

“Here, in this carved-out place, stood the Ark of the Covenant”

Leen Ritmeyer (74), a Dutch Christian, was the assistant to the father of biblical archaeology, Prof. Benjamin Mazar. Together they investigated the mysteries of the Temple Mount in the 1970s. More knowledgeable of the Jewish sources that are relevant than most of the rabbis, Ritmeyer marks the outline of the ancient Temple Mount, built by King Hezekiah.

This interview was given by Leen Ritmeyer in fluent Hebrew – a conversation filled with quotations from Ezekiel, Deuteronomy, Mishnah Middot, that certainly could have been conducted in a beit midrash. However he is a non-Jewish Dutch Christian researcher, who has lived far away, in England for many years. Now Ritmeyer visits the Holy Land every year.

The morning before the interview, he spent time on the Temple Mount, his favorite site. Probably checking that the Step he identified 46 years ago as the ancient Western Wall of the Temple Mount built by Hezekiah has not been moved anywhere.

Ritmeyer was born in Rotterdam, the Netherlands just before the end of the Second World War. After another war, the Six Day War, he arrived in Israel with the aim of volunteering at Kibbutz Yad Mordechai. Here he began to read the Bible and travelled around the country.

In 1973 he began working as a surveyor in the Western and Southern Temple Mount Walls Excavations. An Irish architect taught him the skills of surveying, but after four months the Irishman left, and the director of excavations, Prof. Benjamin Mazar appointed Ritmeyer as his replacement. And that is why Ritmeyer’s signature appears on the architectural plans, published by the excavation of the Temple Mount in the different periods, from the First Temple period to the Umayyad period.

"I came to Israel as a tourist. After two years my visa was about to end and I had to leave", he says. "I read in the newspaper an article written

by Ben-Gurion in which he wrote that the most important thing in Judaism is the commandment to love the stranger, because the people of Israel were strangers in Egypt. In response, I wrote him a letter wondering how, in light of this statement, while living as a foreigner in Israel, they wanted to get me out of here. Ben-Gurion did not answer me, but apparently looked into the matter, as soon I got permission to stay in Israel as a temporary resident, and as such I lived in Israel for twenty years."

By profession he is an architect of ancient sites. "There is a great deal of architecture in archaeology", he explains. "Most archaeologists fail to understand properly how one wall they found in the excavations integrates with another wall. In each excavation square there are walls from different periods. As an architect I can explain to the archaeologist to what period and to which building each wall belongs, and show how the walls relate to each other."

"For four years I worked in the Western Wall Excavations. Every day Professor Mazar arrived in my office for a joint brainstorming session. He was a great historian, but he did not understand much about architecture, and that was where I could help him. In 1978, when Mazar's excavations finished, I worked for about a decade with Prof. Nachman Avigad in the excavations of the Jewish Quarter." There Ritmeyer worked as conservator in buildings from the time of Hezekiah, Herod and Justinian when he worked on the restoration of the Broad Wall, the Herodian Quarter, and the Byzantine Cardo.

Thinking within the square

But his focus was and remains the Temple Mount, where within the confines of today's Temple Mount Ritmeyer made his main discovery – the location of the ancient Temple Mount, described in the Mishna as a square of 500 by 500 cubits. He published several Books on the Temple Mount, the most important of them is *The Quest - the search, the study.*

Ritmeyer recognized that the bottom step of the staircase leading up to

the platform of Dome of the Rock at the northwest corner, is nothing less than an ancient wall. It turned out that this was parallel to the most ancient wall of the Temple Mount, namely the Eastern Wall (Herod extended the mountain only to the north, south and west). The distance between the Step and the Eastern Temple Mount Wall is 262.5 meters long, and when you divide it into 500 (cubits) you get a cubit that is 52.5 centimeters long. This is the Great Royal Egyptian cubit, which was in use during the First Temple period. With this identification, Ritmeyer was able to draw the ancient square Temple Mount.

Today the top of the Step is at the same level as the pavement in front of it. However, when Ritmeyer visited the mount in '73 - before Muslims covered up the ancient remains - you could still see the rough dressing on the sides of the stones of the wall. This stone dressing, says the researcher, fits the construction style of the seventh century BC, the days of King Hezekiah.

Ritmeyer comments that similar stone dressing can be found at the Eastern Wall of the Temple Mount on both sides of the Golden Gate. Indeed, in his understanding, the Gate of Mercy is the Ancient Shushan Gate, the eastern gate of the Temple Mount mentioned in the sources. The researcher also notes that all the finds next to a tower in the Ophel excavations date from Iron Age II - the days of the First Temple Mount - and built of stones that are precisely dressed in the same coarse manner.

"The expression 'Temple Mount' – *har habbayit*," says Ritmeyer, "is mentioned in the Bible only from the end of the First Temple period - in Micha, Isaiah, and the Book of Chronicles. I interpret this concept - *har habbayit* – as an elevated and level surface for the Temple. The greatest builder to which it is possible to associate this work is Hezekiah, who built here even more than Solomon.

The architectural style of stones with rough projecting bosses, can be used to date a building. This style, which is characteristic of the seventh century BC, can be seen also in Samaria and other sites".

The area next to the Step that indicates the original Western Wall of the Mount, was paved over by the Arabs in 1974 with a new pavement, obscuring the projecting side of the ancient wall. Ritmeyer is clear that the Muslims did this deliberately, in order to conceal antiquities of Jewish origin. On the day that archaeologists will finally be able to dig the Temple Mount, he'll run to this point first. He wants to dig here only one meter deep down to bedrock, to finally confirm his claim.

The quest to find the location of the original Temple Mount, began to swirl around in Ritmeyer's mind in the wake of the daily brainstorming sessions with Prof. Mazar. On a certain occasion the same Mazar, asked where he thinks the "Birah" was. "My Hebrew was not so good then," recalls Ritmeyer, "and I thought he wanted a beer, but Mazar explained to me that a Birah - like Shushan the capital - is the religious and political center of a city. He asked me where I thought the Birah of Jerusalem was. Usually it was built on the highest point in town.

"I already knew that the Mishnah indicates that the surface of the Temple Mount was an area of 500 cubits by 500 cubits, I suggested that this square - and nothing else - might be the Birah of ancient Jerusalem. That's how we started our research. For two years I worked on this subject together with Mazar. From the northeast corner of the square Temple Mount, I measured 500 cubits to the south, and there I found that the direction of the wall further south deviated from the main direction of the Eastern Wall by eight degrees.

"To my mind, the reason for this is that when the Hasmoneans and the Herodians expanded the mount farther and farther to the south, they could not continue the wall in the exact direction of the older wall, because of the steep slope."

When examining the plan of the tunnels that led from the Temple Mount gates - the Triple Gate and the Double Gate in the Southern Wall and

Barclay's Gate and Warren's Gate in the Western Wall – I noticed that these tunnels end precisely at the boundaries of the ancient Temple Mount - the original square compound that I outlined in this study. "The Sages of the Mishna did not relate to the Herodian addition to the original mountain and did not recognize this extension as holy. They called only the 500-cubit square compound, *'har habbayit'*- the Temple Mount, and not what is called today by that name."

Deadlock

The rabbis of the Temple Institute have asked Ritmeyer in the past to lecture them about the location of the holy Temple Mount and the Temple itself. And they also accepted his proposal on the matter as it matches the Jewish sources and the consistent tradition that identifies the Dome of the Rock as the place of the Temple. "In light of this," says Ritmeyer happily, "they now know that they are allowed to walk around the edge of the mountain after immersion in the mikveh so long as they do not ascend to platform of the Dome of the Rock."

"We dug only outside the mountain and not on the mountain himself. Of course, we wanted to dig there, but Mazar was forced to sign a contract with the Waqf, in which he undertook to dig only up to the walls of the Temple Mount and not inside them. We found tunnels underneath the Triple Gate in the Southern Wall, that go under the Temple Mount.

"I myself entered these tunnels. One of them comes from Cistern No. 10, in the southern part of the Temple Mount. We investigated these tunnels, we photographed them and I myself measured them. Then we made sure to block them up as agreed with the Waqf. Also under the Single Gate in the south of the Temple Mount, a similar tunnel entered the mount for about 20 meters. We also measured and photographed this tunnel and afterwards we closed it off."

"During the 1970s, I spent a whole week inside the Golden Gate and measured the place. In those years there was a real peace. I also freely entered the Dome of the Rock, and you didn't have to pay anyone to go inside and the building was almost empty. Just two worshipers were there one morning when I entered, and though I knew they would not let

me measure there in the usual way, I learned to measure using my steps. That is how I then walked parallel to the Rock - the Sakhra or Foundation Stone - and I measured my steps - ten meters, which means twenty cubits, the length of the Holy of Holies - from the point where the southern foundation trench was to the northern end the Rock".

"Bagatti, a Franciscan archaeologist, photographed the Rock from above in the fifties of the last century. I received these photographs and I could accurately measure things. That's when I discovered that near the center of the Rock, which apparently was the center of the Holy of Holies, there is a rectangular rock-cutting. I measured it and it turned out that the length of the rectangle is 1.28 meters, which is two and a half cubits according to the Royal or Sacred Egyptian cubit. This is exactly the length of the Ark of the Covenant according to the Torah. I read in the book of Kings that Solomon had prepared a place for the Ark of the Covenant. Why was it necessary to prepare a place? Because it was necessary to create a level space on top of the mountain so that the Ark would stand firm and straight. To my understanding that was exactly the place he prepared."

You say that the top of the Rock as it is appears to us today remained intact for 3,000 years.

"True, undamaged." They claim that the Crusaders quarried in the rock and took stones as souvenirs from it.

"The Crusaders did cause disaster there, but the upper part of the rock – where the Holy of Holies was - remained almost undamaged, just like in ancient times. The Crusaders cut steps that ascended to the top of the bedrock from the western side and quarried on the north of it, as well as on the eastern side. They turned the Dome of the Rock into a church and on its center built an altar. They also quarried a little from the Rock on its eastern side and sold the hewn stones for their weight in gold. When Saladin captured Jerusalem, and after his men dismantled all the marble structures that the Crusaders had erected and they saw the

extent of the destruction, the Muslims were literally crying over the damage caused by their predecessors."

Rabbi Goren claimed that the Dome of the Rock is the place of the burnt offering and not the Holy of Holies. What do you say about that?

"It is impossible. King David built the altar in the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. Where does one make a threshing floor in the Land of Israel? It will always be located just below the top of the mountain, to the east. At the summit itself, the wind is too strong and would sweep away the grains of corn together with the chaff. There are many examples that show that in Eretz Yisrael a threshing floor is never placed on the top of the mountain, always a little east of it. From the description of the angel with a stretched-out sword, described in the Book of Chronicles as 'standing between the earth and heaven', I understand that he stood right at the top of the mountain, where the Holy of Holies was."

Some of the scholars and rabbis claim that the Ark of the Covenant, which disappeared at the end of the First Temple period, should be sought for below the floor of the cave in the Dome of the Rock. What do you think about that?

"I claim that the so-called "Well of the Souls" does not exist." He denies the hypothesis. "One of the Franciscan priests, who documented renovations in the cave during restoration work when the pavement was removed, discovered that apart from a thirty centimeters thick layer of dirt in the cave, no cistern or cave could be seen, only continuous rock. Rabbi Getz excavated in 1981 in the tunnel of Warren's Gate in search of the Ark of the Covenant, and stirred up the country, because he wanted to reach under the Dome of the Rock and where he thought that the Ark of the Covenant is located. I do not believe in this theory."

Ritmeyer's claim is revolutionary: Armita Pierotti, city engineer Jerusalem in the middle of the nineteenth century, even sketched the

Well of the Souls which, according to Ritmeyer does not exist at all. Pierotti claimed that it is a vast space, full of earth and rocks, and told that he had entered it through a channel which leads to it from another water cistern, north of the Dome of the Rock. Such pit is also compatible, ostensibly, with Maimonides, who says that the Ark was placed under the Holy of Holies "in deep and crooked caverns". "Ritmeyer, from every aspect, dismisses the claims of Pierotti, who was indeed considered an eccentric in his field of research.

If not under the Dome of the Rock, where in your opinion, should the lost Ark of the Covenant be sought?

Ritmeyer makes it clear that this is a question that lies outside the scope of archaeology and is ready to say only that he believes that the Ark is not to be found on the Temple Mount. A thread could be found, in his estimation, when search is made for the place of residence of the Kohathite family of priests that was responsible for carrying the Ark from the Days of Wanderings in the Desert – the family of Elizaphan Ben Uziel. "Whoever knew that the Babylonians were on their way to Jerusalem and intended to destroy the city, would probably have hidden the Ark," hints Ritmeyer. "This is what I would have done myself if I had been in their place. I guess those people hid the Ark in their private residence until the storm was over, but afterwards, the location was forgotten."

Ritmeyer, mysterious as he is, reveals a little and hides more "I think I know to point out where this family lived, up to the proximity of a square kilometre, in which to look for. This is an area of caves. More than that I cannot say.

Beyond being an archaeologist, you are probably connected to engaging with the Temple Mount as a believing Christian.

"Unlike most Christians, I do not believe in the Trinity. I believe in Only One God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. There is no other God. Spiritually speaking, I am closer to Judaism than to Christianity. I belong

to the community that is called Christadelphians - Brothers of Christ. For me, the Temple Mount is sacred because there the Binding of Isaac took place. One rabbi once told me he agreed with me in all things, apart from Jesus being the Messiah."

And according to your faith do you have to rebuild the Temple on the Temple Mount?

"I read in the Book of Ezekiel about the building of a new altar, and my understanding is that the Temple Mount in its entirety will only be built when the Messiah comes. If I understand the words of Isaiah correctly, religious Jews will be able to build an altar on the Temple Mount before the Messiah comes, but not beyond that. As I said before, I was in contact with the Temple Institute and my understanding is that that exactly is what they really want to do. If I were a Jew, I would like to sacrifice the Korban Pesach on the Temple Mount. After all, you cannot sacrifice it anywhere else, other than on the mount."

"When I arrived in Israel in 1973, we lived in Gat Rimmon and rented a house from veteran olim from Russia, who have lived in Israel for decades. but they never visited Jerusalem. I find it hard to understand. Why did you come back here, if not for Jerusalem and the Temple Mount?"

Thanks to Dr. Eli David for his great help in facilitating this interview.