara Wolper**

Iraq's tragic past and even more tragic present make a study of its cultural heritage both urgent and difficult.

Although the once-prominent Jewish communities of premodern Iraq have disappeared, medieval travellers described large numbers of synagogues throughout its cities. The most famous of these visitors, Benjamin of Tudela (d. 1173), travelled through Europe, Asia, and Africa, making special note of Jewish populations, tombs and synagogues throughout present-day Iraq. According to Benjamin, Baghdad had some 40,000 Jews, who "dwell in security, prosperity and honour under the great Caliph and amongst them are great sages, the heads of Academies engaged in the study of the law". When another late 12th-century visitor, Rabbi Petachiah of Ratisbon, travelled from Nineveh to Baghdad, he described similarly prosperous conditions throughout Iraq, stating that "from Nineveh and further on there are [Jewish] congregations in every city and village".

In the medieval and early modern periods, Mosul (known by Jews as either Ashur or Nineveh) was the main city of the Jazira, the northern part of Babylonia. During the medieval period, especially from the 12th century, it was known as a centre of Syriac Christianity as well as a holy site for other non-Muslim religions, including the Yazidis. Medieval Muslims noted Mosul's association with the prophet Jonah. The contemporary writer Ibn Jubayr described a "great ruin said to have been the city of Ninawa [Nineveh], which was the city of Yunus [Jonah] – on whom be [eternal] happiness".

Mosul's prominent Jewish community had existed since ancient times – before the Arab conquests of the seventh century. The earliest accounts of a synagogue there date from the 13th century. Like Baghdad's Great Synagogue, it was frequented by local officials who represented Mosul's Jewish community to the various Muslim rulers who controlled the city from the time of the Abbasids to the Ottoman conquest.

> **"Muslims and Christians also worshipped at Jewish shrines"**

But there were other types of synagogue that existed in Mosul and its surrounding areas: shrine synagogues associated with the tombs of prophets – prophets who were of significance not only to Jews but also to Muslims and Christians. The relationship between these synagogues and the Muslim world was mediated through these prophets and not, as in the case of the great synagogues, through central gures (religious leaders) associated with political rule. Consequently, the shrines and their adjoining synagogues often survived the political vicissitudes that resulted in the destruction of other Jewish property.

Shrine synagogues were erected at sacred sites, usually marked by the graves of prophets and sages. Although their foundation and existence were based much on legend, as was the Great Synagogue in Baghdad, these spaces had a very different function within Muslim cities. Old Testament prophets such as Nahum, Jonah and Ezekiel were of great significance to Muslims and Christians as well as Jews, so when Jewish communities were forced to abandon them, non-Jews took over the shrines. In many cases, even after these shrines had been turned over to the care of others, Jewish communities continued to visit them on festival days.

The shrine synagogues were the focal points of networks, known as ziyara, which crisscrossed Iraq and linked it to other parts of the Near East. Pilgrimage to shared

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Opposite page: view of Al-Qosh; ark in the Nahum synagogue, Al-Qosh; the shrine of the prophet Ezekiel (or Dhu'l Kifl, as it is known to Muslims) near Hilla

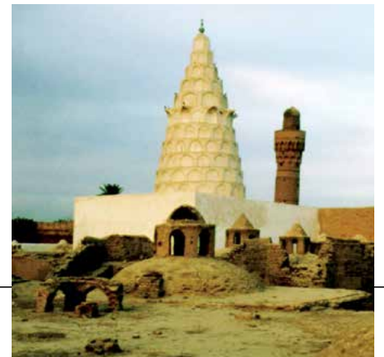
shrines was a ubiquitous phenomenon in the pre-nation-state Middle East. As in Muslim practice, Jews engaged in ziyara through visits to graves of the prophets and other sacred sites. The Near Eastern historian Walter J Fischel explained that it was the Jews of Kurdistan, influenced by their Muslim neighbours, who developed the custom of making pilgrimages to visit the tombs of the prophets. These included visits to the alleged tomb of the prophet Ezekiel, near Hilla, the tomb of Ezra, near Qurna, and the burial place of the high priest Joshua, in Baghdad. The Mosul region also contained important holy sites, such as the alleged tomb of Jonah, near Nineveh, and the sepulchre of Daniel. The most prominent site in the region was the alleged tomb of the prophet Nahum, in Al-Qosh, to which pilgrimages were made annually. Pilgrimages often lasted a month, so these synagogues included accommodation for pilgrims, where they could sleep, eat, and even make purchases.

Both Muslim and Jewish shrines often had at least one dome covering the site of a grave and, from a distance, these were indistinguishable from Muslim domes. Only when entering the synagogues did the differences emerge. In Mosul, Jonah's tomb was incorporated into a mosque, the Masjid al-Nabi Yunis, but Jewish scholars describe a variety of celebrations in and around the city that link the area to Jerusalem and other religious sites. Ibn Jubayr noted what was most likely a Jewish ritual in which people gathered on the Hill of Repentance

> **"During the invasion of Iraq, a chaplain noticed Hebrew inscriptions at a site at Nahum"**

every Friday night to pray. His description of the building also has people coming to the ribat (hostel) for Friday prayers. Jewish travellers of the 12th century described a synagogue on the site and stated that the Jewish community held the key to the door.

One of the most prominent Jewish shrine synagogues in Iraq is at the town of Al-Qosh, 28 miles north of Mosul at the foot of the Al-Qosh Mountains. The shrine here is purported to belong to the prophet Nahum of Elkosh (Al-Qosh). Today the town contains a large, dilapidated synagogue with a cenotaph and Hebrew inscriptions referring to Nahum. The shrine synagogue complex, which covers more than 2,000 square metres, stands near the Christian monastery of Rabban Hormidz (a 7th-



century Syriac monk) in a Christian area. After the Jews were forced to leave the area, Christians cared for the building.

During the 2003 invasion of Iraq, an American Jewish chaplain to the 101st Airborne Division visited the site and noted traces of Hebrew inscriptions and what may have been a women's section. Attempts to restore the synagogue in 2009 were aborted in 2015 and the present fate of the building is unknown.

The historian Zvi Yehuda quotes a 12th-century report that the Jews of Mosul and Kurdistan visited the tomb on the festival of Succot. Other authors have described how visitors prayed and re-enacted the revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai. The synagogue of Nahum continued to function as one of a number of sites used by diaspora Jews for re-enacting events at Mount Sinai. The huge synagogue, which was rebuilt throughout the early modern period, provided places for these Jews to stay, study and pray.

Far from being hidden in segregated areas, some Iraqi synagogues are described in Jewish, Muslim, and Christian sources as places of religious convergence and coexistence. Beginning in the late 12th century, Benjamin of Tudela described synagogues and Jewish shrines as places visited by other religions. Around the same time, medieval Muslim travellers such as Ibn Jubayr and Al-Harawi wrote of how they were a focus for various celebrations.

Today only one synagogue survives in Baghdad. The synagogue of Ezekiel is now a Shia mosque, and the status of the synagogue of Nahum is unknown. These losses alone are cause for alarm. The growth of Daesh (ISIS) raises even more concerns; Daesh has destroyed almost all the shrines of the once multifaith city of Mosul, which formerly had the largest Christian population in the Middle East, and with it the physical evidence for neighbourhoods with shared shrines. Whether these shrines were part of synagogues, churches, or mosques or any combination of these, their very existence allowed for different kinds of meetings among religious groups.

Their destruction is designed to erase the memory of the once frequent moments of interfaith coexistence and convergence within Iraqi cities. ■

This is an edited extract from **Synagogues and the Hebrew prophets: the architecture of convergence, coexistence and conflict in pre-modern Iraq** by Ethel Sara Wolper, one of the essays in **Synagogues of the Islamic World**, edited by Mohammad Gharipour, Edinburgh University Press, 2017, £150.
Mohammad Gharipour will be speaking about the book at a session presented by JR for Jewish Book Week 2018. See: jewishbookweek.com