



- [Home](#)
- [News](#)
- [News Briefs](#)
- [Opinion](#)
- [Judaism](#)
- [Blogs](#)
- [Forums](#)
- [Joys R Us](#)
- [Video](#)
- [Radio](#)
- [Live](#)
- [Jukebox](#)
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News

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Ezekiel's Tomb
 Israel news photo:
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Reports: Iraq De-Judaizing Ezekiel's Tomb

by Hillel Fendel

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(IsraelNN.com) Early reports that Iraq plans to retain the Jewish nature of the Tomb of the Prophet Ezekiel are apparently false. Sources in Baghdad say that the government plans to turn it into a mosque and erase all Jewish markings.

Iraq announced earlier this year that it would revamp the ancient burial site, which is located in Al-Kifl, a small town south of Baghdad. The U.S.-backed government announcement implied that its Jewish nature would continue to be emphasized.

Since then, however, reports have surfaced that the government is actually planning to build a mosque there, including removing the ancient Hebrew inscriptions that adorn the site. Some reports say that all or some of the lines of Hebrew script have already been erased.

Ezekiel (Yechezkel, in Hebrew), lived in the sixth century BCE, having accompanied the exiled Judeans to Babylon. His prophecies include the Vision of the Dry Bones, as well as the future return of Jewish People to the Land of Israel even if they are not deserving (Chapter 36: 22-25). Thousands of Jews often visited the site of his tomb annually before Iraqi Jewry came to an abrupt end in the middle of the 20th century, and Moslems and Christians continue to visit it even today.

Shelomo Alfassa, former Executive Director of the International Sephardic Leadership Council and editor of the International Sephardic Journal, reports that Islamic political parties have pressured the government to remove the Jewish inscriptions. He quotes the Iraqi news agency Ur News as reporting that the writing and ornamentations "are being (or have been) removed... under the pretext of restoring the site."

Alfassa quotes sources to the effect that Iraq's Antiquities and Heritage Authority "has been pressured by Islamists to historically cleanse all evidence of a Jewish connection to Iraq - a land where Jews had lived for over a thousand years before the advent of Islam."

Professor Investigates

Four months ago, a German-based Iraqi journalist tipped off the Association of Jewish Academics from Iraq in Israel (AJAI) that plans were afoot to build a mosque on the site of Ezekiel's Tomb. AJAI asked Dr. Jabbar Jamal al-Din, a lecturer in Jewish Thought at Kufa University in Iraq, to investigate these reports - and he said that he believes them to be untrue.

Baghdad Sources: Room for Concern

Sources in Baghdad, however, feel otherwise. Prof. Shmuel Moreh - Israel Prize

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Laureate in Arabic Literature and Professor Emeritus at Hebrew University of Jerusalem - told *Israel National News* that he had received worrisome phone calls from non-Jewish friends in Baghdad. Prof. Moreh, who serves as the Chairman of the Association of Jewish Academics from Iraq, said that the plans are to turn the holy site into a mosque, and "some told me that they are taking off the Hebrew inscriptions."

Alfassa provides the following translation of the relevant report in *Ur News*: "The officials of the Department of Antiquities and Heritage say that their restoration programme will continue until 2011 and is designed to carry out essential maintenance and prevent the dome and roof from collapsing. But their hidden purpose, sources say, is the removal of features that emphasize a historical connection with the Jews who built the shrine and lived in the city for hundreds of years after the Babylonian exile."

Though well over 100,000 Jews lived in Iraq a few decades ago, this number has now been decimated to no more than eight, Prof. Moreh said. "There are others," he added, "but they barely know that they are Jews; in many cases, their parents did not tell them."

Alfassa concludes: "Iraq - the Biblical Mesopotamia - is almost as rich in Jewish history as the Land of Israel. The tomb of the prophet Ezekiel dates back to the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE. It was there in Iraq that Abraham discovered monotheism, and it is where the prophets Ezra, Nehemiah, Nahum, Jonah and Daniel are all buried."

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