

Erasing Ezekiel's Jewish identity

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For centuries Jews, Christians and Muslims came to Al-Kifl, a small town south of Baghdad, to visit the tomb of the Prophet Ezekiel and pray.

The distinctive Jewish character of the Al-Kifl shrine, namely the Hebrew inscriptions and the Torah Ark, never bothered the gentile worshipers. In the 14th century a minaret was built next to the shrine, but the interior design remained Jewish. The vast majority of Iraq's Jewish community left some 60 years ago, but Shi'ites took good care of the holy site.

Until now.

Recently "Ur," a local Iraqi news agency, reported that a huge mosque will be built on top of the grave by Iraq's Antiquities and Heritage Authority, while Hebrew inscriptions and ornaments are being removed from the site, all as part of renovations.

Prof. Shmuel Moreh of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, winner of the 1999 Israel Prize in Middle Eastern studies and chairman of the Association of Jewish Academics from Iraq, speaking to *The Jerusalem Post* on Wednesday, confirmed the report.

"I first heard the news of tomb desecration from a friend of mine who is a German scholar. After visiting the site he called me and said that some Hebrew inscriptions on the grave were covered by plaster and that a mosque is planned to be built on top of the tomb. He told me that he found the changes at the tomb disturbing and warned me that I'd better act quickly, before any irreversible damage will be inflicted," Moreh said.

"I had contacted Mr. Shelomo Alfassa, US director of Justice for Jews from Arab Countries, and told him about this situation. Then I saw the report from the Ur news agency, mentioning the decision of the Antiquities and Heritage Authority to build a mosque and to erase the Hebrew inscriptions and ornaments," Moreh said.

He asked friends to check out the developments at the site. The most recent to visit the shrine said that some of the inscriptions are now hidden by a layer of plaster.

Iraqi press reports claim that the building must be destroyed because of its poor condition. However, Alfassa believes 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."

According to the Baghdad-born Moreh, many of the Muslims who visit the tomb today are unaware Ezekiel was a Jew.

Iraq, the biblical Aram Naharaim, is rich in Jewish religious sites. Not only Ezekiel is buried there,

but also Ezra, Daniel, Nehemiah, Nahum and Jonah. (Another tomb attributed to Ezekiel is located in Dezful, in southwestern Iran.)

Soon after the US-led invasion in 2003, Iraqi authorities indicated that they intended to take good care of the Jewish sites, which might become an powerful tourist magnet. In May 2009, the Tourism Ministry declared that it intended to preserve all of Iraq's heritage sites, regardless of creed, and would soon begin the renovation of Ezekiel's tomb.

But the future of Jewish sacred sites looks grim in the intolerant current climate of post-Saddam Iraq, where only eight Jews are left, the Christian minority is severely persecuted by the fundamentalists and ancient Shi'ite mosques are blown up.

"Let's hope that the Jewish sites will be spared, but someone must intervene before it's too late," Moreh warned.

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